Songs of the Spheres

by GMBlackjack

Summary

The scope of the multiverse is so tremendously beyond the comprehension of most beings that if they were to truly know what it meant, they would break down and be unable to live their lives the way they wish. Most worlds are lucky to be blissfully unaware of the true picture of reality, never to encounter the higher forces and civilizations. However, when one of those higher forces make contact with one of those unaware worlds - intentionally or not, peacefully or not - everything will change drastically. Sometimes the change is slow, sometimes rapid. Regardless of the pacing, like all change, it is both good and bad. Civilizations have risen from simple worlds overnight, and have crumbled just as quickly. Many can't handle the revelation, and those that can are not always the best examples of honor and dignity.

It is often said that each world - each universe - has a Song, and that all these Songs are related, intertwining together in a mesh of powerful destiny among the Spheres of the
multiverse.
This is the story of how a certain world inhabited by Technicolor ponies found their Song and how it interwove itself in the Songs of so many others. This is a story of how everything can change in a single moment.

Notes

This is a mega-crossover project of immense proportions covering dozens of fandoms. However, it is written in such a way that no previous knowledge of any of them - not even the ponies - will be required. The only warning is that there will be spoilers for any franchise you haven't seen.
There are several side-stories being written for Songs of the spheres, and links to them can be found at https://www.fimfiction.net/group/213761/songs-of-the-spheres-extended-multiverse
Check the group forum for links to the non-pony related stories. You can use the forum to talk about anything relating to the multiverse. You can even submit works within the multiverse setting!
We also have a discord chat you can join! : https://discord.gg/eTuseTh
Should update every six days.
-GM, master of the Dark Tower
The man of light fled across existence, and the enchantress followed.

Presently, existence manifested itself as a desert to the two of them. It was not the apotheosis of all deserts - far from it. It was decidedly too mysterious to be described in such a pure way. The sands themselves couldn't be considered the defining feature unless someone was foolish enough to stand upon the burning grains barefoot, in which case it wouldn't be part of the scenery but it certainly would be prominent in the mind (and feet) of such a person. The real appeal of this particular desert was the ruins. The ancient stone structures stood around in defiance to the eons, chiseled both by intelligence and the merciless decay of time. Symbols adorned the many pillars - triangles within triangles were prominent alongside a depiction of an ancient eye staring forward and letting loose one single, painful, tear.

The man of light did not stop to puzzle over any of this - if he had, he probably could have discerned some meaning from the ancient glyphs and figure out where he was. He unfortunately didn't have the time to waste on getting his bearings, a fact he was painfully aware of. He continued running across the sands, kicking up excessive amounts of the ground with his softly glowing cobalt-blue feet. He wore no shoes, but his crystalline composition kept him from charring his feet. This did not mean he wasn't foolish - far from it.

He was, after all, running from the enchantress.

He knew she was gaining - but he did not dare steal a glance behind him. Not yet, anyway. He kept his gaze forward, catching glances of his hands every time they shifted forward in time with the opposite foot. He kept focusing on a small, black orb in his left hand, grasped tightly by his sharp digits. Had the object been made of glass it would have shattered from the force he was exerting, but it wasn't. It was something far stronger and much more complex than simple glass. He considered using it - but he still had enough intelligence within him to know now was not the time, for there was a strange obelisk coming up.

He recognized this for what it was - an ancient machine. He tore his right arm from its rapid back and forth motion, holding the palm outstretched to the obelisk. He focused, intent on timing this just right. The instant before he passed the ruin a surge of electrical energy shot forth from his fingertips, filling the obelisk's many glyphs with a blue glow. A wall of translucent hardlight shot out of it, erecting fully behind the man of light and dividing him from his pursuer.

He whirled around quickly, raising the black sphere high in the air, tapping it rapidly with his fingers. Even though he wasn't looking at it, he knew many yellow lights were rippling on its surface as it processed his request.

In the instant it took the sphere to process the input he locked eyes with the enchantress - or so he
assumed, anyway, it was hard to tell which way she was looking when her eyes were obscured by those goggles. He also noticed that the wall of hardlight wasn't going to slow her down as much as he had hoped. He’d thought she would use her magic to levitate over the wall since she was avoiding the use of teleports to save her magic reserves. But no, she just shot a single laser from her horn at the obelisk, shattering the priceless relic into thousands of pieces. Her four hooves hardly slowed their gallop from the encounter - he may have gained a second, probably less.

Then the man of light was somewhere else. He didn't take long to gather his bearings - hallway, largely gray, with big numbers on one wall. Some kind of underground base, perhaps. There was most certainly a story behind this place he was not interested in. He bolted down the hallway, his rigid form creating loud clanks upon contact with the equally hard ground. Good thing stealth was not his goal - though perhaps he should have at least considered it.

He turned a corner, discovering a handful of humans in full green uniforms, all carrying what appeared to be military-issue (but primitive) guns. He would have probably been annoyed by the pointless gunfire in his direction, but he heard the enchantress appear in the spot he himself had mere moments before, reminding him that he should still be terrified. The humans must have seen the blue light as well because they soon started shooting behind him as well as at him.

The enchantress's flesh would be vulnerable to these physical bullets while his was not - she would not allow herself to be injured, so she would be slowed. The man of light allowed himself a small glimmer of hope upon realizing this, thanking primitive human technology for the uses it did have.

A voice - male, aged - cracked over the base's intercom. "People, we've got an intrusion into the base and gunfire! Yes, it really is a magic man and a unicorn! Keep an eye out for that horned red fairy or anything else unusual! Get some backup to level twenty-three already!"

The man of light saw SGC-23 imprinted on a nearby wall. Concern crossed his mind for a moment. Perhaps they could overwhelm him? Not likely, he thought dismissively. They were mid-humans with primitive technology, nothing they had could harm him-

A woman with blonde hair stepped out from a side door and shot him with a pistol-sized weapon that launched a blue lightning bolt directly into his shining chest. His body was forced into a mild seizure - his crystals all needed to reset from the energy overload. He twisted to the side just as another bolt came from the gun. He knew it was supposed to do a lot more than just stop him for a second from the woman's surprised look, but one second was a very precious commodity to the man of light at this juncture.

The bolt that missed him hit the enchantress head on but was absorbed by a blue aura-shield she had erected around herself. She ran right for the man of light, horn aglow with an unsettling bright blue.

The man of light acted in reflex, ordering the sphere to take him somewhere - anywhere - and he appeared in a vast room composed entirely of crystal similar to his body, though he knew there was no relation. The entire scene brimmed with power and knowledge. He felt it - something spectacular - tug at his mind with intense knowledge and fortitude. It wanted him to ask a question. It wanted to answer. He suddenly had no doubt in his mind he could be given the answer to almost any question he had.

Still, he resisted, running again. This large open room would not do - he needed to get somewhere else. He felt the high levels of magic here - magic she could use to trap him with ease. He fumbled with the sphere, trying to input something more specific into it. He wanted someplace... crowded.
He left just as the enchantress appeared.

Where he showed up was indeed crowded - and also a place he would fit in. It was a merchant outpost filled with hundreds of beings from countless worlds doing business.

The man of light still ran, shoving several people and machines out of the way. First an orange blob, then some elf-like race (he had no idea which one, there were thousands), then some energy being that he passed through.

"Rude!" it called after him.

He gave no response, rushing past a countertop where some insect-type was giving one of those grey-skinned troll girls some blue orb. The thought that it might be an infinite sided die crossed his mind. He almost paused just to swipe it and see what it would do, but the sound of the enchantress appearing in the world shot that idea out of his mind. He ran past just as the troll girl rolled the die - hope you get a favorable result, blueblood - and that was the last he saw of it. He focused on his sphere again. He was taxing it, he knew, but it was his only edge over her. It worked faster than her magics.

"Make way!" He heard her yell in her authoritative voice, trying her best to sound like a police officer or whatever the equivalent was here. It was enough to move some individuals out of the way, making it much easier for her to move through the crowd than him. His advantage had been lost once again.

He used the sphere, this time appearing three feet in the air over some extremely murky swamp water. He got a look at two humans wearing swamp leaves as simple clothing before he fell into the murk. The shock of hitting the water stunned even his mineral-based body. His grip loosened and the sphere drifted out of his hand into the murk. He was mentally unable to do anything about this, as he was still trying to process the swamp water's existence.

The man of light stopped processing halfway when the enchantress appeared above him. She didn't fall into the water - merely floated above it, her blue magic surrounding her and keeping her free from disgusting murk. She didn't look down - didn't see him.

He started reaching for the black sphere, eyes fixed on her form. He wasn't quite capable of realizing he was underwater just yet, so he grabbed too hard, knocking the ball downwards instead of grabbing it. He was, however, aware enough to curse inwardly at his butterfingers.

The enchantress looked at the two humans. "Have you by chance seen a man of crystal around?" she asked in a friendly voice that came naturally to her.

"...Woah, Due. A talkin' horse."

"You think she tastes like chicken?"

The enchantress responded to this with a slightly bemused undertone. "Everything tastes more or less like chicken."

The man who had asked the question - Due - took his leaf hat off in awe. "Words of wisdom..."

"Naw," the first said. "Just words. The shiny dude is hidin' in the swamp water right under ya'."
The man of light grabbed the ball just as the enchantress looked down at him, disgust on her face. "Oh... Swamp water..."

"It has great flavor miss! You should try it!"

This comment gave the enchantress pause - just enough for the man of light to get out of there.

For the first time he found himself in a place that made him consider giving up. There was absolute blackness - no gravity and no light in any direction. And yet, he knew - he just knew - there were great horrors and terrors out there in the darkness, great heaving eldritch things that would be able to squash him to oblivion by complete accident with a stray whisper.

And then he saw something that terrified him - and it wasn't just because he shouldn't have been able to see at all in this place of darkness.

Two people. Two people he recognized.

One was a man in black, evil on his face. The other was a madman standing in front of a blue box. The man of light realized with a feeling that drove him to shivers that they were both looking right at him.

He had just interrupted the standoff of two giants in an eldritch location.

This realization made him freeze.

The man in black grinned. "Ah, look at what the squiddle dragged in!"

The madman with a box grimaced. "Run. Flee. If you can, whoever you are."

The enchantress appeared behind the man of light, ready to apprehend him - but she was startled by the scene as well. She drew back from the two powerful beings.

The man in black laughed, a truly horrifying sound that should never have come from human lips. "Oh, a familiar tale, old as time itself stands before us! The pursued and the pursuer, dashing across vast swaths of land, intersecting their destinies with that of so many, many others. Wondrous!"

"Oh for-" the madman with a box lunged for the black sphere in the man of light's hand, touching it in just the right places to activate it.

The man in black 'laughed' again, and waved. "Have a nice-"

-Day would have been what arrived at the end of that sentence, and the man of light knew it. The thought - of that thing telling him to have a nice day - came close to making him lose what mental faculties remained within him. What he saw next threw him into a full panic. He found himself in a large field of roses.

*Roses.*

It can't be...

He saw it - to his right, a Tower made of black stone that reached to impossible heights. Powerful energies beyond his understanding flooded his mind, telling him that which he did not want to know,
showing him the meaning of the Tower's many eldritch windows in a horrible and beautiful Song.

Had he not been close to panic there was no telling what he would have done here - would he have even realized what standing next to the Tower meant? Was it possible? Could she be redirected? Such questions went unanswered - he fumbled in panic for the sphere, pressing it at complete random, chance (Chance? What was chance in a place like this?) being the only thing that allowed him to press the right buttons to escape - once again at the exact moment the enchantress appeared.

He appeared in a grassy land and took off at a run. He saw a flash of red in the sky above him, but he was no more able to consciously register that than he was the rock a few feet in front of him. The enchantress appeared in the world quickly, galloping after him.

He hit the rock, tumbling head over heels. The black sphere flew from his hands and into a patch of dirt. He skidded to a stop, a long stretch of grass upturned by the plow that was his face.

He gave up. He let his limbs fall flat, his motion stop. He was doomed - the sphere was God knows where, his face was embedded an inch into the ground, and he could already feel her magic around him.

He did not try to resist.

It took ten seconds for her to cast the spell. Then they were gone from the world with a quick flash of blue light, unaware of the marks they had left. For atop a nearby hill, a tall purple winged unicorn stared at where they had just been, jaw slack.

"What in Celestia's name was that!?"

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Princess Twilight Sparkle was no stranger to bizarre happenings; such things had pretty much defined her life for the last few years. She had been thrust into the positions of hero, diplomat, psychologist, friend, warrior, and prisoner time and time again by the magical world around her. Even her title as Princess of Friendship - truly a defining part of her these days - had arisen from a bizarre encounter with rogue magic and confused destiny.

The main difference between those times and now was that she was usually part of the bizarre events in one way or another. It was an exceptionally odd day when something completely off-the-wall happened that had no relation to her or her friends whatsoever. Today was one of those rare days. Some human-shaped crystal monster and a unicorn in a full body suit had appeared, engaged in a rather one-sided scuffle, and vanished without so much as giving her a glance.

She wondered what in Celestia's name was going on, unaware that she had blurted the thought aloud. With nopony else present she remained completely unaware of her outburst, instead focusing on remembering why she was out here in the grassy hills in the first place. For the life of her, she couldn't determine why she had decided to go for a walk - there must have been some reason, she was sure of it. But no matter how much she racked her brain and tapped her skull with her hoof, nothing came to her.

Twilight became lost in her thought process, the unusual event she had just witnessed falling into the background since no immediate action was required. She squinted her lavender eyes shut and took a breath, stretching out her wings, trying to slow her mind down a bit so her thoughts would become manageable. She channeled some magic into her horn just to release some energy.
Okay... she thought. Back on topic.

She opened her eyes and looked at the grassy hills, still unsure why she had walked out here, but she compartmentalized that nagging thought away for the moment. She walked over to the cut in the ground the crystal-energy-man had made with his head when he'd tripped. *He must be made of sapphires,* Twilight concluded from the depth of the rut. She smiled thoughtfully - a being made of magic and sapphires. She had never seen such a thing! How exactly would it live? It'd probably need to survive off magic alone and wouldn't need to eat. Sleep? Perhaps not, though there was evidence that suggested everybody needed sleep to ease the mind. Maybe it didn't even have a mind?

She could have sworn it moved with *fear* though. The unicorn had as well, but she (had it been a she?) had moved with more purpose and control. She obviously hadn't been scared of the crystal man, it was something else. Had they run into something terrifying in their high-stakes game of teleport-pursuit?

It was then Twilight saw the black sphere sitting innocuously in the dirt. Her thoughts of fear and psyche became secondary as she focused her attention to the remnant of the scuffle. She lit her horn once again, focusing on the globe, using her natural magics to levitate it to her in a purple aura of arcane energy. She narrowed her eyes at the object - featureless. There wasn't even a defect from being dropped roughly in the coarse dirt. Its edges shone like oil despite it being completely solid. She knit her eyebrows together, scrutinizing it.

Something made her look upwards suddenly - a strange feeling of being watched - but nothing was up there. She shrugged it off and returned to the sphere, a nagging feeling eating away at the back of her mind, trying to tell her that *something* had happened. She thought of it as nothing more than curiosity.

She tapped the sphere with her hoof. The section she touched - a square with rounded corners - flashed a dull yellow. Another square lit up alongside it, two 'squares' to the right. Nothing else happened.

*What are you? The crystal man had you... You were the only thing he had. You must be important.*

She tapped it a few times in other places, lighting other squares up, but beyond the seemingly random pattern and number of lights flickering nothing happened. She scanned it for magic and found a faint aura inside it similar to teleportation, but not quite the same. She wasn't sure what that enchantment could accomplish - it was so weak. It'd need something to react with or draw power from to have any sort of visible effect. Seeing as it was the only spell in the globe, this was confusing to say the least.

She was sure she was missing something here. Maybe it reacted with the crystal man himself to do something? It was certainly possible, but that struck her as dangerous. And if that were true it might react badly to her magic...

She stopped messing with it. She levitated in front of her face for a while longer, knowing she couldn't figure anything out by standing here but electing to stare into the oily sheen anyway.

A brash voice interrupted her contemplations. "Hey Twi! What *are* you looking at?"

Twilight looked away from the mysterious orb, directing her gaze to the familiar voice with a smile. "I have no idea."

The cyan pegasus with the rainbow mane to whom the voice belonged flew a little higher into the air and dropped her jaw comically. "You have no idea about something!? Woah."
Twilight rolled her eyes. "Rainbow Dash, there's a lot of things I don't know."

"Uh, durr, that was sarcasm." Rainbow Dash swooped through the air to the front of Twilight, staring at the sphere. "...It's just a bowling ball, Twi."

"Bowling balls are a lot bigger and don't flash when you touch them."

"Small magic bowling ball then," Rainbow Dash said with a smirk. She reached her hoof out towards the ball. "Wonder if you could bowl with it..."

Twilight jerked it back. "No touching! This thing has strange magic in it that might react with your own resulting in Luna knows what!"

"Pfft," Rainbow Dash waved a hoof dismissively, doing it such a way that she wouldn't hit her flapping wings. "Stop being so paranoid, it's just an odd ball." She rushed to the sphere quickly, grabbing it out of Twilight's magic with her two front hooves. Several lights lit up and Twilight gasped.

Nothing happened. Rainbow Dash held the sphere in one hoof, taking full advantage of the unusual traction pony hooves had for the flat and hard objects they were. She started juggling it between her hooves. "See? Nothing to worry about Twi, it's all fine."

Twilight's left eye twitched. "You've made your point, Rainbow. I'd like it back now."

Rainbow Dash shrugged and tossed it back to her, caught once again in purple magic. "Not like I could keep it from you long anyway, assuming you remember to teleport."

Twilight smirked coyly. "I'm getting better at that!"

"You still chased Starlight around the castle on your hooves yesterday."

"I was... caught up in the moment."

"Yeah. Sure. So what are we going to do with this thing? Where'd it even come from?"

"Right here," Twilight said, gesturing at the rut in the ground. "A unicorn was chasing a crystal man. They teleported here, she caught him, he dropped the ball, and they teleported away."

"You just called it a ball. A... bowling ball!?"

Twilight ignored her. "As for what to do with it... I'll take it back to the castle and probably run some tests on it, see what it is. Failing that, find out whatever I can."

"Sounds boring. Can't we go try to find that unicorn and crystal guy? Sounds more like adventure if we do it that way."

"I wasn't scanning the teleport, I can't follow it."

Rainbow Dash groaned. "Really Twilight? For all we know that might have been the biggest adventure ever, and now we'll never have it."

Twilight looked into the sphere and found herself thinking of a rose of all things. She smiled. "Somehow... I think this is the key to adventure, Rainbow. We just have to figure it out." She turned her head to the west - her castle peeking out over the horizon with its magical, crystalline glint. The structure was impressive and tree-like, although it could be described as tacky or gaudy by sensible ponies. The multi-pronged magical starburst on the castle's tip was visible even from this fair
distance, the shape mimicking the six-pointed mark on Twilight's own flank. She took a breath and trotted towards her home.

"Uh... Twilight?"

"Yes, Rainbow?"

"Teleport, remember?"

"Oh," Twilight deadpanned. "Right. Coming Rainbow?"

"Eh, sure, don't have anything better to do today."

Twilight focused a teleport spell into her horn, taking special care to think about Rainbow Dash, herself, and the sphere while also picturing the most prominent room in her castle. She weaved the spell together in under a second and in a flash of purple energy they were there - the 'meeting room' of the castle, for lack of a better name. She had spent much of the last few years of her life in this grand room. The chandelier made of tree roots lit the room up in a multicolored glow and the blue-ish crystalline walls were dulled so they wouldn't blind everypony who entered with refraction. The center of the room was marked by an ornate table surrounded by seven throne-esque chairs, one of which was smaller than the others, designed for Twilight's 'number one assistant,' Spike. The other six were of equal size and intended for Twilight and her five closest friends. Each of the six chairs were adorned with the symbol of the pony that sat there: the cloud with a rainbow lightning bolt for Rainbow Dash, the balloons, the diamonds, the butterflies, the apples, and Twilight's own magical starburst. These six symbols had once been nothing more than 'cutie marks,' pictographic representations of talent and inner magic that all ponies had. But now - now they represented much more. They were the symbols of a legendary band, of Harmony realized in six mares who couldn't be more different.

"Twilight? You're starting to glaze over."

"Oh," Twilight said, snapping herself out of the nostalgic trance. "Yes, well... right." She trotted over to the table. At the moment it was activated, showing a circular map of the nation they lived in, Equestria, and its neighbors. Twilight found herself examining the mountains of the dragon lands, the wastelands of the south, the landscapes of Griffonstone... Even the snowy peaks of the Crystal Empire and Yakyakistan. She smiled - in some way; much of this land was hers. Hers to protect and rule in at least some fashion. She absent-mindedly set the mysterious globe on the table-map and pressed her hoof to the tabletop.

She felt the map's connection to a power much higher than her own, a power Twilight had learned to respect over the years. She owed it so much. The entire castle was a gift from it, and one of the smaller ones at that. She smiled as she felt the welcoming energies of Harmony wash over her.

The welcoming feeling quickly changed, attention shifting from Twilight to the black sphere. Twilight felt the arcane mood shift again to... something she didn't recognize. Fear? No, she'd felt fear before. And anger... as well as disgust...

Confusion?

Twilight blinked, taking a step back. "But the Tree of Harmony knows everything..."

Rainbow Dash stared at her. "Er... What?"

"I'm getting confusion from the magic, Rainbow. I've never felt that from the Tree before... It has no idea what the sphere is."
Rainbow Dash blinked. "You know, I'm not going to question that and take it at face value for once. What does that even mean?"

"I'm... Not sure."

In that moment both Rainbow Dash's and Twilight's cutie marks started glowing, drawing their gaze to their flanks. They knew exactly what that meant. They were being called. They turned quickly to the map and saw their symbols - alongside the symbols of all their friends - dance over the map at a particular location, shining their arcane light down upon it.

"...Here?" Rainbow Dash said. "It's never called us here before."

"It's never had something this unknown either," Twilight said, glancing at the unknown object.

"Eh, it probably has, you just don't know about it," a new high-pitched voice called from across the table. Twilight and Rainbow Dash looked up - to the surprise of neither of them, a pink pony with the most cotton-candy-like mane imaginable sat in the balloon-imprinted throne. Twilight and her friends had long ago stopped asking how the pink mare managed to get to and from locations without anypony noticing so quickly without the use of wings or magic, just like any number of the other impossible feats she performed daily.

"Hi Pinkie," Twilight said with a genuine bright smile.

Pinkie's already huge grin widened. "Hi yourself! So, who's ready to crack this puppy open and see what intrigue awaits for us within?" She lifted a wooden mallet she definitely didn't have a second ago into the air, aiming at the sphere. "I hope it's like a piñata!"

"Pinkie Pie!" Twilight yelled. "Don't break the mysterious artifact!"

Pinkie put the hammer away somewhere nopony could see. She shrugged. "Not like I could break it anyway, thing's durable."

Nopony asked how she knew this. Twilight just continued talking. "The Tree is probably just calling us here to solve a regular friendship problem - no need to get all excited for intrigue or anything..."

"I dunno Twi," Rainbow Dash said. "I have this gut feeling that this won't be normal, y'know?"

Pinkie nodded rapidly - perhaps more rapidly than should have been physically possible. "I do know! I'm not sure anypony, anyone, or anything knows what's going on!"

Twilight nodded slowly, glancing at the sphere again. "We should at least wait for the others before doing anything."

"Agreed," Rainbow Dash said. "Hey, Pinks, wanna take bets on what Rarity'll think of the bowling ball?"

"It's not a bowling ball!" Twilight wailed.

Pinkie ignored her. "I think... She'll find it absolutely beautiful!"

"Really? Looks like disgusting oil. I say she hates it. Three bits?"

"Done!" Pinkie giggled. "Now all we do is wait!"

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Rarity Belle - or Miss Rarity Belle as she was known to those not close to her - was a unicorn who knew exactly how to make an entrance. She knew she would not be the first to arrive to the meeting hall, so she prepared long before she even saw the Castle doors. The moment the diamonds on her flank started glowing, she tossed her purple mane gracefully to the side, turned the sign on her boutique to closed, and daintily trotted across town, making sure to keep her head held high and not to rush frantically.

She - and everypony else - knew this keeping of appearances was a little shallow, but Rarity just couldn't bring herself to stop. She was a graceful mare, and there was no way in Equestria that she'd stop being one for any reason besides a national disaster. Even when there was such a catastrophe she usually maintained her dignity while dealing with the danger; a skill a mare like her needed seeing as she was friends with Twilight of all ponies. Rarity may have loved the purple mare to bits, close to a second sister, but trouble followed the princess around everywhere - there was just no escaping it.

Rarity supposed that, deep down, she liked the antics. No, it was more than that. She eagerly anticipated them, despite constant evidence she gave to the contrary. She may have complained and whined - what lady wouldn't? - but she rarely meant it. Her life was one few mares dared to dream. Hero, lady, fashionista, businessmare, popular... it probably all went to her head if she was honest with herself, which she was often not. Honesty was not her virtue - that was reserved for another of her friends, one who had many a time shown how crazy Rarity was at times.

Speaking of, the mare in question came into Rarity's line of sight. The orange earth pony with apples upon her flank - currently glowing just like Rarity's own diamonds - sauntered up to Rarity. They walked side by side as the orange pony let out a greeting. "Howdy, Rarity."

"Hello, Applejack," Rarity spoke with her careful high-class annunciation - a false dialect she had forced herself to acquire when young and had never dropped since. It was a part of her now. "What do you suppose the problem is this time?"

"Well, it's callin' the two of us again," Applejack commented in her country drawl. "Ah figure it's somethin' that'll require some different viewpoints."

"Perhaps, but Pinkie's been called too. I saw her flank light up right before she darted behind a bush," Rarity said, not needing to explain that Pinkie was most definitely waiting for them at the table, probably bored already.

"Eeyup," Applejack said in response to nothing in particular. "Think it'll be all of us today?"

"Probably," a new voice said - one much softer than the two others, but neither classy nor rustic. Despite the softness of the voice, it wasn't meek either, though it had been in the past. "I'm here, after all."

Rarity turned to her left just in time to see a butter-yellow pegasus land, her pink butterflies glowing on her rear. The color of the cutie mark matched that of her mane, a beautiful and graceful collection of hairs that could house animals (and probably did at times). Rarity was slightly jealous of her friend - she herself was cursed with a light blue mark, a purple mane, and white coat. White may have been among the more glamorous of the colors, but the clash of the diamonds and the mane... Well, at least the diamonds matched the blue of her eyes.

"Guess so," Applejack said, agreeing with the newcomer's comment. "How's Angel, Fluttershy?"

"His feet are healing nicely," Fluttershy responded, her expression telling Applejack thanks for asking. "Though I think he'll just injure it again the moment they're fully healed... That rabbit and his
parkour obsession..."

"Just make sure you do tell him when it's fully healed," Applejack said. ". . . You know, even though he is a vicious little varmint."

"Yes, I guess so..."

Rarity was silent - she was busy positioning herself relative to her friends. She had Fluttershy and Applejack walking to either side of her, and made sure she was slightly forward, taking the lead. The Castle was coming up quickly, and she was ready for it. Her horn burst with a brilliant blue glow, surrounding the giant double doors of Twilight's Castle in her aura. She slid them open with perfect timing, such that neither she nor her companions would need to slow their motion. She didn't look behind her when she closed the doors - such a thing could ruin her rhythm. She could probably regain it before they reached the top of the stairs, but such things were uncertain.

She found herself wondering, once again, why she cared. The only ponies waiting up there would be her friends, ponies who didn't care for class. She could let her guard down and nothing negative would happen whatsoever. But no, like always, she couldn't bring herself to do it. This was who she was - the one who had style. Twilight was the excitable intelligent one, Fluttershy was the gentle soul, Applejack was down to earth, Rainbow Dash was the tomcolt, and Pinkie was... Pinkie.

It was who they were. While they might grow and evolve as ponies, some things didn't need to change. Perhaps shouldn't.

Rarity quickly brought herself out of those thoughts - despite the smile they brought to her face. They were close to the top of the stairs now and her friends had fallen silent. Rarity took in a deep breath and opened the door with perfect timing - her two friends flanking her to augment her entrance, perhaps unwittingly, perhaps not. It didn't really matter.

Mainly because nopony noticed the grand entrance. Pinkie just waved. "Hi Rarity! Been waiting for you for eighteen p-"

"Uh..." Applejack interrupted, pointing at the map in mild disbelief. "Is it pointin' us here? What does that even mean?"

Fluttershy gasped softly. "Are we the friendship problem?"

Twilight shook her head, a motion Rarity noticed was significantly more dignified than when they'd first met. Becoming a princess had slowly drawn Twilight to have at least a modicum of class, something Rarity found satisfying. "I doubt it," Twilight said. "I mean, if these were normal circumstances, I suppose that could be it... But I know what triggered this." She levitated a strange, black, oily ball up to the light, revealing its unusual sheen.

"My..." Rarity said, hoof to her mouth. "That looks rather... beautiful..."

"Ha!" Pinkie shouted, startling Rarity. "Three bits Dashie! Woop woop!"

Rainbow Dash sighed, tossing Pinkie the bits. She caught them in her teeth, giggling.

"Did you two bet on my reaction again?"

"How do you keep losing?"

Pinkie nodded vigorously without a trace of embarrassment or remorse. Rarity turned to Rainbow Dash. "I swear she's cheating somehow."
"You could just agree with me Dashie!" Pinkie giggled.

"Then there'd be no bet!"

"Ah," Applejack spoke up. "There's your problem Dash. She's exploitin' your need for competition."

Rainbow Dash opened her mouth to respond with a presumably clever retort, but Twilight interrupted it by placing her hoof on her forehead. "Girls. Focus. Please."

"You got it!" Pinkie said, putting on a pair of googly-eye glasses. Fluttershy chuckled and everypony else ignored the amusing eyewear.

Twilight lifted the black sphere into the air. "This is..."

"The bowling ball," Rainbow Dash said.

"No, it isn't," Twilight snapped.

"It is now, sugarcube," Applejack said.

Twilight twitched, ready to protest, but thought better of it. She chuckled slightly. Rarity knew that look - it was the look Twilight had when she realized how ridiculous something was. "Okay then... This is the bowling ball, a strange device I found when..." Twilight continued on to tell them all of her strange encounter with the man of light and the enchantress, leaving nothing she thought important out. She ended her tale with the Tree of Harmony's confusion and subsequent calling of the six of them. "So evidently we are supposed to do something with this mysterious artifact here in the castle. All of us. So... ideas?"

"You already shot down the hammer idea," Pinkie said.

"Yes, Pinkie, I did." Most mares would be fed up with Pinkie at this point, but Twilight said these words without a hint of venom at all - though the words did come with a slight tone of impatience.

"You said it was like teleportin'," Applejack said.

"Yes. But it definitely isn't exactly that and I cannot recall another spell like it."

Fluttershy raised a wing. Twilight nodded in her direction. "Well, I was thinking... Maybe it does something similar to teleporting because it's similar to it? I mean, I don't know much about magic, but that's how it works right?"

Twilight nodded with a smile. "Yes, that is how it works Fluttershy. You've been paying attention to my ramblings haven't you?"

"Yes," Fluttershy said, slightly embarrassed.

"Not wise," Rainbow Dash commented. "Her egghead talk will melt your brain eventually."

"I can confirm..." Rarity mentioned, remembering her own times she had tried to parse through what Twilight was saying when she was in one of her science moods. It got far too complicated far too quickly. The worst of those talks had been when Twilight had tried to activate that darn...

"...Mirror Portal!" Rarity blurted out, shattering her calm stance for a moment.

Twilight blinked. "What about it?"
Rarity regained control of her posture. "When you were working on it... The main spell wasn't teleportation, was it?"

"No... No it wasn't!" Twilight lit up. "Now that I think about it, there aren't crystal people anywhere on Equis at all, is there Rarity?"

"Oh, I'm told there are golems around - surprised you haven't heard of them, dear - but I'd have heard about a glowing man-thing made of sapphires if such a thing did exist. Or Lyra would have anyway, you know her."

"That means..." Twilight levitated the bowling ball in front of her face. "This is probably a world-mirror. A portable one... That can probably go lots of places! But how? There's not enough power and the spell isn't quite right... Maybe it's broken? Incomplete?"

"Hey, Twi?" Rainbow Dash asked. "I'm no mage, but didn't you say it might react with something earlier? Why not bring it to the Mirror Portal, see what happens?"

Pinkie gasped. "Genius!"

Twilight smirked. "Good idea Rainbow." Rarity knew Twilight had been about to suggest such a thing herself but was letting Rainbow Dash take the credit anyway. In a way, Rainbow deserved it, she had spoken first after all. Rarity took pride in bringing up the Mirror Portal, though she briefly wondered if Twilight had thought of that first as well... Probably not, given how confused her reaction had been.

"To the east wing!!" Twilight shouted, dashing out of the meeting room in a decidedly not graceful manner. She passed her number one assistant - a small purple dragon by the name of Spike - leaving him in the dust. Pinkie and Rainbow Dash's hurry to get going made the poor scaled boy fall over, his green spines folding against the floor.

Rarity trotted up to him, trying not to chuckle at his adorable struggling. "Spikey... you okay dear?"

"Just... fine!" he said. He meant it, though Rarity could tell his head was sore. "You six got another friendship problem to deal with?"

Rarity frowned. "Something tells me it's different this time... We're going to the Mirror Portal for a look-see. We may be down there a while. Think you could bring us some tea?"

"Sure thing! Be ready in a jiff!"

Rarity smiled warmly. "Thank you." She left Spike to his business and trotted after the other five mares. She was still careful to move with style, though 'careful' was perhaps misleading, seeing as it was second nature to her at this point. She still wasn't sure why she was giving it such a fuss earlier.

She arrived fashionably late in a wing of the castle littered with books, scrolls, and a magic mirror augmented with dozens of unusual magical devices that Rarity couldn't even begin to guess the function of. She knew that altogether they allowed the Mirror Portal to function when the stars weren't aligned, to ensure the portal between worlds was permanent. Rarity herself had never been through the portal - only Twilight and Pinkie had, along with their mutual friend Starlight Glimmer. They had told Rarity of a world much like their own, except filled with humans, technology, and an almost nonexistent level of magic. She had often considered going herself to meet these human creatures who always wore clothing and had hands, but she'd never gotten around to it. Maybe she would today, assuming something didn't go terribly wrong.

She wasn't all that bothered by the idea of something going terribly wrong anyway. Yet another
thing she had gotten somewhat used to over the years - though she never stopped gasping and freaking out a bit when it did happen.

Celestia, her life was strange.

She turned her attention to Twilight - she and Fluttershy were touching the bowling ball to the Mirror to no effect.

"Try harder," Rainbow Dash suggested.

"No..." Twilight said, furrowing her brow in concentration. "I think... It's something else... The spells aren't the same - close, but not the same..."

"Why's that?" Rarity asked.

"I don't know... They're really close now that I compare them - I'm certain this ball has some effect like that of a Starswirl Mirror, but the spell's just... off. And too weak..."

"Maybe it's customizable," Pinkie said, slurping on a blue slushy. "Choose your destination kind of thing."

Twilight blinked. "Pinkie, you are a genius. That's what all the lights are for, selecting - no, wait, they don't alter the spell..."

"But maybe you can dear," Rarity suggested. "If any mage can figure out how to alter a spell, it's you."

Twilight looked into Rarity's eyes and nodded with conviction. She stared at the bowling ball - then the Mirror - then the sphere. Everypony fell silent. They knew what was coming.

Twilight was about to get an idea. And then they would be able to start.

"Got it!" Twilight shouted. Then, without explaining what she was doing, she removed a glass jar from a device on the Mirror Portal's back. Inside the jar was a strange blue magic gas. Twilight set it aside and created an identical, empty jar from the aetherm placing it where the old jar had been and filled it with a gray magic mist, her grin widening as she did so. "Just copy and paste..."

"Uh... What?" Applejack said.

"Computer thing," Pinkie answered as if this explained everything. All it did was let everypony know they shouldn't ask further.

"Strong spell... Mirror..." Twilight muttered, levitating a few tools to her from a nearby box, tightening a few bolts on the Mirror and running magic energies through several magic artifacts. She smirked. "And... Done..." She pressed her hoof to the shimmering surface of the Mirror.

She didn't pass through. It was solid.

"Oh come on!" she shouted. "That should work! I mean - I had it optimized and everything..."

"What did you do?" Fluttershy asked.

Twilight frowned, looking right at the bowling ball. "I put the spell from in here into the Mirror and tried to 'set' it to Earth... But it didn't stick. It's missing something..." She levitated the strange sphere back to her eyes. "Something..."
Pinkie touched the ball lighting up a single square. She looked at Twilight with a knowing gaze. Twilight's eyes sparkled with another idea. She levitated the ball over to the Mirror, touching the two artifacts together. Several squares lit up on the ball, all in a sequence. Twilight grinned. "Aha!"

And then all six of them were gone in an instant, leaving the Mirror Portal behind.

Spike came down with a tray of piping hot tea three minutes later. He frowned at the lack of ponies to give it to.

Eventually, he shrugged and decided it meant more tea for him. And Starlight, assuming he could find her.

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It was the apotheosis of all jungles. Humid, green, and full of the squawking of numerous colorful birds. Distant calls and roars from other, larger animals came from afar. The large, dripping leaves of the many trees rustled in the soft breeze, their water returning to the air as the sun beat down on their canopy. The dirt below wasn't muddy, merely damp and covered with morning bugs.

It was in this jungle six equine friends appeared, three feet above the soil below. Rarity and Pinkie were the only ones who landed on their hooves - though Rainbow Dash was spared the indignity of a faceful of dirt since her default state was hovering.

"I suppose it worked then," Rarity observed.

"Sorta..." Twilight muttered, standing up and wiping the bugs off her face. "I was trying to activate the mirror and not the ball... But it apparently reacted with the altered spell I made and used it itself..." She lifted the ball and studied it. "There was a sudden surge of extreme power within it. I have no idea where it came from..."

"So... This is Earth?" Applejack asked.

Twilight frowned. "Well, I suppose there probably is a jungle somewhere on Earth, but I thought the portal had to take us to Canterlot High..."

Pinkie Pie took a cell phone out of her mane. "No signal. Or GPS signal. Angry birds still works though."

Twilight was only mildly surprised Pinkie had gotten ahold of a cell phone. "Well... it's not Earth then. Somewhere else. I can tell you we aren't in Equestria either - the magic feels off. Only slightly, though."

"Awesome! A brand new frontier!" Rainbow Dash raised a hoof and grinned. "We'll be like Daring Do and explore the jungle!"

"Rainbow..." Fluttershy began. "Shouldn't we get our bearings first? See if... Twilight can take us home?"

Twilight's pupils shrunk to pinpricks.

"Oh..." Fluttershy put a hoof to her mouth.

"Twi? Ah don't like that look..." Applejack commented.

"I... I have no idea if I can..." Twilight said. "I was scanning what was going on, yes... I have the
spell to bring us here. But I can’t channel that much power and I need the reverse spell."

Fluttershy whimpered. "We’re... Stuck here?"

"Nonononono," Twilight said, voice wavering considerably. "I just need to... figure out a solution!" She lifted the sphere into the air. "This thing is the key. It can help us get home. Just need to press the right buttons!"

Rainbow Dash raised an eyebrow. "Isn't it just as likely to take us somewhere else?"

"Not if I figure it out!" Twilight said. She lit her horn, overlaying the spell she put in the Mirror Portal over the sphere, and the same lights from earlier lit up. Nothing happened - probably because they were already in the location selected. "Now just to figure out what all this means..." She stared at the sphere blankly for several seconds.

"Er, anythin' we can do to help with that Twi?" Applejack asked.

"...Not really, no, sorry." Twilight smiled sheepishly. "Don't worry though! Totally got this!"

Applejack raised an incredulous eyebrow but said nothing.

"Can we go exploring then Twi?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"...Sure, this will take a while anyway. I'll find you when I'm done. Don't go too far."

"Got it," Rainbow Dash saluted. "Good luck Twilight!"

Twilight nodded, turning the sphere over in her magic.

Pinkie Pie bounded after Rainbow Dash. "Yay! Exploring!"

Fluttershy followed. "I can't wait to see the animals here..."

Applejack took up the rear. "Rarity? You comin'?"

"Oh no, I think I'll stay here and not romp through the filthy jungle. You girls have a good time though! I'll just stay with Twilight."

Applejack nodded. "Alright. See you." They left, heading into the deep foliage.

Twilight looked up at Rarity. "...Thanks. I'm going to need somepony to bounce ideas off of and keep me... calm."

"Don't mention it, dear. I may not be a magical scholar, but I know a few tricks." She frowned. "...Do you really think you can figure this thing out?"

"Not completely. But I might be able to pretend and get something that works. First I have to figure out why we’re not on Earth. It was almost the exact same spell the Mirror Portal would have used, just altered from the spell in the ball. It should have worked as a test run, just to see if..." She trailed off into ramblings and mumbles. She summoned a black notebook and pen with her magic and began to frantically scribble.

Rarity gracefully sat down, watching Twilight closely. Soon her circular magic diagrams evolved far beyond Rarity's understanding, reaching levels of complexity Rarity had only glimpsed at the back of Magic textbooks as examples of high magic. Rarity didn't say anything or ask any questions - she'd wait for Twilight to indicate it was time for that. The two just sat in the clearing; one patient, one
working furiously.


Despite the attitude she’d displayed to Twilight, Rainbow Dash wasn't completely calm about the situation - they might be stuck on some alien world for Celestia's sake! However, she had put on a mask to keep this line of thought deep within herself. Their chances of getting home were much better if Twilight had space to think, to solve the problem without constant interruptions and stressors. Rainbow Dash knew full well she was the primary source of interruptions and distractions, so she had provided a reason to get out of there.

Who am I kidding I wanted to explore, to find something new and exciting.

That most certainly was true, but Rainbow Dash still knew it was better this way. She and her friends could have an adventure in this world and get back home!

Hopefully.

She tried hard not to think about the possibility of not making it back home.

Applejack was currently making that difficult.

"We should look for firewood," she said.

"Why?" Rainbow Dash muttered.

"Cause we might be here a while - Ah don't wanna be caught after dark without a fire."

"Twilight will get us home long before then. Do you see the sun here? Early morning."

"It might take us all day to find firewood in this damp jungle, Rainbow."

"Exactly why we shouldn't waste valuable adventuring time on finding firewood."

Fluttershy spoke up. "Ricaduro says there's a bunch of dry wood a little ways to the east. Easy to get to."

Rainbow Dash blinked. "...Who?"

Fluttershy lifted a wing, showcasing a tropical bird the size of her head happily perched among her feathers. He had a blue-red complexion and a double-pronged beak that made it hard to tell exactly where his mouth was. He squawked.

"Well now we know Fluttershy has a way with animals here too," Rainbow Dash said, smirking. "And we don't have to collect firewood now."

Applejack let out an annoyed break. "Right. We could look for shelter then..."

Pinkie groaned. "AJ! Stop being so... so... practical. Have some fun! Just... Look at this, for instance!" She ran up to a bright orange seven-petal flower that was twice as large as she was. "Isn't this just beautiful?"

Rainbow Dash had to admit, the orange flower was rather impressive. The patterns on it reminded her of a tiger, though perhaps one whose skin had been through a blender. The thing felt predatory.

Applejack nodded slowly. "Ah s’pose so... Ah didn't think flowers got that big."
Fluttershy shrugged. "Ricaduro says it isn't even the biggest he's seen. Apparently, the 'red creatures' live in a much larger one."

"Oooh! Where's that?" Rainbow Dash asked.

Fluttershy conversed with Ricaduro for a few seconds. "Not far. To the north a little ways. He doesn't want to go there - they eat birds."

Rainbow Dash grinned. "Well, you could keep them under control right?"

"Probably," Fluttershy said. "I'm going to let Ricaduro go anyway though, he's got a family to get back to."

"Mission acquired: find red creatures!" Pinkie announced. She put on a safari hat. "Thataway!"

Fluttershy waved bye to Ricaduro and followed Pinkie. Rainbow Dash flew overhead while Applejack took up the rear.

Rainbow Dash attempted to imagine a bunch of red creatures living in a giant flower. What came to mind first was a giant rose in which a bunch of red diamond dogs lived, except they had cat ears for some reason. She chuckled at the image.

"I think they'll be big bugs," Pinkie said suddenly.

"Ah'm goin' for... Yaks," Applejack offered. Everyone turned to Fluttershy, expecting a response from her.

"Oh, I already know what they look like, Ricaduro told me the basics."

"Who's closest?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"Pinkie. But she's off by a-"

Pinkie held up a hoof. "Don't tell us. Let us be surprised!"

"Oh. Okay then."

Rainbow Dash was now imagining giant red crickets living in a rose. Not as funny of an image, so she added the cat ears again just for the heck of it, bringing a smirk to her face. Applejack apparently had a similarly amusing image in her mind, failing completely to hold her chuckle in. Fluttershy just gave them odd looks and shook her head.

They walked for a while longer - maybe an hour, they weren't really sure. They'd forgotten completely about 'not going far' now that they had a destination. They talked on and off about the jungle, adventure, and other random things that were rather pointless. But that's what friends do - talk about pointless things and laugh and bond.

They mostly forgot that they were stuck in an alien world because of it. They had each other and were easily distracted by the many amazing sights - the flora, the fauna, and the sky whenever it could be seen through the treetops. They made out two moons in the blue heavens, one the smooth silvery orb they remembered from home, the other a smaller, blue sphere that was somewhat hard to see against the sky.

"You know," Pinkie said, "The humans of earth actually went to their moon in a big rocket."

"Ain't no way," Applejack said.
"Oh, it happened! There were pictures, video, everything! They even brought moon rocks back!"

"Ah'll believe it when Ah see it."

Rainbow Dash chuckled. "You hear that ponies? Applejack just got a one-way ticket to Earth!"

"Ah, apples."

"I hear it's nice there," Fluttershy said. "I bet you'd like it once you went!"

"Too many fancy gizmos Ah think."

"Fancy gizmos are the way of the future!" Pinkie giggled

Their conversation of moons, men, and moments was interrupted by a pony that stepped out of the foliage, stepping in front of them. She was an earth pony - pink, blue eyes, cotton candy mane. She lacked a mark on her flank, but otherwise her smooth face and vibrant body were exactly like Pinkie's at first glance. Upon closer inspection, a few differences could be seen - her forehead was a bit too large and bony, for one. But it was her eyes that got to all of them. The orbs stared with a vacant expression, eyes missing most of the light that Pinkie's had to them.

Rainbow Dash, Applejack, and Fluttershy backed up a bit, the mare's presence unnerving them. Something felt wrong.

Pinkie Pie just smiled. "Hi! I'm Pinkie Pie! Who are you?"

The other pink pony just neighed. Pinkie's smile faltered. "Uh..."

Fluttershy put a hoof to her mouth. "Oh... My... She... Uh... She just asked us why we weren't with the herd like... like an animal would."

"Okay, that just made this creepier..." Rainbow Dash muttered. "Uh... No offense," she told the other Pinkie. The mare's expression did not change. She simply did not have the mental capacity to understand language. She finally walked around the group, heading for Fluttershy.

"Er..." Fluttershy took a few steps back. "Uh... Hi. What should I call you?"

The pony - no, animal - had no concept of a name besides 'me' and 'pink'.

Normally at this point Fluttershy would just give out a name, but she couldn't bring herself to name a pony - especially because she just wanted to call her 'Other Pinkie.' Fluttershy shivered.

"Uh... How 'bout Cotton Candy?" Applejack suggested. The other Pinkie turned to look at Applejack blankly. She seemed satisfied with the suggestion somehow.

Fluttershy nodded slowly. "Yes... That'll do. Cotton," she had to force herself to say it, "where's the herd?"

Cotton understood Fluttershy like virtually all animals did and gestured with her muzzle (as opposed to her hoof) towards the north. The same direction they were already headed.

Nopony paused to consider what this might mean.

Cotton seemed to sense it was time to move on. She turned and headed north without another noise. Pinkie followed without question, bouncing after her other self. The other mares exchanged confused glances with each other before following themselves.
Rainbow Dash flew alongside Pinkie. "This... This... She is..."

"Bizarre? I know right! Feral, animalistic ponies in this other world! Who knows what other strange stuff there is?"

Rainbow Dash blinked. "How can you be okay with... With..." She glanced at Cotton.

"Dashie, she can't understand you, only Fluttershy. You don't need to feel nervous around her."

Rainbow Dash shook her head. "That. How can you do that?"

"Do what?" Pinkie asked, an innocent look on her face.

"...It's been maybe two minutes since we met this pony who looks almost exactly like you, can't talk, and acts like an animal! It's not just weird, it's disturbing."

The pony's head was turned, but Rainbow Dash remembered those eyes nonetheless. They were bright, blue, but not full of the *spark*. The spark she'd seen in every pony she ever met - a spark she hadn't even been consciously aware of until today. Looking into the gaze of a pony and *not* seeing it really brought it to the forefront...

"I guess I'm just used to other versions of me already. Earth Pinkie, the many Mirror Pool Pinkies... You know."

"None of them were animals were they?"

Fluttershy shot Rainbow Dash an annoyed look but said nothing.

Pinkie pursed her lips. "Well... It is a little creepy to tell you the truth, but, you know, no point in getting freaked out about it. And - oh! Idea! Cotton!"

Cotton didn't turn - she was unable to recognize her name just yet seeing as she had only just gotten it. Pinkie didn't care. She rushed to the front and gave her a cupcake. "Here! I bet you've never had one of these before!"

Cotton poked her nose at the cupcake and sniffed deeply. The sweet aroma made Cotton's eyes dilate - she ate the entire thing in one gulp, paper and all. Pinkie giggled, patting her on the head. "Good girl."

Applejack blinked. Then she blinked again. "Well, Ah'll be, that's certainly not something anypony ever thinks they'll see."

Fluttershy nodded slowly. "...Yeah..." She took a deep breath and walked over to Cotton. "Hey there."

Cotton met Fluttershy's gaze with her own. Fluttershy flinched, but kept her eyes up and moved closer. "You... You are a good girl aren't you?"

Cotton made a satisfied whinnying sound. Fluttershy scratched her behind the ear, making the pink back leg thump the ground much like that of a rabbit's. Fluttershy smiled.

Rainbow Dash looked at Applejack. "...They're going mental."

"Ah can't bring myself to disagree..." Applejack responded.

"You know if there's a version of Pinkie..."
"Ah know. Ah hope we don't run into 'em."

Rainbow Dash shivered, suddenly enjoying the adventure a lot less. They set out once more to the north, conversation dwindling considerably.

Rainbow Dash was the one who heard it first; a muffled thump followed by a rustle. Her ears perked up and she heard it again. "Hey guys? I hear something."

"What are-" then Pinkie heard the thump as well. Her ears swiveled to the south. "Oh. That."

Cotton fixed Pinkie with a puzzled look. The next thump all of them heard - and Cotton's demeanor changed instantly from puzzled to panic. She ran - bolting into the foliage, leaving the other four far behind.

"Skittish," Rainbow Dash said. "Think we should run?"

There was no time to discuss - the owner of the thumps had increased its pace after Cotton bolted, making no more attempts to muffle the huge steps. The tremendous noise shook the jungle, sending chills of fear into the ponies. Birds squawked in panic and flew away into the sky. Applejack had just decided to turn tail when the thing burst through the trees, bellowing a roar loud enough to make Rainbow Dash wince.

It was tall, almost taller than the trees, and heavily built. There were two gigantic scaled feet and a meaty trailing tail at the bottom. The tiny arms would have made it less impressive had the claws affixed to them not been bloody and jagged, shifting almost naturally to the orange color of the beast's main body. The head of the beast dwarfed everything else about the creature - it was square-set, lined with perhaps hundreds of jagged bone-teeth, and had a predatory eye on either side of the face. The orbs were locked right onto its prey: four succulent ponies.

Rainbow Dash thought it looked like those pictures of a T-Rex she'd seen in dinosaur books, though the face was a little off.

The reptile leaned down, jaws open, preparing to scoop Pinkie into its mouth. She screamed, running off at high - and impossible - speeds to the north. Rainbow Dash and Applejack snapped out of their paralysis to enter a new phase of fear: the flight response. The beast pursued them as they ran. It only got six steps before Fluttershy flew in front of its face and Stared into its eyes with her own, making sure it saw her intense disapproving gaze. The apex predator comically stopped in its tracks and whimpered in her presence.

"It's okay, you were just looking for food," Fluttershy said, easing off her Stare. "But I couldn't let you eat my friends. Sorry. Say, we..." She glanced behind her. Her friends were long gone. "...I could help you find some food in return. What do you like to eat?"

The beast growled.

"...Besides ponies, okay?" Fluttershy shivered at the thought, painfully realizing that the wild ponies here were just another part of the natural food chain. That'd take considerable effort to get used to. "Anything else?"

He grunted.

"I have no idea what a Marm is, but okay, let's go hunting for one." She cocked her head. "Do you have a name?"

He did not.
"Well, then you are Rexy. Let's go Rexy! Also, don't go that way, we don't want to scare Twilight."

Rexy didn't mind going another direction. He marched through the jungle with a pegasus on his head. Neither of them thought this was odd. Rexy because he wasn't that smart, and Fluttershy because she had dealt with more than a few apex predators in her time. This included dragons, though they were more people than animals, less susceptible to the Stare. Not that she liked using it even on animals. Only when needed.

They continued on, both blissfully unaware of how much they were throwing the rest of the jungle for a loop.

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Twilight was not pleased with her current situation. She and her friends were stuck in some alien jungle impossibly far from home. There was no sign of any civilization whatsoever and she had heard dozens of low, guttural, predatory calls that made her hair stand on end. That wasn't the worst part though - she was fairly certain she and her friends could take care of themselves - but that she had no idea what had even happened.

She went over the events in her head again - the Mirror was unable to open the connection she had set for whatever reason, so she'd touched the sphere to it and the sphere had connected - she had no idea how - and drew power from itself somehow to open the portal. But there was no spell to bring that energy, and she didn't know of any non-magical power source that powerful. It baffled her, that power. It had exceeded even that of the Mirror itself. Ten times stronger! How was that even possible?

An idea came to her suddenly. She opened a notebook and scribbled down some numbers - yes, there it was. The Mirror Portal hadn't had enough energy to establish a connection, just like it had been before she added all the extra devices to it, back when it had to wait for the Stars to align to get enough magic. But she knew the Mirror had enough energy to reach Earth at the moment... ...Wait, what if it just required more energy to come here? Wherever here was. That made some sense - maybe some worlds were more 'distant' than others. But the question remained: she had set the destination as Earth. Why didn't they come to Earth? Why-

"The transformation enchantment!" she shouted suddenly.

Rarity looked up from one of Twilight's discarded notebooks. "Did you figure it out?"

"I know why we're here and not on Earth - the Mirror Portal's spell has an enchantment that transforms you to an 'appropriate' form, giving you a sort of 'vortex' effect before you arrive while it changes your body. But we didn't experience that when we came here, we were just here. The ball read the spell I gave it without consideration for possible enchantments - it treated it like a normal Mirror spell and found a different set of coordinates! These coordinates!"

She pulled out the ball. "I can just remove the transformation matrix from the spell and use the ball to go directly to Earth! Give me a sec..."

"...Shouldn't we find the others?"

"If this works I can just make us come right back..." She altered the spell inside the sphere to her liking, sure it was connected to Earth now, and... ...nothing happened.

"...You know, it occurs to me that the presence of the Mirror Portal itself may have activated it or something." Twilight sighed. "We don't know how to use this thing by itself..."
"Well, you know the right spell now. Can you cast it?"

Twilight pondered this. "I... Well if I was going from Equestria to Earth I'm sure I could, now that I have it. It'd take considerable effort, but I'd manage. However... It took a lot more energy than I thought to get here. Maybe if I train myself more I could produce that much... But not right now. I'd probably have to spend weeks doing nothing but practicing my magic. And even that's just a maybe."

Rarity shook her head. "Please tell me there's a plan B, I don't want to live in this jungle for weeks, darling."

"I know. The other option is to find another source of power. I think a physical Element of Harmony would do it."

"So we need to find some magic artifact then? Rainbow's going to love this."

Twilight nodded. "Here's to hoping there's some ancient ruins we can plunder. Or, Plan C, figure out where this thing got its power from."

"That's probably a dead end. We should just find the others and start looking."

Twilight nodded, folding up all her notebooks and creating a simple knapsack. She stuck the ball and books in and slung it over her back. "Let's go. Hope they're all doing okay."

"They're all capable of taking care of themselves, dear."

~~~

Pinkie Pie knew the T-Rex (it wasn't really a T-Rex, but she didn't care) had stopped chasing them long ago. She just didn't see any reason to stop running - it was fun!

She supposed Rainbow Dash and Applejack were still terrified - but she wasn't sure she could stop them just by saying the T-Rex was gone. Plus, Applejack was so far behind them she'd be out of earshot anyway. Pinkie had ways to make her hear, but that'd just be petty in the end. Best to just leave it alone. Pinkie did had to admit they couldn't run forever. She just wasn't expecting what it was that stopped them - a sight so out of left field that her jaw dropped.

Rainbow Dash halted as well - more impressive than Pinkie’s instant stop since she was flying and didn't have the ground's assistance. They saw two more ponies - one they didn't recognize and an earth pony version of Rainbow Dash, both standing near a large tree. This sight alone would have stopped Rainbow Dash - but it was the other half of the scene that stopped Pinkie.

The ponies had riders.

The riders were tall, lanky creatures with two legs and four arms. They had no skin or hair; instead they were covered head to foot in brittle red carapaces. One of the riders was a dark pink shade, the other a blood red. Their hands had three fingers, each of the digits resembling a grasshopper leg. Their own legs were like that of an ostrich, bent backward in a painful looking configuration so their feet wouldn't drag on the ground while they rode the ponies.

Then there was their face.

It was like a mask. A flat, red mask with four eyeholes and angular spines off the top and sides. There was a small opening under the pointed bottom - presumably a mouth - where two mandibles hung out.
Pinkie stared at the eyes. The eyes had the *spark* in them.

The redder one glared at them, then back at the pink rider. It spoke with a series of musical clicking sounds that were obviously a language of some sort. The pink one responded with a shrug.

"Hey girls, what did you find here?" Applejack asked, catching up with them. She saw the riders. They saw her. They heard her voice. They saw her hat. A hat obviously designed for the head of a pony. There was silence for a second.

The red one leaped off his pony and thrust a spear in their direction threateningly, saying something they couldn't understand but obviously wasn't a friendly hello.

Rainbow Dash narrowed her eyes. "Oh you want a *fight* do you?" She flared her wings. "Well-"

"Dashie, no," Pinkie said. "I... I think these things are dangerous. *Really* dangerous. They'd be able to hurt us."

Applejack gulped, nodding. "They... They do look pointy in a lot of places..."

Rainbow Dash stood down, lowering her wings. The red rider didn't. He spoke some more, and the pink one tossed him some rope.

"Aw heck no!" Rainbow Dash shouted. "You are *not* tying me up!"

The red rider moved quickly, touching the spear to Rainbow Dash's neck, coming as close as possible to drawing blood. Rainbow Dash froze.

"Rainbow..." Applejack said. "Let's just do what he says and hope the others find us."

Rainbow Dash nodded extremely slowly. The red rider took this as a sign to tie the rope around her midsection, an act the being had evidently done many times before seeing as it only took a few seconds. Applejack and Pinkie were next, taking even less time due to the lack of wings. Pinkie's smile was gone, replaced with a face of worry and barely contained panic. They were being captured by the *red creatures*. By *aliens*.

That was both cool and terrifying at the same time.
They did go this way, right?"

Rarity fixed her friend of many years with an 'are you serious?' look.

"Sorry," Twilight recanted. "It's just... I don't know where they went and... Yes I know I should trust you more."

Rarity shrugged, carefully stepping over a dampened area of the ground. "No need to apologize Twilight, I understand you're anxious. They'll be fine. They probably already found some ancient temple or something and are finding us a powerful magical artifact as we speak."

"Knowing them they probably found something at least," Twilight admitted. "Though it can't be that easy to find a magical artifact..."

Rarity raised an incredulous eyebrow.

"Who am I kidding, if we were home I could find several dozen of them without much effort at all. If we get home we won't be hurting for a power source to use this spell. Celestia could probably just cast it. The problem here is that we don't know the lay of the land." At this, she tripped over a lone tree root and fell right into the soil below, sending bugs scurrying. "Eeeech..." she muttered.

Rarity huffed. "We're going to get extremely filthy out here... We should have just waited for them."

"I left a note. We should be fine. I'll know if anypony finds it and then we can just teleport back. I do know that clearing."

Rarity nodded, making sure to twist her head so a nearby branch wouldn't tussle her mane further. "To be honest I'd just rather not tromp through a jungle where there are dozens of shifty roots waiting to trip me. Not to mention whatever's been making those noises."

"I have enough magic to protect us and Fluttershy's with the others, so there's nothing we should worry about from any sort of predators." And yet I'm finding myself regretting letting them go... I'm afraid there's something I didn't think about. I was too fixated on the problem... Maybe I still am.

Rarity put a hoof on Twilight. "Hey, don't beat yourself up. You did figure out what was going on and have a few ideas for solutions. We're no longer completely lost here."

"Yeah... You're right," Twilight nodded, swatting away a mosquito. "Just need to find it... Or them... Or both."

"Preferably both," Rarity said. She looked up at the sky. "Huh. There's a second moon up there."

Twilight stopped in her tracks and stared up into the sky. A stupid grin covered her face. She tried to say something but all that came out was vaguely wordlike noises. Her inner thoughts weren't much more coherent - stuck on MOON MOON MOON and many questions about what the second moon meant in an indecipherable ball. Were there two Lunas in this world? Did it orbit under gravity like Earth's moon? If that was the case, how did the gravity work? Why was it blue of all colors?

"Twilight, you've stopped moving."
"Oh!" Twilight blushed. "Yes, sorry. But, two moons! Or more we can't see right now! It's like something from a book!" She squealed. "When we get home I think we'll be coming back here a lot just to learn more..."

Rarity smirked. "I don't believe I'll be joining you unless there's something here besides jungle."

Twilight pointed at the blue moon with her wing.

"Dear, we can't go to the moon."

"Well, yes, but it could be studied."

"Twilight, you're the scientist."

Twilight nodded in mild disappointment. "I wonder if Sunset'll be interested..."

"Probably," Rarity admitted. "As well as the other you."

"Ah, yeah, Sparky will be really interested in this..."

"...Sparky?" Rarity said, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, I don't call her Twilight," Twilight laughed. "She calls me Twinkie though, so there's that."

Rarity chuckled, putting a hoof over her mouth. "I can't believe I've never heard about this before."

"It's a thing we agreed to more recently. It's really annoying calling with 'Twilight! No, other Twilight!' all the time. I don't know how Pinkie manages. I think the two of them switch places sometimes."

Rarity pondered Twilight's thought on Pinkie. "While that would explain many things it raises just as many if not more questions," she chuckled to herself. "Why-"

Rarity tripped over a loose root as she laughed, shifting from cries of amusement to cries of dread (and then disgust) rather quickly. Her face hit the soil, agitating more than a few resting bugs.

Twilight's snickering devolved into open laughter as Rarity squealed and jumped up, waving her hooves around in a haphazard panic, flinging the bugs in her mane everywhere.

"Heh - never change, Rarity. Never change."

~~~

Applejack decided quickly that she hated being led by a rope. It was uncomfortable, undignified, and unbearable. She knew that was probably the point but that didn't stop her from growling, stomping her hooves in annoyance, and spitting none-too-kind insults at the demons whenever she could. She almost wished they could understand her.

Pinkie and Rainbow Dash had looked at her with inscrutable expressions when she'd called them demons aloud but as far as Applejack was concerned that's what these things were. Red, ugly, deadly, and violent - already the red one had punched the pink one a number of times. Notably few of those instances had resulted in the pink one's 'laughter' - which was a strange twittering noise that gave Applejack goosebumps.

The two demons also weren't stupid. Despite having their backs to the three of them most of the time, they still managed to keep a close eye, looking back whenever Applejack was thinking about making
a go for one of them. The red one just seemed to know what she was thinking. For all she knew he could, which wasn't a pleasant thought. The pink one wasn't as logically minded - staring more at Rainbow Dash's wings and at the earth pony he was riding that was Rainbow Dash's mane but without wings. Even though he had no facial expressions Applejack could tell he was very confused. A silver lining in this mess, she supposed.

Regardless, to her, they were demons until they did anything that gave her another idea.

Applejack turned to look at her two friends. Rainbow Dash's wings were tied up, so there was little the pegasus could do. Applejack knew Pinkie could get out whenever she wanted. She had chosen to stay tied up with a grimace on her face. Applejack got the impression that Pinkie was more aware of the danger than the rest of them. She wasn't afraid of the demons though - she was afraid of Applejack trying something. She wouldn't come out and admit it, but Applejack knew. She had a hunch for these sorts of things.

So Applejack refrained from taking action, despite all the times she wanted to. She knew Rainbow Dash would have definitely tried something by now had her wings been free. She supposed they all were lucky the feathery limbs were pinned.

Applejack growled again. "Ah don't like this Pinkie.... Ah really think we should..."

"Shooooosh Applejack," Pinkie said. "We don't want to anger these people."

"Demons."

Pinkie shook her head. "People, Applejack. They talk, laugh, play, yell, and throw big festivals that involve giant red rubber balls! ...You know, probably. Who can say really about festivals?"

Rainbow Dash grunted. "They can still be people and evil. Ponies aren't always nice either, as we all know."

Pinkie sighed. "We should still give them a chance."

"They've tied us up, Pinkie," Applejack said. "Ah'm running a little low on chances to give here."

Pinkie shrugged. "Just keep doin' what they ask. We don't want to get one of their spears pointed at us again. That wouldn't be very fun!" She smirked. "Though I could make it fun if they let me, just need to sew streamers and a party blower onto it... Probably some cotton candy for decoration..."

Applejack tuned Pinkie's musings out, moving on to study the demons once again. Much of their armor was natural carapace, including their 'face'. Some of the arms and shoulders had complex engravings in them that might have been symbols with meaning or just complex patterns they carved into their own limbs for fun. These symbols were also on their chestpieces, which were artificial, made of some dull leather that was painted the color of the wearer.

The pink one caught her staring. She looked away - those four-eyed heads were just disturbing on so many levels it wasn't even close to funny, no matter what Pinkie said.

They rode in silence until they could see their destination.

It was a flower the size of a small town. It needed to be that size since a town was built on top of the red daisy. The flower with a few hundred more petals than a proper daisy had any right to have. Applejack had to admit the tremendous flora was glamorous, even if its design bugged her for some reason she couldn't discern. The buildings built onto the flower were very primitive - all made of wood and leaves, most little more than tents. There were a few dozen demons in the village, ranging
in color from a pale pink to an almost black red. Some of them had large, brilliant wings - probably the females, though this was just Applejack's guess. She was going off her knowledge of ants, which admittedly was spotty at best, though much better than the two ponies she was with. Only a few of the females used the wings, presumably because they were really heavy creatures so it would take a lot of energy to stay in the air.

There were no trees on the flower so the entire town was in the brilliant sun, shade only provided by carefully erected leaf umbrellas, of which there were a dozen or so mixed among the various tents. There were also about twenty 'tamed' ponies in town, a few of which were being ridden around. A couple others of which were being kept in pens like pigs.

Like pigs.

Applejack almost blew it when she saw herself - hatless and with the pronounced forehead - in one such pen, eating out of a trough. It was only Pinkie's steadying hoof that kept her pacified. "Things are... different here, Applejack!"

Applejack made no response beyond a single, long breath.

They were led into the center of town, on top of the fuzzy pollen-filled center. They drew quite the crowd, so much that the red demon had to keep moving the others away and shout something at them, but that only had a minimal effect on the citizens. They couldn't stop staring at Rainbow Dash’s wings - especially the children, whose shells looked considerably softer than the adults'.

"What are you looking at?" Rainbow Dash spat.

The demon crowd backed away at the words, scared of something that could speak.

"Don't worry!" Pinkie called in the friendliest tone she could manage. "We're just talking ponies! Not dangerous! Well not unless you catch Rainbow Dash on a bad day but that's beside the point!"

The words were meaningless to the demons and probably wouldn't have helped even if they were understood. The red demon yelled something out that calmed the crowd. He then yanked on the rope, dragging them the rest of the way to the center of town. Sitting in this prominent position was a tall circular hut crafted from expertly weaved dry grass, by far the largest building in town at the size of a large living room. The red and pink demons disembarked, tying their mounts to a nearby post and entering the hut, dragging Applejack and her friends with them.

The interior was well lit by a big crystal hanging from the ceiling. There was a bed, a chest, and a few sets of armor lying around. Sitting in the throne towards the back was the largest demon Applejack had seen yet - a bright crimson male with a tall staff in his hands. The wooden object was covered in markings similar to the ones found on his carapace, the weaving designs leading to the largest piece of jade Applejack had ever seen.

The red and pink demons fell to one knee and put two of their hands behind their head. They extended their other two and spoke one word - a word that sounded vaguely like 'Siron' through the clicks.

So this was their leader.

Siron.

He was one ugly customer, in both the literal and figurative sense.
The red demon spoke first - and for a somewhat long time - no doubt explaining what they had found and how these three 'pony prisoners' had acted. Siron just nodded occasionally and held his chin with his hand, giving the appearance of deep thought. Otherwise, his flat face made it impossible to read him.

The pink demon said little, and even then only when prompted to by the red one. The responses were short and simple - Applejack was fairly sure that "tach" and "mil" were "yes" and "no" thanks to him, but she had no idea which was which.

Eventually, Siron himself spoke. His 'voice' was significantly deeper than the two demons standing before him. He gestured towards the ponies - inviting them to do something. The pink demon tensed.

Applejack knew what he wanted - he wanted them to speak. She shut her mouth. Screw this, she wasn't doing anything these demons wanted.

"Hello, Mister Siron! I'm Pinkie Pie!" She extended a hoof. "I see we've gotten off on the wrong hoof, but I hope to change that!"

Siron was silent for a moment – then he made the sound Applejack had identified earlier as laughter. He stood up from his throne, a left hand gripping his staff tightly, a right one raised high into the air. A crimson aura surrounded the fingers, wafting around the digits like a soft flare. Applejack felt the rope around her tighten.

"He's got magic. He's going to kill us with it."

In an instant, the ropes disintegrated, freeing the ponies. "Yeah!" Rainbow Dash shouted, stretching her wings. "Siron rocks!"

Siron's legs buckled under him - it looked painful, but it was probably natural for him. He stuck a finger out to Pinkie's outstretched hoof and tapped it in greeting.

Pinkie grinned - and proceeded to show Siron how to properly hoofbump, curling his fingers into a fist and nudging it with her hoof. She giggled and Siron nodded.

He stood tall once again, dwarfing all present. He pointed at the ponies and spread his arms wide; making waving motions with the three that weren't holding the staff.

The meaning was clear. They were free to go. The red demon seemed irked by this, but something Siron said shut him up really fast. Siron pointed at the ponies again and made a shrugging motion, and did the reverse of his previous gesture, bringing his arms in. Then he laid his palms flat and made a circular motion.

Applejack frowned. "...What?"

Rainbow Dash smirked. "I think he just said we are welcome to stay if we want."

Pinkie blinked. "Oh. I thought he was offering us pie, but that does make more sense." She grinned, turning to Applejack.

Applejack sighed, laughing softly, almost out of breath. "All right, maybe they aren't demons."

"Can we stay?" Pinkie pleaded.

"Fine... We can stay for now. Twilight'll be in for a surprise when she finds us, eh?"
Rainbow Dash laughed. "Can't wait for that!"

~~~

Twilight found herself displeased with what she was looking at once again.

What kind of creature made a track this big? Something predatory, given the claw-like impressions of the toes and the distance between the tracks. She was no advanced tracker but she could make some simple deductions from what she saw. The thing had two legs, a tail, and was hunting.

The image that came to her mind first was that of a Tyrannosaurus Rex - but of course, that was silly, right?

...Dinosaurs might still walk the planet in other worlds...

She gulped. There were a lot of smaller tracks around the big ones, of which she could deduce little besides they were hoofprints. She could see several of them shooting off in one direction, more or less directly north. She couldn't make heads or tails of any other direction - not even which way the predator went.

"Well?" Rarity asked, nervous. Her face was still dirty from the fall a short while ago but she had managed to fully recover her eyelashes and reform her mane to a 'suitable' level of grace.

Twilight took a breath. "Well, they were here and a big predatory thing attacked them. At least some of them ran that direction. The creature... I have no idea where the creature went, but I don't see any big tracks where they fled, so that's good."

Rarity frowned. "Unless it can fly."

Twilight bit her lip. "...I think I'd be able to know if it took off flying here. The canopy's still intact..."

"Why wouldn't it chase them then?"

"Fluttershy's Stare?"

"Then why'd they even need to run?"

Twilight shook her head. "I don't know, Rarity. All I can tell you is what I see with my rather dubious tracking skills. Which is not much."

"It's okay. Just... Follow them then?"

Twilight nodded. "Hopefully we can find Applejack and she can put together this mess of trails. Or just tell us what happened... Splitting up was a really bad idea."

"That remains to be seen," Rarity reminded her. "We don't know what happened."

Twilight forced herself to accept the comforting remark. "Right. Right. Let's not keep them waiting. Who knows, we could meet them on their way back!"

~~~

The 'demon' village adjusted to the three unusual ponies rather quickly. Siron made a short announcement - barely two minutes - and things moved along at a quick pace. The children still couldn't take their eyes off the unusual ponies and although they weren't hiding in fear anymore, they wouldn't come close to the ponies either. The adults kept shooting the mares surprised glances but
nodded in their direction as though they were people, not animals. It was a much less hostile environment than it had been just a few minutes before.

Rainbow Dash liked the attention to the surprise of absolutely no one. She waved, grinned, and did numerous aerial tricks for the populace just to see their reactions. Granted, their faces were basically impossible to read, but there was always body language to go off of and Rainbow Dash decided that was good enough. She was the center of attention, and she loved it. This was likely because none of the animal ponies had wings or horns - not even the version of Twilight she had seen trotting around. Nothing but regular, cutie-markless ponies in the care of 'demons.'

Darn Applejack, naming them 'demons.' Now Rainbow Dash couldn't think of anything else to call them. It was still somewhat insulting to them, no matter how apt of a description the name was. The 'demons' were a rather violent people - fighting broke out every few minutes and at least two of those incidents hadn't been friendly sparring. Nobody had gotten seriously injured, but from what Rainbow Dash had seen she wouldn't put duels to the death past these people. The thought was both cool and terrifying, like that T-Rex from earlier.

Oh - Fluttershy! Where was she!?

The moment of panic subsided quickly - she probably tamed that big dinosaur easily. The three of them probably didn't even need to run into the hands of the demons. But had Rainbow Dash thought of that? No, not until now. She'd been in panic mode, which had quickly shifted into annoyed angry mode, and then to showoff mode. She hadn't really gotten a chance to think till now.

"Hey, we should probably go out- check for Fluttershy. We've been here a while."

"We'll head out soon," Applejack said. "Ah think a group of them are preparin' to go huntin', if Ah'm readin' Pink correctly. We could leave with them, have some protection."

Rainbow Dash raised an eyebrow. "Where?"

Applejack looked at Pink - the same pink-carapace demon that had helped capture them and had been with them ever since. (The other one, Red, had noticeably avoided the ponies at every turn.) Pink paused, trying to figure out what Applejack wanted. He eventually just shrugged and pointed to a barrel of apple-like fruit.

Applejack facehooved and shook her head. "No..."

"Tach," Pinkie said before pointing to a group of demons - two men and one woman - suiting up with weapons, chestpieces, and their pony mounts. Rainbow Dash tried not to look at the ponies too closely, especially the one that looked like her. She instead focused on the weapons. Most of them were spears, though she caught sight of a couple swords. One demon had a set of razor-sharp yo-yos she swung around with her four arms, mesmerizing Rainbow Dash with their cyclic motions. "Yep," she smiled. "That's them, that's the hunt. Totally going on that."

Applejack raised her eyebrows. "We aren't exactly hunters, Rainbow."

"Oh, Psh, I'm sure we can show them some fun things, right Pink?"

Pink looked at her and shrugged in bafflement.

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes at Pink and in the process noticed an almost-white demon coming up to her, a female with four blue, shimmering eyes. She had more designs etched into her carapace than most of the others, all variations of a diamond pattern not seen on any other demons. Even the usually untouched 'face' was covered in them, the etchings twisting all the way down to her toes.
Rainbow Dash waved at her and did an aerial frontflip, smirking.

The white woman - who Rainbow Dash was already calling White - raised her hand, creating a soft pink-white glow around her digits. Magic. Rainbow Dash had slowly become convinced that of all the demons, only Siron had magic, but before her was proof that the assumption was false. White's wings began to glow impressively with her magic energy, the power lifting her into the air as effortlessly as Rainbow Dash herself. She performed her own frontflip.

Rainbow Dash smirked. "Hey Pinkie! I think I've just been challenged!"

"Go easy on her at first, Dashie!"

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. "Okay fine." She stretched her hooves and wings - then launched into the air, stalled, and entered a controlled fall. She angled herself perfectly at the ground and pulled up at the last possible second, the tip of her tail touching the top of one giant petal. She arched upward into a loopdeloop and stopped in front of White, smirking.

White looked around the area, calculating. Then she launched herself into the air, fell, did a loopdeloop mid-fall, and then pulled up at the last second.

Some demons started rubbing their fingers together to produce a cricket-like noise. The equivalent of applause, presumably.

Rainbow Dash chuckled. "Nice one! Time to bring out the big guns!" She considered doing one of her more advanced tricks - a tornado, for instance - but that was probably a little too extreme for this. She decided to keep it subdued, but still something beyond her opponent. She launched into the air; flying in a pattern she'd flown before at hundreds of Wonderbolt stunt shows. She hit a critical speed, and a trail of rainbow magic appeared behind her. The manifestation of color drew gasps from the mass below.

"Go Dashie!" Pinkie cheered, waving a flag.

Rainbow Dash did exactly that - she performed a rapid corkscrew back into the ground, landing with a sharp turn, wings splayed, a rainbow visible between them. She smirked at White. "Beat that."

She did.

Rainbow Dash gawked as White raised both of her hands, summoning dual magic spheres to her sides. She flew into the air, face skyward, as the orbs circled her. Two magic trails were left behind in a double-helix pattern, leading the eye up to the impressive glowing point that was white herself. She floated up there for a while, shining like a star atop a double helix. Then she exploded in a shower of sparks, falling down as if dead. Rainbow Dash was concerned for a second but White righted herself, landing on her feet.

"Heh," Rainbow Dash chuckled. "I'm going to have to bring out the big guns, aren't I?"

"No time," Applejack said. "The hunting party's heading out. Pink's getting adamant about it."

This was an understatement, Pink was hopping up and down, waving all four of his arms. Rainbow Dash nodded. "Looks like we have to put this on hold White, but we will continue."

White nodded as if she understood. Maybe she did. Maybe she thought Rainbow Dash was conceding. Rainbow Dash didn't know, she simply left to check out the hunting party. Pink came with them.
Pinkie made a "hrm..." noise.

"What?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"I'm going to call these three... Rose, Crimson, and Fuchsia. The winged one's Fuchsia, if that isn't obvious."

"Good enough for me," Rainbow Dash said, looking at the demons that comprised the hunting party. Rainbow Dash did think that maybe Rose was more of a light pink, but they already had a demon named Pink. It'd be so nice if they could just figure out their names. "...I've always wanted to be on a hunt..."

Applejack raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Well, yeah! It's exciting! Hunting down a target and taking it out - the mark of the predator's life!"

"You'd like being a dragon, huh?" Pinkie asked.

"Griffon too. Gilda'd talk about the hunt sometimes, even though she did eventually admit she sucked at it."

Applejack blinked. "She admitted to that?"

"We were young idiots who hadn't quite gotten the nuance of 'awesome' yet."

"Ah'm just surprised you know the word 'nuance'."

Pinkie snorted at this remark.

As the group of four demons and seven ponies (counting the mounts) set out, Pink eventually urged the three yammering ponies to quiet down. Soon, all of them were carefully prowling through the jungle. Fuchsia was at the front, her wings twitching with the soft breeze. She had the posture of someone listening closely to every last detail she could. The posture of a predator.

After what seemed like hours of walking, she held up a hand. She pointed with the other arm on the same side through a nearby bush. Rainbow Dash didn't see anything at first, but her great eyes eventually made out the target. There was a large green reptile standing perfectly still behind the bush. The behemoth was vaguely reminiscent of a triceratops, except the hood was dome-shaped and there were five horns.

She realized she could hear it breathing.

Fuchsia waved three hands to point at Pink, Rose, and Crimson, directing them to certain locations around the triceratops-thing, giving it a wide berth. They expertly flanked it, weapons ready. Pink and Rose had spears, Crimson had two swords, and Fuchsia held the yo-yo things, eyes narrow in focus.

Applejack took in a deep breath and turned away. Apparently, she'd decided she couldn't actually be a part of this. Her loss, Rainbow Dash thought, turning to Pinkie. The earth pony was smiling, but that smile wasn't as big as usual. Rainbow Dash knew she wasn't thrilled about this either - heck, Rainbow Dash herself was a little nervous - but Pinkie was going through with it. Probably to get on the good side of these people more than anything else.

Rainbow Dash just wanted to prove to herself she could be a part of this. She took in a breath to calm herself...
Fuchsia yelled the command to move before Rainbow Dash was done breathing out. Fuchsia slung the beast's back legs with one of her yo-yos, preventing it from running away. It was surprised that such a flimsy looking string held. Rose and Pink threw their spears into the reptile's thick, flabby side, prompting a substantial roar of pain. Rainbow Dash saw the red blood seep out, a sight that both chilled and excited her. The duality was strong with her emotions today.

Crimson moved next, leaping onto the raging reptile's back, kicking it and driving his swords in with impressive force. He was trying to knock it over, but no matter how much Fuchsia pulled with her yo-yo to help the beast wouldn't topple. It tried to flee again, but the line held fast.

Pinkie Pie decided to act - appearing on top of the triceratops-thing's crown with a wooden mallet in her hooves. She walloped it alongside the head, dazing it. Rose and Pink seized the opportunity, ramming themselves into the beast's side while it was disoriented. This made the fat reptile fall to the side, legs flailing. Crimson leaped into the air again, landing right in front of the beast's face. He drove a sword right between its eyes. It twitched and let out one final roar before falling still, dead.

Pinkie whooped nervously. "G-got 'im! Heh... Heh..." Her entire body shook and her breathing sped up. "Okay... Calm... Calm... Down Pinkie, everything's fine..."

Fuchsia put a hand on Pinkie, drawing the jarred pony's gaze. She nodded in approval - and Rainbow Dash knew the demon was trying to comfort Pinkie. The earth pony grinned, pulling the creature into a big hug. Fuchsia was obviously baffled by this action, but she didn't remove Pinkie from her.

Pinkie eventually removed herself. "It's done Applejack, you can look!"

"How... Nasty is it?"

"Less blood than I was expecting," Rainbow Dash observed. "You always think it'll go gushing... It doesn't, really." She laughed nervously. "Haven't you had dead animals at your farm Applejack?"

"Yeah..." Applejack said, turning slowly. "Ah'm not a fan of it when it happens though. There's a reason we ship the pigs off to get slaughtered."

Pinkie gasped. "You slaughter the pigs? I thought you used them for truffle hunting!"

"Why in Equestria would we need that many pigs for truffle hunting? No, it's just that Equestria's griffon and dragon population need to eat too, you know."

"Oh riiight! Duh!" Pinkie tapped her head.

And then Pinkie's tail started twitching the same time her left pupil dilated. "Pinkie sense acting up!"

She shouted.

The demons went on edge. They were able to recognize the intensity in her voice.

Rainbow Dash raised an eyebrow - Pinkie sense. Yet another thing about Pinkie you just couldn't question. Twilight had tried once and ended up in the hospital multiple times for it. It was just a 'feeling' you had to trust. "What's it mean this time?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"I dunno, it's a new one. Feels bad though."

And then a 'T-rex' burst out of the nearby trees, roaring.

*How in Equestria didn't we hear this thing walk up!?* Rainbow Dash glanced at the once-noisy
Rainbow Dash briefly considered running, but she had enough of her wits about her to realize the demons weren't. Fuchsia had launched herself into the air with some effort, wrapping the predator's jaw in her yo-yo, forcing it shut. Rose and Pink retrieved their spears from the felled beast's flesh and threw them at the larger monster's knees. Crimson drove a sword into the Rex's flanks, opening an impressive gash as long as Crimson was tall. And yet, the apex predator remained standing, albeit displeased with the pain it was experiencing.

Pinkie appeared on top of the Rex's head - this time with a golf club - and hit it in the earhole. The muffled roar somehow sounded more unnerving than a natural one.

Rainbow Dash took a breath. *Okay...* She flew towards the beast's nose and *bucked* it at high speed. Her back hooves hurt - but the Rex's skull hurt more. "Take that!"

Applejack even got in on the action this time - it was no longer a hunt, it was a battle to survive. Her impressive earth pony strength took the Rex's legs out from under it, toppling it to the ground.

Crimson moved to deal the killing blow between the eyes, but that was the moment the yo-yo wire finally snapped. Crimson stopped just short of leaping into the dinosaur's gaping maw. The Rex roared, standing back up despite constant whaling from Rose, Pink, and Applejack. Its head was level with the flying form of Fuchsia. It was angry, biting at her with intents to devour her in a single bite. There wasn't much she could do to avoid it with her tired wings, seeing as falling wouldn't help. The Rex missed the first bite. He would not miss the second.

Then another 'T-Rex' showed up and chomped down on the other predator's neck, killing it in a near instant. The fight stopped instantly when everyone saw who was riding the savior dinosaur.

"Hello!" Fluttershy called, waving from atop her mount. "Meet Rexy! He's a good boy. Uh... Do you all mind if he eats? He's kinda hungry still... It's a little gruesome to watch, more so than predators from home."

Rainbow Dash nodded in agreement. "Yeah... Everything's more brutal..." She let out a breath of relief. They were alive and *awesome.*

Pinkie smiled. "He can have some, but the demo- er, the *red people* need to take some of it back to their tribe."

"Oh, that's no problem, he can share." She then told Rexy what to do and floated down from atop him. "So, are you going to introduce me to your new friends or..."

Crimson pointed at Fluttershy and cocked his head. Fuchsia shrugged.

Rainbow Dash laughed. "Yeah, I guess we can do that. Fluttershy, this is Pink. He... Well, he took us prisoner..."

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Twilight and Rarity found the gigantic flower with almost no difficulty at all despite having lost the trail several minutes back. Their jaws dropped at the sight of the flower-based village. Unlike the others, they'd had nothing to prepare them for the unusual sight - the flower, the bug-people, the domestic ponies, the *pony that looked just like Twilight* - all these things were dumped on Twilight and Rarity all at once. Twilight stared at her other self for some time from her vantage point at the flower's edge.
Twilight shivered. "This isn't Equestria, all right..."

"My... Do you think those ponies down there are anything like us?"

"Eating out of a trough? Being kept in pens? I doubt it."

"...We do that with cows, dear."

Twilight blinked. "...That suddenly seems horribly degrading."

"It might be," Rarity admitted. "The others are probably in there somewhere."

"The chances are very high. Let's hope they aren't captured." Or being cooked. "I'm going to introduce myself, you should stay back."

"Twilight, I'm not letting you go near those things alone. No discussion."

Twilight took in a breath. "Okay then..." She trotted onto the flower, heading right for the center of town, Rarity right behind her. At first, the bug-people paid no attention to them. Then one pointed out Twilight's wings in curiosity. A vermillion female looked up and stared right at Twilight with that unreadable expression all of them shared. Then her posture started to tremble slightly and she pointed at Twilight's horn and yelled an alien word.

Twilight cast a translation spell the instant she heard that without thinking - acting on the instinct of a mage. Since there were dozens upon dozens of different races on Equestria and thousands of different dialects, it was one of those spells that had been perfected in the deep past and one that would be taught to any higher-level mage, even if the need for such a spell had declined. It was by no means a simple or easy spell, but she had been trained to use it whenever she ran into any language not touched by it. She was so fixated on the spell that she didn't notice the red people scamper away from her in fear.

Rarity had to tell her. "Twilight, they're scared."

"Why?" Twilight asked. "They are obviously natural predators and have domesticated..." she paused. "...What are presumably Neandroponies. I suppose they haven't seen wings before..."

"No, perhaps not. But they were scared of your magic."

Twilight frowned, wondering why again. She turned her head to the version of herself - no horn. "I suppose unicorns don't exist..."

"Agreed. Perhaps you could keep magic to a minimum then?"

"Well, I already cast the translate spell, but okay. Speaking of that, they need to talk more so the translation can work itself out. It doesn't read their minds. So... hey!" She called, moving towards a velvet individual standing by a cart pensively. "I'm Twilight Sparkle!"

The man let out a series of panicked clicks - one of which the spell managed to translate as 'away' in an uncharacteristically high-pitched voice.

Twilight smirked. "Oh! Keep talking! We need to be able to communicate! 'Away', see? It works both ways!"

The velvet man apparently heard the clicking noise that meant 'away' come from her mouth. It made him scream in fear, running for a nearby tent. More than a few followed his example.
Twilight shook her head. "This doesn't make any sense! These people are obviously brutal and violent, given the social structures I've observed from afar. Why are they so terrified of me?"

Then a white female walked right up to them. She met Rarity's eyes first. The two had a moment of inexplicable connection, but the white bug broke off the stare quickly. She turned to Twilight and started to speak rapidly. Only a few words got through - 'speech' and 'learn' and 'me' and 'you'.

"She knows what I'm doing!" Twilight said. "Thank you miss... White!"


"Others? Have you seen my friends?"

"What." "Hear."

Twilight created a magic image of Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, Applejack, and Fluttershy's cutie marks. "These?"

"Gone."

"GONE!?" Twilight shouted - instantly going from zero to panic. "What do you mean gone!? Tell me-"

A bolt of red magic hit her in the side, sending her skidding across the dirt. Rarity gasped. "Twilight!"

Twilight opened her eyes, barely giving herself enough time to dodge the next attack by taking off into the air. She saw her attacker - by far the largest of the bug-people. One of his right hands was enveloped in red magic while the other held an impressive staff. Even though he had no expression Twilight could see murder in his eyes.

"Siron! Stop!" White yelled.

This was answered with untranslated clicks mixed with "that is danger."

"I mean no harm!" Twilight shouted. Siron turned to her instantly and Twilight knew that Siron only head "I mean harm." He pointed the staff at her, channeling his magic through it. A claw of green and red swirled death shot out. Twilight raised a magic shield, blocking it - but she could feel it tearing away at her magic in an unnatural way. Sadly, since she was able to block the magic at all she knew the staff wasn't powerful enough to open a portal. She'd hoped it would be. She fired her own bolt of magic at Siron in retaliation.

He took it face first, a mark appearing between his four eyes. It hurt, but he evidently wasn't the type to care about a little pain. He raised his hand, enveloping Twilight in his telekinesis. He twirled the staff, firing a dozen bolts of green-red at her.

Twilight levitated herself out of the grip, flying in an arc behind Siron. She pulled her horn back and unleashed a powerful explosion of purple energy, sending Siron forward - but he didn't topple over. He kept his ground and pointed two hands at Rarity - enveloping her in telekinesis. She screamed. "Twilight!"

Siron put the jade of the staff to Rarity's neck and gave Twilight a deadly look. He wanted her to stand down, or Rarity was going to get it.

Twilight gulped. She couldn't think of anything fast enough to get Rarity out safely. Siron had
discovered her weakness...

And then Twilight remembered her teleportation spell.

Rarity vanished in a puff of purple energy and appeared right next to Twilight. Twilight smirked at Siron.

Siron was not deterred. He raised his staff into the air, collecting energy into a swirling mass. Twilight did the same with her horn, ready to see exactly how much power Siron could muster.

"Everybody STOP!" Rainbow Dash yelled, flying between the two of them, hooves outstretched. "WE! ARE! NOT! ENEMIES! NOT!"

Siron lowered the staff. Twilight let her spell fizzle out. "Rainbow... You're okay. I... I was worried for a second there."

"Naw, don't be. We made friends here, Twilight, even though we couldn't understand a word they said."

"You can now," Siron spoke, standing tall, but visibly more relaxed. A few more untranslated clicks followed this.

"Woah..." Rainbow Dash said. "That's cool."

"Translation spell," Twilight smiled. "...Sorry for getting worked up, Siron."

White narrowed her eyes at Siron, making mad clicks. "Siron." "Worked up."

Siron glanced at White. "Veila." "Protect you." "Alicorn."

"Your name is Veila?" Rainbow Dash asked White. She nodded tentatively.

"You have a word for alicorn?" Twilight wondered aloud.

Siron frowned, trying to parse together what she was saying. "Hand." "Blue." "Danger."

A fuchsia female walked up to Siron and gave a little speech about "Hunt." "Beast." "Chomper." "Pink one." and "New yellow one."

Twilight raised an eyebrow at Rainbow Dash. "...What did you do?"

Rainbow Dash smirked. "We hunted dinosaurs Twilight!"

Twilight had nothing to say to this.

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Rainbow Dash really liked being able to talk to the demons. It had only taken a few more minutes of conversation to get most of the kinks worked out and it was much better than communicating with gestures consisting mostly of varying degrees of shrug. Siron agreed with this statement. It turned out that Siron was really his name and not just a title. Red - or, rather, Anix - as just grumpy about it regardless and hardly talked at all. Veila found the idea of communication simply fascinating, and Fuchsia...

...Well, "Fef" was not the person Rainbow Dash had expected. She was not an awesome, cool, strong warrior type. She was a warrior - as were all the demons - but she was also
rather hyper and excited about, well, everything. Her retellings of what happened on the hunt made Siron chuckle more than a few times.

Rainbow Dash was really glad laughter translated as well, the alien noise had been a little disconcerting.

Fef was still going on, even as Rainbow Dash thought. "And then the yellow one just rode in on her CHOMPING BEAST and DOWNED the enemy! It was just so... So..."

"Awesome?" Rainbow Dash suggested.

"Yes! AWESOME!" Fef twirled her remaining yo-yo in triumph. "That's exactly what it was! Thank you, Rainbow!"

"Don't mention it."

Siron chuckled again. "Well, this is... Interesting. Where is this tame chomper you speak of?"

"Riiiight behind the treeline with the half-eaten Horner and dead chomper. Mlinx didn't want to scare the town with the hulking beast. Probably a good idea, seeing as you were already dueling an ALICORN."

"I'm right here you know," Twilight said.

"Wait, Mlinx? Who's that?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"The bro you probably just call 'Pink'," Fef giggled. "Naming us by colors... What a SILLY idea!"

Siron held up a hand, silencing further conversation. "Before we continue this we should go deal with this tame chomper. I'll believe it when I see it."

"Won't take long," Rainbow Dash chuckled.

Siron, Fef, and Anix set out with Twilight, Rarity, and Rainbow Dash close behind. Rainbow Dash took a moment to wave at Veila as they left. She waved back.

"Hey, why isn't she coming?" Rarity asked Siron.

"She and I are the only P'e'thika in the tribe," Siron saw the look on Rarity's face and knew instantly the word wasn't translated. "We can use magic. There must always be one in the tribe. She is the only heir for now, so she must be protected. It is the main reason why I took swift action against Twilight."

"Ah, I see."

It took less than a minute to reach the edge of the flower and enter the treeline. Pinkie Pie was waiting for them. "Come one, come all, see the giant Rexy! Admission free, but don't call him Roxy, or else your he'll make your hearts break with adorable ferocity!"

Fef broke out into laughter. "You sound EXACTLY like how I imagined you!"

"Oh cool! The translation spell's ON! Woo! Now we can have real parties!"

"Calm yourselves," Siron said. "I must see this... Rexy."

"Right this way Siron!" Pinkie trilled, trotting deeper into the jungle.
Rexy was, in fact, right that way. He stood just under the canopy, sniffing the air like some kind of ferret. Fluttershy was scratching his nose. "Who's a good boy? You're a good boy!"

Siron nodded. Despite his cool demeanor, he was at a loss for words. "...Ah."

Rarity saw the half-eaten 'Horner' and gagged. She put a hoof over her eyes and turned away. Twilight didn't gag, but she gave the carcass an untrusting look.

Rainbow Dash laughed. "It's just food for the tribe, Twi!"

"Not just food!" Fef said. "SCALES for ARMOR too! And those horns can make some off-the-wall weapons!" She squeed.

Mlinx (Rainbow Dash still thought of him as Pink internally) looked up. "...Wait, we can understand them... How?"

"Spell," Twilight offered. "It translates between languages."

Mlinx looked at Twilight for the first time and jumped skittishly into the air, letting out a swear that had no translation.

"At ease, Mlinx," Siron said. "It is not the Mistress."

"Horns on a chomper, now there's more. And look!" Mlinx pointed at Rarity. "Just a horn? Wow! That's terrifying. Must be more powerful..."

Anix let out a huff. "Coward."

Fef punched Anix. "Hey, cool it with that! Mlinx held himself ADMIRABLY on the HUNT!!!"

"You are not a good judge of that."

Siron let out a sigh. "Settle this like warriors or shut up. I'd prefer the latter at the moment seeing as we have other things to attend to."

Twilight looked at the chief of all the demons. "Indeed we do. Among the first things I'd like to know is who this 'Mistress' is and why she makes you terrified of me."

"Come to my hut then. We will no doubt have much to discuss."

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"So... Hi! I'm Princess Twilight Sparkle of Equestria. I'm an alicorn pony. What do you call yourself?"

Siron pondered this with two hands on his hips, one on his chin, and another on his staff. He was still having difficulty processing the fact that he was talking to a pony - an alicorn at that. It - she - wasn't walking around in that aloof, mindless way regular ponies did, nor was she being a savage monster. "Just Siron. We don't have all those complex names here."

"...What do you call yourselves? As a people."

Siron cocked his head. "Not sure what you mean by that."

"Well, I'm a pony, Rexy is a 'chomper', some of my friends are dragons, certain animals are dogs, and you are...?"
Siron laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"We're just 'the people'. I can see now that not giving ourselves a name was perhaps a little hasty, but we had no need for one. Until now, I suppose."

"I... Guess there are a lot of different peoples where I come from. It's just assumed that everyone has a name..." She looked like she was pondering something.

"What were you calling us earlier - demons? What does that mean?"

Twilight folded her ears back and blushed. Siron marveled once again at the expressiveness of that face. The ponies wore their expressions for all to see - it was so fascinating to watch. It must be much easier for leaders to prove their worth in the land they came from.

"Siron... It's not a very flattering word."

Siron liked the idea already. "What's it mean then?"

"Demons are a... Special kind of monster, often associated with violence, evil, and corruption. Most that exist where we come from are sealed away in a horrendous place called Tartarus."

Siron weaved two of his hands together. "I like this. We are, in fact, warriors that terrify all the creatures of the jungle. Even chompers run away in fear sometimes. I accept this label."

"You should really reconsider, it has evil connotations..."

"We are the red demons," Siron stated matter of factly. He could tell this annoyed Twilight, the expressions were just too obvious. Not only were the eyes easier to see than those of his people - there was also adjustable ears, flaring nostrils, twistable mouth, and shifting skin! There was no way these ponies could keep secrets, he was certain of it.

Siron leaned back in his throne. "Now that that's out of the way, tell me your story, Twilight Sparkle."

She did - she described her home in a reverent, almost poetic manner. He didn't understand a lot of what came from her mouth, but he didn't let her know that. He gleaned that there were many different tribal villages - or 'cities' as she called them - filled mostly with ponies. There were other unusual races with names like griffons, dragons, and changelings. Magic was apparently common over there, which Siron felt cheapened the gift. Most interesting was the notable cosmology of only one moon - the evil gray one. He felt sorry for the plight that must have come from that.

Then she spoke of the man of light and the enchantress. Siron had no idea about the man in light, though he did deduce that a unicorn was a pony with just a horn, like Rarity. Twilight spoke of the sphere, something she obviously knew little about.

"May I see it?" Siron asked.

"Sure. Just don't touch it. We... Really don't know what activates it." She brought it out, levitating it towards his face. He took over holding it with his own magic, narrowing his eyes. She was right - there was a spell in there. He'd never heard of enchantments before, though the idea of them explained much about the world he lived in now that he thought about it. She was also right that there was almost no power within the ball.
She nodded. "Yeah, I know, it's baffling. I think I have the right spell, but I don't have enough magic within me to activate it. And no, neither you no your staff do either. I scanned it."

Siron knew this but nodded to confirm anyway. He also knew what she was going to ask next - it was written on her face.

"Do you... Know of any magic powerful enough?"

"The blue moon."

Twilight sighed. "Yeah, can't really get to the moon..."

"There is an altar roughly an hour's ride from here that summons the spirit of the blue moon to those it deems worthy. It no doubt has one of those 'enchantments' you spoke of. The spirit has more power than I can even imagine."

"That'd do it. Probably," Twilight said. "...There's a catch isn't there?"

Siron wasn't sure if she picked up on his body language or just deduced that on her own. Either way, it made him respect her more. She may not have held herself like a warrior, but he was becoming more and more convinced she had just been brought up wrong. "Yes. The Spirit of the gray moon prowls those lands. An alicorn. A dark, evil beast that has used its dark horn to kill many of our kind - demons - for glee. No warrior has managed to even wound her. Many have tried. She kills random demons while we are out hunting, but she always kills at the altar."

"So our way home - if we are worthy - is guarded by a dark alicorn moon spirit?"

"Yes."

"I can see why you were terrified of me. You thought I might have been her."

"The thought crossed my mind. But you just look too weak for that."

"Gee, thanks."

"Wasn't a compliment."

"That was a thing called sarcasm."

Siron blinked, silent. For a moment he became angry - but then he burst into laughter. "Of course it would go both ways..."

"Huh?"

"Not important," Siron said, waving a hand dismissively.

"Okay." Twilight frowned, entering deep calculated thought. Siron found this interesting.

"...You are a leader yourself," he said.

"Er... yes! One of the four Princesses of Equestria! Well, five, but my niece is a little young to be ruling. We're all alicorns. And no, none of us are 'warriors' like you, at least not devoutly so. Ponies are a peacekeeping race, though you probably already figured that out. Your culture is closer to that of the dragons, though more cooperative."

"If I get the opportunity I shall challenge a dragon to a duel."
Twilight smirked. "Better hope you pick one of the smaller ones, they can grow to the size of mountains."

Siron thought that sounded fun.

"Regardless... Thank you for your hospitality Siron, but we should probably try to get home as soon as we can. Maybe we can talk to this evil moon Spirit - or won't run into her at all."

"Wishful thinking."

"I know. But we won't have to beat her, I just need the power. I can get us out of there quickly."

Siron nodded. "Normally fleeing is unacceptable, but exceptions are made for the Mistress. I wish you luck on your quest." He stood up, clasping his hands over his chest and clapping the other two together. "May our arms cross again."

"...I have no arms."

Siron took a moment to realize how silly the saying was in this situation and laughed again. "No... No, you don't."

Twilight smiled warmly. "I get the idea though, don't worry." She turned to the door of the hut and opened it, stepping into the afternoon sun.

The five ponies and assorted demons looked up from their conversation to her and Siron.

Twilight looked at her friends and quickly explained the situation with the altar and the moon Spirit.

"You... You're going to face the Mistress!?!" Mlinx blurted. "You're all crazy!"

"Yep!" Pinkie said, hefting a fuzzy golf club. "There has to be some challenge, after all!"

"Count me in!" Fef said, twirling her yo-yos, having replaced the broken one already. "I've ALWAYS wanted to see the Mistress!"

Siron held up a hand. "You need not feel obligated, Fef."

"I'm not Siron! I just wanna LOOK and SEE!"

"Fool," Anix muttered.

Applejack glared at him. "She's courageous."

"Courage that gets you dead is foolish."

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. "We've faced off against dark monsters before, we'll be fine."

"Plus I can bring Rexy along!" Fluttershy said. "Scare the scary Mistress away!"

Rarity blinked. "My, that's a rather good idea."

"We should go soon - Spike is probably getting worried," Twilight said.

"Yeah..." Pinkie nodded slowly. "Come on Fef! Let's go!"

"Oh my YEEES!" she squealed. "Let the biggest hunt EVER commence!"
"I..." Mlinx looked at Pinkie, then at Rainbow Dash. "I'll come as well."

Anix wordlessly turned form Mlinx and walked away, making a careful gesture behind his back. Siron shook his head. "You know what that means, Mlinx."

"Yes... Yes I do, Siron. We will make it right." He bowed. Fluttershy blinked, glancing from the receding form of Anix to Mlinx. "Uh... What just happened?"

Mlinx held up a hand. "I can tell you about it after this hunt."

Fef's energy increased at the sound of someone else using the word 'hunt'. "Can we GO already!? HUNT! HUNT! HUNT!"

Twilight chuckled. "Yes Fef, we can go now." She paused. "Uh... Which way?"

Siron pointed with all four hands and the staff. "Got it," Twilight said, oblivious to the mocking nature of the gesture. Ah, it was good to be a demon.

Siron wished them luck and returned to his hut. He laughed again - heartily and long. That had gone exactly as planned.

They were going to take care of his alicorn problem for him. Some of them would probably die, but so what? The altar would be free...

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Fef laughed suddenly. "We are now officially in a part of the jungle I've never SEEN!" She eagerly looked around with peeled eyes. "And as expected it looks a lot like the rest of the jungle. Bluh."

Pinkie grinned. "Well I think it looks pretty cool! Look at this giant flower!" She gestured at a large snapdragon-like plant.

Twilight examined it and thought it looked more purple than blue, but the color wasn't all that important at the moment. If she came back and documented the flora of this world it would be, but that thought was running in the background. Her focus was on the magic - she could feel it now, a powerful enchantment calling to her with a sweet song only she could hear. Rarity couldn't hear it - Twilight had asked a few minutes ago. The graceful unicorn just wasn't as attuned to magic.

Twilight had been pretty confident the altar would provide enough magic power before but now she was certain of it. She even thought she could steal the needed magic from just the excess emanations on the chance the blue moon Spirit didn't find them worthy, though that would take time. Twilight found herself wondering what 'worthy' meant on this world - battle-hardened? Strong? Or was it dependant on being pure of heart? ...Whatever that meant. She supposed she was about to find out.

Until that happened...

She turned to Mlinx, who was walking alongside Rexy. He had taken a liking to the huge dinosaur and had been talking with Fluttershy about the possibility of taming other dinosaurs, and she'd been glad to give him tips. He appeared to be actively listening, unlike Fef, who had the attention span of a mayfly.
"Mlinx!" Twilight called.

"Yes?" he said, riding over.

"Why was Anix so upset with you back there?"

"He thinks we're going to our deaths. I don't think that, but he did. He was just trying to look out for us."

"Odd way of showing it..."

"Really? That's pretty standard around here. Though, Fef and I aren't exactly normal. Well, okay, Fef is more normal than me, she's one of our best warriors. I'm well known as the soft shell who gets ideas."

"Are ideas bad?"

"No, just uncertain or dangerous. Mainly to myself. Anix keeps me under his arm to keep me out of trouble. Or... He did."

Twilight frowned. "He rejected you, didn't he?"

"Yes. There will have to be a public confrontation when I return." He laughed bitterly. "I'm going to be trounced."

"Is he really that good?"

"Best warrior in the tribe, besides Siron."

"I take offense to that!" Fef interrupted, slinging her yo-yo expertly past his head, close enough to put him on edge.

Mlinx shivered. "No one is questioning your... Erm... Skill with those things."

Fef laughed. "Oh of course not! Derp, I just have to give you a hard time, you know. Ohmygosh I've never seen this kind of bug before- Oh. Never mind. It was just the lighting." She then did a cartwheel for no reason. Pinkie followed suit, giggling with her.

"Those two are really hitting it off..." Mlinx noted.

"Indeed," Rarity agreed. "It's rare Pinkie finds somepony - er, someone - who can keep up with her antics.

"Fef's never had someone. She's always been the odd bug. At least there are other soft shells in the tribe..."

Twilight was annoyed by his continual self-deprecating use of the phrase 'soft shell'. However, his tone wasn't all that negative, so she couldn't be sure if it really was a degrading term or just a cultural thing. She didn't ask - although she was thinking about it.

All thoughts and clatter stopped instantly when they entered the clearing. Where there had been dense flora before now there was nothing but bare dirt in a circular formation, dried under the gaze of the sun. There was only one thing in the clearing - a single, round, white pedestal. Twilight was instantly struck with a feeling of déjà vu. She didn't know it, but this was only to be one of many such feelings she would get in her life. She would never fully understand then, but they would become constant companions, thoughts defined by the sense of things having happened
before.

Twilight looked around - no sign of the Mistress. Good. She cautiously approached the altar, the rest of her party following behind.

They heard a horrid *screeching* behind them - the sound of something dark, angry, and dead inside. Fef and Mlinx whipped around, readying weapons.

The dark one appeared *behind* the two of them with a teleport, taking her position in the center of the group. She was an alicorn twice the height of Twilight, mane and tail the color of Void and swirling with an unsettling magic aura. Her wings were angular and predatory while her eyes were that of a serpent. Dark gray armor akin to bones lined her midsection, and her horn curved upwards slightly into a threatening point.

Twilight's eyes widened - this was more than *déjà vu*, this mare looked *familiar*.

It was the form of one of her first enemies, the evil she had faced with her friends when they first met.

Nightmare Moon. Slightly altered from the image in Twilight's memory, but unmistakably her.

The Nightmare went after Fef and Mlinx first, giving them no chance to turn around. Her hooves came down on them, smashing them painfully into the dirt.

Rexy stopped the Nightmare from killing them then and there with a swipe of his enormous tail. Even a being such as the Nightmare was powerless against the sheer *girth* of the reptile. Pinkie moved in next with her party cannon, bringing it out of nowhere and blasting confetti festively into the dark mare. Rarity fired off some simple magic bolts from her horn; Twilight smiled, glad to see the spell she had taught Rarity put to good use. Rainbow Dash flew around the Nightmare rapidly, enveloping her in a tornado of wind.

The Nightmare'd had enough of this. She banished the tornado with a simple flap of her wings, tossing Rainbow Dash to the side. Rexy tried to eat the Nightmare but he found himself lifted by pitch-black telekinesis and thrown to the treeline. Pinkie dodged the attack that came after her, appearing on the Nightmare's back with a golf club in her hooves. "Fore!" she shouted.

She never got to the punchline of her joke - the Nightmare grabbed her in a magic chokehold before the club made contact with her skull. The Nightmare tried to snap the pony's neck, expression shifting to fury when Pinkie's neck simply bent like a limp noodle instead of snapping. Pinkie's pained smile distracted the Nightmare enough for Applejack to get a buck in across the dark mare's jaw, releasing Pinkie.

"Thanks, Applejack... Gah..."

"Thank me later!"

"Oh look at that, a cheesy line! Ha- oh right."

The Nightmare pulled her head back, black energies coalescing around her horn, giving it an unusual metallic sheen. Twilight recognized the spell - a *big* laser, directed right at Pinkie.

"Cover me!" Twilight told Rarity as she leaped right into the path of the laser, pulling her own head back to charge a retaliation spell. She had to release it early to counter the Nightmare's, so her purple beam was considerably smaller than the black onslaught, but it held for a moment.
A moment was all that was needed. Fef - who had been pretending to be seriously injured - flung a yo-yo from her position, wrapping around the Nightmare's legs. The blades wouldn't cut into the dark one's flesh, but Fef didn't need that. She just pulled and the Nightmare fell over, her spell stopping in an instant.

Rexy returned to the fight, Fluttershy on his head. She nodded to him. He raised a foot and stomped down on the Nightmare, kicking up an impressive cloud of dust.

Mlinx laughed, getting up on one knee. "Crushed by a chomper... What a way t-

"Not done," Twilight, Pinkie, and Fef said at the same time.

"Crud," Mlinx said. The Nightmare teleported in front of him, growling. He thrust his spear forward and it snapped in two.

Then the Nightmare spoke.

"Fool."

Twilight remembered to teleport Mlinx out of the way before the Nightmare could lob off his head. "You can talk?" Twilight asked the Nightmare.

She didn't respond. Instead, she released an explosion of black energy that toppled everyone over except Fef. Fef gulped. "Nice moon mare..."

The Nightmare rammed Fef through the chest, her black horn driving all the way through the carapace, dripping blue blood out the back.

Fef cried out a little - both in pain and... amusement? "GOTHCA!" With her other yo-yo she tied herself to the Nightmare and wrestled the alicorn to the ground, attempting to snap the dark mare's neck. The neck wouldn't break. The Nightmare teleported out, leaving Fef down on the ground, blue blood pooling around her.

It was then Twilight knew they would lose this fight. They needed a plan B.

"I'm going to try something!" she shouted. "Keep her away from me!"

"I'll... Try, dear!" Rarity yelled. She was shaken by the injury of Fef, but Twilight had faith she wouldn't faint until later.

Twilight bolted for the altar, trying to tune out the yells, screams, and roars of the fight. She arrived, laying her hooves on the altar, feeling its magic course through her. Yes, there was plenty to work with; she just needed to access it...

The altar lit up with a flash of light - a beam that led directly to the blue moon up above. A white figure took form before Twilight. The entity looked human, albeit with four arms. She had no face - merely a white space with a lump that might have been a nose. She wore nothing and her hair trailed behind her like wispy clouds.

Twilight was speechless. What was this?

The woman extended her four white hands and levitated the 'bowling ball' out of Twilight's pack, placing it equidistant from all her palms. She held it there for one second. Then she raised a single hand, poised upright for what seemed like an eternity.
She brought it down, cutting the sphere in two.

Twilight screamed - and was momentarily able to hear the scream of Applejack. Twilight panicked. There went their hope. The Spirit had denied them, cutting up the device, refusing the power. It wanted them to end right here...

The Spirit banished these thoughts with a single action.

She removed a green diamond out of the sphere. It glowed a soft color and shifted in and out of phase with the light around it, making it seem like it was moving.

Twilight's eyes widened as she realized what it was.

A nonmagical power source.

Suddenly the Spirit was gone and the battle rushed back into Twilight's senses. Rexy was laying on the ground, barely moving, Fluttershy frantically tending to him. Fef was trying to stand up, but her wound was too great. Rainbow Dash was nowhere to be seen. Mlinx and Applejack were lying in a pile to the side, the latter's hat over the demon's head.

Only Rarity and Pinkie were facing the Nightmare - and with a magic bolt directed right at her horn, Rarity fell as well.

"Twilight if you're going to pull a trick out of your hat now would be the time!" Pinkie yelled as she leaped over the Nightmare's rage-induced attacks, which were currently in the form of dark scythe-like magics that Pinkie avoided by a hair's breadth each time.

Briefly Twilight wondered how Pinkie was so good at this, but she quickly banished the thought. Pinkie was right; she had to act now. She grabbed the green diamond in her magic and pushed it with the spell she had crafted earlier - a spell for direct transport to Earth. The diamond reacted with ease, pumping far too much energy into the spell. Twilight saw the fabric of reality stretch around her - but no portal formed.

Twilight paled. No. No, that was our last shot.

"Twilight!" Pinkie yelled, one of the Nightmare's hooves hitting her across the jaw.

What had even been the point of going to Earth anyway? There was no magic there, this Nightmare would just lay waste to it - unless one of the leaders decided to drop one of those 'nuke' things, and that'd be just as horrible...

"Argh!" Pinkie yelled - the Nightmare had gotten smart again and trapped her in the dark telekinesis.

"You are unnatural," the Nightmare stated coldly.

"You're one to talk nasty-pants!"

*If only we could go back to Equestria.*

Twilight's eyes lit up. Then she turned to look at the Starburst on her flank.

The connection was still there. She knew it - even from worlds beyond, she was still attached to her destiny. She lit her horn, trying to pull at the faint connection. But she wasn't powerful enough. The connection was *there*, she just couldn't-

"Twilight!" Pinkie wailed just before her head was slammed into the ground, flattened like a
pancake, silencing her.

Twilight grabbed ahold of the green diamond with her wing and locked eyes with the Nightmare.

Twilight saw the reptilian eyes of darkness.

The Nightmare watched Twilight's eyes go pure white. She channeled the power of the diamond and found her connection to her home, her destiny.

The evil being had no time to react - and Twilight knew it. She knew exactly where she was connecting to in Equestria. There was no other location it could possibly be.

A hole tore between the worlds, swelling to the size of a large house in under a second. The edges were white with strands of magic interwoven like braids and through the portal a Tree could be seen. A Tree made of Crystal with a purple starburst in the center that matched Twilight's flank.

The Tree of Harmony.

Twilight and her five friends all felt their souls resonate with the magics within the Tree. The Nightmare felt it as well, lifting up a hoof, preparing to flee.

She forgot to teleport.

A rainbow of colors shot from the center of the Tree of Harmony, enveloping the dark Nightmare in the holy light of Harmony itself. The Nightmare said no words - she merely screamed as she was enveloped by the blinding colors. In a flash of brilliant white, the magics dissipated, leaving behind an alicorn almost nothing like the one that had stood there moments prior. She was shorter, her wings were more natural, her armor was gone, and the dark mane had been replaced with beautiful stars. The eyes were closed peacefully. She was asleep.

Twilight stopped casting the spell and the portal behind her closed with a comical 'pop.'

Pinkie pulled her face off the ground with a single motion. "That was-"

"So AWESOME!" Rainbow Dash yelled, trotting out from the treeline, taking a branch out of her mane. She was very bruised and battered - more so than everypony else - but she looked so alive.

"Hey! That's my line!" Fef shouted, before going into a fit of coughing.

Twilight gasped - she really saw Fef's wound, by far the worst out of all of theirs. "We need to get you-"

"I'll live," Fef said, laughing. "Not like she punctured anything VITAL."

"But... Your chest... There are all sorts of vital organs there..."

"You keep vital organs there? No wonder you ponies aren't warriors. Wow. Sad."

"She's talking petals," Mlinx muttered. "That attack narrowly missed her stomach. If it had hit that, she'd be dead. Most of us wouldn't be able to stand while oozing blood either."

"Ahaha- I'm not standing!" she layed back down on the ground. "I'm not movin' at all!"

"Is everyone else okay...?" Twilight asked, unsure about Fef.

There was a chorus of 'yes'es.
"Uh..." Fluttershy said. "Rexy broke a leg. You... Do you think you can make a portal so I can take
him home to treat him?"

Twilight looked at the diamond. "I think I could move all of Canterlot with this thing. A T-Rex
should be easy."

"Oh. I'll take that as a yes then. Can we go now? There's not anything else to do here..."

"Take care of me," A deep, melodious voice announced. The dark alicorn was awake. "Do what
you must."

Twilight put on a pitying smile. She knew exactly what to do with this mare.

~~~

"Siron, meet Luna. Luna, meet Siron."

Siron blinked - he had not been expecting this outcome. Or at least that's what Twilight assumed, as
always the demons were hard to read. "We found a way home and used it to purge the dark magics
from her. She won't hurt you anymore. In fact..."

Luna bowed. "I submit myself to you as one of your warriors. If you will have me, after all I've
done."

Siron was silent for several seconds. Then he laughed, as Twilight expected.

"I'd be a fool to turn you down. Come, Luna, let's see what you've got..." He led her away. As he
walked off, he took one moment to look at Twilight. "You are welcome in our village anytime."

Fef shot a fist into the air. "YES - ow."

Mlinx shook his head. "Yes, we all know you're excited, yeah, yeah, go rest already so you live to
wear that scar proudly."

"Bluh..." she groaned, followed immediately by a giggle.

Twilight saw Anix watching the procession from a distance. "Mlinx..."

"I'll deal with him when the time comes," Mlinx said. "It'll be much later. You should head home."

Twilight nodded. "Okay. But I'll be back."

"Of that, I have no doubt." He walked away with Fef.

Twilight turned to her four friends - minus Fluttershy, who was already back in Equestria, tending to
Rexy. "Well girls..." She glanced at the receding form of Luna. "I guess the Tree always does send
us to solve Friendship Problems."

Pinkie smiled. "You think we would have learned that by now."

Twilight chuckled. "Yeah..." She held the green diamond up for all to see. The shifting mesmerized
them. "Shall we go home?"

"This is just the start, isn't it?" Rarity asked.

Pinkie laughed. "Yep! You can count on it!"
Applejack shrugged. "Ah suppose Ah'll be up for some more explorin' later... If we have a better plan next time."

Twilight nodded. "We will."

She tore a hole in reality to home. It was then - and only then - when their cutie marks glowed, signifying a job well done.
A full day had passed since Twilight and her friends had returned to Equestria from their little outing in a jungle. Twilight had not slept for any of that time.

She still hadn't the foggiest idea what the green diamond was and the lack of information was driving her up a wall. It matched no mineral she had ever seen, was completely devoid of magic, and yet produced more power than she could even measure. The only other things that did that were the Tree of Harmony itself and the being known as Discord.

At the moment, she had her eyes level with the diamond, unblinking, staring in a vain hope of observing some pattern in its constant shifting appearance. Despite the odd texture and apparent vibrations, the diamond didn't actually move at all. It felt a little fuzzy and unstable when touched directly, but apparently the table it was on didn't think so.

It was just green and mysterious and powerful.

She really hated not knowing more.

"So, you going to put it in the mirror now, or are you going to keep staring at it hoping the 'eureka' moment will come?"

Twilight turned to Spike, her always-faithful assistant. He'd been helping her examine the diamond over the last several hours, though he was asleep for half of that. Despite getting fed up with the lack of progress about two hours in the little dragon was still willing to help her, including slapping her across the face (metaphorically or otherwise) to get her to realize how silly she was being.

Twilight sighed. "I... Guess it is time for that, huh? It is what it's for."

"Good, because I was beginning to worry that you'd put away a thing that can travel to other worlds just because you hadn't studied it enough yet!"

Twilight chuckled. "I'm not that bad. Plus, I did tell Mlinx we'd return one day. Can't really do that without this or some other power source. This object just seems the most... Versatile of all the options. Mainly because I don't want to rely on Discord for anything."

"Good idea," Spike said. "That guy can't even be found half the time."

Twilight shook her head, banishing thoughts of her most annoying friend. She picked up the diamond with her magic and trotted over to the Mirror Portal, sticking it at the top-center, affixing it with a simple adhesive. The Mirror sparked with an overflow of alien energy as a result. Twilight touched her hoof to the shimmering surface and it passed through easily. With a smile, she stepped through, appearing in a very familiar jungle by way of a glowing shimmer of energy affixed to a tree. There were no signs of any demons - but why would there be? This was far from the giant red flower.

Spike came through behind her. "...Huh. Feels a little odd not to be turned into a dog."

Twilight raised an eyebrow. "Do you want to be a dog?"

"Oh, no!" he said, waving his hands back and forth. "It's a good kind of odd!"
"Uh-huh. Well, it works," she said, walking back through the tree's shimmering side, appearing back in her castle.

Spike bounded after her. "Hey! I wasn't done looking at the alien jungle! It was cool!"

"You'll get another chance, Spike," she said. "Right now I need to test something..." She removed the glass jar she had filled with magic gasses the day before and created another one with a different set of gasses. She plugged the new spell into the Mirror Portal and stuck her head through.

There was no transformation vortex. That was good. She went right to her destination - the base of a statue. She knew there was a giant marble horse behind her, but she didn't bother to turn so she could see it. She was looking at the familiar school in front of her, a building composed mainly of maroon bricks that rose three stories, significantly taller than most buildings in Ponyville. There were two separate wings of the structure, each flanking a central entrance adorned with glass etchings of horses and the sun.

Much like both the statue and the glass etching, Twilight reared up in glee, leaping out the rest of the way into the world. "It worked!" she cried.

Three or four faces looked up at her outburst - decidedly non-pony faces. They were the faces of two-legged apelike creatures with mostly bare skin. Said skin came in a wide range of colors, and while there was preference for peach tones, Twilight could see green, yellow, and blue. The hair on their heads was usually much more vibrant, with a tendency for brilliant solid hues. These beings lacked horns or wings, had hands at the edge of their arms which could hold amazing devices like cellphones, and all of them wore copious amounts of clothing.

In other words, just humans.

Twilight waved. "Hi Coco!"

Coco - a blue haired girl with cream skin - blinked, bewildered at the talking alicorn. She waved back, confused, and continued on her way.

"Huh... Guess I do look different. Must be odd to them."

"No kidding," Spike said, coming through the portal himself, retaining the form of a scaly reptile. "Did you know dragons are legendary creatures to humans?"

"Yeah. So?"

"Not sure if I'm going to like being a real dragon here or not, is all I'm saying."

Twilight grinned. "Well, it's time to find out. Come on, let's go inside and say hi!"

~~~

Sunset Shimmer was a woman who had allowed herself to get a little too comfortable with the status quo. Understandable, since she was currently happy, something she couldn't have said for most of her life. Most of this previous unhappiness had been her fault, a direct result of having ambition as a primary character trait. As so many had before her, she had attempted to climb to the top and gotten burned by the sun - though in her case this was more literal than most.

Those days were behind her. She had given up her delusions of grandeur to live amongst her human friends at a high school instead of... Well, almost anything else. She was mentally much older than her classmates, was a master in magic in her home world, and knew ponies in high places. But she
stayed here because she liked it. She didn't want it to change. She didn't see any reason why it would until one of her friends asked a very particular question.

"So... Sunset!" Pinkie said, sitting herself and her lunch tray across from her fiery friend. "What're you going to do after you graduate in a few months?"

Sunset looked up from the book she was reading - *Essays on Quantum Theory* - tossing her red and yellow curls. She stared blankly at her pink friend with her crimson eyes.

Pinkie sighed, putting a hand to her forehead. "Please tell me you've actually given it some thought..."

"Uh... No..." Sunset said, face blank, nervously clasping her gloved hands together.

"Sunset, it's my job not to think things through!...Okay, so, it's actually Dashie's, I'm just supposed to be ditzy. Still, you're a genius, you think about things."

Sunset smirked slightly. "I wouldn't say I'm a genius..."

"What about all those magic-scanny things you hooked us up to? Or those times you outthought the bad guys? Or those mysteries you solved? Or that book you're reading?"

Sunset blinked. "Fair point. I'm not as smart as Twilight though, yo-"

"Oh no, we aren't derailing the topic into 'which Twilight are we talking about' territory. I see your ploy."

"Sorry," Sunset said, leaning back in her chair. "I... I really haven't thought about it Pinkie. I guess I'll go wherever you girls go."

Pinkie facepalmed. "Sunset..."

"What?"

"Not all of us are graduating. Fluttershy and Rarity will be out the same time as you but the rest of us are staying another year. Fluttershy's already got a job offer and Rarity's headed for fashion school or something," Pinkie shook her head, a sure sign of not really being sure what Rarity was doing.

"Oh," Sunset said. "...I knew that."

"Yes, but you haven't thought about it." Pinkie put her chin in her hands and leaned forward. "Sunset, school's ending. You're going to have to do something. Go to college, get a job, go back to Equestria... School doesn't last forever, silly!"

Sunset bit her lip. "Well... Great."

Pinkie raised an eyebrow. "What's wrong? There's a whole new life out there for you, you just have to find it!"

Sunset shook her head. "I don't want to leave you girls. You are-"

"We are not your only friends. Twilight, Spike, and Starlight will all welcome you in Equestria. As well as the other me!"

Sunset blinked. "...Are you pony-Pinkie right now?"
"Wouldn't you like to know!?” Pinkie giggled.

Sunset narrowed her eyes. "Yeah. Should've expected that answer."

Pinkie nodded. "Profound observation! Now stop sidetracking."

Sunset chuckled. "Fine, fine... You're right. I should think about it. I'll figure something out, Pinkie. It's still several months away, don’t worry."

"Several months can burn like dynamite Sunset! Starts out slow then BOOM! Doooooom!"

Sunset reeled back from Pinkie's sudden outburst. "Good point. I'll probably talk to Twilight about it."

"Which one?"

"Probably both, come to think of it."

"I ask because there's one standing right behind you."

Sunset smirked, turning around slowly. "Twilight, why did you sneak up on-"

She was stunned into silence by what met her gaze. It was Twilight, all right. Twilight the pony. Still a pony despite being on Earth. All of her was there, the wings, the horn, the purple fur coat... The eyes...

"Because I wanted to surprise you!” Twilight answered Sunset’s unfinished question, grinning.

Sunset touched Twilight's muzzle with her finger. Fuzzy, a little damp, but definitely solid.

"Uh...” Twilight cocked her head.

Sunset shook her head. "Just...Checking to see if you're real."

Sunset heard a laugh that drew her attention to the small purple reptile on Twilight's back. "We're real, all right. As real as your hanging jaw,” Spike said, smirking.

Pinkie giggled.

"You're... Both... Here...” Sunset managed.

"Uh... Yeah?” Twilight said, smile fading. "Is something wrong with that?"

Sunset darted her eyes left and right, scanning the cafeteria. Yep. People were staring. None were afraid - they’d had enough experience with magic mumbo-jumbo to be used to it - but they had a lot of phones out.

"Nothing to see here!” Sunset blurted out suddenly, trying to position herself over Twilight and Spike. "Nothing at all!"

Twilight fumbled with her wings. "Sunset, they know who I am..."

"NOTHING AT ALL!” Sunset grabbed Twilight by the scruff of her neck and ran her out of the cafeteria, checking to make sure Spike stayed on board. Sunset didn't let Pinkie's maniacal laughter deter her. Nor the sounds of cell phone camera apps snapping pictures.
"Sunset what are you-"

"Shush until I get you into a closet," she blurted, kicking the doors of the cafeteria open. She stepped into the well-lit - but abandoned - hall. She turned a sharp corner and tossed Twilight and Spike into a broom closet, slamming the door shut with them inside. She leaned against the door, breathing hard, sliding down to the hall floor.

"Ow..." Spike muttered from behind the door.

"Sunset, why are we in a closet?" Twilight asked.

Sunset took in a breath. "Because you can't just walk around as a pony, Twilight! People were taking pictures!"

"...So? They know me, and it's not like you girls aren't on TV with your fancy powers and dresses. Weren't you in a movie or something?"

Sunset opened her mouth, closed it, grunted, then opened it again. "Look, Cinch is watching us. I've tried to get us to be more careful than before so she doesn't learn too much..."

"...Cinch? Isn't she that incompetent principal who bullied Sparky?"

Sunset took a moment to process Twilight's nickname for her other self. "...Yes."

"Why should we care what she knows?"

"Because she's going to want revenge eventually and the less she knows, the better."

Twilight was silent for a moment. "...Wasn't this still an overreaction, even then?"

"Uh... Yeah. Probably," Sunset admitted. "Maybe I just wanted to have something happen. Or maybe I still haven't processed that you're a pony. Oh my gosh you're a pony how are you a pony Twilight, how!?"

"...Can you let me out of the closet first?"

"Nah, I'll just come in." She opened the closet and shut it behind her. It was pitch black inside. "Huh. Dark."

"No, Really?" Spike said.

Twilight sighed, creating a light with her magic. "Fine, guess we can do it in here to satisfy your baseless and sudden paranoia."

"Thank you," Sunset said. "So, first question. HOW!?"

"Mysterious transdimensional power source and an accompanying adventure," Twilight said.

Sunset blinked. "That...That doesn't help me."

"Maybe you should start from the beginning?" Spike suggested.

"Oh. Okay," Twilight cleared her throat. "It all started with me walking down the hill for no discernible reason."

"Stop," Sunset said, holding up a hand. "I know your storytelling voice when I hear it. How many
hours will this take?"

"Uh... Four?"

"Five," Spike corrected. "It took seven with me, and that was because we were doing science at the same time."

Sunset shook her head. "Yeah, don't have time for that. Lunch ends in twenty minutes." She lifted up her hand and removed her glove. "Let's do this the fast way. Think of... The story you were telling."

Twilight looked at Sunset's bare hand, confused for a second. Then realization dawned on her face - she glanced at the red crystal hanging around Sunset's neck. "Oh. Got it. Go ahead."

Sunset delicately touched Twilight's forehead with her bare finger. The red crystal sparked, and Sunset was flooded with emotions and images from Twilight - she saw Twilight walking on the hills... She saw the man of light and the enchantress... She saw the ball... She saw the jungle, felt Twilight's barely contained panic... She saw the demons... She saw the Nightmare, the Spirit, and the green crystal...

She slowly retracted her hand. "Woah..." It was a bit much to take in all at once. She raised a hand to keep Twilight from talking while she sorted out her thoughts. Twilight had just uncovered a spell that could travel the worlds easier than the Mirror Portal ever had and she had the power source to activate it. She'd met an alien race that was, frankly, pretty awesome looking. And Twilight was prepared to go looking for more worlds.

Sunset grinned. "Twilight, this is amazing!" She grabbed Twilight by the shoulders, forgetting she wasn't wearing her glove and absorbing a rush of excitement form Twilight, raising her own adrenaline levels even further, making her hyperventilate. "Easy... Easy..." she gasped.

"Probably should put the glove back on," Twilight observed.

"No... Kidding..." Sunset gasped, slipping the glove over her hand. "Yeesh..."

"So yeah!" Twilight grinned. "That's what's up and why I'm here! Just decided to tell you in person since the opportunity arose!"

"If I walked through the portal right now I'd appear in Equestria as a human," Sunset realized.

"Yeah! We might not even need to use the Mirror Portal - I could probably use the energy from your crystal to open my own portal. It doesn't take all that much power to open a gate to Equestria, compared to the jungle at least. I could probably do it with my own power from here, actually..."

Sunset's pupils contracted. "Twilight... Do you think other you..."

"You mean Sparky?"

"...Yes. Sparky." Sunset rolled her eyes. "Do you think she could... learn this spell?"

"Well, probably, but she isn't exactly skilled at magic and the spell is somewhat complex."

Sunset smirked. "Do you doubt her fidelity with gadgets? She had that locket, remember? She can just make something to cast it for her."

"Well, yes. I could probably store the spell in something like that for her but she'd still need power for going to other places... Oh. Right. Crystal."
Sunset was *giddy* - most of it was probably just excess excitement from Twilight, but Sunset didn't care about that at the moment. There was something *new to do* and... well it just *felt* like she had to be part of this world jumping fiasco. It felt like... A natural evolution of herself.

_Couldn't have come at a better time._

"I'm going to go get her so we can do this thing," Sunset said.

"Uh, isn't lunch almost ov--"

Sunset stood tall. "Who cares? Pshaw, this is more important than school! Stay here, I'll be back!"

She ran out, closing the closet door behind her. She ran down the hallway, towards the room she knew Twilight/Sparky would be.

Sunset was probably letting Twilight's excitement affect her a bit _too_ much. She noted this, and pushed it out of her mind - there was a goal for her right now. An... adventure. Yes. That was right. Adventure. She was going to throw open the floodgates.

~~~

The Twilight Sparkle known as Sparky was currently in Canterlot High's labroom, an enclosure that had at one point just been a place for chemistry professors to make vain attempts at being cool. Now, however, it was filled with all manner of scientific gadgets thanks in no small part to Sparky herself. Sunset may have started it up, but Sparky, like all good aspiring researchers, had connections. Those connections were more than willing to provide extra funding to a budding science program for a student as full of promise as she was.

Currently, she was experimenting with magic. The purple crystal around her neck glowed slightly as she tapped into its power with her mind, producing a small telekinetic aura around a block of iron. The cube was _precisely_ ten centimeters by ten centimeters by ten centimeters. After she lifted it a full meter off the ground, a disc-shaped device clicked on and absorbed the magic field into itself and displayed the number 71.2. She wrote this number down in her notebook, to be put on a spreadsheet later, at which point she'd run it through a complex series of programs to find any discernable patterns.

Until then she was just going to move onto the next experiment she had running. She glanced at the ocarina she was printing in the brand new 3D printer. The machine was putting the finishing touches on its first printed design, finishing the smooth blue plastic of the woodwind instrument. It was currently on the top... or side... or... Actually, Sparky had no idea if ocarinas really had any directions besides 'put mouthpiece in mouth.' Considering how sideways the mouthpiece was that didn't really help analyzing it in three-dimensional space. She decided she'd need to look at the design on the ocarina's virtual model to see what equations defined it.

Regardless, Sparky stared at it for the two minutes it took to complete. She opened the sleek door of the printer and took the instrument out, tossing it in her hand to test its weight and stability quickly. She'd measure the dimensions and mass accurately a little later, right now she just needed a ballpark estimate to see if everything made sense - which it did. She fed a small piece of string through the side of the mouthpiece and slung it around her neck, just like she'd seen in pictures. Then she brought it to her lips and blew.

The noise that came out was atrocious. It worked though; she just absolutely _sucked_ at it. She looked at it incredulously, wondering if she could either find the time to practice or if she could find some other use for it. Something to think about later - now was the time to take those measurements...
Or it would have been had Sunset not pushed into a room with a frantic smile on her face.

"...Sunset?" Sparky said, concerned.

"Guess what?"

The concern left Sparky instantly. She raised an eyebrow. "Rainbow needs another guitar string?"

"What? No! Well, maybe, but that's not what this is about." She rubbed her hands together rapidly.

"Twilight-"

"-Twinkie-" Sparky corrected automatically.

"...Twinkie has found a way to travel worlds! Worlds other than just Earth and Equestria!"

Sparky glanced at the clock. Thirteen minutes until the next class. If she responded positively to Sunset she was likely to miss said class and probably a few more. There were no exams or tests today as far as she knew so the chances of her grades actually being affected in any way were pretty low, seeing how forgiving Celestia was about absences.

Sparky grabbed her notebook, camera, pens, and assorted devices quickly, stuffing them into her purple laptop bag. She held tightly onto her labcoat and stared right into Sunset's eyes with her own - eyes that were almost identical to a certain purple alicorn's. "When do we leave?"

Sunset grinned. "Glad we're on the same page. That's up to Twil-Twinkie though. Come on, she's in the broom closet."

Sparky blinked. "The broom closet?"

"Oh... I may have been trying to hide her."

"Why?"

"...You can see for yourself. Come oooon!"

"Are you high on excitement again? Did you touch Pinkie?"

"No!" Sunset raised her hand. "Just Twinkie! ...Man, that's a dumb name."

"It's adorable," Sparky countered. "Plus, she likes it."

Sunset shrugged. "Eh... Guess so. Come on." She grabbed Sparky by the hand and ran her across the school to the broom closet. They passed the school's resident 'cool dude' on the way.

"Hi Flash! Bye Flash!" Sunset called, leaving the blue haired boy rather bewildered at the rapid encounter. He didn't even manage to formulate a response before they were out of his sight.

Sparky was shoved into the closet shortly thereafter and rather unceremoniously flopped onto her pony self's back. "Oh. Twinkie. You're a pony."

"Yep! Amazing, right?"

"I'd say so." She stood up and dusted herself off. "So, Sunset, why are you hiding her?"

Sunset twitched and Spike broke out into laughter.
"What's so funny... Spike?"

Spike managed to nod in agreement with Sparky's greeting but couldn't get any explanation out, he was too busy chuckling. The responsibility fell to Twinkie. "Oh, just that Sunset hid me because I was a pony, trying not to make a scene or let information fall into the wrong hooves or something. I'm honestly not all that sure."

Sunset sighed. "Fine, you all win, I was being silly.” She waved a hand dismissively. “Can we do the thing now?"

Twinkie raised an eyebrow. "I can't teach or give Sparky the spell like this!"

"Wait, you want to teach me how to do it!?" Sparky said, grin widening. "I can try, I've been studying those scrolls you sent through and I think I can..."

"You are not versed in higher spellcasting Sparky, sorry," Twinkie apologized. "You'd need to use one of your machines to unleash the spell, or at least something similar."

Sparky was already drawing up plans in her mind on how to create the device she would use to capture the spell and activate it over and over again. Something similar to the magic disc device she had, but with a power input valve so she could use her own power on it, and of course a safety mechanism...

"Uh... Sparky?"

"Sorry, just... thinking up designs."

Twinkie grinned. "Great! We're part way there. But that'll take time. You'd have to design it, I'd have to distill the spell down, and I'm pretty sure Sunset doesn't want me to spend all day in the lab here."

Sparky's eyes widened. "C-can we go to Equestria to do it?"

Twinkie smiled. "Yes. Yes, we can. Let's see if I really can open this connection with my magic…" Her horn flared up and she cast the spell to connect directly to Equestria. She tore a hole in the fabric of reality similar to the one she had torn a day ago in a far removed jungle, though this one was considerably smaller and cost significantly less power to open, small enough that she could generate it on her own. Light poured into the closet from a world of green hills, blue sky, magic aura, and crystal castles.

The three girls stared at the bright light, blinking as their senses adjusted.

Spike sighed. "Well, I'm going through.” He hopped into Equestria. "You coming?"

Twinkie shrugged, entering her world with a flap of her wings. Sunset stepped through next, looking at the world with an expression of nostalgia.

Sparky came out last, stepping slowly, legs shaking. This new world felt different to her - and it was more than just the unrealistically bright landscape, more than the somehow 'off' sun, more than the magic crystal castle nearby. The substance of this world was different. Was the gravity slightly altered? Were physics somewhat different? Was it just the magic?

She didn't know.

All she knew was that it was amazing and a little overwhelming. She'd always just accepted that
there was another world through the Mirror Portal that had ponies in it. How had her scientific mind never fully realized the implications about that? Never asked the questions? Never told her to come here?

She stood in abject awe a full minute and twenty seconds before she started snapping pictures and taking notes. "My gosh why didn't we do this sooner?"

Sunset rolled her eyes. "You were nervous about, and I quote 'my molecules being torn apart and re-arranged by some unknown force through unknown means with unknown side effects'!"

"Oh. Right." She blushed.

"Hey, don't worry, we're all here..." She blinked. "Hey, is that Lyra over there?" she said, pointing down the street towards Ponyville proper.

Twinkie's eyes suddenly flew wide open. "Hide."

"Huh?" Sunset said, bewildered.

"Hide! Lyra's crazy about human conspiracies!"

"Twilight I don't really think-"

Twilight teleported herself and the humans into the foyer of her castle, startling the unicorn who happened to be standing there, Rairty. "Oh! Uh... Sunset? What a surprise! And uh... Are you Twilight, or... Oh my..." She put a hoof to her mouth, glancing back and forth between the purple alicorn and the purple human.

"...Rarity?" Sparky gawked.

"...Sparky, right," Rarity waved gracefully, regaining her composure quickly. "Welcome to Equestria. What brings you here?"

"Twinkie's paranoia."

Rarity stifled a laugh at the absurd nickname. "Well, that's certainly how she is all right. What was it this time?"

Twinkie rolled her eyes. "Lyra's here."

Rarity raised an eyebrow. "Why is that a problem? She's such a nice mare."

"Humans, Rarity. Humans. Right in front of you," she said like this explained everything.

"Dear, there's nothing to worry about. I'm sure she'd love to meet these two."

"Oh, you think everything will be fine... It won't be. Spike will be distracting her now, but I'm not sure if that'll last."

Sparky winced. "Poor Spike..."

"Yeah. Sorry, we're going to have to cut the tour short, get you two back before she-"

Sunset put a finger to Twinkie’s muzzle. "Shhhhhh. We'll be fine."

"This is not the time to get on my case for calling you paranoid!"
"Yes. Yes it is."

Sparky giggled. "Hey, Lyra!" She called outside. "Come on in! Got some people for you to meet!"

"Celestia save us..." Twinkie muttered.

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Less than a minute ago, Spike had walked up to Lyra. “Hey, Lyra, what brings you here?”

Lyra bit her lip. “I… I need to talk to Twilight about a… problem.”

Spike raised an eyebrow. “Did you and Bon Bon have a fight?”

“Oh no, Bon Bon and I are fine! It’s just…” Lyra sighed. “I’d like to talk to Twilight, okay?”

“Well, she’s a little busy, but I’m sure she can-“

“Hey Lyra!” Twilight called. ”Come on in! Got some people for you to meet!”

Spike groaned inwardly. Lyra raised an eyebrow at him. “…Should I not go in?”

“I don’t think I’ll be able to answer that question until I see your reaction.”

Lyra blinked. “Well that’s certainly an odd response.”

“You’ll understand in about ten seconds. Come on.” Spike led her to the front doors and threw them open. “Tah-dah, be amazed!”

Lyra’s eyes widened and her jaw dropped.

“Hi!” Sparky said, getting down on one knee. “I’m Twilight Sparkle. Not the Twilight you know, but-“

Lyra did not let her finish her introduction. “HUMAN!” She shrieked, her previously frowning face turning into a stupid grin. She flung her front hooves wide and tackle hugged Sparky.

“OHMYGOSH A HUMAN!”

Twinkie turned to Sunset and raised an incredulous eyebrow. Sunset just kept grinning at her.

“Uh… Yeah, I’m a human!” Sparky said, trying in vain to pry the minty unicorn off her. “And I hear your name is Lyra!”

“YOU KNOW MY NAME! The texts were right, you know everything...”

“…What?”

Lyra stared into Sparky’s eyes. “Tell me the secret of the seven-sided chest.”

Sunset shrugged. “Lyra, we don’t know anything about any seven-sided chest.”

Lyra stared into Sunset’s eyes with a grin that was somehow both stupid and terrifying. “If you exist, that means I was right! I was right all along! You can’t hide the truth from me anymore! I will find out what really happened at Tartarus’s Inception, you can bet your bottom bit on it! Now tell me!”
Rarity blinked. “…I’m going to leave you dears to this, it looks like you have quite a bit to-“

“Oh no you don’t,” Twinkie said. “You’re going to stay right here and suffer through this like the rest of us.”

“I’d hardly call this suffering…”

Lyra interrupted the train of thought again. “Enough talking about normal things. Human-Twilight, I need to know what your people did…”

Sunset facepalmed. “Humans don’t exist on Equestria, Lyra. We come from another world entirely.”

“Aha! I knew it! You’re all aliens from another planet!” She cackled. “Brilliant deduction, Heartstrings!”

Sunset chuckled a little. “Actually, I used to be a pony. But yeah, Sparky here’s an alien. We’ve got a magic mirror and everything.”

Lyra stared closer at the human in her hooves. “…Why is your world concerned with ours? Why have you altered our history? I need answers!”

Sparky blinked, face straight. “…We didn’t know your world existed until a couple years ago.”

“I’m sure Starswirl had some contacts when he forged the mirror,” Twinkie said.

“No, this comes from before Starswirl!” Lyra *wailed*. “Ancient humans! We have legends about you all from long before ponies had even formed the three tribes! They were the authors of our world, the builders of our society-“

Twinkie sighed. “This is why I thought this was a bad idea.”

Sunset rolled her eyes. “I happen to be enjoying this.”

“Hey!” Lyra interrupted. “Answer my questions!”

Sparky squirmed. “Lyra, if we were somehow in your world all those thousands of years ago, we don’t remember it. It’s just not likely!”

Twinkie nodded. “Yeah, those legends were probably based off the Handmaid, since there was no way humans could have been here before Starswirl made the mirrors.”

Lyra stood up and shook her head, releasing a thankful Sparky. “No… No you’re *wrong*!”

Sunset knelt down to be level with Lyra. “Lyra… Rarely is anything as it seems, or as you have believed for so long.”

“I… But you don’t understand, I’ve been researching the human myth most of my life! They existed way back then! How do we have records of the name ‘human’ from that far back if they didn’t exist?”

Sunset frowned. “I… I don’t know. I never studied ancient world history that well. But you have to be willing to accept that things are not as you think they are. We sure don’t know about your ancient humans.”

Lyra sat down, dour. “Well… This is disappointing.”
Sparky stretched her back to make sure it was okay from Lyra’s death-grip. “It’s fine, really. I’m admittedly a little interested myself why you have legends about humans.”

“Oh we have the best legends about humans! Once, long ago, a tribe of ponies and other races lived in Tartarus, sealed from the world above by a terrible magic wrought by the demons of the past. But then a human child fell into Tartarus and led them all to freedom! …Well, in one version of the story at least, the one I like. In others the human kills them all to ensure the dominance of human control of the world.”

Sparky blinked. “…Morbid. Though I guess ancient legends tend to be. We have ones where a wolf eats a kid and she has to be cut out. Rather… Gorey.”

“I always liked that story,” Sunset said out of the blue. Noticing the strange looks she was getting, she put her hand behind her head. “I also liked Hansel and Gretel!”

“They cooked the witch, Sunset. In her own oven.”

Sunset raised a finger to protest, but Rarity shushed her. “Just face it dear, you’re a girl with a penchant for morbid stories. Nothing to be ashamed of.”

“But-“

“No buts Sunset, you are who you are. Accept it!”

Sunset hung her head. “…I like explosive and violent things. Sometimes.”

“Hrm?”

“…Almost all of the time. It’s not something I’m proud of!”

Rarity rolled her eyes. “I just said it was nothing to be ashamed of. While those of your ilk aren’t all that common, there’s still merit in the way you hold yourselves. The world needs warriors, just like it needs ponies with an eye for the finer things.”

Lyra blinked. “I am learning so much about human culture…”

“Pony, remember?” Sunset said.

“You’re a human right now. …I need a notebook.”

Spike raised a claw. “We’ve got plenty!”

Twinkie twitched. “Spike!”

Lyra grinned. “Where are these notebooks!?"

Spike pointed to a nearby bookshelf, one of many many places notebooks could be found in this castle. Lyra grabbed it hastily, along with a nearby pen. She clicked the pen several times in her magic. “Okay! Let’s get this show on the road! More culture! Hit me with it!”

Sparky blinked. “Well, I can’t really give a good survey of our culture…”

“I can,” Sunset said, a grin appearing on her face. “I’ve lived among the humans for almost four years now. I can give you a very interesting look at the way they tick, Lyra. It will, of course, take several hours to explain in full, and require a lot of tangents and random factoids, but I’m sure it’ll be worth it!”
Lyra’s eyes twinkled while Twinkie’s became crestfallen. “Sunset… We really don’t have time for that…”

“We have all the time!” Lyra shouted.

“Actually, I don’t think you do,” Spike said. “Didn’t you have a problem?”

Lyra’s cheerful expression suddenly dropped. “Oh… Right… Twilight?”

“Yes?” Sparky and Twinkie said.

“The princess,” Lyra said, walking up to Twinkie. “I… I have a problem.”

Twinkie raised an eyebrow. “Fight with Bon Bon?”

“Why does everyone assume that? No, it’s…” She glanced at the two humans, the dragon, and the unicorn standing around them. “Uh…”

Twinkie spread her wings. “Can you all wait outside please? Lyra needs a word with me in private.”

Sunset nodded, quickly leading everyone else outside without a word. Soon only Lyra and Twinkie stood in the hall. Lyra sighed. “So, you know the Canterlot gang?”

“Yeah. Did something happen between you and one of them?”

“Lemon Drops.”

Twinkie smiled at the memory of the yellow mare, one of her and Lyra’s mutual childhood friends. “Ah, her. What’s up with you and her?”

“Well… I was talking to her about my human theories. I’d never shared them with her before! Don’t know why I never did – I did with both Moondancer and Minuette a long time ago. Moondancer actually gave me most of my human legend books!”

“That explains a lot.”

Lyra chuckled. “Yeah, a bit. But when I started explaining things to Lemon she got… Angry, screamed at me for being stupid and… stomped off back to Canterlot. And… Well you’re the only other one of her friends in town, I figured you might know what that was about.”

Twinkie frowned. “…No… I have no idea why she’d act so negatively. This sounds like more than… annoyance at your antics.”

Lyra smirked. “Twi, if I cared about ponies being annoyed, I’d’ve stopped being a human conspiracy theorist years ago. This was different. She was angry. Not even Moondancer got angry at me for this. Fed up? Yeah. Frustrated? Oooooh yes. But never angry.”

Twinkie nodded. “…Looks like we need to go on a trip then. Can’t let hurt feelings like this stew for too long. Come on, we’re going to Canterlot.”

Lyra raised an eyebrow. “But what about your… visitors?”

Twinkie furrowed her brow. “I guess I could bring them along…”

Lyra laughed. “Humans? Out in the open? That won’t cause a scene, nope, not at all.”
Twinkie smirked. “I can always just turn them into ponies. …You know what, that’s one of the best ideas I’ve had all day. Do you care if they join us?”

“I mean, no? I just don’t want Lemon to be mad because they exist.”

“I gotcha.” She and Lyra left the castle, stepping outside to meet up with the others. Sparky was currently talking to Rarity about differences in fashion while Sunset and Spike were talking about fire. “Hey guys! We’re going to Canterlot.”

“…Like this?” Sunset said.

“No,” Twinkie said. “Sparky, you okay with becoming a pony?”

Sparky’s jaw dropped. “…I mean, let me think about it, it’ll rearrange my molecules and have an unknown number of side effects-“

“She’s fine, cast the spell,” Sunset said.

“Sunset I did not say I was fi-“

Twinkie cast the spell anyway, transforming the two of them into ponies – unicorns to be exact. Sunset stretched the familiar legs of her old body and smiled, noting that they had boots instead of gloves. “Been a while…” She glanced at her brilliant solar cutie mark, still bright upon her flank. She lit her horn, creating a fireball in midair. “Yep, I’ve still got it.”

“You going to burn something?” Spike asked.

“I’m not a pyromaniac!”

“I sense lies.”

“No, really! Just because fire is my thing does not mean I like to burn everything. Come on!”

There was a thump behind them that interrupted their conversation. Sparky had just landed flat on her face, glasses falling into the grass. “…Observation: four legs does not make it easier to stand as hypotheses would suggest.”

Lyra chuckled. “Can’t handle the hooves?”

“It feels like I’m an eternal hunchback,” Sparky said.

“A what?”

“Have Pinkie show you sometime. It’s creepy,” Twinkie said. “I’m curious…Do you have more magic now that you’re a unicorn and have the crystal?”

Sparky focused her energy into her horn, lighting it up. She tried to lift a nearby rock and instead condensed it into fine powder. “…I’d say so. Holy cow.”

“Holy… cow?” Lyra said.

“Expression,” Sunset explained. “Twinkie, you have an airship right?”

“Yeah?”

“To Canterlot then!”
Sparky, Twinkie, Sunset, and Lyra all sat in the basket of Twinkie’s ‘airship’.

It was a hot air balloon in the shape of her face.

“Question,” Sunset said. “How can you be a princess and not have a personal airship?”

“I do! It’s… Just at Canterlot all the time!” Twinkie smiled sheepishly. “Only big cities have airship docks!”

“Ponyville needs to hurry up and grow,” Lyra said. “Get more modern fun stuff. No offense to Pinkie, but sometimes I want to go out for something a little more fancy than baked goods.”

Pinkie poked her head out from under the basket. “I heard that!” Then she vanished.

Lyra shivered. “…There are no secrets from her…”

Twinkie shook her head. “No… Rainbow Dash successfully lied to her for years about, of all things, pies.”

“Question,” Sparky said. “…Pies?”

“Long story. One that Rainbow Dash should probably tell you, actually, not me. Besides, we’re at Canterlot.”

The glorious capital of Equestria was a true feat of pony engineering. Built onto the side of a tall mountain, numerous levels of pearly-white city hung over the valley below. Hundreds of buildings weaved in and out of the numerous levels, entering and exiting the mountain itself, winding up towards the largest structure in the city by far. The castle was an awe-inspiring work of art with dozens of yellow-tipped minarets scraping the sky. Gardens flourished in the brilliant sun of the day and pegasi flew all around the complex structures, casting fleeting shadows on the lands below.

“This looks nothing like the cities back home…” Sparky observed, adjusting her glasses. She took out her phone to take a picture – but it slipped out of her hooves. “My phone!”

Sunset teleported it back with her magic. “There you go.”

“…How do you ponies hold anything with hooves?” Sparky said, snapping a picture using her magic to hold the phone.

“Traction theory,” Twinkie said. “There’s a faint magical field that exists on all pony hooves that allows us to hold objects. It’s unwieldy, and far inferior to your hands, but it works well enough.”

Lyra raised an eyebrow. “…I always just thought they kinda held things. Never bothered to think if it was weird or not.”

Twinkie smirked. “You were focused on other things.”

“Still am. Those ancient humans were a thing. I’m telling you.”

Twinkie rolled her eyes. “Riiiiight. Regardless, I’m taking us down…” She guided the balloon to a flat area of the city, behind the castle so as not to draw unwanted attention. The four of them hopped out like large rabbits, glancing around the city with mixed expressions of wonder, nostalgia, nervousness, and amusement. “Lyra, I uh… Don’t remember where Lemon’s house is,” Twilight admitted.
Lyra rolled her eyes. “This way. When we get there, Sparky, Sunset, you might want to hang back a bit, k?”

Sunset nodded. “Of course.”

Sparky agreed absentmindedly – she was busy staring at the society around her. Ponies of all three kinds lived here, though there was a visibly higher concentration of unicorns. She watched them go about their lives, particularly fascinated by the many _many_ restaurants they passed, including some place that made her think ‘Indian’, even though there was no way India existed here. The food smelled so good…

She took a picture and tore her nose away, allowing herself to take in other sights. Guardsponies patrolled the areas with stern expressions and unmoving postures. Sparky found it odd that most of them were male in an obviously female-dominated society, but didn’t question it openly. “So… This is your capital.”

“Yeah,” Sunset said. “Pretty cool huh?”

“I have to admit, it looks like it was designed with artistic aesthetic in mind, rather than functionality…”

“It’s really, really old,” Twinkie admitted. “The lower levels are newer, built less with art in mind, and there are several sections of the city inside the mountain.”

Sparky noted this in her book. “Celestia rules from here?”

“Both Celestia and Luna, as equals. Legally, Cadence and I have the same say, but in practice they do all the actual ruling.”

“Huh. I wish Principal Celestia was the president.”

Sunset let out an annoyed sigh. “You and me both.”

“Hey, that’s the problem with electing your leaders,” Twinkie said.

Lyra shook her head. “They elect their princesses!”

“Well, they don’t have immortals over there. Or magic. Because of that there are no wise rulers who can live forever. Invariably kings, queens, princes, princes… All will pass away, and less altruistic leaders take their place.”

“Woah… Kinda like how we elect mayors?”

“Yeah. Actually, exactly like that. They just do it all the way to the top.”

“That’s pretty weird!”

Sunset gave Sparky a knowing look.

“Okay, fine! I was biased!” Sparky threw her hooves in the air – and fell over. “Ow…”

Twinkie helped her up. “You okay?”

“Fine, thanks.”

“We’re here,” Lyra said, walking up to the door of a _very_ yellow house seamlessly placed among
other similar houses, forming a bit of a house wall. Twinkie followed close behind her while Sunset and Sparky stayed behind.

Sparky looked to Sunset. “Okay, my observations about this world. One: you never told me enough about it. Two: these ponies are far too colorful and happy all the time about everything. Three: can we go get a bite to eat at that Indian place?”

Sunset raised an eyebrow. “It’s not ‘Indian,’ but sure. Though I don’t think I have any bits on me…”

“Oh…”

Sunset smirked. “Twinkie – still feels odd to say that – can pay for us. We just have to wait for her to deal with-“

“GET OUT!”

Sunset and Sparky swiveled their heads back to the front door. Lyra was thrown out the front door – caught by Twinkie’s telekinesis before she could hit the ground. Sparky couldn’t see who Twinkie was talking to, but Twinkie’s expression was rather angry.

“Lemon, that was uncalled for.”

“Twilight, I’d appreciate it if you left.”

Twinkie shook her head. “As both your and Lyra’s friend, I can’t just let this be. I want to know what’s going on.”

“She’s bat-hoof crazy that’s what’s wrong!”

“…And this is news?”

Lyra raised a hoof. “Yeah, okay, maybe the calling me crazy all the time is a little irksome.”

“Shut up,” Lemon spat.

Lyra obliged. Twinkie didn’t. “Lemon, I need to know what’s going on-“

“What’s going on is that Lyra’s crazy and I don’t want to hear about it!”

“I’m sure Lyra will agree not to talk about it if we just know why, Lemon.”


Sunset sighed, walking up to the front door.

“Who are you?” Lemon muttered.

“I’m Sunset.” She removed one of her front boots. “And I’m going to figure this out.” She touched lemon on the shoulder, and the red crystal glowed…

Sunset saw what Lemon remembered. She saw a stallion – obviously Lemon’s father – digging into ancient tomes, his long beard draped over the texts.

“Dad?” A young Lemon asked. “Watcha lookin’ at?”

“Legends of the ancient humans!” He chuckled. “Did you know, long ago, that ape-like creatures
ruled the world?”

“Yes, after the age of demons was the age of man, an apparently brilliant age. We don’t know much about them because they left only scant traces behind, but we know they existed!”

“…I thought things that far back were just legends?”

“Really?”

“Oh, I suppose Tartarus is a legend then?” he asked with a chuckle.

“I dunno. I’ve never seen it!”

“I have. Went there myself when I was younger. It really is full of terrible creatures – but also a really friendly dog.”

“Cerberus! You’ve told me the story before!”

“Have I? I suppose my memory fails me then…” He rolled his eyes. “Anyway, I’m studying these ancient texts and I think I may be onto something. Starswirl’s encounter with the Sirens – I told you about that a week ago – was a wild goose chase. There probably is no Mirror. I found something greater. In the land of Tauryl, there are great towering relics older than time itself.”

“Tauryl? Never heard of it!”

“It’s the land of centaurs and gargoyles, the homeland of the great sorcerer Tirek. I’m thinking of planning a trip there, to see if I can find the humans.”

“Can I come along?”

“Sorry little Lemon, a bit too dangerous for you. But I’ll be sure to bring back souvenirs!”

Sunset took in a deep, pained breath. She knew what was coming. Lemon’s memory blurred to her sitting on the porch of her house, looking at the street. Waiting for her father to come back. Days passed. Lemon the filly eventually gained her cutie mark and grew into a mare, still staring out the front door for her father. The stallion who never came back…

More years passed. Lemon got her own house – this one. Still, many days she would sit by a window and stare at the road, wondering.

Sunset pulled back from Lemon, shaking her head. “I am so sorry.”

“Did… Did you just apologize for going into my head?”

“No,” Sunset asserted. “You needed somepony to go into your head since you weren’t yourself. Lemon… You’ve been holding onto this for too long.” She slipped her boot back on.

“I…”

“You’re mad at the mystery of the humans for taking your father from you. And you don’t want to face that – so you get angry. You fight back…” Sunset realized something in that moment, chuckling. “…I’m guilty of that too. I don’t want to think about my future, so I either get angry or dismiss it. It’s something we all do.”

Lemon looked at Sunset, baffled by how she was acting.
Twinkie smiled. “What Sunset’s trying to say is that, sometimes, we need to think about things to move forward, not push them out of our minds. The best way to do that is talk about it.”

There were tears in Lemon’s eyes. “I haven’t seen him in decades…”

“And I’m not going to say he could come back. I am going to say you can move on.” She hugged her. “You can talk to Lyra and I. Neither of us are here to corrupt your memory. We could even call Moondancer, Twinkleshine, and Minuette, if you want.”

“I… don’t want to drag them into this.”

“It’s not a question of want, Lemon. It’s a question of if you need more friends.”

Lemon sniffed. “I… Don’t know.”

“Then… How about you just start by telling the story of your father? Don’t worry about us, or what we think, or even about the humans. Just tell it.”

Lemon looked at Sunset. “…She already knows.”

Sunset shook her head. “I don’t know how you need it to be told.”

Lemon nodded. “…Yes. You… You’re right. He… Well I don’t know what his childhood was like, but it was full of adventures…”

And she told her story.

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After it had become clear the story would last several more hours, they moved to the ‘Indian’ restaurant, which turned out to have the rather uninspired name of the Tasty Treat. What it lacked in creative names it more than made up for in food. Twinkie, Lyra, and Lemon were sitting at one table, leaving Sunset and Sparky alone at another.

Sparky looked at Twinkie, a faraway look in her eyes.

“…What is it?”

“She really is amazing, isn’t she? World leader, diplomat, magical scientist, librarian…”

Sunset smiled. “She is, isn’t she?”

“I’m just… some kid with a phone and a magic necklace.”

“Twi… You’re so much more than that. You’re a genius.”

“Yes, but I’ll never amount to what she is.”

Sunset smirked. “How does ‘dimensional traveler’ sound to you?”

“But she’s already that too…”

“Ah, but she’s new, just like you. You could both start on this path and find something different. A bit of… competition.”

Sparky rolled her eyes. “We both know you’re the leader, not me.”
“Who says the glory has to go to the leader?”

“Why does there have to be glory at all?”

“Cause it’s fun,” Sunset said. “Doesn’t have to be diabolical, you know.”

“I guess so. You really want to start our own dimensional exploration thing? I mean, we aren’t that experienced.”

“We have powers, we have skills, and we have something they don’t have – science. Or, more accurately, technology. They have to expend a lot of effort to make something like an iPhone. We have billions of them around. We’re not advantage-less.”

Sparky nodded. “We better ask principal Celestia for a new club then.”

“No doubt.”

“What kinds of worlds do you think we might find?”

Sunset grinned. “A world made entirely of donuts. I’m placing my bets.”

“I’d be curious to find a world that exists only in two dimensions! Or four dimensions!”

“A place where there are no men at all!”

Sparky shot Sunset a look. “That’s impossible.”

“You won’t know until you find one!”

“I… That’s… …That’s right. By that logic, there may be a world identical to this one, except you never get the idea to travel to other worlds. And you will, by chance, never travel there.”

Sunset blinked. “…Wow, we really don’t understand anything about this, do we?”

“Nope.”

Sunset grinned. “That makes it really exciting!”

“You bet it does!”

They high-fived for no particular reason.

“What are you two planning?” Twinkie asked from her table.

“Nothing you need to be concerned with! Yet!” Sunset responded, chuckling.

“I don’t believe a word of what you’re saying.”

“You don’t have to! We just want the dimension hopping spell you were going to give us anyway.”

Lemon blinked. “…Dimension hopping?”

Lyra shrugged. “I dunno. But I might want to find out.”

Twinkie shrugged. “Maybe eventually. Right now, we don’t even know what we’re doing. But in the future… Who knows? We might have a big national production.”
“Yeah. Who knows?” Sunset laughed. Of course that was just wishful thinking. There was no way this thing would get that big.

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Pinkie the human (or at least a Pinkie who was a human at this moment) stood in front of the Mirror Portal, tapping her foot impatiently.

Sunset, Sparky, and Twinkie walked through the portal as ponies.

Pinkie shook her head. “You know, for being ‘Ponies on Earth’ you didn’t spend all that much time on Earth!”

Sunset rolled her eyes. “Sure, Pinkie. …Hey, I’m still a unicorn. Huh.”

“I can change you back, somewhat easily,” Twinkie reminded her.

“Wonder if there’s a way to keep my horn…” Sunset mused.

“That’s something to wonder about later, right now we need to get the spell in your hands. Er… hooves.”

Sparky chuckled – and tripped over her hooves again. “Ow.”

Sunset laughed. Then she looked around nervously. “You know…”

“Sunset, you have nothing to worry about,” Twinkie said. “It’s not like there’s a bunch of people spying on us, waiting for the right moment to strike.”

Pinkie rolled her eyes. “Yeah. That’d be silly.” Nopony noticed her sarcasm, they just walked into the school, prepared to make a scene. Pinkie shrugged, following them and preparing a party at the same time.

Of course, they were being watched. But it wasn’t by Cinch – or anyone associated with Cinch in any way. A woman dressed in all black stood at the window of a nearby apartment complex, binoculars in her hand. Her skin, purple; her hair, red; her face, scarred over the right eye. She slowly lowered her binoculars as her targets left her sights.

She pulled out a phone, dialing a government number.

“She’re definitely ponies,” she said.

“Good work agent Shadow! I assume there’s more, since you’re actually calling. Did you figure out how their portal works?”

“No. I have discovered that, normally, their kind can use magic naturally, through their horns.”

“Woah, so they’re unicorns? How… interesting. I bet they can do some pretty awesome things in their world!”

“That remains to be seen. Do I move in to the portal?”

“Only you can make the call if it’s time for that.”

“…For now, I will just keep watch on this Sunset. She shows promise.”
“You do that. Welp, it’s Friday, time to give the office its weekly cake. Don’t disappoint me, agent Shadow.”

“I won’t,” she said, hanging up.

Agent Tempest Shadow took one more look at Canterlot High before ducking out of sight. No one knew she had ever been there.
Spike walked down the stairs to the basement that held the ever-so-popular Mirror Portal, carrying a tray of sandwiches. He was mildly surprised to find all six of the girls there rather than just Twilight. “What’s the special occasion?” he asked.

“Ah, Spike! I was just explaining to everypony what I’ve done!”

Spike looked at the Mirror Portal, specifically at the large glass globe mounted on top of it that hadn’t been there yesterday. The sphere was filled with a large quantity of multicolored magical gas that held a strangely uniform shape vaguely like a puffy sea urchin. It nested itself snugly inside the halo-like machinery the Mirror Portal had been adorned with prior. “Uh… What have you done?”

Twilight gestured towards the globe with her wing. “Why, I’ve made it so we no longer have to switch out spells! This bulb is set to change to whatever I want! Earth, the demons, somewhere else, you name it! So long as I have a correct spell configuration we’re fantastic!”

“Uh huh…” Rainbow Dash said. “…So, what’s that mean for us?”

“I’ll get to that Rainbow! I had a randomization spell running on the bulb all night to see if I could land a stable connection, and wouldn’t you know it – it worked! I’ve got a new dimensional address that nopony has ever been to before!”

Rainbow Dash’s bored expression vanished. “When are we going in?”

“Well, soon, obviously. I called you over here as soon as I saw it myself!”

Applejack raised a hoof. “Isn’t walkin’ in blind a little… Dangerous?”

Twilight blinked. “…Fair point.” She stuck her hoof through the portal, waving it around a bit. “…Seems safe, room temperature, I can feel air…”

Applejack raised an eyebrow. “Oh, in that case, why not go ahead and stick your head in?”

Twilight stuck her head in, prompting a facehoof from Applejack. ”Ah was jokin’ Twilight.”

“Huh?” Twilight said, pulling her head out. “I’m sorry, didn’t catch that.”

Rarity rolled her eyes. “Is it safe, Twilight?”

“Well. It’s actually another version of this very castle.” Twilight grinned. “Can’t wait to meet another version of ourselves!”

“Like that won’t be confusing… Or creepy…” Rainbow Dash muttered.

“We’ll obviously have to use nicknames at some point.”

Rarity smirked. “Like Twinkie?”

“Sure, like that.” Twilight said, oblivious to Rarity’s soft giggling. “…What should the rest of our nicknames be?”
Everypony looked at each other and shrugged. “Ah suppose we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” Applejack said.

“It’s probably best if somepony else gives us nicknames anyway,” Pinkie added. “I mean, giving yourself a nickname is just a taaaaaad silly.”

Fluttershy raised an eyebrow. “Doesn’t Rainbow Dash do that all the time?”

Rainbow Dash shrugged. “What can I say? I’m so awesome I can make my own nicknames.”

Twilight smirked. “Well, I’m sure we’ll get to put your nickname skills to the test eventually. But, for now, who wants an adventure?” She gestured towards the mirror. “Who knows what lies behind this shimmering portal?”

“You do,” Applejack said. “You looked in.”

“Well, I – yes – let’s just go through the portal already.” She spread her wings and flew through the portal, her five friends following behind.

Spike waved goodbye as they left. He looked at his tray of sandwiches. None of them had been taken. Once again, more for him. He wondered if this was going to become a pattern or if it was just an early adventure fluke. He shrugged, throwing a sandwich into his mouth. If it was a pattern, good; if not, he’d enjoy it while it lasted.

He walked out of the Mirror room and back into the castle proper, devouring another sandwich. “Hmm… These could really use some sapphire sprinkles…”

With a flash of blue magic sprinkles of sapphire gemstones appeared on the sandwich he was holding. “Huh. I have gained the power to summon sapphire sprinkles at will!”

He heard lighthearted laughing behind him. He sighed. “Or it’s just you using magic.”

A pinkish-purple unicorn walked in front of him. “Hey, you don’t know for sure that was me.”

“Starlight, it was either you or Trixie, and if Trixie had done it things would have exploded. Violently.”

Starlight shrugged. “It would have probably just turned into a teacup.”

Spike nodded, taking a bite of his sapphire sprinkle sandwich. “Woah, this is excellent.”

“Flavor enhancement spell,” Starlight said. “Figured I might as well make the best possible sandwich.”

Spike gulped down the entire sandwich. “I can never look at sandwiches the same way again…”

“Yeah, that spell tends to do that. Though not to Pinkie’s cakes, for whatever reason.”

“Her pastries defy explanation.”

“That they do.”

Spike wiped his face and offered Starlight a sandwich, which she grabbed in her telekinesis. “So, Starlight, where have you been? Haven’t seen you around.”

“I was helping Trixie with a show because, you know, she needs help.”
“Did you do all the tricks for her?”

“Oh no, merely that one that needs the teleport spell.”

“Which one’s that, again?”

Starlight gave Spike a knowing smirk. “If I told you that it’d remove the mystery of the act. A true magician never reveals her secrets.”

“Trixie’s told you, though.”

“That’s because I’m in on the act.”

“Thought you said you only helped on that one part…”

Starlight blinked. “…You’re on point today, Spike.”

“Thank you.” He took a bite out of another sandwich. “…That’s disappointing.”

“Hey, don’t give me that look, I’m not enhancing everything you eat.”

“You’ve ruined me.”

Starlight rolled her eyes. “You’ll live.” She juggled a sandwich in her magic. “…So, where’s Twilight?”

“Adventure,” Spike said.

“Where’d the map send her this time?”

“The map didn’t send her. She went through the Mirror Portal.”

Starlight grinned. “Oh, she’s going to see Sunset? Well, why don’t we join them?”

“No, I mea- oh, that’s right. You haven’t been around the last two days. You don’t know.”

Starlight cocked her head. “Don’t know about what?”

“Twilight’s figured out how to use the Mirror Portal to other worlds. She’s exploring somewhere new right now.”

Starlight blinked. “…I go hang out with Trixie for a few days and all the exciting stuff happens.”

“Pretty much.”

“Well, I can join them anyway.”

Spike shrugged. “I mean, you could but they could be far from the Mirror by now doing Celestia knows what. …Actually, Celestia probably has no idea. Huh.”

“Riiight… Probably dangerous to charge in blind alone…” Starlight sighed. “Well, guess I’m doomed to be bored today.”

Spike shook his head. “Come on, we could do stuff! Like… Uh…”

“Ogres and Oubliettes?”
“Well I mean that’s just one of many options…” Spike said, tapping his fingers together, nervously grinning.

Starlight chuckled. “I guess we can do that, Spike. Do we have anyone else who actually knows how to play though?”

“Well, Big Mac’s busy, and I have no idea where Discord is, so… No.”

“If Discord’s not playing, I have some terms.”

Spike folded his arms and smirked. “What are your terms, o’ great mage?”

Starlight grinned evilly. “I get to run the adventure.”

Spike broke out into a cold sweat. “Uh…”

The sound of ominous thunder booming came from Starlight’s horn. “You want to play, don’t you Spike?”

“…Yeah. Can you… Make it not so intense this time?”

“No promises. It is very likely you are going to die in your quest.”

“…Fine. I suppose emotional terror is better than boredom.”

“That’s the spirit!” Starlight squeed. “Come on, your wizard has to come to terms with the true face of the ‘fair Schmarity’.”

“Hey! That’s not fair!”

“Ah ah ah, it’s not against the rules, and it’ll be a good story. Come on, time for some fun.”

Spike winced. The chances of some important character dying were about 100% when Starlight was running the adventure. And yet… Even though his emotions went through a brutal rollercoaster during her stories, they often felt more satisfying than the ones he came up with. It was moments like that when Spike wondered if he really had what it took to be a great dungeon master.

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Starlight slammed her hoof on the crystal table hard, making Spike jump. “The fair Schmarity has betrayed you for her own selfish desires, trading you to Lord Vester for riches and power.”

“Schmarity would never do that-“

Starlight raised an eyebrow. “Really? What about all those times she complained on your little trek? What about her annoyed glances? Her avoidances of you? She also didn’t seem very thrilled about all those times you failed to protect her interests. Though, pfft, I mean, it’s not like you’ve been failing over and over here.”

Spike took in a deep breath. “…And, once again, you’re right. I cast lightning storm on Vester.”

Starlight grabbed a twenty-sided die and menacingly handed it over to Spike. “Roll a 17 or higher. You don’t want to find out what happens when you don’t.”

Spike carefully examined the twenty. He sent off a short prayer and rolled it. It tumbled across the table, ending up in a slow spin on a point. It leaned towards a rest point – 10. Spike slammed his
head on the table in defeat before it had stopped rolling, making the dice shift slightly to 17.

Starlight blinked. “…I’m going to allow that. It’s just too perfect.”

Spike beamed. “Really!?”

“Yeah. Your powerful electric energies shoot through the air and impact Vester right in his ethereal brain matter. He is unable to reciprocate to destroy you and at the same time he is utterly baffled that you had enough power within you to injure him in this form.”

Spike raised a fist. “I take him out!” He rolled another die without asking – 20.

Starlight laughed. “You feel the energies and souls of your fallen companions enter you, giving you the power to do what you need. All the suffering, horrors, and wrongdoing you’ve experienced has been leading to this moment. A single moment of righteousness, all you need to redeem it all. Your staff glows with the power of a billion wronged souls and fires a blast of intense magic at the malevolent Vester. He tries to respond, firing off some spells of his own, but they all fall flat to the power of those he wronged. Karma has come to bite him in the rear, forcing his own spirit conglomeration to dissipate into nothing. The dark army will fall without its head and the world will be allowed to rebuild.”

“Awwww yeah!” Spike whooped.

“You have saved the world, dragon mage. Congratulations. But there is one thing left undone…”

“Oh?”

Starlight nodded solemnly. “Schmarity comes up to you, crying more tears than you have ever seen come from her face, and you have seen plenty on this journey. She throws herself at your feet and begs for forgiveness.”

Spike smiled. “I knew it. I lift her up and hug her, telling her it’ll all be fine now.”

Starlight groaned and rammed her face into the table. “Spike…”

“…What?”

She rolled a die in her magic. It was a 6. “You’re an idiot. She takes a shiv out and stabs you in the neck, killing you on the spot. She will claim that you died heroically facing Vester, and will take your place as the hero of the world, even though she sure as Tartarus doesn’t deserve it.”

“But… But… Starlight! I was offering forgiveness!”

Starlight shook her head. “Come on Spike, the one thing I was trying to do with this adventure was to get you to drop the whole Schamrity thing, to see that maybe this character of yours isn’t the best pony! Sometimes you’ve got to just realize that! Sure, she was redeemable, but implicitly trusting that avalanche of crocodile tears? Come on!”

Spike blinked. “…Wait, you were trying to get me to realize something?”

“Well yeah, there’s a moral to the story. Morals to most the stories I write for this, actually. There’s a point I was trying to get across.” Starlight shrugged, sitting back in her chair. “Well, there you go. You ‘won.’ World’s saved.”

“…That was a pretty good adventure, Starlight, though… the ending was… Yeah, I didn’t like the
"I maaaay have been a bit annoyed with you at that point," Starlight admitted. "Sorry. Tell you what, your death won’t be permanent. In a thousand years you’ll be resurrected, or something."

"All right then. So, it’s my turn to run an adventure."

Twilight walked into the room at that moment, startled to find the two of them there. "Oh. Hi. You two look like you had fun."

Starlight nodded. "Yeah. Now, you and I need to have a talk about your adventures in the Mirror Portal…"

Twilight yawned. "Maybe later. I’ve got some notes I need to file."

Spike blinked. "...You don’t have your notebook."

"Mental notes, Spike," Twilight said. "It was an interesting place, like our world but different. Have to get it down while it’s all fresh in my mind." She laid her hoof on the map and stroked it, smiling.

"Uh… You want us to get off?" Starlight asked.

"Well you don’t have to, but that’d be elegant."

Spike raised an eyebrow. "Eh, we were done anyway." Starlight cast a spell and put the entire game up in under ten seconds. "Enjoy your… Note scribbling."

Twilight nodded. "Uh-huh…" She conjured a bunch of papers and laid them out on the table as the two left.

Starlight raised an eyebrow after they’d left the room. "She seems… Distant."

"Probably just distracted by something that happened. She’ll tell us about it later."

"COMING THROUGH!" Pinkie screamed, bounding up the stairs. Spike and Starlight shot to either side as the pink blur shot through them. "TOTALLY NOT GOING TO SEE TWILIGHT!"

"Uh…" Spike raised a hand, but Pinkie had already entered the map room.

Starlight rolled her eyes. "Pinkie probably got into the energy drink stash."

"You have an energy drink stash?"

"Why wouldn’t I?"

Spike pointed at where Pinkie had just been. "That’s why."

"Oh come on, she’s not that bad."

"Yes. She is. I’m going to go get some armor on, there’s no way she isn’t blowing something up with her energy."

Starlight groaned, using a spell to summon some simple magic armor on Spike. "Happy?"

"…It’s blue and see-through."

"And stronger than steel."
Spike shrugged, accepting this. They descended the stairs to the main hall, where Fluttershy, Rarity, Rainbow Dash, and Applejack were mingling.

“Oh, hi Starlight!” Rarity said. “My, what mischief did you get up to while we were gone?”

“I emotionally scarred Spike,” Starlight said with an innocent smile.

“She isn’t joking,” Spike said, shivering.

Applejack raised an eyebrow. “Uh-huh. All right then.”

Rarity pursed her lips. “Didn’t think that was you, dear.”

Starlight laughed. “It was just a round of Ogres and Oubliettes that took a dark turn because Spike was being a numbskull.”

“You and I both know it would have taken a dark turn regardless,” Spike muttered.

Starlight shrugged with a proud smile on her face.

“Huh,” Fluttershy said, scratching her chin. “…What a moment.”

“I could tell you all about it!” Starlight grinned. “Actually might make a good book... I wonder if Twilight would be willing to write it…”

“Ah’m sure she’ll give you time for it,” Applejack said.

“Yeah, not now though. She’s… distant.” Starlight frowned. “What happened through that portal by the way? I’m dying to find out!”

Rarity smiled. “Well, we found a world much like this one – almost every detail was the same. Right down to the other Twilight. They spent so long talking over complicated magics in detail – it’s probably why she’s distant, her head’s swirling with that.”

Rainbow Dash laughed. “Yeah, even eggheads can’t handle that much webbing.”

Applejack grunted. “You just like being right.”

“What? I vouch betrayal!”

Starlight raised an eyebrow. “Really Rainbow? I seem to recall you fighting for your right to be right on many, many occasions.”

“Wow,” Rainbow Dash said, staring at Starlight. “…Just wow.”

Starlight blinked. “Uh… What?”

Rainbow Dash coughed. “Just... Really, calling that out? Soda in a bomb, Starlight.”

Starlight smiled sheepishly. “Oh! Sorry. Thought you’d be okay with that.”

“She’s just in a bad mood,” Rarity said. “Had a whole debacle with her other self. She lost the race.”

“Hey!” Rainbow Dash blurted.

Spike chuckled. “Lost a race against yourself? Does that mean you won?”
“I… I…” She looked like she wanted to say something but couldn’t manage it.

Applejack coughed. “It means it doesn’t matter all that much. It was a thing that definitely happened, that’s about it.”

Starlight looked at Applejack. “…You okay Applejack?”

“Wha? Yeah, totally fine.”

“You seem a little… Nervous.”

Rarity sighed. “She’s fine, dear, just… Well, she wasn’t all that thrilled about meeting herself.”

Fluttershy nodded. “It was a very awkward silence that lasted till the end of all.”


Starlight blinked. “Okaaaaaaaaay…”

Rainbow Dash nudged Rarity and mumbled something in her ear. “Oh! Right. I do believe we all have homes to return to. It’s been a long day, time for some rest. See you around, Starlight, Spike.”

“Sure,” Spike said, raising an eyebrow as the four mares dispersed.

“Well then,” Starlight said.

“Something happened over there and they’re not telling us.”

“Applejack’s really bad at lying…” Starlight frowned. “Though if she’s lying, it’s probably something big. She never lies about much of anything.”

“Maybe they just had something really embarrassing happen?”

Starlight rolled her eyes. “I doubt it. …We should go talk to Twilight about it. Busy or not.”

Spike nodded in agreement. They turned around, setting back up the stairs they had just come down a few minutes prior. They approached the door they heard a loud yell.

“What are you talking about Pinkie?!” Twilight shouted with a venom Starlight had never heard in her voice before.

“You should know better than to ask questions like that,” Pinkie responded, giggling.

“Most ponies at least follow rules.”

“Aha!”

“You get that accusing hoof away from me.” Starlight heard a thud. Had… Had Twilight just slapped Pinkie?

“Look at you. Twilight the great and glorious, spreading her domain! I’ll have a cake prepared for you by sundown!”

“As always,” Twilight muttered. “Look, Pinkie, straight-talk, okay? What do you mean? You never follow any of the rules, you always bounce from one end of the spectrum to the other, and yet you are the most instrumental.”
Pinkie shrugged. “I mean that the tables have turned, that’s it. Surprised you needed to declare straight-talk. Don’t you know me well enough by now?”

“I’ve got plenty of other things to deal with. The good news is that exploitation will be easy. The art of speech is foreign to them.”

“Oh, so they’re all mutes?”

“Pinkie, straight-talk.”

“I Don’t follow the rules, remember?” Pinkie giggled again. “Call me the ‘bozo’ in double all you want, I’m the reason this all works.”

“But you’ve said the tables have turned. Which means it isn’t working anymore. Why?”

Starlight imagined Pinkie shrugging. “Too ambitious perhaps? I don’t know everything, Twilight. The other me didn’t see me coming, as I’m sure you noticed.”

“She can’t escape in her state. There’s no way she’s coming here.”

Pinkie groaned. “That was just an illustration! Yeesh.”

“Illustrations should be restricted to double,” Twilight spat.

“Oh but that’s the art of it! I mean, it’s not like I can do whatever I want whenever I want.”

“…Your shifting of modes is irksome.”

“I know right? But you like it.”

“No, I do not, but I have to admit it is useful at times.” She frowned. “I’d recommend refraining from straight-talk with any of the locals, it’s the only kind they know. With their assumptions in place, manipulation will be easy.”

Starlight gasped loudly.

Twilight sighed audibly from the other side of the door. “Pinkie, the noises of this castle sure are unusual, are they not?”

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“I suppose… Neither did I.”

Starlight and Spike took a cautious step back from the door, glancing at each other with worried expressions. Their hesitation would have been their doom had a yellow blur of color not swept into them at high speed, tossing them into a side room. Twilight and Pinkie poked their heads out of the room to see… Nothing.

In the adjacent room, Fluttershy stuffed Starlight and Spike behind a shelf. “Straight – keep quiet if you want to live,” she hissed. She quickly turned away from then and faced a window, putting on a scowl.

Twilight and Pinkie walked into the room, Pinkie sniffing the ground like a dog. Normally the sight would make Starlight chuckle, but now it only sent ice through her spine. Pinkie was almost always able to find them normally…
Fluttershy turned to them. “I see you’re here.”

Twilight nodded. “It’s prudent to find those who hear.”

“Ah, but where?”

Pinkie held up a hoof. “Either here or not.” Twilight and Fluttershy shot Pinkie confused looks. “What? It’s a perfectly valid statement.”

Twilight rolled her eyes. “In marginality.”

Pinkie continued sniffing. “Hey Fluttershy, did you see them in here?”

“On the sun.”


“What lies beyond the moon.”

Twilight grimaced. “Astrologically speaking, the foremost nature of the universal constants is beyond most plebian minds.”

Fluttershy rolled her eyes. “For what it’s worth, no.”

Twilight turned to Pinkie. “The ears?”

“Are deceptively hidden from my senses, master Twilight!”

Twilight facehooved. “Adieu, then.” She and Pinkie left.

Pinkie turned and giggled. “You know what, this was the perfect conversation to confuse ponies.”

Fluttershy blinked. “In fin.” When she was sure she was alone, she looked behind the bookshelf. “Straight – you can come out now.”

“What… was that?” Starlight asked, baffled.

“They aren’t the ponies we know!” Spike said, waving his hands.

“Thank you Spike, I managed to deduce that.”

Fluttershy nodded. “We are not. My Twilight is here to subjugate your people with double.”

“…’double’?” Starlight asked.

“You’d probably think of it as simple lies, but the nuance is far too much to explain at this juncture,” Fluttershy said. “You need to go through the portal and free your friends. They’re in the dungeon of the castle exactly like this one.”

Starlight frowned. “…Dungeon?”

“The area of this Castle that has letter storage.”

Spike raised a claw. “I know where that is.”

“Good. Now get yourselves to the portal and hurry – Pinkie knows things. Her senses have been off lately but I have no idea how long that will last.”
Starlight nodded. “One question – why are you helping us?”

“The light at the end of the tunnel.”

“Uh…”

Fluttershy facehooved. “Celestia damn it’s hard to talk in pure-straight… Just do it, it’s in your best self-interest. I don’t have time to figure out how to express that straightly.”

Starlight let out a breath. “Okay. Spike, we’re going in.” She cast an invisibility spell on the two of them. “See you soon… Uh… Lieshy.”

Lieshy raised an eyebrow. “Eternal detriments, indeed, I don’t see why not.”

“…You’re really going to have to explain that later,” Spike said.

Lieshy twitched. “Straight – get moving already!”

“All right, geez!” Spike said, moving to leave the room. He tripped over an outcropping because he couldn’t see his feet. “Ow.”

Lieshy sighed. “What an evident paradox of fate.”

Starlight put Spike on her back and snuck out of the room, levitating herself down the stairs so as to not make a sound with her hooves. She passed Applejack and Rarity – who hadn’t gone home – speaking in that strange disconnected way Lieshy and Twilight had. Lielight? She found herself wondering how to insert ‘lie’ into the names of all her friends… Liety, Liebow, Linkie, Lack.

…Lack.

She was barely able to contain the laugh on that one.

Yeah, all those names were pretty stupid. She’d have to think of better ones later. She eventually arrived at the Mirror Portal, which was currently being guarded by their Rainbow Dash. She was muttering something about pinnacles for whatever reason. She was none the wiser as the two slipped through the shimmering veil…

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A few hours ago…

Twilight Sparkle stepped out of a wall into a room identical to the one she had just been in except for the lack of a Mirror Portal and associated devices. It was rather empty, save for a few boxes. The area was apparently used 3 for simple storage.

Her five friends came out behind her. They took a moment to look around the familiar surroundings. “Now what?” Rainbow Dash asked.

“…Now we try to find somepony?” Twilight suggested.

Pinkie grinned. “The best way to do that is to go to Ponyville! Quick, out the front doors! Chop chop!”
Twilight did as suggested, walking through the empty castle halls to the front door. She noticed the castle had slightly fewer decorations in it than her own, though the layout itself was precisely as she remembered it. Even the engravings on the front doors were exact! It just – well it lacked the personal touch.

She opened the doors of the castle and looked out at Ponyville.

“Doesn’t… Look any different,” Rainbow Dash said.

“This world must be extremely similar to our own,” Twilight said. “I’m willing to bet their Applejack is working on her farm and their Pinkie Pie is working at Sugarcube Corner.”

“Shouldn’t their version of you be in the castle then?” Rarity asked.

“Maybe… But she could be out on important princess business.”

“We could just ask somepony,” Fluttershy said.

“Good idea.” Twilight trotted into Ponyville proper. The first pony she saw was a mare she knew – in her world at least. The cream-coated earth pony Bon Bon. She waved. “Hey!”

Bon Bon smiled and trotted up. “Nice weather.”

Twilight nodded. “It is, isn’t it? Anyway, to the point. I’m not the Twilight you know, and I’m looking for her. You see, we’re from another world!”

Applejack facehooved. Bon Bon just looked at Twilight with a delicate smile, though her eyes gave away mild infuriation. She took a few seconds before responding. “Time sure has its way sometimes.”

“…Indeed it does…” Twilight said, furrowing her brow. “But that’s not helpful.”

Bon Bon tensed. “I’m certain you can render your own assailment.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

Bon Bon’s ears laid flat. “…Please…”

Twilight cocked her head. “What in Celestia’s name has you so worried? I may be a bit… Weird, but I’m just asking straight questions.”

Bon Bon gasped – and fainted on the spot.

Rainbow Dash shook her head. “Okay, what in Equestria?”

“I… I have no idea.” Twilight frowned. “Maybe their culture’s different? …Oh no, how many taboos did I just break!?”

“Several,” Fluttershy said.

“How can you know? How can we know it wasn’t a hundred!?”

Fluttershy pointed away from herself. “Uh… That wasn’t me.”

The group turned to see… Another Fluttershy. There was no physical discernable difference between the two pegasi save for the new Fluttershy’s notably grumpier expression.
“Uh… Hi.” Twilight waved sheepishly with her wing. “I… Er…”

Pinkie rolled her eyes. “Twilight’s not working right now, too afraid to break a taboo. But not me! I don’t care about that at all right now! Hi! I’m—“

“Pinkie Pie. Straight talk?”

“…What?”

The other Fluttershy facehooved. “For the sanity of golems…”

Pinkie giggled. “That’s a fun saying! I like ‘and that’s how Equestria was made’, but that’s just me.”

“If only just.”

“Oh yeah, probably other Pinkie too. Is she just as hyperactive as me?”

“For the equation, indeed.”

“…What?”

The other Fluttershy took in a strained breath. “Straight talk. Okay. Requirement of the natural endowment of mind apparently… Greetings, I am Fluttershy. You are not Twilight, you are not Pinkie, and you are not Fluttershy.”

“Uh… Yeah,” Fluttershy said.

“I need… You to explain,” the other Fluttershy said, fumbling with her words.

“We’re from another world where things are really similar but pretty different!” Pinkie said. “For one, we don’t talk like you! At all!”

“An… Annoyance. I assure you.”

“Why?” Rarity said.

“…I am currently unable to express that feeling in straight-talk. There may be a way, but I do not grapple it.” She glanced around. “It is taboo to use straight-talk in public.”

Twilight groaned. “I knew it... Everything I said was a political blunder!”

Fluttershy put her wing over Twilight. “There there… You didn’t know. You just need to ask for forgiveness!”

“Uh…” Twilight looked at the still unconscious Bon-Bon and to the other Fluttershy. “Sorry?”

The other Fluttershy bit her lip and let out a strained breath. “Never apologize in straight-talk to somepony who isn’t a lover.”

Twilight blushed and covered her face with her wings. “Done talking now!”

Rarity smiled. “Well… I must admit, while this way of speaking is confusing, it sounds like it is quite civilized. I wonder if we could learn?”

“Probably over time,” Applejack said. “Not now.”

Other Fluttershy looked to the sky. “My Twilight is coming. You will not understand the ensuing
The native Twilight appeared, just as foretold. She looked exactly like Twilight, once again the only difference being in the expression, one of pride. She turned to Fluttershy. “In the labyrinth?”

“The mirrors edge isn’t forged.”

The other Twilight raised her eyebrows. “A land of loss and sorrow?”

Rainbow Dash glanced at Rarity. “I feel like we’re being insulted.”

The other Fluttershy continued. “What understanding? So much is outside the realm.”

The other Twilight laughed – hard. Then she turned to the six ponies and started speaking. “And then the ball started rolling, down, down, down, much further than any could possibly see. In the depths of the realm – that’s you – there is a spark. Thus, lightning comes from beyond with just rule and provides an avenue for intrigue. Doubly beyond these, but for far more than possible, the taboos. Entrapment with a physiological aspect, careful, implied, powerful. Hello!”

Twilight blinked. “…Uh… Hi?”

This was greeted with more laughter. She pointed back to her castle, gesturing they come back with her. Twilight turned to the other Fluttershy – and she nodded.

Pinkie shook her head. “Okay, so the entire time other Twilight was talking, I had a really weird feeling. Pinkie Sense was acting up.”

“She was probably just insulting us,” Rainbow Dash muttered.

Other Twilight pointed at Rainbow Dash and grinned, nodding comically, like an adult would do with a young child. Except more patronizing. Rainbow Dash seethed inwardly. “Okay, so not fair that she can understand us and we can’t understand her.”


Rainbow Dash fell silent until they were led back into the castle. The native Twilight gestured for them to move forward, a big dumb grin on her face.

Rarity looked at Twilight. “Your counterpart gets far too much enjoyment out of our predicament.”

Twilight sighed. “Yeah.”

The other Twilight chuckled. “What a half, mysterious!”

“Okay!” Rainbow Dash said. “We’re in private now! You can use the ‘straight-talk’ or whatever! No pony’s going to know!”

The other Twilight shrugged. “All right. Have a nice imprisonment.”

“…Wait wha-“

The other Twilight cast a spell, capturing Rarity, Rainbow Dash, Applejack, and Fluttershy in crystal. Twilight gasped. “Why – why did you do that?”

“Because I see an opportunity with you idiots,” her counterpart responded. “Quite an easy one, I might add.”
“What are you planning?”

“Oh, you see, I already told you. To your face, I might add, not only a few minutes ago. But since you’re incapable of experiencing the double, let me reiterate. I’m going to imprison you all. I’m going to keep all of you here, locked away. I will return to your world and pretend to be you after I’ve harvested enough information from your mind with my magic. I will make sure you can’t use magic and your Pinkie can’t use her shenanigans. There were also a lot of insults – really clever ones, I might add – that would be completely lost in translation to straight-talk. Such a shame, really.”

Twilight lit her horn and Pinkie Pie produced a frying pan. Twilight aimed. “We can’t let you do that.”

“Does the little alicorn want a fight?” the other Twilight snarked, rolling her eyes. “Please, the only reason I haven’t frozen you is because you could break out. I’ve got another plan for you.”

Twilight didn’t let her finish. She tried to shoot a bolt of magic from her horn, but instead only got a migraine.

“Magic circle!” her counterpart laughed.

Twilight looked down – they were indeed standing in a strange magic circle that… Well she was pretty sure her castle didn’t have.

The evil Twilight conjured up a horn-sealing spell. “Can’t have you casting spells when I move you out of there. Be a good girl and accept this willingly, will you?”

Pinkie was having none of this. She appeared next to the other Twilight and hit her alongside the head. “Yeah, how about no?”

“Backups within backups!”

“Hi there!” another Pinkie Pie said, hitting Pinkie Pie across the head with another frying pan. Pinkie went flying – right into a net of cotton candy laid by her counterpart.

Pinkie screeched. “No! Cotton candy nets! My weakness!”

“For today, anyway,” the other Pinkie said.

“Curse you and your identical abilities! Woe! Oh woe!”

“Woe!”

“Enough you two,” the other Twilight said, turning to the normal Twilight. “Now, take this spell or I have to knock you out.”

Twilight ran for the edge of the circle.

A frying pan hit her in the back of the head, knocking her to the ground. This didn’t knock her unconscious. The magic bolt from her counterpart did.

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In a world parallel the two colliding universes, Sunset glanced at the team she had formed for the ‘dimensional explorers’ club. She… was honestly expecting more to show up. But she could work with this.
“Okay, so. Let’s go around introducing ourselves. Name, skills, and why you’re interested in this club. I’ll start. I’m Sunset, I’m good at scientific analysis and have magic powers. I used to be a unicorn and frankly other worlds fascinate me because I came from one.”

Twilight stood up excitedly. “Hi! I’m Twilight and I’m good with technology and have a lot of theories on how magic works and I’m the one who invented all the machines we’re going to use! It’s just such an interesting scientific journey!”

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. “Hey. Rainbow Dash here. I’m an athlete, so, I’m going to be your action girl. I’m here for the awesome adventure.” She looked around. “I’m a little surprised Pinkie didn’t show up…”

“She could be in Equestria for all we know,” Sunset said, shrugging. She turned to their other three prospective members. “Well?”

The young lanky man in glasses adjusted them nervously. “Ah… I’m Micro Chips, I’m good with computers, and I… I always wanted to see how these machines work. I’m sure we can find new scientific discoveries!”

“You bet we can!” Twilight added.

A minty-green girl went next. “I’m Lyra! I uh… …I can play the harp. But I’m also an avid follower of blogs that seek to find the truth in our world! I like to think I’m a master of the internet! I’m sure we can uncover the conspiracy with this! Right? Right?”

A bigger student with heavy green hair went next. “I’m Sandalwood. I like working with nature and animals. I’m mainly here because Micro is, but I’m interested to see other cool parts of nature.”

Sunset grinned. “You’re in luck! If everything goes as planned, today we’ll be heading to a world with a huge jungle and a race of bug-people!”

“Nice.”

Sunset pointed at Twilight. “Take it away!”

She nodded. “Well… Uh, Hi! Princess Twilight Sparkle has given us the magic spell to travel the universes.” She pulled out a circular locket from her pocket. “When I release the magic from inside this device, I will combine it with the power from my necklace and we’ll have created a portal.” She pulled out another locket. “And this one contains the return spell. I’m currently designing a device that can permanently store spell patterns. It should be done soon, but until then, you’re going to have to stand back when I open these portals.”

Everyone stared at her.

“I mean stand back now.”

Everyone except Rainbow did. Twilight rolled her eyes. “Well okay, if you really want to get blown over, be my guest.” Twilight lifted the first locket into the air and popped it open. A swirling ball of light generated in the space between the two halves. Twilight focused her gaze, channeling the magic energies from her necklace into the ball. The energies spiked into an urchin formation and shot forward, hitting the air in front of her like it was a wall, rippling a flat area of spacetime faster and faster until it couldn’t take it anymore. The boundaries between worlds ripped with a soft white glow, revealing a direct passage to a jungle.

Twilight had fallen to her back from the forces, as had Rainbow. The two stood up and dusted
themselves off.

“Woah…” Sandalwood said. “Those are some big flowers…”

Sunset gestured to the portal. “Be my guest. Though look out for dinosaurs.”

“D-Dinosaurs!?” Micro blurted.

“Dinosaurs,” Sunset affirmed.

Lyra’s eyes glistened. “Dinosaurs…” she said, giddy.

Sandalwood stepped through the portal first, a stupid grin forming on his face. The slightly wet leaves glistened in the morning sunlight, illuminating the small butterflies flying through the air. “Sweet.”

“It is ‘sweet,’ indeed,” Sunset said.

“Are you kidding Sunset? This is awesome!” Rainbow Dash whooped.

“I was trying to avoid an overuse of the word.”

“There can never be an overuse of awesome.”

“Actually,” Twilight said, raising a finger. “It is a true statement that too much of anything can become bad for you. Moderation is the key to life. If you said nothing but awesome I am sure you would quickly regret it.”

Rainbow Dash sighed. “Way to take the fun out of it. Yeesh.”

Lyra took out her phone and started snapping pictures while Sandalwood carefully examined some of the larger flowers. Micro just… stood there, nervous.

Twilight walked over to him, scribbling some things on a notepad. “Hey, Micro? You don’t have to just stand there.”

“I want to be next to the portal in case some dinosaur shows up.”

The portal closed behind him with a comical pop. He yelped in surprise.

Twilight held up the second locket. “Calm down. This is our way out. Everything’s fine as long as we have this.”

A verdant pterodactyl swooped out of the sky and snatched the locket out of her hand. She stared at the place the locket had been for several seconds before facepalming. “Guys, a pterodactyl just made off with our escape plan!”

Rainbow Dash stretched her neck and cracked her knuckles. “On it.” The blue crystal around her neck flashed and she took off with super speed, leaving a trail of rainbows behind.

Lyra pursed her lips. “No fair, you guys get all the special powers.”

Sunset shrugged. “Maybe we can find you some on our adventures?”

“Powers shouldn’t be the goal,” Sandalwood said. “We should be here to explore, to contact other peoples, to learn about the vastness of existence…”
“To boldly go where no man has gone before?” Micro said.

“Yes. That.”

Sunset rolled her eyes. The conversation was cut off by Rainbow’s return. She held a dazed pterodactyl in one hand and the locket in another. The only problem was the locket was crushed.

“Rainbow!” Twilight scolded.

Rainbow Dash shrugged. “Hey, it was already crushed when I got there, don’t blame me.”

“Well now what are we going to do? We’re stuck here!”

Sunset rolled her eyes. “No, we’re not. Princess Twilight will be back in this world eventually, we can have them pick us up. …Annoyingly.”

“How long will that be?!”

“I dunno. A day, maybe? Two?”

Micro grabbed his hair. “My parents will freak out if I’m gone for two days!”

Sunset blinked. “Oh yeah. Sometimes I forget you all have lives.”

Twilight rolled her eyes. “Really? Sometimes?”

“Yeah. Okay, a lot of the time.”

“Where are we going to stay until then?!” Micro wailed.

Sandalwood cracked his knuckles. “I can make us a shelter.”

“No need,” Twilight said. “There’s a friendly race of aliens here. Apparently, they call themselves demons, but don’t judge them for that. We just have to make our way to their village. Since Equestrian and English are the same thing they should be able to understand us.”

Lyra’s eyes widened. “…We’re going to meet aliens?”

“Yes. Yes we are-“

And then a velociraptor charged at them from behind. They all screamed. Rainbow Dash prepared to give the dinosaur a lesson but she never got the chance, for a large sword flew right into the thing’s skull, killing it instantly. It collapsed in a heap at her feet. She kicked it. “…Well, it’s dead.” She shivered.

“Really,” a new voice said – a red demon, walking towards them. Micro Chips hid behind Sandalwood.

Sunset snapped her fingers. “Anix?”

“That would be me,” he said. “You look like Twilight.”

Twilight shrugged. “Different world, different Twilight. You can call me Sparky.”

“I’ll just call you Twilight unless there’s another reason,” he grunted. “You probably want to go to the village…”
“Yes please,” Twilight said. Lyra furiously took pictures of Anix with her phone. This annoyed him to no end, but he didn’t snap.

“My mount is this way,” he said, taking his blood-covered sword out of the raptor and hefting the raptor itself over his shoulder. Human beings may have been tall, but the Anix was a full head taller than all of them. Sunset figured the only reason he could ride ponies was because his legs had two joints, letting the limbs fold. Interesting.

They all followed him – even Micro, though he stayed as far away from the creepy bug monster as possible.

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Twilight Sparkle – the alicorn – woke up on a crystal floor. Her first thought was did I fall asleep in the library again? She quickly realized this wasn’t the case since there were large crystal bars in front of her, like a jail cell. I don’t have a dungeon…

Oh. Right. I’m not in my castle.

She sighed, tapping her horn with her hoof – as she expected, there was a silence cover on it. Looking at her reflection in the crystals, she saw that it was a smooth black substance with a locked metallic pressure ring at the base of her horn. She wasn’t going to be pulling off any magic like this.

“Ah, dear, you’re awake.”

Twilight turned to Rarity, looking her over. She looked as graceful as ever and was even lucky enough not to have her magic sealed – probably because their captors didn’t think it powerful enough to bother. “Oh thank Celestia, you’re fine. I was worried…”

“At the very least, our captors aren’t complete monsters,” Applejack added. “But they aren’t stupid either.”

“How so?”

Rainbow Dash pointed a wing at the lethargic form of Pinkie. She was breathing extremely slowly, almost unnaturally. Twilight’s stomach leaped into her chest, twisting into knots. “Pinkie…?” She put a hoof to her neck – even her heartbeat was far too slow.

“They’ve drugged her… heavily,” Fluttershy said. “I think they know how strange she can be. So she doesn’t get to be awake.”

Twilight grimaced. “Will… she be okay?”

“So long as we can get it out of her system. I think Zecora knows some brews that can do that.”

Pinkie’s tail started twitching and her cheek began vibrating.

Rainbow Dash raised her eyebrows. “Apparently being asleep doesn’t stop the Pinkie sense.”

“Doesn’t really help us,” Applejack noted. “None of us have any idea what the Pinkie sense even means. Ah think the twitchy tail has meant both falling objects and surprise pie.”

Rainbow Dash shivered. “…Surprise pie…”

Everypony turned to Pinkie, half expecting her to shoot up and throw a surprise pie in her friends’ faces. She stayed where she was.
Twilight took in a deep breath. “Okay. Escape plan. Rainbow Dash, time to put those destroying-my-house skills to the test. Smash through a wall.”

Rainbow Dash grinned. “You got it, princess!” She flew into the air, backed to the far side of the cell, and charged the bars at top speed. Rainbows shot from her tail and sparked in all directions upon impact with the crystal pillars. Despite the impressive light show, the only result of the dash was a loud thump and a pained yell. “Owowowowowowow!”

Applejack looked from the unbroken bars to Rainbow Dash. “…Ah’m surprised you didn’t crack your skull.”

“Well, I probably have a concussion, so that’s the next best thing! Ow!”

Twilight tapped the bars. “…These are stronger than they’re supposed to be.”

Rarity frowned. “Had they been weaker Rainbow Dash probably would have been drugged like Pinkie. We’re facing off against you, remember? As forgetful as you can be at times, you are still very thorough when you want to be.”

“Great,” Twilight muttered. “Of course, that means she also has my weaknesses…”

Fluttershy pondered this. “If only we could deshelve the books in her library to distract her…”

Twilight twitched. “I wouldn’t wish that on anypony…”

Rainbow Dash groaned. “Of course… Maybe we can play off her pride?”

“That’s your problem, Dash,” Applejack said.

“Eh, I’m awesome, so I can tell when ponies have egos that are through-the-roof. Other Twi sure does.”

“But how exactly could we take advantage of that?” Twilight asked. “She’s not exactly going to let us convince her to do anything.”

Rarity put a hoof on Twilight. “No offense Twilight but I think you’re underestimating your gullibility.”

“Oh.” Twilight sagged. “Yeah.”

“There’s a problem though,” Fluttershy added. “They’re different enough that we can’t be sure something will work. We-“

They heard a pony walk into the dungeon. They quickly shut up and looked through the bars. Starlight was walking in, carrying… Starlight in her telekinesis. The limp Starlight had a horn-seal just like Twilight did. Twilight smiled nervously. “Would you by chance be our Starlight?”

“No,” Starlight said, teleporting the Starlight she was carrying into the cell. “Through my amusement, imprisoned within your fill.”

“Ah was afraid of that,” Applejack said. Fluttershy walked over to the groaning form of their Starlight, checking her for any signs of harm. She nodded to Twilight, signifying she was fine.

Twilight glared at the other Starlight. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Go ahead.” She teleported away, leaving Twilight alone with her friends.
“That… Darn…” Starlight muttered, rubbing her forehead and trying to stand up. “Ugh…”

Fluttershy steadied her. “Easy Starlight, you’ve just been captured…”

“Well there goes plan A,” Starlight laughed bitterly.

“Oh take it you figured out the ponies who came back weren’t us?” Applejack asked.

“Duh. Wasn’t all that hard.”

“Is… Spike okay?” Twilight asked.

“He’s fine. He’s back in the castle – your castle – watching the other ponies to see what their plan is and possibly stop them from over there. He should be rallying the town sometime soon.”

“What is their plan?”

Starlight shrugged. “I’m pretty sure they want to use their ‘cunning’ or whatever to exert control over us ‘simple ponies.’ But they talk really weird. Like, Luna’s mane, it’s a strange ‘double talk’ where everything has a hidden meaning, and that hidden meaning is the most important part!” She groaned. “What kind of language even is that?”

“One found in this world,” Twilight said. “And since we don’t know how to speak or understand it, they look down on us like fools. They think they can exploit us…”

“They’re right, aren’t they?” Applejack said. “They got all of us captured and unless Spike can do something, there’s not much stopping them from taking over our home.”

Twilight shrugged. “I… I think Celestia’ll know something’s wrong with me. That I’m not myself. And you have a close family, Applejack. They’ll figure that something’s up. As gullible as we may have been, I don’t think they thought this through as much as they think they have.”

“Good point.”

“Though we could still be stuck here even if they’re found out…”

Fluttershy winced. “We need to get home.”

“Portal’s still open. They haven’t closed it,” Starlight said. “If we could get out of here…”

“I already tried smashing it,” Rainbow Dash muttered, nursing the lump on her head. “Wasn’t a great idea, Twilight.”

Twilight laughed nervously. “Eh… Yeah, sorry. We’ll get you patched up later. So… What else can we do here…” Twilight turned to Rarity. “Your magic is free.”

“Yes. Though you know I’m not that great at it.”

“You might not need to be. If we can find the lock and pick it…”

“There’s no lock,” Rarity said. “This is a teleport in-out cage.”

Twilight glanced at the bars. “Really?”

“Really.”
“Wow. That’s a pretty ingenious design. How come I never thought of it…”

“Because you don’t design dungeons,” Starlight offered.

“Fair point.” She furrowed her brow. “There must be some way out of here…” She touched her horn’s cover. “If only I could remove this… Rarity, do you remember that spell I taught you?”

Rarity cocked her head. “Which one dear?”

“The basic laser. I want to see if we can burn it off.”

Starlight grimaced. “I don’t think we need to resort to burning your mane off just yet. Probably won’t even work. Takes a lot of magic to break a silence.”

Rarity rolled her eyes. “Well, it’s an idea at least.”

Fluttershy looked at an ant scurrying across the ground. “Hey there little guy. Do you think you could help us? …Oh? Oh, well nevermind. Have a nice day!” She looked up. “The ants can’t break the crystal either, even in small chunks. He’s just here because Pinkie’s got sugar all over her.”

“You know…” Applejack said. “It says somethin’ that none of us are freakin’ out about bein’ captured. We’re just tryin’ to find a way out.”

“We get captured way too much, don’t we?” Rainbow Dash said.

Twilight shrugged. “Yeah. I mean, I’m worried… Okay that’s an understatement, I’m terrified. But… Well, I just don’t feel the need to panic. Yet.”

“Good,” Starlight said. “We need to keep our heads…” She glanced at her hoof as if at a watch and tapped her hoof impatiently.

Applejack raised an eyebrow. “We’re tryin’ to come up with an idea. No need to get impatient.”

“No, it’s not that, it’s just…” They heard footsteps approaching, shutting up once again. Soon, the small purple form of Spike was standing before them.

Starlight cleared her throat. “Klutzy…?”

“Draconequus,” Spike said. “I have no idea why that’s the code word though.”

Twilight blinked. “Wait I thought he was back at the-“

Starlight grinned. “That’s what I wanted my other self to think. So, she took the bait?”

“Totally did!” Spike gave the thumbs up. “She’s gone through the portal and is probably searching the castle for me right now!”

“I love it when plans work,” Starlight said. “Now, burn us out of here.”

Spike took in a breath and unleashed a powerful belch of green fire that consumed part of the crystal bars. He burped, smiling at the hole he had created in the imprisoning columns. “I have no idea where I sent those.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Twilight said. “We need to get out of here. Can you burn off our horn-caps?”

“Sure thing!” Spike carefully shot a small flame around Starlight and Twilight’s horns, consuming
the silencing devices and sending them… somewhere.

“You know, if you’re sending those to Celestia…” Rainbow Dash’s eyes widened. “Or this world’s Celestia…”


Applejack hefted Pinkie onto her back. “Somethin’ tells me we don’t want to run into her. Let’s move, Twi.”

Twilight quickly teleported them all to the portal. She stepped through the wall, a spell at the ready in case she ran into any unwanted company. The Other Rainbow Dash was quickly captured in a crystal spell.

Rainbow Dash passed through the Mirror and laughed. “Justice has been served.”

Twilight nodded. “I don’t think she can break out, but watch her anyway. You never know with these ponies…” She waited for everypony to come through and then set the Mirror’s dial to Earth with a quick spell. She didn’t want to take any chances that they might have their own backup plan. “So… Now that we’re back, I see a problem. How are we going to deal with their Pinkie?”

“That… is a very good question,” Rarity said.

“I can go get Maud,” Starlight suggested. “She can handle any version of her sister.”

“Do you know where she is right now?” Twilight asked.

“…Not exactly, no.”

“Then we probably don’t have time…”

“Do what she did,” Rainbow Dash suggested. “Freeze as many friends as you can then rush those who are left.”

Spike raised his hand. “Their Fluttershy might help us. She’s… Not on their side. I think. We call her Lieshy.”

Twilight nodded. “That does make things easier… Okay. Let’s go with that. Starlight, I think I should go in first…”

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Twilight Sparkle – the evil one – sat on the throne with her cutie mark, looking at the map of Equestria. She wondered briefly how this castle had been formed in this world. She didn’t think any of the ponies she’d met were cunning enough to manipulate the Tree of Harmony itself into doing their bidding. Perhaps it had given it to them as a gift?

Pathetic, really.

She glanced at the book she had just finished reading – A contemporary guide to the world – and smiled. That had been helpful. None of this world’s peoples knew how to speak properly. This Equestria was just naive and ripe for exploitation. It had been extremely difficult to rise to the top of her own world. Here… she could probably get ponies to go to the moon and conquer it for her.

It was amazing what a superior mind could do when it was applied among fools.
Starlight charged into the room, a grumpy look on her face.

Twilight wondered what was wrong with her, and if she’d found the dragon yet. “Reptile got your tongue?”

“Jello.”

Twilight sighed. So he’d gotten away then. How could any version of Spike actually have any skill at anything? “You realize the outliers?”

Starlight shot her with a furious look. “Straight talk. Now.”

Twilight rolled her eyes. What would the purpose of that be? She’d done enough straight talk today. “Your sound is that of a fecal pond.”

“Porridge.”

Twilight blinked. She… She couldn’t parse what that one meant. She couldn’t admit it, she’d never admit to not seeing the true meaning, but Luna’s horn did she hate the single word responses. So many interpretations… She’d just respond in a generic, yet meaningful, way. Divert the conversation back to finding the Spike. “What are your new buildings?”

“Ah, that’d be known as a distraction.”

Twilight frowned. That seemed a bit too… Literal. Oh, wait, of course. ‘A distraction’ must refer to how she was setting up a secondary method by which to capture him. She needed the details. “Show your work.”

“Uh, no, I’m really just a distraction.”

Twilight blinked. What?

And then a magic bolt hit her horn and sealed the magic within. She heard the sound of her own chuckling. “Gotcha!”

Twilight glanced at her naive self. How did they pull off the double talk? “You cannot reflect. How?”

Her counterpart shrugged. “Well, I’m assuming you’re asking about the double talk? Starlight kinda just… improvised?”

“I honestly can’t believe porridge worked,” Starlight said. “What did you think it meant?”

Twilight was not going to dignify that with a direct answer. “Let’s refer to it as sod, hmm?”

The other Twilight facehooved. “Celestia, she’s still doing it. Whatever. Straight talk - you are going to order your ponies back home.”

“Straight talk, well fine then. No. I will not stoop so low.”

“Then we’ll just have to take care of them ourselves. Already froze your Rainbow Dash, Applejack, and Rarity. Pretty sure we can take your Starlight and Fluttershy easy.”

“And our Pinkie?”

Other Twilight and Starlight exchanged a nervous glance. “…We have a plan.”
Twilight laughed. “Oh, well would you look at that, their plan falls apart because of the pink one! Shocker!”

“Pinkies are not invincible,” her counterpart said. “I should know. I spend a lot of my time with one. Sometimes more.”

“Oh, you do?” Pinkie said, suddenly sitting in the throne with her cutie mark. Twilight laughed.

Starlight turned to Pinkie. “…We don’t have to fight, you know.”

“Oh, I know. I also know I’m almost guaranteed to lose since the tables have turned. But I’m not about to turn down a good fight!” She produced a giant blue hammer with a Z on it. “Time to smash you with obscure foreshadowing that I don’t even understand!”

The ‘naive’ Twilight grabbed the hammer with her own magic and hit Pinkie across the head with it, tossing her across the room.

“What are you doing?” ‘evil’ Twilight shouted. “Use a chainsaw or something!”

Pinkie pulled out a chainsaw, cackling. “Gladly!” She charged Starlight, sparks flying off the chainsaw. Her targets teleported to dodge.

‘Evil’ Twilight saw an opportunity. She slinked out of the room while her assailants were occupied. All she needed to do was find her Starlight to remove this magic seal on her horn and everything would be fine. These ponies were still stupid, despite the upper hoof they had temporarily acquired. All she needed to do was use her superior mind…

“The sun sure is bright, isn’t it?”

Twilight turned to Fluttershy. Time for a quick test to see if this was her Fluttershy. “I require a present of soliloquy.”

“The last frog you found was the starline,” Fluttershy responded.

Ah, so not only was she the right Fluttershy, but she remembered the moment Twilight had risen to power. Good. Time to brief her on the situation. “The walls close in, the tables turn, the outside fight.”

“Knowledge is not hard to come by.”

Twilight bristled. Now was not the time to be insulting her. “The implosion is imminent, Fluttershy.”

“The direction will surprise you.”

What?

Fluttershy punched her across the face, forcing her to the ground, dazed.

“The path of the servant is done,” Lieshy said, kicking Twilight again, knocking her out.

~~~

Princess Twilight Sparkle and Starlight were having difficulty fighting the murder-crazed Pinkie.

“Pinkie!” Twilight yelled, teleporting out of the way of a dual-sword slice. “You really don’t have to do this!”
“But I waaaaaaant to!”

“You can’t stay here – your secret’s out! There’s no more reason to be here!”

Pinkie shrugged. “So? Even if I’m destined to lose, I’m going to have some fun!”

Starlight twitched. “If you know you’re destined to lose why haven’t you forfeited?!”

“Same reason I go on living. Because it’s fun! Woooo!” She leaped into the air and tossed exploding cupcakes around. Twilight caught them all in her telekinesis and shot them back at Pinkie, throwing the pink pony into the chandelier. “Oh! Nice trick!”

Starlight cast a spell to slow Pinkie down, but there was no visible result. She kept moving like a hyperactive pink hummingbird. Starlight grimaced. “Okay, seriously, what is with you? Do you ever get hurt? Can you be affected by anything?”

“Oh, of course I can!” Pinkie giggled. “It all just depends on the context! And you have to surprise me! And there’s no way you can do that!” Her pupils shrunk. “…I’ve just doomed myself.”

Rainbow Dash shot into the room from a window and grabbed Pinkie, holding her tight and crashing to the ground. Pinkie struggled, shouting and yelling, but Rainbow Dash held her tight, not letting her out.

Starlight looked at Pinkie nervously. “…Uh… How? Why?”

Twilight blinked. “She… doomed herself? I… I – let’s not question it, let’s just send them home. Thanks Rainbow Dash.”

“Don’t mention it!” Rainbow grunted. “Man she’s a wriggler…”

“I AM MORE WRIGGLER THAN ANY PONY EVER WAS!”

“Can you cool it? You lost!”

Pinkie grunted. “I know. I just… Why did I have to say that? I didn’t want to fall because of my hubris! The double-decker tables!”

“…You don’t talk like the others,” Twilight observed.

Lieshy nodded, walking into the room herself, dragging the limp form of evil Twilight behind her. “She… is a confuser.”

“I speak in both! So I can grundle your topiaries while following no rules whatsoever!” Pinkie giggled. “Can we get it over with now? Come on Starlight.”

The other Starlight walked into the room, took one look at the scene, and tried to run – but Starlight and Twilight pulled her back and sealed her magic.

Twilight smiled. “And that’s everyone! Time to send you all back and get things back to normal!”

Lieshy shook her head. “That’s not what’s going to happen.”

Twilight raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

Lieshy smiled. “I… Don’t want to go back. And… I don’t want to stay here either.”
Sunset sat next to Mlinx in the village of the demons. “So. You and Anix did… what?”


Sunset furrowed her brow. “What does the fight even accomplish?”

“An official ending of the bond,” Mlinx said. “Custom dictates we are not to speak to each other or go on hunting parties together ever again.”

Sunset shook her head. “That’s stupid.”

Mlinx laughed. “…That’s the way things are. I’m sure you have a few ‘stupid’ customs.”

“As a member of two very different worlds, I can say every culture has them,” Sunset said. “Though that doesn’t mean you can’t change them.”

“I talked to Siron about it. He said he understood that I think differently than the others, and that if it were anyone other than Anix he might allow it. But… Anix is the most traditional of all of us.” He pointed. “Look, there he is, avoiding Luna and your friends. He wants nothing to do with anything that isn’t us ‘demons’.”

Sunset shook her head at the scarlet demon’s motions. The regal form of Luna even gestured towards him, but he made no response. Sandalwood put an arm around Luna to comfort her.

The rest of Sunset’s group was doing fine – even Micro, who had gotten over the freaky bug-creatures after about half an hour. Rainbow Dash was racing demons around the village, showing them all up with her speed, though she was annoyed at Veila’s ability to just fly on command. Twilight was talking to Siron directly, taking notes on their culture and asking a million questions. Lyra… was just taking pictures and giggling to herself oddly.

Mlinx cocked his head. “What is the green one… Lyra right? What is she doing?”

“I… I really don’t know,” Sunset said. “She’s a little… out there.”

“Ah, like Fef?”

“No, that’s… Another kind of crazy entirely.”

The two of them laughed.

Then princess Twilight walked into the village, Fluttershy behind her. She waved to Siron and he came right over. “Ah, Princess. Here for your friends?”

Twilight blinked, looking at Sunset. “Ah, no? Didn’t even know they were here.”

Siron chuckled. “Well they’re here, and they need a way back to their home.”

Sunset blushed. Twilight raised an eyebrow. “Did you forget a return spell?”

“No, a pterodactyl took it.”

“Ah,” Twilight chuckled. “I’ll get you all home. But first… Siron, this pony behind me is not the one you know.”
“Oh?”

“She comes from a world where everyone spoke in veiled lies. Their culture bred deception, manipulation, and other unsavory things. She does not wish to stay in my world – too ‘nice’ apparently – so I thought maybe she could come here?”

Siron raised his head. “Are you dumping more citizens on me?”

“It’s just a request, Siron. I can probably find another world for her.”

Siron nodded. “She shall be welcomed. What shall we call her?”

“Lieshy,” Lieshy said. “That’s what they call me. Stamp the papers.”

“…Hmm?”

Lieshy facehooved. “Sorry. Habit.”

“That’s her double-speak,” Twilight said. “You’ll… probably have to get used to it. It’s how she’s spoken her entire life.”

Siron nodded. “Curious.”

Twilight smiled, turning to Lieshy. “I hope you will enjoy it here! I was planning on staying a little longer to introduce you to people and ponies, but apparently I have to save some humans. See you around!”

“Until the next sunrise,” Lieshy said. “The doubles will collide to one.”

“…Riiight. Sunset, gather your people.”

Sunset sighed and nodded, still really embarrassed they had to be bailed out. This was supposed to be a friendly little competition between the ponies and the humans, not the ponies helping the humans at every turn.

They needed an edge…
“So, let me guess,” Rairty said. “You found another one?”

“Actually, I found several,” Twilight said, gesturing at the Mirror Portal. “I let it run while I did all that paperwork yesterday.”

“Ah was kinda hopin’ we’d get more than a single day’s worth of break,” Applejack admitted.

“Oh come on Applejack, this is something new and never before explored!”

Rarity raised a hoof. “Didn’t Starswirl make this Mirror? And a few others like it? And what about that ‘limbo’ place or all those things Discord shows us?”

Twilight blinked. “Fair point. Still, it’s not something most ponies get to explore, and we’re making all kinds of new and interesting friends!”

“Yeah!” Rainbow Dash cheered. “And there’s so much awesome around every corner!”

“Uh… Sometimes awesome action isn’t good,” Fluttershy said.

“Ah, pfft, really?” Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. “It’s not like we’re picking fights, we’re just defending ourselves when things get too hot.”

Pinkie giggled. “And having fun while doing it!” She and Rainbow Dash bumped hooves.

Applejack sighed. “So, do we know if the place on the other side of that mirror is safe?”

Twilight smiled. “I have a spell for that now.” She lit her horn, creating a white spark. “I’ll send it through the portal, and if it comes back green everything’s good. If it comes back red it’s not. So I’ll prove to you that it’s all fine.” She sent the spark into the mirror and it shot back all on its own, glowing a red color.

“…Ah…” Twilight said. “Well, it’s a good thing we checked!” She went over to a large notebook and wrote next to the location the Mirror was currently set to: unsafe.

Pinkie winked. “Just try another one!”

“Yeah…” She pulled a lever, changing the spell in the globe to another confirmed location. “I should have listened to you sooner, Applejack.”

“No, really?”

Twilight smirked. “Yes, really.” She sent another spark through the Mirror, this time coming back with a satisfactory green result.

“Onward!” Rainbow Dash shouted, flying through the portal. Rarity rolled her eyes and followed her through in a calm and dignified manner. She came out the other side at the base of a round tower in the middle of a simple town. The tower had what Rarity could only assume was a clock affixed to it, though she couldn’t read the time of the ornately decorated circle. She saw what she thought were images of the moon, sun, and maybe stars, but it was hard to tell. Was it noon? Morning? Evening? The clock itself was rotating to tell the time, so she had no ‘noon’ reference point at the top, making
what would normally be a difficult puzzle impossible.

She eventually decided it was gorgeous and that was all that really needed to be determined at the moment. The rest of the town was… notably less striking. The buildings were simple constructions, usually square and made of stone, many of which had thatched overhangs shading numerous people with shops. Most of these people were human, though they all had dull hair colors and simple peach skin - not to mention a high quantity of absurdly pointy ears. Strikingly there were a few non-human races, beings Rarity didn’t have words for. There were a couple large rocklike creatures with huge bellies and a couple short wooden creatures with round mouths below leaves sprouting out of them instead of hair.

A few of the locals had noticed the six ponies, giving them odd looks. Nothing fearful or angry, mostly just gestures of confusion. Rarity couldn’t understand what they were saying, but Twilight was about to fix that. She lit her horn, walking up to two of the rock people who were having a conversation. She sat down next to them and listened for a while, allowing the spell to do its magic.


Twilight figured there were enough words translated to issue a greeting. “Hi! Keep talking, trying to learn your language.”

The two rock people looked down at her and then at each other. One pointed at the other, demanding he think of something to talk about. The other shrugged, grunting something about not having any idea what to talk about when talking about things was what they needed to do.

Rarity smirked. “Dears, you’re having a conversation now aren’t you?”

Evidentially, some of that didn’t translate properly since they gave her odd looks. She sighed and pointed at the Clock Tower. “Talk about that.”

They took this to mean they should walk over to the Clock Tower and bask in its glory. At least they were talking about it, which helped the translation spell immensely. Within a minute or two it had a working understanding of the native language.

“There we go!” Twilight said. “Hi! I’m Twilight Sparkle, and these are my friends! We’re new here, as you can probably tell.”

“You are welcomed!” One of them said in a voice that was deep, but not as scratchy as one would expect from a being composed largely of rock. “I am Durinlo, and this is Timon. What brings you here, travelers from afar?”

“Exploration,” Twilight said. “Could you tell us anything about where we are?”

Timon laughed heartily. “You walked into the center of town without even knowing where you are?”

“We teleported,” Applejack said. “From another world.”

Durinlo raised an eyebrow. “Are you from the land across the sea?”

“No,” Twilight said. “We come from a place called Equestria. We actually came from that shimmering spot in the Clock Tower wall over there.”

Timon looked at the area, squinting his eyes. “That soft sparkliness definitely wasn’t there yesterday.”
“We weren’t here yesterday,” Durinlo pointed out.

Timon laughed again. “This is true!”

Durinlo bowed slightly to Twilight. “In that case, welcome to our land! This is the town of Termina, a quaint place in the outskirts of a kingdom called Hyrule.”

“Interesting. And what do you call your planet?”

“…Your speech-changer isn’t working. You just said ‘planet’.”

“Ah…” Twilight nodded. “I guess you don’t have a word for that and the spell didn’t realize that… World. What do you call your world?”

Durinlo glanced at Timon, who just shrugged. Durinlo scratched his head. “…The land is called Ardent…”

“Good enough. Just wanted a name.”

Rarity looked their forms over again. They wore no clothing, unlike the humans walking around, and had a strange mixture of fat and muscle to parallel their rocky backs. There were also faint patterns on their bodies that may have been tattoos, maybe not. If they were natural they were most impressive in the regularity of their angles.

“What’s your race, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Goron. We are gorons.” They fist-bumped and bumped bellies, showing off their impressive girth. “We are the people of the mountains and land itself! We are steadfast, strong, and dependable!”

Twilight smiled. “I have no doubt. We’re ponies. I’m an alicorn, Rarity over there is a unicorn, Rainbow Dash is a pegasus, and then Applejack and Pinkie here are earth ponies.”

“I’m also a pegasus,” Fluttershy said, raising a wing.

“Never heard of talking ponies before,” Timon said, laughing again.

Rainbow Dash flew up to his head, smirking. “You sure like to have a good time, huh?”

“That I do, rainbow flying pony!”

“What do you like to do for fun?”

“Arm wrestling and races!”

Rainbow Dash grinned. “I doubt I could beat you in arm wrestling, cause I don’t have arms… But I don’t think a race would be fair for you.”

Timon pounded his chest. “Not fair? You’re on, pony.” He pointed at the archway leading out of town. “First one out to the field is the victor.”

“What’re the stakes?”

“A hundred rupees!”

Twilight facehooved. “We don’t have your currency.”
Durinlo blinked. “You must have money of some kind.”

Twilight reached into her saddlebags and produced a few bits. “This is what we use. We call them bits.”

Durinlo picked one up in his large hand and examined it. “Gold. Valuable. Each of these is worth twenty rupees, easy.”

“Then we have a deal!” Rainbow Dash whooped. “Ready Timon?”

“Yes. Three…”

Rarity sighed. “We’ve been here less than ten minutes and already we’re spectators in another race…”

“Go!” Timon yelled. Surprising everypony present, he curled himself into a ball and rolled across the cobbled road of the town at high speed like a tire. Rainbow Dash quickly snapped out of her astonishment at the surprising agility of the maneuver, using her wings to blast towards the gate at a much higher velocity. Even with his head start, Timon did not manage to get out of town quickly enough.

Rainbow Dash smirked. “Not bad, didn’t expect that from you.”

Timon laughed. “Everyone always thinks Gorons are slow! We are not! We’re just not runners!”

“Well, I still won. You owe me.”

Timon jogged back to Durinlo at a much slower pace. “She won.”

Durinlo sighed. “You always wager too much…” He pulled out five red crystals from his pocket and handed them to Rainbow Dash.

“So, each of these is a bit?”

Twilight shook her head. “Probably not. Gold is a valuable commodity here. That’s likely worth quite a bit more than five bits. At least here.” She examined one of the red crystals. “Back home this would probably fetch a price of about thirty bits, I’m thinking.”

“…Bleh, currency, booooring.”

“Aha!” A new voice said – young and male. The ponies and gorons turned to see a kid in a blue shirt pointing at Rainbow Dash. “I was right! Money is boring!”

Rarity raised an eyebrow. “Uh… Hello young man.”

He ignored her, looking right at Rainbow Dash. “You, tell my mom that money isn’t interesting!”

Rainbow Dash raised an eyebrow. “I’ll tell anyone money isn’t interesting. But why do I need to?”

He pointed at a large countertop a tall woman was running. She was examining many different colors of rupee with a magnifying glass and putting them in various chests. “She won’t stop talking about them!”

Fluttershy raised an eyebrow. “Is she a banker?”

The boy blinked. “…Yes?”
Fluttershy smiled warmly. “Then it’s her job to talk about them. You shouldn’t take it personally.”

The boy threw his hands into the air. “Mooooooooom!” he called, deciding to ignore Fluttershy.

She looked up from a purple rupee. “Yes?” she called

“Money is boring! This flying horse agrees with me.”

She looked at Rainbow Dash, raising an eyebrow at her alien body. “…That’s nice. Hey, you, flying rainbow horse.”

“Uh… yeah?”

“Come here, would you?”

Rainbow Dash landed right in front of her, five friends and the boy close behind. The gorons shrugged and went back to their business.

The woman smiled. “So, money is boring?”

“Yes?”

The woman stood tall and took in a breath. “Do you realize that currency, in and of itself, is the lifeblood of a good economy? Why, it comes from a point deep in the past where people decided to leave behind the primitive methods of barter. Without currency, we would be stuck without society, without reason, and—”

Fluttershy coughed. “I don’t think she finds money useless, she just finds it boring.”

“…Yeah,” Rainbow Dash said. “It’s just boring.”

The woman blinked. “…Oh. Well as long as you realize it’s important.”

“Trust me, we do,” Rarity said. “I run my own business back home, it’s quite the nightmare to keep track of all the funds. Yet, oddly exhilarating.”

The woman clapped her hands. “Oh, you own a business back home? Well, if you lived here I’d be offering you a loan right now but we can just forget about that. What do you do?”

“I design clothing. Beautiful clothing.”

Applejack smirked. “For a bunch of ponies who don’t normally wear clothes.”

“I still make a living!”

“Yeah, still. A bit silly.”

“Coming from the only mare here actually wearing an article of clothing,” Rarity said, pointing at Applejack’s hat.

“Uh…” Twilight gestured towards her saddlebags.

“Doesn’t count, too practical.” Rarity turned back to the woman. “Regardless, I am Rarity.”

“Eliza,” the woman said, shaking the outstretched hoof.

The boy groaned. “No… You were supposed to make her stop!”
Eliza rolled her eyes. “Just ignore my son, he’s taken a bit of a rebellious streak as of late.”

Fluttershy smiled. “I can see that. But don’t dismiss him, okay? Sometimes they just need love.”

“EEEEEEWWW!” the boy said, squirming.

Eliza chuckled softly. “I’ll keep that in mind. Regardless, what can I do for you?”

Twilight blinked. “I… I have no idea. We’re just exploring, looking for interesting things to do.”

Eliza pursed her lips. “Well, there’s a dance festival this evening themed around hidden identities. You’ll need a mask to participate, though in your cases I’m not sure exactly what they’d hide…”

Rarity’s eyes sparkled. “A dance festival?” She turned to Twilight, eyes as big as she could make them.

Twilight chuckled. “Fine, we can check it out. How long until… evening?”

“Three hours. Better find your masks fast. There’s probably a vendor around who’ll sell them, but they’ll be busy.”

“We better hurry then,” Pinkie said. “Rainbow Dash! Be prepared to spend your earnings!”

Rainbow Dash shrugged. “Eh, sure. Masks sound cool. Will they fit on our faces though?”

“They probably have masks for those bush-things,” Rarity said. “I’m sure it’ll be fine. Will you be there, Eliza?”

“I plan on it,” she said.

“Then see you there!”

“Oh, I’ll see you, but you won’t see me. The whole point of the masks is to hide your identity.”

“Ah,” Rarity said. “…That does sound interesting. Until later then, I suppose.”

The six friends set out, looking for a mask shop. There were plenty of shops – it seemed at times that this town was nothing but residential houses, shops, and the Clock Tower. Rarity found that somewhat odd, but decided not to judge the town based on its layout. It worked for the inhabitants.

Then they heard an echoing laugh behind them; the laugh of a man amused with something morbid, something that should not be laughed at under any circumstances. The laugh of someone mad delighting in suffering, quietly, as if only slightly tickled.

The laugh of someone who knew death all too personally.

The ponies turned to see a tall, human man standing over them. His eyes were squinted, almost shut, and his mouth was twisted into an eternal smile that was just too perfect. His ears were larger and pointier than any of the others they had seen and his purple cloak rippled with a wind that none of the ponies felt. On his back was a tremendous knapsack filled with all number of strange knick-knacks and devices, many of which gave off a magical vibe Rarity could detect. Most of these objects were masks of many different colors, sizes, and designs.

“Hello, my little ponies. I’m the Happy Mask Salesman, and I heard you needed some masks!”

Rarity already didn’t trust this man, and Twilight apparently shared her opinion. The princess looked
up directly at the Happy Mask Salesman’s narrow eyes. “I’m sorry sir, but I think we’ll go with
masks that aren’t enchanted. It’s a simple party just for tonight. Thank you for offering though.”

“Oh, but I assure you purple alicorn, you can use these masks for far more than just a party. And if
you are concerned about any…” His expression and posture shifted to anger for a split second.
“…dark magics…” his mouth shifted back to a smile and his pose returned to normal seemingly
instantly. “I assure you, none of the masks I am willing to sell have such power. Here.” He pulled a
yellow, foxlike mask off his bag and held it out to Fluttershy. “This is a Keaton Mask, enchanted
with the aura of the keaton foxes, which will allow you to bring them out of hiding and speak to
them!”

Fluttershy hesitated only a moment before grabbing the mask in her hooves. “That sounds… nice.”

“Fluttershy,” Twilight said. “We probably can’t afford that.”

“Oh, it costs a mere hundred rupees… or five bits.”

Rarity raised her eyebrow. He’s been scouting us out. But we do have plenty of bits… She considered
trying to fight his insistence to sell them magic masks, but then she saw it – a beautiful pearly white
mask hanging off his bags, adorned with the design of a brilliant ruby eye with three eyelash marks.
It stared into her soul – and she felt a connection.

“Ah!” The Happy Mask Salesman said, suddenly in front of her, holding the mask in his hands.
“This is the Mask of Truth! A beautiful work of art that will not only allow communication with the
ancient Gossip Stones of the land, but also let you see the truth of the matter in many situations.”

Rarity stroked it with her hoof. It was so smooth, so pristine… and it called to her. “…Twilight?”

Twilight rolled her eyes. “Fine, we can buy some magic masks. So long as no dark magics show up
on them.”

The Happy Mask Salesman put his hands to his chest. “I would never do such a thing! I assure you,
all my products are completely clean!”

Pinkie appeared on his back and pulled out a black round mask with a skull design on it.

“Wait, that one’s not-“

She slapped it on her face, giggled, and promptly exploded herself across the street. “I’LL TAKE
IT!”

The Happy Mask Salesman looked stunned for a moment, then shrugged. “That’s the bomb mask. It
explodes. I don’t sell it because that’s not something you can survive, but… Well, it seems I was
mistaken.”

Twilight blinked. “Who even makes that kind of mask?”

“I have no idea,” he said. “I merely collect the things and sell the beneficial ones.”

“And the others?”

“Sealed away,” he chuckled. Then he shot her a death glare. “Don’t get any ideas.”

Twilight took a few steps back. “I won’t…”

Fluttershy put her mask on, fitting the yellow fox-face on perfectly. “Huh. Enchanted to fit any
“Yes!” the Happy Mask Salesman bowed. “Only quality materials for my customers.”

Rarity put the Mask of Truth on and didn’t feel any different. She could see through it just as well as she could see with her own two eyes, which was a little disconcerting, but not all that unexpected.

She jumped when Pinkie’s mask exploded again, tossing Pinkie back to the group where she landed upright. “Whee! This is fun!”

“Please don’t blow up anywhere near us,” Applejack said.

“Ah, I’m not that careless—“ the mask exploded again, charring Applejack and launching Pinkie into the air. She landed flat on her face, the mask somehow squishing along with the rest of her body. “I’m okay.”

“Ah’m not…’” Applejack muttered, scratching soot out of her eyes. “Hey, got a mask for me?”

The Happy Mask Salesman was at her side, holding a rocky mask with a simple face drawn into it. “This is the Stone Mask. It might as well make you invisible!”

“Might as well?”

“Well you still exist and can be seen but nobody notices you.”

“Ah.” She took it in her hoof. “…Rainbow Dash, don’t even think about it.”

“Don’t even think about what?”

Applejack just put the mask on. Rainbow Dash laughed. “Hey, mister Mask guy? I can totally still see her. And notice her. What gives?”

“Look again,” the Happy Mask Salesman said, hand to his mouth. Rainbow Dash did look again.

She blinked. Then she blinked again. “Okay, where’d she go?”

Rarity cocked her head. “Really Rainbow Dash? She’s right there!” Rarity pointed.

Rainbow Dash rubbed her eyes and gawked. “Woah… She is. How didn’t I see her? How did you see her?”

“Mask of Truth,” Twilight explained. “Applejack… Wherever you are, could you take off the Stone Mask? When only Rarity can see you it’s a bit… weird.”

Applejack took it off. “Ah’m not sure if this’ll be good or bad at the party.”

Fluttershy jumped into the air. From her perspective it was as if Applejack had just suddenly appeared and started talking.

Rainbow Dash decided she was done waiting. “Okay Mask guy, where’s my mask?”

The Happy Mask Salesman produced a mask with a beak and white feathers. “The Breman Mask. With this you will be able to lead animals and other beings of lesser will with a simple march.”

“…I’ll take it.”
“And as for you…” the Happy Mask Salesman turned to Twilight. He produced a terrifying looking mask of blackness and red eyes. “The All Night Mask.”

“…What’s it do?”

“When you’re wearing it, you won’t fall asleep, no matter how tired you are. Good for late night cram sessions or guard duty.”

Twilight levitated it to herself, scanned it, and put it on. “Okay then. Thirty bits for them all?”

The Happy Mask Salesman nodded slowly. “Of course. Though if you had your own masks I would happily trade for free.”

“Don’t have any,” Twilight said, taking out thirty bits and levitating them into his hand. They vanished on contact with him. “There you go.”

“It was a pleasure doing business with you. Until we meet again!”

“You going to the festival!!?” Pinkie asked.

“Alas, no. I am referring to something…” He was suddenly standing behind them with a more sinister look on his face. “…further down the line.”

Twilight glared at him. “…You know, I really don’t appreciate you trying to scare us like that.”

“Oh, really?” He took a few steps back, rising to his full height. “Maybe you need to be scared though. Evils hide in this land. I’ve seen legions of darkness thunder across the land. I’ve seen the moon threaten to crash into the planet. I’ve seen horrid artifacts used for the destruction of many. This world is not as welcoming as you may think, my little ponies.”

Rarity’s eyes widened. He used the word planet. And the phrase ‘this world’. “Sir, are-“

He was gone.

Applejack shivered. “He gave me the creeps.”

Twilight nodded, taking off her mask. “I think that’s just who he is. Creepy.”

“Are the masks safe?” Fluttershy asked.

“I think so,” Twilight said.

“They are,” Rarity said, tapping her own beautiful headpiece. “I… I think that’s what this feeling is. I know they’re safe.”

Rainbow Dash raised an eyebrow. “So… You can read minds now or what?”

“No… I just get inklings of truth, I believe. I have no idea if any of that stuff he said about darkness was true, though I doubt it. But I feel certain about the safety of these masks. They won’t hurt us.”

“Then we’ll use them,” Twilight said. “Then study them when we go home. I’m very curious how these enchantments work.”

Rarity smiled. “Good. Now, I do need to learn more about this festival so I can observe the proper rituals. I am going to speak to Eliza about it.”
Pinkie exploded again. “And I’m going to play real-life hot potato!”

Rarity shrugged. “You… do that, dear.”

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“Okay, so, here’s all you need to know about the festival.” Eliza cleared her throat. “You wear a mask and you dance. There’s some symbolic reason about not seeing your true face or something, but basically remember not to take your mask off and you’ll be fine. The dance will last until you want to go to sleep. There will be food everywhere, and most of it will cost a fortune.”

Rarity shrugged. “I… guess that’s simpler than I thought it was. Is there any story or legend to it?”

“There probably is, I don’t know, it’s not rupees, so really it can’t be all that fascinating.”

“Er… Well, what do you think of my mask?”

“Looks great.”

Rarity paused. Yeah, that definitely wasn’t true. “…You haven’t even looked at it.”

Eliza glanced up and smiled. “It really does look great.”

Rarity took in a breath to calm herself. “Of course. Well, I must be going then….” She trotted away, frowning. Of course, Eliza was just trying to be nice, right? No… No, she just didn’t care. Rarity knew she just didn’t care.

Wow, the mask really worked. She saw the truth of the matter. If she hadn’t been aware that was the mask’s enchantment she probably would have just commended her own instinctual skill with these matters. It was a very subtle feeling…

She could root out lies and find truth. However, unlike Twilight she didn’t really have any desire to analyze the exact capabilities of the mask – it was nice to know it could do special things but it really didn’t matter much beyond that. She decided she should just explore the town for a while, see who she ran across and what colorful customers she could find.

After wandering a bit, she found herself in north Termina, watching a group of boys playing, all of them wearing similar getups to that of Eliza’s son. She watched them from afar, tossing a ball to and fro, laughing. Then one of them spiked the ball right into another’s face. Rarity gasped as the boy fell over and hit his head on the cobblestone, hard.

She rushed to his aid, lifting the boy’s head up and checking him over. He would be fine – but he was going to have a nasty lump on his head. Rarity glared at the boy who spiked the ball.

“It was an accident!”

No it wasn’t. “No it wasn’t, you did this on purpose.” She glared at him – the design of her mask only serving to heighten the intensity of the expression, rather than obscuring it. He backed down and looked at the ground, ashamed.

“Apologetize,” Rarity demanded, leaning the hurt boy up.

“S-sorry…”

“Good.” She turned to the boy in her hooves. “Is there a hospital nearby?”
“Yeah,” a boy said. “Right over there. We can take him miss, don’t worry.” They all lifted him up and helped him walk to a place that was probably understaffed, but Rarity didn’t worry. She knew he’d be fine.

She smiled under her mask – this felt good. She wondered if her friends were getting as much out of their masks.

There was an explosion and Pinkie sailed over Rarity’s head, Bomb Mask still firmly planted on her face. “Wheeeeeeee!”

Rarity shook her head – best not to question Pinkie, as usual. It was worthwhile to question Rainbow Dash, who was pursuing the pink missile with a dozen birds flying in formation behind her. “Come on, she can’t launch away from us forever!” The birds cawed in agreement.

“Yes she can…” Rarity muttered, smiling to herself. They’d be doing that back and forth until the festival started, no doubt about it. It was nice, having certainty about that. Having certainty about anything. This mask was turning out to be quite the blessing to her. Simply divine!

Applejack walked up to her, mask and all. “Hi Applejack!”

“Hey. Uh…” She took off her mask and stared into the eye on Rarity’s mask. “Hey, could you-“

“I can take the mask off, since it bothers you,” Rarity finished for her, sliding her mask off. “You have to admit, it is gorgeous.”

Applejack rolled her eyes. “It’s a one-eyed thing that makes everypony feel like they’re being stared at.”

“Well, yes, but I believe that’s the point. It’s letting everypony know I can see the truth of the matter. I’ve already had little inspirational inklings about a half dozen things!”

Applejack blinked. “Interestin’. Ah’d personally rather rely on my own judgment than what a mask says, but Ah suppose Ah’m already Honesty.”

“That you are. You’d have no need for this beautiful thing. Though if you really want it you can have it, I could try out your mask for a while.”

“Ah’m gonna keep this. Less chance of Dash getting’ ahold of it.”

Rarity chuckled. “She really wants to cause trouble doesn’t she?”

“Ah can just imagine her prankin’ us all for the rest of the day, and we’d have no chance to even see her. …Well, Ah guess you could, with that mask.”

“I can see all that is hidden. I should really try to find one of those ‘Gossip Stones’ that mask salesman talked about… I can speak with them.”

“Well, Ah dunno what one of those are.”

“I will know it when I see it,” Rarity said, tapping the mask. “And I will strike up a rousing conversation with a rock. …It’ll be an experience.”

“Everything’s been an experience since we’ve been out here…” Applejack said, frowning.

Rarity cocked her head. “Applejack, what’s wrong?”
“Can’t you tell?”

“Mask’s not on,” Rarity said.

“Ah… Right.” Applejack looked into the distance. “It’s just, we’ve been doing this a lot lately. Ah know this is only the third world we’ve been to, but it’s been taking up most of our time. We always had adventures, yeah, but never this frequently, and it’d never been this… intense for so long before.”

“Oh, I’m sure you can handle it.”

“It’s not that. Ah’m more wondering if this is really a good use of our time.”

Rarity frowned. “Really Applejack, we’re making new friends and exploring new worlds. I think that’s definitely worthwhile!”

“Maybe…” Applejack said, watching Pinkie sail over them again, still pursued by Rainbow Dash. She fell silent, the conversation drifting into an awkward lull.

Rarity looked around and slid her mask back on.

“Where you goin’?” Applejack asked.

“I’m going to find one of those stones. Ask around, see what there is.”

“Good luck.”

“I’m sure I’ll find one eventually.” She chuckled. “Actually, I know I’ll find one eventually. See you at the festival, Applejack.”

“Sure thing.”

Rarity had hardly gone a few feet before she noticed Fluttershy talking to a young red-haired woman tending to a cow. She decided this was interesting enough to deter her quest for the Gossip Stone.

“Oh, hello Rarity!” Fluttershy said, her mask still on her face. “This is Romani! She runs a nearby ranch and takes care of these beautiful cows! Did you know cows don’t talk here?”

Rarity shrugged. “I do now. Though…” She looked at the cow closely. “…She wants onions right now.”

Romani rolled her eyes. “She always wants onions even though she knows it makes her milk taste sour. I take it that’s a genuine Mask of Truth then?”

Rarity tossed her mane back. “Why, yes! Have you seen one before?”

Romani smiled. “Yeah, few years back, a certain hero had one. He didn’t use it very often though.”

“Why not?”

Romani shrugged. “I don’t know. Never asked.”

Rarity raised an eyebrow. “…It was a bit offputting, wasn’t it?”

“I don’t think that was the only reason he avoided it…” she shrugged. “But now’s not the time to dwell on the past, now’s the time to get ready for a dance festival!” She put on her own mask – a
simple cow’s head. “Moo.”

Fluttershy chuckled. “Fliift.”

“…Is that what the keaton says?”

“I… I’m not sure,” Fluttershy said. “I talked to one. He… He really liked puzzles. I think Twilight would have fared better against his riddles…”

“What was he like?” Rarity asked.

“Well, golden fox, three tails, very playful. Though quite a bit smarter than me…”

Rarity put a hoof on Fluttershy. “He probably just collects puzzles and riddles, he may not actually be all that smart.”

“You think so?”

Rarity tapped the Mask of Truth and chuckled.

Romani crossed her arms. “Now, I’ve never met a keaton, but they are pretty well known for being intelligent creatures.”

“They may be known for it, but that doesn’t mean they are,” Rarity said.

“Huh. You learn something new every day.” She paused for a moment. “Do you mind if I ask something?”

“Go ahead,” Fluttershy said.

“What exactly are you?”

“Ponies,” Rarity said. “I’m a unicorn, she’s a pegasus.”

“I’ve heard of your kind…” Romani said. “I thought you were just legends though. I also expected you to be… bigger.”

“What does that mean?” Fluttershy asked.

“Horse-size,” Rarity said. “We’re ponies.”

“Oh, I see. You’re just a small version?”

“Well I don’t know,” Rarity said. “I have no idea what the pegasi and unicorns are like here. We’re from really far away, a place called Equestria.”

Romani chuckled. “What a fitting name.”

“What does that-“ Rarity paused. “Huh, I suppose it does mean ‘horse land’ doesn’t it?”

“You didn’t realize that until just now?”

“It’s not something we really think about.” Rarity sat down, thinking of all the other places in Equestria… She’d known Ponyville was literally “village of ponies” before, but… Appaloosa? That was a pun on a certain kind of pony and apples. Canterlot? Based on the movement of hooves known as a canter…
“Fluttershy, our world is filled with places named after horse puns. Nothing but horse puns.”

“…Weird,” Fluttershy agreed.

“How did all these puns get accepted? Who named all these things? And who keeps just going along with it?”

Fluttershy cocked her head. “Rarity, you okay?”

“…I’m just a tad confused at our culture…” She twitched – the Mask of Truth wasn’t helping her find any answers to her questions. Perhaps because they didn’t exist.

Good gravy, I’m turning into Twilight. I don’t need to know the answers to everything. She shook herself out of her confusion and turned back to Romani. “So, what’re you doing for the festival?”

“Selling milk.” She patted the cow on the side. “Everyone loves the milk from Romani ranch, and since today’s a special day, it’s time to sell it personally. And probably do some dancing.”

“How much for the milk?” Fluttershy asked.

“Five rupees. But, seeing as you’ve never had it before, your first cup is free.” She took a mug out of her pack and started milking directly into it. Rarity and Fluttershy waited patiently as the mug filled up.

“Hey…” Rarity said. “…How do you think Applejack’s cows get milked? We don’t exactly have… hands.”

Fluttershy raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know. I do think that mask gets you to ask a lot of questions.”

“Oh, sorry-“

“It’s not a bad thing!” Fluttershy said quickly. “It’s just something I noticed.”

Rarity put a hoof to her chin, wondering exactly how much the mask was making her question things. She was certain it wasn’t zero – but if that was the case, what else in her mind was it affecting? …Probably not that much.

Romani stood up and handed the mug to Rarity and Fluttershy. “Drink up!” Fluttershy took a sip first, shivering a little as she did so.

“This is delightful!” She handed it to Rarity. “It’s a bit strong,” she warned.

Rarity rolled her eyes – how could milk be strong? But then she paused. It was strong, wasn’t it? But… what did strong mean? There was no inkling of help there. The mask was apparently very selective and spotty over what inspirations it decided to give her. She shrugged and took a swig.

The liquid was thick, creamy, and full of flavor – a bit too much flavor. The intensity of the milk hit her tongue like an anvil. She reared up on her hind legs, stumbling backward a few steps. “My… This is rather rich. Delicious, divine, but my Stars…”

Romani chuckled. “That’s the usual reaction. But people keep coming back for more. It’s a very vital drink, apparently almost as good as an enchanted health potion.” She patted the cow on the back. “I don’t know what she does to make it so good, but she’s a blessing to the farm.”

Rarity looked at the mug in her hoof and took a sip, expecting the impact of flavor this time. She shivered. “…I can see the appeal…”
Pinkie popped up next to them without exploding. “Oh cool!” She grabbed the mug and drank the entire thing in one swoop, somehow without taking off her mask. “DELICIOUS!”

Romani’s eyes widened. “You just… **chugged** it.”

“Yep! And boy was it tasty! Not as good as cider though.”

“Most people end up in the hospital after attempting that.”

Pinkie giggled. “I’m a **pony**, silly. Anyway, I have to jet, Rainbow Dash is still chasing me with her army.” She leaped into the air and exploded, flying over a nearby building. Rainbow Dash flew overhead in hot pursuit with a flock of birds behind her

“Your kind is… Unusual,” Romani said.

“No argument here,” Rarity said. “Oh, by the way, do you know where I can find a Gossip Stone?”

Romani nodded. “There’s one in town, behind the Clock Tower. You’ll know it when you see it.”

“Thanks. It was a pleasure.”

Romani smiled awkwardly. “Uh… Same?”

Fluttershy chuckled. “Don’t mind her, she’s being fancy.”

Romani shrugged. “Never did understand that…”

Rarity rolled her eyes – not that anybody could tell – and walked towards the Clock Tower. She found Twilight and one of the wooden bush people sitting next to each other, staring at it.

“Uh… Twilight?”

“I’m trying to bore myself into falling asleep,” Twilight said. “It’s not working.”

“Told you,” the bush muttered in a high, squeaky voice.

“Shush! You’re making me more interested in talking!”

Rarity raised an eyebrow. “Is it really the time to be testing the magic in your mask, Twilight? There’s a festival soon, and I doubt staring at such wondrous architecture will make you bored enough to sleep.”

Twilight groaned, putting her face in her hooved. “You’re right…”

The bush twitched. “What am I, chopped liver?”

Twilight looked up at him. “…You did say your name was Liver.”

“It is. Chose it myself.” He rustled his leaves, turning to Rarity. “Maybe you’ll be better. Name’s Liver, I consult on everything from architecture to politics to art. I’m what’s known as a Deku Shrub if you haven’t figured that out by now. So, just to clarify, you are all from another world.”

“Uh, yes,” Rarity said.

“This is going to bring great business. I can add ‘culture consultant’ to my impressive list of consulting endeavors.”
Rarity sighed – this guy wasn’t any good at being a consultant. This guy just didn’t like taking orders from people and wanted to be in charge of his own business. Not really all that deceptive, but very delusional in his own greatness.

Still, she could probably ask him some things about the culture and he’d give more or less correct answers.

“So, Liver, explain the importance of this Clock Tower.”

“No idea. Legend states that it just appeared here one day and people decided to build a town around it. No one knows what makes it tick, and no one knows if there’s even an interior. Apparently, some hero in recent years found a way in but he didn’t tell anyone how that worked.”

Now Rarity was curious. “Would there be any way to find that out?”

“If you can get the Gossip Stone to talk, maybe. But nobody can get those things to talk.”

Rarity smirked. “I’ll be right back. Enjoy your… sit.”

“We will,” Twilight said, staring at the clock again.

“No, we won’t,” Liver muttered as Rarity moved behind the Clock Tower. The back face of the tower was blank, though still constructed with an excellent regard for symmetry. A single round statue stood in the pavement there, motionless. It had a number of spiked protrusions on top of it, and a single decorative eye was engraved in its center.

She knew it was the Gossip Stone the moment she saw it. She walked right up to it and cocked her head. “Hello?”

It said nothing. It remained as motionless as a statue should be.

Rarity frowned and tapped it with her hoof. It bounced back from her like it was made of rubber.

“Boing-oing!”

“AUGH!” Rarity jumped back.

It looked at her, twisting its rubbery body without a hint of difficulty. “What’s the problem there miss? Never seen a Gossip Stone before?”

“N-no but – how? Stone is not rubber!”

“Beats me, it’s just the way I am. So, you got ahold of a Mask of Truth didya? Discovering the fun parts yet?”

“…No?”

“Ah, well then I wish you luck with that. You’re in for a ride! Anyway, what you want to know? I know lots of things!”

Rarity twitched. “In that case, how do we get into the Clock Tower?”

“You need the moon to be out to do that. There’ll be a big one tonight, I’d suggest coming back here
then."

"…You aren’t very helpful are you?"

"Well, you’re not exactly some big hero on a quest so I don’t have to tell you anything. I’m just here to talk. I can tell you that Eliza really likes money to an extent that isn’t good and Romani secretly drinks that strong milk nightly. Addiction is a powerful thing."

Rarity blinked. “I… I’m not sure what to do with that information.”

“Exactly. I’m a Gossip Stone, no rule that this has to be useful.”

Rarity leaned in. “Know anything about the Happy Mask Salesman?”

“He and I have a deal. I don’t say anything about him and nothing bad happens to me.”

Rarity shook her head. “What is it with people and being so violent all the time?”

“I don’t do philosophical questions. Just a bad idea.”

“Well, in that case, what should I ask?”

“Ask what to do next.”

“What should I do next?” Rarity deadpanned.

“Go to that festival already, it’s about to start.”

“…Oh. Right. …Well, goodbye then.”

The Gossip Stone made no response. It once again looked like a perfectly normal stone statue with no hint of a rubbery structure.

This world was certainly unusual.

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The festival began with fireworks. Everyone had masks on, and most had robes over their bodies to hide the rest of their features as well. The town became a shifting mob of sheets with flat faces – a ghostly image. Lanterns of all colors lit up the town, and people ran into the streets dancing every dance imaginable. Musicians stood outside the various buildings, playing every song they knew, producing a mixed cacophony of noises that somehow managed to have a unique beauty to it.

Rarity trotted down one of the streets, witnessing six couples in blue masks dancing around a large barrel. Their dance was one focused primarily on the legs, kicking in and out repeatedly with ever increasing speed. They switched their dancing partners every few seconds, spiraling around in a strange flowery pattern.

She moved towards them, curious about what they were doing. Eager, even, to become part of it. But then all twelve of them turned to look at her – staring at her with their masks. She knew they did not want her presence. She sighed and turned around, looking to find someone else to involve herself with. Someone to dance, to be a part of this culture. As poor as this town obviously was, they obviously knew what class was.

And she was going to be part of the class. She just needed to find an open group.
The barrel in the midst of the dancers exploded, shooting a brilliant crimson firework into the sky behind Rarity. She didn’t turn around to appreciate it. It was not for her.

There – she saw Pinkie. And, of course, Pinkie was the one dancing with everyone, masterfully standing on her hind legs and spinning some people around a goron minstrel with a rather large guitar. The moment Rarity started walking over, Pinkie grabbed her and threw her into the dance. “Stand on your hind hooves and just let the dance carry you!” she cheered, spinning Rarity around in a short dance before tossing her to a person in a pig’s mask.

She heard him snort.

He wanted nothing to do with her.

She was tossed to a smaller person; a woman, the Mask of Truth told her. This woman was distracted, didn’t even notice Rarity. Was busy thinking of something else. Someone else.

Next was a goron who lifted her up and laughed. It was probably Timon, only dancing because he knew who she was. Only because of a previous connection…

Rarity took in a sharp breath as she was tossed to the next person. This person danced with her kindly, carefully, appreciatively. He must have felt sorry for her. He did feel sorry for her. And after he thought she needed no more consoling, he tossed her away.

He didn’t know she could see the truth.

The next one thought her form was ugly. The next one thought the dance itself was stupid. The next one hated her because she couldn’t dance properly.

She tore herself from the dance, stumbling to the side of the street. While leaning against a wall she bit back tears.

“Hey…” Pinkie said, walking up to her. “What’s wrong?”

She’s only doing this because she feels like she has to. “Nothing, Pinkie. Nothing at all. I just need a breath, is all.”

Pinkie shook her head, taking off her mask to reveal a concerned face. “Rarity, I can tell when something’s wrong, even if I can’t see your face. Something’s got you sad.”

She really seemed concerned… But no, the mask had told Rarity that Pinkie was only doing it out of obligation, and that had to be true. The mask knew everything. “…Pinkie, get back to your dance.”

Pinkie frowned. “Rarity…”

She needs to go back. “Pinkie, go have fun. I’ll be back.”

Pinkie shook her head, putting the mask back on. “…Okay.” She bounced back to the party, unleashing a burst of confetti from nowhere.

Rarity slunk away. So this is what people really thought at parties and events – they judged each other. They judged her, deeming her unimportant. Ugly. Alien. Maybe she didn’t belong out here, in the other worlds… She would just be pushed back in every way. Pushed to nothing, pushed because they were different. Because people had their own desires. Because of the truth.

Even her own friends had that. Everyone had that. She had it.
Certainty…

She stood tall at the edge of a street, looking into an alleyway. The dust and grime told her the people were dark here. The trash told her they cared not. How could she have not seen this before? Why only now was she seeing this toxic atmosphere?

Two people stood in the alleyway – one wearing the cow’s mask. Romani. The other was tall, probably a man, wearing a mustached mask. The tall man grabbed Romani by the arm, hard. She cried out, but no one heard.

No one but Rarity. She activated her horn and tossed the burly man back with her telekinesis, dumping him in a trash can, where his kind belonged. She walked up to Romani.

“T-thank you…” Romani said, distantly.

*She isn’t all that thankful. She’s distant. She has mixed feelings. You messed something up.*

Rarity took a few steps back, trembling.

“…Rarity?”

*Obligation. Culture. That’s all she cares. She just wants you out of her sight so she can sort through things.*

Rarity took off at a full gallop, tears streaking down the bottom of her mask. She couldn’t take it anymore. She was done with this – done with the people, done with the festival, done with the dancing. She’d just lock herself in her house forever and eat all the ice cream she had. That’s all that would help her now.

Only it wouldn’t. She knew it. It was more *truth*. Everything was horrendously disparate. Everything she saw had a dark twist, a nasty eventuality, a devastating realization. Nothing was clean. Every last thing she laid eyes on lashed at her already broken psyche.

She ran for home… But came to the Clock Tower’s back first. A back with a large gaping hole in it. She paused, tear streaks still plain on her face.

“See? There it is. Only you can see it,” the Gossip Stone said. “The night reveals the truth.”

She walked into the darkness, the light from the outside vanishing the moment she stuck her head in. Her eyes took a moment to adjust – but adjust they did. The interior was simple, made of stone, and had a spiral staircase leading up. There was a lack of clockwork mechanisms to drive the spinning disc, but this impossibility didn’t bother her. She ascended to the top of the Tower absent-mindedly.

She arrived, standing atop a round flat roof at a height from which see the entire town and quite a bit of the surrounding grasslands as well. It was beautiful – but tainted.

She was not alone. There was a man in green wearing a rather unique cone hat that drooped down his back. Numerous weapons, potions, and other miscellaneous artifacts lined his person and the magic within him more than strong enough to register with Rarity’s meager magic sense.

*He doesn’t want me here.*
She started back down the stairs-

“Don’t go,” he said, turning to her. He had no mask. His face was that of a middle-aged man, but his eyes were young and full of life. He extended a hand.

Rarity stared at him a moment, not sure what to make of the mixed signals she was getting.

“Take off that mask. Nobody needs it up here – and Masks of Truth tend to cause more problems than they solve.”

Rarity took it off, gulping. She wiped her eyes, realizing slowly that he could see she was crying. “I…”

“Don’t apologize for your emotions,” he said. “They’re a part of us. The things we do because of them we may be responsible for, but we are not in control of them.”

Rarity blinked. “…Wise words.”

“Well, I have a Mask of Truth myself,” he said, taking one out of his backpack. “I know what it’s like.”

“…It just tells you the horrors of everything.”

“No… it tells you the truth of things, sometimes.” He held it to the light. “But the truths it tells you are so vague that it’s hard to discern them from your own intuition. It’s impossible to tell the two apart.” He sighed. “It becomes a horrible self-fulfilling process.”

“…So it lies?”

He shook his head. “No… You just think it’s telling you things when it isn’t.”

Rarity looked at the mask in her hooves. “…I’ve hurt some people because of this. Pinkie… Romani…”

“Romani will understand. She doesn’t know everything, but she understands people.”

Rarity nodded. “…How could I have thought those things about everyone?”

“When you’re wearing an oracle, you only hear what you want to.”

Rarity looked down at the town. “Do I really want to think those things?”

“On some level, you do. On some level, I wanted to think everyone was an enemy. I wanted them all to be servants of a great evil.” He laughed. “The only one who ended up being a servant was someone I thought I trusted. Dismissing all the inclinations the mask actually gave me.”

“That… that sounds horrible.”

“It was.”

Rarity looked at her mask again.

“You’re thinking about chucking it over the edge?”

“Yes…” Rarity admitted.
“I wouldn’t. It’s still a powerful mask that can do great good. But it’s a horrible thing to view the world through.”

Rarity nodded, placing it on the back of her head. She extended a hoof. “I’m Rarity.”

“I’m Link,” he said, shaking her hoof. She felt a warming power, a courage, flow through her.

Rarity smiled. “Charmed.” She glanced down at the festival. “…They’re still dancing.”

“They always dance.”

“Why aren’t you down there?”

Link shrugged. “It’s… It’s deceptive down there. People lead fake lives behind their masks. With them on, they feel like they can do anything. And that’s a truth. I can’t bring myself to be down there with so many people doing horrible things. I can usually figure out who they are.”

Rarity shook her head. “Part of me wonders why.”

“I honestly have no idea. This festival is much older than I am, or any of the elders. They do it because of tradition. In the morning there are just as many scared people as those who had a wonderful time, and they always forget about that by next year.”

Rarity pursed her lips. “Some of that ugliness was true.”

Link nodded. “People are a paradox. We are ugly. But we are also noble.” He laughed. “I’ve met many of both on my adventures…”

“Oh, care to elaborate, mister Link?”

“Just Link, no mister. And I won’t mind elaborating if you talk about yourself a little.”

Rarity chuckled. “Well, I don’t do as much adventuring as you probably do, judging by all those artifacts you have and that impressive sword, but I do have my fair share of excursions. I think it’d be best to start with the day I met my best friends…”

The two of them talked the night away while what tradition commanded continued on below.

In the end, it didn’t matter all that much.

~~~

“Well, the mask works,” Twilight said, standing in front of the shimmer that led to Equestria. “It’s, what, 3 AM? I’m not even remotely feeling like falling asleep. I feel like I’m about to fall over, but you know, that’s nothing.”

Pinkie giggled. “Yeah!”

Applejack took off her mask. “Okay, done with this mask. We better be goin’ home, Twilight.”

Fluttershy nodded in agreement. “Yeah, I’m beat. And this… party wasn’t really that nice all the time.”

Rainbow Dash raised an eyebrow. “How do you mean?”

“Let’s just get home. …Where’s Rarity?”
“Here,” Rarity said, coming out from the back of the Clock Tower, Link behind her. She shoved the Mask of Truth in Twilight’s hooves. “That thing is dangerous. Careful with it, Twilight.”

“…Okay. Who’s your friend?”

Link bowed. “I’m Link, your highness.”

Twilight facehooved. “Great, you told him I was a princess.”

Link smirked. “I might have bowed regardless. You look like a leader.”

Twilight rolled her eyes. “I do not!”

Rainbow Dash facehooved. “Yes, yes you do.”

“You are a shining star of leadership, darling,” Rarity said.

Twilight shrugged. “Okay, sure, I’m the leader. What do you do Link?”

Link smirked. “I’m just an adventurer.”

“I bet you’re more than just a simple adventurer.”

Rarity nodded. “He’s a lot like us, dear. I’ll tell you about it later – I can tell you need sleep. I don’t need the mask to see that your body is done with all this.”

“But I feel fine!”

“When you take off that mask of yours you will collapse in a heap,” Rarity said.

Fluttershy giggled. “You probably will.”

Twilight smirked. “I’ll prove it to you!” She took off her mask – and fell asleep on the ground, in a heap.

Pinkie laughed heartily. “Well, we need to get Twilight to bed! We’ll probably be coming back here! See you later Link!”

“Later,” he waved as the six of them left through their portal. He smiled contently to himself, his spirits having been lifted slightly by the sight of six colorful equines.

~~~

Later that night, long after the six ponies from another world had left, hours after most the dancers had gone to bed, another portal opened. Sunset Shimmer stepped out of the gap in reality. She took a moment to appreciate the night air and the appeal of the unique quiet a town had after a large festival.

But, well, it was night. She probably wouldn’t be welcomed here just yet, since even the inns were probably unmanned. She’d just have to come back later when the world would be more responsive to her presence. She was about to head back when she saw something.

There was a man in green talking to another man in purple. The man in purple sent shivers down Sunset’s spine just from the way he stood – unnatural.

“Is it still safe?” the man in green asked.
The man in purple laughed, and suddenly there was a purple mask in his hands. Its primary shape was that of a heart, but it was far from an image of affection. It had two eerie eyes that glowed slightly, two colored horns on the rounded top and eight spikes along the bottom edges. Even in the darkness, Sunset could see the jarring tribal designs all around it. That mask was evil.

“Put it away!” the man in green said. “It’ll call to someone!”

“It’ll do that anyway,” the man in purple said, having somehow put the mask back in his pack without Sunset seeing. “But rest assured, it is safe in my possession.”

“You know…” a new voice said, this one feminine. “Those ponies came from another world. What’s to say they don’t have the ability to take it from you?”

“Midna, they wouldn’t do that,” the man in green said, addressing his faint shadow.

“They would not,” the man in purple said. “And I’m more than capable to defend against otherworldly threats, ye of little faith.”

“We’re putting a lot of faith in you…” Midna muttered.

“But I’m the only one who can resist its call, and you know that from personal experience.”

The man in green nodded. “It’d be better if it was destroyed.”

The man in purple laughed, the sound making Sunset shiver again. “I’m open to suggestions!”

The man in green said nothing in response. He just shook his head.

“Hey,” Midna said, suddenly. “I think we’re being watched.”

Sunset leaped back through her portal and closed it faster than even she could comprehend. It took a moment for her to realize how hard she was breathing and how terrified she felt.

Twilight blinked. “…What happened over there?”

“I probably just heard a conversation I really wasn’t supposed to hear,” Sunset said.

“…Want to investigate?”

Sunset shivered. “Normally I would, but… I don’t think I want to mess with something that evil.”

Twilight blinked. “Okaaaay….”
Spike walked to the Mirror Portal room, a cup of piping hot tea in his hand. It was far too hot to drink at the moment, so he was wandering around while it cooled. He had expected to find Twilight and the gang preparing for another adventure, but they weren’t here. Maybe they’d taken an off day or something, though they had gone almost every day in the last week. He’d heard tales of new friends, awesomeness, explosions, and strange games. At first he’d felt left out, but now he realized that getting involved would probably drain a lot of his time, and he was not the mad machine of productivity Twilight was. He, like any normal living being, needed more than four hours of sleep a day.

He glanced at the Mirror Portal. It was on, connected to some far off world, like it always was. Usually the default was Earth, but Twilight was forgetful and often forgot to switch it back until Sunset yelled at her through the communication journals. Speaking of which, one of them was on a nearby table right now. He would have opened it, but that would have been rude. The private correspondence between Twilight and Sunset was none of his business.

He found himself staring at the globe of magic above the Mirror Portal, the device that contained the glowing pattern of a far away world. This particular cloud seemed to be a half and half mixture of vibrant rainbow and dusty desert colors. The colorful contradiction drew him in and soon he had no idea how long he’d been standing there.

He checked his tea – still too hot. He really needed to get a control on his fire breath when heating things up. He may have been fireproof but heat was still uncomfortable.

Something extremely fast shot right past his ear, setting him on edge. This something hit the wall behind him with a bang! He didn’t even have time to turn around before another one shot through the gap in his legs, denting the floor beneath him. A third one flew right through his teacup, shattering the piece of porcelain and pouring steaming water on his hand. He screamed and ducked for cover, the sudden heat serving as a good reminder that he should get out of the way.

More of the tiny objects – bullets, Spike’s mind finally concluded, drawing on what he knew of humans from Twilight – shot from the portal, bouncing off the crystal walls. No others came close to hitting Spike, but he knew his chances of escaping unscathed lowered the longer those bullets kept flying.

“TWIIIIILIIIIIGHT!” he yelled.

Twilight leaped out of the portal, performing an athletic roll while holding a magical shield up, deflecting several bullets. Her friends poured out of the portal right behind her, ducking out of the way of the bullet stream. Amazingly, there wasn’t a single bullet wound on any of them, though they were ragged and covered in dust.

“Close the portal!” Applejack yelled.

“On it!” Twilight said, using her telekinesis on a nearby lever. She was unable to change it fast enough – a giant man stepped out of the portal, so large that Spike wasn’t sure he was human despite his peach skin, red shirt, and giant gatling gun.

He pointed a finger at Rarity. “SPY!” He yelled in a deep, thundering voice.
“What is that, the catchphrase of your people!?” Rarity retorted, exasperated. The heavy man readied his gun to tear Rarity to shreds, but Twilight wasn’t having any of that. She grabbed him in her magic and threw him back through the portal. Then she changed the destination to somewhere else, letting out a sigh of relief.

“Yeah!” Rainbow Dash shouted. “That showed him!”

“…Do we know why he was attacking us?” Fluttershy asked. “Why they were all attacking us?” Pinkie shrugged. “I think we interrupted them in the middle of something. Probably shouldn’t hold it against them.”

“They kept calling me a spy and shooting at me!” Rarity wailed. “Then there was that man who hit me with a baseball bat!” She rubbed the back of her head. “I’m going to be lumpy for at least a day!” Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. “Nobody can see that bump, Rarity.”

“Maybe I care about how much it hurts rather than how it looks!” Rainbow Dash raised an incredulous eyebrow.

“Okay, so it’s both. Whatever. I still have a right to complain!”

“It must be horrible there…” Fluttershy said. “Always fighting…”

“Fluttershy, we were only there for, what, ten minutes?” Twilight said. “We don’t know if they’re always fighting.”

“Pretty sure they are,” Pinkie said. “It’s a big game to them!”

Twilight twitched. “…Fair enough. Regardless, it seems we ended our adventure early… I’ve got about a dozen other worlds we could check out, and we’ve got plenty of time-“

Applejack raised a hoof. “Twi? Ah’m gonna have to pass. Ah’ve got work to do. Haven’t been doing as much on the farm as Ah need to lately.”

Twilight nodded. “That’s fine Applejack, we’ll see you tomorrow then-“

Applejack shook her head slowly. “Twi, it’s a bit more than just takin’ a day off. Ah need to stop doin’ this.”

Twilight stopped flipping through her book of discovered worlds and looked Applejack in the eyes. “…What are you saying?”

“Ah’m sayin’ these little adventures of ours are gettin’ in the way of my life and my responsibilities. Far more than they should. So Ah’m checkin’ out, goin’ to my farm and doin’ what’s needed. Ah’m sorry, but this just isn’t meant for me Twi.”

Twilight sagged. “I’ll respect your decision Applejack, but… Are you sure?”

“Very sure. In fact, Ah’m surprised the rest of you haven’t thought about this. How much of our lives are we putting into this exploration? Twilight, you’re a princess. Have you been taking care of what you need to?”

“I – of course I have!” Twilight said, flustered.
Applejack raised an eyebrow.

“…Okay, I’ve been loading a lot of it off on Spike…”

Spike blinked. She had? …He supposed he did have more work than usual, but he didn’t really mind. Should he mind? He didn’t know; he’d have to think on that one.

Applejack nodded. “See? You’ve had to give up some stuff too. And it’s fine if you want to give that up, but my life is at the Apple Farm, not here. Ah suggest you – all of you – think about what you want to do here. Ah don’t think any of you have really thought about all the time you’re sinking into this.” She adjusted her hat and smiled. “See you girls around. Ah’ll be at my farm, where Ah belong. Hope you girls enjoy whatever it is you decide to do.” She walked out of the room, leaving five ponies speechless.

Twilight gulped. “Well…”

Rainbow Dash shrugged. “Ah, whatever, let’s just go to a new place already.”

“Rainbow, I think she’s right,” Rarity said. “We should think about this. I have a boutique, after all…”

Twilight nodded. “Applejack does have a point. …Let’s take a break today. Meet back here tomorrow if you still want to go somewhere, okay everypony?”

Everypony nodded.

“Good. I want you to know that, whatever you decide, I’ll respect it. And… Well, that I need to think as well. I’ll let you girls use the Mirror even if I don’t though, so no worries.” She put a hoof to her chin, walking to a nearby wall.

The other four ponies stood still, in awkward silence.

Twilight turned and looked at them. “Uh… you girls can go now. Okay?”

“Oh. Right,” Fluttershy said, shaking her head. “See you tomorrow?”

“Hopefully,” Pinkie said, walking out instead of bouncing like normal.

Rarity took a breath. “Time to go sort out our lives then, I suppose.”

Soon, Spike was left standing alone in the room, feeling a little existential. He sat down, holding his legs close.

He wished he still had that tea. It would have been drinkable by now.

~~~

A few miles out from Ponyville there was a giant cloud construction known as the Wonderbolt Academy, where pegasus stunt fliers were trained and one of the more common places the actual Wonderbolts practiced their stunt shows.

Rainbow Dash had quickly found herself in one of these practice sessions after the earlier conversation at the castle. Flying always helped clear her head, and extreme flying was just better in every imaginable way. She flew across the length of the clouded academy at speeds close to that of sound itself, leaving a complex trail of rainbows over the runways embedded in the cloudy ‘ground’. Other pegasi – both students and fellow Wonderbolts – cheered her on as she picked up speed.
She wasn’t going for a rainboom this time. They’d all seen that trick before. Even though it was her signature move and by far the showiest, she was always looking for something a little more interesting to perform for the audience. She checked behind her to make sure the rainbow trail of pegasus magic was perfectly vibrant, which it was. She smirked to herself and angled herself directly upward, twisting her left wing slightly to turn her body in a corkscrew motion. The rainbow trail behind her became a twisting ribbon, spiraling behind her at an ever-increasing frequency. Soon, a tall and narrow tornado formed around the rainbow ribbon, coursing with the energies of the wind and air itself. When she felt as though she should stop climbing any higher in altitude, she pivoted her body around and kicked the rising tornado with her hoof, forcing a discharge of static energy throughout the cyclone. A bolt of lightning drove itself through the swirling rainbow, destroying it in a single instant with a thundering roar.

Rainbow Dash went temporarily deaf from the thunder but she could see the cheers and applause coming from the ponies on the ground. She gently glided down to the runway and landed gracefully, smirking.

As her hearing returned, she could hear the shouts and commendations from the other pegasus. She grinned.

She loved her job.

The grin vanished in an instant as she remembered what Applejack had said earlier. Would traveling through the worlds keep her from doing this? If she was forced to choose…

Spitfire, the fiery leader of the Wonderbolts, walked up to her. “…You okay, Crash?”

Rainbow Dash started nodding – then shook her head. “Can I… Talk to you for a minute?”

Spitfire raised an eyebrow. “Sure. Here or the office?”

Rainbow Dash looked around at all the ponies. “Office.”

Spitfire’s expression became concerned. “Well all right then.” The two of them flew to one of the larger cloud-mounted buildings, entering the top floor. Spitfire sat at her desk, shoving all the paperwork off to the side of the desk, probably ruining a few students’ test scores in the process. “What’s on your mind Crash?”

Rainbow Dash bit her lip. “Well… Hard to explain. How about – well, think about it like this. What if you had been doing something for the last week or so that was so awesome and full of adventure that you’d forgotten about doing most anything else.”

“Was this why you missed last practice?”

Rainbow Dash blushed. “Eheh… Maybe, but let me finish. So you do this thing, right? And it’s awesome and great and could change the world. But then one of your friends says you need to think about what you’re giving up, what you’re not doing, that sort of thing. And you realize that by doing this thing you’re neglecting your childhood dream that you spent so long trying to accomplish, squandering it.”

“Was this why you missed last practice?”

Rainbow Dash blushed. “Eheh… Maybe, but let me finish. So you do this thing, right? And it’s awesome and great and could change the world. But then one of your friends says you need to think about what you’re giving up, what you’re not doing, that sort of thing. And you realize that by doing this thing you’re neglecting your childhood dream that you spent so long trying to accomplish, squandering it.”

“Ah,” Spitfire said. “You’ve found something more interesting than flying stunt shows.”

“N-no!”

Spitfire facehooved. “Crash, let me tell you something. All we really do is fly in complex patterns so ponies can have a sense of awe. In theory, we’re a special ops military unit for Equestria, but there’s
never any battles so we’re rarely called in as that. If you’ve found something that can really change the world, I’d take it.”

Rainbow Dash blinked. “…Spitfire? Are you saying that…”

Spitfire interrupted with a sigh. “…I didn’t join the Wonderbolts all those years ago to become a stunt flier, Rainbow Dash. I joined to defend Equestria and make a difference. But this is what we became. It’s a fine life, don’t get me wrong, but I often feel like there’s something… missing. And I’m rather stuck here. You though… you’re not.”

“Are you… Telling me to stop being a Wonderbolt?”

Spitfire laughed. “Oh hay no! …Guess I was laying it on a little thick there. I’m just saying you should pursue what’s valuable. You’d know this if you thought about your Wonderbolt history more, but many Wonderbolts have taken time off to pursue other interests, and more than a few come back later. Why, I remember Fleetfoot vanishing for two years!” She laughed. “I still have no idea what she did.”

Rainbow Dash frowned. “I still don’t know if I want to.”

“Hey, your decision. You are one of our best fliers and your tricks make the shows worth seeing for a lot of ponies. But if I were able to elope, I would.” She glanced at a piece of paper.

Rainbow Dash frowned. “I really don’t know. This is what I’ve wanted my whole life, Spitfire, you know that. I’m happy here. But I’m also happy there.” She grabbed her head. “Ugh, why do decisions have to be so hard?”

Spitfire laughed. “No offense Rainbow, but that’s just life itself. You’re going to have to choose one way or another, or find some third option. Just don’t refuse to decide.” A wistful look appeared in her eyes. “That never ends well.”

Rainbow Dash looked out the window at the many pegasi, young and old, doing stunts in the brilliant sunlight. She bit her lip, still not knowing what to do. “Spitfire, this was my life. I’m happy here. I love my job. I don’t know if I’ll love adventuring as much as I love this.”

“It’s your life. All I’m telling you is what I’d do. But then again, I’m not known for being satisfied with life. If you are satisfied, I wouldn’t throw that away. Very few ponies can actually consider themselves happy with life.”

“I know… Ugh. Why does thinking about things have to be so hard?”

Spitfire laughed. “I’m tempted to say that your question is also your answer.”

“…What?”

“You aren’t a thinker. You’re a pony who acts based on instinct and feeling most of the time. That’s pretty knuckleheaded of you, but it makes you who you are. If your mind fails you, follow your gut.”

“My gut is a twisted knot that doesn’t even know which way’s up!”

“Now, is that from the decision or the trick you just pulled out there?”

“I don’t know!” Rainbow Dash rammed her head into the desk. Spitfire patted Rainbow Dash’s head with her wing.
“There, there, it’ll be fine.”

“…That doesn’t help.”

Spitfire shrugged. “Well then pony-up and make a decision. I’ll support you whatever you do.”

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Suddenly Pinkie Pie was standing over two adorable fillies by the name of Pound and Pumpkin Cake. “Hello!”

The twins smiled at her and raised their hooves excitedly. Pinkie grabbed them and swept them into a big hug. “Aren’t you two just the most adorable things?”

They nodded in unison. Pinkie giggled. “Well, I need to talk to you two about something. Usually I’d go talk to Gummy, but he’s surprisingly unhelpful today. I mean, just look at him!” She pulled a small toothless alligator out of her mane and set him on the floor. He blinked, remaining motionless. “See? He’s just being existential again! Come on Gummy, snap out of it! We do not fall to the forces beyond our control!”

Gummy licked his eyeball.

Pinkie facehooved. “These moods of yours. What am I going to do with you? Tsk tsk tsk.”

Gummy did nothing at all.

Pinkie returned to the twins. “See? I’m not crazy.”

This prompted the twins to laugh. Pinkie glared at them. “Oh, so you find that funny do you? Do I look crazy to you?” She giggled. “Of course I do, what am I thinking. Hey! You’ve sidetracked me, you rascals! I’ve got something important to talk to you two about!”

They stared at her, giving her their absolute attention.

“So, it looks like I’ve been given the opportunity to go on a grand adventure that will be bigger than anything any of us can imagine! But to do that, I’d have to see you two a lot less, and probably stop working at the bakery. I mean, I suppose I could just leave your parents with a stockpile of random pastries, because those aren’t hard to make.” To prove her point she pulled two cupcakes out of her mane and gave them to the twins. They ate the pastries in one gulp.

“Buuuuuuuuuut there’s something about working in that bakery. And, well, I guess to be completely honest, I could probably work at the bakery just fine, I’d just need to manage my time. But what the real problem is… is I won’t be able to celebrate the birthdays of every pony in Ponyville! It can’t be done!” She leaned on a chair that hadn’t been there a moment before, putting her front leg to her forehead. “Oh the horror! A pony in Ponyville not getting a birthday cake from me!”

The twins looked at her, sadly.

“And it’ll only get worse. You can’t tell anyone, because they don’t know this, but I know that soon this whole series of tiny adventures will get blown way out of control. I’m so nervousited about it! I could be part of the biggest amazing thing ever! But… It’ll also be hard if I’m involved. I could be so helpful to everypony, but I would have to be put through so much…”

They looked at her questioningly.
“I don’t know exactly what, sorry. There’ll be both good and bad. There’ll be good and bad regardless. It’s what life is, really.” She giggled. “But I have a choice. I can stay here and be the party pony of Ponyville… Or go out and become… Something else.”

She fell silent, looking down at the ground. “…It should be easy,” she said. “All I have to do is realize that there’s something bigger than me. And I can be a part of it. Why am I so selfish!? Why do I want a simple life in a simple town!?“ she groaned, slumping to the ground. “Everything outside is so exciting, so powerful, so amazing. There’s almost definitely a world filled with nothing but giant donuts and it’s almost guaranteed that I will find it one day! That is, if I go. If I don’t… I just stay here with you, with the ponies I know.”

She stood up, looking in a window and seeing her reflection. “…Who am I kidding. The problem’s not the bakery, the problem’s not the other ponies in Ponyville, it’s me. And just me. I’m scared.”

The twins walked up to her and hugged her. Pinkie giggled. “Yeah… Hugs are always welcome.” She wiped a tear away, looking out the window, out into the existence only she was aware of. She caught glimpses…

She had a choice. She could stay or go.

The end result would probably be the same regardless of her choice. But…

But she could make a difference.

If she was willing to put herself out there. To welcome the danger and the coming sorrow.

“…The sadness will come anyway,” she said to herself.

The twins looked up at her.

“It’s okay, not you. You two are safe.” She giggled. “Look at me, I’m starting to cry for no good reason. Silly Pinkie, you’re not juggling lives in your hooves.”

Gummy stared at her.

“Stop giving me that look,” Pinkie muttered, shaking her head and wiping her eyes. “I am thinking, Gummy. Thinking hard.”

Gummy blinked.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. You were always right. Sorry for being mean to you earlier, you didn’t deserve that. Sometimes I need a healthy dose of existentialism!”

Gummy licked her hoof.

“Awwwww, thank you Gummy!” She pulled him and the twins into another hug. “Thank you all! I think I know what to do now!” She set them down, stuffed Gummy back into her mane, and bounced into the main room of Sugarcube Corner, taking her position at the counter next to the blue form of Mrs. Cake.

“Hey Mrs. Cake!”

Mrs. Cake’s ears perked up. ”Pinkie, you’re using that tone of voice...”

“What tone of voice?”
“The tone of voice of ‘I did something and now I have to tell you about it, please don’t be mad’. What did you break?”

“What?” Pinkie said, aghast. “Nothing! I broke nothing! I just spent some time seriously thinking about my life! You know, healthy things for healthy ponies to do healthily! Everypony needs to do some deep thinking from time to time.”

Mrs. Cake blinked. “…And what were you thinking about?”

“Well, life, but you want something more specific. I was thinking about adventures, alligators, two awesome little fillies in the other room, baking, parties… And if I’m going to go exploring with my friends long term or stay here in Ponyville.”

“And what did you decide?”

Pinkie grinned. “You’re about to find out! Just you and nopony else!” She winked and giggled.

~~~

Animals.

Fluttershy loved animals.

Fluttershy loved animals more than ponies a lot of the time. She understood animals when she didn’t understand ponies. Their desires were simpler, their lives quieter, and they were just so much more *fluffy*. Well, most of the time. Fish and reptiles weren’t fluffy. And neither were bugs. And… Okay so a lot of things weren’t fluffy but she liked the fluffy ones because they were so *huggable*. And a big snake was huggable as well; you just had to know how to hug it right. Fluttershy was one of those ponies who *knew*.

Presently, she was hugging *all* the animals that lived at her house – the snakes, the bears, the rabbits, the squirrels, the bees, the hummingbirds, the turtles, the strange squishy things that didn’t have official names but she called *frishen*, *Rexy*, and the other innumerable types of animals. She was in *bliss* as she did this, all her worries vanishing by simple contact with hundreds of animals. Her house was a haven. Not as good as Sweet Feather Sanctuary, but that place was the animals’ home, not hers. There was just something about her treehouse that made her feel glad to be there.

Though she was starting to feel a little crushed by the sheer mass of animals around her…

“Okay! Enough hugs for now!” she said. They all backed off without so much as a growl of fuss. “Thank you,” she said, sitting down on her couch and taking a deep breath – and finally allowing herself to think.

Applejack was always the one to point out what should be obvious. Really, she wondered how Twilight, Rarity, and Rainbow managed to go to other worlds that often given their jobs. But Fluttershy knew she didn’t really have a job – she just cared for animals and the Sanctuary, things that she definitely didn’t get paid for. She lived off the welfare of others these days, though years ago she had lived off the welfare of animals and the forests. She had to admit, even though the food her friends provided was tasty, she did miss forest berry salad sometimes.

But really, what was she leaving behind when she went through that Mirror? She had little to no responsibilities. She was mainly worried about the adventures themselves. As much progress as she had made over the years, she still wasn’t all that keen on constant danger and adrenaline. Did she *want* to keep going? That was the question. The time she spent with her friends was precious to her, and she had to admit the places they went that *didn’t* have danger were beautiful and fun. She even
had some animals from those other worlds here right now.

Rexy was the most obvious of these, having refused to leave after he was healed, standing now as a sort of sentinel for Fluttershy’s house. He did have to eat a lot, which scared some of the other animals, but they were slowly realizing that Rexy knew who was off limits. Harry the bear had even ridden Rexy for a while in one of the most adorable scenes Fluttershy had seen with two apex predators. Usually they were a lot less adorable than that.

But that was the way life was.

A plate hit her in the face. Fluttershy shook her head and glared at the white rabbit that had thrown the dish – Angel Bunny, simultaneously her most beloved and most infuriating animal. “Angel! That is not how you greet ponies!”

Angel grabbed another plate and pointed down at it with his finger. Then he pointed into his mouth. Fluttershy gasped. “…Did I forget to feed you!?”

Angel nodded vigorously and glared at her.

“Oh my gosh I’m so so so sorry Angel I… I completely forgot, I think I was caught up in the moment of coming home and hugging everyone…”

He threw the other plate at her and folded his arms. This time the plate shattered on impact.

“Ow! Angel bunny! I am getting you food!”

Angel folded his arms and glared. He held up a calendar of the current month and pointed at the current week. Red x’s were around three days.

“I fed you on Thursday…” Fluttershy said, nervously.

Angel took a book off a shelf and showed her a complicated salad with a cherry on top. He pointed at the cherry and growled.

“I thought we discussed eating food even when it doesn’t have cherries, Angel.”

Angel made a slicing motion over his neck and threw his arms into the air. He pointed at Fluttershy and made a noise that was supposed to be threatening, but just sounded cute.

Fluttershy sagged. “You… You’re right. I… I have been forgetting to feed you and I’ve been neglecting you and…” she burst into tears. “I’M SORRY!” She grabbed Angel and pulled him into a hug. “I’LL NEVER LET YOU STARVE AGAIN!”

Angel rolled his eyes and accepted the hug.

“I’ll… I’ll have to call off the adventures…” Fluttershy said. “I’ll need to stay here and keep you fed…”

Angel nodded, sure in his victory.

“Fluttershy…” a deep, amused voice said, coming from all directions.

Fluttershy raised an eyebrow, a smile coming to her previously sad face. “Discord…”

The moment she said the name, a creature that could only be described as an abomination against
nature appeared in a flash of white light. His body was snakelike in shape, composed of both scaled and furred sections. His legs were different, one ending in a hoof and the other in reptilian claws. His hands that of a paw and taloned hand, while his head was a mix between a pony and a goat with both a deer and a unicorn horn on his head. He was Discord, spirit of chaos. And he just so happened to hang around Fluttershy’s house a lot because the two were good friends.

“Fluttershy!” He called, pointing at Angel. “You know he’s toying with you, right?”

“Uh… no?”

Discord snapped his fingers, making large glasses appear on his face and a whiteboard appear on the wall. He quickly scribbled a diagram of Angel eating the salad without the cherry on top and getting berries from the forest. “The rabbit gets food on his own. He just wants to be doted over like a prince.”

Angel shook his fist at Discord in cute rage. Discord chuckled, flicking the rabbit’s ears with his talons. “I’m sorry, did your diabolical plan completely fail?”

Fluttershy looked at Angel, narrowing her eyes. “You really did didn’t you? You were fine without me!”

Angel nodded slowly, ashamed. He grabbed his heart and drooped his head.

“Oh… Angel…”

Discord raised a hairy eyebrow. “Hmm? What is it now?”

“…He just wanted me to spend more time with him.”

“You already spend a ton of time with him,” Discord said. “More than you spend with me I might add.”

Fluttershy nodded. “That… is true.”

Angel grabbed her by the neck and pleaded with his big rabbit eyes. Fluttershy hugged him close. “…You really do want me to stay, don’t you?” She looked at her other animals. “…You do too…”

Discord snapped his fingers, appearing in Fluttershy’s hoof as a rabbit similar to Angel. “But Fluttershy, the animals don’t have to tell you what to do! They like you, but your friends like you as well! And sometimes you just need to get out and have some fun! Whatever kind of fun it is your friends are planning. I’m sure it’s absolutely delightful.”

Fluttershy nodded slowly, pursing her lips. She looked from Discord to Angel, unsure. “I don’t know…”

Angel pleaded.

Discord huffed. “That rabbit knows nothing but how to manipulate you. You’ll see him every night.”

Angel punched Discord in the face. He reverted to his normal chaotic form. “Why you little…”

“Discord, no swapping of Angel’s body parts.”

Discord sighed. “Fiiiiine.”

Fluttershy looked at Discord’s eyes, her gaze steady. “…You really think I should stay on these
adventures? I… I feel like I should stay here.”

“And let the rest of existence not see your beautiful face and your kindness?” He snapped his fingers, opening a chaotic portal of his own making to a land filled with darkness and lightning. “You had the power to redeem me, and there’s a lot more out there that could stand some redeeming, if I do say so myself.”

Angel squirmed.

Fluttershy, years ago, would have looked at the thundering landscape and screamed, preparing to hide under a couch until it went away. Not she just stared at it, eyes reflecting the lightning. She nodded slowly. “There is a lot I could do… Animals I could save and put in the sanctuary… Ponies who need kindness… I’ve already seen horrible things done in worlds without kindness…” An image of Lieshy came into her mind. The other version of her was trying hard to adjust from a world built on half-truths, but she was still struggling. So many people and ponies struggled.

Was she meant to help them? She felt compelled to…

She took a deep breath. “I’m going to go think about this for a while. Angel, Discord, play nice while I take my walk, okay?”

The two begrudgingly nodded while shooting daggers at each other with their eyes.

“And Discord, close that portal, okay? It’s scaring the birds.”

~~~

In a world parallel, Sunset Shimmer was staring at a computer screen blankly.

*Congratulations! Your application to Wolfe University has been completed! You will be contacted within two months about acceptance!* 

Sunset continued to stare intently at the large blue words on the screen. She didn’t move. She barely breathed. The magnitude of what she’d just done weighed on her.

“…What are you doing?” Twilight asked.

“I just applied to college,” Sunset said, voice hollow, as if the soul had been drained out of her.

“That’s awesome! Where’d you apply!?”

“Local, Wolfe. Best college in the state,” she deadpanned.

“What are you planning on studying?”

“…Not sure,” she admitted. “Part of me wants to go into physics… But there’s also psychology, anthropology, sociology…”

“Go into physics,” Twilight said. “Tell me what it’s like.”

“…Sure,” Sunset said, still distant.

Twilight finally picked up on her tone. “Hey, are you okay? What’s wrong?”

“I’m still not sure if this is what I want to do. Drop everything and march off into an education system in a world I’m not even from. I could go home to Equestria and become a high mage without
much effort, serving in Twilight’s court. Or Celestia’s…” She wasn’t sure she was ready for that though. “But, well, here I am, applying to a university so I can learn about science and maybe change the world? I don’t know. I’ve only really cared about this place for, what, a little over a year? Am I really devoting myself to it?”

Twilight sat down next to her. “Well, that’s your decision. You could also go to college, get your degree, and run to Equestria and not have to pay back any loans!”

Sunset smirked. “You know I’d just grab some gold from Twilight to pay for it. It’s not too hard to make money when you have magic at your disposal.”

Twilight shrugged. “I suppose… You do have a big decision to make soon.”

“To think I never would have even thought about it had Pinkie not pointed it out to me.”

“She has a way of saying just the right things and just the right time. Or the complete opposite.”

Sunset chuckled. “That she does…” She looked away from the computer screen. “Well, I don’t have to commit for sure yet. I can always run back to Equestria if I want. I do know that I don’t want to get a job flipping burgers.”

“Here’s what I think. I think you should go to college, see if you like it. If you do, stay, and decide after you graduate if you want to use that knowledge in Equestria or stay here. If you don’t, leave and go back to the land of colorful equines. I’m sure we can visit you from time to time, and you us.”

“That’s… a nice and logical way of looking at it, thanks Twilight. But… Unless we can get that dimension dialer working visiting will be somewhat annoying to accomplish…”

Twilight’s face became a canvas for the biggest grin her face had ever held.

Sunset’s pupils shrunk. “You didn’t…”

“I DID!” She pulled a disc out from her shirt. There, affixed around her neck like a piece of jewelry, was a flat device made of numerous adjustable dial rings with a circular screen in the center. She used her fingers to quickly dial a location by twisting the many rings. When she hit a known coordinate, the screen flashed a green check. She then used her magic on it, activating the spell within and opening a gateway large enough for a person to walk through to a mysterious land where the grass was orange and the trees looked like pom-poms.

“…Where is that?” Sunset asked.

“No idea!” Twilight said. “Twinkie sent over some new coordinates a day or so ago, and that was one of them.”

Sunset frowned. “Still relying on ‘Twinkie’s’ spells, huh?”

“Yeah. Not like anything other than magic can open a portal, though. Even the sphere used magic despite the amazing power source it had…”

Sunset blinked. Then she looked back at the computer screen. Then a mischievous smirk appeared on her face.

“…What?”

“Challenge accepted,” Sunset said. “I’m going to find a non-magical way to traverse the universes.”
Twilight blinked. “I… I’d have no idea where to even start!”

“That’s the fun part, Twilight.” Sunset rubbed her hands together. “Twilight, I’m going to study physics. I’m going to figure this out…”

Twilight smiled. “I’m glad you got that sorted out.”

“I’m going to need a really, really big binder,” Sunset said. “And some more books. Mostly on quantum mechanics. And all those papers you’ve written about the nature and effects on magic you’ve never published.”

Twilight blushed. “A-all of them?”

“Yes. Even the ones you think are useless. There could be something useful. We’re going to figure this out, Twilight. Then we can explore without leaning on ‘Twinkie’s’ understanding.”

Twilight smiled. “This is going to change the world!”

“You bet it is! All we need to start is to know how exactly these spells open up portals…” she frowned. “But how to do that…”

~~~

Rarity walked into her boutique.

It looked exactly the same as when she had left it. The dresses were still in the window, the mannequins were all arranged neatly, and all her fabrics were put away in the correct shelves. The floor was clean, the design beautiful, and the sewing station just the perfect level unkempt to appear busy, but not frantic.

And yet she couldn’t look at it normally.

How long had she spent in the boutique lately? An hour or two a day? Less?

The boutique may never have actually been busy, and usually if a client needed anything they could just find her later or have someone tell her… But there was still the principle of neglect. This place wasn’t being cared for, despite how it looked. It was uninhabited. Closed.

And yet, even when she had been here, she hadn’t really had much work. She sewed and designed, sure, but most of her actual jobs involved beautifying the town for events, not clothing. Ever since she’d established her other shops in Manehattan and Canterlot she’d been popular – but the work was largely out of her hooves. It had been bumpy there for a while – stressful, frantic, insanely busy – but after it settled… Well, everything ran itself.

She was in charge, but she didn’t really do anything anymore. She couldn’t design everything, and what she did design was produced by Coco and Sassy in the other locations with their own hired hooves while she lived here with hardly a customer. They all went to the more prestigious locations in the big cities…

She had never really thought how much she had let control of her enterprise slip. It could probably function pretty well without her at this point. She still produced plenty of designs in her free time, even if she didn’t sew all of them. It was an odd thought, one that was slightly demeaning, but true. Had she realized it at any other time it probably would have sent her into an emotional funk that could only be cured by tubs of ice cream.
Oh, ice cream, *that* sounded simply *divine*. With her magic she levitated some ice cream from a hidden freezer and started eating. She wasn’t stressed enough to make a mess of the ice cream, but she was stressed enough to forego eating at a proper pace. A fourth of the gallon was gone in a matter of minutes.

She ran her hoof over her sewing machine. “Old friend… what do you think I should do?”

The sewing machine offered no response, as expected. Rarity rolled her eyes at her antics – what was she thinking, talking to something that couldn’t talk back? Preposterous. She sat down in her chair and took in the air of the boutique again, expression shifting from smile to frown every few seconds. She had so many memories here, so much in pursuit of her dream. So much success. She was easily rich at this point and could afford to buy a mansion in a far off exotic country. But she stayed here because it was her home.

In the end, the classy society *was* overrated, she supposed. Even though it was delightful, when she was here with her friends and neighbors, here at *home*, she was happier.

And there was something about those adventures. So much… *daring.* So much *culture.* So much surprising beauty. The romantic quality of jaunting off to new lands on a daily basis was just so *tantalizing.* There had been that difficulty with the Mask of Truth, admittedly, but she thought she was a better pony for having experienced it. She felt more full of *life* out there in the unknown.

She was surprised by how much she loved it. And she got to enjoy it with her best friends in the world. Well… Some of them at least, now.

“…Am I really considering closing the boutique?” she asked herself.

“*WHAT!*?”

Rarity looked up from her stupor to see a pony on the other side of the counter – her little sister, the white unicorn Sweetie Belle. She had her purple curls held to the sides of her head, her hooves pressing stressfully into her skull. “What are you talking about!? CLOSING!?”

“Oh, Sweetie, dear…” Rarity chuckled. “Surely you’ve noticed I’ve been out a lot lately. I’m just thinking of closing this location here since I’m not here often enough to warrant it. I could move everything to my house, take simple orders from people when they asked, but otherwise go explore with Twilight and the girls.”

“But but… The boutique is an important part of Ponyville! It can’t just be… *closed!*”

Rarity frowned. “I… I suppose not. But nopony comes here all that often. It’s… Well, it’s about as busy as it was before Twilight came to town, which is to say hardly anypony comes in here anymore.”

Sweetie frowned. “I… I mean, yes, but come on! Rarity, this is your dream! You… This is your life!”

Rarity smiled. “I wouldn’t be giving up on fashion dear, Stars no. The other locations will still make my designs and I’ll run them, but it’ll be mostly hooves-off.”

“But… But ponies like this boutique!”

Rarity raised an eyebrow. “Well, I suppose I could hire someone to run it for me, like Coco and Sassy do, but I don’t know anyone in town who has the requisite tastes besides you and the Doctor.”
Sweetie smirked. “The Cutie Mark Crusaders can find you somepony.”

Rarity blinked. “Really? Your friends could do that?”

“Yes, we’ve managed to get a lot of connection in helping ponies get their cutie marks. That said…” Sweetie frowned. “You sure you have to close it? Can’t you just stay? I’m pretty sure the town would feel different without your presence. So many look up to you.”

“Dear, they can find other role models…”

“I look up to you…” Sweetie said, sagging.

Rarity had to fight back a momentary urge to cry. Sweetie Belle was just so precious and adorable. Rarity couldn’t believe she used to find her very existence annoying. She smiled. “Oh, Sweetie… Sometimes things change. You changed, after all. Maybe I need to find some way to grow up as well. When a goal is reached, a new goal must be made…” She paused. “…Or maybe you’re supposed to be satisfied with where you are...?”

“I don’t know,” Sweetie said. “All I know is I’ll be sad if you aren’t here, doing what you’ve always done.”

“Hmm…” Rarity said, hoof to her chin. “I’m at a crossroads in life… Ah, how poetic.”

“…You feel the need to burst into song?”

“Oh goodness me, no, I was just reminded of a poem I read a while ago by the poetic legend, Rippling Frost. A crossroads…” She imagined the two roads splitting, one side leading to adventure and beauty, the other leading to a life of fashion and business.

Both sides were very tantalizing.

~~~

Twilight stared at the Mirror Portal the following morning, face blank. Spike stood next to her, drinking his tea.

“Spike, should I stop?”

Spike blinked. “What?”

“Should I stop exploring? Should I return to my duties as a princess and fulfill them in every way I can? Should I ignore the call to learn everything I can? Should I sit down and stay put or go out and risk it?”

Spike shrugged. “I really don’t know. I don’t mind staying here and doing the princess work, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I know you don’t mind, it’s…” She took a breath. “It’s more about what the right decision is. I want to go out there and explore, and I’m coming up with so many reasons why I should. But the more I go, the more I’ll have to neglect public appearances, celebrations, friendship consultations…”

“Well, by going out there you help other people in faraway places that don’t know of the magic of friendship,” Spike said.

“That’s true…” Twilight said. “But… But… But it still feels wrong, somehow.” She began to rock her head side to side, thinking.
Spike took a step back – he knew what was coming.

Twilight took in a deep breath and began to *sing*.

“*I’m a princess, leader of my kind*

*But now I’m asked to leave them behind*

*For the gateway before me has shown*

*That the worlds outside are so alone”*

She took a calm breath, spreading her wings.

“*Out there in the beyond there is fire*

*Ponies stuck in life’s deep mire*

*Great wonders to discover for all*

*True friends who lie just beyond this wall*

*Waiting to be found…”*

She flew into the air, spinning in a slow corkscrew fashion.

“*I hear the cosmos calling my name!*

*Demanding that I come forth to them!*

*I hear the cosmos calling my name!*

*Singing with a melodious hymn!”*

She teleported to the room with the map, and her cutie mark suddenly appeared on it over her castle.

“*I am called*

*I am sung*

*I am brought*

*I am seen*

*I am taught*

*I am lured*

*I am the one*

*My destiny is to leave this place*

*My calling to find what lies beyond*

*But my soul that lies beyond this face*

*Belongs to my friends and to our bond*”
She teleported back to the Mirror Portal, placing a hoof on the rim, breathing hard.

“Oh what does this mean, oh Harmony

My destiny seems split in two; three

Called to beyond I cannot resist

But what would happen if I desist?”

She took a step back – and heard hoofsteps behind her. Some ponies were returning. She didn’t know who.

“I hear the cosmos calling my name!

Demanding I lead friendship to them!

I hear the cosmos calling my name!

Singing with the power of all!

I hear the cosmos calling my name!

Singing the song…

Singing the song of us…

Trapped in this sphere of our own making…”

She landed, took a breath, and turned to see who had come back.

Pinkie and Rarity stood there, smiling at Twilight warmly.

Twilight smiled. “So… No Fluttershy or Rainbow Dash?”

“No that I see,” Rarity said. “Sorry dear. I guess it just wasn’t for them.”

“That’s fine,” Twilight said. “We all have our hopes and dreams… Not all of us can align on one goal. Nor should we.” She turned to the Mirror Portal. “But I have to go. If I don’t… I don’t know. I’m called. I know I’m called. There’s something out there I need to do. I don’t know if you have to be with me to do it, but I would like it if you joined me.”

“We’ll be with you until the end,” Rarity said.

“Even those of us who aren’t here!” Pinkie said. “You’re our friend Twilight.”

Twilight nodded. “So… Why did you two decide to come back?”

Pinkie giggled. “I felt like I needed to, in the end. Ponyville can go without a few parties. Plus, this way I get to make so many more friends! It’s great!”

Twilight smiled. “Yeah. I felt called as well. Rarity?”

“I… Well I realized my business is able to operate without me. Not a particularly pleasant realization, but I just made it official. Sweetie and the CMC are out looking for somepony to run the boutique while I’m gone. I’m still the manager, but no longer do I need to stand at the counter all day. There’s… Not all that much traffic in Ponyville anymore, admittedly.”
Twilight smiled. “I’m glad you came. Well… Where do you girls want to go?”

“I don’t know…” Rarity said. “I do believe somewhere new. What do we know about the places we haven’t been yet?”

Twilight shrugged. “Not much, besides what’s safe and what’s not. We could probably look into a few of them with a spell though…”

Pinkie grinned. “Yeah! Let’s do that!”

Twilight turned to the Mirror Portal and pulled a lever.

~~~

Rainbow Dash stood in front of the doors of Twilight’s castle, staring. Her expression was blank.

Fluttershy walked up to her, concerned. “…Why aren’t you going in?”

 “…I don’t know if I want to,” Rainbow Dash admitted.

Fluttershy gasped. “You? Not sure if you want adventure and awesomeness? What happened?”

“I’d have to stop being a Wonderbolt. I’m not sure I want that, even if it is temporary. I’m pretty sure I don’t want that. But… Behind this door, there’s the Mirror, and there’s so many new things…”

Fluttershy nodded. “I know…”

“Wait, why are you here? I figured for sure you’d stay away! You’re, like, the pony among us who likes adventure the least! Plus, your animals!”

Fluttershy shook her head. “It’s not that simple… My animals can all take care of themselves, especially with the Sanctuary there. And even if I may not like the danger… We do help ponies. We saved the demons and redeemed their Luna. We helped people in Termina. Then there was that colony of mushroom people we saved from a forest fire. We do great good out there.”

“That’s true,” Rainbow Dash said. Then she laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“Look at us, the ponies you’d think wouldn’t hesitate to go on an adventure or avoid it, the ones having the most difficulty.”

“Yeah…” Fluttershy said, staring at the doors alongside Rainbow Dash.

“…Are either of us going to go in?”

“I don’t know.”

“Same.”

“You should go in,” Fluttershy said. “You’re the awesome pony who could save everyone with your amazing tricks and acrobatic stunts. You’re built for danger.”

“…You should stay. You have the animals to take care of and you aren’t the best at handling it when it gets tough.”
They were silent.

Fluttershy shook her head. “I can handle it.”

“Yeah. And I’m already doing what I want with my life.”

The two stared at each other for a moment. Then they burst out into laughter.

“And here we are!” Rainbow Dash said. “Failing miserably to convince the other to do what we think they should do!”

Fluttershy nodded. “The more we argue, the less they want to do what we say!” She shook her head. “...That was a confusing sentence.”

“That it was,” Rainbow Dash said, furrowing her brow. “I’m Loyalty though… Leaving you would be against that.”

“But you’d be Loyal to your team, to the Wonderbolts,” Fluttershy said. “They do need you, regardless how much as they may say otherwise. It’s the same with my Kindness – do I be Kind to my animals, or to the many people and ponies who need it elsewhere?”

“Can’t do everything,” Rainbow Dash said.

“Definitely not,” Fluttershy chuckled.

There was silence.

Suddenly, Fluttershy stood up. “I’m going in.”

“...Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“What made you decide?”

“I realized that, if I devoted myself to my animals, that would be a step back for me. I’d be shying away from those who need kindness rather than those who just want it.”

Rainbow Dash nodded. “I… See.”

“You coming?”

Rainbow Dash looked at Fluttershy – her eyes, her outstretched hoof, her soft smile.

She put out her hoof.

She retracted it and shook her head. “I… I can’t.”

Fluttershy nodded in understanding. “It’s okay Rainbow. It’s not an easy decision. You are where you want to be in life – that’s not something many ponies can say about themselves. You should be happy about it.”

“I feel like I’m betraying you.”

“You’re not,” Fluttershy assured her. “Nopony has to share their interests with all their friends. If neither of us went in there, it would still be okay. We all need to make decisions in the moment.”
Rainbow Dash nodded. Fluttershy grabbed her and pulled her into a hug. “See you later, Rainbow Dash.”

Rainbow Dash wiped some tears out of her eyes. “You too, Fluttershy.”

They completed their goodbyes. Fluttershy waved as Rainbow Dash flew back to the Wonderbolt Academy. Fluttershy took a breath, turned, and walked into the castle. She entered the room where Twilight, Pinkie, and Rarity were, standing in front of the Mirror Portal.

“Rarity?” Fluttershy said. “You came!”

“That I did. And I see you did too. Should we expect anypony else?”

Fluttershy shook her head. “No. Rainbow Dash isn’t coming.”

Twilight nodded sadly. “Well, that is her choice. She’s happy where she is. Perhaps in a few months we’ll all realize she was the smart one.”

“I doubt it,” Pinkie said. “The can of worms is open! There’s no closing it now!”

“So…” Twilight said, looking at her three friends. “This is our team?”

Fluttershy glanced around. The excitable Pinkie Pie, the fabulous Rarity, the regal Twilight…

Four friends, going on a trip, a mission, as friends to seek out interesting people and to bring aspects of Harmony wherever they could.

“Yeah,” Fluttershy said. “This is everyone.”

“Oh no it isn’t!”

The four ponies looked to the doorway to see Starlight Glimmer standing there, a smirk on her face. “It’s about time you girls let me in on one of these mysterious adventures, considering I had to deal with the aftermath of one already.”

Twilight laughed. “Sure, Starlight. Come on in. You don’t have anything else to do today, do you?”

“Not at all! I get bored a lot in this castle.”

Fluttershy smiled. “Well, this will be perfect for you.”

Starlight winked. “You betcha! So, Twilight, where we going today?”

Twilight shrugged. “My spell only told me it was tropical and humid. I’m hoping for a beach instead of another jungle.”

“I’d like to meet a squid,” Fluttershy said suddenly.

Everypony chuckled jovially. “Me too!” Pinkie shouted.

Twilight set the Mirror Portal to the new location. “Let’s go then!” At that point, her cutie mark glowed, telling her that she had just solved the friendship problem she’d been called to in the middle of her song. She grinned – the tree of Harmony was giving them its blessing. If that wasn’t a tangible feeling of being on the right path for her destiny, she didn’t know what was.

The five mares bounded through the portal, ready to have a good time.
Spike finished his tea. He wondered if Rainbow Dash was going to be up for some Ogres and Oubliettes while the others were gone sometime later.
In a world not far removed from Equestria, the sun shone down on the landscape, blanketing the lush greenery with a slight azure tint. The sky was a simple blue, adorned with a small gathering of wispy clouds and a filament of blue-purple magic coursing through the heavens from north to southwest, shifting with an aurora effect. The aurora’s soft glow was easily trumped by the intense light of the sun, but magical reflections would occasionally flash through the shadows of large trees, bringing light to dark locations. The land itself was covered in lush grass and tall evergreen trees, the edge of a mountain forest. A single dirt road ran through the landscape, meandering around the landscape at a mostly constant elevation. It deviated from its level course only to circumvent a small stone obelisk covered in violet glowing runes.

The Mirror Portal connected to a loose rock a fair ways from the mysterious obelisk. Five ponies stepped into the new world, ready for anything the world might throw at them.

“Another day, another world,” Starlight said, looking around with a smile on her face. She crossed her eyes to look at her horn – it was buzzing slightly. “There’s a lot of magic here.”

“No kidding…” Twilight said, looking at her own horn with concern. “It’ll be really easy to channel too much energy here…”

Starlight cast a simple light spell and instead conjured a ball of magic with the light intensity of the sun. She quickly dispelled it but she had already blinded everypony.

“Starlight!” Rarity wailed. “What did you do!?"

“Too much magic,” Starlight muttered, rubbing her eyes. “Our sight should come back in a few seconds. Ow…”

Pinkie fell over. “Oof. It’s hard to bounce around when you can’t see.”

“Then stop bouncing around,” Fluttershy suggested.

“Silly Fluttershy! One does not simply stop bouncing around!” She fell over again. “Oof.”

Starlight squinted – she could make out shapes again. Rarity let out a sigh of relief. “Oh, good, grass. I never thought I’d be so happy to see grass.”

“Don’t go overboard and eat the strange grass,” Twilight warned.

“Already did!” Pinkie said, “It’s tasty!”

Twilight rolled her eyes. “Well… Still not easy to see, but we’re at the edge of a forest, evergreen. The air is very open and there’s an oversaturation of magic here. I don’t know if that’s just the way this world is or if we’re in a special location…”

“The sun’s blue,” Starlight said.

Twilight raised an eyebrow. “Starlight, that’s just your eyes—“

“The sun’s blue,” Starlight insisted, holding out her hoof and examining it. “I’m not seeing a normal pink tint here. I’m seeing a purple. You’re a much deeper purple than usual. And Pinkie’s violet.”
Twilight blinked. “…A blue sun… That doesn’t make any sense! Stars aren’t actually blue that’s just the name we give them! All stars emit colors across the entire spectrum! Even if there were a spike in blue it wouldn’t create this drastic a difference!”

“Other universe,” Rarity offered. “Maybe the stars here aren’t the same as stars in our world.”

“Isn’t our sun unusual anyway?” Starlight pointed out. “I mean, it’s smaller than all the others and Celestia controls it. Why should we expect every sun except our own to act like Earth’s?”

Twilight shrugged. “Good point. Maybe it’s just the saturation of magic that’s making it blue, I don’t know. But… it is definitely blue.” She poked the grass. “Makes the green things look bizarre.”

“I think it makes them taste better!” Pinkie cheered.

Starlight chuckled. “Your opinion has been noted.”

“Yay!”

Twilight pointed at the obelisk. “That looks interesting.”

Starlight squinted at the runic construct. It was composed of a smooth, dark stone and was twice her height. The violet runes didn’t care about the blue light blanketing over them, popping out as if they didn’t belong. She briefly wondered if their color was some kind of optical illusion, given how they seemed to shift as her eyes darted around the runic edges. There was also a much higher concentration of magic around the stone, extending up to the edge of the road.

“Looks like they built around its magic bubble,” Starlight said.

“I wonder why…” Twilight said, flying closer to the obelisk, careful not to enter its bubble. She examined the grass around it, noticing hundreds of tiny flowers growing in between the blades that weren’t in other patches of greenery.

“It makes flowers grow?” Fluttershy wondered aloud.

“Could be a side effect of the magic it’s producing,” Twilight said. “I can tell it’s something relating to life – a pure essence of some kind. It might just literally be producing a ‘flower’ spell pattern that’s so strong the area around it is sympathizing.”

“Uh… what?” Fluttershy asked.

“It’s making the area around it want to be flowers,” Twilight said. “It’s extremely strong and concentrated, more so than most magics in our world, and it seems to be very permanent.”

“Let’s take it home and study it,” Starlight said.

Rarity blinked. “Starlight, I don’t think it’s ours.”

“Nopony’s been around here for a long time. This road is unkempt and I don’t see any sign of habitation whatsoever. Nopony owns this thing. We could just take it and learn how to use it.”

Twilight furrowed her brow. “It would fit through the mirror portal… But I don’t know, it’s pretty powerful. Probably dangerous. I certainly don’t want my insides thinking they have to be flowers.”

Fluttershy shook her head. “I don’t think we should mess with it.”

“Oh come on Fluttershy!” Starlight said. “Where’s your sense of discovery? Look, it’ll be fine,
watch.” She lit her horn and surrounded the obelisk in her telekinesis, careful not to channel too much energy. She tried to lift it up, but found it rooted firmly to the ground. “Well this thing doesn’t want to move…”

“Stop!” Fluttershy called. “You could be defiling a grave for all we know!”

Starlight was about to retort when the obelisk’s runes flashed brighter for a moment. A dozen purple lights shot out of the obelisk and gathered together on top of the monument, forming a violet wireframe. The resulting being was essentially a skeleton of lights with four legs, a tail, and a head without any defining features. Flowers popped into existence all around it.

Starlight felt the magical bubble around the obelisk extend to encompass them. Her stomach did a flip-flop, a sure sign of it wanting to become a flower but not being able to comply. She didn’t let this deter her, however. She took advantage of the surge of magic to fire a laser at the beast. She made direct contact, but the power of her blast caused so much knockback she went flying into a nearby tree. The creature of violet light disintegrated into dozens of light shards, only to reform almost instantly.

Fluttershy squealed, running away. The creature tried to pursue her but was hit by a lesser laser from Rarity. It charged Rarity, only for Twilight to grab the creature in her telekinesis, holding it firm. “Stop it…”

The beast did not stop it. It unraveled itself, worming out of Twilight’s telekinesis in multiple parts, coming together behind her. It lunged for her neck with reckless abandon, crashing into a hasty magic shield with enough force to flatten itself. Any normal creature would have broken all its bones, but luckily for this beast it didn’t have any bones. It reformed once again, ready to envelop Twilight in a snare of violet light.

A giant sword flew through the air, driving itself into the best’s framework. The beast shattered, trying to reform, but one of its strands was now stuck on the sword’s blade, struggling.

“Ah suggest you all get out of the circle like the yellow one did!” a familiar voice yelled. “The golem won’t stay down for long!”

Rarity didn’t need to be told twice – she ran first, followed closely by Pinkie. Twilight took a moment to think about what she’d just heard but quickly decided now was not the time for deep thinking.

Starlight took up the rear after recovering from her daze, glancing behind her to see the violet strand of the beast known as a golem free itself from the blade. It met with its brethren, forming into the full beast once more. It charged Starlight at full speed, managing to look ravenous despite not having a face.

Starlight raised a shield, easily smashing it. She leaped out of the circle just as it reformed, jumping after her – disintegrating into flowery dust the moment it tried to leave.

“Huh,” Starlight said. “…That was interesting.”

“It tried to kill us!” Rarity wailed. “How is that interesting!?”

“Have you ever seen anything like that? A creature made of strands of light?”

“Girls, we can talk about this later,” Twilight said. “We have somepony to thank.” She turned to their savior, using her telekinesis to grab the sword inside the magic circle and giving it back. The orange mare grabbed the sword with her hoof and put it on her back alongside another sword of
similar construction. The mare looked exactly like the Applejack they knew, with only one major
difference besides the swords.

She had two antlers.

The Applejack blinked. “…What’re you staring at?”

“She has antlers,” Pinkie said, eyes wide.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Twilight cleared her throat. “We’re from really far away – another world in fact. One where the sun
isn’t blue, where there aren’t golem-creatures made of light, and there aren’t deer-ponies.”

The Applejack raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Really!” Pinkie said. “We came through that shimmering portal in that rock right over there.”

“…Ah guess there is somethin’ there…” She walked over to it to investigate, sticking her head in.
She pulled it out. “That… was a lot of crystal.”

“It’s my castle,” Twilight said. “A gift from the Tree of Harmony – do you have a Tree of Harmony
here?”

“Ah have no idea,” she said. “Doesn’t ring a bell at least.”

Twilight nodded. “Well, I’m Princess Twilight Sparkle, this is Rarity, Starlight, Fluttershy, and
Pinkie.”

“Your name sounds familiar…”

Twilight smirked. “There’s probably a version of me in this world with an identical or at least similar
name.”

“There ain’t no way. Ponies don’t just have duplicates.”

“Your name is Applejack,” Starlight said.

“…How’d you know that?”

“We’ve met several versions of you. Granted, none of them are deer, but you still look like them.”

Applejack shrugged. “Ah guess that’s interestin’.”

“It really is!” Twilight squeed. “The differences between alternate versions of the same pony are
always fascinating! I happen to know another me who’s a great scientist and another who’s a
complete jerk!”

Applejack raised her eyebrow. “So, okay, you’re all from another world. Ah’ll accept that. Why in
Lai did you come here and get attacked by a golem?”

“Exploring!” Twilight answered. “We’re here to explore, make friends, and help ponies where we
We need a better mission statement,” Starlight said.

“It is just a work in progress,” Fluttershy added.

Rarity pursed her lips. “I still think it should be ‘to discover and bestow beauty’.”

“Too cheesy,” Pinkie said. “What we need is a goal set around cheese itself!”

Starlight facehooved. “Pinkie…”

Applejack looked between all of them. “This is perhaps the stupidest argument topic I’ve ever heard.”

Twilight blushed sheepishly. “Riiiiight… Sorry about that, we’re still working out the kinks to this. We’ve only been doing this a month or two.”

“It shows.”

Starlight coughed. “Well, why don’t you tell us about your world? What’s it like here? What do the ponies do?”

Applejack looked to the blue sun and grimaced. “The world is in darkness and despair. Our lives are defined by struggle that goes unnoticed by the evil Queen Luna, ruler of the ‘civilized’ world. She cares not for our struggles and stamps out any town that complains with her impressive army. My world is a place of slaughter – slaughter of my friends and family, and slaughter of the armies that assault us. It is my life’s quest to dethrone the Queen and bring in a new era of peace and harmony to our land.”

The group of five ponies stared at her blankly.

“Y’all are free to go running back to your home now, pretend like you never saw this place.”

Twilight shook her head. “We won’t do that. If there is an evil Queen hurting your world… We can help stop her.”

Pinkie nodded in agreement. “You betcha! We’re out here to be adventuring heroes! Basically what you are, but on a larger scale!”

Applejack shook her head. “All of those who have stood by my side have fallen. Ah wouldn’t dare let you risk your lives for something you don’t know.”

Pinkie pulled a giant hammer out of nowhere. “I’m pretty sure we can take care of ourselves.”

“And we can leave at any time,” Twilight said. “This world is close enough to ours that I can just open a portal under my own power.”

“And, among other things, the Tree of Harmony sent us here,” Rarity said. “Apparently it saw into this world and deemed there was a friendship problem that needed fixing.”

Applejack raised an eyebrow. “Friendship problem?”

Starlight shrugged. “It’s a term we use to describe our missions. The Tree of Harmony wants ponies to get along. For all we know it could mean deposing your queen and restructuring your society with harmony in mind. That’s what happened when I was the ‘evil queen’ after all.”
Applejack raised an eyebrow. “Come again?”

Starlight smiled nervously. “I brainwashed a town. They stopped me.”

“How in Lai can you let her travel with you?” Applejack asked Twilight.

Twilight smiled brightly. “She’s proven herself time and time again to be reformed. That thing with the town was deep in the past.”

“Not somethin’ Ah would do. Ah also wouldn’t talk about my dark past in the open like that, it’d give ponies the wrong idea.”

Starlight blinked. “You are probably right about that.”

Applejack sighed. “Well, it looks like Ah’m not goin’ to be able to get rid of you, so looks like you’re with me for a while.”

“What’s the plan?” Pinkie asked.

“There’s a town a couple miles to the north called Peri. There’s a sage there Ah’m going to meet who will give me the location of the Spectacularium now that Ah’ve accomplished all the tasks of purification.”

“…The Spectacularium?” Fluttershy asked.

“You really aren’t from ‘round here… It’s an ancient temple made of crystal that made many distinct prophecies in the deep past, all but a few of which have come true. It is the holder of all answers, and it will tell me the secret to defeating the Queen.”

“That sounds amazing,” Twilight said. “Do you think it’d answer our questions as well?”

“Maybe? Ah really don’t care, so long as it can tell me what Ah need to know.” She turned around. “Enough dilly-dallying. Ah’m ready to go. You can come or not.” She started walking without another word.

“She seems… nice,” Starlight said a few seconds later.

“She’s been through a lot,” Fluttershy said. “We should try to be understanding.”

Twilight nodded in agreement, setting off after Applejack without another word. They followed the winding path through the trees, leaving the obelisk and its violet lights behind, returning once again to a world shrouded in blue.

About a minute later Starlight felt the excess magic drop away to levels that were still high, but no longer absurd. “What just happened?”

“We just left the range of the Sigma Runes,” Applejack said. “There is a giant runic artifact inside that mountain that fills this entire area with power.”

“What exactly are these runic artifacts?”

“Ah dunno, they’ve just always existed, probably built in ancient times by somepony long forgotten. They shape the very landscape on which we walk. You’ll see what I mean when we enter the range of the Crusted Runes.”

“How long will it take us to get there?” Rarity asked.
“Right now,” Applejack said. They turned a bend in the path and the scenery abruptly changed. The mountainous forest gave way to a flattened desert. The change was so abrupt it looked like the mountains had chunks sliced off of them at the edge of the desert.

Fluttershy stuck a hoof into the desert. “There’s no moisture in the air at all over here…”

“Hope you girls can survive the heat, because we’ve got to walk through this area for the next hour or so.”

Starlight used her magic to summon bottles of water. “Ready.”

“Neat trick. Hope it works for you.”

“It will.”

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Starlight chugged her tenth bottle. “How… How is it so dry…” She created another one and handed it to Fluttershy, who splashed it in her face.

Twilight gasped. “I think… The spell is one of dryness… So it’s drying us from the inside out…”

“Is drinking water even helping!?” Rarity wailed, downing another bottle.

“No,” Applejack said, still walking strong. “You just have to deal with the heat until it’s over.”

Twilight took a break from her drinking. “How are you okay?”

“I’m a deer. We are one with the environment. I’m more curious as to how Pinkie over there is just fine.”

Pinkie gasped like a fish. “I’m still dry as a bone!”

“And yet you were bouncing around like a ping-pong ball just a few minutes earlier. That is not a sign of dehydration.”

“And check,” Rarity said.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing big. It’s just that every adventure, a few things always happen. Chief among them is somepony questioning Pinkie. Word of advice: it never works, stop trying to understand her. …Stars, I wish I could tell that to everypony who’s about to ask.”

Pinkie pouted. “But Rarity, it’s fun when they’re baffled!”

“That may be true but it does get old for some of us after a while.”

Applejack shook her head. “You five make no sense collectively.”

Starlight doused her head in water. “Yeah, that’s not news to us.”

“How much longer until Peri…?” Rarity asked.

Applejack grunted. “Closer than last time you asked.”

“That doesn’t tell me anything!”
“Armonia’s will, you’re whiny.”

“This is not whining, Applejack, this is complaining.”

“You don’t want her to start whining,” Fluttershy warned.

Starlight blinked. “Wait, we don’t?”

“Definitely not!” Twilight blurted, laughing nervously while tossing more water into her face. The water stayed on her face instead of evaporating quickly. “…Huh?”

“We left the Crusted circle,” Applejack said. “You don’t have to keep dousing yourself in water.”

“Drat,” Rarity said, tugging at her mane. “This is going to be a nightmare to curl again… Extreme humidity changes are no good for any mane.”

Applejack shot her a look. “How can you care about your looks at a time like this?”

“It’s called being dignified.”

“Dignified ponies are pompous halfwits who serve the Queen.”

“Did you just call me a halfwit!?”

“That’s what you take issue with in that sentence?”

“I’ll have you know I’m a qualified seamstress who is very successful!”

“I bet you actually do serve some evil Queen!”

“I’ll have you know that our Luna is not only a very good and kindhearted mare, but she also is a Princess, not a Queen, and rules alongside her sister Celestia as equals!”

Applejack took a step back. “…Your world makes no sense.”

“How so?”

“There is no way the Sun and Moon could live in harmony. There must be a lie somewhere.”

“There’s no lie,” Twilight said. “I’m the personal student of Celestia and a good friend of Luna’s, in our world at least. They had a falling out a while back but they’ve learned a lot since then.”

Applejack shook her head. “There’s something fundamentally wrong with your world.”

“Actually it seems to be one of the normal ones,” Twilight said. “Most of the worlds we find are similar to ours in one way or another. Yours is one of the exceptions.”

“More reason for me never to leave this world,” Applejack muttered. “We’re entering the grasp of the Slanted Runes.”

“The wha-“ the ponies suddenly walked into a horrendous gust of wind, blasting them from the side, threatening to knock them over. They could no longer hear each other, but they saw Applejack point further down the path towards a town. As they approached, the winds died down and they could make out the simple stone houses. There were perhaps a few hundred inhabitants and a dozen or so fields that grew numerous kinds of produce. Ponies of many kinds walked around – alongside the standard three races, Starlight could also make out some deer and even a seapony poking its head out.
of a river. In the center of town was presumably the obelisk of the Slanted Runes, a stone pillar two stories tall with light blue-green runes on it. It was most likely responsible for the giant whirlwinds around the town.

Starlight also noticed something odd as she walked in – there were a couple hybrid races. She saw a deer with wings fly across the sky and a pony with two antlers and a horn. “…Hybrids?”

“Yeah?” Applejack said, eyebrow raised. “Isn’t your friend a unisus?”

Twilight blinked. “I guess I would look like one… I’m called an alicorn where I come from. And I wasn’t a hybrid… I was made.”

“You aren’t an alicorn here. Alicorns also need the antlers and fins to be real. So maybe get off your high horse, hmm?”

Twilight was taken aback. “I am no-“

“Take it easy, Twilight,” Rarity said.

Applejack kept walking.

Fluttershy looked around at the inhabitants of Peri. Most of them had smiles on their faces, going about their lives with a grin. It was a lot like Ponyville, if a little smaller. “…These ponies look happy to me.”

Applejack grunted. “Don’t let this place fool you. They’re just unaware of the Queen’s horrors. They’re protected by the wind.” She pointed. “Come, the sage’s this way.”

Fluttershy held up a hoof. “I think I’ll stay out here and talk with the locals, if you don’t mind.”

“Ah really don’t care.”

“Don’t get lost,” Twilight told Fluttershy.

“Don’t worry Twilight, I know how to take care of myself.” She trotted off to talk to the seapony. They struck up a conversation quickly and seemed to be enjoying each other’s company, but Starlight soon lost sight of them as her group entered a round house with no windows.

In the center of the room was a crystal ball. Behind it, a pony sat, dressed in robes that covered every part of her except the mouth. She spoke with a dry, level voice that was nonetheless young. “Why did you bring others here?”

“They won’t leave me alone. And Ah’ve done all you asked me to do, so Ah’m a little low on patience. You said you can show me the Spectacularium.”

“That I can. Are you sure you wish your new companions to know?”

“Ah really don’t care. Ah’m headin’ there the moment you tell me and there’s nothin’ anypony can do to stop me.”

The sage nodded slowly. “That much is true. You’ll be glad to know they aren’t allied with the Queen, at the least.”

Applejack raised an eyebrow. “It’s not like you to give away free information.”

“It’s not every day prophecies can be challenged.”
“What do you mean?”

The sage paused. “I mean that since the five entered the world, all certainty in prophecies has vanished.”

Applejack’s eye twitched, turning to Twilight. “What did you do?”

“N-nothing!” Twilight stammered.

“She speaks the truth,” the sage said. “It is merely the fact that the prophecies did not take into account the possibility of other worlds existing.”

Applejack glared. “Ah’m still goin’ to be the one to dethrone the Queen, right?”

“At this point nothing is certain, though it seems likely,” the sage answered.

“Then let’s get this over with and tell me already. Ah’m tired of runnin’ your errands.”

The sage nodded, glancing at Pinkie for a moment before touching the crystal ball with her hoof. With her other hoof she took off her hood, revealing her face. Everypony gasped – not because she looked exactly like Pinkie except with straight hair, because that wouldn’t have been all that unexpected. It was because of her eyes – they glowed like moons in the night, their brilliant blue color illuminating the room. There were no whites to the eyes, only the giant blue voids with a pupil of ever shifting shapes. The black dot became a square, an octagon, five circles, a star… Shifting around all sides of the glowing globe, independent of the other eye. The crystal ball glowed a soft pink, producing a magical effect around Applejack. A small gilded key floated out of her satchet and into the sage’s extended hoof, the final task complete when it touched her hoof.

The crystal ball flashed, showing an image of a pointed dome made entirely of crystal similar to that of Twilight’s Castle. Around it were six tall runic obelisks in six familiar colors. The color scheme of the Elements of Harmony sure was everywhere.

“That doesn’t tell me where it is,” Applejack said.

“Look at the scenery.”

Applejack did. “…There’s no sunlight…”

“Underground,” Rarity said. “There’s no plants around at all.”

“That still doesn’t tell me where underground,” Applejack said.

The sage and Pinkie facehooved.

“Ah’m not an idiot…”

“Yes you are,” the sage said. “I sent you on the quest to the Dragon Tunnels last to get that key. Well it just so happens that this key can open a door in the Dragon Tunnels to the Spectacularium now that I’ve given it my enchantments.” She handed Applejack back the key.

“Which door is it?”

“You can figure that out on your own.”

Pinkie rolled her eyes. “The really, really big red one.”
The sage looked at Pinkie. “You are much more forthcoming with information.”

“Eh, looks like I don’t get the specifics you do. Must be fun, being able to see everything you want.”

“It does allow me to guide the path of the world.”

Applejack snorted. “Give me a break. You just wanted me to gather fancy artifacts for you.”

“I never claimed to be altruistic.”

“You should have sent me for just the key and gotten me to the Spectacularium sooner. The longer the Queen is in position the more suffering occurs!”

The sage shook her head and closed her eyes – plunging the room into near-darkness. “You are so headstrong… Whatever. I’m done here. Go fulfill your destiny, if it still holds merit.” She put her robes back on and walked out. “You will not see me again.”

Applejack grunted. “Ah still have more questions!” She rushed outside – but the sage was gone. “…How in?”

“Same way I can do this,” Pinkie said, suddenly appearing in a faraway bush. “There’s tricks we Pinkies have.”

“…What kind of pony was she?” Starlight asked.


“What do those eyes do, exactly?”

“Dunno. Ah just know Oculi tend to know things. That one in particular.” She started marching off.

“Uh… Applejack?” Rarity called. “Where are you-“

“Going back to the mountains.”

“But night is starting to fall…”

“Don’t care. If you need sleep, stay.”

Twilight shook her head. “We don’t have to walk all the way back. Now that I know where we are, I can teleport us back. It’s as simple as remembering where we were. Just need to find Fluttershy first…”

The obelisk of Slanted Runes flashed for a moment, summoning a wireframe blue-green creature that stood like an ape with a sword. Twilight, Starlight, and Rarity tensed.

Applejack held up a hoof. “This golem protects the town. Don’t fear it. Be afraid of whatever it detects coming.”

“What could have set it on edge?” Rarity asked.

Applejack sighed. “Probably the army…”

“The army!?"

“ATTENTION PERI!” A male voice boomed from the edge of town. “I AM COLONEL
TURNER. IF YOU ARE AWARE OF IT OR NOT, YOU ARE HOUSING THE FUGITIVE KNOWN AS APPLEJACK, WANTED FOR TERRORISM, MURDER, INSURRECTION, AND TREACHERY. WE REQUEST THAT YOU GIVE HER OVER TO US. WE WILL COMPENSATE YOU HANDSOMELY IF YOU DO.”

“No they won’t,” Applejack muttered, readying both her swords. “This is going to get ugly.”

Twilight glanced around at the many townsponies turning in their direction with angry looks in their eyes. “Applejack, you seriously aren’t thinking of…”

“They’re going to try to turn me in. Ah can’t stop now.”

“Ah, Applejack, did you get some companions with conscience?” The voice of Sunset Shimmer said. Everypony turned to see a mare on top of a nearby building – she had a horn, antlers, and a tail that ended in a mouth with many sharp teeth. “Perhaps you should listen to them.”

Applejack grit her teeth. “Sunset Shimmer. This is the last time you get to destroy the livelihood of my ponies.”

“You’re the one destroying their livelihood Applejack!” Sunset spat. “All you can see is your stupid quest!”

“You’re the one with the army around this town, ready to attack despite the wind and the guardian golem!”

“The golem’s smart enough to realize you are the threat,” Sunset said. “Otherwise it would have attacked me by now.”

“It hasn’t attacked me has it?”

Sunset’s tail snapped hungrily. “It’s just waiting.” She lit her horn, summoning a giant fireball between her antlers. The antlers glowed slightly, and the fire was sent into the ground, transforming the grass around Applejack into fiery snake tendrils. Applejack’s own antlers sparkled and she drove her hooves into the ground, turning all the grass to dust. She whirled around, deflecting the golem’s blade with her own two weapons, barely able to resist the tall construct’s stature.

Sunset leaped towards Applejack, tail ready to remove the hero’s head from her body.

Starlight cast a teleport spell forcing her, Twilight, Rarity, Pinkie, and Applejack back to the Mirror Portal.

Applejack put her swords away wordlessly. “Thank you. That was significantly less bloody than usual. Though Ah would have liked to end that Sunset’s plans then and there.”

Starlight shook her head. “How can you keep going through all this? Why haven’t you broken?”

“Because Ah can’t.”

Twilight suddenly screamed. “FLUTTERSHY! WE LEFT FLUTTERSHY!”

Starlight sighed. “I know, but we had to get out-“

“Wait. You knew you were leaving her behind!? And you left her anyway!? What if she gets hurt!? I’m going back!”

“Don’t,” Applejack said. “They probably haven’t killed her. They’re fans of capturin’ and using
them as leverage later. You’ll just get yourself captured because they’ll manipulate her with you. Our best bet is to use the Spectacularium.”

Twilight growled. “I bet Pinkie, Starlight, and I can-“

“Do you want to take your chances with an opponent you don’t know? Sunset is brutal, dangerous, and relentless.”

“The same could be said about you,” Starlight muttered.

“I have to be. She just serves the Queen.”

Twilight shook her head. “Fine. We do it your way, Applejack. This Spectacularium better have some good answers.”

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Fluttershy was talking with the seapony – Germanium – when the announcement went off. She froze, realizing that the town was about to be under siege.

“Oh no…”

Germanium narrowed his eyes. “You said you were with an Applejack…”

“Yes, I mean, yeah, it’s probably her, but I don’t know…” She bit her lip. “Remember what we talked about?”

“Yeah?”

“She’s the reason why. I have to stop this before something goes wrong…” She saw her friends out in the open… Fighting a version of Sunset with far too many horns and the guardian golem of the town. Starlight teleported them away before Fluttershy could do anything.

Fluttershy gulped. This couldn’t be good.

Sunset looked at the guardian golem and nodded in respect. Then she stamped her hoof on the ground in rage and screamed. “ALL RIGHT! Is there ANYPONY here who talked to APPLEJACK or ANY OF HER NEW COMPANIONS!?”

Germanium raised a hoof. Fluttershy stared at him, a look of betrayal on her face. “Germanium…”

“Sorry, Fluttershy. You seem nice. Just tell her what you told me and you should be fine.”

Fluttershy wanted to say something back, but Sunset had already walked over. “Yes, citizen?”

“This pegasus came into town with that group.”

Sunset turned to Fluttershy, tail snapping like a barely restrained guard dog. “Is that so?”

“Y-yes.”

Sunset conjured some hoofcuffs around Fluttershy’s legs. Sunset teleported the two of them away, placing them in a large tent lined with a bedroll, numerous bladed weapons, and a handful of books. “So, pegasus. Why were you associating with a well-known terrorist?”

“You’re not going to believe me, but I’ll tell you anyway. We’re visitors from another world and
Applejack was the first pony we met.”

“You’re right, I don’t believe you.” She lit her horn.

 “…There wouldn’t be a chance that you’re preparing a truth-detecting spell, is there?”

“No. It’s a torture spell. It will get you to tell me whatever you know.”

“H-how about we just use the truth-detecting spell!?”

“…Why? You could have some way to trick it. It’s not very reliable. You’re just afraid of pain.”

Fluttershy nodded vigorously. “Y-yes. And I know I can’t give you the answers you want…”

Sunset growled. “I want to know where Applejack is going. Tell me that.”

“The Spectacularium. I don’t know where it is, I wasn’t in the tent when they talked to the sage.”

Sunset stepped back. “…She knows where it is now?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t talk to them after they talked to the sage. You came before that.”

“So acting quickly was a bad thing?!”

“You had no way to know,” Fluttershy said.

Sunset stared at her for a moment. “…You really have nothing to hide, do you?”

“No. I’ll tell you whatever I know.”

“Why?”

Fluttershy sighed. “I don’t think I could lie to you and… Well, I don’t think the way Applejack’s doing things is right.”

“It doesn’t take much of a brain to realize that.”

“It’s… different than that. She seems like a hero who’s willing to stop at nothing to dethrone an evil Queen. …Tell me, what has Applejack really done?”

Sunset frowned. “All right. I’ll go along with this for now, pretend you really have no idea. Applejack is a terrorist from a distant town on the edges of the kingdom that was inhabited only by deer. Then for whatever reason a member of the court was brutally murdered there for seemingly no reason. I ordered an investigation to bring whoever killed him to justice. The investigation found out it was Applejack’s brother, but the town came together to kill the team to cover it up, not realizing they had already sent word to me. I brought the army in, planning on taking every deer into custody and figuring out the whole mess. They decided they wanted a war instead of a simple intervention. They refused to let a single one of their number get arrested for anything, blind in their stupid bond. They eventually had to be slaughtered, killing way more of us than we did of them. Applejack survived, somehow, and ended up catching wind of a prophecy that declared there would be a hero from a slaughtered village to dethrone the Queen. She took up the mantle and has been destroying entire towns that are loyal to the Queen, and we can’t stop her!” She slammed her hoof into the ground, shaking the tent. “Do you have any idea how much pain she’s caused?!”

Fluttershy shook her head.
“I’m the last living member of my family!” Sunset screamed. “My partner, a mare who looked at lot like your unisus friend, was killed by Applejack in combat! And yet, try as we might, we can’t stop her! We try to use any of her followers against her, but she always chooses herself over them. We’ve tried hitting her with overwhelming odds but she’s just too strong. We’ve tried conscripting the golems now, but even that doesn’t seem to work!”

Fluttershy sagged. “I’m… I’m sorry. We haven’t helped, have we?”

“No, of course not! You all show up and now you’ve ruined yet another chance!”

“…Have you ever considered that you might be being too aggressive with her?”

Sunset growled. “What do you mean?”

“Your constant anger and spite is just giving her more reason to fight you. I can see why she thinks you are evil at least – you constantly try to kill her and exploit her in any way you can.”

“Well then why don’t you think I’m evil? Huh? I’m pretty angry at you aren’t I?”

Fluttershy took in a deep breath. “Because you’re passionate. And you’re telling me what you feel. I know you mean what you say. Even if you might be biased… You are telling the truth. She’s killed so many…”

Sunset frowned. “…I’m still not sure if I believe you about the other world thing.”

“There’s a portal in the forest next to the mountains past the desert. I’m sure Twilight won’t mind me taking you there to sho- Sunset?”

“…Her name really is Twilight…”

“Yeah? I – oh. Your friend…” Fluttershy tried not to cry. “I’m so sorry…”

“How can Applejack not see it? The face of her!?”

“I don’t know,” Fluttershy said. “I just met her today. As I’ve just met you.”

Sunset nodded. She undid Fluttershy’s hoofcuffs with a spell. “I’ll be upfront. I’ve done many of the horrible things she’s done. You shouldn’t think of me as some kind of hero. I’m just doing what needs to be done.”

“That’s… More or less her attitude, I think. Except she thinks she’s the hero.”

“That’s nothing new,” Sunset said. “Though usually when her followers tell me this they don’t think she’s wrong.”

“I’m not a follower,” Fluttershy reminded her.

“Well then… Maybe you can help me. Who’s right?”

“…Excuse me?”

“Applejack or me. Who’s in the right.”

“Uh… You’re both wrong.”

Sunset blinked. “…Come again?”
“From what little I know, it looks like you and her have both made many, many mistakes to get you to this point. A personal war of vendetta.”

“What else can I do?”

Fluttershy smiled. “Well… You could refuse to use any underhanded tactics. You could be honest. You could own up to what happened at her home.”

“That was their fault!”

“It wasn’t just their fault, was it?”

Sunset blinked. “…No.”

Fluttershy put a wing around Sunset. “It’s okay… You thought you were doing right. That’s not all that matters, but that doesn’t mean nothing.”

“How… How in Lai did you do this?”

“Do what?”

“Get me to talk?!”

“It’s… a skill I have. I was also really terrified of being tortured and spoke a lot of that without thinking. Still pretty terrified.”

“I’m not going to kill you, there’s no reason to. You’re free to go, even.”

“I still need to get back to my friends. The best way to do that is stay with you.”

“Guess we can go check out that portal…” Sunset muttered, rubbing her eyes. “It’s the only lead we have…”

Fluttershy nodded. “…Remember, try something different this time, okay?”

Sunset twitched. “She still needs to die…”

“Do you?”

Sunset gulped. “…Maybe.”

Fluttershy sighed. “Don’t think that…”

“I’ve done the same things she’s done for roughly the same reasons! If she deserves to die, I do too!”

Fluttershy failed to keep the tears from falling down her face. “But… But that’s just so sad. You’re a pony who cares, and cares deeply!”

“Yeah, so? That might not be a good thing!”

“You haven’t turned your back on connecting with others though.”

“Armonia damn it, how are you so good at this!?!” Sunset blurred. “I don’t even know you and yet I’m pouring myself out to you!!?”

“Maybe the time was just right. I was called here by the Tree of Harmony after all… I think I needed to be here, to help you see.”
“…Well, now that you have, now what?”

“I need to resolve the ‘friendship’ problem. I need to end the fight between you two, one way or another. And my friends are going to help.”

Sunset nodded. “I… I hope you’re right. I hope your ‘Tree’ know what it’s doing.”

“It always does. There hasn’t been a failed mission yet. Though they’re not always what we think they are…”

~~~

In a world of humans and high school, Sunset sat on a stage next to several other students, tapping her heels nervously. There was a huge crowd – everybody and their parents had shown up for this. That was to be expected, but it was still a lot of people. Sunset may not have had as much difficulty speaking in front of people as a lot of her classmates did, but there was still a nervous feeling in her gut.

It had all happened so fast…

She had been working on the dimensional adventurers club, traveling around for fun, and then Principal Celestia had told her she was the valedictorian and needed to give a speech at graduation. Sunset had tried to deny it, saying she’d had an unfair advantage over the students given how old she really was, but Celestia insisted that she deserved the honor for all the other things she had done, if not for her grades. So there was a speech to make.

And then it was graduation.

Pinkie hadn’t been kidding about it coming quickly...

She felt like there was so much she hadn’t done… Hadn’t really explored that many worlds… Hadn’t really accomplished what she set out to do… Hadn’t spent enough time with her friends…

But time marched on, and she had to deal with it. And that meant giving this speech.

And it sure wasn’t going to be a boring one like all the others she’d heard over the years.

Principal Celestia had finished giving Sunset Shimmer an introduction – it was time to go up there. She took a breath and walked to the podium. She glanced at Rarity and Fluttershy, both of whom were sitting in the row of graduating students. Both waved encouragingly. Sunset swore she could hear Pinkie screaming her name from somewhere in the back.

With a smile on her face, she gripped the podium.

“You all do realize all the insane magic and problems you’ve had over the last four years are basically my fault, right?”

This prompted laughs from the audience and baffled looks from some of the parents. Good. Already this was better than most other speeches. Her grin became a smirk and she leaned in.

“Think about it. For most of my time here, I was the worst bully imaginable. And after, what, a year of good behavior you give me this medal and tell me to address the entire student body? You are all way too forgiving. I was a manipulator, a liar, a deceiver, a girl who wanted to be worshipped. Hey, Pinkie, I see you bowing, stop it.”
More laughter.

“I could go on and list more disgusting features I used to have – anger, insecurity, rage, vanity, excess… The list goes on and on. The original draft of this speech was just me being a thesaurus for five minutes on how garbage I used to be. Worst idea ever. I would have ended up with actual garbage all over me had I gone through with that. So let’s forget about all that – just like you all did.”

She beamed at them all.

“It was rough, but the forgiveness all of you showed me after I hit my low… It speaks for this school. You saw me show my true colors as a literal demon, only to welcome me back into the fold. Not all of you came to me at once, but eventually I was welcomed. And… Well, first of all, you’re all insane! Secondly… Thank you. It makes this school mean so much more to me than just a place to learn things or make myself ‘popular.’ This school, Canterlot High, has shown me what it means to be forgiven. It taught me, more than anything else, mercy.”

She grabbed the valedictorian medal hung around her neck. “Had I not learned that, I think we all know I’d be up here giving some horrendous speech about how great I am and how all you suck. But it doesn’t matter how great I am, or how great the school system wants me to be. There’s more here than just education and a place to hang out. There’s a family here. And I have no doubt that, when I’m gone, it’ll continue to go on just as brightly as it did before. So here’s my shoutout to you – all of you – who were willing to see another side of someone. For that, I thank you.”

She leaned back and sighed. “I really wish I could stay with you all, but time marches on. Life’s not something we can run away from. So keep it crazy, my friends, and you can make life worth living.”

She bowed – and the audience entered into applause. She smiled, walking off the podium and to her seat.

Now she could go have fun exploring other worlds all summer.

Then… college, she guessed.

She wondered if it’d be like she was expecting.

~~~

The Dragon Tunnels were exactly what they sounded like. Spacious tunnels in the earth filled with dragons.

Except all the dragons were just skeletons littered around everywhere.

“…What is this place?” Rarity asked.

“A dragon burial ground,” Applejack answered. “This is where they took their dead since they lacked the patience to dig large enough graves.”

“Do any dragons live in here?”

“There was one. It’s dead now.”

Twilight shivered. She thought the odds were pretty good that Applejack had been the one to slay it, probably recently. Rainbow Dash probably would have found that awesome… Twilight just found it another way this world was too brutal. But having seen what that Sunset was like… They really did need to stop the Queen. Though she knew the Tree would never send them to do it by pure force…
There was probably something in the Spectacularium that would help resolve this. Something only they could find.

She wondered if she could ask it what the friendship problem actually was. She still wasn’t clear on that.

“Hey, should we figure out what questions we’re going to ask?” she asked aloud.

“How to get rid of the Queen,” Applejack muttered. “That’s all Ah want, and all Ah need.”

“I’ll ask it what’s really in the blue flavor!” Pinkie Pie announced.

Rarity furrowed her brow. “I think… I’ll want to know about you, Applejack. You don’t tell us much about yourself.”

Applejack tensed, but kept walking deeper into the caverns. “Ah could care less. Ask away. There’s nothin’ to tell.”

“Why don’t you tell us about you so we don’t have to ask?”

“No,” she said. “Ah’m not talking.”

Starlight raised an eyebrow. “You’re afraid you’ll form a connection with us.”

“Ah don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.”

Rarity raised an eyebrow. “Dear, I can tell that you’re lying. No Applejack is good at it.”

Applejack twitched. “Do you want me angry? Because you’re gettin’ there.”

“No, of course not.”

“Then shut up and mind your own darn business. We have a mission. Nothing else matters. Getting all friendly only makes us weak.”

Twilight shook her head. “Applejack… That’s not the case, and I think you know it. Friendship makes ponies stronger and gives them something to lean on when the going gets hard. Friendship is magic. It’s how I got my wings, it’s why Starlight’s traveling with us, it’s why we’re here in the first place.”

“Then things are just different in your world.”

Twilight nodded. “Maybe. But that only makes us want to help you more.”

“You’re all a bunch of idiots.”

Pinkie giggled. “Yeah, so?”

Applejack grunted. “Done listenin’.”

“You said that already, and yet you kept talking!”

Applejack made no response. She just kept walking forward.

Twilight sighed. She wanted to say something – she really did – but she couldn’t. Applejack didn’t want to hear it. The deer ‘hero’ was a tragedy. After she was done with her quest, what would she
even do? She defined herself so much by this single goal. What would life mean to her after it was over? Would it mean anything?

Applejack turned a corner in the tunnels and came to a large red door. She took the key out and placed it in the lock, turning it. The doors recognized the key, pulsed with the light of dozens of multicolored runes, and slid open all on its own. Applejack marched into the darkened interior, followed by the other four. The interior was much like the rest of the Dragon Tunnels: rocky, spacious, and empty. There weren’t even any dragon bones this far down. The floor became steeper and Twilight was slowly becoming aware of a powerful source of magic beneath them.

They eventually came out into a much more expansive cavern that was so large they couldn’t see the other end. The six runic obelisks – which Twilight just knew were the Runes of Harmony – glowed in the distance like lighthouses in the night around a shimmering blue crystal dome.

The Spectacularium.

Twilight saw a tear roll down Applejack’s cheek. She’d been looking for this thing – the answer – for Celestia knew how many years. Twilight suddenly felt like she could never understand what was going on in the warrior’s head, never empathize with the intense emotion in this moment. Applejack had finally shown a crack in her tough exterior. Who knew what was flashing before her eyes right now?

Twilight didn’t. This was just an adventure she’d come in near the end. It had little impact for her. This realization struck her as rather messed up. Because of her position, she was distant to the issues – all of her friends were.

Was she missing something because of this?

“C-can you teleport us closer,” Applejack stammered.

Twilight nodded. “Of course.” They were soon inside the boundaries of the Runes of Harmony, all five of them filled with serene power. Before them stood a giant door, through which was a hollow interior with seemingly nothing inside. But the five ponies knew better than that.

“So, you finally arrived.”

Twilight turned to see a version of Starlight standing on a nearby outcropping of rock. She was hornless, but that didn’t mean she had no magic. Two arcs of rune-covered material extended from both her sides, forming a circular pattern when viewed from head-on. The runes glowed the color of Starlight’s magic, and some of the runes had embedded themselves in her flesh instead of the arcs. It looked painful.

Applejack drew her swords. The unicorn Starlight grabbed her with her telekinesis. “Calm down!”

“She’s an arcei!” Applejack yelled. “Blasphemous!”

“She might be able to tell us things!”

“That I can,” the arcei said, glancing into the Spectacularium’s interior. “I am Starlight, though it wouldn’t surprise me if you already knew that given your companion. I am a… caretaker of sorts.”

Twilight glanced at the struggling Applejack. “…Why does she want to kill you?”

“I fused myself with a golem, creating a race that has no right to exist,” the arcei answered.
Applejack’s jaw dropped. “You’re the first arcei!”

“Yes,” the arcei said.

Pinkie nodded slowly. “Yeah, this would be a lot more interesting if we’d been a part of this story from the start.”

“You’d be surprised how little it actually matters.”

“So… What is the Spectacularium?” Rarity asked.

“It’s an ancient device created by the rune-makers. I have no idea who they were, all I know is that they made this place to answer their questions before they vanished from Lai. I have my theories that they were slain by their answers, but I cannot prove this without asking a question myself. Which I will never do again.”

“Then why do you live here?”

“Because I detected a surge of magic here larger than anything I’d felt before. It was something I could only describe as a man of light running away from a unicorn.”

Twilight’s pupils dilated. “…Did this happen a couple months ago?”

The arcei looked surprised for the first time. “…Yes. Why?”

“That… That was the crystal man who had the device that allowed us to start traveling dimensions.”

The arcei frowned. “Interesting. Very interesting, in fact. It seems our worlds are connected in more ways than one. Perhaps there is fate beyond what the Spectacularium can see.”

“Can you just let us in already,” Applejack muttered, having finally stopped struggling.

“I’m not stopping you. I’m just warning you. It’s changed since the man of light was here.”

“How so?” Starlight asked.

“It gained a mind.”

And with that, her arcs glowed the colors of magic and she folded herself up into nothingness. Twilight had no idea if what she had just done was even magic. Maybe that was something to ask the Spectacularium…

…but What had the arcei meant, it had a mind?

Applejack didn’t care – she walked right into the big room, and the others followed close behind her. In the center of the Spectacularium, there was nothing but magic.

And then there was something. A thread of magic appeared, forming into an E like rune shape. Then it became a Y. Then a 6. It never settled, shifting through shapes as fast as the ponies could make them out. The color kept shifting as well, gradually, like a passing rainbow.

They felt it touch their minds. They felt an intelligence.

It spoke to them through their thoughts. The two prophecies that remained – that Applejack would defeat the Queen, and that the Spectacularium would return and make prophecies again one day – were no more. Things had changed too much to ensure their occurrence. Not the least of which was
the existence of the Spectacularium’s intelligence. Its power. It could no longer simply live like it did, focusing towards one goal. The rune-makers did not foresee their creation attaining a new level, becoming the conscience of magic itself.

But it would answer their questions one last time. Whatever each of them wanted to know most.

The Queen can be defeated if you simply reveal that her dead sister was given an honorable burial and has a secret shrine within the royal palace, despite the sun’s evil deeds. The Queen visits it daily and has regrets. If the people realize that she doesn’t have that conviction and in fact holds the most horrendous figure in history as a good memory, she couldn’t possibly hold power.

Nopony resents you for your past actions, they are all truly your friends. You should stop second-guessing.

You will not outlive your friends.

You will find love one day, and it will be beautiful.

The answer to your deepest yearning is protected. But you knew that. You also know this intelligence’s birthday. The blue flavor is an anomaly beyond logical answers. You are one side of the coin.

The Spectacularium’s intelligence allowed them to wonder what answers were to whose questions. Those who asked the questions knew. But they all heard the answers.

The Spectacularium was now ready to self-destruct.

“WHAT!” Rarity yelled.

Starlight teleported them out. The moment they left the premises the crystal center of the Spectacularium shattered, leaving only the six runic obelisks to light the cavern.

Applejack smiled. “Ah have it! Ah have the answer! The way to depose the Queen!”

“…Didn’t that answer seem a bit… odd to you?” Twilight asked. “It seems like she just cares about her sister…”

“Who cares? It’s a way to get the tyrant off the throne. Ah’ll take any weakness Ah can get.”

“You’re in luck, then.”

The five ponies turned around to see Sunset and Fluttershy standing a few meters away. There was no sign of any army, golems, or anything. Applejack drew her swords.

Fluttershy held up a wing. “We aren’t here to fight. We’re here to talk.”

“We!” Rarity blurted. “Fluttershy, you teamed up with this… maniac!?”

“That really is how I come off…” Sunset sighed. “Yes, she has. But she’s also made me realize something.”

Applejack lowered her sword slightly. “…Ah’ll bite. What happened?”

“Applejack, we’re killing the world we love.”

“You don’t love anything!”
Sunset shook her head. “I love the ponies of this nation, and I fight to keep you from killing them. But I fought blindly, violently, and without any thought about what I was destroying in the process. It was a single-minded goal. I didn’t see the destruction – and this little pegasus came along, said some things, and suddenly I see.”

“How does this change anythin’? You still serve the Queen, and Ah have to get rid of her.”

“Applejack, I’m the one responsible for everything that’s happened to you, your town, and your family. The Queen doesn’t even know what really happened to start you on your quest of vengeance. Only I know,”

“But she lets ponies like you run things!”

“I made a mistake!” Sunset yelled. “And you’ve made a mistake as well! We’re both wrong!”

“Ah don’t care!” Applejack roared. “Ah’ll do anything to stop this madness!”

Sunset looked ready to scream again, but Fluttershy put a wing around her, silencing her.

“Applejack, I know you’re angry. But… what if she’s really the one who did everything to you? What if the Queen had almost nothing to do with it?”

“Destiny isn’t that cruel,” Applejack said. “Ah’m the chosen hero, destined to save the world from the evil Queen.”

“…Where in the prophecy does it say you’re a hero, or that the Queen is evil?” Sunset asked.

“Does it matter? Why would there be a prophecy about a little deer fighting against a Queen if the Queen wasn’t evil and the deer wasn’t the hero?”

“Because it’s a realistic prophecy about real things?”

Applejack growled. “You think you can stop me…”

“I’m willing to pardon everything,” Sunset said, gulping hard. “You may have killed her and everyone I held dear, but I did the exact same to you. If I walk free, you should as well. All you have to do is agree to stop. I’ll resign from the military if you do. We’re destroying the world with our fight, Applejack. It has to stop.”

Applejack stamped her hoof. “Ah don’t think you realize that if Ah stop this will have all been for nothing!”

“It is for nothing,” Sunset said. “I’ve had to accept that. All my fighting only made you angrier and killed more ponies. I’m sorry.”

Applejack threw one of her swords, embedding it in Sunset’s side. The blood splattered all over Fluttershy, like a claw across her face. She stood strong, holding Sunset up despite the wound.

Sunset coughed, blood flying out of her mouth onto the ground. “I… I suppose this is what I deserve…”

Applejack’s eyes were wild. She grabbed her other sword. “STOP DOING THAT! YOU ARE EVIL AND YOU CANNOT CHANGE! THERE’D BE NO POINT!” She threw it – only for Twilight to grab it.

Applejack turned around, charging her – but Starlight grabbed Applejack in her telekinesis and
pinned her. Applejack’s antlers glowed and the ground began to shake like an earthquake – but Pinkie leaped in, smashing Applejack with a squeaky hammer and knocking her out. It was over. For now, at least.

Everypony ran to Sunset. Twilight cast a spell on the wound – but she didn’t know the advanced healing magic required. “S-sunset…”

“Take her… away from this world…” Sunset said, gagging. “Neither of us can be here…”

“Don’t say that,” Fluttershy said. “You can still do well! You have so much to do!”

“There’s no way you’re getting me to a healer in time…”

Starlight looked at Twilight. “Crystal stasis.”

“Crystal stasis,” Twilight agreed. The two of them used their horns, encasing Sunset in a crystalline cage, freezing her inside. “I don’t want to teleport her like this. But we can get her to a healer.”

“What about… her?” Pinkie asked, pointing at Applejack.

Twilight sighed. “Tie her up.”

Fluttershy wiped some of the blood off her face and stared at it. She gulped.

“Hey… It’s okay. We’ve got her,” Pinkie said, hugging Fluttershy.

“Everything’s so brutal… I tried… I tried so hard…”

“You got one of them. That’s good Fluttershy. That’s good.”

~~~

Sunset awoke a little later, her wound already healed by magic from some unknown healer. It had the unusual stiffness magical healing always had, but at least she was alive. She was mildly surprised to see Twilight standing over her.

She didn’t know what to say.

“You don’t have to say anything. I’m also not her, sorry.”

Sunset nodded. “What… happened to Applejack?”

“We have her tied up. She’ll be in your custody.”

“I’ll have to take her in. The ponies will want execution…”

Twilight nodded. “We could take her. There’s a world of demons who like to take in ponies.”

“No… I can’t just let her run away. That was hasty of me. But… I’ll argue for her life. I have sway, I can get the Queen to give her life in prison instead, despite what she’s done.”

“…And?”

“…I’m going to visit her. We really aren’t that different. She just ended up on the wrong side…”

“What is the Queen like, really? I’m curious.”
Sunset laughed painfully. “A bit clueless, to be honest. Despite her age she seems to have a childlike aura about her a lot of the time. She switches from old and wise to young and energetic. She’s a delight to be around.”

Twilight smiled. “It does sound like Applejack was misguided… There’s part of me that thinks the Pinkie sage was just manipulating you all, by the way.”

Sunset frowned. “It’s possible. Though why, I don’t have any clue.”

“Well… We’ll return to our world now. We might meet again. Might not.”

“Actually…” Sunset coughed. “As a general within her majesty’s army, I’d like to establish official relations with your people.”

Twilight blinked. “Really?”

“Really. You helped me. It’s the best I can do for you in return. Put in a good word.”

“Well… Not what I expected, but cool. We aren’t really a big part of our nation though. We mainly just explore to help ponies.”

“Doesn’t matter. I have power, I’m going to use it for something good for once. Remember you have a friend here.”

Twilight smiled. “I will.”

Then her cutie mark started glowing, signifying a job well done. She sighed. “I was hoping we’d be able to do better than that.”

“…Huh?”

“The Tree of Harmony just told me we did what we came here to do. I’m not sure if that was to become friends with you, get you to help us, or to resolve the tension between you and Applejack… Possibly a combination of all three. But I really thought we could help her as well.”

“She’s more determined than me,” Sunset said. “It’s one of those neutral traits…”

Twilight nodded. “I hope you can show her the way, given time.”

“Somehow I doubt it, but I have to at least put in the effort. Atone for my sins…”

Twilight smiled. “I knew a Sunset like you. Ashamed of what she’d done, she ended up living with those she hurt, and they became her closest friends. Maybe there is parallelism in the cosmos.”

“Maybe… I hope so.” Sunset smiled. “…Thank you, Twilight. Just… Just for talking.”

“And thank you for not torturing Fluttershy.”

Sunset chuckled. Twilight left the room, telling the girls it was time to go home.
A dimensional portal ripped through the fabric of space-time into Sunset’s living room - which, given the miniscule size of her house, meant it took up most the space between the couch and the TV. Sunset, Twilight, Rainbow Dash, and Lyra all walked through the ring laughing.

“It’s always such a delight to visit the mushroom people!” Twilight managed as the portal popped shut. “So cute!”

“I got a video of the one doing the dance!” Rainbow Dash said, holding out her phone. “So sweet.”

“Not ‘awesome’?” Sunset ribbed.

Rainbow Dash raised an eyebrow. “Well, it’s that too. But that goes without saying.”

“Then why do you say it so much?”

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. “Because. It’s awesome.”

There was silence for a couple seconds. Lyra broke the silence with a slight snicker, sending everyone into a collective laughing fit lasting for at least a minute. They stopped only because they were starting to run out of breath.

Sunset fell onto the couch. “So, you girls want anything? I’ve got some of those amazing pocket nacho things.”

“You’re the only one who thinks those are amazing,” Lyra said.

“I’ve got other food, if you don’t want that, yeesh.”

Twilight shook her head while fingering her necklace. “Sorry, I’ve got a trip to NASA tomorrow, need extra sleep for it. Can’t stay.”

“I drank far too many of those shakes, not hungry.” Rainbow Dash laughed – then belched loud enough to knock herself over. “Ow.”

Sunset turned to Lyra. “What about you?”

“Uh… Will you be mad if I say I wanted to eat with my folks tonight?”

“Not at all,” Sunset said. “It’s okay, I shouldn’t expect you all to stick around every time. See you next week!”

Twilight waved. “See you!”

Soon, Sunset was the only human being in her house. She took in a deep breath, leaned deeply into the couch, and grabbed the remote. She pointed it at the TV, ready to turn it on and get over random entertainment until she fell asleep, but something stopped her. She found herself staring at the remote’s power button, contemplating how it turned things on and off. If she turned the TV on, she turned her brain off. That probably wasn’t good, come to think of it. But if she didn’t she’d just have to realize that she was completely alone in this house.
Too late, she thought. She set the remote down and looked around the living room. The furnishings were simple and uninspired – a clock, a couch, a TV, and a random painting Sunset had hung without much thought. Pinkie had given it to her. It was of a beautiful woman made entirely of fire writing in a study, herself as the only source of light in the canvas. Knowing Pinkie, this could be the most in-depth and meaningful painting on the planet, or it was just random. There was no telling with her.

The clock ticked.

Sunset stood up, deciding not to watch TV. She couldn’t waste her mind all summer. She had a big project ahead of her. One I could be working on right now, come to think of it. She set out across her small house, entering what had once had the dual function of dining room and schoolwork space. These days, it was a place to store all her designs. The walls were covered in equations, schematics, and random musings written in hasty handwriting. Most of the scrawling only she could read, the rest was by Twilight’s much neater hand.

She set her hand on the biggest sheet of paper, placed in an honorable position atop the round oak table. Two arched spikes, connected to each other through the ground. The perfect shape to tear a hole in reality, angled for maximum focus at the center, and yet separated like two lines ready to open a set of double doors. She was certain this was the basic design, and she knew she could make it work… with magic.

It wasn’t a question of power – she was certain a small power plant could form a connection to Equestria easily enough – it was a question of methods. In their experiments, Sunset and Twilight had discovered how the spell opened a portal. Regardless of if it was attached to the Mirror Portal or just summoned on the spot, the spell always manipulated gravity forcefully, drawing the fabric of space-time to a single point then pushing. The pushing part was difficult enough to understand, but it wasn’t the problem. It was the manipulation of gravity. She had no idea if that was even possible without magic.

She looked for her notes on the subject. They weren’t where she left them. Somebody had probably come in here and messed it up. Primary suspect: Rainbow Dash. As if it could be anybody else. That girl never listened…

Sunset found the notes on the floor after a few minutes of searching. Forgetting her momentary annoyance with Rainbow Dash, she was absorbed in her own musings…

Gravity cannot be bent with known technology or materials. Quantum mechanics has not identified a graviton, so it’s impossible to even start work on that. Controlled gravity surge with mass would not function. Wormholes are a possibility, but negative mass has not been proven. Consider attempting to create some with magic as a proof-of-concept, then work backwards. Alternatively, find a universe with highly advanced technology and convince them to answer some questions or provide assistance.

Now there was an idea. The only problem was they hadn’t found any universes with advanced technology yet. They’d found plenty of worlds with high magic that had gone to the moon and other planets within the system, but the best non-magical world they’d found was a bunch of strange furred creatures living on two different planets that were essentially just Earth and Mars analogues. No teleportation, no gravity manipulation, no wormholes.

Apparantly similar universes were clustered together. Most of the other universes Sunset and her friends – and the ponies in Equestria – had explored were simply different versions of Equestria itself. Earth was a bit of an oddball, though there were a few other Equestrias with copies of it as well. And yet, no two universes were exactly the same… Just similar. Some more than others. Even
the demon’s jungle resembled prehistoric Equestria. Then there were the occasional oddballs like the worlds with the mushroom people...

But if she believed anything, it was that the multiverse was a lot bigger than what they’d seen.

She pulled out another piece of paper, examining the ‘map’ created of explored universes, a bunch of dots with labels connected by lines of a length determined by the energy required to travel. Some of the lines squiggled since the numbers didn’t line up properly on a two-dimensional surface, but the idea was the same. Most everything was clustered around Equestria and Earth, with a couple more distant worlds, Ardent being the furthest away. The place where she’d seen that mask...

She pushed the thought of the evil out of her mind. If she wanted to find more advanced technology, she’d have to go further out. She pulled one of the portal-devices out of her pocket and twisted some of the dials, testing out some of the connections, letting it drain some power from her necklace for a moment. It lit up green, displaying how much energy it was using to connect to… She checked her list of coordinates. The world of doublespeak liars.

“Yeah, let’s not go there,” she muttered to herself. She flipped open a large magical journal, laying it flat. The most recent message she’d received from Twilight was a table with a few more world coordinates, most untested. She plugged one at random into the device…

It turned red.

*Not enough power.*

Sunset grinned, tucking the journal into her jacket and allowing the device to draw more power from her necklace. The device couldn’t drain the relic completely; the magics were too fundamental for that. But it took five whole minutes to power it up to green.

She looked at it, curious.

This would lead her somewhere far away. It was using more power than Ardent by a fair margin, not quite double.

Sunset glanced out the window. The sun was setting. Was she really going to go to another world, all on her own, this late? She felt like that would be irresponsible, even though she had literally no responsibilities. She didn’t work tomorrow, her friends were out doing things…

She shrugged, holding the device out and activating it. The surge of energy blew several of her papers around, driving Sunset even further up the wall.

“You know what? I’ll clean that later.”

She looked through the portal, glad that these direct rips in space-time weren’t as mysterious about the destination as the Mirror Portal’s connections, although they definitely weren’t as permanent. The sky through the portal was red and something fiery was flying through the sky. The world was that of a city filled with many stone buildings, though the roads weren’t paved.

She likely wasn’t going to find what she was looking for here.

But the fiery object in the sky was enticing… There was no way she could just close the portal now and *not* have a closer look.

She stepped in.
In a world where the sky was red and the earth was made of pillars, two men fought.

One was a tall man with a body fit for an emperor. His muscles tensed and his hair whirled as he shot his hands forward, unleashing a torrent of fire from within brighter than the cosmic blaze from above.

His blaze hit a shell of carefully constructed rock, shattering it and revealing the occupant inside. The target was little more than a boy cowering in a defensive posture, blowing air from his body to keep the licking flames from burning him. He was covered with blue arrow tattoos that pointed to his hands, feet, and forehead; the latter matching the creases formed in his face from his intense concentration.

The fire pushed him back into the stone pillar, a blunt point ramming into his back where a scar interrupted the flow of the tattoos. The sharp pain awoke something within him that had been lost. Energy flowed through his body freely where once it had been blocked.

The fiery man stood tall over the rubble, taunting the boy. “Come on out, Avatar! You can’t hide in there forever!” He smirked slightly, continuing his berating, oblivious to the energy shifting beneath the rubble.

The Avatar shot out of the rubble, eyes an intense white, tattoos glowing with the power of spirits unknown to both combatants. He grabbed his assailant by his long, wispy beard. The man swiped at the Avatar, aiming for his vulnerable neck with a flaming slice, but the Avatar stopped the movement with his other hand. With a kick, a pillar of earth shot out of the ground and threw the man aside.

The Avatar flew into the air, a bubble of wind whirling around him fast enough to be visible from afar. Fire shot from his hands, feet, and mouth, showing the landscape a five-limbed monster of pure heat. The Avatar’s opponent could only stand and stare at what was taking shape before him.

The tentacles of fire coalesced into a ring, taking its place alongside the whirlwind of air. Next, rocks flew up from the ground, shrinking as they were crushed into dense conglomerations, forming a second ring. To complete the set, water was drawn into the air from the nearby sea to form a ring, giving the Avatar the appearance of an atom of the elements.

Then the Avatar started attacking again. With a face as impassive as that of a statue, he tore the pillars of earth from their positions in the ground, throwing them at the man. The man used his fire to blast into the air like a rocket, avoiding the oversized rocky assault. He attempted to throw a few bursts of fire at the Avatar.

The attacks were blown away by intense winds, filling the air with intense light once again. The Avatar pursued, face steadfast, eyes featureless. Fire, water, earth, and air flew at their target with accuracy, power, and beauty beyond anything seen before. All four elements worked in unison, ready to corner their enemy.

With a blast of fire, the man attempted to gain some distance. He may have been arrogant, but he wasn’t an idiot. He knew when he had to change strategies. This fight would no longer be won through brute force. He’d have to think.

Unfortunately for him the Avatar wasn’t giving him time to think. Waves came from nowhere; crashing over him and sweeping him along like nothing. Chunks of earth fell on him, destroyed only by quick flaming clouds from his fists. Air flew through his body, changing his direction.

Something as simple as fleeing became difficult.
He rocketed away, forcing fire out of his hands and feet, pushing his speed to the maximum.

And yet, the Avatar gained. He looked ancient, monstrous – unnatural. With a quick movement, a trail of water wrapped around the flaming feet, extinguishing the heated power. The rushing water enveloped the man, tossing him to the top of a pillar of earth. He gasped, the wind knocked out of him by the impact.

The Avatar raised the earth around the man’s feet and hands, pinning him. The man gritted his teeth.

The Avatar spoke with the voice of many. Men young and old, women of all ranges; they spoke alongside his own boyish vocalization in a haunting harmony. “Firelord Ozai. You and your forefathers have devastated the balance of this world, and now you shall pay the ultimate price!”

All four elements formed into a single, devastating point. Air took the center, spiraling water and fire around it in a corkscrew while forcing chunks of earth along with it. The spearhead of the Avatar rushed the Firelord’s chest, aiming right for the heart.

Ozai turned away, unable to face his own death.

But it never came.

There was a noise – something that could only be described as sparkling – and he heard the attack bounce away from him.

He opened his eyes, surprised to see a circle of a purple, translucent substance between him and the Avatar. It was unlike anything he had ever seen.

A purple winged unicorn appeared next to him, angrily staring at the Avatar. Both men stared at it in disbelief.

“Run!” she said. “I’ll keep him busy!”

Ozai and the Avatar stared at the winged unicorn, still disbelieving.

She shook her head. “Don’t have time for this…” She lit her horn. In a flash of purple, Ozai was on a faraway rock pillar, barely able to see the shape of the winged unicorn and the Avatar in the distance.

He didn’t waste any time to see what happened next. Surveying the landscape, he knew this battle was lost. In the distance he could see his entire fleet of Fire Nation zeppelins smoldering on the shore. Sozin’s Comet would leave the atmosphere eventually, and the boost to his power would be gone. It was time to cut his losses and accept what fate had given him.

His four limbs unleashed a torrent of fire and he rocketed across the sea towards his kingdom.

Meanwhile, the Avatar was screaming.

“You freed him!”

“Of course I did!” she yelled back. “You were going to kill him!”

“He-“

“Did he need to die?!”
The white energy vanished from the Avatar, returning him to his normal state. The winged unicorn’s expression softened. He no longer looked like a monster. He looked like… a boy.

“Maybe not…” the Avatar said.

“Good. Then I’m glad I-“

“But he did need to be stopped!” he shouted, his face now fully capable of showing true, passionate anger. “He was a horrible man! This was when we needed to stop him!”

“I’m sure he couldn’t have been-“

“Do you see that over there?!” he yelled, pointing at a patch of scorched earth at least a mile long. “He was going to blanket this entire continent in fire, killing all the resistance he could! He was defeated! But you stepped in and stopped me from ending this! You… You unicorn-bird!”

She took a few steps back, turning to look at the devastation. She gulped. “I… I didn’t know.”

“How could you not know? He’s been waging war on the entire world for decades!”

“…I’m not from this world. This is the first thing I saw. I… I felt like I needed to act…”

The Avatar rammed his foot into the ground, knocking off a chunk of earth. “Go back to where you came from.”

“But… But I can help you catch him! And find a way not to k-“

“You’ve helped enough!” the Avatar yelled, the energy flowing into him again. “You are not welcome here!”

The winged unicorn whimpered. She lit her horn and teleported away.

The Avatar let the energy flow out of his body. He fell to his knees and roared. He stayed there, motionless, for a long time, contemplating how everything had fallen apart at the last moment once again.

An airship eventually drifted near him, unloading three people.

“Uh… Aang? Did you do it?” one of them, a young man in blue, asked.

“No,” Avatar Aang said. “He got away. Some… thing with unusual bending saved him. He’s going back to regroup. We haven’t won yet.”

“But… But we will! The airships were destroyed and Ba Sing Se’s been liberated!”

“And Ozai is still free, Sokka.” Aang stood up, looking at where the alien form had been. He frowned. She’d seemed nice, but misguided. Definitely the wrong place at the wrong time.

She had ruined everything with a single action.

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Sunset walked around the city and did what she normally did when coming to a new world – observe quietly. She wasn’t being sneaky, but she wasn’t walking up to people and talking. She noted, curiously, that they were speaking a language she could understand, no need to use the translator spell at all. Which was probably best because she did not have that particular device on her
at the moment. Probably not a smart move, come to think of it. She made a mental note to always bring it with her from here on out.

The inhabitants of the city were all standard humans. It had been a bit unusual to discover most humans didn’t have the neon colored hair and pastel skin, but in the end it didn’t really matter. Her yellow skin tone wasn’t that unusual, so she was only getting occasional sideways glances. She was left alone, allowed to wander freely. They probably thought she had a disease or was born wrong, or something.

She looked up at the flaming power moving across the sky. She’d heard a few people call it Sozin’s Comet, even though it obviously wasn’t a comet. It was too on fire for that. It was definitely powerful though – she could feel the cosmic energy in the air all around her. If only she were a unicorn right now, she could experiment with it.

She walked through another street, passing a bunch of kids playing a game with… a stack of black war tanks. She blinked – she’d overheard conversations suggesting there’d been a war in the city recently, and several of the buildings had looked rather damaged, but… Well she hadn’t seen any tanks until now. The kids were punching the ground, drawing pieces of earth up into the air and kicking them over the black metallic pillar.

So, magic definitely existed in this world. It was not a form she’d ever seen before – it was channeled through the movements of the entire body rather than a single body part, like the horn or hands. As she watched the earth get tossed around like volleyballs, she noted that the movements of the body allowed more power to be put into it. It was more a physical exercise than a mental one.

She had to admit; the sight of children tossing rocks over war machines was as delightful as it was poetic. A smile was creeping up her face.

“I see you appreciate the beauty of freedom.”

Sunset turned to her left. A large old man with a spiky gray beard stood there, looking at the children with a pleased smile.

Sunset nodded. “Yeah. I may not have any idea what’s going on… But it’s great.”

The man smiled coyly. “There was a war. This city, Ba Sing Se, was under the control of a brutal enemy that had been laying siege to the entire world. Today, this city was freed, and I have faith that the war has ended.”

Sunset raised an eyebrow. “…Why are you explaining this to me? I mean, I’m glad, but that all sounds like it should be public knowledge.”

The man laughed. “You obviously aren’t from here. I have no idea how you managed to get in here without knowing, but that really doesn’t matter. What matters is I saw you looking at those kids with a smile – and that’s all I need to know about you.”

Sunset smiled. “Well I’ll tell you more, I’m not really trying to be secretive.” She held out her hand. “I’m Sunset Shimmer.”

“I’m Iroh,” he said, shaking her hand. “Welcome to the newly liberated Ba Sing Se.”

“Glad to be.”

“TRAITOR!” Someone screamed. A man in black and red armor ran out of a nearby building, pointing at Iroh.
Iroh sighed. “Again…?”

The man thrust his fist forward, producing a fireball. Iroh nimbly dodged the attack despite his large figure. He took a breath, channeling energy into his body.

Sunset twisted her leg, planning on kicking the man over. She felt cosmic energy flow into her, traveling through her head and to her foot, producing a fiery spark at the end. The kick made direct contact with the soldier’s armor, blanketing him in fire in addition to knocking him down. He groaned pathetically.

Sunset stared at her foot. “What!? I can’t use magic like this! What just…?”

Iroh raised an eyebrow, dropping his fighting stance. “Well, that’s not the reaction I was expecting.”

Sunset punched the air. She felt the energy of the Comet flow into her again, and a fireball launched into the air, dissipating quickly. She stared at her hands in disbelief. “Could I always use magic…?”

“I wouldn’t call it magic,” Iroh said. “It’s called firebending. It channels the chi within you to produce changes in the elements.”

Sunset stared at her hands, a smile slowly creeping up her face. “It’s not the same… You’re right. But it’s close enough.” She pushed her hand into the air, launching out a burst of fire. “Yeah!”

Iroh laughed. “Now I’m the one who has no idea what’s going on, but it’s still delightful! Would you by chance be some spirit? A witch perhaps?”

“Spirit? No… I’m a human. Well, not really, obviously not the same type of human as you, and I used to be a unicorn.”

Iroh took this in stride, chuckling. “Looks like fate is having a fun time with the world today.”

“Multiple worlds,” Sunset said. “I’m from another place entirely.”

“I should probably be surprised at that…” Iroh mused. “Would you like to continue this over some tea?”

Sunset nodded cheerfully. “I’d love some tea.”

“I used to own a teashop right over here… It should still have what we need.” He led her through the streets of Ba Sing Se, past many signs of a recent battle. Yet, despite the destruction apparent in most places, people were walking around happy. Even those working themselves ragged rebuilding did so with a smile on their face, as if this was an honor. She even saw a few of the enemy soldiers working alongside them. It was simultaneously an image of past suffering and future peace.

Iroh found his old teashop boarded up, but he didn’t let this stop him. With an agile finger, he burnt the edges of the boards and tore them off. He delicately opened the door to reveal a dark interior. He grinned. “Hasn’t even been touched!” He set to work, quickly lighting a fire with his bending and pulling a teakettle out of a nearby shelf. He dusted the dishes off and found a sealed container of water, pouring it in the kettle, humming to himself all the while.

“The firebending must make it a lot easier to cook.”

“Oh it certainly does, but sadly few of us ever bother to learn the culinary aspect of our power. It’s usually all about the fighting.”
Sunset nodded, accepting a cup of tea from Iroh. “Your kind was the one leading the war, weren’t they?”

Iroh nodded. “It’s been a long war. I even fought in it myself – tried to capture this very city.”

Sunset smiled. “Well, as you said, you’re pretty sure it’s over now. And you helped free this city. I may not know all the details… But that looks pretty good to me.”

Iroh chuckled softly. “Just going with the first story you hear? You know nothing, how can you know I’m telling the truth?”

“I don’t, really. But you haven’t been afraid to tell me anything, and you also looked at those kids with a smile on your face. They are here because of your actions, from what I can tell.”

“It’s nice to hear that from an outsider. All I usually get to hear is encouragement or hatred based on the side I’m on.” He took a sip of his tea. “…I suppose the leaves got stale.”

“It tastes fine,” Sunset said.

“You’ve never had good tea then! We’ll have to remedy this!”

“Sure. As long as you teach me the culinary arts of firebending.”

Iroh laughed. “I would be foolish to turn down such a delightful and mysterious student. We’ll have to wait for the Comet to leave though – starting your journey with empowered firebending will ruin your expectations.”

Sunset shrugged. “Fair point. How much longer until it leaves?”

“A few minutes?” Iroh shrugged.

Sunset rolled her eyes. “Well that’s unhelpfully vague.”

“It gives us time to get to know each other. If I’m going to be teaching you anything, I have to know who you are.”

“What do you want to know?” Sunset asked. “There’s a lot I could say.”

Iroh pointed at the necklace. “What does that mean to you?”

Sunset lifted the red crystal up so she could look at it. “I’m… not sure. It’s a crystal with magic properties that allows me to feel what other people are feeling and thinking if I touch them directly – it’s why I wear these gloves, so I don’t accidentally trigger it. As for what it means… I guess it’s a reminder that I’ve moved beyond my past. I wasn’t always the best person. I have a feeling you know what that’s like.”

Iroh nodded. “Fighting a war on the wrong side, as a general no less, does weigh on a man as the years pass by.”

“You had it worse than I did then. I was on the right side – then I betrayed my mentor and tried to take great power for myself. I didn’t actually get to fight a war. I might have if I was allowed to continue, but I was stopped by some good friends.”

Iroh chuckled. “Now I’m curious… Does that crystal of yours work both ways?”

“No. And it only works for me, sorry.”
“Seems rather unfair to everyone else then, if you can see into them but they can’t see into you.”

“It might be,” Sunset admitted. “But it helps a lot. Many people don’t want to say what they’re feeling, and the only way to get them to talk is to call them out on it.”

Iroh nodded slowly. “Do you think that perhaps you need to look into me?”

“No? You seem to have it together and appear trustworthy.”

“Appearances can be deceiving. Though you are right.” He took another sip. “So, you were once a unicorn?”

Sunset nodded. “My original world was one filled with magic. I was a powerful mage, the personal protégé of Princess Celestia herself - the leader of our nation. I specialized in fire and light magic, though when I betrayed her I ran to another world, became a human, and lost my magic powers… Even this crystal didn’t give them back. But…” She snapped her fingers, shooting fire into the air. “Something about this world has given me something.”

“That does explain your reaction. Though I do wonder if you always had the power within you, and it was just the Comet that awakened it.”

“It’s possible. Magic does exist on Earth – the human world I live in now – just not as powerful. Maybe I just hadn’t tried hard enough before…”

“Could be you were trying too hard,” Iroh suggested. “Sometimes struggling for the thing you want with reckless abandon gets in the way of actually obtaining it.”

“You’re full of all sorts of wisdom, aren’t you?”

Iroh chuckled. “And you’re full of… I believe the word the young people are using these days is ‘spunk’.”

Sunset snorted. “Is that not the word?”

“I have no idea, I don’t live here. But if it is the word I’m never going to be able to take it seriously. It sounds like something Rainbow Dash - one of my friends - would say. Alongside ‘sweet’ and ‘awesome’ and ‘rad’.”

“She sounds like quite the handful.”

Sunset had some difficulty sipping her tea through her chuckles. “She’s rather headstrong. ...Who am I kidding, she’s really headstrong and oftentimes I wonder if she even uses that brain of hers.”

“I have a nephew like that, Zuko. No matter what he’s doing, he has a reckless determination about him. You have no idea how long it took him to realize the war was a bad idea.”

“...What’s he doing now?”

“Currently? Challenging his sister in the Fire Nation capital to ensure the war ends. I have confidence he can do it, since he’s not alone. Actually he’s probably already done it and just waiting for us to go see him.”

“Well, why don’t you?”
His face became home to the largest and stupidest grin Sunset had seen in awhile. “Because I’m having tea with a beautiful young woman! What kind of fool would I be to pass that up?”

Sunset rolled her eyes. “You’re quite the character, Iroh.”

“I try.”

The red light flowing through the window dimmed, giving way to a bright blue sky. Sunset felt the intense power from the Comet leave her body. She suddenly felt… empty.

She stood up and walked outside. She took a deep breath and tried to channel energy through her body. She punched forward.

A tiny spark of fire appeared and then vanished. She smiled sadly. “…Looks like I need training.”

“Your form is good, for a beginner,” Iroh said. “You lack an understanding of the flow of chi, however. Try feeling your soul – reach for the energy in your heart and toss it out along your arm, like throwing a ball.”

Sunset took a breath, reached toward her chest, and punched out. A slightly larger tuft of fire came out.

Iroh smiled warmly. “Promising.” He quickly looked up into the sky.

“Huh?”

“I heard something. It looks like we’ll have to put this on hold…”

A strange white creature Sunset could only describe as a flying lemur landed on Iroh’s shoulder. Iroh smirked. “Ah, Momo.” He stroked the creature and took a piece of paper off the lemur’s back. He frowned upon reading it.

“…Not good news?”

“No…” Iroh said, folding the paper up nicely. “The war isn’t over. The Firelord has not been defeated. He escaped, and will perpetuate the war as long as he is able…”

Sunset grimaced. “…Should I go then?”

“No… I think you’re here for a reason. Come with me, we’re going to steal a tank.”

Sunset nodded. “On the way you’ll need to tell me more about this Firelord.”

Iroh laughed. “You’ll be begging me to stop before I’m even half done with all the stories I could tell!”

“You’re on!”

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In the capital of the Fire Nation, a prince was preparing to become Firelord. The man known as Zuko stood at the edge of the Fire Palace, looking at the beautiful blue sky. He smiled.

He knew in his heart that the other missions had succeeded. Ba Sing Se was free, his father was defeated, and the war was over. He and the Avatar would lead the world into a brand new era, one without a century-long war. One where the three nations lived together in harmony.
However, like the scar across his eye, there would be a constant reminder of those who had done wrong in the war. It would be a difficult job to remedy this literal and metaphorical burn, and he wasn’t sure he could do it well enough. But he knew he had to.

He glanced downwards, at the Palace courtyard. He could see his sister chained up to a grate down there, screaming and yelling every few seconds. Nobody had tried to move her to the prison cells yet. She was far too… insane and dangerous at the moment. He could still see her belching fire at nothing in vain attempts to release her undying rage and developing insanity.

She was a sad sight, to be frank. A powerful woman who had run the Fire Nation for all of a day before losing her grip to paranoid madness. As horrible as she was, he couldn’t help but feel sorry for her. She was still Azula, his sister, despite all she’d done.

“Hey, don’t feel bad, okay?”

Zuko turned to his companion, one of the Avatar’s great friends, a waterbender by the name of Katara. Had she not been here, they would not have been able to stop Azula and take control of the Fire Nation directly.

“I’m… Well I do,” he admitted. “But I also feel… complete. Like we’re finally done. Even though there’s a lot left to do, the war’s going to be over. Almost no one alive even remembers what the world was like without war. It’s going to be amazing.”

“Yeah,” Katara said, leaning on the balcony and allowing her loops of hair to drift in the soft breeze. “…Hey, there’s something bright over there.”

Zuko put a hand over his eyes, looking into the distance. There was a bright fiery point coming at them from the direction of the sea. “A rocketing firebender…” He said. “Not many benders have the power to do that.”

“Aang?”

“Why wouldn’t he just airbend? Much easier to fly with that.”

“Iroh?”

“Possible. I’ve never seen him rocket though. He’d just take a boat; he never wants to get anywhere quickly. Unless…” Zuko frowned. “Unless something’s gone wrong.”

Katara’s eyes narrowed. “We should be prepared.”

Zuko turned behind him to an aid. “Tell the men to be ready. The war may not be over yet.”

The armored man nodded and ran into the palace.

Zuko narrowed his good eye, studying the spark in the distance closely. “Let’s go to the ground and meet them.” With a quick burst of flame he leaped off the balcony and landed on the ground below. He caught Katara, setting her down next to him. The two stood tall, awaiting the arrival of the spark. Several ranks of soldiers filed in alongside them, mostly Fire Nation soldiers, but a couple of earthbender warriors lined up alongside them.

Zuko’s eyes widened in fear when he saw who the star was. “No…”

Ozai landed on the ground, leaving a small crater in the cobblestone with his fiery landing. He breathed in and out with impressive force, tired from rocketing across the sea without the power of
the Comet for the last leg of the journey. “Yes, Zuko… Your Firelord has returned…”

Zuko glared. He entered a fighting stance alongside Katara. “You’ve been weakened. You can’t take us on.”

“I don’t have to. Guards! Seize them!”

“No!” Zuko yelled. “Don’t listen to him! Do you want the war to continue? Do you want your friends and loved ones to suffer as we attempt to destroy the entire world for our own selfish gain? Seize my father. End this madness.”

Ozai stood tall despite his lack of energy, towering over most of the people in the courtyard. “You are going to listen to my traitor of a son rather than me? What has he done for you besides produce false hope and perform foolish actions? He’s a traitor. I, on the other hand, have brought you glory and power. We are on the verge of ending the war with our victory. Today has been but a minor setback. Do you want to make this century of suffering and sacrifice of the Fire Nation mean nothing? If we end this war without getting what we came for, it was all pointless. Now, I give you an order, seize my son.”

No soldier moved.

Zuko smiled. “It looks like there’s a standoff here, Father. I think they want us to fight, and they’ll side with the winner. And you can’t win as you are.”

Ozai’s fist tightened until his knuckles became white. Then he smiled. “Then so be it.” He threw a punch of fire at Zuko, who was barely able to deflect it behind him. Katara unleashed a torrent of water from her pouch, dousing the Firelord. He jumped out of the way before she could turn it to ice, sending out an arc of fire towards Katara that Zuko deflected – only this time he deflected it into one of the soldiers.

In reaction, they sent a beam of fire at Zuko. One of the other soldiers sent that fire back, only for an earthbender to step in and launch a rock at Ozai.

Ozai grinned. “Perfect.”

Katara bit her lip, finding it increasingly difficult to keep up with the sudden chaos of attacks. Earth and fire flew in all directions, and it was getting harder and harder to simply defend herself…

Then Ozai grabbed her by the neck. She screamed – and all the fighting stopped in an instant.

Ozai glared at Zuko. “You lose.”

“Father, fight me, one on one. The rite of Agni Kai. For honor.”

“I will honor the rite later, my son. I agree that we will fight, as we always should have, tomorrow. But the life of this girl rests in your hands right now, regardless of the outcome of the rite.”

Zuko curled his hand into a fist, and for a moment it looked like he was going to try something. But he dropped it and sagged.

“Take him away,” Ozai ordered. “And the girl too.” He shoved her into the hands of a nearby fire soldier. “All of you are extremely lucky I don’t execute you on the spot for hesitating.”

“Woo-hoo!” Azula yelled from her chained-up position. “Goooo Dad!”
Ozai’s eyes twitched. He strode over to Azula.

“Hey, do you mind getting me out of these things? I-“

He slapped her. “All of my children have ashamed me. You are to be banished like Zuko was those few years ago. Your mission is the same. The Avatar.” He tore the chains off her hands without care for her wrist. She screamed as part of it broke. “Leave. Now.”

Azula’s fingers crackled with electricity. Like Zuko, for a moment it appeared as if she was going to try something. But she didn’t. She bowed and ran off.

Ozai took in a furious breath, turning to watch his two prisoners be taken to the dungeons. He briefly considered having the girl killed. She had no say in the Agni Kai… But no, she could be useful. If his intelligence was correct, she could be used to lure in the Avatar.

He pointed at a soldier. “You. Prepare a small balloon and get a pilot. Have them sail to the wreckage of the fleet with a message for the Avatar and my brother. Tell them I want to meet and… work out our differences.”

~~~

In the land where pillars of earth rose into the air, a Fire Nation tank drove up and parked. Iroh popped his head out of the tank, grinning. “Hello!”


“Thanks, we examined dozens of different models before settling on this one. She’s a beaut’.”

“…We?” Aang asked.

Iroh crawled out of the tank, allowing Sunset to come out as well. She waved. “Hi! I’m Sunset. I hear you’re the Avatar, master of all four elements!”

“Uh. Yeah.” He blinked. “Is it ‘weird people show up for no reason’ day, or something?”

Sunset blinked. “Maybe. Why do you ask?”

Aang frowned. “That… Will take a while to explain.”

Iroh leaned against the edge of the tank, surveying the charred landscape. “Then forego telling us that story and tell us what happened with Ozai.”

“Those stories are related… I had him,” Aang said. “I unlocked the Avatar state and had him pinned in the rock. I was ready to deal the final blow… And then some unicorn-bird showed up and stopped me with some kind of purple spirit-energy!”

Sunset paled, but said nothing.

“Then she made him vanish, telling him to get away while she dealt with me. It only took me about a minute to get her to realize what she’d done, but… He was already gone.”

“He probably went back to the Fire Nation…” Iroh said.

“Oh no!” Aang grabbed his head. “Zuko and Katara!”

“Indeed…” Iroh said, sighing. “We’ll have to hope they were able to get out in time. Sunset, why
don’t you tell Aang what you know.”

“Huh?” Aang said.

“I… I think I know who came through here,” Sunset said. “She’s a friend of mine. Twilight Sparkle, exploring different worlds just like I am.”

Aang twitched. “Did you know about this!”?

“No! I didn’t even know she was here! It’s a complete coincidence!”

“It may not be as much of a coincidence as you think,” Iroh commented.

“Well, even if there is some ‘fate’ at play here, I had no clue about this until you said something.”

She took the journal out of her jacket.

“What are you doing?” Aang asked.

“Writing Twilight. She’ll see this and we’ll get to set things right—”

“No! I don’t want her to get involved again and mess things up further!” Aang shouted. “In fact, you should go back before you rui—”

Iroh held up a hand. “Aang, it’s okay if you don’t want this ‘Twilight’ Involved. But you cannot judge a person based on the actions of another.”

Aang took in a breath and let out a slow sigh. “I am sorry, Sunset. Please, just don’t contact her.”

Sunset closed the journal. “Okay. How can I help then?”

Aang shrugged. “I don’t know… Ozai’s protected by his entire nation once again…”

Iroh nodded. “The Fire Nation has been beat back significantly for the first time in years. There is still hope to win through the art of war alone. While not ideal, there is still a possibility.”

Momo appeared on Iroh’s shoulder again, this time pointing into the air. The three of them turned to see a small Fire Nation balloon drifting their direction.

“It’s… unarmed,” Aang noticed.

Iroh frowned. “It probably carries a message.”

“Maybe Zuko defeated Ozai?”

“…It’s possible,” Iroh said.

The balloon landed next to them and a simple Fire Nation pilot stepped out, reading from a scroll. “Avatar Aang and General Iroh are cordially invited to the Palace of the Firelord for a banquet, over which the future of relations between the Fire Nation, the war, the Avatar, and the rest of the world will be discussed. Firelord Ozai wishes it known that this banquet is to work out the differences between the various parties. Transportation has been provided for you.”

Iroh frowned. “This… is unexpected.”

“Maybe being saved from me made him rethink everything?” Aang suggested.
“Or he has Zuko and Katara captured, and just wants us where he can see us”

Aang frowned. “Probably. …We can’t really refuse, can we?”

“Who knows what he’d do to them otherwise…” Iroh muttered. He pointed at a nearby member of Aang’s party. “Gather everyone and head to Ba Sing Se. It’s liberated. Use it as a stronghold. I no longer know if this war will end soon or last several more years. Be prepared.”

“You got it!” The small woman said, running off to tell the others.

Iroh turned to Sunset. “…Would you mind coming along? Your skills would be appreciated.”

Sunset glanced at her necklace and nodded. “I’ll try to read him.”

Aang looked like he wanted to object. He took one look at Iroh and decided not to push it; Sunset was coming along. The three of them piled into the balloon and rose into the air, heading over the sea toward the Fire Nation. The sun was setting. It would be night by the time they got there.

Sunset leaned on the side of the basket Aang was on. “So, you’re the Avatar. Chosen hero of this world. Iroh’s told me a lot about you.”

“And I don’t know anything about you.”

“From another world, used to be a unicorn, used to be a horrible person, I know Twilight, and I’m also apparently a firebender.”

Aang blinked. “…That was fast.”

“I explain it a lot, especially since I travel so often. It’s a good way to sharpen your storytelling skills. I could probably write a book at this point.”

“I haven’t had time for that,” Aang said. “Ever since I woke up it’s been nonstop fighting against the Fire Nation. I was looking forward to all of it stopping…”

Sunset looked at Aang with pity. “You’ve been given far too much responsibility all at once…”

He raised an eyebrow. “Look who’s talking. You’re not that much older than me.”

“I’m well into my twenties. I just look like a teenager due to a spell inconsistency.”

Iroh laughed. “You learn something new every day!”

“Spell?” Aang asked.

“Where I come from, we don’t bend. We use magic to do any number of things. Magic is more about the mind than the body, so I’m pretty sure it isn’t the same thing as chi, though as a unicorn I could cook up quite a storm of fire.”

“So you basically just use magic instead of chi to bend the elements?”

“Oh no, magic can be used for other things. Teleporting, shields, lasers, healing, growing, transforming… Every unicorn worth their salt can lift things with magic, the rest of the tricks require training.”

Aang nodded. “…Do you think I could learn to use magic?”
“…I don’t know. I didn’t think humans could, but here I am discovering I can throw fire with my fists. So… Maybe? You want to try?”

“…No.”

Sunset could sense he was still livid about what Twilight had done. “All right. Fair enough.” She turned to Iroh. “So, do we have a plan?”

Iroh gestured to the messenger in the balloon with them.

“On it,” Aang said, lifting the soldier with a gust of air and tossing him into the water, closer to shore. “And now we can talk.”

“So, the plan is I don’t have a plan,” Iroh said.

Sunset and Aang facepalmed.

“Ozai has us where he wants us. We have to go to this banquet and talk to him. Our only edge is Sunset here, who can tell us what he’s planning after a simple shake of the hand. After that…”

“Make it up as we go…?” Aang said.

“Well that is what you usually do,” Iroh chuckled.

Sunset bit her lip, holding tightly to the journal in her jacket. She could call for help, but… Twilight had already ruined things once. What were the chances she messed up again? Higher than Sunset wanted to admit. Maybe Aang was right.

Should I even be here? Is it possible for me to make it even worse?

~~~

It was highly unusual for the banquet hall to be set this late at night, but Ozai knew he wouldn’t be able to rest until he dealt with this insulting slice at his power. Had that unicorn-bird not appeared, the war would be over and the Fire Nation would have fought for nothing.

He was not going to put himself in that kind of danger again. This time, instead of coming to the Avatar, the Avatar was coming to him, along with the only real remaining threat to Ozai’s power: Iroh. But this time it wouldn’t be brute force… The time for brute force had been when Sozin’s Comet was in play. It was time for other tactics.

For one, he actually wanted to hear what they’d say to him. It would be quite the experience to know the Avatar, as well as what Iroh really thought.

Ozai did not expect there to be a peaceful resolution to this meeting. Nor did he want one. That didn’t mean he wasn’t going to have some fun and let them think they had a chance.

The double doors to the red hall opened, revealing three figures. Two were easily recognizable to him – the large figure of his brother and the childish figure of the Avatar he had seen only a few hours prior in close combat. The Avatar’s expression was that of barely contained rage. Ozai knew he wouldn’t try anything though, such a move would be a suicide mission not likely to work, for the entire Palace was crawling with guards and soldiers.

The third figure he didn’t recognize. She was a young woman with unusual yellow skin and brilliant red hair. Her clothing didn’t match that of any of the nations, though if he had to place her he’d say
Fire Nation. Perhaps an estranged colony or band of traitors.

Ozai nodded, maintaining his professional appearance. “Brother. Avatar. And…?"

“Sunset. Sunset Shimmer,” Sunset said, holding out her hand.

“You could call her my new apprentice,” Iroh said with that big smile of his.

Ozai smirked – even in dire situations, Iroh knew how to keep his chin up. An admirable trait, even if he was a traitor. He shook Sunset’s hand. There was a feeling vaguely like a static shock, and for a split second Ozai thought he saw light in the crystal. This meant nothing to him – the slight shiver that went through Sunset did. She was terrified of him, and angry. As he expected they all were.

Good.

Iroh shook Ozai’s hand without incident. For a split second, they both smiled. These were not pleasant smiles; these were the smiles of brothers remembering a time when things were better, but also plotting each other’s downfall.

Aang refused to bow or shake Ozai’s hand. The Firelord was not surprised by this action. The boy did not understand the nuance of politics and meetings. As insulting as it was, there was no way Ozai could get any more furious with the Avatar, so the slight was meaningless.

They sat at the long table decorated with food. Ozai at one end, Iroh, Aang, and Sunset at the other. Everyone knew that there were dozens of soldiers watching from nearby, ready to intervene at a moment’s notice, even if they couldn’t be seen.

Ozai knew that the Avatar and Sunset weren’t used to the decorative walls of fire along the room’s edges. To him, it was comforting. To them, the decorations were sinister. Perfect.

“Where’s Azula?” Iroh asked.

“Banished,” Ozai stated matter-of-factly. “Sent her on the same errand I sent Zuko on a few years ago.”

“May I ask what she did to deserve that?”

“Went insane and lost control of her position of power,” Ozai stated. “But that’s not why we’re here, and you all know it.”

Aang nodded. “You said you wanted to work out our differences?”

“That I do,” Ozai said, delicately taking a grape and devouring it. “You see, it has become clear to me that this war is rather devastating to the Fire Nation in addition to the rest of the world. You may not think so, but I assure you, many tens of thousands of my people have died and lost their livelihood for this war.”

“It is not like you to feel concern for our people,” Iroh noted.

Ozai shook his head. “It’s not a concern, Iroh. It’s a fact. And if the war were to end now without any gain from the Fire Nation, all the years of fighting and loss will mean nothing. The number of individuals driven solely by revenge in our people is extreme. Even if it is the right move to end the war, many of the people just won’t allow it.”

Sunset whispered something in Iroh’s ear. Ozai wondered what she could have possibly known.
There was no way she knew about his soldiers being unable to choose between him and Zuko? No… She wasn’t there. But she might have deduced. She was definitely here to play the role of a wildcard, not only to provide some unknown assistance but to play off Ozai’s paranoia.

Iroh cleared his throat. “Such things can be dealt with, Ozai. Most will follow the royal family without question, and those that don’t can be made to comply.”

“It is not so easy as you think. Not all are intellectuals like yourself.”

“What do you propose then?” Iroh said.

“Do we just let you conquer everything!?” Aang blurted.

“No,” Ozai said, sitting back. “I don’t think you have the influence to arrange that. What can be done is to create a ‘victory’ for the Fire Nation. It will not be feasible for us to run the entire world, but we can make it seem that way.”

“How so?” Iroh asked.

“If the population centers of the Earth Kingdom and both Water Tribes were under our control, I could declare the war a victory and end the fighting so long as the remaining people didn’t take up arms.”

Iroh frowned. “I do not have power over the Water Tribes.”

“But you do have influence over Ba Sing Se. They’d make you their king if they could.”

Iroh folded his arms. “That leaves the Water Tribes.”

“I fully believe that once a treaty is struck with the Earth Kingdom – Ba Sing Se in exchange for peace with the rest of the kingdom not under Fire Nation control – the Water Tribes will soon follow.”

Aang frowned. “If you just wanted to declare victory and be done with it, why didn’t you do this when you had Ba Sing Se under your control?”

“Because I had not been reminded of my own mortality,” Ozai spat, letting his calm exterior drop for the first time. “Being pinned atop a rock pillar and being saved at the last minute by providence does things to a man.”

“You still don’t believe the war was wrong, though,” Sunset said, speaking up for the first time in the conversation.

Ozai had to fight to look at her without visible contempt. “Why would I? It’s all any of us have ever known. It’s our drive as a nation. This war is our goal. What would we do without it?”

“You seem pretty handy with technology. You could pursue progress.” She shrugged. “Just a suggestion.”

“What is your point?”

Sunset ate a grape. This annoyed Ozai for some reason. “My point is that, you don’t believe the war was wrong. You still want domination and plan to extort your subjects for fire Nation dominance, even if you no longer think conquering the whole world is viable. And what’s stopping you from holding onto the population centers for a decade then launching an all-out assault on the rest of the
Iroh, Aang, and Ozai stared at Sunset, surprised.

Ozai sat back. “Even if that is the case, that would result in a quick end to this war and all the death. Why not consider it?”

“You’re asking for a surrender,” Aang said.

“In a way, I am,” Ozai said. “A direct surrender would be ideal, but the people will not accept a drastic measure such as that. I’m just calling for you to use your influence to change how the future will play out – will the war be long and hard, or end quickly?”

Iroh took in a breath. “Ozai, you know I’ll never turn over Ba Sing Se.”

“Are you sure?” Ozai said, smirking.

“Just bring them out already,” Iroh said. “Lay out your real terms.”

Ozai scowled. “Fine. Bring them!”

Two guards walked in, dragging Zuko and Katara. Katara had fresh lash marks all over her body and was too weak to look up. Zuko stared ahead with an intense fire in his eyes.

“Katara!” Aang yelled, standing up. Iroh held up a hand, keeping him from acting foolishly.

“Your real terms?” Iroh reiterated.

“If you don’t do what I want, they die,” Ozai said.

“Your own son Ozai?”

Ozai’s face darkened. “Perhaps. I do owe him one final Agni Kai. It will likely be to the death if you don’t comply. As for the girl, I can have her throat slit right now.”

“No!” Aang shouted, standing up.

Ozai smirked. “As expected. Iroh might be able to put his love aside for his cause. But you can’t. Luckily for you, you don’t have to betray anyone to save the girl. You just have to give yourself over to me. I won’t even kill you; I’ll just keep you locked in my dungeons for eternity, ensuring that another Avatar does not come. You’ll even get to spend your life with her, won’t that be romantic?”

Aang faltered, sitting back down.

“I’ll take that as your acceptance. As for you Iroh… Brother…” Ozai smirked. “I know you probably have some sort of plan, some sort of agency. Some secret society that will continue acting even once you two are out of the picture. All you have to tell me is everything about them. Then you live, Zuko lives after losing the Agni Kai, and I’ll get to lead the Fire Nation to a new age. I’ll even declare victory before the entire world is under my thumb. I’m no fool.”

Iroh stood up and took a breath. “Yes, you are.”

“Come again?”

“You can’t see the world’s beauty. There is no real glory in war, there is no future in bloodshed. You talk of those driven by revenge. More war will only lead to more revenge, until we destroy this world.
we call home. Your war cannot end in your victory. It can only end in your defeat, or the destruction of everything.”

Ozai’s face twisted into a scowl, his composure falling away. He slammed his fist on the table. “Are you really willing to go through with this? I’m not an unreasonable man Iroh. I keep my word. All that I’ve said, I will follow through with. There is no deception here.”

Iroh looked Ozai in the eyes. “Do you, by chance, not really want to kill your son?”

Ozai faltered. “I will if I need to.”

“…I’m not sure about that.”

“Do you want to test me?”

“I don’t need to. I know you care for your children, despite everything. You can’t bring yourself to kill them. Just banishment, quests of honor, and reinstatement. You won’t do it.”

Ozai slammed his fists on to the table. “Maybe I should just kill you then.”

“You tossed me in prison before. You will do it again.”

Ozai roared. This time he lit the table on fire when he slammed his fist into it, breaking it down the middle and pouring all the food off. His hand was still aflame as he stood there, staring at the broken piece of furniture.

He turned to Iroh. “Agni Kai, brother.”

“Such a duel would mean nothing,” Iroh said.

“Then we’ll fight without any rules or honor!”

Aang stood up. “No you won’t. We’re talking here.”

Sunset quickly took a book out of her jacket and scribbled furiously into it. Ozai leaped over to her and swiped it out of her hand. “WHAT is THIS!?”

Sunset stared at him in abject fear. “…A journal.”

He flipped to the last page. He couldn’t read what was written. But he was able to see some purple words appear before his eyes, as if written by an invisible hand. “What. Does. This. Say!?”

“…Already here…” Sunset said, surprised by the words.

“Who’s already here!?”

Aang shook his head. “No, we do not need her!”

Ozai lost all composure. “Guards, take them all away! You!” He pointed at the soldier around Katara. “Do it.”

Katara braced as the soldier readied the knife. The blade vanished with a flash of soft white energy.

Ozai’s confidence fell. Soldiers began to storm into the room, but a barrier of white magic separated the dining table from the incoming soldiers. With a flash of holy power, a tremendous white unicorn-bird appeared in front of him, towering over him by at least a full foot. Her pastel mane shifted as if
blown by an absent wind. She glared right at him, speaking with a voice both melodious and wise. “Firelord Ozai?”

Ozai regained his stature. “Yes. You are trespassing on the Property of the Royal Family.”

The white unicorn-bird ignored him. “I am Princess Celestia. My protégé saved you from death. While that action may not have been a mistake on its own, letting you escape was. You will face judgment for your crimes.”

Ozai frowned. “My armies will fight you.”

“I have armies of my own,” Celestia said. “This palace is surrounded by my many ponies, ready to challenge you for power right here. I don’t think you want to go that route.”

Ozai glowered. He knew she was right. She could be bluffing – but something told him she alone could defeat him. At the very least she could teleport him far away and deal with him later. She just wanted him to order his men to stand down.

To surrender.

*Oh, how the tables have turned.*

He found himself considering it. If he fought back, he doubted they’d let him live. He couldn’t run in this position. He couldn’t manipulate anyone with his soldiers sealed out.

But was he really willing to give up all that the Fire Nation had worked for all these decades?

It really *was* a cause bigger than him.

No… No. He would have to fight. If he died, that would just fuel the fire of his people. They would keep fighting out of a desire for revenge. The Fire Nation would not be snuffed out!

He pointed at Sunset Shimmer, unleashing a bolt of fire in her direction. She yelped, flailing her hands around, managing to deflect the oncoming torrent.

Ozai did not get off a second shot. But it was not Celestia who attacked him. It was Aang.

“You don’t have to die,” Aang said, grabbing Ozai’s head and chest. “But you can’t continue as you are.”

Ozai felt the very chi inside him – his soul – react with that of the Avatar’s. They mingled, twisted, and warped around each other. Ozai felt the Avatar encroach on his own being, so he fought back. He pushed the boy’s weak spirit out of his own with pure determination, using *his* power to alter the Avatar’s essence. He felt the boy, all alone, crying out for help…

And then Ozai felt hundreds of spirits at once, the voices of all Avatars that came before. In an instant, Ozai was flooded with power from beyond possibility, beyond his pathetic understanding. The energy of a spirit long forgotten to all present flooded Ozai, twisting the chi connected to his inner fire.

He fell back, hitting the ground. He groaned.

Aang stared down at him.

Ozai threw a punch – but no fire came out. He stared at his fist. “Wh- what did you…”
“I took your bending away. Like I should have done on that pillar. You won’t be able to hurt anyone with it ever again.”

“N-no!” He yelled, standing up tall. “That’ll… Ruin their will to fight! That will…”

Sunset punched him, knocking him out and singing his face. She twisted her wrist. “That felt good. It was so unpleasant having those emotions in me.” She shivered. Iroh chuckled despite himself.

Celestia dropped the shield surrounding them and stared at the many soldiers. “Your Firelord has fallen. You should now go.”

Slowly, wordlessly, all of them filed out.

Celestia turned to Aang, a pained smile on her face. “Avatar. There is somepony who wants to talk to you. Are you willing to hear her out?”

Aang looked at the fallen form of Ozai. “…Yeah.”

Twilight dropped the invisibility spell she had on, walking towards Aang. “I am sorry. I couldn’t stay away like you asked. I had wronged you – I had to set it right.”

“It’s…” Aang sighed. “Well, it’s not okay. But your heart was in the right place. I didn’t want to kill him either. You’re forgiven.”

“We have not fully repaid our debt,” Celestia said.

Iroh blinked. “You haven’t? You fixed the problem you caused! Don’t feel obligated to do anything else!”

Celestia smiled. “Well, don’t consider it part of the debt then. I’m doing it anyway – your world is recovering from war. My world is not. We will provide you with the aid you need to rebuild your society.”

Aang, Iroh, and Zuko bowed in Celestia’s direction. “We… Cannot tell you how much this means to us,” Iroh said. “For such a gift, we would owe you.”

Celestia smirked. “To continue the back and forth of repaying, how about this. Twilight here hasn’t bothered to inform me of any of her extra-dimensional escapades until now. So, I am creating plans to hold a meeting of multiple universes, to sort out how we should all interact with each other. All you have to do to repay us is have some of your leaders show up and play nice. Nothing more will be expected of you.”

“N-nothing?” Zuko said. “You… You are far too kind.”

“Yes, I’m told that may be a fault of ours…” Celestia said. “Apparently being naïve about conflicts has gotten Twilight and her friends into trouble more than once…”

Twilight blushed. “Yekeah… Sorry again.”

“Now…” Celestia looked at Aang. “Do you think you can convene the world leaders to discuss how I am to give aid to you all?”

Aang looked at Iroh. Iroh chuckled. “Sure, we can do that. But first…” Iroh grabbed Sunset. “This girl is going to show me her home and make me some tea.”

“What!”?
“You said you wanted to learn, and I can tell I’m not going to get another chance for a vacation for a loooong time,” Iroh said.

Sunset blinked. “Uh… Sure. Okay. Sounds good!”

Twilight looked at Sunset. “Do you need a quick way back? It can’t be easy to get this much power into your device.”

“No, I got it, just… give me a few minutes.”

Twilight rolled her eyes. “Okay then…” She turned to Aang. “I… I still don’t feel like I’ve done enough for you. I stole your moment as the hero. What you were meant to do.”

Aang smiled sadly. “Don’t worry about it. You… You aren’t as bad as I thought, and I was pretty angry. But if I do think of something, I’ll let you know.”

“Okay! Good.”

Sunset smiled. And just like that, everything was set right.

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Azula watched Iroh and that fiery girl walking down a street.

She grinned – she’d been right. Her father had been defeated, in the end. Good thing she didn’t leave right away. Serves the old man right, slapping her like that. She wasn’t Zuko. She’d never be Zuko.

They were talking about something Azula didn’t care about. All she wanted to do was watch them. The girl was holding a strange device that glowed red. Azula didn’t want to make her move on Iroh just yet, because she didn’t know what it did. She’d wait…

The device turned green, and the girl’s face lit up. She activated it, tearing a hole made of unusual strands in the air itself. Azula could see a sprawling city with dozens of houses. Automatic carriages rode by across black roads. Sunset and Iroh stepped through.

Azula leaped through as well, making barely a sound as she entered. The portal closed behind her with a pop. She leaped into a bush before Iroh could notice her. “That’s a lot of effort for something that lasts only a few seconds,” Iroh noted.

“Well, your world is very distant from this one. Now… Oh great. I just realized, we’re on the other side of the planet. I came to your world in Ba Sing Se, and exited in the Fire Nation. Just my luck.”

Iroh laughed. “I suppose I’m in for a longer vacation then?”

“Probably. Come on, let’s see if the translator spell already knows how to speak Mandarin, or whatever’s actually spoken here.”

Azula watched them walk away, a smile creeping up her face.

A whole new world for her…

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On the other side of the planet, in Sunset’s house, Agent Tempest Shadow rooted through Sunset’s many notes. Since the fiery girl had neglected to clean them up, the agent had full freedom to examine whatever she wanted without fear of getting caught by misplacing a note. But all of it was
nearly impossible to read. She had to snap photos and send it to the tech department so they could attempt to use computer algorithms to detect letters. It was a horribly annoying process.

There was one note she could read through that caught her attention. One probably written by Twilight.

*Observation: it seems like time flows at different rates in different universes. I had previously thought the constant shifts in hours were because of different planetary rotation periods or magic, but this is not the case. Using two synchronized watches, I found that the one I left home had let seven hours pass while the one I took had let six and a half hours pass. Similar results occurred in other universes. This explains why Sunset talks about Equestria as if it’s experienced multiple years since the demon incident, but how it’s definitely only been one year from here. This time discrepancy warrants further investigation.*

Very interesting.
Twilight’s entry hall had never looked so regal in all its history of occupation. She’d never bothered with the official banners of Equestria before, nor had she gone all out on ordering tables. Usually she wasn’t entertaining the leaders of a handful of different worlds – the regular simple stuff wasn’t going to cut it. Instead she had procured carefully furnished oak tables covered in intricately embroidered tablecloths. There were numerous images of famous smiling Equestrian figures, even a picture of Starswirl, bell-adorned hat and all. The Mirror Portal itself had been moved from its secluded space to the honored position at the base of the stairway, facing the front doors. The lighting glinted off it at a pristine angle.

In other words, the hall was amazing.

Twilight looked at her two decorators with a look of utter panic. “What if it’s not good enough!? What if some of them consider smiles condescending and insulting?! What if having images of historical figures who are still alive is bad form!? AUGH!”

Rarity and Pinkie stared at Twilight with raised eyebrows.

“It could happen!”

Rarity continued staring at her.

“Hey, there have been more than a few times where I’ve messed up with these things, okay? I don’t want today to be one of those times! Celestia’s coming here to see what we’ve been doing and it has to look great or… Or…”

“Or what?” Pinkie asked.

“I don’t know! Something! A planet could explode!”

Pinkie giggled.

“It could happen!”

“My, is there an echo?” Rarity wondered aloud.

Twilight spread her wings, flustered. “Look, I get that I may look a little paranoid right now…”

“May?”

Twilight ignored the question. “…but the thing is we don’t know what the other cultures are like all that well! We always visit them – they never visit us! We’re weirded out by them all the time! They could get angry!”

Pinkie grabbed Twilight by the cheeks. “Twilight, calm down. Remember who’s running this thing behind the scenes. That’s right, me, the number one party pony. I’ll keep everything under control at all times. Trust me.”

“I… Pinkie you’re a little-“

“Shoosh. Trust Twilight. Truuuuuuust.”
“Uh… Okay. I’ll trust you Pinkie.”

“Good, cause you won’t see much of me. Behind the sceeeenes, remember?” She mysteriously walked backwards behind a potted plant. Twilight didn’t need to investigate to know she was gone.

“…Right. Pinkie’s got this. All I have to worry about is making sure everybody doesn’t want to kill each other and to get everyone to agree to sit down and talk oh Celestia that’s a lot to worry about.”

Rarity sighed. “Twilight, dear, if you’re nervous and flakey like this all those things are more likely to happen.”

“We’re doomed!”

“Twilight Sparkle! Get a handle on yourself! You are a Princess and you need to hold yourself with dignity for the visitors!”

Twilight was startled into silence by Rarity’s sudden fire.

“Better, but you look a little too terrified.”

Twilight whimpered.

Rarity sighed. “If it makes you feel better, you’ll never be alone. Fluttershy, Starlight, and I will all be here. Not to mention most of the people coming are friends. You don’t need to feel afraid of them.”

“I know. I know… I know…”

Starlight walked out of the Mirror Portal. Twilight screamed at the sudden addition of a pony to the room, falling onto her back. Starlight blinked, ignoring Twilight’s outburst and instead noting the Mirror Portal’s new location. “Huh, moved it for the meeting then? Is that why it wasn’t on the same tree?”

“Probably,” Rarity said. “Dear, what is that you’re holding?”

Starlight glanced at the flat, electronic device in her hoof. “Souvenir.”

“Interesting. Meet anyone new?”

“I was just on another Earth, nothing special. Turns out that Sunset never turned good. Had to run quickly.” She snickered. “Turns out she really doesn’t understand that four legs are faster than two. She also forgot I had a horn!” She gently tapped her horn with the screen.

Rarity rolled her eyes. “Yet another escapade. Don’t go anywhere else for the moment, the meeting will start soon.”

“Augh! SOON!” Twilight said, shooting back up to alert and ready. “Are we all certain everything’s fine? Are we?”

“No,” Fluttershy said, walking into the hall. “But, really, should we be? That’d just ruin the experience. I may think Discord’s distracted for the next few hours, but can I really know?”

“Oh no. If he comes in…”

“Twilight, the point is not to panic. The point is to realize you can’t watch everything, you can’t stop time, you just have to go with what you can see. And I think the castle looks fit for a royal banquet,
“by the way.”

“This isn’t a banquet!”

Fluttershy put her wing over her face. “Twilight…”

“She’ll be like this until the meeting actually starts,” Starlight said. “Then instinct will kick in and she’ll perform amazingly like the Princess she is.”

“Why are you all so confident in my abilities!?” Twilight blurted.

“Because they usually come through,” Rarity said.

Twilight groaned. “Why…”

Fluttershy patted her gently on the back. “There there… It’ll be fun, you’ll see. You’ll be worried and then you’ll be talking to Mlinx and introducing him to Queen Luna and-”

Sunset and human Twilight walked out of a portal of their own creation. Fluttershy screamed and fell on top of pony Twilight.

“Oh. Hi Sparky, Sunset,” Rarity said. “Decide to drop by after all?”

Sunset grimaced, the portal popping shut behind her. “Only for a little while. It’s technically early morning on Earth and today is the first day of classes at Wolfe University. So I will have to abandon you all.”

“Aw…” Starlight said. “I was looking forward to hanging out again.”

“Sorry, got another life. Not to mention all the sushi… So much sushi…”

Sparky raised an eyebrow. “I thought you loved your job and it was Iroh’s training sessions that drained you.”

“Can’t they both?” Sunset said, chuckling tiredly. “Why did I ask him to teach me…”

“Because you like using fire and it fulfills a part of you that you didn’t realize was missing.”

“When I ask a silly question, assume I don’t want a poetic answer.”

Sparky winked. “Oh, really?”

The pony Twilight – Twinkie – finally managed to stand up. “Well, it looks like you two are the first to arrive. Ambassadors from Earth!”

“Ambassador. Single,” Sunset pointed at Sparky. “I don’t have any claim to Earth.”

“It’s still a check off the guest list!” Twilight said, marking her guest checklist. She decided to read it off. “Let’s see… The demons, the ponies of Lai, the Elemental Nations… Those are all who I expect to show up actually. Ardent, the Binaries, and the mushroom people got invitations but I don’t think they’ll listen. We’ll set the Mirror Portal to them anyway, see if anyone’s there.”

“Aren’t you forgetting someponies?” a new voice questioned.

“Who—” Twinkie paled. “Riiiiiiight.” She turned around, face to face with the royal sisters Celestia and Luna. Celestia’s flowing, magical mane of pastel colors contrasted with her darker sister’s starry
mane. Luna herself was of a slightly shorter stature than Celestia, though she still towered above all normal ponies. Images of the moon adorned her regalia and her eyes were a wise, piercing green.

Twilight folded her ears back and smiled nervously. “Sorry Princesses, I guess I didn’t think I needed you on the list…?”

Luna rolled her eyes. “It is no problem, Twilight Sparkle, my sister is just giving you a hard time.”

Celestia chuckled. “Oh, Luna, don’t ruin it! I could have drawn that out for a few more minutes at least.”

Sunset tried to look interested in one of the banners on the wall. She tried to look very interested. So interested that Celestia wouldn’t ever try to bother her—

“My, that’s quite an interesting banner, is it not?”

Darn it.

Sunset laughed nervously. “Why, yes, yes it is, I should congratulate the designer!”

“Here,” Rarity said.

“Yes! Good job Rarity! How great!”

“Sunset…” Celestia said.

“Yes……?” Sunset gulped, turning around slowly.

“We should have lunch sometime.”

“…Okay?”


“Eheheheheheh… Wait! I might have classes then-“

“I’ll just come to Earth then, eat lunch with you there.”

Sunset paled. “I…”

“Is there a problem with that?”

“…No…”

“Good. Pleasure to see you again.” With a bemused expression on her face, she walked off to the stairway. As soon as she was out of sight Sparky burst into laughter.

“You are terrified of her!”

“We didn’t exactly part on the nicest of terms Tw- Sparky.”

“You saw her at the showdown with that Fireguy, right?”

Sunset blinked. “Yeah, but that was business, and we didn’t really talk…”

“I’m sure the lunch will go fine,” Twinkie offered. “Also, Sparky, do not call the Firelord the Fireguy, okay?”
“Oh no… is that a cultural insult?!?” Sparky gasped.
“I don’t know! It might be!”
“How many cultural rules do you think we break just by standing around normally!?”
“I DON’T KNOW!”
Luna blinked. “…Mother of… They’re reinforcing each other.”
“Run,” Starlight said. “Run while you still can.”
“This is far too fascinating to flee from.”
Sparky and Twinkie shot Luna a look. She just fixed them with a knowing smile. “I may not be my sister, but even I have to admit at certain times the difficulty of others is… amusing.”
Twilight and Sparky groaned. “They just don’t understand us…”

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In a dense jungle not far removed from the crystal castle, a different Luna paced.

“Are you sure this is the right tree?”
Siron shrugged, leaning against a large flower, slowly eating it petal by petal. “I have never seen it. I could not say for certain.”
Fef raised her fuchsia fists into the air. “I trust what they told us! This is the exact tree the Mirror Thing will find!”
Lieshy raised an eyebrow. “The repeated patterns raise the fog.”
Fef put two hands on her hips and pointed the others at Lieshy. “Translation!”
Lieshy rolled her eyes. “The trees all look the same so it’s easy to make a mistake.”
Fef blinked. “…That makes sense. Dammit, Lieshy, why can’t you always talk like a normal person? I know you know how!”

“There is no such thing as a normal person. Conversations, even in your ‘straight talk’, still rely on context and clues from what I’ve seen. For instance: ‘letting the cat out of the bag,’ a perfectly acceptable phrase in double.”

“That’s not a reason.”
Lieshy allowed herself to smile slightly. “It’s fun.”
Siron chuckled. Luna frowned. “I’m not sure fun at the confusion of others is… harmonious.”

“Harmony is not all there is to seek in life.” Lieshy pointed a wing at Luna. “We can’t call you Luna over there, there’s going to be another one.”

“…Oh. What should I be then?”
“Mistress,” Siron said. “A title, rather than a name.”
Luna looked downcast. “A title I am not proud of…”

“It carries power with it. You can take great pride in your power without exalting your past actions.”

Lieshy raised an eyebrow. “The shark’s maw encroaches on your railway.”

Siron bent his legs so he was closer to Lieshy’s eyes. “The strain on the rope is golden.”

Lieshy smirked. “The glass is half full of potential.”

“For the love of Moons please stop!” Fef moaned. “You agreed that a society built on double-whatsis was bad!”

“While true, that doesn’t mean double is worthless.”

Fef grabbed the sides of her head, grunting. Luna sighed. “This… hardly seems like a dignified set of ambassadors. We’re rather rowdy.”

Siron shrugged. “That’s the way we are. We should not be ashamed of it. We are warriors.”

“I’m not,” Lieshy deadpanned.

“You’re a mental warrior.”

“…Potatoes in a row.”

Siron was silent. Lieshy took this to mean he was unable to parse the meaning of the phrase, which was good, since it was nothing more than a disgruntled expletive. Sometimes the simplest ideas were the hardest to convey in double. A flaw in the system, she supposed.

It was in that moment a nearby tree sparked faintly, signifying the connection of the Mirror Portal. It was not the tree Fef had pointed out. It was the one on the opposite side of the clearing.


“Two words,” Lieshy said.

“What did I just say you little – ohmygosh Luna your mane looks adorable when it blows like that!”

Luna raised an eyebrow. “…You already said this.”

“I know. I think. But diddly-darn it looks so… sparkly…”

Lieshy raised her eyes. She lived with these knuckleheads. Admittedly, the three with her were great friends and good people to talk to. At least when Siron wasn’t busy, when Fef wasn’t having an attention span shorter than a bumblebee, and Luna wasn’t wallowing in the darkness of her past. She actually felt at home here, even though most of the inhabitants of the village were no match for her linguistic wit, the place still gave her a sense of community.

One that didn’t exist in her original world.

Starlight peeked through the portal, appearing before them as a disembodied head affixed to a shiny tree. “You guys coming in yet, or what?”

Siron raised a hand, circling it with another in a gesture Lieshy knew meant ‘time passes us by.’ “It does appear we’ve delayed pointlessly.” Without another word, he walked towards the portal.
Starlight ducked out, allowing him to pass through. Fef pranced in next, followed by Lieshy herself.

Lieshy once again found herself in the entry hall of Twilight’s castle. The basic shape hadn’t changed – the double doors were the same tremendous blocks, the stairs still curled up in a symmetric pattern, and the space was as bright as ever. It was easy to see that a lot of care had been put into making the place appear as brilliant as possible. She saw ornate tables, historic paintings, and even a chandelier that slowly shifted through all the colors of the rainbow.

Lieshy’s Twilight had never bothered to decorate the castle this well. She’d cared little about the thoughts of others besides how moldable they were.

Lieshy was not surprised to note that her group was not the first one to arrive. There were several dozen humans she presumed were from the Elemental Nations, all talking in mixed groups, often discussing only with members of their own world instead of members of others. Lieshy understood the politics between the various nations was tense, although she didn’t know the details. Secondhoof information was not much to go off of, even for one as observant as her.

The humans were far from the only group there. She saw some ponies that definitely didn’t belong in this world, namely a Sunset who was part deer, unicorn, and… ‘mawlie’ was the term for the ponies with the mouths for tails, right? She wasn’t sure. There were a few other oddball ponies around her mingling with the others, most of which passed Lieshy’s attention quickly and were simply classified under ‘Other ponies of Lai.’

There were a few oddball attendees who didn’t look like they belonged with any group. Sunset and Twilight – or Sparky – were the first of these that Lieshy noticed, though she also saw a strange girl made of purple shadow and a couple large creatures completely buried in fur.

Lieshy let her gaze fall upon an interesting sight – two versions of Luna. One was the moon princess of the world, the other a conglomeration of all the races of Lai. The Queen was the same height as the other Luna, though she had the horns of a deer, the toothed tail of a mawlie, the fins of a seapony, and the alien eyes of an oculus.

Lieshy nudged her Luna – Mistress. “You should go talk to them.”

“Oh, they look busy, I wouldn’t want to…”

Lieshy raised an incredulous eyebrow.

“Eheh… All right. I’ll… Try.” Nervously, she strode up to her other selves. The native Luna – who Lieshy was already coming to think of as Moona – noticed Mistress and welcomed her in with a wing. Lieshy considered eavesdropping on their conversation, but decided against it. She was much more interested in a different meeting of alternate versions…

Sunset looked down at… Sunset.

“We’re going to need to figure out a naming system,” the hybrid pony said.

“I don’t want a stupid nickname like ‘Twinkie,’ got it?” the human asserted.

“I know the feeling. One of us could be Sunset, the other could be Shimmer.”

“Seems unfair that one of us gets to keep our first name. What if I call you Soldier?”

“…Not a fan of that idea. How about we just come up with new names entirely?”
The human shook her head. “That could take forever…”

Lieshy interjected. “Can I throw a boomerang into the wire?”

“…Are you asking if you can suggest a name?” the pony asked.

“Yes.”

“Sure. Go ahead.”

Lieshy pointed at the human. “You are Sun.” She pointed at the pony. “You are Set.”

Sun raised an eyebrow. “I’m not so sure that’s great…”

Sparky tapped Sun on the shoulder, stopping whatever she was going to say. “Factoring in likely time dilation, you have twenty minutes until your class.”

“Holy fruitcake on a stick! I have to go now!” Sun ran for the Mirror Portal frantically; just in time to witness a man in green arrive. Sun paused to look at him cautiously for a moment before shaking her head and running to the controls of the Mirror Portal, returning to Earth in haste. Lieshy heard Iroh’s hearty laugh fill the space.

Set raised an eyebrow. “Guess we won’t need to worry about the name thing then.” She extended a hoof. “I’m Sunset, but you know that.”

“I’m Fluttershy, but I go by my nickname these days. Lieshy.” She shook the outstretched hoof.

“Seems like you got shafted with the nicknames.”

“It works for me. I’ve grown to appreciate it.”

Sunset raised her eyebrow. “How can you appreciate a name that brands you as a liar?”

“Because it’s wrong. The lie and the shy create a paradox. A… Well I’d call it a twisting eclipse, but I think the way you’d describe it is the truth makes it a lie but the lie makes it true.”

“…Gotcha.”

Lieshy smiled innocently. “Your leftovers are showing.”

“…What? You’re one of those double-talkers, ain’t’cha?”

“What do you think?”

“Definitely,” Sunset muttered something incoherent under her breath. “It was… Nice meeting you.”

“Egad, the leftovers return in full force,” Lieshy deadpanned.

Sunset quickly got out of the interaction. Lieshy felt rather proud of herself, she still had it.

“That wasn’t very nice, you know.”

Lieshy saw her counterpart walk up to her. “It was harmless.”

Fluttershy shook her head. “I mean, probably, but that doesn’t change anything. It was an awful lot like how your fellow ponies acted. Manipulation.”
Lieshy rolled her eyes. “I’m not trying to extort anyone for my own gain. It was just for the sake of my amusement.”

“That’s just a lesser form of the same problem. Just because you can run circles around ponies and make them uncomfortable doesn’t mean you should.”

“You and your friends mess with each other all the time. I believe you call it good natured ribbing.”

“That’s… Not the same thing. We know each other.”

“Why does that really make a difference? If a relationship is going to involve fun mockery and foreplay, why not start with it from the gate?”

“Because there’s this thing called tact.”

“Tact is just a lie, and not the kind I like at that,” Lieshy asserted.

Fluttershy sighed. “I’m just trying to help you here, Lieshy. Ponies will resent you for what you’re doing.”

“Will it make them want to extort me and everypony around them?”

“…No?”

“Then I’m fine with it. I’ll be who I am, regardless of what they like or not.”

Fluttershy took in a deep breath. “Assertiveness can be a flaw.”

Lieshy pondered this. “The barrels turn in many directions.”

“Lieshy…”

Lieshy chuckled awkwardly. “Sorry. It means almost everything can be a flaw or a benefit depending on the situation. The turning represents the benefit or pain, the directions refer to differing viewpoints, the barrels bring to mind images of large objects of impact, referring to the importance of the assertion and direction. And ‘many’ because the issue is not black and white.”

“You really do pack a lot of information into one thought… I don’t think the direction is so vague all the time though. You should try to make friends, not push ponies away.”

“We both know I’m not going to change because of a conversation.”

“I know. I hope you’ll remember this conversation when something does go wrong.” Fluttershy shook her head. “Enough of that. This is supposed to be a happy place with a promising future. Everyone’s going to start helping each other!”

“Idealistic,” Lieshy said. “The cultures here are so very different. The Elementals are used to war while the Lai are used to a brutal peace. Your ponies are all about friendship and understanding while the demons are all about glory in brutality. Not to mention the oddballs. I have no idea about the human Twilight’s world, nor that green guy, nor those fuzzy people, nor that shadow girl.”

“Sparky’s not here to represent anyone, she’s just the inventor of the portable portal. No it doesn’t have a name. The green guy’s Link, a friend from a world called Ardent. He could be here on official business, but I doubt it. Ardent doesn’t seem to care much about us. The fuzzy people are the Binaries. No magic at all, so they find us… a bit scary. And… shadow girl?”
Lieshy pointed at the girl made of purple shadow with a pink striped hat and similarly colored curls that might have been hair. Her eyes were not visible, but her mouth was, curved in a slight innocent smile. She was talking to a man in red robes.

“Huh…” Fluttershy said. “I have no idea who she is. She’s talking to Firelord Zuko though.”

“I bet you never thought you’d need to know all these important people, huh?”

Fluttershy laughed nervously. “Never in my wildest nightmares did I think this much would be put on me… But I am helping them. That’s why I’m out here, even if it isn’t my comfort zone.”

“I wish there were more people like you,” Link said, walking up with Rarity at his side.

Fluttershy blushed. “Thank you.”

Lieshy raised an eyebrow. “Do you really? Would it really be better if people left their comfort zone regularly?”

Link smiled, kneeling down so his eyes were level with hers. “You’re a contrary one, I can tell.”

This guy’s smart. “While that may be true, you didn’t answer the question.”

Link nodded. “True. I really do wish that. You probably do as well and are just poking me to see how I’ll respond.”

“It’ll sharpen your mind.”

“Sometimes you just know things without thinking,” Link asserted.

“Bowtie blubber.”

“…What?”

Rarity rolled her eyes. “Her people talk in this bizarre double-speak almost all of the time. It’s a mix of half-truths and metaphors designed to tie your brain in a knot.”

Lieshy cleared her throat. “It essentially meant ‘that’s absurd,’ by the way.”

Link blinked. “I can’t imagine a place like that.”

“You’re derailing the conversation,” Lieshy said.

“So?” Link stretched his arms. “I think I’m just not in the mood for a conversation where I’m dragged around for your amusement.”

Lieshy shrugged. “Have it your way. Enjoy the ignorance.” She turned and walked away, angling her back toward Rarity.

“Lieshy!” Rarity yelled. “That’s rude!”

“He’s being rude to me, is he not?”

“You’re railroading him,” Rarity muttered.

Lieshy smirked. “Maybe I was railroading you.”

Rarity blinked. “…My…”
Fluttershy sighed. “Lieshy…”

Lieshy let herself smirk, walking back to them. ”What?”

“Please, stop treating conversations as… as a game. It’s hurting ponies.”

“No.”

“Lieshy… It’s not good. Surely you can see that you’ve hurt Rarity’s feelings and have put Link on the defensive.”

“So? Their minds could stand to be sharpened.”

“I say!” Rarity blurted. “My mind is just fine!”

“That may be so,” Siron said, walking in on the conversation. “But Lieshy here is a warrior of mind. How will she keep her skills active and ready if she doesn’t spar constantly?”

Link looked up at Siron, sizing him up. There was a slight trace of contempt in his expression that wasn’t present when he was addressing Lieshy. “Siron, is it?”

“Yes.”

“You should know there are other things besides skill and strength if you’re a leader.”

Siron leaned down until his four eyes were level with Link. “My physical and mental strength is what makes me worthy to lead. It is what defines our worth.”

“What place do the weak have in your society then? Slaves?”

“No. Just pity. I can tell you are a strong man yourself. I can also tell you are livid with my perceptions of power. Why?”

“All people are equal.”

“Such an assertion is extremely foolish. Some have power over others. Some can do more things than others. Some of us are given powers beyond understanding while others are limited to simple, menial tasks. Everyone may have a purpose, but some are greater than others.”

“What about care? How can you care for your people if they’re lesser than you?”

“I.”

Princess Twilight teleported between the two of them, pushing their faces apart. “Okay! Enough of that! We won’t be fighting here! This is a place of peace and friendship, not distrust and arguments!”

“But that’s exactly what it is,” Lieshy muttered. Fluttershy nudged her.

Siron and Link took a step back from each other. They did not stop glaring at each other.

“Did you two hear me!?” Twilight snapped. “You’re both different! Just deal with it! There’s no way everyone here is going to agree on everything!”

The two silently turned away from each other and went their separate ways.

“Link!” Rarity called, running after him. Lieshy went after Siron, flying until she was level with his
head.

“I appreciate you backing me up, but it was unneeded.”

“I needed to gauge the ‘Link’ fellow. He’s dangerous.”

Lieshy raised an eyebrow. “How so?”

“He’s an idealist, like the ponies of this world, but he’s not naïve. He’s seen how the world is broken. People who can stare darkness in the face and come out like that are dangerous, unpredictable, and uncontrollable.”

“Is he a real threat?”

Siron looked directly into Lieshy’s eyes. “No. He’ll never have any reason to act out against me.”

Lieshy’s expression remained flat. “Ah.” She didn’t believe a word of what Siron had just said.

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Princess Twilight Sparkle sighed. “And those two were the third standoff I broke up today! The pony Sunset had to be called off Celestia! I caught Zuko and one of the Water Tribe people yelling at each other!” She covered her eyes. “I just… Augh!”

Iroh patted her on the back. “There there… Yelling happens. Peace, war, it doesn’t matter. Diplomacy always ends up with yelling at one point or another. You shouldn’t be hard on yourself about it. I’m sure you’ve done your fair share of yelling in your time.”

Twilight nodded slowly. “Yeah… But you seem to have it all under control. Your people respect you and you just have this… aura about you that makes people respect you and like you.”

Iroh laughed. “You speak as if you lack that skill.”

Twilight rolled her eyes. “I’m a nervous wreck, Iroh, I don’t have things under control! I—”

Iroh grabbed her by the shoulders. “Twilight, I don’t have things under control either. The Earth Kingdom is demanding all the other Nations treat it with respect, the Northern Water Tribe has adopted a stance of isolationism, and there are numerous Fire Nation vigilantes wandering the world seeking revenge of their own. These things bother me. The only difference between you and me is that I’m older and am used to the constant feeling of everything falling around me.”

Twilight blinked. “Really?”

“Really. Well, that, and I can’t stand digging through scientific studies. Too dry. Don’t know how you manage.”

Twilight giggled. “The understanding is its own reward.”

“That explains a lot! I never understand anything!”

Twilight facehooved. “Sweet Celestia…”

“How do you know she tastes sweet? Looking like candy does not make you candy.”

“It does if you’re Pinkie Pie…” Twilight glanced over her shoulder, expecting to see the pink pony there. She wasn’t. The table behind her had just been cleaned though. The party pony was around.
Twilight turned back to Iroh and saw sadness in his eyes. She cocked her head. “What is it?”

“I want to run a tea shop,” he said. “I was looking forward to passing the baton on to the next generation. To living a simple life. But it looks like that won’t be the case… I was chosen as the ambassador for all nations. I don’t rule, I represent. I’m never going to be let go now, never going to retire. The worlds are changing too much too rapidly. I’ll always be needed…”

“Who’s to say you can’t still own a teashop? Rarity still owns her boutiques, even though she doesn’t spend much time in them.”

“There’s something about a personal touch, Princess. Living the tea…”

Twilight smiled sadly. “…When this settles down a little, I’ll see if I can do anything for you. Get you a tea shop in a place where you can keep an eye on things. If we don’t move the Mirror… Maybe inside this very hall.”

Iroh laughed. “I’ll consider your offer. But I will not be able to take it up for… years, probably.”

“The offer will remain,” Twilight said. “You deserve it. You deserve so much more than you’ve been given.”

Iron grinned. “I thought you didn’t like it when people praised you.”

Twilight blushed. “Galloping gazelles, this is just some bizarre cycle of positive reinforcement isn’t it?”

“I leave that deduction up to you. Also, watch out.”

“Huh?” Twilight did not watch out. Aang ran to her, a rush of air blowing her across the face and turning her mane into a bird’s nest.

Aang smiled. “Hi Twilight. So, I’ve talked to a lot of people now but… I can’t wait. Teach me magic.”

Iroh laughed. Twilight raised an eyebrow as she used her magic to straighten her mane. “Are you sure now’s a good time?”

“I don’t see why not,” Aang said. “You’re just talking to Iroh.”

Twilight turned to Iroh. “Do you think he can?”

“I haven’t the foggiest idea. I may know a lot but I don’t know the full capabilities of the Avatar.”

Twilight nodded. “Okay. Aang, you can still bend in here, correct?”

Aang nodded. He created a ball of air in one hand, a ball of fire in the other, and stomped on the ground to dent the crystal floor. A nearby glass of water blasted its contents into the air. “Still got it!”

Twilight smiled. “All right. What about the… other form of bending you know?”

Aang faltered. “I… Don’t think I should bend the energy of others except as a last resort.”

“Good. Sometimes… Power can go right to your head. But you shouldn’t be afraid to use it if you need to, Aang. Who knows what it can do?”

Aang nodded solemnly.
“Okay, first lesson. Forget everything you know about bending. Magic is not focused through motion of the body, like the powers of a pegasus.” She raised her wing and blew a gust of wind into Aang’s face. “That… Was a bad example. I’m not good at my pegasus magic. But you get the idea, it’s basically control of the air and water to produce weather effects.”

“I’ve bent cloud before, is it like that?”

“…Probably? You’d have to talk to my friend Rainbow Dash about that one, she’s good at it. But the point is that actual magic of the arcane is not like that. True use of magic always involves the mind and a focal point. In unicorns, it’s the horn.” She tapped her glowing point. “For dragons, it’s their fire glands. Some pegasi can use their wings to cast actual spells and certain earth ponies have discovered how to use their hooves. I only know one human who actually uses magic – that version of me over there – and she channels through her hands.”

Aang looked at his hands. “So… How do I use them?”

Twilight smiled sheepishly. “Okay… for unicorns it comes naturally, but I’ve done studies. You have to pull the energy of magic from around you into your focal point. This should produce a glow of some kind.”

Aang took a deep breath, held his right hand in front of his face, and focused. The fist vibrated slightly.

Then it burst into flames.

Iroh chuckled. “I think you’re trying too hard, Avatar.”

Aang let the fire dissipate. “The other elements all had a mental state associated with them… passion, peace… Does magic have one?”

“Thoughtful, if any,” Twilight offered. “A sort of lack of emotion. This isn’t always the case, but it’s how it is for me.”

He tried again, careful not to put any power into his hand, keeping the fire at bay. He tried to reach out, to feel the arcane energies around him. He took a breath. “I’m… going to try something.” His body became rigid and his eyes lit up with the intense white of the Avatar State. He focused on the hand, trying to draw the energy to him… But still, nothing.

“Looks like I don’t have anything…”

“The Avatar State only draws on what previous Avatars have learned,” Iroh said. “If no Avatar ever learned a technique, no help will come.”

“I have an idea,” Twilight said. “I can force magic into your hand for you, so you know what it feels like.” She lit her horn and forced magical energy into Aang’s hand. The arrow tattoo on the back of his appendage glowed a soft purple.

He grinned, focusing on the energy in his hand, unleashing a purple spark of energy. “Yeah!”

“Now, see if you can replicate that. Try to draw the energy in yourself. That’s required.”

Aang nodded, readying his hand. He willed the energy to flow back into his hand, to flow into his body…

But nothing happened.
Twilight sighed. “Well, you could probably cast magic if you had someone putting it in your hand constantly, but it doesn’t look like you have it. If you do I’m not sure how to awaken it.”

Aang smiled sadly. “It’s okay. I guess I may want too much.”

Iroh put his hands on Aang. “Even if that is true, which I doubt, you should never stop trying new things. Who knows what you may find?”

“Something really cool, hopefully.”

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Celestia smiled, walking up to the three Lunas. “Hello, sisters.”

The Queen yelped in surprise. “C-Celestia!”

Celestia nodded. “I am not the mare you knew. Which, from what I hear, is a good thing.”

“I… It is… I…” She couldn’t restrain herself. She rushed Celestia into a hug. “I…”

This didn’t surprise Celestia. She warmly held the unusual version of her sister. “It’s fine. It’s never easy to do what needs to be done.”

“I’m sorry!” she blurted, backing up. “I did not need to do that-“

“I do not mind,” Celestia said. “Though I hope your subjects won’t think any less of you.”

“They will…” she said. “But I think Sunset can keep the ones here under control.”

“Good. Sister! What are you calling yourselves now?”

Her sister shrugged. “I’m Moonie, that’s Queenie, and this is Missy.”

The Mistress Missy waved sheepishly. “…Hi.”

Queenie wiped her face, the action punctuated by a nip of her tail. “Celestia, thank you for having us. It’s a delight to see so many happy faces.”

“Glad I could make your day,” Celestia responded. “To be fair, this was all Twilight. She feels bad about not telling me anything of these other worlds she’s been visiting and went the extra mile to make this ‘perfect’.”

Queenie gasped. “She didn’t tell you? Sunset told me the day after it happened!”

“Why’s that a big deal?” Missy asked. “She was having fun and didn’t think you needed to be bothered.”

“It’s not that big a deal,” Moonie said. “My sister is just letting Twilight believe it is.”

Queenie raised an eyebrow. “That doesn’t seem like it’d be very helpful…”

“It’s not. It’s just fun,” Celestia said.

Queenie grinned. “Finally, somepony who understands! Tell me, do you walk into guarded rooms from the same direction twice?”

“I’m known to mess with the guards on occasion…” Celestia admitted.
Moonie let out a sharp chuckle. “Oh, ‘occasion?’ Why, just last week I recall a guard running down the halls, raising the alarm because of an ‘overly large swan honking loud enough to tear down the castle walls’.”

“Sister, that’s not what he said. He said there was a ‘big honking swan singing the walls into oblivion!’ The wording’s important.”

“Yesss!” Queenie cheered inwardly. “All my advisors always tell me to act more regal but that’s just so annoying. If I act regal ponies won’t identify with me and I’d never get to have any fun.”

“Careful,” Celestia said. “A regal aura is important to obtain, at least on some level. Ponies believe their leaders need to be wise and powerful. If a normal pony is on the throne, they’ll start wondering why they aren’t on the throne.”

Queenie blinked. “Huh. I wonder why we never have that problem… Actually, you know what, we do, Sunset did tell me about that Applejack character. I completely forgot about her! Can’t believe my loudest prisoner slipped my mind. Huh.”

Missy cocked her head. “…Do you have many prisoners?”

“Oh yes, the dungeons are filled with monsters, beasts, and cruel ponies.”

“…How many?”

“Several thousand? Why?”

“…Seems like a lot.”

“It is,” Moonie said. “Our prisons have maybe a thousand prisoners across the nation, total.”

“How can you do that?” Queenie asked.

“We let most of them go after a while, thinking they’ve learned their lesson,” Celestia said.

“Weird. Not bad, I suppose, just weird.”

Celestia raised an eyebrow. “You’re the one with a mouth on your tail.”

The tail seemed upset at this remark. Queenie only laughed. “Why, so I do! I had no idea.”

“…Does it eat?” Missy asked.

“It does. Doesn’t need to though. But food tastes different in the tail, so feasts can be quite interesting. You all will never know the joy of dual ice cream melts.”

“I’m sure Twilight can whip up a race-change spell,” Celestia said.

Queenie stared at her slack-jawed. “You… You have a race-change spell!?”

Celestia raised an eyebrow. “Yes. Do you not have one?”

“…It’s highly illegal.”

“Why?” Moonie asked.

“It’s because…” Queenie blinked. “I actually don’t know, but it is. The idea of forcibly changing
your identity is blasphemy against Armonia herself.”

“…Who?” Missy said. Moonie and Celestia shot her worried looks.

Queenie took a breath and let it out slowly. “Okay! Okay. Okay. I’m not going to freak out. I’m going to maintain a level head and HOW THE FLIPPING FRACK CAN YOU NOT KNOW WHO ARMONIA IS!? She’s the creator of everything!”

“…Maybe she’s just the creator of your world,” Celestia said, face serious. “We’ve never heard of her.”

“Then who created your world?”

Celestia looked to the ceiling. “There was a Star.”

“…A what?”

“The Stars in the night are beings of great power. Our legends say they have a society of their own, and that one Star fell to our planet long ago, creating our sun and moon, providing Equis the spark of life and Harmony. Of course, nopony knows if these legends are true or not. My sister believes them, Twilight doesn’t. I myself am undecided. I know the Stars are out there, but they don’t seem to care about us one way or another.”

Queenie took a breath. “I’m… I’m sorry, this is a lot to take in. It… It didn’t occur to me that things would be this different. That each world would be created another way. …You shouldn’t flaunt the race-change spell around. My ponies would be out for blood.”

“It’s not a common thing anyway. Extremely difficult.”

“Good. But now I’m curious… Missy, what legends does your world have?”

“There are two spirits, one of the blue moon and one of the gray moon,” Missy began. “They… Always existed, and so did the world beneath them. The demons don’t really have much in the way of legends.”

“You were in direct contact with the spirit of the gray moon, though,” Moonie observed. “Did you learn anything from that?”

Missy hung her head, silent.

“…I’ve been to the moon,” Moonie said.

“What!?” Queenie blurted. “Are there no end to the surprises!?”

“No,” Moonie said, continuing. “It’s a lifeless rock with nothing on it… except nightmares. Physical, evil, horrid nightmares. They controlled me for a time. Made me do evil things. I saw many horrible things. I understand. It’s okay if you don’t want to talk about it.”

“Thank you,” Missy said.

Queenie stared ahead blankly.

“…What is it?” Celestia asked.

“N-nothing. Shouldn’t we start the official meeting sometime soon?”
Celestia looked at the clock. “I suppose so. There wasn’t really a set time for the mingle period to end.”

“Might as well be now, then. Moonie, Missy, excuse us, we have politics to discuss.”

Moonie smirked. “Normally I’d argue that I have as much a right to be there as my sister – which I do, by the way – but I’ll leave the politics to you all. Enjoy.”

“Yaaaaaay,” Queenie muttered, walking towards the center of the hall and sitting down at one of the tables. Celestia looked at her with concern for a few moments – for such a chatty mare, she sure had wanted to end that conversation quickly. But she was right, they might as well start now. With her magic, Celestia conjured a large bell.

With a ring, the conversation in the main hall was silenced. Celestia cleared her throat. “We’re ready to start the official discussions. Will Queen Luna, General Sunset, Twilight ‘Sparky’ Sparkle, Harrier Boxen, Iroh, and Siron please join me at this table.”

Twilight “Twinkie” Sparkle appeared next to Celestia. “Sure you don’t need me?”

“I’m sure, Twilight. Just keep talking and making friends. Do not think what you’re doing is unimportant.”

“Yes, Princess.” She vanished.

Siron arrived at the table first, sitting down next to Queen Luna. “So, you’re a little bit of everything then?”

The Queen nodded. “Everything natural, at least.”

“Those beautiful eyes don’t look natural.”

The Queen smirked. “They are, believe it or not. They also tell me that your motives for that comment aren’t altruistic. Nice try.”

“It seems you have me at a disadvantage!”

“You’re just used to ponies not being able to read your expression.”

Celestia smirked herself. “Siron, pleasure to finally meet you face to face.”

“The pleasure is mine.”

The Queen snorted. Siron’s left hand became a tense fist, but he said nothing.

Twilight “Sparky” Sparkle arrived next, sitting down and delicately setting a box of machinery on the table. She said nothing, nervously glancing around the three powerful individuals at the table.

“Twilight… There’s no need to be worried.”

“Gotcha…” Sparky managed.

General Sunset arrived, sitting on the other side of Queenie. “Remember, your Majesty, don’t just blurt whatever you think out.”

“They have a race-change spell here, Sunset.”
“…I’m sure they have a good reason.”

“This world wasn’t created by Armonia.”

Sunset blinked. “Okay, while that’s a good reason, that just raises more questions.”

“I’ll be sure to answer any and all questions about that you may have at a later time,” Celestia said. “We have slightly more pressing matters to deal with at the moment.”

Harrier Boxen arrived next – a creature made entirely of fur that resembled a mop slightly shorter than a human. He grunted a short greeting before sitting next to Sparky. She tried to inconspicuously scoot away from him. Despite her effort, the movement was loud, jarring, and very noticeable. She turned beat red and tugged on her sleeves.

Iroh arrived last, walking at a leisurely pace to his seat next to Siron and Boxen. “Can I be the first to say I never expected to be sitting at a table with a unicorn-bird, a red bug, a purple woman, and a pillar of wispy fur.”

“The feeling is mutual,” Boxen asserted in a frank, business-like voice.

Celestia nodded. “I want to start by thanking all of you for coming. These new worlds are confusing and baffling to us all, it helps to get us all on the same page.”

“Here here!” Queen Luna cheered.

“We are leaders, ambassadors, scientists, and representatives of our worlds. Through my student Twilight, we have been brought together. Some encounters went well.” She nodded at Siron. “Some went poorly.” She glanced at Iroh. “And, in the end, we are here to figure out what to do with these interdimensional doors that have been thrown open, together. But one thing I want everyone to know for certain is that we will do it together. Everyone, this is Twilight, or ‘Sparky’, a version of my student and a great inventor. Why don’t you show everyone what you have?”

Sparky took opened the box and took out several devices nearly identical to the one around her own neck. “These are portable dimension dialers. When powered, they can open any portal you want. Just input coordinates by turning the dials like so and you can go to that location. You’ll have to find out how to power it yourself, but I’m sure most of you could work something out. Go ahead, take one. They’re, uh, not charged so you can’t open a portal at the moment.”

“I could charge it with my magic,” the Queen observed.

“Yeah, er… Please don’t. Anyway, you should know that the screen will be red when it doesn’t have enough power to translate. It’ll turn green once it does.”

“How will we know what to put in?” Iroh asked as he fiddled with one.

Sparky levitated a bunch of large books from the box. “Twinkie – the other Twilight – has created these books. She calls them the Directory. Every coordinate known to function has been put in these books. If new ones are discovered, she will write a note in one book and it’ll be sent to all the books. If you write something in your book, it’ll translate to all the other books as well. So, uh, yeah. Everyone will have access to the same coordinates and all the basic information known about each one.” She sunk back into her seat.

“Thank you,” Sunset said, bowing to her. “We look forward to visiting the rest of your worlds.”

Boxen tensed at this. “Is… our world in there?”
“…Yes. Why?” Celestia asked.

“We’d… Rather unwelcome visitors not drop in.”

The Queen raised an eyebrow. “Oh, so we’re not welcome then?”

“Any of you arriving on official business would be allowed and even encouraged. But many of you have primitive security measures. The demons, for instance, have none at all. Any of them could just drop in and disturb the peace at any time.”

Siron shrugged. “He’s not lying. We are good at destroying peace.”

Iroh furrowed his brow. “I have no qualms striking the Harrier’s world from the Directory. Surely in the future there will be other worlds we wish to keep secret from one another for security reasons.”

Celestia blinked. “That… was not something I foresaw. But I do see Boxen’s point.” She opened one of the Directory books and found the Binary universe. With her magic she removed the coordinates from the book, leaving just the name and notes. “Done. Does anyone else wish their world stricken from the Directory?”

There was silence and a bunch of shaking heads.

“Good. Then we can actually begin. We need to establish what our relations to each other are going to be. And to do that we will need neutral territory for everyone to meet. As proud as I am of my student and of this grand crystal hall, it is definitely a show of power on our part. It is not proper to continue conducting our business here, making everything rather unfair. We will need to select a location.”

Iroh chuckled. “Princess, if you mind, Siron and I may have a solution for you, if you’ll listen to what he has to say for a moment.”

Celestia smiled. “By all means Siron.”

Siron nodded. “Few of you are aware of this, but my world experiences extreme forest fires every year. The entire jungle around us will burn down, and after the smoke clears our tribe travels until we find a new area of the jungle to call home. We are currently three days overdue for this fire.”

“How terrible!” the Queen said.

“It makes us stronger,” Siron dismissed. “However, this time I don’t want to travel to another part of the jungle. I wish to travel to another world. The representatives of the Earth Kingdom have already offered to give us one of their forests.”

“In exchange, they will help us set up the neutral territory for the Elemental Nations,” Iroh said. “In a way, serving as its first citizens.”

Siron nodded. “Their world is the best for us. They understand warriors and struggle on a great scale.”

“How does this help us with the original problem?” Boxen demanded.

Siron snorted. “Because, fluffball, our original jungle will be abandoned. I’m sure you can build a fireproof building there with your oh-so-great technology.”

Boxen leaned away from Siron, silent.
Celestia pursed her lips. “It’s certainly an option. Do other tribes exist in that jungle, Siron?”

Siron shook his head. “We conquered the other tribes. I haven’t run into any others for decades.”

“Any objections or alternatives?” Celestia asked.

“Isn’t there a world with nothing but grass on it?” Sparky asked.

“Yes,” Celestia admitted. “But the soil is made almost entirely of pony bones. Nopony has any idea why, but I’d rather not chance it.”

Iroh frowned. “So there are horror stories out there in the other worlds.”

“There is probably much worse out there than we could ever imagine,” Sunset pointed out.

“But also much better!” the Queen asserted.

“Regardless, any objections to building it in the demon jungle after they leave?”

There were no objections. Boxen looked unsure, but his small beady eyes were hard to read.

“Then that’s where it will go.”

Sunset shook her head. “Politics never goes this quickly back home.”

Iroh laughed. “It helps when you’re not all at each other’s throats.”

“Next… Aid,” Celestia said. “The Elemental Nations need it most, we need it the least, and the rest of you are somewhere in the middle. But we should divide our resources so we all stand strong.”

“Actually…” Iroh took a breath. “Celestia, as ambassador of the Elemental Nations, I am sorry to inform you that we have to decline further offers of aid.”

Celestia blinked. “…What?”

“Yeah, why’d you turn down free help!?!” the Queen asked. “It’s free!”

“It’s invading our culture,” Iroh said. “You’ve helped us get on our feet, we appreciate that, but you need to understand that your ponies are building things their way. Not that the houses are too small or anything, but it’s built to accommodate the way you think. The towns are colorful, out of place, and don’t have an identity like that of their nation. They’re already feeling ostracized from their nationality.”

Celestia was speechless.

Iroh smiled sadly. “Please don’t hold it against us Princess, and don’t take this as an insult to your hospitality. We’re extremely grateful for what you have given back to us. It’s just that you’re putting your stamp on it, doing all the work, when we want to do the work and have our own identity from it. You’ve done enough. We’ll take it from here.”

“I… Okay, Iroh, if that is what your people wish… The rest of you…?”

Boxen bristled. “Our stance is similar. We do not need your magic in our world. We are not recovering from a war.”

“I’ll take it!” the Queen said. “Apparently we’ve got several broken and destroyed towns, and we
can’t have *that*.”

“I’m against it,” Siron said. “I already refused assistance in establishing our home in the Earth Kingdom’s forest.”

Celestia nodded, having regained control of herself. “I see. As you all wish. Just know that all you have to do is ask, and we will help if we are able. This does mean we don’t have much to talk about relating to aid then.”

“To the main issue then?” Iroh asked.

“Yes. Concerning exploration.” Celestia lowered her head. “We’ve encountered many, many different worlds. We’ve helped some – and come dangerously close to ruining others. Simply exploring has shown us that we have great power. As a group, we need to decide how to manage this. How to minimize the damage to other worlds and maximize the help. How to deal with first contact and interference. Right now, no rules exist. This should change.”

“Finally, something reasonable,” Boxen said. “Naturally, first contact should be conducted in secret, and only after a long recon mission should revelations be allowed.”


“Because an assessment needs to be made if they are ready to come into the fold of the multiverse, to prevent unfortunate incidents of those not prepared.”

Siron pointed a finger at Boxen. “What are you implying?”

“Nothing at all.”

“Lies,” the Queen said. “My eyes tell me all I need to know. You think his kind is far, far too primitive to be allowed at this table.”

“And your mental tricks are indecent, if you wish to be honest. Clearly you do not understand the nuance of diplomacy.”

The Queen bristled, but Sunset calmed her down with a gentle touch.

“I propose we not stay hidden at all,” Iroh said. “But that we be sure not to interfere until a certain amount of information is known. All should be allowed to know what we are, but we cannot take the risk of making something worse.”

“But what if there’s death just around the corner?” Celestia said.

Iroh’s face clouded over. “…Sometimes you’ll make the wrong decision for the right reasons. It’s better than doing the wrong thing for the perceived right reasons.”

Celestia sagged her head. “I say we just need to create rules that establish what can and can’t be done based on the situation. We’re out there to help people, after all.”

“Not necessarily,” Sunset said. “We are also out exploring to further our own worlds. Discovery, after all.”

“Not to mention furthering of our own spheres of influence,” Boxen pointed out.

“People… We need to work together on this,” Celestia pleaded. “I know we think differently, that we all have different ideas. But we need to put that aside and come together in unity. We-“
“Why?” Siron asked.

The table fell silent.

“Why do we need to be unified? We are all different nations. Different tribes. We are not the same. We can be allies, friends even, but we are not the same.”

Iroh furrowed his brow. “Unity is still better than division.”

“Is it? If we are all one, where is the struggle? Where are the trials that make us stronger? Greater? What point would there be?”

“Siron, not everyone agrees with your view of the world as a warrior,” Celestia asserted.

“Exactly my point, Princess, why should we feel pressured to make agreements with each other at all? Why not take these threads of alliance here and all do our separate thing! The best will get stronger faster, and we’ll find out what worked in the end. We—“

Pinkie appeared from nowhere and grabbed the table. She flipped it over, tossing the books and devices onto the floor violently. Strapped to the bottom of the table was a strange gray box with multicolored wires framing a large red timer…

With six seconds left on it.

Five seconds.

“BOMB!” Pinkie said, throwing the table into the air.


Four seconds.

Celestia lit her horn, trying to cast a teleport. She hoped she had time to get it away. Far away… She couldn’t send it to Ponyville. Which direction was Ponyville in?

Three seconds.

She had to think about it too hard - she wasn’t going to get it out. She’d probably be fine now thanks to Pinkie throwing it, but it would still kill some of the visitors.

Two seconds.

Just send it somewhere, anywhere, any – what was Link doing waving that sword around?

One second.

He traced an hourglass pattern in the air, unleashing a truly powerful spell… And the table was gone. A window was also somehow broken. They heard an explosion in the distance.

Link walked back in through the window, breathing hard. “You’re all safe now.”

“How did I not see that…” the Queen said, face pale.

“Bad luck,” Pinkie explained, face haunted as well. “It needed to get that close to going off, apparently…”
“These ponies tried to kill us!” Boxen shouted.

“They did not!” Iroh roared, standing to his full height to snap Boxen out of it. “They’ve done nothing but be kind to us and patient! This was the work of some other party! A group that wants all or some of us dead!”

Siron slammed his staff into the ground, sending sparks around him. “Coward! Come out and face us if you wish to challenge our power!”

There was no response.

“Clearly not any of my warriors…” Siron muttered. “Fef’s the only one here anyways.”

“Who’d dare try this?” Sunset demanded.

“You tell me,” Iroh said. “There are a number of nationalist parties from my world that would love me dead, but I hear your Queen isn’t very popular.”

“That’s only part of the picture! We have enemies from within, yes, but none of them even knew about this!”

“What about spies?” Boxen blurted.

“I would see them,” the Queen asserted.

“You didn’t see the bomb!”

“…A fluke.”

“Please!” Celestia said. “We need to be calm and relaxed. Think through this logically. Has anyone looked out of place, shifty, or untrustworthy this entire gathering?”

Sunset pointed at Siron.

“Besides Siron.”

“What a rousing endorsement…” Siron growled. “Were you one of my warriors, you’d be challenged to a duel right now, red pony.”

“I accept. Later, though, bug.”

“Sunset, please, you could be killed. Don’t,” the Queen said, worried.

“It won’t be to the death,” Siron asserted. “Even if she deserves it…”

“What about… …That shadow girl?” Sparky said all of a sudden. “The… The one I’ve seen wandering around. Doesn’t belong with any group.”

Siron pointed at his warrior. “Fef! Bring me the shadow girl! Now!”

“Yes Siron!” Fef called from across the hall. Two earthbenders she was talking with filed in line alongside her, charging across the room quickly.

Boxen shook his head. “This is pointless. We should all just return to our worlds and let the ponies handle the investigation.”
“Then the assassin would get away,” Sunset pointed out.

“GOT HER!” Fef said, dragging the shadow girl across the hall with her yo-yo string, the girl’s hands encased in rock. She was crying.

Siron narrowed his eyes. “Who are you?”

“V-vivian…”

He pointed his staff at her. “Vivian, why did you make that bomb?”

“I d-didn’t!”

“I don’t believe you.” He raised his staff – only to be stopped by Celestia.

“No, Siron. There are other ways.” Celestia kneeled down, lifting Vivian up and breaking the rocks off her hands. “Child, do you mind if I look into your mind? I won’t tell a soul any of your secrets. I’ll just prove your innocence.”

Vivian sniffed, wiping her face with her hands. She nodded silently. Celestia touched her horn to the shadow being’s hat, touching her mind. Vivian shivered, but smiled. “…That felt… warm.”

Celestia smiled. “I try to make it at pleasant as possible.” She turned to Siron. “She’s innocent. She came alone, stumbling across the Mirror Portal when it was left open. She’d been enjoying herself before this moment. I hope you’ve not scarred her for life.”

Siron took a sigh. “…Apologies, Vivian.”

“It’s… It’s okay. Someone just tried to kill you. You… You can be angry.”

Siron folded his arms. “Who then? Who else was mysterious?”

Sunset looked at Boxen. “Lieshy.”

Boxen nodded. “Lieshy.”

Siron blinked. “There’s no way… There’s…” He paused. “…Mother of the Moon, she certainly has the skills to mask her true intentions.”

Lieshy looked up from her position atop a char a couple tables away. “…The spotlight bleeds the color of lies.”

Celestia narrowed her eyes. “Lieshy, now is not the time for your double. This is serious. Did you do it?”

“No,” she said, incredulously.

“That’s the tone of a guilty woman,” Boxen said.

Iroh frowned. “…I think it is more the tone of an arrogant one.”

“Close enough.”

Celestia walked up to Lieshy. “May I?”

“You may not like what you see. But au revoir regardless.”
Celestia touched her mind – and frowned. “...You think in metaphors and images.”

“Did you ever wonder why it’s difficult for me to speak straight?”

“Immune to the mental tricks,” Boxen said. “Suspicious.”

Sunset walked to Lieshy, face angry. “I knew somethin’ was wrong with you.”

Lieshy’s arrogant annoyed expression vanished slowly as she realized what was happening. “This... You can’t be serious.” She turned to Celestia. “I saved your ponies!”

“They’ve been fooled before...” Celestia admitted.

“I’ve lived with your people!” she shouted at Siron.

“And we are not known for our intelligence,” he said, pointing his staff at her. “You could have pulled the blinds over us.”

Lieshy frantically looked around. “Anyone? Anyone?”

Some voices chimed in from the crowd.

“You tricked me earlier!”

“You just sound untrustworthy!”

“You made my wife cry!”

“All of this is just a sick game to you!”

Lieshy’s gaze finally rested on Fluttershy. Fluttershy stared at her sadly. “I don’t believe you’re guilty. But I can’t refute what they’re saying, Lieshy.”

Lieshy’s harrowed expression gave way to a disturbing smile. She laughed. “Well the nexus has held a council and decided on soul-damning Tartarus for the broken lamppost! Grab a mirror, wave it, do the chicken dance why don’t we? The last mountain has driven itself through dark matter's height.” She held out her hooves. “Take me away, then.”

“Wait!” Link shouted, dragging a man in Fire Nation armor behind him. “It’s not her!”

“How do you know?” Siron grunted.

“I used one of my... items to follow the scent I found on the bomb. It was this guy.” He dumped the dazed soldier in front of Iroh.

Iroh leaned down, removing the helmet. “...Larry?”

“Death... Death to ponies...” the man muttered, obviously very confused.

Celestia blinked. “Is he usually like this?”

“...Dazed? No, of course not. But I have to admit, it’s not all that surprising he’s a Fire Nationalist. He had an anger streak.”

Celestia leaned down to Larry. “Mister Larry, do you mind if I touch your mind?”

“STAY BACK INVADERS!” He belched fire out of his mouth, singing Celestia’s eyebrows.
“…Well I’m not doing it without his consent… …I liked those eyebrows.”

“There’s enough evidence for me,” Boxen said. “I suggest execution.”

“Seconded,” the Queen voted. Sunset nodded in further agreement.

“And I make four…” Siron said. “…Can it be by my hand?”

“No,” Iroh said. “He will be given a chance to see his family first. I do not vote for execution, you have the majority.” He stood Larry up and handed him to a couple Earth Kingdom soldiers. ”You know what to do.”

He was taken away.

Lieshy let out a sigh of relief. “I… Funny. The universe wants me to learn.”

Celestia walked up to her. “Our world has a habit of doing that to ponies. You could write me a letter about what you learned.”

“Maybe…”

“But first, we need to continue our discussion about regulations-“

“No,” Boxen said. “This place is not safe. There should not be further debate until a safe location is constructed in the jungle. Until then, Siron’s suggestion will be treated as the decision. We all do what we will until the next meeting. Goodbye.” He walked away to the Mirror Portal without another word, the rest of his furry congregation following suit.

Siron bowed. “I will take my leave as well. Sunset, come with me. We will duel, as promised.”

Sunset smirked. “You’re going down, Siron.”

The Queen sighed. “I’m coming with you all to make sure you don’t hurt each other. …Sorry Celestia.”

“It’s… Okay.” Celestia said, hanging her head. “In reality, I was probably being a little too hopeful about how this would go.”

“I’m glad you understand.”

Soon, only she and Iroh were left.

“I really am sorry about refusing your aid,” he said.

“I believe I understand why you did it,” Celestia responded. “…Go home. See to your people.”

“I think I’ll drop by Sunset’s first, haven’t given her a lesson today.”

“She’s in college, with real lessons.”

“Then I’ll just wait around for a while. I haven’t gotten her to perfect shrimp scampi yet!”

Celestia smiled. “Take care of yourself, Iroh.”

“I will.”

The hall was soon cleared out. A few stragglers remained, finishing up their conversations, but it had
did down. The books and devices had been taken, so at least the meeting was a partial success.

Still.

She couldn’t help but wonder what would have happened if there’d been no bomb…

She glanced at Vivian and Lieshy. They were talking to each other. Probably bonding over being falsely accused. That was good, at least.

…Still.

She couldn’t help but feel that this was a bad omen.

Twilight walked up to her, crestfallen. “I… I knew this would happen. I knew something would go wrong. I…”

“It’s not your fault,” Celestia said, hugging her once-student close. “I was too much of an idealist today.”

“Celestia-”

“I was, Twilight. Don’t hide the truth. Accept it. And learn from it.”

“…Okay, Princess.”

~~~

Sunset flopped onto the bed in her dorm and groaned into her pillow.

Her roommate glanced at her. “You’re being a whiny freshman. You know this is week one, it’s only going to get harder from here,” she deadpanned.

“Thank you, Sugarcoat, for those words of encouragement!” Sunset blurted.

“Your biting sarcasm could use work.”

“Twilight was not kidding about you.”

“I guarantee she was exaggerating at least one of my traits.”

Sunset took in a deep breath and let it out. “Okay. Sorry, Sugarcoat, I just… I had a bad day. The physics professor has assigned homework on the first day due in two days. I mean, I can answer all the problems easily enough, but it’ll take forever to work them out and show all the steps, same thing for Calc III! Then there’s, suddenly, a paper on what I think about philosophy due in the honors class and-”

“You know you don’t have to deal with the terror of General Ed because of honors class. Why are you complaining?”

Sunset stared at her. “…Good point. Still, Calculus and Physics…”

“You’re the one who decided you wanted to take the Physics major and not retake the previous Calculus classes. Freshmen are not meant to take Calculus III. It will kill you.”

Sunset cocked her head. “…How would you know?”
“I had a sister who went through here several years ago. I got to hear nonstop agonizing tears and screams of joy from her. It was intense,” she deadpanned. Ninety-nine percent of the things she said were deadpan, Sunset had quickly learned. It was baffling, yet oddly endearing.

“…Right,” Sunset said. “I’m going to try to get some rest.”

“Then you’ll wake up in the middle of the night and study.”

“Yep. I’d ask how you know that but my brain is done for the day.” She rolled the blanket around herself. “G’night…”

“It’s only 3 PM. This does not qualify as night.”

“Shush…” She yawned, preparing for sleep to take her and the ordeal of the first day to pass into unconsciousness…

Then there was a knock at the door. Sugarcoat got it.

“Sunset, there’s a creepy old man here to see you.”

_Oh no._

Iroh laughed. “Indeed I am little one! I should take offense to being called creepy, though.”

“You’re not offended.”

“You have a sense for the truth, don’t you?”

“I have a sense that Sunset’s going to fall asleep if you don’t get to her soon.”

Sunset groaned, sitting up in her bed. “Iroh, can’t we do this later? I just had one heck of a day and-“

“Shrimp scampi, Sunset. Firebending style.” He shoved a bag of frozen shrimp and seasonings into her arms.

She groaned. “Wonderful…” She blinked, glancing at Iroh’s chest. “Iroh, do you have a university nametag?”

Iroh tapped the metal plate on his shirt that said ‘Professor Iroh.’ “I had your Twilight create this. Good for sneaking ingredients out of the cafeteria.”

“You can’t just steal food!”

“Clearly, he can,” Sugarcoat said.

Iroh grinned. “Yes. Plus, it wasn’t going to be put in actual food. I saw the cafeteria dishes. Not worthy for peasants.”

Sugarcoat blinked. “Huh. Nice one. Mind if I use that when describing the food to my fellow students?”

“Not at all.”

Sunset blinked. “…This is all surreal. Am I dreaming?”

“No. And you’ll realize that after the third failed attempt. No more dilly dallying! Sunset - cook!”
“All right all right!” She snapped her fingers, producing a candle-like flame.

“And now we’re playing with fire,” Sugarcoat said.

Sunset ignored her.

She didn’t get to relax for three hours.
It is time to move in.

Agent Tempest Shadow stood before the statue at Canterlot High. The sculpture’s base shimmered in the sunny afternoon, making it impossible to tell if there was a portal there or if it was just really shiny.

There was an easy way to find out. She could just touch it.

She stood motionless, hesitant. She found herself going down a mental checklist – her gun was safely hidden under her jacket, her sunglass scanners were active, and she had her bulletproof vest on. Not to mention the other useful gadgets she carried on her at all times… She was prepared. She knew it was time to make her move.

But why did she pause here, now?

She shook her head – no, none of that. She was an agent of the United States Government, and she would not let herself falter now. She moved her hand toward the pedestal, expecting to be sucked in…

She just hit solid rock.

The portal wasn’t open right now. She retracted her arm slowly. Turning, she walked away nonchalantly. Nobody paid her much attention.

She pulled out her phone and dialed her boss. “The portal’s inactive at the moment. The operation cannot continue.”

“Well that’s a load of bull. And I’m not just saying that because I’ve got a load of illegally shipped bulls here.”

Tempest heard angry mooing in the background. “I did inform you of the portal’s unreliability.”

“Oh, I’m not mad at you, merely at fortune. I await the day when we can know things for certain…”

“I suggest we attempt again in a week.”

“Bah, I’m tired of waiting. We’re going with plan B.”

“…I am not confident in the validity of that plan.”

“You don’t have to be. Just gather division C and bring in Sunset Shimmer. Today.”

“…Yes, sir.”

“Good! Now hurry back, you might miss french toast day.”

Tempest hung up. She was tempted to roll her eyes but decided the gesture would be pointless. She was more than used to the antics of her boss at this point. Slightly crazed, possibly insane, but also very effective. He had a way of making things work.
Would this be the day everything fell apart?

Possibly. Though she always thought this when she went on missions she believed were ill-advised.

She dialed another number on her phone. “Division C, it’s Agent Shadow. We’ve got a mission. Meet me on the corner of Maple and Locust Grove.”

~~~

Starlight returned to Twilight’s Castle through the Mirror Portal, humming a little tune to herself. In her hoof was a small obelisk carved in white runes, the most dominant of which was a cross shape.

Another successful haul. This beauty was able to heal all sorts of wounds by touch alone. It had sure come in handy when she was procuring it, so much danger attacking her from all sides. Thanks to these runes she didn’t even have any scars. This was one of the better items she’d managed to obtain on her journeys.

“What do you have there?” Fluttershy asked, sauntering up to her.

“Souvenir,” Starlight said automatically.

“Oh? What’s it do?”

“It’s a small healing rock,” Starlight said.

“You sure do get a lot of magical souvenirs when you go through the portal alone…”

Starlight rolled her eyes. “It’s just because I’m looking for interesting things when I’m alone. When I’m with you girls we’ve usually got other things to deal with. I just let myself have some fun.”

Fluttershy narrowed her eyes. “That looks a lot like one of the runes from Lai…”

Starlight lit her horn, adjusting the controls on the Mirror Portal with her magic, careful not to let Fluttershy notice. “I wasn’t in Lai, Fluttershy. Plus, trying to take one of those runes would be stupid. Not only would the ponies get upset that they lost a rune, but the golems would be out for blood.”

Fluttershy turned to the Mirror Portal, checking the levers. “…The mushroom people had it?”

“Well they didn’t have it, but it was in some magical alcove in their world,” Starlight said. “You want it? Very helpful. Cleaned up a pretty nasty cut of mine in an instant.”

Fluttershy smiled. “I will if I get an injured animal. Don’t have any though. The Sanctuary’s been doing fine on its own. Rexy is a great guardian.”

“I’d expect so. Anyway, see you tomorrow, Fluttershy. Think we’ll find that world made of donuts yet?”

“I don’t think it’d be safe to let Pinkie in such a place…”

“We’re still going to find it eventually. It’s just a matter of time before we get to witness the apocalypse.”

Fluttershy chuckled. “I hope we find it sooner rather than later. Rip the bandage off quickly.”

Starlight shrugged. She waved goodbye and sauntered off to one of the castle’s basements. The moment she was out of Fluttershy’s sights she let out a harsh breath. “I’ve got to be more careful.
“Never understand what?” A deep, amused voice said from all angles.

Starlight tensed – not because she couldn’t tell where the voice was coming from, but because she recognized who it was. “D-Discord! Uh… How nice of you to drop by! …Where are you?”

With a flash of white magic the wall right next to her transformed into Discord himself, in all his conglomerated glory. He smirked at her, staring into her soul with his uneven eyes. “Right here, of course, are you blind?”

“Veeeerey possibly,” Starlight said. “What brings you here?”

“Oh, just checking in on Fluttershy. And lo and behold, I find that you are talking to her and decide to listen in. It seems innocent enough, but then, oh but then, I hear you make a remark…” He snapped his fingers, changing his face into a parody of Starlight’s. He let out a comical wail. “Oh woe is me! I was almost discovered! They can never understand me!”

“That’s not what I said!”

“It’s close enough. Still pretty suspicious, if I do say so myself.”

“I just didn’t want to tell her about all the pain I went through to get this,” Starlight said, holding out the rune. “I lost a leg before I got a hold of it.”

Discord narrowed his eyes. “Hrm… You’re covering up the lie with a half-truth.”

“…What?”

“What you just said was true, but it’s not the whole story. You’re being misleading. A wonderfully chaotic move, I must say, but Fluttershy doesn’t like it when that’s done to her. So I suppose I’ll have to grab her and have her demand the truth from you.”

“Oh no. The Stare.”

“Yes. The Stare. Nobody can resist those eyes.”

Starlight shivered, biting her lip. “Please… Please don’t, Discord. If you’re my friend, you won’t grab her. The truth would hurt her.”

“Then tell me. I’m unlikely to be hurt.”

“You… You probably won’t.” She blinked, thinking for a moment. “Actually, I think you might be able to understand.” She glanced around nervously. “…Is anyone else around?”

“Pinkie. But that’s a universal constant.”

Starlight shrugged. “I think she knows, like she knows so many things, she just doesn’t say. I’ll never understand why… Regardless, this way. I’m going to take you to my… stash.”

“Is it full of energy drinks?”

“Part of it, at least.” She trotted further into the castle’s basement, arriving at a hall with no light in it. She used her own horn to illuminate the way, eventually coming to a stop at a door with her cutie mark imprinted on it. “Magically sealed, only I can open it. You probably could as well if you put your power to it.” She lit her horn, undoing the lock spell. The door slid open, revealing a small
room with numerous boxes in it. Many of them contained energy drinks.

“…Why are you showing me a bunch of energy drinks?”

“Not what I’m here to show you.”

He twisted his body so he was standing behind her and looking her in the face. “Why energy drinks though? I never see you drink them!”

“I don’t in public. Pinkie finds them. Then things start exploding. Have to keep them hidden down here, in the stash.”

Discord grabbed one and drank it – prompting a spit-take that lit a nearby box on fire, reducing it to rubber balls. Starlight rolled her eyes at Discord’s chaotic antics. “It’s not that bad!”

“How can you drink these things!”?

Starlight ignored him and walked up to a seemingly empty wall. She lit her horn, unleashing magical sparks on six particular sections. A magic circle appeared in the wall, dissolving a circular path into the crystal. Starlight stepped through, entering a new, even more secret room.

Discord’s jaw dropped the moment he got a look around the new enclosure. There were boxes in here as well but they weren’t full of energy drinks. There were magical artifacts of many different sizes, including more than a few Lai runes. Several boxes were filled to the brim with electronic tablets, phones, and computers. A large television screen was mounted on one wall with several large boxes plugged into it. Propped up next to the screen was a large blue rune with a cat-like golem sleeping on top of it. The unusual items had no unifying pattern – robot heads, scientific equipment, ancient bending scrolls, books – it seemed like she’d taken anything she wanted.

“…You have a problem,” Discord said.

“I’m not a kleptomaniac,” Starlight asserted.

“…What?”

“It means someone who can’t stop stealing. I don’t steal from the other worlds for no reason – I take so we can use these things. You see that table over there? I’m trying to insert one of the runes into a helicopter drone. If possible, I could create an automatic friend that’ll constantly cast protection spells for us! Or look over here, this is a completely normal tablet, right?”

“Too shiny to be a normal tablet.” He snapped his fingers, transforming it into stone. “Much better.”

“Undo that, I was trying to make a point.”

Discord shrugged, reverting it. Starlight smiled, tapping the screen with her hoof. An apple materialized in the air in front of her. She tossed it to Discord. “I’ve enchanted this thing with several spells, each activated by certain buttons in this ‘app’ here.”

Discord looked at the screen, eyebrow raised. “…Why’s it a cookie?”

“I adapted one of the games on this thing. This tablet used to belong to an evil Sunset before I got my hooves on it.”

“Seventeen decillion cookies?”

“Uh… Ignore that number, it means nothing,” Starlight blushed. She shut off the tablet with a quick
press of the button. “I also have projects exploring the art of fusing runes together, making masks out of runes, letting these robots use magic… All stuff that Twilight will be very glad I made, all stuff that’ll greatly help Equestria.”

Discord raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“She’s too nice, Discord. Refuses to take anything, doesn’t think about furthering her world. The others do, having taken advantage of our magic and hospitality without giving much in return. I’m just the backup Twilight doesn’t know about. We have their stuff.”

Discord furrowed his brow. “So… You go to universes, take random things you think might be useful, and then work on them here, hoping that in the future Twilight will thank you for what you’ve done?”

“Yeah! That’s it!”

Discord chuckled. “I like it! Completely crazy and doomed to failure, of course, but who cares about that!”?

“…What a rousing endorsement.”

“I do have a question though. What’s the TV for?”

“Ah… When I was in Earth stores, there were a lot of things to take easily. They’re video games unlike anything we have here, much better than those dinky arcade machines. Wanna play? I’ve got a two player game but I’ve never had anypony else down here to try.”

“Not even Trixie?”


Discord created a blue unicorn sock puppet meant to be Trixie. “Oh Starlight, I assuuuuure you, the Great and Powerful Trixie won’t boast about all the things her best friend is doing! Trixie can keep a secret! Trixie is great at being silent about your thieving exploits!”

Starlight chuckled. “Trixie, the entire neighborhood just heard that. You’ve doomed us all.”

Discord created a sock puppet Twilight. “TRAITORS! ALL OF YOU!” He made the Trixie sock puppet look aghast. “But Trixie wasn’t involved!” The Twilight sock puppet folded her arms. “You were standing nearby and you’re Trixie! GUILTY!”

Starlight rolled her eyes. “That’s enough Discord. Do you want to play or not?” She levitated two controllers into the air.

He shrugged. “Eh, I have time to kill. I need to see if these things of yours are really worthwhile.” He grabbed one with his foot, ready to conquer these ‘video games.’

~~~

“Fire comes from within, Sunset. Reach into your passion and push out!”

“I know, Iroh!” Sunset said, flinging a fireball at a sparring dummy made of a propped up mop and a bucket. “That’s one of the first things you told me!” She did a backwards cartwheel, shooting fire into the air, careful not to burn the track she was practicing on.

“Feel the chi flow through your body-“
“Are you just repeating basic training to annoy me?” Sunset asked, spinning around to generate a small whirlwind of fire around herself.

“I thought that was obvious!” Iroh laughed.

Sunset grunted to herself, standing on one leg and shooting fire out of one of her fingers, hitting the dummy right in the bucket-head. Then she leaped over to the bucket, grabbed it by the handle, flipped it over, and put a flame under it. She reached into her pocket, removing a piece of bacon from a sealed bag and tossing it into the bucket. In two minutes the delectable meat was ready. She removed the flame and kicked the bucket into the air, tossing the meat over to Iroh. He caught it in his mouth, licking his lips. “Well done!”

“This is very, very absurd,” Sunset said.

“So? You’re getting good. A fast learner. Not as fast as Aang, but he had a bit of an unfair advantage over you.”

“Did he learn to combatatively cook things?”

“…I’m not sure that’s a word.”

“Did he?”

“No. He had a more… specific goal. But I fully expect him to discover the art of culinary firebending and fall in love with it. Once he has time to rest, anyway. The world always needs its Avatar.”

Sunset nodded. “I’m surprised you find the time to come here to me.”

“I am as well. It turns out that an ambassador, while an important individual, isn’t needed constantly.”

“If you were an ambassador for Earth the paperwork would never end.”

Iroh chuckled. “Remind me to never be an ambassador for Earth then!”

“They’ll never let an outsider speak for them…” Sunset said, smile vanishing. “Humans have a… problem. At least here. They all think they’re right and will seek out information that confirms what they believe, passing off anything else as lies. Anyone who isn’t them or with them is the enemy, worthy of being hated.”

Iroh raised an eyebrow. “I thought your world was at peace?”

“There are wars happening elsewhere. They’re small compared to what you experienced and to what happened in this world’s past. But they’re there. It’s like people just want to hate each other. I’m concerned what they’d do if they found the other universes…”

Iroh shrugged. “I won’t pretend to have any idea. This world makes little sense to me. Everything’s so prevalent, and yet nobody seems happy.”

“My friends tell me not to worry about it, that I can’t do anything,” Sunset said. “And they’re probably right. For now, anyway.” She shook her head. “Sorry about this. I guess I went a little deep there for a second.”

“It’s no problem. It’s a sign that you know how to think.”

“I have to know how to think or I’m not going to make it in the world of theoretical physics.”
Iroh shook his head. “I don’t mean that kind of thought. I mean the thought directed inward, the thought that helps you see yourself and others for what they are.”

“I try.” She kicked the bucket back on top of the mop. “Well, I should probably go study. Those derivatives won’t derive themselves.”

Iroh chuckled. “There you go, speaking those words again. Such a strange alien language.”

Sunset rolled her eyes, waving as she walked away. She turned a corner, heading to the dorms. She was already considering flopping onto her bed the moment she arrived, but that Calculus homework was due tomorrow and if she didn’t do it now she’d have to rush it. That’d just be bad.

She was suddenly thankful her roommate wasn’t a party animal. Sugarcoat was surprisingly helpful in studying. Sometimes brutal tactless honesty had a point normal encouragement didn’t.

Sunset heard a footstep behind her. She glanced over her shoulder, expecting to see another student.

It wasn’t. It was a woman dressed in black. She moved too fast for Sunset to react – covering Sunset’s mouth with a hand and jabbing a gun painfully into Sunset’s side.

“You’re coming with me,” she said in a powerful, somewhat arrogant tone. “Don’t try anything. I’m Agent Shadow, and your presence is demanded by the Government of the United States. I’m willing to release you if you’ll come peacefully.”

Fat chance, Sunset thought. She let her muscles relax and go slack though.

Agent ‘Shadow’ (if that was her real name) apparently knew this was just a ruse to gain the upper hand since she produced a pair of handcuffs, ready to imprison Sunset.

“Excuse me, can you tell me where-”

Agent Shadow didn’t let Iroh finish. She pointed the gun in his direction - a motion he was apparently expecting, for he threw fire in her face as she turned to look at him. She was knocked to the ground, leaving Sunset free from handcuffs.

“Let’s get out of here…” Sunset said, reaching into her pocket for the dimensional device. She realized with shock that it was busted. The agent had pressed her gun right into it. “Crud.”

“I used the Mirror Portal,” Iroh said. “It should be open.”

Agent Shadow leaped up with alarming speed, kicking Iroh right in the chest. She whipped her gun on him. “My quarrel is not with you.”

“That’s what you think.” He breathed fire at her, throwing her aim off. The gun went off, hitting nothing. Sunset elbowed her in the gut, knocking her to the ground again. She was prepared for a longer fight, but Iroh grabbed her and ran.

“Why are we-“


Sunset nodded, taking the lead. “This way!” She leaped over a bush, heading right for the parking lot, Iroh showing no difficulty in keeping up with her.

Two men in black charged at them from the side, holding guns. “Stop in the name of the law!”
“Drat,” Sunset muttered. “They’re going to start shooting.”

Iroh leaped into the air, putting his hands together. A torrent of fire shot forth from his hands, bright enough to blind the two agents. Only one of their guns went off, again, hitting nothing.

“They’re being very cautious with those guns…” Iroh observed.

“They don’t want to cause a scene. It’d be really bad if someone other than us got hit.” She ran to the door of her car, jumping in. “Mildly surprised they weren’t watching this.”

“They still might be,” Iroh said, taking his place in the back seat. Sunset turned the keys and floored it. She pulled out of the parking spot with the intense and unpleasant screech of burning rubber on a rough road. She tore through the lot of cars at a speed well above what was safe.

She was glad she tossed safety to the wind. A black car began pursuing them at its own reckless speed. A siren went off, alongside red and blue lights.

“They want everyone to think this is just a criminal chase…” Sunset muttered.

Iroh furrowed his brow, looking out the back window. “They’re not gaining, at least. We should be able to make it…”

Sunset paled. There was a red light ahead at a busy road. There was a sea of cars moving across her field of view. “Iroh, I’m going to have to pull a very, very sharp right turn at a speed right turns were not meant to be taken at. Hold onto your lunch.”

Iroh grabbed his stomach and grinned. “Done!”

Sunset shifted slightly into the left lane, making many cars honk at her for intruding on their space. Then she yanked the wheel down to the right, skidding into the intersection in a semi-spiral. The car leaned up on its two left wheels, but didn’t tip over. Sunset was able to floor it, completing the high speed turn without crashing into any cars.

Mostly.

She noticed her left mirror was missing.

She wondered when that had happened.

“They did it as well,” Iroh announced.

“Trained professionals…” Sunset muttered under her breath.

“One’s pointing a gun out of the window.”

Sunset’s pupils shrunk to pinpricks. This was the only reaction she was allowed before a bullet shot through the back window and went straight through to the front windshield, barely missing Iroh and Sunset.

“I have no way to stop that!” Sunset said, hanging a left into a mostly abandoned side street.

“Do,” Iroh said, popping open the skylight and crawling onto the roof of the car. “Tell me if you’re going to turn!” He yelled down.

“Are you crazy!?” Sunset blurted.
“Very.” Iroh looked behind them, now able to see two cars in hot pursuit. A bullet flew past him, nicking his ear. He winced at the pain but maintained his composure. He raised his hands into the air and began to move them in a calculated circular motion, separating his chi into controllable powers. Blue sparks of energy began to come out of his fingers.

Sunset had no idea what he was doing. But she trusted him.

Iroh moved his body back, pushing energy behind him. He pointed a finger towards the pursuing cars, blue electricity crackling around his extended hand. He unleashed a bolt of lightning from his fingers, hitting the metallic cars dead on. The arcs of electricity bounced from car to car with intense energy.

Cars, especially government issue ones, are designed to protect their occupants from lightning strikes, should they ever come. Had Iroh’s attack been a simple bolt similar to the ones in storms, nothing would have happened besides some very disoriented drivers. But Iroh got lucky. Tires, while very good insulators, will blowout if enough heat is put into them. Iroh’s lightning lasted long enough to raise the air pressure beyond manageable levels. Both cars blew out a tire. When combined with the disorientation of the lightning strike itself, the cars spun out.

“…That was awesome.”

Iroh leaped down into the car again. “I’m a firebending master, Sunset. Don’t be all that surprised when I pull out something unexpected.”

“You’re bleeding!”

“Just a nick on the ear. They’re horrible shots.”

“I’m talking about your arm!”

Iroh looked at his left arm. It was drenched in blood. “…Well would you look at that. I suppose I’m in shock then. Keep driving, I’ll treat myself.” He tore off the sleeve on his right arm, wrapping it tightly around the wound. “Went clean through…”

“I think that’s good! I think? I don’t know, TV could lie!”

“Sunset, calm yourself. Get us to the Mirror Portal.”

Sunset pulled onto the curb of Canterlot High a moment later. She ran past the statue – the Portal wouldn’t be there. Twilight had moved the Mirror Portal, so the connection point had moved as well. Twilight was working on figuring out why that was the case, but at the moment Sunset didn’t care. She ran to one of the first-floor windows of Canterlot High, pressing her hand into it.

The portal wasn’t there.

Sunset took a breath. “…Are you sure you came through here?”

“Positive. It appears someone else used it.”

“Well, fudge,” Sunset said.

“You should’ve used a stronger word than fudge,” Agent Shadow muttered, aiming her pistol at Sunset’s head. “You’ve just made a big scene.”

Sunset looked at the street. Yep. There was a black car there. One without a busted tire. She gulped.
“Both of you. In the car. Now.”

Sunset curled her fist. Maybe she could…

“Sunset…” Iroh said, gesturing with his head towards the car. There were other agents with guns aimed and ready.

Sunset was pretty sure they wouldn’t miss this time.

She sighed, putting her hands high into the air. “…Fine. We surrender.”

Agent Shadow produced a pair of handcuffs. “Good.”

They were soon on their way in the custody of people who Sunset doubted were really government agents. To make matters worse, she didn’t have the journal on her. They couldn’t call for help…

And she wasn’t getting that calculus homework done.

Somehow that was the worst part of all this.

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Discord and Starlight stared at the screen with tears in their eyes. The controllers had been discarded a long time ago in exchange for a movie. And Celestia, was the movie emotional.

“That… That was beautiful,” Discord said.

Starlight sniffed. “She gave up her dream so the kids could have theirs… That was so…”

“…Perfect.” He stood up. “This is definitely worthwhile. I’m on your side, Starlight.”

“Thank you,” Starlight said. “You’re welcome to come down here whenever you want. I’ll keep getting new stuff. Just don’t mess with anything.”

Discord snapped his fingers, summoning one of the Directory books to his hand. “I’m going to do more than that. I’m going to help you.”

Starlight blinked. “…What?”

“Let’s go. Right now. Find a world, get something interesting.” He flipped to a random page and pointed at a world marked with *UNSAFE*. “I’m sure I can get us through here.”

“Discord! We don’t know what’s in those places!”

“Exactly. Ripe for the plundering!” He snapped his fingers, putting Starlight in a blue suit. A spherical bubble surrounded her head.

“Discord this is bizarre. And unsafe.”

Discord smirked mischievously. “You’re already being unsafe and dastardly. I’m just here to improve your experience.” He snapped his fingers, tearing a hole in reality completely on his own power. The world they connected to was monochrome and unlike any word they had seen before. The ‘sky’ was visible in all directions – an unchanging static pattern that belonged on a TV screen in a picture, not all around them. They could see the individual ‘pixels’ that made up the pattern, all identical in size, all somehow forming a single grid even though they *should* have appeared like a celestial *sphere*. The world was filled with impossibly expansive chunks of black earth only as thick
as a bell tower. They floated on every level, and Starlight knew they extended beyond their sight range.

Discord stepped through and stretched his legs on top of a black chunk. “Well this is something I’ve never seen before. I particularly like this sky. My house could use something like that.”

Starlight stepped out behind him, carefully touching the earth beneath her. It felt like a rock. Like what she’d expect a rock to feel like, a rock that was somehow the combination of all rocks she’d ever felt. “Bizarre…” She used her magic to lift a pebble and toss it back into the room. She waved her hoof in front of her. “This place is airless.”

“Yep!”

“How are we talking?”

“Magic. Mine, of course.”

She walked to the edge of their earth chunk and stared into the abyss below. More static – but also more slabs of earth. All of them were parallel to the one they themselves were standing on. Some must have stretched for hundreds of miles.

“How is there even an up and down here?” Starlight wondered.

“Well that isn’t me,” Discord said, creating an apple that fell upward and exploded in a shower of cardboard. Each brown piece was immune to gravity. “I can remove it if you want.”

“Nah… I like having a down.” She glanced at the portal. “We should probably close that before we suck all the air out of Twilight’s castle.”

Discord closed the portal dutifully. It was then Starlight realized how quiet everything was here. There was no sound and no motion besides her and Discord. She could hear her own heartbeat thumping in her chest.

“We need to name this place,” Discord said.

“What if it already has a name?”

“Does it look like anybody lives here?”

“Looks can be deceiving,” Starlight said.

“I vote for calling it the Graybox.”

“No…” Starlight said, lifting her ears. She listened to the silence. “That’s not it…”

Discord raised an eyebrow. “Whatever. We can name it later.”

Starlight rammed her hoof into the ground. She heard half of the noise that was supposed to come from that action. The part that came from her hoof. No sound at all came from the rock. “This is impossible,” she said. “I’m hitting it, and it’s not giving way, it has to be vibrating. But there’s no thunk, no thud, no skidding noise… Just motion. But motion implies at least some sound…”

Discord facepalmed. “This is another universe Starlight! That may be unusual, even for me, but come on, you’re talking to the lord of Chaos. I could make sounds come from nothing and turn you into sound.”
“Please don’t,” Starlight said. “I don’t think that’d be safe here.”

Discord shrugged. “As you wish.” He snapped his fingers, teleporting them to another slab of rock. Even though they had to have moved several miles, the static sky did not change.

“They must be light-years away,” Starlight offered.

“Or they could always be the exact same distance from you,” Discord said, creating a box of orange peels in front of them. It always stayed precisely one meter from Starlight’s face. She turned to Discord – slapping him in the face with it. “Ow…”

“You should be more careful with the illustrations you create. Your point can always come back to bite you.”

Discord created a pen with teeth. It snapped at him. “Eh, I don’t know. Seems innocent enough.”

Starlight facehooved.

Discord grinned, tossing the pen behind him. It imploded, spraying laughing ink everywhere. Starlight wiped it off her face, unamused. She took in a breath. “Well, it doesn’t look like anything’s here… Just rocks, gravity, and no sound whatsoever.”

“Do you want to go back already?” Discord put his hands to his face, forcing green reptilian tears to fall from his face.

“I already got a soil sample. There’s nothing else to collect. Unless you’ve suddenly learned how to teleport light-years away so we can investigate the static.”

Discord frowned. “There she goes. Ladies and gentlemen, pointing out a limit in my power. Amazing.”

An audience composed of three copies of Discord yawned. The ‘feminine’ one booed.

Starlight summoned an orange with her magic and threw it at the booing Discord. The audience vanished before it made contact.

“Are oranges your attack of choice now?” Discord mused. “I much prefer limes myself.”

Starlight rolled her eyes. “Can you think of anything else to do here besides throw fruit at each other?”

Discord turned into a mouse. “We can have a rat race. Or…” He transformed back into his regular self, except wearing a pilot’s suit. “We can see how far we can fall.”

“Discord…”

“TALLY-HO!” He cheered, stepping off the edge of the rocky slab, falling down into the eternity. Starlight rolled her eyes, wrapping herself in telekinesis and rushing to match his increasing speed. Without air, there was nothing working against gravity. They both kept falling faster and faster.

“Think we’ll be able to see a rock before we hit it?” Starlight asked after a minute of falling.

“I dunno. But you can rest easy, Discord is here! I’ll just bring your flattened body back to life, easy.”

“It’s almost like there’s no danger when you’re around.”
“I know! It’s great, isn’t it? You all should have Fluttershy scream ‘Discord! Save me!’ so I can swoop in and save the day!”

“We all know you can’t hear her when she’s in another universe.”

“You never know, I might be watching anyway…”

Starlight rolled her eyes. “…How fast do you think we’re falling now?”

Discord took out a speedometer from nowhere. “Over a kilometer a second. In two more minutes it’ll be two kilometers a second.”

“…Those numbers don’t mean anything to you.”

“Nope! It’s just what the dealy says!”

“It’s a compass now.”

“Huh. So it is. Apparently up is north.”

Starlight rolled her eyes. “So, had enough of falling yet?”

“Yeah.” Discord clapped his hands, and suddenly they were motionless. Starlight didn’t question how she survived this deceleration. Discord opened a portal back home – and hit rock. Soil poured out of the opening into the world of static.

Discord put on a detective hat and a pipe that blew bubbles upside down. “It seems we’re deep underground.”

“No, really?”

“Easy fix. Just a teleport.”

“Wait,” Starlight said, holding up a hoof. “I see something over there.”

Discord stopped his fingers from snapping. He followed her gaze to a nearby slab of rock. There was, in fact, something on top of it. A tall black rectangle. A monolith.

Starlight teleported them right next to it. It was about the height of Discord, taking the shape of an ideally proportioned rectangle. It was only as thick as a hoof and it floated above the ground high enough that Starlight could walk under it, which she did. It was made of some black featureless metal that glinted in the light.

“Question. Where is the light coming from?” Starlight asked, ignoring the whine that had started in her ears. Her senses were finally wigging out from the silence.

“No idea,” Discord said, tapping the monolith with his claw. Nothing happened.

“Discord, you could have triggered an apocalypse or something.”

“Yeah, right,” he rolled his eyes.

Starlight returned her attention to the monolith, eyes narrowing. She figured since nothing had happened when Discord touched it, she might as well try messing with it herself. She lit her horn,
attempting to touch it with her magic.

It sucked her telekinesis spell dry, right into itself.

Starlight grinned. “…A magic absorption material.”

Discord took a step back from it. “Like that bug Chrysalis’ throne? Eck!”

“Somewhat. That absorbed magic selectively, and with a range. This thing will just absorb whatever contacts it…” She rubbed her hooves together. “We’re taking this home.”

“How? It’ll just absorb any magic we throw at it, and that’s about all we’ve got to throw at it.”

“Only what it’s touching. Discord, create some rockets and put them under this stone slab. We’re carrying this thing up.”

Discord shrugged. “Sure.” In an instant, seven rockets were placed beneath the rock. Starlight cut a circular area of the rock out of the miles-long slab, allowing it to rise into the air. The monolith maintained a constant distance from the rock, effectively moving upward.

“This’ll take a while,” Starlight noted. “Now we are fighting something. Gravity itself.”

Discord conjured a deck of cards. “Care for a game?”

“I don’t see why not. As interesting as this monolith is, I’d prefer not to chance it draining all my magic here. Here is bad.” As the whine in her ear attested, ponies were just not meant to have true silence around them. She tried to focus on the game, but it was difficult. Everything she heard felt wrong. She was certainly ready to get out of this place.

But she couldn’t leave without the treasure.

~~~

Sunset and Iroh sat in a room. It was comfortable enough, like a hotel room. Two large beds, a TV, a desk, and a bathroom. No windows though, and the door was locked with several levels of security in addition to being completely fireproof.

This didn’t stop Sunset from trying to get through. She’d bypassed two electronic locks and had picked a physical keyhole. Currently she was using a wire obtained from a lightbulb fixture to probe a lock situated through the door’s crack.

Iroh glanced at her. “You know, they probably know what you’re doing.”

Sunset held up a busted video camera and three listening devices. “I combed the place. They have no more eyes in here.”

“Then why haven’t they come in to check on us in a while?”

“I have no idea,” Sunset said. “I’m just going to work on getting out since there appears to be an opportunity.”

Iroh shrugged, lying back on the bed. “I’d just wait for our captors to return and tell us what they want. They even treated my wound. No enemy would do that.”

“It means they want something, and I don’t like that…” Another lock clicked open. “Gettin’ there…”
“Come, Sunset, relax and watch TV. I’m personally learning a lot from your news. I just saw the same story run twice on two separate channels. Very different…”

“News is not relaxing…”

“It can be amusing though. Your leader is a riot!”

“Joy,” Sunset deadpanned, continuing her work. She probed the lock – and it clicked open. Then all the other locks opened up as well.

Sunset blinked. “Uh… what did I do?”

The door swung open, revealing Agent Shadow standing there with a keycard. “Four locks. Not bad. But your time’s up. Come on out you two, the boss wants to see you.”

Iroh stretched his uninjured arm and grinned. “Ah, good thing you came now, I was considering taking a nap!”

Sunset twitched. “How can you be so relaxed!?”

Iroh shrugged. “I’m an old man. Getting worked up over things seems like too much work.”

Agent Shadow narrowed her eyes. “Hurry up.”

Sunset stood up, kicking all her makeshift tools out of the way. She reached out for Agent Shadow gently, her ungloved hand ready to get a reading.

The agent kicked Sunset in the gut and shoved her in the shoulder. “You are not going to be doing that. Put your gloves on.”

Sunset groaned, but did as was asked. She stood up, glaring at the agent. “You’ve clearly done your homework.”

“I’m well versed in your capabilities. We clearly underestimated the old man though.”

“Us old folks often know the dirtiest tricks,” Iroh said. Then his face suddenly became serious. “Take us to your leader. I have a feeling there’s much to discuss.”

“That there is.” She put handcuffs on the two of them, leading them into a hallway with many other doors that presumably led to similar rooms. They passed dozens of these rooms before coming to an elevator. The three of them piled in. The agent selected “B12” on the keypad. Sunset ran her eyes across the numbers – highest floor was 3, lowest was B13. This was a big facility. It probably also didn’t exist. At least not the lower levels.

“What’s in basement 13?” Sunset asked.

The agent gave no response. Iroh and Sunset followed her example. They arrived at the basement in a few seconds. The doors slid open to reveal a large, open space filled with computers. Dozens of people in suits and glasses sat at the computers, typing furiously. A few agents stood rigid at the edges of the room, presumably serving as both guards and overseers. Towards the back of the room were several giant screens, one of which showed a map of the world colored in different places. Most were a faint purple, but a few areas spiked in color. The Bermuda Triangle, some place in China, and the state Canterlot High was in were all bright red.

Other screens showed images of people. Sunset saw herself, Iroh, both Twilights, and Pinkie up
there alongside other individuals she didn’t recognize. Words flashed by faster than she could read. 

*Magic surge found in... China researching Arcanum... conformed haunting in Japan...*

“Holy meatballs on a stick. You guys are a paranormal investigations unit,” Sunset muttered.

“That we are!” A loud, jovial, bombastic voice yelled from just beneath the world map. A tall man with pale blue skin and an impressive white beard stood up from his large swivel chair, his black suit shining with premium polish. “I am Director Storm! Pleased to make your acquaintance! Agent Shadow, remove their handcuffs, this is no way to do meet new people!”

Agent Shadow tensed. “But sir, they can-“

“I know they could burn this place to the ground, but since we’ve been rather rude in bringing them here, I think we should extend an olive branch.”

Agent Shadow undid the handcuffs reluctantly, letting Iroh and Sunset free.

Director Storm rubbed his hands together. “Much better! Come up here, my desk has extra chairs. I can even order us drinks. Coffee or tea?”

“Tea,” Iroh said.

“Coffee,” Sunset said.

Iroh looked at her like she was a traitor.

“Hey, hey, I’ll get tea next time! Both are good drinks!”

Director Storm laughed. “Already off to a great start!” As they sat down opposite Storm, an agent with a blank expression delivered piping hot tea and coffee, along with a bizarre rainbow fruit cocktail for the Director.

Iroh extended his hand. “I am Ambassador Iroh, Director, pleased to finally make your acquaintance.”

Director Storm shook the hand. “The pleasure is all mine. And I see you using your injured arm there, trying to show you aren’t afraid of a little pain are you, hm? I do apologize about the gunshot, I had instructed her to be brought in without injuries. Though I suppose that did end up being true. Not a scratch on Sunset. Don’t you hate it when your subordinates technically follow your orders?”

Iroh nodded. “I was a general once. Many battles were lost by technicalities.”

“Ah, a military man? I myself was one, served as a colonel before coming here. I like this job a lot better.”

Sunset raised an eyebrow. “What, investigating magic?”

“Precisely!” Director Storm confirmed. “We are the Arcane Investigations Department, tasked with observing the magical hotspots of the world for the United States Government. Unfortunately we don’t exist so there’s no special arcane badge or anything, we just get regular FBI stuff. So disappointing.”

“So...” Sunset pursed her lips. “Let me get this straight. You saw some of the magic happenings going on around the school recently, decided to investigate and watch us, and then became so interested in what was going on you had to capture me so I could tell you how to take control of it
“Do it for yourself?”

Director Storm laughed. “So close, and yet, so far! We’ve been watching Canterlot High for decades, Sunset, since before I came in the program! Magic keeps popping up around there for no discernable reason – or, well, at least until we realized it was all because of its connection to another world. Thanks to you and your notes, by the way.”

“…You were riffling through my notes.” Sunset blinked. “…I need to apologize to Rainbow Dash. Wait, how did you read them?”

“It wasn’t easy. We had to run most of it through computer algorithms.”

Iroh laughed. Sunset furrowed her brow. “You still want me to tell you how to take control of magic.”

“Goodness gracious, no! You obviously don’t know how to do that and this isn’t some power play. That’s for politics, and we hate politics here. I have numerous Senators breathing down my back and it’s painful when a power play is involved. It goes like this. ‘Hey, can I get some funding to stop a magical disease from exploding all over India?’ ‘No, sorry, if I provide funding to you now they’ll hate the new budget proposal!’ And on and on and on and on…”

Sunset frowned. “You must want something from me to go through all this trouble.”

Director Storm smirked. “That I do.” He grabbed a remote and pointed it at the main screen, switching it from the world map to an in depth schematic that Sunset recognized instantly. A fully 3D rendered version of her non-magical portal. The two spikes were clear. She watched as the model animated and tore a hole in reality.

Then the screen switched to a live video feed. In a large, dark room, Sunset could see two physical spikes protruding from the ground. Her jaw dropped. “You built it?”

“Well, not precisely. It doesn’t function without magic, and we lack the precise spells you use to travel. But it’s your design. It can draw power from the nearby plant and drive it into a dimensional energy gateway… in theory, anyway. We’re unable to test it. So I decided I was tired of waiting for the brainiacs on level nine to replicate the spell. I brought you here with an offer. I want you to work for us, Sunset. I want you to push this division beyond simple ‘Arcane’ studies – we can make history with a non-magical portal device. You have the new ideas, the genius, and the prerequisite knowledge. You probably know more about magic than this entire facility put together!” He sat back. “Make the portal work and you’ve got yourself a job. It’ll pay for all your education and you’ll get to turn what you’ve been doing in your free time into something more… worthwhile. Isn’t this exciting!”

Sunset blinked. “You have my broken portal device. You can just use that. Why all this talk of ‘offers’ and a ‘deal’?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Iroh said. “He wants you on their side.”

Sunset raised her right hand and took off her glove. “Director Storm, I do not know if you are altruistic, if you are telling the truth, or if you have some sort of evil plan in the back of that mind of yours. This all seems very, very fishy to me. But you can do something to prove yourself to me, and I think you know what it is.”

Director Storm grinned. Without a word he vigorously shook Sunset’s hand.

She felt his deep passion, his intense joy about life, his devotion, his anticipation… His desire. He
wasn’t perfect. His positivity and words were genuine, but power corrupts, and it was corrupting him like it did all other men. He was being honest now, but he was a well-versed liar. He had not gotten to the top without causing bloodshed.

She was witness to several memories. Him throwing a Christmas celebration for all the AID agents. Him killing a man in cold blood with an arcane artifact. Him leading troops in a battle he was not prepared for. Him yelling at some random politician with a fire usually limited to the mouths of bloodthirsty barbarians…

Sunset leaned back. “…You mean what you say.”

“But, naturally, I’m not pure. I’m a horrendously selfish man who just wants to be great. I’m definitely willing to hurt people to do that. But it just so happens that I think huge projects for all of mankind is part of being great. And I think we can help each other here.” He folded his hands and grinned. “So? You want a job?”

“…I’ll have to let the sushi place know I’m quitting ahead of time…”

Director Storm fist pumped. “Yes! We can take care of that for you. I’m sure they’ll accept a Harvard graduate as a worker for now.”

“I haven’t said yes yet!”

“Yes you have,” Iroh and the Director said at the same time.

Sunset rolled her eyes. “Fine. I do have a condition though. I’m not going to be able to keep this secret from certain people I know.”

“You can tell anyone who knows about magic,” Director Storm said. “Well, that we exist at least, and that you’re working with us. You can’t give them details. Good enough of a compromise for you?”

Sunset slid the glove back over her hand. She tried to calm herself – she couldn’t let Director Storm’s excitement make her lose control. “Fair enough. Before we make any plans, what exactly will I be doing besides helping design this portal?”

“You have experience traveling the worlds, yes? You’ll be going through it with our main team with my best agents. Yes, that includes you Tempest.”

“I’m aware,” Agent Tempest Shadow muttered.

“Good!” Director Storm quipped. “You can start work right away! See if you can get old Iroh here home. Speaking of Iroh, Ambassador, I’ve been neglecting you. I do hope this won’t interfere with our agency’s relation to your world.”

Iroh raised an incredulous eyebrow. “You did shoot me.”

“I apologized!” Director Storm put on his best ‘cute eyes’ expression. It worked surprisingly well, Sunset decided.

Iroh smirked. “I’m afraid my opinion of you can only go so far, the people close to me aren’t going to like you.”

“Challenge accepted.”
“Hold it!” Sunset said. “I have calculus homework to get done! I can’t be working on a portal right now!”

Director Storm narrowed his eyes. “...I think we all know you won’t be able to focus on homework now that you’ve heard this.”

“...Yeah,” Sunset admitted.

“Agent Shadow! Take them to level 13, and bring the broken device. Introduce Sunset to the rest of the team!”

Tempest nodded. “This way,” she said, clearly not pleased that Sunset had accepted.

“You know, if we’re going to work together we’re going to have to get along,” Sunset observed.

“I don’t get along with anybody. Not my boss, not my coworkers. I do the job and I do it well. That’s it. End of story.”

Sunset turned to Iroh. “Challenge accepted?”

Iroh nodded. “Challenge accepted.”

“CHALLENGE ACCEPTED!” Director Storm echoed.

“Do you even know what challenge was accepted?” Sunset asked.

“Nope! Don’t care, that was fun to say. Now go have fun!” He waved them off cheerfully.

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“Right, should be back to the right height now,” Starlight said. “Kill the rockets.”

Starlight heard agonizing screams beneath them as the rockets cut out. She facehooved. “I didn’t mean literally.”

Discord shrugged. “You should be careful about what you say around me, Starlight. I could turn anything into a juggling competition at any moment!”

“Just suck the monolith into the room.”

Discord snapped his fingers, creating a portal beneath the monolith. He lifted the gateway upward, transporting the monolith without actually touching it. Starlight grinned – this was working well! She’d be able to leave soon and her ears would be fine.

When half of the monolith was out of the dimension a brilliant red eye shape appeared in its center. The crimson shade was jarring to both of them. Nothing in this world had had any color before.

Then the monolith moved. It touched the edge of the portal, forcing it to close. The interdimensional forces were so strong the black slab was cut clean in two. The crimson eye vanished, unable to fully manifest on half a monolith. The remaining half fell to the ground, kicking up dust – but making no noise.

Starlight examined the place where the cut had occurred. There was no inner workings to the monolith at all. It might as well have been solid metal.

“...Odd,” Starlight said, biting her lip. “That makes me a little… nervous. Maybe this place is
inhabited after all.”

“Could be.” Discord shot a magic bolt at the partial monolith. It absorbed the magic. “Still works though.”

“Hmm. Well at least we got something interesting. Come on Discord, take us—” it was at this point she saw them coming right at them. Hundreds, if not thousands, of monoliths that definitely hadn’t been there before approaching them from all sides. All the monoliths wore the single eye. All of them drifted in their direction, silent, emotionless. Yet, still threatening.

Starlight felt compelled to look up. She paled – the static sky still existed. But there was another red eye directly above them, as if painted. On a hunch, she looked down over the edge to the static below them. There was another eye, but this one was… closed? How did she know it was an eye then?

Gravity suddenly flipped. They fell up, towards the open eye. Starlight was forced to reorient herself, realizing that the open eye was down.

“Discord! We’ve awakened something! Get us out of here!”

Discord snapped his fingers, generating a portal between them and the eye in the static. The monoliths were suddenly right next to them, close enough to disturb the formation of the dimensional portal. They closed in, making a box of red eyes around the two of them.

Starlight summoned a bomb with her magic and tossed it at the monoliths. The bomb hit, exploded, and did nothing.

Discord’s attempt at doing something worked better. He folded space itself into a noodle, creating a pathway out of the monolith box by circumventing three-dimensional space. He created another portal, shoving the two of them through it before the monoliths could react.

They were back in Starlight’s secret stash room. The bottom half of the first monolith was there, as dead as it had first seemed. Starlight glanced back through the portal.

She saw something sitting on a rock, past the swarm of monoliths.

Something purple.

“…Twilight?”

Discord closed the portal.

Starlight’s ears instantly stopped detecting any sort of whine. She let out a sigh of relief. Then she laughed. “We did it!” She set her foot on top of the monolith chunk. “We have obtained some anti-magic stone! Ha-ha!”

Discord produced a party blower out of nowhere and blew it.

Starlight shook her head. “Tsk tsk tsk. You should stop copying Pinkie’s moves, Discord. It isn’t good for your self-image.”

Discord shrugged. “Originality is overrated. So, Starlight, when are we going to do this again?”

“Again?”

“That was fun. I think it’s about time I put my foot in this dimensional exploration ring, and your
lack of regard for rules seems just right for me!”

Starlight grinned. “How about every time I head out? I’ll no longer have to sneak around the Mirror Portal, and we can deposit things right here. Discord, we’re going to get so much awesome stuff.”

Discord smirked, knocking the monolith chunk. “You got it! …You think we could make a throne out of this?”

Starlight furrowed her brow. “….Maybe…?” Already, she was thinking about how to turn it into a throne without using magic. Already pushing the memories of the Noise out of her mind.

What Noise? There was no noise.

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“Well, I like the Director,” Iroh said. “Reminds me of myself in many ways.”

“He doesn’t care as much as you,” Sunset said. “He wasn’t lying when he said he was selfish. He really does like power and glory, even if he does like those around him as well. He’s… An interesting character, I have to say. I wouldn’t trust him.”

“What do you think about him, Tempest?”

“He’s my boss,” Tempest muttered. “That’s it.”

Sunset put her hands on her hips. “Come on, every person you ever meet you have thoughts about.”

“People aren’t worth my time,” Tempest muttered. She led them into the elevator again, pressing the basement 13 button. They arrived at the bottom of the base shortly thereafter. It was just the large room they had seen on the screen earlier with the two arches. The only other people in the room were two men in suits talking happily to each other.

“Mike! Ike!” Tempest yelled. “Looks like we’ve got the sun girl on our team now.”

“Nice!” The shorter, pale white man said. “Told you she’d accept! Nobody can say no to the Director!”

“I could,” the dark red skinned man said. “It just happens that I agree with him most of the time.”

“Mike, there’s no way.”

Mike gave no response beyond a knowing smile.

The shorter man – presumably Ike – just shrugged. He went to shake Sunset’s hand – but held it back. “Waiiiit… I don’t want you seeing into my mind.”

“I’ve got a glove on right now,” Sunset said, smiling. “It’s fine.” She grabbed his hand and shook it.

“See? No weird stuff. I’m Sunset Shimmer, but you know that. You probably know a lot about me. How about you tell me about yourselves?”

Tempest grunted. “Mike and Ike were once agents of the FBI whose very names are a national secret. Mike and Ike are code names they gained on a very, very classified assignment you will never know about. Mike is an agent with several confirmed kills, combat experience, and commendations. Ike… is his friend.”

Ike frowned. “Really Tempy? Really?”
“And I am Agent Tempest Shadow. And that’s all you need to know.” She shoved the broken portal device into Sunset’s hands. “You’ll know how to make the thing work.”

“Where do I put the spell?”

Tempest pointed at the only spot on the arches that had a light shone on them.

“Oh. Gotcha.” She popped the back off the device, which was easy considering how broken it was. She took out a single silver wafer, the part of the machine enchanted with the spell. She placed it inside the arch. “That was really easy.”

“Wait, that was it?” Ike blurted.

Iroh grinned. “That it was, my young friend. If you don’t mind, Sunset, do you think you can take me home?”

Sunset frowned. “Let’s see… Tempest, controls?”

Tempest shrugged. Mike pointed at a computer in a nearby wall. Sunset ran to it, finding to her delight that the user interface was almost identical to how she imagined it. She adjusted a few parameters involving the portal, and pressed *go*.

The two arched spikes lit up with a purple energy, coursing with electricity drawn from the power grid. A small point appeared in between them, stretching to match their edges to the arches. The city of Ba Sing Se could be seen clearly through the portal.

“Hrm…” Sunset said, scratching her chin. “We aren’t underground on that end… Something to look into.”

Tempest shrugged. “Finding that out is your job. Iroh, leave now. We’ll be in contact.”

Iroh shrugged. “To the point, aren’t you?”

“Move it.”

Iroh didn’t get a chance to move. A small group of people had noticed the portal and were walking towards it.

“Abort!” Tempest yelled.

Iroh held up his hand. “I know them.” He waved to the approaching group. Sunset could make out an Earth Kingdom girl, Toph, a grumpy looking Fluttershy, and some shadow girl…

“So, old man, you seem to have found yourself an adventure!” the Earth Kingdom girl said, smirking.

Iroh smiled. “What are you doing with such an interesting group, Toph?”

“Looking for you! Nobody wants to go exploring, everybody’s got a bunch of responsibilities. Sokka, Katara, Aang, Zuko, all of them are just too busy. But I’m not about to let this chance go. So I’m gathering whoever I can find to go have some fun with those things the ponies gave us. And you’re going to give us one!”

Tempest looked at Iroh. “You let children command you?”

Iroh and Toph burst into laughter. “Good Spirits, no!” Iroh said. “She’s a friend. And I think an
exploration team is a great idea. A parallel to what you’re doing here, as it turns out.” He smirked. "What are the odds two groups would form at the same time?"

“Extremely low. And yet, perfect,” Mike offered.

“Yeah! I like you!” Fef cheered.

“We are not the same team. All of you out!” Tempest shouted.

“Yeesh. Anger issues incarnate,” Toph muttered. “All right! Everyone follow the blind girl out, as is tradition! Hup hup!”

Iroh laughed, waving to Sunset. “I guess I’ve overstayed my welcome. This was fun. We should do this again.”

Sunset rolled her eyes. “Something tells me we will. There’ll be no end to the fun.”

Tempest closed the portal, sealing the two worlds apart.

“There. Done. From now on we will do things by the book and follow the rules.” She stood tall. “Such a security breach should not be allowed again.”

Ike shrugged. “Loosen up, will you?”

“The boss is loose. I’m not. That’s how it works,” Tempest huffed.

Sunset shrugged. Frankly, she didn’t care all that much about what Tempest thought. She had a new job… And she was still excited about it. She was sure it was her excitement now, and not Director Storm’s. She now had the resources to actually help build the portal. And probably scientists who could figure out the gravity problem!

There’d be a non-magical solution yet…

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Princess Twilight Sparkle teleported a desk in front of the Mirror Portal. “Okay, so since people are starting to travel to and from the worlds a lot, as I’m sure you’ve noticed, the public is starting to learn about the Mirror Portal and what it is. More than a few have actually showed up asking to be let through. Naturally, this is a precious magical artifact and we can’t just let anypony in. That’s where you come in. You’re here to defend this Portal and keep track of who leaves, as well as who arrives.”

A cream-coated mare with a blue-pink curled mane bowed. “You can count on me, Princess.”

Twilight smiled. “You came highly recommended, Bon Bon. Celestia herself suggested you.”

Bon Bon glanced around nervously. “…What does this mean about my cover?”

“You’re still Bon Bon of Ponyville. No secret agent history as far as anyone who comes through here is concerned. You’ll look like a simple secretary. But your job is very important.”

“I won’t let you down.”

Twilight smiled. “I know you won’t.”

She left Bon Bon to get situated with her new desk. She noticed Starlight and Discord walking
towards her. “Oh. Hello you two!”

Starlight smiled. “Hi Twilight! Hey, have you, by chance, recently been to a world where the sky was static?”

Twilight blinked. “Uh… No. Why?”

“Thought I saw you somewhere. Guess it wasn’t really you.”

“…And why are you in a spacesuit?”

Starlight smiled brightly. “Discord and I went to one of the unsafe universes with his spell! It was an interesting place. It had no sound Twilight! And the light came from nowhere!”

Twilight’s eyes widened. “Oh really? Awesome! Put what you found in the Directory!”

“I will! Don’t go there though, no air at all.”

Twilight nodded. “Oh, of course. And thanks for being helpful, Discord!”

Discord gasped. “Oh no – I was helpful!” He made his body melt into an agonizing puddle. “Noooooooo…”

Twilight rolled her eyes. “Well, if you promise to behave yourself you can come on adventures with us. Okay?”

Both him and Starlight started laughing uncontrollably.

Twilight rolled her eyes. “Ooooor not. See you around.” She trotted off, completely oblivious to what was going on right under her nose.
“Woo-hoo!” Pinkie hollered. “It’s been a while!”

Twilight took her gaze off the Mirror Portal and raised an eyebrow in Pinkie’s direction. “We went through two days ago. The crystal world, remember?”

“Yeah, I’m not talking about that though!” Pinkie giggled.

“What are you talking about then?” Fluttershy asked, curious.

“Well, it’s just been awhile since I’ve felt like this! So good! We’re going to do something fun today, Twilight!”

“You think so?” Twilight asked.

“Well, yeah! But then again I always make things fun so this might just mean nothing for us. Eh.”

“Oh! Before we go in…” Starlight said, reaching into her saddlebags and pulling out a small helicopter drone. “I’ve made… this.”

Rarity looked at the thing resting in Starlight’s hoof. “…What is it, dear?”

“It’s a flying machine.” Starlight lit her horn and the small machine rose into the air. “It’ll follow us around automatically and cast a shield spell whenever it thinks we need it.”

Twilight looked at it and grinned. “That’s pretty amazing Starlight. How’d you get the technology to accept the spells?”

“Ooh! Ooh!” Pinkie said, raising her hoof. “It was her souvenirs!”

Starlight chuckled. “Uh… Yeah! I worked with various otherworldly magics and a drone from an Earth and eventually made this thing. Discord and I tested it, it works pretty well.”

“Oh, so that’s what Discord’s helping you with?” Fluttershy asked.

“Yeeep! I mean, what else would he be helping me with?”

“I don’t know. It just seems unlike him to do ‘sciencey’ things.”

Starlight rolled her eyes. “He got to shoot chaos magic at a robot for a few hours.”

Fluttershy smiled warmly. “Well that certainly sounds like him.”

Twilight nodded. “That it does. Hopefully we won’t need to test this drone today. I don’t want to spend another day getting shot at.”

“Twilight, we have not visited enough worlds to be jaded to gunfire,” Rarity asserted. “Give it a year or two. Some of us still jump whenever there’s a bang.”

“Right, right, sorry.”
"No need to apologize!"

"But I-"

"Enough chit chat!" Pinkie said, appearing between the two of them. "We’re wasting the time that could be used elsewhere! Perhaps in a world of candy!"

"Is today donut world day?" Fluttershy asked.

"Fluttershy, there’s no way we could know that," Twilight noted. "We have to go in first. All I know right now is that the other side is safe. Other than that, could be anything." She took a step forward. "Pinkie’s right though, time to find out!"

She stepped through. The other side was dark. There were no sources of light, and yet she could see her purple hooves as if it were the middle of the day. The sky was a pitch black emptiness, a void of starless despair. The ground was flat, cold, and felt vaguely like plastic. Twilight noted that the ground was a grid – black squares bordered by dark blue glowing lines, each roughly the size of a square meter. She could see precisely fifteen squares in every direction before the blue lines no longer existed, giving way to seeming endless blackness.

"…Peculiar," Twilight said.

"Why do we even say that anymore?" Rarity asked, taking her place beside Twilight. "This is nowhere near as odd as that infinite forest."

"True…" Twilight said, putting a hoof to her chin. Starlight, Fluttershy, and Pinkie arrived in the new world along with Starlight’s drone. The robot happily buzzed above Starlight, observing every space it could see.

Twilight took a step forward into the next square. The moment she did so, more squares lit up in front of her. Glancing behind her, she saw that the squares in the back had vanished, replaced with blackness. "Hey, Starlight."

"Yeah?"

"How many squares away from yourself can you see?"

Starlight glanced at the square she was on, counting in her mind. "…Fifteen in every direction. Exactly."

"I can see fifteen as well. From where I’m standing. That means I can see squares you can’t."

Fluttershy blinked. "Um. What does that mean?"

"Not sure yet…" Twilight cast a simple light spell and forced it to sit on the fifteenth square in front of her. "Can you see that Starlight?"

"It just vanished into nothingness for me." Starlight smirked. "It seems each of us have a limited field of view. There’s no way this place is natural…"

"Ahem," Rarity coughed. "There are weirder things in the multiverse."

"All right, fine, I doubt it’s natural. Too many squares, artificial light, forced perspective. Almost like a…"

"GAME!" Pinkie squeed, jumping around in her characteristic way. Bounced out of the last square
in Twilight’s field of view, vanishing into nothing in an instant. Twilight felt afraid for a moment – what if Pinkie never came back? They couldn’t see far enough to locate her, and if she needed help there’d be no way for them to give it!

Pinkie came back into the field of view a few seconds later, putting those thoughts to rest for the most part. She stopped right next to Twilight. “I’m here to report that there’s nothing but flat squares in that direction!”

“Nothing but flat squares anywhere,” Rarity said, walking around. “The only feature is… Well what we came out of.”

What they came out of was a simple cube raised out of the ground, borders glowing a soft dark blue. One of the cube’s faces shimmered with the light of the Mirror Portal. Starlight tapped one of its sides. “It’s… Just like the floor.”

“Why’s it raised though?” Twilight asked.

“Could be natural,” Fluttershy shrugged. She looked up. “I’m going to try flying.”

“All right. Just make sure you can still see us. If you can’t, come back down.”

Fluttershy flapped into the air. She was soon much higher than fifteen meters, but they could still see her easily. She kept going higher, but nothing changed besides her getting smaller.

“You can come down now!” Twilight yelled. “There’s no upper limit!”

Fluttershy slowly drifted down to the ground. “It’s… odd not being able to see further when you go higher.”

“Rainbow Dash would hate this place,” Rarity observed. “Can you imagine?”

Pinkie smirked. “AUGH! I can’t see where I’m going! AUGH! Stupid wall! AUGH! Going fast is punisheeeeed! No fair! Lame!”

The girls had a good chuckle at the impression.

“So…” Fluttershy eventually said. “Are we going to go explore, or what?”

Twilight blushed slightly. “Right, right, we do need to look around…” She cast a simple navigation spell so they’d always be able to find their way back here. Not that they needed it, since she had the dimensional device in her saddlebags as a backup, but it never hurt to be careful. They set out in a random direction – compasses didn’t work, so there wasn’t really a north here – and quickly left the sight of the raised block.

A couple minutes passed. Nothing presented itself to them.

“Ugh,” Starlight muttered. “Is there nothing here?”

“That wouldn’t be very fun…” Pinkie said.

“There’s obviously something imposing the field of view on us,” Twilight said. “Though I suppose that could be the universe itself… But if this place really operated on a grid why would we be allowed to stand on corners and move like we do?”

“Cause it’s a game!”
“What a thrilling game,” Rarity deadpanned. “I’m on the edge of my seat with excitement.”

“Girls…” Fluttershy said.

“Hrm?” Twilight asked, looking to her left at Fluttershy.

“I see something over there.” She pointed into the void.

“I don- Oh. Right.” Twilight walked into the same square as Fluttershy. The square was a little cramped with two ponies on it, but they managed without issue. Twilight looked at the furthest square she could see and did make out something. It was a blue pawn, similar to those pieces on the game of chess she’d seen on Earth. “Huh.”

“I want to see!” Starlight said, trying to worm her way onto the same square. The location went from cramped to uncomfortable in an instant.

“Starlight, if you want to see just move one square for-“

“LEMME SEE LEMME SEE!” Pinkie cheered, leaping into the three of them and creating a pony pile.

Rarity rolled her eyes at her friends’ antics, taking it upon herself to move forward. She strode gracefully towards the blue pawn, eyes watching it closely. It was a brighter color than the lines in the ground, bright enough that it spread a little blue spotlight around itself. It seemed alive – even though it didn’t have any moving limbs or body parts, it bounced around slightly like some frog, shifting its weight around to remain comfortable.

It eventually noticed her approaching it. It hopped up and down excitedly.

“Hello,” Rarity said.

The pawn hopped a square closer to Rarity. She took a step back – making the pawn pause. It leaned towards her, as if trying to gauge her reaction to it.

“Can you talk? …Or even understand me? …Or even have ears?”

The pawn made no response.

“Take that as a ‘no’ on all three!” Starlight called.

“Already got that figured out, but thanks anyway!” Rarity called back. She changed tactics, resorting to gestures to facilitate communication. She beckoned for it to come to her. It got the message, hopping over squares one at a time until it reached the one in front of hers. She touched it with her hoof, discovering that it felt exactly like the ground. “Don’t worry girls, he’s harmless.”

The pawn decided that was enough of that, and bounced over to the other four ponies eagerly. Pinkie Pie appeared on its head mid-journey, making it stop to re-examine its life. “Hi! I’m Pinkie Pie! You can’t understand me but that’s okay! Onward, steed!”

The pawn seemed to understand anyway, carrying Pinkie to her friends. Twilight eyed the pawn suspiciously. “Are you sure this thing’s safe? We’ve been wrong before.”

“Well, it probably doesn’t want us dead,” Pinkie said. “It’s kinda like a dog!”

Fluttershy put her wing on it. “…Not like any dog I’ve dealt with. I don’t understand it at all… I have no idea what the poor thing wants!”
“How do you know it’s a poor thing then?” Starlight asked.

“How do you know it’s a poor thing then?” Starlight asked. “Animal talk,” Pinkie explained. “All cute things are poor things unless Fluttershy is doting over them.”

“Hey! I…” Fluttershy blushed. “I can’t argue with that.”

“I won a cookie. That’s worth, like, a trillion internet cookies.”

“At this phase of the game…” Starlight noticed her friends looking at her. “…All right, the game is stupid, I shouldn’t get so worked up over it, sorry Pinkie.”

Pinkie winked. Then she pulled out a cupcake, offering it to Starlight. “Here.”

“How many internet cupcakes is that worth?”

“None, I just grabbed it!”

Starlight nodded slowly, trying desperately to make it look like she understood.

The pawn hopped up and down excitedly again, moving a square away and pointing its head in the same direction. It hopped another square, stopping to point at them, then leaned away.

“I say we follow it,” Rarity cut in. “It’s the only thing we’ve seen in this entire place. What else are we going to do? Have a sleepover?”

“I do have pillows,” Pinkie said, throwing a pillow in Rarity’s face.

“Thank you Pinkie for your input. I’m going to follow the pawn.”

“Brilliant deduction,” Starlight deadpanned.

“Thank you Pinkie for your input. I’m going to follow the pawn.”

Twilight nodded. “It seems like the best thing to do.” They fell in line behind the blue being. It wanted to go as far and as fast as it could, but it never let itself get more than seven squares away from Twilight. She figured this meant that the pawn had a smaller field of view than she and her friends did.

Once again Twilight was left to wonder why and not come up with a satisfactory answer. Something had to be keeping track of them to do this. She didn’t detect any high levels of magic, but that didn’t really mean anything anymore.

Their pawn friend led them to an area that had more blue pawns – much, much more. Twilight could count twenty in her field of view alone, and she knew there were even more behind them.

“There might be hundreds… Thousands…” Twilight muttered.

“Well, it’s a society at least,” Rarity observed. “No buildings though… Nothing but them and this grid. What kind of life do they have if they can’t talk? It must be boring.”
“They seem happy,” Fluttershy said. “Maybe they just don’t need anything but each other.”

Twilight surveyed the landscape, brow furrowed. “I still want to know why. What runs this place?” She glanced around – and on the edge of her vision she saw a red pawn. It hopped into the field of view – then hopped out.

“Girls, I just saw-“

From the left edge of her field of view, dozens of red pawns poured out, charging the blue pawns. The blue ones leaped up and ran for the most part, fleeing the red onslaught. Not all of them were fast enough to escape. The red pawns leaped on top of the blue ones, smashing them into a thousand pieces that dissipated into nothing. Five shattered before Twilight registered what was happening.

“No!” Fluttershy said, flying towards the pawn that had led them here. She was too late – it was quickly crushed by an invading red pawn. Fluttershy screamed, Staring at the red pawn with ferocious intensity.

It froze solid, unable to move as Fluttershy inched closer.

“You… Are going… To… Protect these lit-“

The red pawn bolted, as if a switch had been flicked inside of it from ‘stand frozen in fear’ to ‘flee!’ The entire group of red pawns got the idea at the exact same time, fleeing from the ponies’ field of view.

Twilight stared, jaw hanging. “…What just happened?”

“I’ll tell you what happened!” Fluttershy screeched. “A bunch of mean red pawns attacked for no reason and killed a bunch of adorable blue pawns!”

Rarity held a hoof to her mouth. “There are no remains at all…”

“This isn’t any game I’d like to play,” Pinkie muttered.

“We need to help these pawns!” Fluttershy said. “They can’t live like this. Look at them – they’re terrified!”

The pawns did indeed seem to be terrified. Instead of hopping around carefree and amiably, they shivered and huddled as close together as possible.

“We can’t do that,” Twilight said, shaking her head. “We don’t know all the details. We can’t talk to them, we can only go off what we see. And we haven’t seen much. Acting without knowing is likely to cause more problems. More destruction.”

Fluttershy’s face indicated that she really wanted to argue against Twilight’s stance, but couldn’t. She sagged in defeat. “Fine. But we need to do that quickly so more of this doesn’t happen while we’re waiting! How do we find out more?”

“We can’t ask them, so we’ll have to watch them. And since we need both sides of the story, we need to go see what the red pawns are doing.” She took in a deep breath. “They fled that way. Let’s follow them.”

Fluttershy spread her wings and flew away, giving no regard to her usual slow movement.

“W-wait up!” Starlight called after her, galloping at full speed, her drone flying behind her. Twilight,
Pinkie, and Rarity took places behind Starlight, attempting to keep up with the driven pegasus.

“Fluttershy!” Twilight yelled. “Slow down when you see them! We can’t let them know they’re being followed!”

“Got it!” Fluttershy called back, showing no signs of slowing.

Rarity turned to Twilight as they ran. “Did… Did we just see pawn creatures die?”

“Think about it later, Rarity,” Twilight said. If she was being honest, she said that more for her own benefit. She couldn’t let herself get bogged down by what had just happened now. Her mind couldn’t process it.

Fluttershy flared her wings, slowing everypony down in that moment. They all kept running, but at a slower pace – because Fluttershy had seen the pawns and was keeping them at the edge of her vision. She glowered at them.

“Good job, Fluttershy.” Twilight said. “Now we just have to keep them in our sights…”

While Twilight was finishing that thought, the red pawns arrived in their encampment, taking up positions in a loose coalition of happily bouncing red pawns. None of them could see the ponies, for they were too far away.

Fluttershy blinked. “It… It looks exactly like the blue pawn place…”

“That’s what it seems like…” Twilight frowned. “I think we should go in.”

“What?!”

“Those pawns we were tailing are long out of our sights. The red pawns won’t be able to recognize us. So they should accept us just like the blue ones…” She took a few steps forward. One of the pawns saw her and began shaking in fear. It ran into the sea of other read pawns. Twilight imagined it screaming.

Some of the red pawns looked like they wanted to take a stand, but ran away anyway.

Twilight held out a hoof. “Uh… So we’re terrifying. Great. This makes no sense!”

She did not have time to contemplate the senselessness of the situation, for what sounded an awful lot like a gunshot reached her ear. She noticed with some fear that Starlight’s drone had raised a shield directly to the left of her skull, protecting her from a projectile. She’d probably be dead right now without that drone.

To her left, exactly fifteen spaces away, she saw a floating red octahedron. It flashed red, firing another red bullet, which the drone defended as well.

Twilight was done – she had to defend herself now. She fired a magic laser at the diamond, only for it to step out of her field of view.

“What is it Twilight!?” Starlight shouted.

“Under attack! Red diamond! Look out!”

“I see it!” Rarity yelled, firing off a magic bolt of her own. “It’s staying out of our line of sight!”

Twilight saw it to her right. It fired the moment it entered her field of view, but Twilight sent the
bullet right back at it – only to miss. “It has the same field of view we do! Next time one appears, try
to keep it in your sights!”

“I SPY WITH MY LITTLE EYE, A DIAMOND!” Pinkie yelled. She ran out of Twilight’s field of
view, presumably after the diamond. But then one appeared behind Twilight in the exact opposite
direction.

“There’s more than one!” Twilight shouted.

“Got one!” Starlight yelled, latching onto a red diamond with her magic. She encased it in a bubble
shield so it couldn’t unleash its bullets and pulled it closer to her. “Keep an eye on it!”

Fluttershy nodded, staring at it intently.

A red diamond *rushed* at them from beyond their sight range, fire burning off of it on all sides. With
graceful movement, it bounced over Starlight’s and Twilight’s attacks, landing directly on the magic
box containing the other red diamond with a fiery burst. With its companion freed, the flame-
wielding diamond turned on Rarity, a torrent of flame shooting right at her. Starlight blocked it with
her magic, unable to prevent Rarity’s mane from getting slightly singed.

The drone blocked another bullet, this time saving Fluttershy a wound to her chest. Pinkie came out
of nowhere, holding a red diamond in her hooves and hitting the fiery diamond across the side with
it. “STRIKE! Or FORE! Or something!”

The flaming diamond didn’t hit the ground – it just floated upright, ready for more fighting. It
charged, accompanied by more gunfire from a fourth companion.

“How many of them are there?” Rarity yelled, firing off ineffective bolts of magic.

“I don’t know!” Starlight said, tying the one she’d had imprisoned previously and the one Pinkie had
brought in down. “I count four so far!”

The flaming diamond unleashed a wave of flame towards everypony. Twilight had to raise the shield
to defend this one since the drone was far too weak for the task. The drone caught a bullet from
behind, and Starlight took the opportunity to imprison a third diamond. “Just the fiery one left unless
we’ve miscounted!”

The fiery diamond launched itself right at Starlight, only to be caught by her telekinesis. “Woo! Full
of *fire* wouldn’t you say?”

Pinkie facehooved. “That’s my job, Starlight.”

“Did… Did we get them all?” Twilight asked, nervously glancing around. There were no diamonds
besides the four Starlight had frozen in magic bubbles.

“No more action on the horizon…” Rarity said, scanning the area.

“Good,” Twilight let out a breath. “…I did *not* want guns today…”

“They weren’t really guns, you know,” Starlight observed. “Just… Gun-like magic-like like… …I’m
going to stop this sentence before it gets too out of hand.”

Twilight glanced at the diamonds. “You have them secure?”

“Long as I’m thinking about it, it stays up. Give me a minute or to and I could make it more
permanent.”

“Well-“

A yellow pawn appeared out of the corner of their vision and charged. Rarity stopped it with her telekinesis, grunting from the strain. “My… How do you two push so hard all the time?”

Twilight shrugged. She was about to respond when two more yellow pawns appeared, charging. She caught these in her telekinesis, but it didn’t end. More appeared, all needing to be stopped. Soon there were a full dozen yellow pawns frozen by their magic.

“This… Is a bit much to focus on…” Starlight admitted. “Maybe we should consi-“

A yellow diamond showed up. It grabbed a pawn from behind it with an invisible force and threw it at Starlight. Starlight panicked from the sudden movement, unable to stop the pawn from hitting her in the head. It bounced right off of her harmlessly, but she lost her focus on all the beings she was keeping imprisoned. Including the four red diamonds.

The fiery diamond wasted no time at all. Starlight was given a face full of fire without any sort of magical protection. She fell to the ground, singed.

A second yellow diamond appeared out of the floor and attacked the flaming red diamond. Fire appeared in front of the yellow diamond, before exploding onto the red diamond. The red diamond didn’t seem to care – and its associates fired bullets right at the yellow shape. They passed right through without so much as a dent.

Two more yellow diamonds entered the scene, bringing with them more yellow pawns. One broke the grid beneath it and tossed chunks of it at the red diamond and the ponies, while the other attacked with neon chains that lengthened and shrunk with alarming accuracy. One of the chains clocked Fluttershy in the side of the head, knocking her out. The drone stopped the other one from hitting Pinkie.

Pinkie grabbed ahold of a red shooting diamond and smacked a yellow diamond with it. Both the diamonds slumped to the ground, but Pinkie was open to an attack from the grid-smasher. Part of the grid hit her in the back of the head. “OW! That hurt! Tha-“ A chain hit her right in the face. Pinkie twisted around like a corkscrew and fell to the ground.

Twilight unleashed the spell she’d been building up in her horn. “Enough!” She sent out a burst of purple magic energy, a spell designed to stun all enemies. It worked – all the diamonds and yellow pawns stopped moving.

They’d only be frozen a second. She lit her horn again, drawing magic together for a somewhat less complex spell. She latched onto Pinkie, Starlight, Rarity, and Fluttershy with her magic and teleported them all the way back to the blue pawn base. They escaped the battlefield in an instant, out of danger and into safety.

Twilight ran to Starlight first. She could smell the burn. “Starlight!”

Starlight moaned. “Hrng…”

Twilight winced when she saw Starlight’s face – the coat was burned off the right side, revealing the pale skin beneath. Her eye was swollen shut and part of the skin was charred. “All right… Twilight… You can do this…” She lit her horn, trying to remember her first aid spells she had brushed up on for these missions. For a burn… Cool aspect, aloe effect, and… And uh...
She gulped, forcing herself to stop thinking and just perform the spell. A soft purple glow surrounded Starlight’s face, working on the burn wound.

Starlight screamed about a second in. Twilight reeled, and would have stopped the spell had it not been automatic at this point. Starlight screamed the full three seconds it worked on her – and then fell silent.

“S-... Starlight…?” Twilight said, nervously.

“You… Forgot… The anesthetic…” Starlight spat, breathing heavily.

“SORRY!”

Starlight stood up, rubbing her face. “Ow…” her coat was still burnt off that half of her face, and the scent of singed hair was still strong, but her eye was no longer swollen shut. “That hurt worse than the burn, Twilight.”

“Well burns tend to remove your nerves and so it probably hurt more and I’ll stop talking now because you really don’t need to hear that heheh.”

Starlight walked over to Fluttershy, standing her up. “You okay?”

“I’m… Fine. I feel sore though…”

“Your wing is bleeding,” Starlight said, lifting the limb with her magic. “I think a bullet grazed it…”

“Yeah…”

Starlight cast a simple ‘scab’ spell to stop the bleeding. “That’ll work for now.”

Fluttershy nodded. “Thanks…”

“Well,” Rarity said, “now we know what’s going on here. Three-way war.”

“Probably,” Twilight said, sighing. “They’ve been fighting for Celestia knows how long. We… We really shouldn’t do anything here. It’s not our place. …I’m not sure what we could do either, besides fight in the war.”

“I understand,” Fluttershy said. “I… I think” She shook her head. “This is a messed up place. We should leave.”

Twilight nodded. She lit her horn, teleporting the five of them to the raised block.

Or what she had marked as the raised block.

There was no raised block anymore.


“That… That it is,” Twilight said, trying her best to keep a straight face. “How… Great.”

“You brought the device, right?” Starlight asked.

“Oh yeah!” Twilight said, pulling it out of her bags. “I forgot!” She levitated it out in front of her and dialed Equestria. The device had more than enough charge, seeing as she always kept it full when possible. Never hurt to be prepared. She activated it, channeling the magic into reality itself. She saw
the familiar ripple of space-time in front of her – but no tear. Just the ripples.

“…Huh?” She activated the device again, this time pushing her own magic into it, trying to accentuate the space-time ripples. She felt something push back against her magic, forcing the distortion levels to remain and manageable lows.

“Twilight, please don’t tell me we’re stuck here,” Starlight said.

“Something’s keeping us here, forcing the portal to stay closed…”

“I take it back, I would have much preferred you just told me we were stuck here.”

Fluttershy curled into a ball. “Something wants us here?”

“That seems likely. There is a… force.”

“It wants to play a game,” Pinkie said with no hint of her usual jovial tone.

Twilight gulped. “That it does…”

“What are we going to do!?” Starlight wailed.

“Someone will come looking for us eventually,” Twilight said. “Discord could probably get us out…”

“Trusting Discord to be prompt and helpful?” Rarity blurted. “That sounds… Less than ideal.”

“Well we can’t do anything from this end! Our spells and machines don’t work!”

“We could find who’s doing this and ask him to let us go,” Fluttershy suggested. “I’m sure we can convince him.”

Twilight frowned, glancing at the glowing grid in the ground. “I could… I could try to trace the power as I attempt to open a portal, but I don’t know if that’ll work. And if something can prevent us from opening a portal, couldn’t it do much worse to us if we angered it?”

Starlight gulped. “Maybe… Maybe we should play the game. Fight in the war. The blue pawns will accept us.”

“No,” Fluttershy said, putting her hoof down. “I will not fight in any war. Ever.”

“How would we even win? There’s probably an endless number of pawns!” Pinkie added.

Starlight shrugged. “Defeat the diamonds? They seemed… special. More unique.”

“There was something odd about them,” Rarity agreed. “They didn’t seem limited to the grid and seemed to be smarter.”

“Commanders, probably,” Twilight said.

“Is anyone listening to me!?” Fluttershy interjected. “We are not playing the game! We are finding the pony or person or thing that’s doing this and making them stop!”

“It might not even be a person,” Twilight said. “It might not be able to talk…”

“We have to try, Twilight. Please. For all these pawns who are always fighting…”
Twilight sighed. “Fine, I’ll try again, but I’m burning through the device’s battery. I shouldn’t try this more than once.” She activated it again, using her magic to accentuate it once more. She felt the presence push against her magic again, and she latched onto it. The power tried to pull back, but Twilight managed to get a direction. She pointed. “That way.”

“Where is that way?” Rarity asked.

Twilight frowned. “It’s not the red or blue base, that’s for sure. The yellows maybe?”

“Well, we’re about to find out,” Fluttershy asserted. “Lead the way, Twilight. We’re getting to the bottom of this.”

Twilight nodded absent-mindedly – her thoughts drifted back to the diamonds. Something about them didn’t sit right with her, but she couldn’t put her hoof on what it was. In silence, they walked through the field of squares. They passed by a few blue pawns and saw a red one for a split second, but otherwise nothing much happened on the journey.

Yet, this time, nobody complained about the relatively boring silence. There was a somber mood, and even Pinkie knew to keep quiet when that was the case. It was a mutual understanding between the five of them, even if they all knew they probably should talk about it.

The journey took much longer than the journey to the blue base from the raised cube – but only by fifteen minutes or so. They arrived at a tall, black diamond floating on top of a single square. It was easily the size of Fluttershy’s tree house and was composed of the same material as the ground.

“…This is the center of the warzone,” Starlight said. “I think we’re roughly equal distances from the red and blue bases, and I would not be surprised if the yellow base was over there.”

Twilight nodded. “I think you’re right… But… I wonder what this is?” She scanned it with her magic and came up with nothing. The power had definitely come from here, but it felt no different than the rest of the ground around them. “Hrm…”

“RED DIAMOND!” Pinkie said, pointing at the edge of their vision. Twilight tensed as the four red diamonds appeared. Curiously, none of them attacked. They just hovered there and did nothing, much like Twilight and company were doing. Nobody moved.

Twilight furrowed her brow. “I’m going to walk towards them.”

“Twilight!” Rarity hissed. “What if they’re trying to figure out how to kill us?”

“I… I don’t think that’s the case.” She took a few steps forward. “But you girls stay here, okay? Starlight, teleport me away if there’s trouble.”

Starlight nodded. “Okay. If… If you’re sure.”

Twilight walked towards the red diamonds. One of them turned to the other three, made a strange tilting motion, and left the group as well. This red diamond alone met Twilight. They were soon a single square apart from each other in the shadow of the black floating diamond.

Twilight put a hoof on the diamond – nothing happened. The red diamond leaned against the black one – and half the black diamond’s faces lit up with a red glow.

Twilight frowned. “Only half…”

The red diamond leaned away from the black one and created a ball of fire in midair. Twilight
flinched, but didn’t flee – it wasn’t an attack. A smaller ball of fire began to orbit the large ball of fire.

“Are you trying to make me think of the sun?”

The fiery diamond kept doing what it was doing.

“…Right, can’t understand me. Uh… Sun. Sun…” What was it about these diamonds that seemed so off to her? Why was that fire bringing such an itch to her mind? What was it? What were they?

Something clicked in her mind. Not really believing what she had just deduced, she lit her horn and summoned a magical image of a sun – the sun that was Sunset Shimmer’s cutie mark.

The red diamond bounced up and down in joy and confirmation.

Twilight’s jaw dropped. “SUNSET!?”

“What?!” Starlight yelled. “That’s Sunset!?”

“Apparently!” Twilight said. Continuing with communication, Twilight created images of the cutie marks of the five of them, placing the six-pointed star on herself. The diamond that was Sunset jumped up and down in understanding. She turned back to her other three teammates, presumably to yell something at them Twilight couldn’t hear.

“This is beyond weird…” Twilight muttered. “Why were you turned into diamonds? Why’d you attack us? Uh, wait, right…” Twilight used her magic to create an image of sunset, a question mark, and a red diamond. Then a symbol of a sword and shield for battle.

Sunset generated an attempt at a flaming question mark next to the red diamond. Then some fire pointed at the diamond, then at Twilight.

“…Girls?” Twilight called back.

“We look like diamonds to them don’t we?” Pinkie said.

“Apparently.”

“Well that certainly explains a lot,” Fluttershy said.

“And brings up more questions!” Rarity muttered, walking toward Twilight. “For instance, why are we all made to look like diamonds? Why are we forced to play this game? Who wants us fighting?”

“Who are playing the yellow diamonds?” Starlight offered.

Twilight sighed. “Ugh. This just got more confusing…”

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Tempest walked up to her red-haired agent. “Corona, are you absolutely positive it is the ponies?”

“Positive,” Agent Corona – a woman previously known as Sunset Shimmer – responded. “They’ve got the cutie marks down and seem to be just as confused as we are about the whole thing.”

Tempest nodded. “It’s safe to assume the yellow diamonds are similar. Travelers plucked into this sick game by some higher power. Ike, has the central diamond’s readings changed any?”

“Nope. It reacted when the blue diamond – er, Twilight, I guess – touched it, as you saw, but
nothing else.”

Corona frowned. “It needs the yellow diamond as well. It probably needs all three colors, actually.”

“Where are we going to find a red diamond though?” Ike asked.

Mike raised an eyebrow. “We’re the red diamonds, Ike.”

“…Oh. Right.”

“How are we going to get a yellow diamond here though?” Mike asked Corona.

“Diplomacy, like we did here?” she suggested.

“Wishful thinking,” Tempest said. “Ponies are naturally trusting and willing to talk, but even they fought at first.”

“We fired first,” Corona deadpanned.

Tempest didn’t dignify this with a response. “I suggest we engage in a capture operation.”

“And how exactly?”

Tempest pointed at the many blue diamonds that were really ponies. “We have them help us. They subdued all of us pretty easily.”

Mike looked at his arm. Currently it was in a makeshift sling. “You don’t have to remind us.”

“All we need is for that blue-magic one – Starlight, I presume – to ensnare one of the diamonds in her magic and bring it here. Possibly by teleport, if they can do that.”

“You really do read up on their capabilities, don’t you?” Corona said.

“I’m well informed so I can make good decisions,” Tempest asserted. “Now, we need to communicate the plan to them. Corona, we know they can see your fire clearly. Use it.”

“…I really wish I was a unicorn right now…” Corona muttered, lighting her hand on fire. “It would make this so much easier…”

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Twilight cocked her head at the flurry of flames dancing before her eyes. “I do not understand.”

Starlight squinted her eyes. “…She’s pointing at herself, then us, then out into the distance. She emphasizes the distance. Does she want us to go somewhere?”

“When I pointed that direction she lit on fire. I presume that means frustration.”

“Safe bet,” Rarity said.

“Pinkie,” Fluttershy said, “care to help?”

Pinkie giggled. “Nah, you girls don’t need my help. Just think of it as a game of charades with poorly controlled fire!”
“You know, sometimes you’re helpful, sometimes you’re the exact opposite of helpful,” Starlight commented.

“Thank you! I try.”

Twilight furrowed her brow. “Okay, so… She’s pointing at herself…” She created an image of Sunset’s cutie mark. “Us…” She created an image of her own cutie mark. “And… over there.” She created an arrow image.

The fires from Sunset surrounded the three glyphs in diamond patterns. Twilight facehooved. “Oh. She’s talking about the three colors of diamond.” She changed the images to red, blue, and yellow diamonds.

Sunset’s fire danced around the yellow diamond image, then a burst of fire thrust toward the black diamond, causing half of it to light up with a red color. Twilight blinked. “So we need to get a yellow diamond to touch the black diamond as well. I got it. I was thinking the same thing.” To display her idea, she created a black diamond image with three colored diamonds on top of it. Sunset marked this with a flaming checkmark.

“Okay. So…. How?” Starlight asked. Twilight generated the image of a question mark.

Sunset’s flame pointed at Starlight.

“What does that mean?”

Pinkie rolled her eyes. “It means you’ve got to go capture one, silly!”

“Oh. Oh that’s just a great idea! Go attack a yellow diamond and capture it! Do you not remember that they trounced us just a short while ago?”

Twilight nodded. “That I do. But… We have allies now. And we don’t have to defeat them, just capture one and get back here.”

“But the question remains, where are they?”

Rarity smirked. “I have a feeling if we find the yellow base and scare a few pawns, we’ll draw their attention. After all, the game wants conflict does it not?”

“That could work…” Twilight said.

“I still want to know what this will accomplish,” Starlight muttered. “I mean, we’re going to light up a black diamond! What’ll it do?”

“Maybe it’s the victory condition? I have no idea. Honestly it’s our only lead at this point so… We just have to do it. Now… We need to make a fully developed plan.” She took in a deep breath. “This is going to take some masterful communication skills…”

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The yellow base was identical in every way to the red and blue ones except occupied by yellow pawns. Twilight had taken her position – far, far above the ground, so high up that the pawns didn’t notice her, but she could see them. She flew in a circle pattern around the field so she could scope out a much larger area than the world usually allowed. She couldn’t locate the yellow diamonds, so they would have to go with the special plan.
Sunset’s group of red diamonds was closest to the base, ready to move first. Starlight, Pinkie, and Rarity were spread out a bit further out, poised to strike at any single location should it be needed. Fluttershy flew into Twilight’s line of sight, completing Twilight’s mental map of the ground below.

“I can’t see the diamonds… But everyone’s in place.”

“I hope this works,” Twilight said.

“I hope they don’t shoot any pawns…” Fluttershy added.

“They’ve been told not to. I’m sure they’ll do whatever’s in their power to keep all the pawns safe.”

“…If you say so.”

Twilight nodded. “We need to start the cycle. Fly in the circle we outlined and try to always stay on the opposite side of it as me. We are the eyes in the sky. We make sure there are no complications. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“Then go. I’ll give them the signal.” Fluttershy nodded, flying away on the predetermined path, leaving Twilight behind. Twilight waited three seconds before sending a purple spark to the red diamonds directly below her. She couldn’t see her three friends. But she knew they could see that spark she created. It was go time.

Twilight took off in the same direction Fluttershy went, angling in a circular pattern. She witnessed the red diamonds fire off a few bullets, hitting the ground right in front of numerous yellow pawns. The pawns reacted with fear for the most part, retreating deeper into the base. However, more than had been expected attacked back viciously. Sunset cleverly used walls of fire to keep them back, and those that continued on were blocked by Starlight’s magic. Twilight found it mildly odd that she could see Starlight’s magic but not Starlight herself.

Twilight’s path of flight took the battle out of her sight, replacing the scene with the inner workings of the yellow base. The pawns were moving like a sea from this vantage point. A ‘wave’ of running pawns dominated Twilight’s vision, with a few outliers moving behind or in front of the wave. The alarm had spread quickly through the base, exactly as planned.

Then she saw one – a yellow diamond, rushing through the base, heading right for the source of the battle. Twilight broke off her circular path to follow. It didn’t see her, even though she knew it could if it only bothered to look up. It was too focused on finding the source of the commotion.

Twilight flew ahead of it, sending a magic spark down to Sunset’s group – a warning that a yellow diamond was coming. They were supposed to spread out the moment they got it – but they were a little surrounded. On one side were the yellow pawns, and on the other… blue pawns aggressively attacking? Where did they come from?

Twilight flew further out until she could see Pinkie. She was dealing with a bunch of red pawns, using her bouncy abilities to keep them occupied. Twilight couldn’t find Starlight, and Rarity had encased herself in a magical bubble shield. Twilight prayed that would hold – Rarity wasn’t very proficient in the spell. Twilight grit her teeth - everybody’s mobility had been squandered by the sudden appearance of pawns.

“It was as if they knew we’d be doing this and wanted to mess it up…” Twilight muttered to herself. She flew back over Sunset’s group, which was now within sight range of the incoming yellow diamond. The red diamonds had started shooting the blue and yellow pawns around them directly,
shattering them into a thousand pieces that faded to nothing. This pulled at Twilight’s stomach – but she was able to rationalize that they were being overwhelmed and had no choice.

Fluttershy was not able to do any such thing. Twilight saw her dive-bomb from the sky directly at one of the red diamonds, pinning them to the ground. “Fluttershy, no!” Twilight yelled, far too late.

This disagreement gave the yellow diamond the opportunity it needed – dragging the ground beneath the red diamonds and Fluttershy up, encasing them in a blue-black box. Twilight tried to swoop down to assist them – but another yellow diamond hit her from the side.

Twilight didn’t bother to think about how one of the diamonds had gotten this high up – it was probably just a being with wings under that yellow shell. Twilight encased the diamond in telekinesis to prevent it from acting any further. It fell still.

Twilight began to ready the teleport spell – screw the original plan, she had a rogue yellow diamond in her magic, it was time to return to the black diamond and… and…

She stared at the yellow diamond, losing focus. Why… Why did she feel so guilty all of a sudden? Why did she – why did she feel like she couldn’t move? Why were her wings freezing up? Oh Celestia.

She lost her hold on the yellow diamond and dropped from the air like a stone. She couldn’t take her eyes off it – and she knew that if she could see the eyes behind the visage it would be Staring right at her.

Twilight wondered how far away the ground was now. Pretty close, given how small the diamond appeared now. She was definitely moving fast enough to completely blow her brains out simply by landing. But… she wasn’t scared. For whatever reason, she didn’t feel like today was her day. It wouldn’t be a very satisfying ending.

When Pinkie caught her, Twilight just smiled. “Thank you, Pinkie.”

“Don’t mention it. Yellow diamond have the Stare?”

“I guess so…” Twilight regained control of her wings. “You don’t think it’s Lieshy do you?”

“Could be,” Pinkie said, kicking a rogue red pawn in the head, knocking it over. “But that’s not something to think about now. What we need to do is capture one of these diamonds.”

Twilight stood up, rubbing her head. “I… I don’t think I have the focus to teleport us out now, and I don’t know where Starlight is, and-“

The yellow diamond that was on the ground charged them, lifting a block of the ground and tossing it at them. Pinkie drew a solid-iron baseball bat and hit the block right back at the diamond. The block shattered on contact.

“Just grab it or something!” Pinkie shouted, deflecting another chunk of ground.

Twilight shook her head, clearing the fog away as well as she could. She focused on the yellow diamond assaulting them and prevented it from moving with her telekinesis. “Got it!”

“Incoming!” Pinkie said, bringing out a shield and deflecting the yellow chain attack. “We need to get out! That was part of the plan, right!?”

Twilight focused – she had to find everyone. Where were they though? Sunset’s group and
Fluttershy were trapped in that rock cage, Rarity was huddling under her magic over there, and who had any idea where Starlight was…

Wait, there was the drone. Hanging around… nothing. What was it doing…?

Starlight decloked herself, revealing her position to be right underneath the drone. She also revealed a few dozen blue pawns she’d been hiding. They launched from her sides at her command, charging the yellow pawns around Sunset’s prison. Starlight lit her horn, shattering the walls of the prison, and the four red diamonds and Fluttershy ran out.

“Starlight! Teleport!” Twilight yelled.

Starlight didn’t waste any time – she checked the positions of everyone, nodded, and lit her horn.

The flying yellow diamond barreled into Twilight just as the teleport was executed. She lost control of the yellow diamond in her telekinesis, but it was still teleported.

Five ponies, four red diamonds, and two yellow diamonds appeared before the black diamond.

The yellow diamonds tried to fight back, but without the chaos of the pawn war around them, not to mention two of their team members being absent, there wasn’t much on their side. A chunk of the ground was thrown only to be stopped by Rarity, then the yellow diamond was frozen by Starlight.

Twilight shook her head. “Now!” She called, grabbing the yellow diamond next to her and pressing it to the black diamond. Half of the black structure became yellow. Sunset floated up to the black structure and touched it, making half of it red.

Rarity touched the diamond last, presumably lighting the diamond up with blue colors for all the others.

The diamond flashed brightly, becoming white. The whiteness of the diamond quickly raised to a level so bright, it was blinding. But as soon as Twilight considered looking away, it flashed, making everything go white in the most literal sense. The sky and ground became white, with only the dark blue of the gridlines not changing color.

Now, instead of a diamond, there was a strange white cube floating a meter off the ground.

It ‘spoke’ with a reverberating voice that just sounded wrong.

“You found the alternate solution,” it said, “congratulations. You’re all winners.”

“Winners of WHAT?!” Tempest demanded. Twilight noted that not only could she hear the human agent now, but could also see her as something other than a diamond. The two yellows as well – one was indeed Lieshy, while the other was some girl in green and yellow Twilight swore looked very familiar.

“The experiment.”

“WHAT experiment!?”

“Hey, calm down,” Twilight said, stepping forward. “I am Princess Twilight Sparkle of Equestria. I wish I could say I was pleased to meet you.”

“I do not have a name. I was not aware names were a thing until you arrived here. I was not aware speech was a thing until you arrived here.”
“What were you aware of then?”

“*The grid. And my dominion over it.*”

“You *did* do all of this then!” Fluttershy blurted.

“*Indeed I did. Everything you see is my doing.*”

“How could you have made those poor pawn creatures fight each other?!”

“They are not creatures. I merely designed them to look alive. They are but fragments of my own subconscious.”

Fluttershy gawked. “Wh… He… Why would you make us think people were *dying!*?”

“That was your own assumption. But in truth, I did it to make the experiment more realistic. To give you a motivation to become involved that you, ultimately, turned your back on.”

“…You wanted us to fight,” Sunset asserted.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“*Because I thought it would be interesting to see how my wars would play out without my knowing exactly what every single move would be.*”

Lieshy glared. “The grayscale uncertainty – the insanity caused by loneliness.”

Twilight shook her head. “…You should know we wouldn’t approve of this.”

“Your approval was not my concern. I wanted to see what would happen. I would have preferred you played the game as it was meant to be played, until one color completely dominated, but I knew you might be too smart for that. So I provided this other victory, one that could only be accomplished if you deduced your nature. The only concern of mind was making sure things stayed interesting.”

“What on earth is going on,” the girl asked. “Who’s the arrogant jerk talking, and where is he so I can fling a rock at him?”

“It’s a cube Toph,” Lieshy said. “And probably wouldn’t care if you threw a rock at it. It doesn’t care about much at all, the doorway.”

*The ‘Lieshy’ understands. This was just a game. You won. You’re free to go.*”

Twilight shook her head. “I mean, thank you for letting us go now, but… This conversation isn’t over. You’ve done horrible things to us. I don’t think we can just let that slide.”

“So?”

“So… So…” Twilight’s features twisted into a mess. “So what you did was wrong!”

“By your definition.”

“How could what you did be right?”
“How can you be so sure there is right?”

Twilight gawked. She had never heard this from anyone else before. Everyone – even the many villains she had seen – believed in a right to do things. A good, even if it was misguided, or if they knew they weren’t part of it. This guy… He couldn’t be serious.

Rarity spoke next. “How can you be so sure there isn’t?”

“I’m not. But why would I care? All I do is exist here, alone, forever with my games. You are the first other beings I’ve ever seen. And you’ve proven to be horribly unsportsmanlike. Not bad, just unsatisfactory. I’ll just continue existing now, you can go home, and we can all forget about this until the next group of adventurers comes through. Hopefully in a few eons I’ll have better ideas. Or maybe they’ll never show up and I can just go back to the way things were. Either way.”

Starlight shook her head. “There’s no talking to this guy. I… I don’t think he can see things the way we do, Twilight.”

“So… we just… go?” Fluttershy said. “Go and forget about all that he put us through without any kind of resolution?”

“I… guess so,” Twilight said, glancing at the faces around.

“Good. Use your devices. I won’t block them now. The game is over.”

Twilight took hers out. “…Well, it was good to see you Sunset.”

“Yeah,” Sunset said. “Though, uh, call me Corona out here, okay? Need to get used to that.”

“Right.”

“Also… Sorry, Starlight. I… I didn’t know it was you.”

Starlight rubbed her burn. “Yeah. I didn’t know I was freezing you in magic either.”

“Hey, where’s my apology?” Toph demanded. “I was kicked around a lot!”

“Would you stop?”

Everyone turned to the black cube. Twilight raised an eyebrow. “Why? Do you care?”

“I am annoyed that I cannot start the next game for certain until you leave.”

“Well, maybe we’ll stay around a little longer.” Toph crossed her arms. “Vivian and Fef aren’t here anyway.”

Suddenly both Vivian and Fef were there. “Oh. There you are,” Fef said.

“Go. Now. Actually, I don’t know why I’m being polite. Go or I kill you when I wipe the universe.”

The three teams pulled out their dimensional devices faster than ever before, leaving the dimension in a matter of seconds.

The cube was pleased with this. The entire world returned to black, and a four-color game was started. The cube continued existing as it had. The experience it had just had changed nothing about it.
Meanwhile ponies and humans would spend the next few days wondering about the pointless game they had been in.

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Sunset – or Corona – wouldn’t be allowed to think to deeply about it until she was in her bed that night. For when she returned to the A.I.D. office, she was greeted with quite the surprise. Every conceivable surface was covered in red and green knick-knacks ranging from wool socks to fake presents to glass ornaments. Four separate Christmas trees were set up in the corners of the workspace, and numerous pieces of mistletoe hung from the ceiling. Each computer had a reindeer bobble-head sitting on it, a nearby table had a nativity scene on it, and there was fake snow dusted around.

Corona blinked. “Uh…”

Ike grinned. “Oh yeah! Christmas time! The boss always goes overboard in holiday decorations.”

“HO HO HO!” Director Storm yelled, turning around in his giant chair. He had a bright red Santa hat on, but had apparently decided not to trade away his nice suit to complete the costume. “Are you all ready to get into the holiday cheer?”

“Sir, I have a report to make,” Tempest said.

“It can wait a few minutes, can’t it? Let Agent Corona grow accustomed to her first Christmas here. I’ve already got a gift picked out for you! It’s under the southwest tree, wrapped in the black, red, and green stripes.”

“Sir, it’s rather important.”

Director Storm shrugged. “If you insist. Ike, show Corona around in my stead. Alas, I have a job.” He and Tempest disappeared into his private office.

“Huh,” Corona said, furrowing her brow. “You know, half of the time I wonder how he runs this place.”

Mike smirked. “Most new agents wonder how such an ‘idiot’ could be placed this high. He’s not an idiot. Nor is he foolish. He’s a very thoughtful and careful man. He’s just also decided not to agree with societal norms.”

“It was weird for us at first as well,” Ike said. “And we had worked with an eccentric like him before.”

Corona smirked. “That ‘super secret assignment’ that I’ll never know about?”

“Exactly,” Mike said.

“I could just touch you and find out.”

“Tempest would throw a fit,” Ike said. “Also that’d make Storm’s superiors upset at you.”

“Right… Sometimes I forget he’s not in charge of everything.”

Ike shrugged. “Anyway, welcome to the Christmas office. It’s exactly like the normal office, except decorated to kingdom come with Christmas stuff. He’s bought a present for everyone who works here, and will be elated if people put gifts for each other under the trees. He never asks for any
himself. He has everyone open them on Christmas Eve unless there’s a national emergency, then it’ll be the day after Christmas.”

Corona blinked. “And now I just remembered finals are next week. Oh my gosh I am going to die.”

Mike smirked. “You’re smarter than you give yourself credit for.”

“I’m not worried about the physics test! I’m worried about art history! I haven’t lived in this world my whole life, I don’t just know these things like most people do!”

“You shouldn’t worry about your grades,” Ike encouraged. “You’ve already got a neat job.”

“I… True. I do need to pass though.”

“Suuuure you do.”

“You’re projecting, Ike,” Mike pointed out.

Corona shook her head. “Okaaaaay… Ike, was there anything else? Director Storm made it sound like the tour of Christmas was going to take a while.”

“Oh, if he did it, it would,” Ike answered. “Luckily for you I know exactly what to tell you and what you need to know! I don’t need to tell you precisely what each individual in the nativity represents.”

“And for that, I thank you.” Corona smiled. “…I think I like the decorations.”

“You should see it on Halloween.”

“Or St. Patrick’s day,” Mike reminded him.

“…I still have no idea how he put all the green stuff up and down in a day…”

“Could have hired Pinkie Pie,” Corona suggested.

“…I wouldn’t put it past him…”

Mike raised an eyebrow. “That would be such a breach of security.”

“Mike, you and I both know the pink anomaly notices everything.”

Corona furrowed her brow. “Wait, she saw you guys before?”

“Several times,” Mike said. “We considered taking action, but she never told anyone. She just made sure we knew she knew.”

“…I wonder why she never said anything…”

Ike blinked. “I’d think that, as her friend, you would have realized that asking questions about her is kinda pointless by now.”

Corona smirked. “Once you get to know someone, you ask deeper questions about them than why they throw cupcakes everywhere. There are answers to be found, somewhere.”

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The cube detected another portal entering its universe several hours later. An object was thrown in, and then the portal closed.
The cube paused the game – all four colors stopped moving in an instant. It examined the strange device. It had no mind, no words, nothing to tell the cube what its function was. The cube noted that there was a flag design imprinted on the side of it, as well as the word ‘NUCLEAR.’ What could that mean?

The cube never got the chance to answer its question. It was soon no more.
Twilight’s castle had a different sort of beauty about it in the middle of the night. While in the day it shone like a pearl, at night it flickered softly, sending sparks of soft light out in a sort of reflection of the stellar sky above.

Sometimes, when sleep proved difficult for any number of reasons, Princess Twilight liked to come out to her balcony and stare at the stars overhead. Sometimes she thought about what had been going on in her life, sometimes she wondered what the future would bring, and sometimes she just appreciated the natural beauty of night.

*How could anypony have ignored this a thousand years ago?* She wondered. *It’s just so… mesmerizing…*

She started examining the constellations. There was the triangle, the bear, the bull, the alicorn, the Handmaid, the dragon, the sphinx, the belt, the noble circle…

She stared at the noble circle. It was several stars in a loose ring around a single, much brighter star. One of the brightest in Equestria’s sky, Sarin. A deep red spark on the blue night.

“Stargazing?” Starlight asked, walking onto the balcony.

Twilight smirked. “Yep. Sleepwalking?”

“No,” Starlight said, yawning. “Though I suppose this could be a dream and I really am sleepwalking in reality.”

Twilight rolled her eyes, returning her gaze to the stars, their luminous points reflecting in her huge eyes.

“Whatcha lookin’ at this time?”

“The noble circle. And what, if anything, is actually up there.”

Starlight raised her eyebrow. “You mean aliens?”

“Maybe. I’m talking more about the Stars though.”

“Stars? But – oh, you mean *capital S* Stars. Didn’t you say they were just legends?”

Twilight smirked. “Most of the stories about them are. For instance, the idea of one crashing into Equis long ago and bestowing the sun and moon to us is laughable, even more so based on what I’ve seen in the other universes. But the Stars themselves certainly do exist – some of those sparks of light hold consciousnesses.”

“Have you ever talked to one?”

Twilight shook her head. “No. Celestia has, though. She says they’re… rather indifferent to us.”

Starlight frowned. “…When I was little, I used to pray to the Stars. I still do, sometimes. Started again around the time you took me in.”
Twilight smiled softly. “There’s no shame in that, Starlight. Though you didn’t strike me as the type.”

Starlight laughed nervously. “I’m not. Yet I still feel the urge to do it sometimes. To ask for protection. For help. For all of you.”

“…Maybe some of them do listen.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“No, it could be true. There are many different kinds of ponies – there are probably many different kinds of Stars. Some would care more. A large part of me wants to visit them and find out.”

“Well we don’t have any starships, and no universe we’ve come across has had any either.”

“That doesn’t change anything…” Twilight said, holding a hoof up to the stars. “I want to go up there, Starlight. I want to see them, to feel them, to be among them. Maybe to get some answers about our universe.”

“Heh. If only we could find a ship.”

“If only…”

Starlight coughed slightly. “Uhh, Twilight?”

“Hrm?”

“There’s something… Well, uh, you know those things I make with my souvenirs?”

“Those things? What about them?”

“Well… You see… They… Uh…”

Twilight raised an eyebrow. “…What is it Starlight?”

Starlight let out a long breath. “Eheh… Sorry. No idea why I’m so nervous. I… May or may not be working on a way to get into space. Yes. That’s it.”

Twilight blinked. “…R-really? But you don’t have any idea of all the math involved?! How are you-“

“Discord! And, heheh, brute force magic! That’s all it is. Definitely.”

Twilight frowned. “Starlight? Are you okay? You’re… being a little odd.”

Starlight gulped. “Er, yeah. I think I’m just tired. And crazy. And I may have also been unable to sleep because I was thinking too hard about my place in the universe. Great idea, coming out here to talk about Stars.”

Twilight rolled her eyes, fears put to rest. “Sometimes we just need to think about these things. I’ve discovered it’s always better done with other ponies. I was feeling the same way, really. So thanks for joining me out here.”

“I’m glad I came out. It’s better than wandering the pointless maze of corridors in your castle.”

“They aren’t pointless!”
“You don’t use half the rooms and the floorplan can’t be mapped out on a flat piece of paper.”

“That doesn’t mean they’re pointless!”

Starlight chuckled. “It just means it’s a mess to navigate, Twilight.”

“Now that I can understand.” Twilight chuckled, turning back to the light of the stars – and Stars.

“…You really want to go up there don’t you?”

“Yeah…” Twilight said. “The studies of space in all these worlds… The more I read, the more I want to see it with my own eyes. It’s like the Stars are calling me.”

Starlight nodded. She lit her horn, creating a small bubble of magic in front of her mouth. She whispered something into it and launched it into the sky.

“…What was that?”

“A prayer spell. It launches the words into the sky at the speed of light. There’s no way it actually does anything, but it’s symbolic.”

“I… see.”

“No you don’t,” Starlight said, nudging Twilight playfully.

Twilight shrugged. “Fair enough. You’ll have to explain these customs to me at some point. But right now, we really should be in bed.”

“Yeah.” The two of them left the balcony, allowing the night to fall into silence once more.

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The next morning, Pinkie had a question. “So, Twilight. Why the sudden announcement of an instant adventure? Not that I mind or anything, but I think Gummy might be stuck to the ceiling right now.”

Twilight chuckled. “This is why.” She went to the Directory, flipping to the last page. “I was testing the latest batch of worlds for safety, when this happened.” She pulled a lever, setting the coordinates to a specific dimension. When she did so, the green diamond in the Mirror Portal flashed brighter than it ever had before and some sparks went flying off the machinery.

Rarity raised an eyebrow. “While impressive, and mildly concerning, we have no idea what that means, dear.”

Twilight unrolled a scroll in front of them all and grabbed a pen. She scribbled a dot on it. “All right, so. Let me explain ‘distance theory’ as we currently understand it. Let this dot represent our world, okay?”

Everypony nodded.

“This next dot, almost right next to Equestria, is Earth, a world extremely closely related to our own. So close, in fact, that the worlds are basically inseparable. They are connected by a very short line.” She drew a line between her two dots. “A little further out are worlds that are close to ours, but not the same. The world of liars, Lai, etcetera. Curiously, we find worlds like this far out as well, almost as if we’re inside a membrane of pony worlds with others dispersed around randomly, like a pepper in a salt and pepper shaker.”
“…Uh…” Fluttershy said, confused by the metaphor.

“Not important to understand. But if I draw more dots here further out…” She drew several dots and lines in quick succession. “I create a map of the known multiverse. We know of just over a hundred worlds in this map, with some close, and others like the Static world very distant compared to others.” On the edge of the map she drew a single dot to represent the Static. “Now, the longer the path, the more energy it takes to get to a universe.”

“So, I take it this universe takes a lot of energy?” Starlight postulated.

Twilight grinned. “A hundred thousand times more energy than the Static draws. If I tried to draw it on this sheet of paper I’d need to stretch it all the way to Canterlot. It took so much energy that, for the first time, the green thing showed strain. And, to put the cherry on top the universe is safe. Checked just a few minutes ago then called you all here.”

“Well what are we waiting for then!?" Pinkie said. “Let’s go to the furthest reaches of the multiverse already!” Without waiting for any of them, she bounced through the Mirror Portal.

Twilight rolled her eyes. “Well, guess we’re rushing in head first then.” She shrugged and leaped in herself, passing through the Mirrory Barrier. Traveling felt slightly different this time – whereas every other trip had always felt instant, she could have sworn there was a fraction of a second where she wasn’t in either location. She couldn’t even imagine what that would be.

The five of them appeared in a largely gray hallway with large numbers painted on the walls. It was mostly concrete with a few metallic pipes snaking around, indicative of a deep underground bunker. Judging from the height of the hallway, something human sized lived here.

Twilight blinked. “I… Was expecting something more exotic.”

“Definitely seen this kind of thing before in Earth government bases,” Starlight said.

“When were you in an Earth government base?” Rarity asked.

“I was on a random Earth universe. Upset the government. Had some fun.”

“I wonder how in Equestria you manage to get up to so much without us…” Starlight shrugged. “I make time.”

“Are you neglecting your other friends?” Twilight asked. “When was the last time you saw Trixie?” Starlight blinked. “A week?”

Pinkie narrowed her eyes. “Mmm… I’ll be watching you, Starlight. Watching…”

“You already are. I doubt there’s a single secret I have that you don’t know.”

Pinkie giggled. “Yeah… How you doing with your thing, by the way?” She winked cheesily.

Starlight turned beet red. “Pinkie…”

“Hey, I’m not telling.” She held her hooves up in surrender. “You’re the one who brought up me knowing secrets. Like tha-”

Rarity put a hoof over Pinkie’s mouth. “Things are usually secret for a reason, Pinkie. It wouldn’t be decent to shout it out.”
“Duh, I know that! I learned that lesson a long time ago!”

“Flurry’s only a few years old, Pinkie,” Twilight deadpanned.

“Egad! Years! I’m getting old!”

Fluttershy facehooved. “Girls, we haven’t done anything here yet. Think we should look around?”

“Right, right,” Twilight said. “Celestia, we get sidetracked easily. Let’s go… this way!” With a confident grin on her face, she turned a corner in the hallway.

A dozen humans in green military uniforms were pointing guns at her.

“Already with the guns!?” Twilight blurted. “Come on!”

“Should I get the drone out?” Starlight asked, poking her head cautiously out from around the corner.

“No… They’re not shooting yet.” She waved at them. “Hi! I’m Twilight Sparkle!”

One of them said something in a bizarre language.

“Of course humans this far out wouldn’t be in the translation spell…” Twilight muttered. She sat down, trying to look as unthreatening as possible. “We come in peace. Please keep talking so we can get the translation to work, okay?”

One of the men said something. No words were translated yet.

“Yep, this is going to be a far-removed language,” Starlight said. “Might take some time.”

“Never could have guessed that,” Twilight deadpanned.

The human man said something again.

“You’re going to have to talk more, I really can’t understand you.”

The man angled his gun closer to Twilight. He gestured to the left, where the other ponies were.

“…Girls? I think he wants us all where we can be seen.”

Fluttershy shrunk back. “Is that… safe?”

“Well, if they were going to just kill us I think they would have already. I say we go along with what they want.”

Pinkie shrugged, trotting into plain view of the soldiers. “Hi! I’m Pinkie Pie!” She waved. Two of them started muttering things to each other – but the leader silenced them. “Hey! Keep talking!”

Fluttershy and Rarity walked into view as well, Fluttershy making sure she was as far back as she could be. The lead soldier seemed pleased with this. He issued a command to his men, and they backed to the sides of the hallway, guns still poised. He himself gestured for the ponies to follow him before he set down the hallway in an ordered march.

Twilight shrugged. “Well, guess what we’re doing? That’s right, following him.”

The five ponies had to line up in single file to get through the men on either side of them. When
Fluttershy passed the first set of soldiers, they fell in line behind her, startling her. Everyone tensed for a moment, thinking fighting would break out, but no such thing happened.

Starlight let out a breath. “Good. Everyone here just needs to calm their nerves a bit.”

“Why aren’t they talking?” Rarity asked. “They’re all being dreadfully silent and it’s making our lives more difficult.”

“They’re soldiers,” Starlight said. “They’re trained to say what needs to be said. Speaking out of line will not help them here.”

“Hmm…” Rarity mused.

“I think lots of them would like to talk but they’re scared of the big guy,” Pinkie suggested.

“Or they’re scared of us…” Fluttershy added.

“Very possible,” Twilight said. After a few more minutes of walking, they were led to a medium-sized room with no windows, one door, and a single nondescript table. There was only one chair, and seated in said chair was a middle-aged man with large glasses and brown hair. Behind him was an older man in a blue uniform with a wrinkled frown on his face. Judging from all the colored rectangles on his shirt, he was either high ranking, accomplished, or both.

The man in the glasses greeted them with a warm smile. He moved to offer them a seat out of habit, but realized that not only did the room not have chairs, but he wasn’t even sure if ponies needed chairs. He said something to the older man – who just shrugged.

Twilight cleared her throat. “I am Princess Twilight Sparkle of Equestria, and we come in peace. You cannot understand me, I know this, but please just respond.”

The man in the glasses responded warmly with what was presumably an introduction of his own. Then he pointed to himself and said two words – “Daniel Jackson.”

Twilight smiled. He was trying to translate the old fashioned way. That helped her, at least. “Hi Daniel.” She pointed at herself. “Twilight Sparkle.” Then she pointed at her friends. “Pinkie Pie, Rarity, Starlight, Fluttershy.”

“Hi Daniel!” Pinkie echoed.


Twilight bowed, believing she should show the man some respect. “Now that that’s out of the way, what’s next on your list of attempts to communicate with us?”

Daniel started speaking rapidly, changing the way he spoke dramatically every few seconds.

“…He’s shuffling through languages,” Rarity said.

Twilight facehooved. “That won’t help the spell. Unless he hits one it knows. Which… Doesn’t appear to be happening.”

“Wow, he knows a lot of languages,” Fluttershy commented. “He’s still going.”

“…Impressive,” Twilight agreed.
Eventually Daniel ran out of languages and turned to O’Neill to say something. O’Neill shook his head, responding negatively to something. Their conversation lasted several seconds, but still the translator couldn’t work anything out.

Daniel pulled a sheet of paper out of his pocket and unfolded it, covering the table with a sheet of hundreds of written scripts. Almost all of them looked familiar to Twilight, but none of them made any grammatical sense. She smiled sheepishly and shrugged. “Sorry. You’ll just need to keep talking amongst yourselves until we get something…”

“Twilight, I propose finding a way to improve this spell,” Rarity suggested.

“It’s one of the most complex spells around, improving it is much easier said than done!”

“I’m sure you can do it Twilight!” Pinkie encouraged.

Twilight returned her focus to Daniel – he was talking to O’Neill again. Twilight had no idea what it was about, but O’Neill was looking rather tired. As if what was happening wasn’t all that unusual for him, and it was just a sign of “one of those days.” That’s a curious response… Twilight thought.

Then she caught a word come from O’Neill’s mouth. “Again.”

Twilight grinned. “Again!” She shouted, grinning. “You hear that, again! You can hear the word ‘again’ coming from my mouth, a partially translated sentence!”

Daniel turned to her and blinked again. He said a few more words, “again” and “meaning” came through.

Pinkie grinned. “Woo! There it is! Meaning! What kind of meaning? I don’t know! But I do know it’s finally working!”

Twilight nodded, grinning in Daniel’s direction.

He looked right at her and spoke. “Translator?”

“Yes!” Twilight said, nodding vigorously.


“Again?” “Why?”

“Translator.” “Working.”

Twilight spread her wings, beaming. “Yes! Oh my Stars that took a lot longer than it usually does. Rarely does it need any more than a few sentences to latch onto something…”

“Something?” “Slower?” Came through from Daniel.


“Faster.” Daniel said. He started talking so fast Twilight could barely hear anything, but the spell was still able to pick it up. The sounds blurred together in Twilight’s mind – and apparently O’Neill’s as well, since he was fixing Daniel with the ‘have you lost it?’ look. But Pinkie was more than able to keep up.

“OhmygoshyouknowtheartoffasttalkingfastwellsodoI! Weshouldgettogetherandhaveacompetitionsomeday!”
Daniel took a breath. “Okay, I understood that entire sentence. I believe your translator has enough words now, Miss Sparkle?”

Twilight smirked. “I believe so. Also, you can just call me Twilight. Though I believe real introductions are in order now. I am Princess Twilight Sparkle of Equestria, and these are my friends whose names I presume you already know.”

Daniel nodded. “I’m Daniel Jackson, and this is General Jack O’Neill.”

Twilight bowed again. “Nice to meet you.”

O’Neill raised an eyebrow. “Care to explain why you were in our hallway?”

“We’re explorers,” Twilight answered. “We opened a portal to somewhere new and it happened to be in your hallway.”

“…How did you get here, then?”

“Through a portal,” Twilight said. “If you look around the corner where you found us, you’ll find a shiny spot on your wall. That leads directly back to our world.”

“And you’ve traveled to other worlds… often?”

Twilight nodded. “Around a hundred at this point, and we haven’t even been at it for a year! Your world is the most distant one we’ve visited so far!”

“So, let me get this straight…” O’Neill said. “You are a bunch of colorful ponies that go through a portal regularly to explore other worlds?”

“Yep!”

“Daniel, they’re pony versions of us, except instead of space it’s other universes.”

“Yeah, I got that-“

Starlight and Twilight glanced at each other and spoke at the same time. “Did you just say space?!”

Daniel blinked. “Yes? Do you do that as well?”

“No!” Twilight said, grinning. “And neither does any other universe we’ve encountered! This is amazing, we finally found one that can go to the stars! Oh yes oh yes oh yes!”

“Twilight, get a hold of yourself,” Rarity muttered in her ear.

Twilight blushed hard, forcing herself to stop bouncing around. “Ahem. Yes. I and the rest of my people would be very interested to see how you travel the stars. Or to see the stars themselves. Are we on a spaceship right now!?”

“Ah, no,” Daniel said. “You see, we use…” He paused when O’Neill grabbed his shoulder. “Oh, am I not allowed to tell them?”

O’Neill let a smirk crawl up his face. “Oh, they’ve got the same clearance as any other alien visitor. I just want to see the look on their faces when they see it.”

“See what?” Starlight asked.
“…Celestia…” Twilight said, jaw hanging loose.

It wasn’t a spaceship.

It was a giant ring with alien symbols all the way around it. The metal was a dark dull gray, giving it a somehow ancient feel. Seven orange triangular shapes were spread along the edge of the ring, glowing softly, each one pointing at a singular symbol on the inner part of the ring. The inside of the ring was currently blocked by an iris hatch, clearly designed to open and close the ring quickly.

O’Neill nodded slowly. “Behold! The hunk of metal that’s more trouble than it’s worth!”

Daniel sighed. “It’s the stargate.”

“I like mine better.”

Twilight turned to Daniel. “How’s it work?”

“Well, I’m not really a scientist… But I know it operates by forming a wormhole connection with a gate at the other end, creating a near-instant passage from gate to gate. Just enter the coordinates and wait for it to connect, basically.”

“Sunset would love this…” Twilight said. “She’s been looking for a non-magical solution for months now, and if this thing can make wormholes…”

“…Did you just say ‘magic’ there?” O’Neill asked.

“Uh… Yes?” Twilight said, smiling nervously. “We’re very magical creatures from a world where the arcane arts are used in day to day life. I take it that’s not the case here?”

“No,” O’Neill deadpanned.

“Well, uh, I can demonstrate if you want…”

“Please do,” Daniel said, adjusting his glasses.

Twilight gulped. “Now, don’t be scared or anything…” She lit her horn, taking a pen out of her saddlebags with her telekinesis. She grinned stupidly.

“…I was expecting something more, I don’t know, impressive,” O’Neill said.

Starlight lit up. “Do you want impressive!”?

“Starlight no,” Twilight said.

“Starlight yes,” O’Neill said, nodding in confirmation at Starlight.

Starlight lifted herself into the air and created a crystal from the aether. Then she teleported to the other side of the room, frowning. “That took a bit more effort than usual…”

Daniel’s glasses slid down his nose. “…Do all of your kind have these abilities?”

“Only those who bother to study,” Rarity said. “For instance, you won’t see me teleporting around randomly.”
“And only unicorns,” Pinkie said, appearing behind Daniel.

Daniel jumped back from Pinkie. “And what about you?”

“I’m just Pinkie Pie!”

“I know that, I mean you aren’t a unicorn, but you just appeared behind me!”

“Already answered the question!”

O’Neill nodded in approval at the pink pony’s response. Suddenly, an alarm went off – not a particularly jarring one, but one designed to get everyone’s attention without causing a panic. The stargate made a large clunk sound and its inner ring started turning, and one of the orange triangles shifted overtop of a symbol, presumably entering it into the system as the first digit of the address.

“Ah. SG-14 must be coming back,” Daniel said. “Looks like you get to see it work.”

The ponies fell silent, staring right at the gate as its inner ring cycled around slowly, coming to a stop only after several seconds of turning for one of the triangles to lock in a symbol. The grinding sound the gate made was somehow comforting, though Twilight wondered how it didn’t wear out from the constant rotating. Every time one of the symbols was locked, the strange noise sent shivers of anticipation down Twilight’s spine.

She was overcome with a feeling of it taking way too long. Four symbols. Five. Six. Seven.

With the seventh lock, a noise vaguely reminiscent of an engine revving and failing to startup filled the room, and then a noise that could only be described as a ‘kawoosh’ greeted their ears. There was a blue glow coming from behind the gate, though its source was blocked by the iris.

O’Neill looked behind him, up at the bulletproof glass separating the gateroom from the control room. “It them?”

A balding man nodded from behind the glass. He pressed a button and the iris slid open with the noise of a dozen knives scraping against each other. Behind the metal was a rippling puddle of blue and white energy, kept in place by the stargate itself, its glow filling the entire room with watery light.

A soldier stepped through, followed by three other men. They saluted to O’Neill and walked down the ramp to him. “Alien visitors today, sir?”

O’Neill nodded. “It always happens when I’m here, doesn’t it? I should just stop agreeing to help Landry with his vacations.”

The soldier looked at the ponies. “So, these guys again?”

Twilight blinked. “Wait… Again? You’ve met others like us before?”

Daniel’s eyes widened. “Oh, right. Forgot about that. We did have a unicorn in here for a short while several months ago. She was chasing a being made of blue crystal.”

“No way…” Twilight said.

“You know them?”

“Sort of. Their chase ended in our world. When they vanished the crystal man left his dimensional device. It’s why we’re able to explore the multiverse at all. That’s all we know of them. But… You
aren’t the first people besides us who saw them, strangely…”

The solder who’d just come through the gate raised an eyebrow. “Multiverse? One of those days, eh General?”

“Yes it is,” O’Neill said.

Rarity raised an eyebrow. “…Do you guys travel the multiverse as well, or am I reading this wrong?”

Daniel put a hand to his forehead. “The stargate is, under special circumstances, able to link to other universes. Such events are rare, poorly understood, and, as Jack would say, more trouble than they’re worth.”

“You girls come across evil versions of yourselves yet?” O’Neill asked.

Twilight pondered this. “From time to time, yeah.”

“That’s why. It also gets really confusing differentiating one person from another.”

“Did you ever consider nicknames?” Starlight asked. “I mean, Twilight here goes by Twinkie sometimes.”

O’Neill tried to suppress a laugh and ended up snorting instead.

 “…No, we didn’t consider that…” Daniel said, a little embarrassed. “Still, it’s not something we really looked into that often. We could count the number of times other universes were encountered on one hand.”

“So you must be really good at space travel then, huh?” Starlight asked.

“Yep, even got ourselves a few ships,” O’Neill said.

Twilight’s eyes sparkled. She looked right into O’Neill’s eyes with the cutest expression she could muster.

“That’s cheating,” he said.

Pinkie giggled. “No it isn’t! If Fluttershy was doing it it’d be cheating, but she’s not.”

 “…The Apollo is in orbit,” Daniel said. “They’re not doing anything at the moment.”

O’Neill relented. “Fine. Let’s go on a space cruise. Show off our ship.” He turned back to the control room. “Walter! Tell the Apollo to pick us up and prepare for a little demonstration.”

The bald man – Walter – nodded and got on the phone.

“You have a ship…” Twilight said. “…How fast does it go?”

O’Neill blinked. “Uh…”

“Thirty thousand light years per hour, give or take,” Daniel Jackson said.

“I can’t even comprehend that speed,” Starlight said. “Twilight, what’s a light year?”

“The distance it takes light to travel in a year…” Twilight murmured, processing exactly how fast
that was in her mind.

“…I take it that’s a really long distance?”

“The nearest star to Equis is about five light years away. It would take you thousands upon thousands of years to fly there if you could survive.”

Starlight blinked. “So, am I the only one not able to comprehend this sense of scale? Anyone else?”

O’Neill pointed at Starlight. “This unicorn gets it.”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “That she-“

Suddenly, there was a flash of blue-white light, and they were somewhere else.

“…does,” Daniel finished.

O’Neill tensed up and sighed. “I thought we’d stopped the ‘teleporting without warning’ thing.”

Twilight blinked. “Technological teleportation!? How’s it work?”

Daniel raised his hands. “I can’t answer that one. I’m an archeologist by trade, not a theoretical physicist.”

“It also doesn’t matter,” O’Neill deadpanned. “Something about atoms and stuff.”

“But that is matter!” Pinkie said.

“Matter doesn’t matter.”

“So matter’s an oxymoron?”

O’Neill paused for a moment. “…Maybe.”

Twilight took the moment to examine her new surroundings. Instead of bland concrete, now there was cold metal all around, arranged in a practical manner. The novelty of the metal made it less boring than the concrete hallway they had just been in, but no doubt the grey color would seem monotonous to those stationed on here. A few people in uniforms walked around, glancing curiously at the ponies but not paying them too much attention. Screens lined the walls, displaying schematics of what Twilight assumed were the ship itself – a large rectangular center with two rectangles on either side and one large neck. She hadn’t the foggiest idea what any of the parts of the Apollo actually were, just that it certainly looked spaceworthy - though she couldn’t really be considered a worthy judge of such a thing.

“This way,” O’Neill said, marching through a doorway. “You want to see space, well the best way to see space is from the bridge.”

“Ohmygosh yes,” Twilight said, giggling to herself. She was trying very hard to keep herself under control, but even she could only take so much. They walked up to the bridge of the ship. O’Neill exchanged pleasantries with the captain, but Twilight definitely wasn’t looking at that. She passed the command consoles and other controls, walking right up to the front window. She pressed a hoof to the glass, delicately. Her pupils shrunk to pinpricks and her mouth went slack. She could see stars – and a large blue marble. A planet.

“It’s really somethin’, isn’t it?” O’Neill said.
“Yeah… I… I can’t believe I never asked the Binaries to take me up…”

“Captain, engage hyperdrive. Take us to Chulak.”

“Huh, wha-“ Twilight began, only to be stunned into silence as the starry field was replaced with a blue-purple vortex of energy surrounding the ship on all sides, passing all around them. She reeled back, a little nauseous at the patterns she saw. “…What is this?”

“Hyperspace,” O’Neill said. “Can’t tell you much else about it.”

 “…It’s beautiful…” Rarity said, placing her hoof on the window as well. “I could get used to this…”

The moment she said that, it the blue shimmer of hyperspace vanished, replaced by a different planet, and a different star. Twilight grinned. “How far did we go?”

“Only a few dozen light years,” Daniel said.

“Only a few dozen,” Twilight emphasized. “Why, with this it would be easy to find the stars in our world… Just jump around until you get one you can connect with…”

O’Neill raised his eyebrows. “Since when did we give you permission to use our ship for your scientific curiosity?”

Twilight laughed nervously. “Yeeeah… You didn’t.”

Pinkie shrugged. “Twilight’s just getting ahead of herself, don’t hold it against her.”

Daniel smiled. “It’s fine. We’re used to people being overwhelmed.”

Twilight cleared her throat. “I believe our next course of action should be to form official relations and discuss diplomacy, yes? Unless your human culture is very different than the others we’ve encountered.”

Daniel blinked. “I… Have no idea if we’re the same or not, but that would be the next step.”

“Politics…” O’Neill muttered under his breath, making a ‘great’ gesture with his hands.

“Oh no… Politics…” Pinkie muttered. “Twilight, do we have to?”

“You girls can head home, assuming our friends here can take us back to where we came from. I’ll do all the talking.”

Rarity raised a hoof. “I’ll stay.”

Twilight smiled. “Thanks. I could stand some backup. Funny, this is actually the first time we’ve gone right to diplomacy. Usually there’s some crazy adventure first or-“

“DON’T JINX IT!” Pinkie shouted, covering Twilight’s mouth.

Twilight rolled her eyes. “Anyway, can you take us back?”

O’Neill gave the order.

~~~

Discord sat in Starlight’s secret room, playing some random game where he was a human killing
blobs with a knife. He had no idea about the story of the game (if there was one), all he knew was that killing amorphous blobs was fun. Really, really fun. Also a little hard, but that was part of the fun.

Starlight teleported into the secret room. “Discord! We are going on a trip!”

Discord blinked. “Where to?”

“We’ve found a new world – one with science-fiction technology. Spaceships. C’mon, we’re going to steal their secrets.”

Discord dropped the controller. “Yes! So, what are we going for?”

“I don’t know. Ideally, we get spaceship blueprints, but only if we can grab it without them noticing. If they notice, they’ll probably blame Twilight. So not only do we need to be invisible, but intangible. Got it?”

Discord snapped his fingers. “Got it. We are now invisible and intangible. To the Mirror Portal?”

“To the Mirror Portal.”

With a snap of his fingers, Discord and Starlight appeared in front of the Mirror Portal. Bon Bon looked up from her paperwork as if she sensed something, but shrugged and went back to work.

“Can we be heard?” Starlight wondered aloud, quietly.

“Nope!” Discord giggled. “HEY BON BON!”

Bon Bon didn’t so much as flinch at the scream.

“Good,” Starlight said. “Can’t take any chances. That place is probably crawling with cameras, sensors, the like. But they don’t have magic. So that’s our way in.”

Discord pressed his fingers together evilly. “Perrrrfect…”

Starlight stepped through the Mirror Portal, appearing back in the hallway. There was a human guard there, completely unaware of them. Starlight passed her hoof through his body. “We’re like ghosts.”

“Who knows? Maybe ghosts are just ponies who learned this spell and didn’t know how to undo it.”

“What a comforting thought…” Starlight muttered. “How in Tartarus are my hooves touching the ground?”

“Magic. Duh.”

“I do not believe for a second you had the foresight to make me not pass through the floor.”

“You wound me so. Maybe you just want your hooves to be solid. Ever think of that?”

Starlight rolled her eyes. “Riiight. Anyway, let’s check this place out. To the gate first. It’s down a few levels. …Maybe I can just…” She jumped into the air, and landed face first on the ground – passing through to the level below. “Sweet.”

“We could just teleport,” Discord noted. “You obviously know where it is.”

“Right,” Starlight lit her horn and then they were in the gateroom. At the moment nobody was there.
Starlight glanced towards the back – through the glass she could see the control room, and she also noticed a higher ‘window’ overlooking the stargate where Twilight and Rarity were talking with a bunch of humans.

“Okay, so… the meeting probably isn’t important, but I bet that control room is.”

They walked through the walls, climbing up the stairs to the stargate control room. There were dozens of tall computer boxes with hundreds of blinking lights distributed among them. Wires snaked across the walls and floors, and screens of all kinds were littered around in a fashion that looked disorganized but was actually optimized for space.

Starlight furrowed her brow. “And now, to figure out if anything here is particularly useful…”

Discord reached a finger out to poke a scientist’s hat, presumably for a prank.

“*Discord! Stealth!*”

“Fine then.” He folded his arms. “What should I do if I can’t have fun?”

“Look at the screens, see if they can tell us where the interesting stuff is!”

Discord pointed at one of the bigger screens. “This one shows a hangar right above the stargate. Status, closed. Calls it the Jumper Bay.”

Starlight shoved her head closer to the screen Discord was pointing at. “Wow. That was fast. Good work.”

“It’s on multiple screens and seems like it’s an important thing. I’m surprised you didn’t notice it.”

“I was… Interested in numbers. Yeah.” A soldier walked right through her. She shivered. “That just doesn’t feel right at all.”

Discord waved his hand through her face. She glared at him. “The epitome of comedy, everypony.”

“I’m here all week!”

“Let’s try not to be here all week.” She levitated herself up, floating back into the gate room and through the ceiling. They arrived at a large room with a handful of cylindrical shaped objects with windows in the front. Little ships. Probably little spaceships. Little spaceships that looked designed to fit through the stargate.

“…These are probably the Jumpers,” Starlight said.

Discord rubbed his hands together. “Let’s take one.”

“Are you crazy!?? There’s no way in Tartarus that we’ll be able to get one of these out without them noticing!”

“Starlight, I can turn an entire city into utter chaos in a manner of minutes. I can make everyone think there’s still a ship here. Just have to mess with their heads.”

“…Discord! We do not want to be caught! What if they have some kind of alarms!?”

Discord smirked. “Then I just have to be precise with my chaos, don’t I?”

“Discord this is a bad idea and I’m telling you-“
“Done.”

Starlight blinked. All the Jumpers were still there. “…What do you mean?”

“I mean I stole the Jumper. I currently have it in my hand.” He unfolded his claw, revealing a small metallic cylinder.

“But… But none of them are missing!”

“That’s what everyone thinks. But that one right there isn’t real.”

“…While I admit that’s impressive and makes me wonder why you don’t do these things more often, they’ll still notice when they try to fly it!”

“Oh, but that’s the beauty of it!” Discord grinned. “We can take this home, have some fun with it, figure out how it flies, and then return it! They’ll never know.”

“I’m not sure a copying spell will work on this.”

“Well at the very least you can download the computer or whatever.”

“…Fine. But we need to work fast, okay? Who knows, maybe there’s a Jumper cleaning day today!”

Discord snapped his fingers, taking them back to the hallway where the Mirror Portal was. “After you.”

Starlight rolled her eyes, stepping back into Equestria. Once again, Bon Bon looked up. This time she furrowed her brow, like her sixth sense was acting up, but since she didn’t see anything she went back to her papers.

One more teleport took them to the secret room. “Why do you even have a door?” Discord wondered aloud. “Seal it up with bricks, make it more secure.”

“Never know what’ll happen. I might lose my horn or magic or something and need to get in here.”

“…How would you open the magic lock then?”

Starlight blinked. “…Good point. Time to invest in a different lock. Anyway…” She facehooved. “Discord we can’t look at it in here, not enough space. We need to be outside.”

“I could just shrink us~”

“Discord, I think if there was ever a time to adhere to the laws of physics, it’d be now.”

Discord rolled his eyes. “Fiiiiiine. Everfree Forest?”

“Everfree Forest.”

With a quick teleport, they stood in one of the many clearing in the magical Everfree Forest. The mixture of purple and green trees was usually uninviting and mysterious, but today the sun shone bright and the air felt friendly. Discord dropped the stealth spells and grew the Jumper back to its normal size.

They stood there for several seconds.

“Now what?” Discord said.
“...There should be a way to open it...” She walked around to the back, prodding the hatch with her magic. “Locked.”

“Then use an unlock spell!”

“I don’t know how it’d rea-“

Discord snapped his fingers. The back of the Jumper slid open, creating a ramp into the surprisingly roomy interior.

Starlight twitched. “You know, if we break it...”

“They’ll blame it on their technicians.”

“...Mmmf. Whatever.” She walked in. “...Looks like there’s supplies here.” She levitated a bag off one of the side shelves and opened it. Inside was a first aid kit, food rations, a few devices she couldn’t identify, and a couple guns. One of the guns looked different from all the others.

She took out the small, vaguely snakelike pistol. “Huh. Looks alien.”

Discord snapped his fingers and created a dummy outside. “Fire away.”

Starlight clicked the button on the side with her magic. With a startling noise the pistol readied itself, but didn’t fire. “Geez, all these noises are going to give me a heart atta-“

She accidentally fired it, hitting the dummy head on with a coursing bolt of power that vaguely resembled electricity. The dummy shook, singed.

Starlight’s mane was now standing on end. “…Welp, that’s probably an effective weapon,” Starlight said, shoving it back into the bag. “Let’s never shoot it again.”

“I say we do more experiments to determine if it’s shocking in the electrical or emotional sense.”

“Nooooot right now!” She rummaged around through the extra boxes for a while longer, finding a box with dozens of crystalline chips inside of it. “…I bet these interface with the system computer.”

“Is there an instruction manual?”

“...Sorta?” Starlight pulled a small booklet out of the case. “More like scientific gibberish for people who already know what they’re doing.”

“Well copy some of the stuff and let’s move on already. Come on, I want it to fly.”

Starlight frowned. “Why don’t you duplicate some things?”

With those words, Discord decided to make another one of the snake-pistols.

“AUGH!” Starlight blurted. “Not those!”

Discord pointed it at the dummy and fired, successfully knocking it to the ground. “Looks like I still have it.”

“Could you just duplicate the entire ship then!?”

Discord frowned. “…I could try… HUZZAH!”
Another Jumper appeared.

“WE DIDN’T HAVE TO STEAL IT AT ALL DISCORD, FOR THE LOVE OF F—”

Discord burst into laughter. The duplicate Jumper fell over, revealing it to be a cardboard cutout. The gun in Discord’s hand disintegrated into sound. “I can’t replicate things this complicated, why do you think I’ve been helping you steal things?”

Starlight twitched. “…Fine. We can take that entire bag out, they won’t miss it.” She threw the bag with the gun, rations, and other supplies out of the Jumper. “But now I want to see how this thing flies…” She and Discord walked to the front of it and sat in the two chairs. Starlight pressed one of the buttons with her hoof.

Nothing happened. Not even a consolatory beep.

Starlight furrowed her brow. “Great.”

“Maybe we need a key…”

Starlight tried a simple ‘unlock’ spell. Nothing happened. “Nope, not a key. Not in a literal sense at least.”

“I’m sure you’ve got spells that break into just about everything, including the minds of ponies.”

“Leeeeeet’s not talk about that!” Starlight laughed. “I’ll just try my ‘skeleton key’ spell. It should allow access to anything that isn’t magically guarded in some way. And I’m not detecting any magic on this thing, so…”

She cast the spell, and the console lit up.

“Cool. It’s on.” Discord snapped his fingers, turning his head into a car. “How make go?”

Starlight rolled her eyes. “I don’t know. Maybe you just ask it to go up.”

The Jumper opened up its sides, revealing two engines. It activated them and floated a meter up into the air.


“Starlight.” Discord grabbed her face and touched her muzzle with his nose. “Take us. To. The. Moon.”

Starlight thought about this for a moment – then decided it was time to throw caution to the wind. “You got it!” She thought about closing the Jumper’s back hatch, and it complied. She thought about flying into the sky, and it compiled. The Jumper rocketed through the atmosphere, passing all the clouds in a matter of seconds. Starlight briefly wondered why she wasn’t feeling any acceleration – but then she decided she didn’t care. She pushed the thing as fast as it would go, leaving Equis behind rapidly. The blue orb shrank behind them to a tiny pinprick as they sailed towards the sun.

“Moon, Starlight. Moon. Not the fiery thing.”

“Right, right…” Starlight turned the Jumper around, looking back at Equis. The day side was nice, brilliant, and inviting. Not to mention absolutely amazing to look at. She wasn’t even sure she knew all the landmasses she saw. She ordered the Jumper around to the other side, the side in shadow. She could see small pinpricks of magical light wafting from parts of the globe, but there weren’t that
many.

But the moon was certainly easy to see. She sailed right for the mysterious silvery orb, thinking that they’d arrive at any moment, certainly.

The moon was a lot further away than it looked. It took a few minutes to actually arrive, and Starlight didn’t even land. She just skated over the surface.

“Wow. Bigger than I thought it was,” Starlight noted.

Discord shrugged. “Eh, it’s not that interesting!”

Starlight blinked. “…You could have just teleported us here.”

“Yeah, but at least we know the Jumper works!”

Starlight twitched. “Discord, those last two minutes were of no help determining if the Jumper worked or not…”

“But they were fun!”

“Discord…”

“And who cares about two minutes anyway?”

“We need to get this computer system downloaded so we can return this thing!” Reacting off her anger, the Jumper decided it was a good time to fire a weapon. A yellow drone shot from one of the Jumper’s sides, impacting the surface of the moon. The weapon hit, bounced off the surface after making a crater, and decided to hit again in the same spot.

Starlight blinked. “…That’s too small to see from Equis, right?”

“I’m sure nopony noticed,” Discord said, the uncertainty in his voice clear.

“Take us back.”

“Good idea.”

Discord teleported the Jumper back into Equis orbit, and Starlight took it down to the Everfree Forest, landing back in the clearing. She let out a breath.

“I’m going to try to get the computer’s information out, somehow. Something tells me we won’t have enough storage. Then we can return and-“

There was a knock at the back of the Jumper. Starlight and Discord tensed. They turned behind them, looking at the closed hatch.

There was another knock.

Starlight told the Jumper to open the hatch. She put on the most innocent grin she could manage, and Discord followed her example.

On the other side of the hatch was a very ticked off Princess Luna.

“Why Luna! Fancy running into you here!” Discord announced. “Why, Starlight and I were just-“
“You two are going to explain to me exactly what’s going on here,” Luna interrupted. “There will be no lies, no deceptions, and no half-truths. Understand?”

Starlight gulped. “Y-yes, Princess.”

Luna sneered. “Now, how about we start with what hit my Moon?”

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Rarity laid the dimensional device on the table. “And here it is. The portable device. It can’t store anywhere near enough power to get from here to Equestria, but it can go most other distances. We are most willing to share it and our knowledge of dimensional travel with you, in exchange for some of your own devices. Namely the hyperdrive you use to travel the stars at ‘impossible’ speeds.”

Daniel glanced at O’Neill and the other politicians and soldiers in the room. “Well?”

O’Neill nodded. “I approve. Now all we have to do is wait several weeks while the senators sort out the paperwork.”

“It really takes weeks to do that?” Twilight asked.

“Anything that isn’t urgent will be deliberated until it can’t be deliberated anymore,” Daniel admitted. “If there was a crisis on hand, O’Neill could authorize it. But it’s not like you need it to survive.”

“Yeah… Mostly just curiosity. I guess I can wait a little longer.”

Rarity raised an eyebrow. “Should there be any formal signatures of any kind? Humans generally like that sort of thing. No offense, mind you.”

Daniel chuckled. “Signatures won’t come until your lawyers and our lawyers actually draw up a treaty of some kind.”

Rarity took in a breath and let it out. “I was mildly afraid of that. Our society isn’t big on… Lawyers and legalese, usually.”

“You two seem fine at it.”

“By necessity only. Run into enough different cultures you realize that lots of them like paperwork.”

O’Neill smirked. “So the opposite problem we have.”

“I suppose so.”

Twilight used her horn to create a scroll. She shook her head. “Wow… This universe must have extremely low levels of magic. It’s difficult to perform spells. Glad there’s at least enough to maintain the translation, but ponyfeathers…” She levitated a pen out of her saddlebags and started scribbling out some lines.

Daniel adjusted his glasses. “That makes sense, seeing as magic doesn’t exist here, far as we know. The only things that come close to having it are Ascended beings.”

“Come again?” Twilight said, looking up from her scroll.

“There’s… some kind of spirit-force in our world that you can advance through a number of… bizarre and seemingly inexplicable methods. Eventually you can turn your mind and ‘soul’ into a
physical entity with immense power.”

“It’s like ‘enlightenment’, but in space!” O’Neill remarked.

“Curious…” Twilight said. “That doesn’t quite sound like magic… More like the powers the Elemental Nations have. Powers that come from within. Hrm… I may wish to meet one of these Ascended to learn more. I’ve been trying to formulate a theory of esoteric powers, and it’s been proving rather difficult.”

Daniel shrugged. “You’re looking at one. Or, well, a man who used to be one.”

“Really? Why aren’t you one anymore?”

“Lots of reasons. Mainly because the Ascended enforce a pretty strict non-interference policy. I had the inability to just sit by and let things explode.”

“Ah. Don’t suppose they’d be willing to talk to me then.”

“Probably not,” Daniel agreed.

“Well…” She turned back to her scroll, scribbling a few more things down. She handed it to Rarity, who crossed out a few items on it and scribbled a few ideas of her own. She then slid it to Daniel.

“This is a… ‘draft’ of sorts.”

Daniel read it over. “Very basic, but we can work with this.”

“Then let’s hope all goes well with your political processes.”

There was a knock at the door. O’Neill sighed. “Timing… Yes, what is it?”

Walter stuck his head in the room from the doorway. “There’s a ‘Princess Luna’ here about… Something.”


“You know her?” Daniel asked.

“Yes, she’s one of the rulers of Equestria, alongside me. But she never leaves Equestria… I wonder what she’s got to say. …Maybe she wants to look over what we’re doing? It should be fine to bring her in.”

O’Neill nodded to Walter. He left the doorway to let Luna in.

Everyone got the impression something was about to go wrong when Starlight was tossed into the room, faceplanting on the ground. She covered her face with her hooves and couldn’t make eye contact.

Twilight paled when Discord was tossed in next, landing face-first next to Starlight. Luna strode in afterward, scowling. “I take it you are General Jack O’Neill and Daniel Jackson?”

“…Yes? What is this about?” Daniel said, frowning. He set the scroll down on the table and folded his hands together.

“These two have committed a crime against you. They stole one of your devices for their own needs.”
“We were going to give it back!” Discord spat back, standing fully upright. A few of the soldiers drew guns on him. He snapped his fingers, turning the guns into silly putty.

“Discord… Just stop…” Starlight moaned, refusing to look up.

O’Neill stared right at Starlight with a stare that anyone could feel boring into the back of their head. “What did you take?”

“…One of your Jumper ships,” Starlight muttered.

“There’s no way, we would have noticed.”

Luna slammed the Jumper – currently miniaturized – on the table. “The one in your hangar is currently a fake, crafted by Discord and Starlight here. They were planning on stealing all the technology and secrets they could, and would have had I not stopped and found them. I turn them over to you for prosecution.”

“Luna!” Twilight blurted. “You can’t do tha-“

“They’ve been doing this for months, Twilight. Starlight has a secret room filled with stolen objects from other universes. They need to see that there are consequences for their actions.” She turned back to O’Neill, refusing to respond to Twilight’s aghast expression. “How does your kind go about this?”

O’Neill took a deep breath, picking up the tiny ship in his fingers, studying it. “…Well from what I understand, there’s a trial, and for something like this we lock them up in jail for a while. Though… This will be an odd case…”

“Nope,” Discord said, “not dealing with that.” He snapped his fingers, vanishing in a puff of white light.

Starlight stared at where he’d just been, tears in her eyes. “…Discord…”

Daniel turned to Luna. “Can you…”

Luna shook her head. “Unfortunately, no. Discord’s power is far beyond that of any others. I was lucky to get him this far.”

“He’s basically an Ascended…” Daniel commented under his breath.

O’Neill turned to Starlight. “…You really handing her over to us?”

“Yes. Considering her position in our society, I believe Twilight would just pardon her with a stern talking to.”

Twilight shot Luna a look. A look that was both accusing and hurt. Luna remained impassive.

Daniel let out a long, deep sigh. He slid the scroll back to Rarity. “I’m afraid this is no longer on the table. I don’t think we could convince our people to work with those associated closely with thieves. I’m afraid discussions have to be suspended.”

“It was going so well…” O’Neill sighed. “Take her away, men. And… hold on, what about her magic?”

“I’ve sealed it,” Luna said. “She won’t be able to use it unless I release her.”
O’Neill nodded to his men. Then grabbed her and dragged her away – she didn’t fight. “By the way,” he said. “It’s a Puddlejumper. Not a Jumper.” He left without another word. Everyone began to file wordlessly out of the room after him, including Luna.

Twilight turned to Rarity. “Rarity, what am I going to do.”

Rarity furrowed her brow. “We’re going to talk to Luna, that’s what.” She trotted out of the room, face determined. They met up with the lunar princess in the hallway. “Princess Luna!”

Luna was clearly not used to one of her subjects addressing her with that tone. She turned around and loomed over Rarity. “What? Choose your words carefully.”

Rarity didn’t flinch. “That was a political mess Luna! A mess! We were working towards a better tomorrow and a great friendship, and because you did that you ruined it!”

“Well would you rather I let them do what they wanted?”

“Maybe!” Rarity spat, standing as tall as she could muster. “Or just make them return it with no one the wiser!”

“That’s dishonest, Rarity.”

“If you’re honest all the time the world will grind you into powder. This was one of those times.”

Luna glared. “Starlight was acting far out of line, and she’s ruined Stars know how much with her constant thefts. She needed something like this.”

“Then you could have punished her!” Twilight blurted.

“You and I both know you would have found a way to pardon her. Turn Cadence and Celestia to your side.”

Twilight fumed. “Did you ever think that, maybe, if you thought the rest of us would disagree with your choice that maybe it was wrong?”

“How many times has Starlight overstepped a major boundary, Twilight?” Luna said. “She learns, yes, but she learns slowly because you keep pardoning her. Brainwashing, mind control, magic abuse, theft - you just talk to her and tell her to learn. I see her dreams. She never does those particular things again, but her nature is still disposed for going against the rules, against harmony. She needs more of a kick than you’re willing to give.”

“She’s my student, Luna, not yours!”

“Didn’t you let her ‘graduate’, Twilight?”

Twilight took a few steps back, tears in her eyes. “W-why didn’t you just tell me about this earlier? Talked it out?”

Luna sighed. “Twilight… I – I probably should have. But I needed to act now in this particular instance. I cannot say I handled the situation perfectly, but I stand by it.”

Rarity shook her head. “Luna, there’s more to this than what Starlight and Twilight need. Your actions have changed things forever between these people and Equestria. They may never trust us again.”

“Should they?” Luna asked.
“…We’d want them to.”

“Isn’t that manipulative?”

Rarity narrowed her eyes. “Please, princess, you live in Canterlot. You know how things are. You can’t be as high as you are without pulling a few calculated strings.”

Luna’s expression lost its certainty. “…Maybe. Regardless, what’s done is done. Now we all have to deal with it.” She walked away, trying to keep a regal figure – but her stature was damaged.

Rarity let out a panicked breath the moment Luna turned the corner. “Oh. My. Stars. I just shouted at the princess. Twilight I just shouted at the princess. TWILIGHT I JUST SHOUTED AT THE PRINCESS! I’m dead!”

“No… No you’re not dead,” Twilight said, wiping her eyes. “She… I think she needed to hear that. I’ll have to go talk to her later. But… But right now, I’ve got something else to do. We need to stay here to deal with what Starlight’s done.”

“I still can’t believe she did that…” Rarity said.

“…I can,” Twilight said. “She tried to tell me as much last night. There were signs… And Luna’s right, it is in her nature to just do things against Harmony.” She shook her head. “What a mess…”

Rarity hugged her close.

~~~

Starlight sat in a cell. The door was locked, she had no magic, and she was crying.

What in Equestria was I thinking? I should have known, I should have known, I should have known, I… No, I made this choice! I knew exactly what I was doing and did it for the future of Equestria! Equestria just didn’t want me! So why did I bother? Was there even a point…? Discord betrayed me. He just left me here to dry. He… AAAAAAAAAAA

“AAAAAAAA!” She screamed, ramming her head into a nearby wall. Since she already had a splitting headache, the pain didn’t even register. She just couldn’t deal with this right now. Her mind was a swirling mess of contradicting thoughts and emotions, urges to beat herself up and to inflate her own ego coming at her from all sides.

She couldn’t think. What did this even mean? Was she wrong? Was everybody crazy? Was it somehow both? Was she crazy? What did Twilight think?

Oh no. Twilight. She probably hates me. They were doing something important and I… I…

There was a knock at the door. Starlight looked up to it, unable or unwilling to say anything. Even she wasn’t sure.

It slid open. A guard let Twilight in. He shut the door behind them.

Starlight froze. Tears dripped down her face but her expression was blank, her pupils tiny.

Twilight sighed. “…Why?”

“…I, I wanted to help Equestria. Y-you wouldn’t do it, so I had to. I… that drone that saved your life? It wouldn’t exist without what I d-did.”
Twilight bit her lip. “I was afraid of that. Starlight, bad things can result in some good, and good things can result in bad. If you’d never brainwashed that town, we’d never have met. But I still think it would have been better for you never to do that.”

Starlight sagged. “…You’re right.”

Twilight frowned. “Am I really?”

“Of course you are! You’re always right!”

“No, I’m not, and you know this. Luna doesn’t think I’m right either. She thinks I’m way too soft with you. That you need to be punished like this.”

Starlight blinked. “You… don’t think so?”

“No. I think you need to be taken back to my castle so we can talk this out. There didn’t need to be public embarrassment or irreversible consequences. There didn’t need to be persecution. Or… I thought that.”

“…And now?”

“I’m not sure. Luna’s made me think about it…” she leaned against one of the cell walls and sighed. “I can probably strike a deal to get you out of here. All I’m wondering is if I should. What do you think?”

“I…” Starlight grabbed the side of her head. “I don’t know. I’m not in my right mind right now. There’s part of me that thinks I need to be locked up forever and there’s the other part that’s begging you to let me out. To forgive me.”

Twilight shook her head with a sad smile on her face. “I’ve already forgiven you. Just like all the other times.”

Starlight wiped her face. “You are way too forgiving, Twilight.”

“I know. I think that’s part of what Luna wants to teach me.”

“Nopony ever stops learning, huh?”

“No.” Twilight hugged her. “It’s something we share.”

“You should probably let them have their way with me,” Starlight said suddenly. “It’s the politically correct thing to do at this point.”

Twilight shook her head. “I’m not thinking about that right now. I’m thinking about what’s best for you and me.”

“Well, I can’t tell you that.” Starlight removed herself from the hug. “You’ll need to make your own decision.”

“It seems like I’m making a lot of those lately…”

“Yeah…”

Twilight took in a breath. “I’m going to think this over. Whatever I decide, know you’re still my friend, Starlight. Okay?”
“I know.”

They hugged again, and Twilight left, leaving Starlight alone in the cell again.

It was so silent.

~~~

Discord analyzed the situation. He was not about to let Starlight succumb to this, oh no. He had the power in him to stop all of this. It’d take a little effort, but he could do it.

The plan was deviously simple. All he had to do was teleport Starlight back to Equestria, then use a complicated chaos matrix to alter everyone’s memories to have no idea she ever existed – on this side of the portal, anyway. It would be better if he could alter Luna’s mind, but she and her sister were very resistant to that. Twilight probably was as well, come to think of it. So manipulating ponies was out of the question.

He’d find some way to make Twilight believe that these humans had released Starlight because they felt like it was a good idea. Perhaps disguise himself as that Daniel fellow and do the speech himself.

Then he’d actually go to that Daniel guy and give him the scroll draft again. He’d find it and suddenly remember that it HAD to be written up exactly as the ponies wanted it. And everything would be better, Starlight would be off the hook, and Discord would feel great.

He’d also engage in a campaign against Luna to stop her from trying to assault him again. She’d learn her lesson.

He teleported into the meeting room – it was empty now. Nothing remained on the table except the drafted scroll that nobody had known what to do with. He grabbed it, read it over, and shrugged. “Guess this is it.” He then set to work on the cascade spell. There wasn’t much magic to work with here, but he was a master. He could alter the memories of an entire city in Equestria, altering just a few dozen individuals would be nothing to him.

He teleported to Starlight’s cell. “All right, I’m getting you out of here.”

Starlight sighed. “Discord, that’ll just make things worse-“

He held up the scroll. “They won’t remember anything, Starlight.”

“Discord, no. We can’t just undo this.”

Discord folded his arms. “…Well I’m doing it anyway. I’ll just-“

Before he could snap his fingers, he was enveloped in a flash of light.

He was suddenly standing in a well-lit and simple diner filled with old patrons. “…What in my name is this place?”

The patrons paid him absolutely no mind. One sipped his coffee in a way that annoyed Discord. He twitched, snapping his fingers, attempting to turn the coffee into a singing bean. Nothing happened.

He blinked. “…Okay, something’s up.”

“That it is,” a woman said, turning to him, turning her seat around. Her features were young, but her eyes extremely old.
“Who are you?”

“Sestar. I’m what you may or may not known as an Ascended Ancient.”

“A what now?”

“One of many beings in this universe with powers similar to your own.” She leaned in, contempt evident on her features. “You’ve broken our laws.”

“What did I do?”

“You were about to heavily interfere with the course of history. We allowed you to take the Puddlejumper, thinking you would leave and not interfere again. This has proven to not be the case. So we’re going to keep you here.”

“What.”

“You heard me.”

~~~

One thing Discord failed to realize was that there was supposed to be more than the scroll in the meeting room - the dimensional device. The humans hadn’t touched it before they left, and the ponies forgot completely about it in their emotional stupor. It would be a long time before anyone asked where it was.

And by then it would be far too late.

Somewhere far across the galaxy, there was a large pyramidal ship among a small fleet of similar, golden ships. They were drifting in the endless void between stars, trying their absolute best to remain hidden. After all, they were on the run from the forces of the Milky Way, labeled as the eternal ‘bad guys’ of the conflict.

They were the alien forces under the name of Ba’al.

Ba’al sat on his throne in the largest ship, plotting. He was a tall, middle-aged man with a short black beard and sly, cunning eyes. To his side was a man who looked exactly like him – another Ba’al. One of many, many Ba’al clones in the fleet.

They all knew they were running out of options. Their enemies – the humans, the Tau’ri – had gained powerful allies and risen as the dominant power in the galaxy, and Ba’al was the only one of their enemies still alive. Hundreds of thousands of clones had fallen to the Tau’ri, and as far as this Ba’al knew they were the last sect left. Drifting in the void, waiting for an opportunity.

The opportunity came in a way none of them expected. A man – one of Ba’al’s informants that had been planted amongst the Tau’ri – ran into their presence. He bowed to one knee and presented them with an unusual device.

“…What is this and why have you left your station to bring it to us?” the two Ba’al’s said at the same time.

“It is a device from a different universe, my Lord. A device with the power to travel between universes, near and far. It will lead us to new lands to conquer.”

Ba’al raised an eyebrow at his clone. The clone raised an eyebrow in return. “This galaxy is lost to
us.”

The other nodded. “All we’d have to do is find a simple world to start the empire again. Build our forces without their knowledge.”

The first picked the device out of their servant’s hands. He twisted a few dials until he came to a name he liked – Ardent. “Hrm… Now how does it work?”

“There was no demonstration, but it needs power.”

Both the Ba’al’s stood up. “You do not have to return to the Tau’ri,” they said at the same time. “I doubt we will stay here for long.”

The servant bowed respectfully and scurried away.

“Let us hope this thing actually works…” One said.

“I have no doubt it works. It will likely need some altercations though…”

“With a few hundred of us working on it, it should take no time at all.” They grinned and let out slow, evil laughs.
Waiting is Tartarus.

No…

Waiting is *hell*.

Somehow, it felt more cathartic thinking of it that way. Starlight didn’t know why, but she felt a little better. Maybe she should just start screaming “ponyfeathers” or “peeve” or “heck” or the human “damn” at the walls now. Maybe it would help with the waiting.

The waiting…

How long had she been in here? Normally she’d just cast a simple timekeeping spell to get the time, but that clearly wasn’t an option right now. Her horn felt *dead* right now. She tried not to think hard about the horror stories of unicorn horns going permanently dead after being sealed, but since she was doing nothing but waiting… Well she could do nothing but remember.

The great unicorn Bursting Neon was a mage of unparalleled power – until one day he decided to seal his own magic away for a month to see if he could live without it. That month was the hardest of his life, but he got through it. Then the seal wore off and he found he couldn’t use magic anymore, but he didn’t mind, he had learned to live without it.

The moral was supposed to be ‘don’t put too much trust into your gifts’ or something. But Starlight could only think about that in passing. All that came to her mind was the horrific idea that she could never use magic again. Surely Twilight would be able to re-infuse magic, right? Or figure out how to grow a new horn? Or… something?

No, no she wasn’t able to do that for Tempest the unicorn. Horns were still broken. Magic finesse could be taken away.

Would she be able to live without magic? It was so much of what defined her. She had a handful of spells operating at any given time without even thinking about it: heightened senses, rain avoidance, arcane ping, vague… What did vague even do? Why did she have it on all the time? She knew there must be some reason. But she couldn’t remember it at the moment. She was stuck in her own mind.

Had it been a day? It felt like it’d been three days, so it’d probably been only a day. She hadn’t heard the guard switch shifts yet, but frankly she could have missed that in one of her crying fits.

Why was she crying? She was doing what was best – no! No that was wrong. She was wrong. How could she have ever thought that stealing random things was a good idea? Well nobody noticed most of the things that went missing, and most of them weren’t actually that important… But there were the runes… The large computers… The monolith chunk…

She still had nightmares about those eyes.

Had she slept at all? She could swear she remembered seeing the eye in this room. …Was she just going crazy?

Wait, they hadn’t fed her! So it must be less than a day! Unless they were cruel. But these humans
didn’t strike her as cruel, just stuck in their laws. …How long was a sentence for stealing valuable
government property? A year? Ten? How long even was a year on this planet?

How could she minimize the sentence? Probably… Plead guilty, put on the waterworks and puppy
eyes, and beg. Unless that offended them. So… Plead guilty, put on the puppy eyes, and stay quiet?
Puppy eyes always worked – even more so on humans. But these humans were very distant from the
rest of them… More serious. Much more serious.

More real, in a way.

What in Equestria was she even thinking now? What did ‘more real’ even mean?

She had no idea where that thought had even come from. That scared her. Lots of her thoughts
scared her right now. She had thought stealing was a good idea and that maybe the others could be
brought around to see it – just like when she’d been in charge of that cult! It was happening all over
again! She got an idea in her head, decided it was true, and thought it’d be best to get other ponies on
board!

Thank Celestia she was stopped before she recruited someone other than Discord.

…Great, Discord. She was worried about him. He had been about to do something to ‘help’ her
when something grabbed him. She knew he could take care of himself, but whatever it was had kept
him from doing something crazy. She just couldn’t have accepted what he was trying to do…
Something about memories, right? Crazy. Just like her. They’d set up a feedback loop with each
other.

She wondered what the humans here thought of Discord. They didn’t seem that
scared
of him when
he was there, merely surprised and cautious. Though if she knew their kind, they’d probably be
paranoid about his mere existence later. It was just the way things were, sadly…

Waiting.

She was going mad by waiting.

*Time to start thinking about shouting swears at this wall again…*

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

Starlight leaped into the air, bumping into a nearby wall. She let out a sharp yell of surprise from the
pain.

Daniel poked his head in through the doorway. “…Starlight?”

“Uh… H-hi.”

“I’m here to bring you to our little makeshift court.”

“Oh. Okay.” *At least it’ll be over quick.*

“But first... I want to talk to you, if you don’t mind.”
Starlight laughed nervously. “I am at your mercy!”

“The judges are going to be hypocrites.”

“…What do you mean?”
Daniel sighed. “Almost everything we have in this base was not technology given to us. It was stolen, in one way or another.”

Starlight blinked. “…What?”

“The stargate? Used to belong to Egypt, but one of our intrepid explorers dug it up and shipped it here. Our weapons? Many of them were stolen from our old enemies, the Goa’uld. Our early ships were based on technology we recovered from other worlds, not through our own intelligence. Eventually we proved our worth and things like the transporters were given to us, but we started our journey grabbing everything we could. That was just a little over ten years ago.”

Starlight nodded slowly. “I… So we are like you in a way then?”

“Judging from how Twilight responded, I don’t think so. You and that… Discord fellow were the only ones stealing, weren’t you?”

“Yeah. But we’re different in another way. We stole from friends in addition to enemies.”

Daniel smiled awkwardly. “We… Tried to do that as well, a few times. It wasn’t just spoils of war.”

“I take it you were probably the one who objected?”

“Yeah. It still doesn’t change what we did.”

Starlight nodded slowly. “Okay, so now I don’t feel like I was completely out dancing in left field, but the fact remains that I’m a bit of a psycho. Plus, you said the judges are going to be hypocrites, meaning they won’t care about this.”

Daniel nodded. “I’ll do what I can. But we can be very, very harsh people.”

“Can you at least make sure my friends can visit me?”

Daniel smiled. “That I can do for sure. Might even be able to arrange for you to be held on this base, by reason of ‘useful knowledge’ or something.”

“Thank you. I really don’t deserve it, but thank you.”

“I think you do deserve it, actually. You ponies are much more trusting and cooperative than almost any other race we’ve encountered. I am more than a little disappointed that we couldn’t just get that accord signed quickly.”

“…Totally my fault.”

“More like your Princess’ fault. Tell me, does she even understand politics?”

“Yeah. I think she was just really upset we blew a crater in her precious moon.”

Daniel furrowed his brow. “Now that you mentioned it she did seem rather moon themed. Anyway… I am still here to take you to the little court we have. Jack decided to have it all arranged here quickly so he didn’t need to have much of a headache. Be thankful he has little patience for bureaucracy, you could have been here for days otherwise.”

“How long have I been in here?”

“Five hours?”
“…Yep. I have no sense of time without my magic.”

“…You’re going to hate legal proceedings. This is going to take all day. There’ll be many breaks and a lunch, but most of it will be legalese nobody understands.”

Starlight facehooved. “Can I just plead guilty and get it over with?”

“The judge will still want an exhaustive study of motivation and politics to make sure the sentence is correct, and because this is a case involving two worlds in a semi-first-contact scenario, we’ve got a lot of paperwork to sort through.”

“Greeeeat.”

~~~

Discord glanced at Sestar. “So what do you people actually do here?”

“We observe.” She dropped a newspaper in front of his face. Discord knew instantly that if he flipped the page he could know anything he wanted to know about anywhere, through a network of Ascended Power. The front page declared CONTACT WITH ANOTHER UNIVERSE! UNICORN ON TRIAL! WILL THIS END IN DISASTER OR GREATNESS?

“A bit dramatic on the titles, are you?”

“It’s an approximation of what’s really there, which is unique to our power. You aren’t the same as us so you can’t see the reality, even if your power is approximately equal.”

“That doesn’t explain why the headline is so over the top. I bet some days it probably reads A NEW RACE DISCOVERS HOW TO LIGHT FIRE, BEHOLD THE DAWN OF IMAGINATION or something equally stupid.”

There was no response from any of the other Ascended.

“Do any of you people actually listen to anything?”

“They think you are a child, not worth their time.” Sestar said. “I think you are a child, but realize that if I said nothing it would become… problematic.”

“A howling screaming draconequus too much for you?”

“Doubtful. But it would be annoying.”

“My specialty.” He took a drink from his mug. Determined to have some chaos even if his powers weren’t working, he drank from the far side of the glass, upside down, spilling some around the table. He burped.

“Why do you feel the need to cause disorder?”

“I am the literal incarnation of chaos and disharmony, what do you think?”

“Have you ever considered stopping?”

Discord laughed. “Why, yes actually! But, here’s the thing, I tried to be orderly to accommodate Fluttershy once – great pony, you jerks will never get to meet her if I have anything to say about it – and wouldn’t you know it, I started fading into nothing! It looks like if I’m not chaotic I cease to exist! Isn’t that fun?”
“You are telling the truth,” she said with mild surprise in her voice. “Interesting. How did you obtain your power?”

“I was just born with it, Miss Pompous. One day, there was no Discord. Sensing a hole in the fun side of existence, I was born, and completed the balance. Tah-dah, best day ever!”

“And how do you use your power on your world?”

“Can’t you, like, look into the minds of people and ponies to find out?”

Sestar was silent.

“…You can’t can you? Oh this is rich! Powerful deity level beings who can’t read minds!”

“Can you?”

“Er… Not exactly. It’s never reliable. Just changing memories is much easier. There’s a spell system for that.”

“Do you change memories often?”

“Why would I want to? Every time they see this face is a blessing!”

“Are you sure that’s not just your ego talking?”

“It is just my ego talking. What do you take me for, a self-absorbed idiot? No, just self-absorbed here, and proud of it.”

“Why do you take pride in that?”

“Look, lady, if you have to ask that question you clearly need to grow an ego.”

Sestar sat back and pursed her lips.

Discord grinned. “I’m wiiiiinng.”

“Do you regularly try to alter the course of history on your world?”

Discord laughed. “In my day I tried to control the entire world! But, you know, there were magical artifacts, and friends; I mellowed out a bit. I’m a retired supervillain!” He snapped his fingers, trying to create a superhero suit out of habit. As usual, nothing happened. “Man, you have a joke and then the buzzkill just suffocates you…” he muttered.

“You imply that you don’t alter the course of history anymore?”

“Not true! I’m on the good side now! I helped take out an entire hive of changelings that were being all evil and such, I help my ‘friends’ see the best way to do things, I go on adventures, and, oh yeah, I help Starlight steal stuff. Which, by the way, I have to bust her out. So how do I get out of here?”

“You agree to abide by our laws of non-interference with a binding contract, punishable by imprisonment here.”

Discord laughed. “I’m not going to do that! That’d be so plain boring. Think about it, starry, think about it. Do you think a being of chaos and disharmony can survive without causing those things?”

“It is wrong for any beings of our power to interfere with the affairs of lower races.”
“Oh, so I should have been a lonely hermit in my universe then?”
“I doubt you were the only one of your power.”
“What if I was?”
“Then an eternity of solitude was your duty.”
Discord laughed. “Wow, you’re dogmatic. I’m just waiting for you to get up and start barking. Would have done it myself just now but, you see, magical chains.”
“You will stay here until you agree to follow our ways. We cannot let a being like you roam free.”
Discord folded his hands. “I’ll find a way out.”
“No you won’t. We have numbers.”
“But, you see, I’m clever.
“And we’re dogmatic.”
Discord blinked. “Did you just try to make a joke?”
“If that’s what you want to believe.”
Discord sat back. “Well… In that case, HEY! ALL YOU PATRONS OF ASCENDED IDIOT CITY! PAY ATTENTION TO ME!”
Only one of them with a bored expression glanced his direction. Discord leaped to him. “What do you think about all this? I swear this lady’s got bats in her brain and an airhorn for a mouth.”
The Ascended didn’t respond. He went back to looking at a newspaper.
Discord fumed. “What does it take to get people’s attention around here?”
“Galactic war,” Sestar said. “The last time we interfered directly was when another faction similar to us tried to conquer this galaxy. We only interfered when it was clear the inhabitants of this galaxy would not survive on their own.”
Discord blinked. “Are any of you actually happy with this life? Sitting around and doing nothing?”
“It is the way things are. Were they not this way, we would be just like our brethren. Feeding off the worship of our followers for power, for glory. We would fall to using them for our ends.”
“That sounds like a pessimistic view of the world. Why not just have some fun with them?”
“It is not our way. And we cannot let it be your way in good conscience, either.”
Discord fell back into his seat and fumed. To his annoyance he didn’t actually start steaming. He considered starting screaming, but that would just confirm their belief that he was childish. Well he wasn’t going to give them what they wanted. This was war.

~~~

A dozen Ba’als stood in the bridge of the mothership. Just hours ago, they had witnessed an amazing test. With almost no work or reverse-engineering required, the dimensional device was able to open a
portal large enough to fit a small ship through. The scouting ship had gone through and scouted out a singular, primitive planet brimming with unusual energies. It had seen a single, tiny spacefaring vessel around the world, but the vessel was easily destroyed with simple weapons. The planet was defenseless.

The dimensional device was now hooked up to the hyperdrive of the mothership, the largest ship in Ba’al’s little fleet. If their calculations were correct, and they probably were, simply pushing more power into it would create a larger opening. It had taken a lot of power to open a portal to the universe on the other side – more than the little device could store inside it – but that was no issue for a powerful man with access to an Zero-Point Module. Stolen, of course, and saved for a rainy day.

“Power the device,” several Ba’als said at once, essentially ordering other versions of themselves to press a button. The hyperdrive and power systems of the ship focused as much as they could to the dimensional device, more than overloading its storage capacity. But the ‘spell’ inside was more than able to accommodate the power. It surged with the energy needed to traverse galaxies, rippling through spacetime in front of the ship. A tear forced its way through the cosmos, widening slowly to the size required to fit the mothership. The Ba’als grinned evilly as the stars through the portal took shape, showing them constellations and arrangements they didn’t recognize. The planet wasn’t visible from here, since the portal opened up several stars away from it, but it would take but a minute to arrive.

The ships filed in, first the mothership, then its six similarly-pyramid-shaped Ha’tak vessels. Even a single one of these ships was generally considered powerful enough to subjugate a planet, but they were headed into uncharted territory. It never hurt to be cautious.

The portal closed behind them. One of the Ba’als checked a display. “Yeah, our Ancient power cell is burnt out. We won’t be making a return trip.”

“We won’t need to,” another said. “The device has numerous locations within it that can be accessed with much less power. All we need to do is find them. But first… Let’s pay Ardent a personal visit, shall we?”

~~~

Corona – or Sunset, if you were one of the people or ponies who knew her a few months ago – was on an interdimensional vacation. It may have just been a single day where she didn’t do anything for Storm or, Celestia forbid, Tempest, but she still considered it a vacation. Time to stretch her legs, relax, and enjoy the scenery.

She knew this world was Ardent. But she saw no reason to be scared of it, even after what she’d seen that one time. So long as creepy mask guy or that Link didn’t show up, she was fine. The Gorons were nice, the shopkeepers were welcoming, and everything was just quaint. It was a good world to spend an afternoon in.

She was currently visiting with one of the said shopkeepers, a potion seller. “I don’t know, you really think I could use a flaming potion? I’ve already got the fire ‘magics’, after all.”

The pink-haired white-skinned shopkeeper shrugged. “I think you’ll like it. Overkill for the sake of overkill. I think it’s useful from time to time. And something tells me you might want it soon.”

Corona shrugged, grabbing a few rupees from her pocket and slapping them on the table. “Well, there you go Seskii. I am now the proud owner of a flaming potion. Your sales pitch worked.”

Seskii clapped her hands together excitedly. “Yay! Here you go!” She handed Corona the orange
potion. “Careful, really hot!”

“How are you holding it then?” Corona asked, delicately picking it up with her gloves.

Seskii tapped her hands. “Plastic, remember?”

“Right. Well, see you around. Thanks for the potion.”

“That I will. Come again soon!”

Corona placed the small potion in one of her pockets, walking away. As she walked down the street filled with happy people, she was overcome with an intense feeling that life was good.

“Hey, you’re Sunset, right?”

Corona smiled. “I actually go by Corona now, but-“ she froze when she saw who she was talking too. Link. She remembered his exchange with the Happy Mask Salesman, the creature in his shadow, and that Mask. She tried her best to smile confidently. “Ah! Link! What a… surprise!”

“Surprise? Why’s it a surprise?”

“Just wasn’t expecting you is all.”

Link shrugged. “Well, in the future, don’t be. I spend most of my days here. Even more so now that you people have started showing up more often.”

Sunset frowned. “That’s not a problem, is it?”

“Not at all, none of you have been bad yet. Though some have been better than others. Those hairy people were just jerks.”

“Oh, the Binaries? They are a bit stuck-up, aren’t they?”

“Definitely have a superiority complex. I’m not worried though. I think we scared them off.”

“How, exactly?”

Link smirked. “Growling.”

Sunset nodded slowly, like she understood everything. “I see.”

“Anyway, what brings you here to little out of the way Termina?”

“Vacation. For a day. I’m taking a break from all the secret agent and scientist business. It sometimes gets a little tiring.”

“I can imagine. I adventured a lot in my day. Did a lot of hard work. I’m basically on permanent vacation now.”

“Lucky.”

“Well if any great evil shows up again, I’m going to have to deal with it.”

Corona shrugged. “I wish you luck when that happens.”

“I said ‘if’.”
“I said ‘when’,” Corona emphasized.

Link just smiled at her. “Little pessimistic there, hrm?”

“If you want to think so. I’ve just learned from experience that there’s always more danger and evil out there. It never ends. We just have to keep fighting it.”

“You have the heart of a hero.”

Corona smirked. “I would try to deny that, but at this point that’s pretty pointless.” This guy wasn’t actually that bad. He probably had nothing to do with that mask and just wanted it kept safe. She didn’t know why she was so unnerved by him before…

There was a soft, mad laugh from right behind her. She whipped around, fists ready for a fight, coming face to face with the Happy Mask Salesman. She paled.

“Hello, Sunset…”

“C-Corona,” she managed to correct.

“Sunset,” he emphasized. “A mare who knows things she shouldn’t…”

“…Mare?” Link asked.

Corona gulped. “Uh… Yeah, I’m a unicorn. Or was. Link who is this guy?”

Link put his hands on his hips. “He’s an old… ‘friend’. A bit mysterious, creepy, and over the top, but ultimately a decent guy.”

The Happy Mask Salesman’s hands were pressed together. “Ah, Link, you inflate my ego.” His finger was pointing at Corona now. She hadn’t seen his arm even move. “But she needs a warning. Your dreams are haunted by what you know, but you must not ask. You have more important things to deal-“ Suddenly his face became livid. Sunset considered bolting, but soon realized he wasn’t angry at her. He was looking to the sky. “…We have visitors.”

Link readied his sword. “I take it they aren’t friendly this time?”

“No,” he said, standing up to his full height. “Not at all.” His hand was pointing into the sky. “There.”

Corona and Link saw a golden pyramid descending from the sky. It had a large gray extrusion coming out of its base from all sides, and spikes stretching out in all directions. It was metallic, shiny, and was a clear sign of highly advanced technology.

Corona blinked. “That doesn’t belong in this universe.”

“No, it does not…” the Happy Mask Salesman hissed. Then he was gone. No puff of smoke, no movement, he was just suddenly gone. Corona shook her head in bafflement.

Link drew his masterfully crafted and ornate bow. He loaded it with a silvery arrow glowing with the power of light itself. He aimed – and fired. The arrow seemed unaffected by gravity, flying straight and true right into the pyramid ship.

They didn’t even see it impact.

“That’s a big pyramid,” Link said.
“Maybe we can talk to them?”

“I doubt it. The Salesman wouldn’t have acted the way he did if he thought that were possible.”

Corona raised an eyebrow. “Oh, so he knows all about otherworldly threats then?”

“Yes.”

Corona shivered. “Well, maybe we can fight them directly. After all-“

A yellow bolt of energy shot from the pyramid ship’s bottom, impacting the Clock Tower. The entire building exploded, showering the town square in splinters. The large bell let out one huge ring one last time, crashing into the ground alongside dozens of large clockwork gears. The people of the town screamed in fear, running away from the smoldering ruins of their precious clock tower.

The pyramid didn’t fire another shot at the small town – instead it focused on shooting elsewhere. Presumably somewhere more populated…

“A Hyrule-“ Link said. He drew his sword and started running out of town.

“Link! Wait!” she yelled after him. “There’s no way you can-“

“I’m going to try!”

“We should try to get help first!” Corona yelled. “I’m sure Twilight would be willing! Or any of the others!”

Link turned and ran back to her. “What are we waiting for then? Open a portal!”

Corona pulled out the dimensional device – fully charged. It should have a couple jumps in it. She opened a portal directly to Equestria, stepping into the main hall of Twilight’s Castle, Link right behind her.

Bon Bon stared at them and listened to the panicked screaming from through the portal.

“Where is Twilight?” Corona asked.

“Offworld,” Bon Bon responded. “Busy dealing with a legal case against Starlight.”

“Darn it…” Sunset muttered. “That’d probably take too long…” She pulled out the dimensional device. “If you can, Bon Bon, tell her that Ardent is under attack by some pyramid spaceship and we need help. Okay?”

Bon Bon nodded. “Of course.”

She opened a portal again, this time stepping into her Earth. She pulled out her cell phone while Link looked around the street, somewhat confused by the area around him.

“Hello, Corona!” Director Storm’s voice came through her cell phone. “What can I do for you today?”

“There’s a world under attack from a spacefaring threat,” Corona explained. “We need to help them. I’m requesting some agents to go-“

“Let me stop you there. Sadly, this is not a military installation. I don’t have the resources nor the authority to help in a war. I’d suggest talking to your pony friends.”
“They’re busy with legalese!”

“There are other options. I am sorry.”

Corona hung up, quickly dialing another number. “Twilight? Get the girls, head to Ardent. We’re going to have to fight what are probably aliens. I’ll explain more when you get there.”

“Is that it?” Link asked.

“No, I have another option.” She dialed the device to the Elemental Nations and stepped through, arriving in Ba Sing Se. She ran to the palace, tripping over her own two feet occasionally. She and Link charged into the main hall, panting.

Aang and Iroh were currently there, discussing matters that were probably very important, but not as important as what Corona and Link needed. “Ardent is under attack!” Sunset yelled. “We need help!”

Iroh furrowed his brow. He nodded to one of the aids nearby. “Ready the army. What’s the attack?”

“Pyramid spaceship,” she said, panting. “I’ve managed to conscript the girls from Earth, but Princess Twilight’s not available at the moment and I don’t have time to go look for anyone else. We need help.”

Aang nodded, grabbing his staff. “I’ll be right there.”

Iroh held out a hand. “Aang, your duty is to this world. Let Toph and the others go.”

“…No. I feel like I need to go. Get the army ready, I’m heading over with them now.”

Iroh nodded slowly. “I suppose we do not have time to deliberate… Very well. I’ll send help as soon as I can. Go, you three, figure out what you can.”

Corona nodded. She lifted the dimensional device – it needed a little charge to make it back to Ardent, but that didn’t take long. She, Link, and Aang stepped out into Termina. The Clock Tower was still smouldering, and the pyramid ship was much larger, closer to the ground, though further to the east.

Twilight Sparkle the human stumbled out of an open portal with Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, and Applejack. “This is everyone I could find!” She looked around the wreckage, pupils dilating. “…Oh my goodness…”

Corona nodded. “We’re getting more help from the Elemental Nations, but we don’t have time to dally around. Link, the ship is headed to Hyrule?”

“Yes.”

“Then that’s where we’re going. Dash, Twilight, we’re going to need to get there fast. Think you can manage with your powers?”

Twilight looked at her necklace, unsure – but Dash grinned confidently. “You bet we can!”

Twilight gulped. “It’ll be complicated, a little crazy, and-“

“Just levitate everyone, make them lighter for me, and I’ll rush us all the way over there! Simple!”

“That’s hardly simple! I’m not that strong of a spellcaster!”
“Just do it!” Link ordered. “We can’t waste time!”

Aang pressed his hands together, entering the Avatar State. He lifted everyone up with his power over air itself, pressing them all into an uncomfortable ball. “Just get us there!”

Rainbow Dash gave him a thumbs up, grabbed Sunset by the ankle, and dragged them across the grassland at high speed like they were some kind of balloon. The speeds they moved at were jarring, but not unbearable. It was difficult to see what was happening, but Corona spied three different towns as they ran, all of which were smoking from at least one hit.

Whoever these attackers were, they were trying to drive fear into the people of Ardent. It was working.

Rainbow Dash slid to a stop suddenly, right at the edge of Hyrule City, the capital of the Kingdom of Hyrule. The city was large, expansive, and dominated by a single huge castle. It was also smoldering in several places, and the nearing pyramid ship only continued to berate it with golden bullets.

Whenever a bolt attempted to hit the castle itself, a blue diamond-shaped shield would appear, conjured out of some kind of magic.

Link leaped to the ground, out of Aang’s air. “Zelda’s defending. Good. We’ve still got a chance.”

Applejack shivered. “How exactly are we gonna fight this thing? It’s way up there and has a really big gun!”

Aang’s eyes flashed brighter for a second. “It shouldn’t take too much effort…”

“Wait,” Corona said. “It looks like it’s dropping smaller ships.”

Sure enough, smaller ships descended from the bottom of the pyramidal ship, landing in the field below. Hatches dropped open, revealing hundreds of beings that looked human, albeit dressed in archaic armor and wielding strange staves.

Corona’s group could see the armies of Hyrule charging from the Town to meet the opposing force. The otherworldly beings aimed their staves, firing energy bolts that burned right through the armor of the knights, often killing more than one with a single shot.

Corona grabbed put her hand to her mouth. Rainbow Dash, Twilight, and Applejack flinched backward, biting their lips.

People were dying.

This wasn’t like the shattering pawn game, these people were really getting holes burned through their chests by golden plasma. She… She wasn’t sure she could handle this. She started breathing faster and faster.

Link put his hand on her shoulder. “We must remain strong. Death is a horrid evil, but we cannot let it deter us from what we need to do.” He pointed his sword at the clashing armies. “See those blue and green lights? We have our own mages in the midst. They’re not outmatched. Our soldiers can win this fight.”

The pyramid ship shot a bolt of plasma at the Hylian army, decimating it.

“If we can take out that ship.”
Aang prepared to take everyone up there, but a yellow plasma bolt shot right at him. In the Avatar State, he had the reflexes required to bend the ‘fire’ away from him. He whirled around. “Who!?”

It turned out that there was a small troop of a dozen or so men right next to them. Most were just like the soldiers on the battlefield, but one was a bearded man in a robe. He smirked, holding out a hand, around which was a strange metallic device that placed a red crystal on his palm. It glowed – and Aang lost all control of his muscles.

Twilight pointed her finger at him and shot a magic bolt, but a forcefield blocked it. He laughed, ordering his soldiers to fire. They aimed their staves. Rainbow Dash kicked one faster than humanly possible, knocking one of them over, while Corona attempted to engulf them in fire – but it wasn’t either of them who took the warriors out.

Link was suddenly just there, standing in front of the bearded man, the Master Sword right through his chest. All the other soldiers already had sword wounds from the sword in their chests, keeling over all at once. The bearded man looked at him in surprise and awe. “…Quite the trick you got there… Boy…”

Link kicked him down. “I’ve got a lot of tricks. All of them will be used against your assault.”

“Heh… Heh…” His head rolled to the side and his eyes lost focus.


“It ain’t fine,” Applejack muttered. “But we don’t have a choice.”

Twilight just held Corona’s arm. Pinkie curiously leaned down and inspected the man’s corpse. She poked it.

“Pinkie!” Corona shouted, looking away from the strange motion the body’s head made. “Agh!”

“Sorry,” she said. Then she coughed, stood up, and shivered. “…We… Woah, we need to move.”

Aang shook his head, letting the Avatar State dissipate. “What… What happened?”

Pinkie pointed at the device on the man’s hand. “Ba’al here had you in the grasp of that hand device. You wouldn’t have been able to do anything had Link not saved you.”

“So… Ba’al, then…” Link said. “We won’t be seeing him again.”

Pinkie giggled nervously. “Uh… Right.”

“…There’s more than one, isn’t there?” Applejack asked.

“Yeeeah…”

Aang cracked his knuckles. “Then we need to go – now. The more time that pyramid is in the air, the more people die.”

He entered the Avatar State again, raising them all higher with the power of wind. They could soon see the entire battlefield beneath them. It was clear – the Hylians were losing, badly. They could not face the forces of Ba’al, it was simply too much to face an army and a ship they couldn’t reach. Even if they managed to defeat the ship, it might have been too late…

“Is that your help over there?” Twilight asked, pointing toward the horizon.
Corona squinted. “…Iroh’s forces shouldn’t be coming from there…”

Link frowned. “That’s the direction of the Gerudo Desert. And that does look an awful lot like an army…”

It was an army – a large army composed of hundreds of dark-skinned individuals. Most of them blurred together in Corona’s vision, but she could make out one individual at the front of the forces. Someone big, burly, and powerful. She could sense the power even from her considerable distance.

“Let’s hope Ganondorf’s in a helpful mood today…” Link muttered under his breath. Then he grabbed Aang’s arm. “Look out!”

Aang shifted the entire group upward, just barely fast enough to dodge plasma fire from a smaller, birdlike craft.

Link drew his bow and fired a bomb-arrow. It hit the craft, exploded, but did no damage. “I can’t deal with it from this range!”

“I got it,” Twilight said pointing a shaky finger at the craft as it tried to loop around back toward them. She shot three times before hitting, but the magical bolt hit true and the fighter exploded. She whooped.

Corona shook her head. “We can’t keep doing this, there are too many of these ships!”

Pinkie took a marshmallow out of her pocket and tossed it at a nearby ship, blowing it up. “Good point. We should probably go back down, too many defenses are locked on us!”

“No!” Aang said. “We’re doing this!” He rushed them toward the hull of the pyramid ship, flying past the various fighter ships. Several of them ended up on their tail, firing relentlessly. It was only Twilight’s magic shields that protected them.

“Guys, I’m not very good at this!” Twilight yelled. “Only a little longer…” A bolt got through Twilight’s defenses, glancing across Applejack’s leg. She screamed, throwing everyone’s focus off. A ship aimed, ready to take them out completely.

It exploded in a shower of darkness and magic. The shockwave from the explosion tossed the group the rest of the way to the ship, planting them uncomfortably into the golden hull.

“What was that!” Rainbow Dash shouted.

Link stood tall, tossing a health potion to Applejack as he did so. “…Ganondorf.”

The man floating before them had dark green skin, short red hair, and ornate black armor flanked by a flowing red cape. “Link. I never thought this day would come.”

“Working together. What an interesting thought.”

“The enemy of my enemy.”

Applejack stood up, leg healed by the potion. “No offense, but we need to take this ship out now. Y’all can get back to chit-chat later.”

Ganondorf nodded in understanding. He pulled his fist back and punched the hull of the ship, denting it. He stared in disbelief. “That should have been more than enough to break through.”
“It’s a heavy alloy spaceship hull, several inches thick,” Pinkie said. “Course it’ll be a little more difficult than what you’re used to.”

Applejack cracked her knuckles. Her orange necklace started sparkling. She placed her hands on the edges of the hull and pushed with all her might. It buckled, bent, twisted, but eventually did break through. She peeled the two pieces of metal apart, revealing the three-inch thick plating she just broke. She took a breather. “That was… somethin’ else.”

Link and Aang charged in without another glance. Corona took the chance to look at the battle below them – Ganondorf’s army was helping the Hylians face off against Ba’al’s forces. A once hopeless battle had now returned to a real fight, a real contest.

They still needed to take this ship out.

She pushed the thoughts of how many people were dying down there out of her mind, running after her friends into the ship itself.

~~~

The mothership remained in orbit around Ardent, two of the smaller ships flanking it. Four of the Ha’taks were down on key places on the planet, causing chaos. Most were experiencing heavy resistance, but nothing too impressive. Ba’al had to admit he hadn’t been expecting two different nations to send armies to the same location, but they still couldn’t do anything to the Ha’taks. They were just too far above these primitive people, and he could always get more Jaffa and clones to replace the losses.

Actually, Jaffa might be at a premium now. Though he could get new soldiers easily from this world. Already, the idea of fish-people and rock-people servants tantalized him. Naturally stronger than Jaffa. With technology they’d be unstoppable.

“Hey, we’re detecting large amounts of dimensional activity near one of the smaller towns.”

Several Ba’als turned to look at the screen. They saw a satellite image of a small town with an army slowly appearing out of nowhere.

“Ah… Otherworldly allies. We should have foreseen as much…”

“Order one of the free Ha’taks to intercept. We don’t want to be surprised.”

One of the Ha’taks broke orbit, descending to the gathering army below. On this ship was one Ba’al in particular who found himself in the position of leading a troop of Jaffa in battle against the inhabitants of the town itself, instead of the gathering army. Such tactics usually put the enemy off their game. He and his dozen Jaffa took one of over a dozen smaller landing ships down to the surface while the Ha’tak began laying waste to the army from above.

Ba’al’s interest was piqued when he saw the armies shoot fire from their arms and launch into the air with pillars of earth. These people had control over fire and the very ground itself. More useful servants. They lacked technology, and even with their powers of earth they were having difficulty getting to the Ha’tak. Not that they could break in even if they got to it, it was far, far too durable.

Ba’al’s ship landed, and he led the Jaffa troop out into the streets. There were a few soldiers here that tried to shoot fire and earth at him, but the Jaffa’s staff weapons made quick work of them, and Ba’al’s personal shield deflected all the loose fire. The earth was more concerning – it might be moving slow enough that it could pass through the forcefield. He’d need to be careful.
But for now, it was time to terrorize the inhabitants. He kicked in a door, finding a woman holding both her son and a pile of colored gems tightly. He smirked. Ah, this would be fun. He raised his hand, forcing the energy in the crystal to attack the mother. Her expression went blank and she lost all feeling in her muscles. With a push of his mind, Ba’al killed her in an instant.

The son went in much the same way. Then he ordered the Jaffa to blow the walls out of the house. Things were going well. He went to house after house after house, tormenting the inhabitants and quickly killing the few soldiers that weren’t occupied with the other attacks. This was fun, easy, and great.

He kicked in a cellar door next, hand device at the ready. Inside was the most disturbing man he had ever seen, staring right at him.

The Happy Mask Salesman laughed and said something Ba’al couldn’t understand. Ba’al held out the hand device, shoving the man into the wall. He would have pushed further, killed the man right then and there, but something caught his eye.

Several masks had spilled out of the Salesman’s backpack. Almost all of them were boring and uninteresting, but there was one. One mask that called to him. It was a purple thing in the shape of a heart, spikes lining the edges. Two eyes stared at him through the wooden fixture.

He knew without being told this was an artifact of great power. He reached down and picked it up. The chilling energy ran through his limbs, driving a feeling of sick pleasure into his brain. He looked at the Happy Mask Salesman, who stared right back at him with a look of contempt.

“Don’t want me to have this do you?” Ba’al said, even though he knew the Happy Mask Salesman didn’t speak his language. It was just Ba’al taunting for the sake of taunting.

Suddenly the mask was in the Salesman’s hands again. Ba’al hadn’t even see the man reach out for it. It was as if the Salesman moved without taking all the steps between.

Ba’al glared at him. “Kill him.”

The jaffa fired their weapons, but the Salesman was suddenly on the other side of the room. Ba’al shot out his hand device, smacking the Salesman with a burst of telekinetic energy again. The Salesman vanished – but he lost his grip on the mask. Ba’al grabbed it again, holding it to his chest.

“We need to return this to the fleet. Now.”

The Happy Mask Salesman appeared behind him, punching Ba’al in the back. He was more than ready for this – he shoved the hand device into the Salesman’s face, trying to blow his brains out. The Salesman screamed in pain but he didn’t die.

Ba’al pinned the Salesman to the ground, pushing more energy from the hand device into him.

“What are you?”

The Salesman laughed – then said something presumably insulting. Ba’al was prepared to draw a dagger to stab the man to death, but he never got his chance. A Fuchsia bug with four arms dropped into the cellar from the ceiling, spinning two yo-yo’s with enough precision to behead four of Ba’al’s Jaffa.

“Retreat!” Ba’al yelled, ducking under a yo-yo attack. He clutched the mask to his chest, running towards his dropship. The mask filled him with determination. All the action around him fell silent as he ran, becoming non issues to him. He felt a yo-yo tear at his leg, enough that it should have made him fall. But something kept him running. He didn’t even feel the pain.
His Jaffa fell behind him, but he didn’t notice. A girl threw some rocks at him, but they mysteriously missed. Some shadowy vixen tried to punch him, but he ducked without even thinking. He ran into his drop ship, alone, and it took off into the sky.

He didn’t even notice that it had taken off without him giving any command. It wasn’t supposed to be able to do that. But he already didn’t care.

He looked at the mask. The beautiful, beautiful mask.

He knew what its name was.

Majora.

Beautiful.

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“The bridge is this way! Come on!” Pinkie shouted, blowing through dozens of armored soldiers with her explosive confetti and giant squeaky hammer. Everyone followed her, not questioning where she was getting her information – after all, Pinkie was Pinkie, and if she was this serious she was probably right.

Corona unleashed a torrent of fire, horrendously burning a soldier trying to ambush them. The scent of the charred flesh filled her nostrils. This particular soldier wasn’t dead, but she’d probably consigned more than a few to their ends on the journey to this part of the ship. She tried not to think about it. She didn’t really have time to think about it even if she wanted to, really.

Ganondorf and Link were much more lethal than the rest of them though. Corona’s friends and Aang at least tried not to deliver killing blows. The two of them just blazed trails through whoever they could. Corona had seen heads explode. She was rather surprised she wasn’t freaking out like Rainbow Dash was.

Rainbow Dash zipped past them, kicking another body out of her sight. “Okay! Okaaaaay! Okay. Can we just get this over with already? We’ve been in here doing… things… for far too long!”

“This door here! Open sesame!” Pinkie said. Applejack nodded, punching through the sealed doorway, a structure much weaker than the outer hull. The room on the other side was filled with consoles, screens, and only a single instance of Ba’al. He held out his hand device, ready to waste them, but Link shot an arrow right through his skull. He keeled over and fell to the ground, blood pooling around him.

Rainbow Dash kicked the body out of the room, trying really hard to ignore the blood that was on her shoe now. And the blood that had been on her shoes and hands since she’d started removing the bodies as fast as possible. Because she had to. She started humming to herself.

Corona walked up to the controls, frowning. “Okay, so, how do we turn off the gun… Gun… Gun…” The entire thing was in an alien script Corona didn’t recognize, so that made understanding it difficult. There were a few diagrams, but they could mean anything.

Twilight pointed to a diagram. “That’s probably flight controls.”

“Just move it out of range…” Corona said, smirking. She pressed a few buttons. A diagram that showed the ship’s location relative to the planet told her the entire pyramid was rising. “There we go, I think we’ll be high enough shortly.”
Pinkie twirled a knife in her hand. “Ah, but we won’t be high enough for long.”

Corona turned to her, eyebrow raised. “…Why not? And what’s with the knife, Pinkie?”

Pinkie sneered, her eyes flashing an eerie, alien white for a second. “Pinkie’s not home,” she said in a deep, reverberating voice. “It’s Ba’al in here.”

Corona took a moment to register that she’d just been stabbed through the stomach with a comically large knife. Oh boy. I can’t feel any pain right now. That’s not good.

Her friends prepared to fight – but the doors to the control room opened, revealing dozens of Ba’al clones, each one holding a snake-like gun in their hands. “I wouldn’t try anything,” one of them said.

Corona gagged, looking at Pinkie-Ba’al. “H-how…?”

Pinkie grinned, removing the knife from Corona’s stomach with a sharp yank. “The Goa’uld, my race, are a race of parasites. When a host body dies, we transfer. She just got close enough for me to get in. And boy oh boy is this a great host! It made everything so easy!”

Sunset slumped to the ground, vision blurring.

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Rarity cleared her throat. “And as you can see, my client clearly feels remorse for what she’s done, and will be more than willing to do anything you ask of her. All I ask is that you be lenient, and consider the fact that Discord pushed her to his level of action.”

The prosecuting attorney – some fellow named Friedrich – stared Rarity down. “We cannot hold this Discord accountable for anything, due to his power. Therefore that argument is moot.”

Starlight glanced at Rarity, and she nodded. Starlight took in a deep breath. “I think Discord is being held accountable. He came to my cell and told me he was going to free me – but then something took him away.”

Rarity nodded. “I therefore believe that Discord is being held accountable by your Ascended, having apparently decided Discord was their responsibility.”

Friedrich frowned. “Where’s your evidence?”

“You have a security feed in Starlight’s cell, do you not? Just look at that.”

“This still does not change what she did.”

Rarity raised an eyebrow. “We already pleaded guilty. This piece of information simply pertains to the sentence. She does not need to be locked away for eternity.”

Friedrich leaned back, turning to the judge. “Your honor, if it pleases you, I have one last line of questions to ask.”

The judge – some guy Starlight didn’t even know the name of – nodded slowly. Friedrich continued. “You ponies, as a race, are familiar with the crystal man and the unicorn that came here previously?”

“Yes…” Starlight said.

“What does this have to do with anything?” Rarity asked. “You already know that we know about them. They’re where we got our dimensional technology.”
“Are you also, by chance, aware of a being that could be described as a ‘red humanoid fairy with ram horns’?”

Rarity blinked. “…Yes, actually. There’s a legendary figure on our world known as the Handmaid who fits that description. Why do you ask?”

Friedrich ignored her question. “So you are aware of two interdimensional powers that have visited this very base, and yet claim this is the first time you’ve ever visited? Is it not more likely you’ve known of us for a while, and were instead trying to lull us into a false sense of security exactly so you could pull this stunt off?”

“…Are you accusing us of conspiracy?” Rarity said, raising an eyebrow.

“I’m merely saying that the situation should be looked into, and that this case cannot be truly decided until we know for certain exactly how many forces were at play here.”

O’Neill charged into the room and grabbed Friedrich by the ear. “Excuse me, your honor,” he said to the judge. He glared at Friedrich. The glare was all Friedrich needed to know.

“Ahem…” Friedrich said, adjusting his tie. “…That will be all I have to say on the case, your honor.”

The judge nodded. “The case has been reviewed. I judge Starlight Glimmer of Equestria as guilty of grand theft. However, due to the delicate nature of the situation, she will not be jailed. Since she is a representative of the Equestrian government, the payment of the fine falls to them. A hundred thousand dollars worth of materials or currency will suffice.” He sat back. “Court is dismissed.”

Starlight blinked, turning to Rarity as the people shuffled out of the room. “I thought you said to expect jail time?”

Rarity frowned, nodding. “You should have… I read over their laws. Grand theft usually involves a year for much smaller thefts. I was expecting many years, actually. Something must have happened. Maybe they didn’t want to ruin a political relationship?”

“It was me,” Twilight said, walking up to them. “I offered them a trade.”

Starlight cocked her head. “You… Did?”

“After Rarity told me what sentences were, I couldn’t just let it slide. I promised them a dimensional device and a Directory, as well as personally seeing to it that I equip their ships with dimensional capability. I… also gave them permission to request official Equestrian mages for magic testing.”

Starlight raised an eyebrow. “And… You did that all just so I could go free? Twilight… I didn’t need that much…”

Rarity narrowed her eyes. “It’s also another political blunder. Now the number of things we have to offer them are more limited. They’re coming out on top in this interaction, and will easily be able to exploit us in the future.”

Twilight sighed. “Maybe so. I… I just couldn’t let it happen. I had the power to change it, so I did. There’s no way Starlight needs to spend a decade in prison to learn her lesson.”

Starlight looked at the ground. “…You sure?”

“Yes, Starlight, I’m sure. I’m very sure.” She pulled her into a hug. “Come here.”
Starlight let tears fall down her eyes. “Will… Will I ever get it? Do you think I can?”

“I don’t think anypony ever truly gets it, Starlight. We all struggle, we all flail, we all fall. Over and over and over again, even at things we already thought we learned.”

“Life sure is funny.”

“Yeah, it is.” She shook her head, releasing Starlight from the embrace. “Anyway, we need to get back to Equestria and grab a dimensional device. I… misplaced the one we brought here.”

Starlight blinked. “…You ‘misplaced’ it?”

“Well I’m not accusing them of stealing it, that’d just be stupid at this point,” Twilight said. “I’m pretty sure Daniel wasn’t involved anyway. Speaking of…”

Daniel walked up to them. “Are you girls ready to head home?”

“Yeah,” Twilight said. “I still need to get things for your ship though.”

“I know. I’m planning on coming back with you, to learn more about your culture.”

Twilight smiled. “Good.” She lit her horn, expending some effort to teleport them back to the hallway. She let out a breath from the energy loss. “Ouch…”

“Maybe you shouldn’t rely on teleportation so much?”

“Probably not…” She shook her head, stepping through the shimmering wall into her castle, Daniel, Starlight, and Rarity behind her. “Bon Bon! We need to figure out how much a hundred thousand dollar fine is in pure gold, stat.”

“Of course, Princess. But first, Corona came by earlier with an urgent message.”

“What was it?”

“There’s a pyramid ship attacking Ardent right now, and they need your help.”

Daniel paled. “…Pyramid ship?”

Bon Bon narrowed her eyes. “Are you responsible?”

“No. But… But that’s the kind of ship our enemies use.”

Twilight blinked. “Well, at least I know you guys didn’t steal the device now.”

Daniel shook his head. “Does this ‘Ardent’ have any technology capable of repelling ships designed to conquer entire planets?”

“I doubt it very much,” Bon Bon said.

“Damn,” Daniel muttered under his breath. He turned to Twilight. “I hope you can work fast.”

Twilight gulped. “…I can try.”

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The other Twilight, the human, couldn’t take her eyes off Sunset – Corona’s – limp form. She was alive, for now, but that wound was serious. They needed to heal her, and heal her fast. But they were
currently being held at gunpoint.

“Shall we kill them?” one of the Ba’als asked.

“Nah,” Pinkie-Ba’al said in Pinkie’s regular voice. “They’re all useful. Dark guy is the king of the Gerudo, the green guy is the hero of Hyrule, the arrow kid is the patron hero of an entire other world, and the colorful girls are all very precious to important people and ponies.” She giggled. “And baconhair here is also important, but I felt like stabbing someone.”

“How do you know all these things?” another Ba’al asked.

Pinkie-Ba’al smiled. “This host is connected to something… beyond understanding. She has a natural way of seeing everything. Who everyone is. What they are for. How things are going to happen. It’s almost like a psychic, but not quite. I’m still figuring it out myself, but it allowed me to mimic her antics easily. She can also pull things out of nowhere, such as this knife.” She cackled. “Such a powerful body!”

“Do each of you control a human mind?” Link demanded.

“Yes, but this particular human mind is blank due to cloning,” another Ba’al said. “Though you’re probably still upset about it.”

An alarm went off. A Ba’al close to Twilight checked a screen. “That interdimensional army took out one of our Ha’tak’s.”

“How?” Another said.

“They were clever,” Pinkie-Ba’al said. “They had a shadowy being on their side that could pass through walls and an earthbender who could fold metal like paper. They found the engine room and things collapsed from there.”

“They’re coming here.”

Pinkie-Ba’al pointed at Aang. “Show them him tied up, and they’ll stop fighting. He’s their ‘Avatar’. Truly a stupid title, but it works.”

Link tried to inconspicuously trace an hourglass symbol with his sword near the ground, but Pinkie-Ba’al knew it was happening before he tried. Suddenly the Master Sword was in her hand. “No mysterious time-stop powers from you! We just can’t have that!”

Link bristled. “At least let me heal Corona. I have potions.”

Pinkie-Ba’al shrugged. “Hey, guys, let’s take it to a vote! Let them heal her?”

All the Ba’als gave a thumbs down with bemused expressions on their faces. One sipped a martini. Pinkie-Ba’al snickered. “The mob has spoken.”

“If you are the mob it’s hardly fair,” Applejack said, placing herself in such a way that she protected Rainbow Dash, who was currently curled up in a ball on the ground, crying.

“Oh look, they’re trying to take defensive stances…” Pinkie-Ba’al said, shaking her head. “You’ve all lost! We’ve got weapons far beyond anything you’ve ever seen pointed at you, and…” She paled suddenly. “The Tau’ri are coming.”

“What?!” most of the Ba’als said.
“Forget about reactivating the weapon! Tell the mothership to get us out of here now! We need to leave this place before they show up! Dial some random universe!”

The Ba’als frantically scrambled around, working with the controls. The Ha’tak rose further away from Ardent, moving to meet the mothership and its single guardian Ha’tak. The mothership began to shift ominously, channeling energy into the dimensional device, preparing to escape into a nearby dimension.

A portal opened in the opposite direction, revealing the human ship Apollo. Twilight stared in awe at the contrast between the golden pyramid ships and the dulled, rectangular visage of the Apollo. It came out, guns blazing, firing standard turrets alongside long, thin blue energy beams. On the main screen, the mothership got hit, but its shields held. Its companion Ha’tak was not so lucky, with a few shots destroying it quickly.

The mothership opened a portal, accelerating into it to a place without stars at all. The ship Twilight and the others were on attempted to follow – but a laser grazed its side.

Consoles on the bridge exploded, screens went dead, and the room fell into darkness. Pinkie-Ba’al screamed. “NO NO NO!” The scream of someone who had felt like this was going to happen, but just ignored it. Twilight cowered – she heard guns go off, spells fly around her, and bones crunch. The ship shook again, taking another hit.

Was she going to die here, on an alien ship, with most of her friends? After witnessing all that death, that destruction, that-

She saw Aang enter the Avatar state, his eyes providing enough light to see by. She could see many Ba’als laying around them, dead. Not as many as there had been – presumably more than a few fled.

She screamed when she saw Corona standing – holding the Master Sword, having thrust it right through Pinkie-Ba’als chest.

Pinkie-Ba’al let out a sick laugh. “I guess… I guess this body can’t see everything then…”

Corona winced, falling to a knee, holding her chest – but keeping her other hand solidly on the sword. “Give… Us… Pinkie… Back…”

“Hahahah! She’ll be gone forever, you stabbed her Sunset! You’re to blame!”

Both Corona and Pinkie-Ba’al collapsed in that moment. Twilight swore she could still hear Pinkie-Ba’al’s laughter.

There was silence. Aang dropped out of the Avatar State. There was nothing else to see.

Twilight heard Link saunter over to Corona and Pinkie-Ba’al. He took a jar out of his satchel, one with a glowing white fairy inside it. He tied Pinkie-Ba’al’s hands behind her back and tied her legs together – then released the fairy. It swirled around the two of them, flooding them with white magic before vanishing.

Twilight heard Corona cough and Pinkie-Ba’al moan.

She let out a sigh of relief. They would be okay. And, for whatever reason, the ship had stopped shaking…

The last thing she remembered clearly for the next little while was the face of her alicorn counterpart lifting her up to see if she was okay.
Princess Zelda of Hyrule strode across the halls of the Tau’ri ship Apollo. She’d already had her meeting with O’Neill and the Captain – it was time to see those other people who’d saved their kingdom.

She walked into the sickbay, noticing a few familiar faces. Link, nursing numerous cases of internal bleeding. Ganondorf, suffering through a broken arm and leg. He shot her a look, but said nothing. As it should be. Most of the other faces were new to her though. An orange-skinned girl was talking to a blue-skinned girl who looked like she had seen the horrors of war for the first time, and probably had. A boy with an arrow on his head stood next to a purple girl, standing over the bedridden woman Zelda knew was Corona.

Zelda touched Corona’s arm, smiling. “I want to thank you.”

Corona groaned. “You’re welcome… Ugh…”

“The pain will pass. Focus on that.”

Corona managed a slight chuckle. “Probably a good idea… But I’m busy thinking about Pinkie…”

Zelda raised an eyebrow.

“…Some snake got into her head. They’re trying to remove it now.”

As if on cue, they heard some alien screaming. Coming from behind a curtain. A doctor came out from the curtain with a glass tube, inside of which was a large white fleshy snake. It had three sharp prongs for teeth and a few beady eyes – and it was livid.

Corona looked at it. “So, that’s Ba’al then?”

“Yep,” O’Neill said, walking into the room. “Pretty pathetic without bodies, huh?”

“Creepy,” Corona muttered. She managed to sit up, looking at the horrid snake a little closer. She winced, but glared. “Ba’al…”

The creature just hissed and complained with incomprehensible languages.

Corona swiped the jar, popped the top off, and burnt the Goa’uld inside to ashes before anyone could stop her. Then she handed the cremated remains back to the doctor. “How’s Pinkie doing?”

“She’s doing great!” Pinkie said, leaping out of the operating curtain. There was still blood on her shirt, and she really shouldn’t have even been able to walk, but there she was. “That was interesting!”

Corona grinned. “Pinkie, we almost died.”

“I said interesting, not fun. Though parts of it were fun. Most of it was terrifying though.” She paused, staring into nothing for a moment. “I knew everything Ba’al knew, but I also knew things he didn’t, and he knew things I didn’t, and… And I was watching everything happen like it was on TV.”

Rainbow Dash hugged her without any warning. “Don’t ever do stuff like that again, okay Pinks?”

“Of course not!” She hugged Rainbow Dash back tightly. Far too tightly, but nobody cared at this
point. The doctor just shrugged and went back to examining his various patients.

Zelda smiled. “It warms my heart to see you all here. I’m going to give you all the highest honor of valor in our kingdom, the Goddess’s Regalia. Yes, even you Ganondorf.”

“…Sweet,” Rainbow Dash said, devoid of her usual vigor. It was as if she wasn’t really into it.

“There’ll be a ceremony in a few days. I expect you all to be there.”

“Also, something else,” O’Neill said. “That Ha’tak you guys were on? It’s busted up, but still functional. Corona, we’ve decided to give it to you.”

Corona blinked. “Give it to Twilight.”

“…Huh?”

“The people I work for do not need access to a spaceship, okay?”

O’Neill shrugged. “Screwing over the man. I can respect that. Request granted.”

“Thank you.” She laid back down in the hospital bed. “Ugh… Can I get some sleep now?”

“You heard her! Everyone out!” O’Neill shouted, clapping his hands. “If you aren’t critically wounded or are a pink monstrosity that can’t feel pain, move!”

A flood of people began to move out of the hospital – while Princess Twilight tried to get in.

“Hey, I said everyone out!” O’Neill said.

“But… I need to see Coron-“

“I sai-“

Corona raised a hand. “It’s fine, O’Neill. She won’t stay long.”


Soon, Twilight and Corona were more or less alone.

“How’d you get this ship over here?” Corona asked.

“Had to drain one of their ZPM power module things,” Twilight said. “But it wasn’t that hard. It was really as simple as slapping the dimensional device onto the hyperdrive and channeling power to it, which explains how Ba’al was able to get here so easily.”

“…Heh. Both a blessing and a curse, how easy those things are to use.”

“It appears that way.”

Corona blinked. “I got you a spaceship, by the way. The Ha’tak that’s intact is yours for the keeping.”

“…What, really?”

“Really.”

“Oh thankyouthankyouthankyou!”
“Hey, you’ve still got to fix it. Don’t get too excited.”

Twilight rubbed her hooves together. “But I love fixing things!”

“Indeed you do.”

Twilight got a hold of herself. “Anyway… You okay?”

Corona sighed. “I think so. There was… a lot that happened today. A lot of death. A lot of blood. A lot of war. But… I believe I’ve come to terms with it. It’s affected me, but not as badly as I was thinking. Not as badly as Dash.”

“…How’s she doing?”

“Badly. She’s been rambling a lot. Laughing a lot sometimes, seeming strikingly apathetic at others. I think she needs therapy. Maybe Twi- Sparky as well.”

Twilight nodded. “I’ll be sure they get some. You just stay here and rest.”

“I will. Am I getting taken to their world?”

Twilight shook her head. “They’re not going back. They’re keeping the Apollo on this side of the multiverse. It’s over here, they might as well use it. Try to hunt down the Ba’als that escaped. They are, apparently, their responsibility.”

Corona frowned. “I wonder what the story behind it is…”

“Ba’al is apparently the last of the powerful System Lords, a race that had the entire galaxy in their universe subjugated until recently. He’s really, really crafty, and was willing to use cloning to get the upper hand.”

“We definitely haven’t seen the last of him.”

“That much is clear,” Twilight agreed. “But… We’ll all be ready for him.”

Corona nodded, mumbling something.

“…I think I’ll let you sleep now.”

Corona tried to mumble ‘thanks’, but she was already drifting off again.

~~~

Discord stared at Sestar. “So, in conclusion, by keeping me here you are interfering with the ‘lower races,’ because part of their culture and life depends on me. You’re breaking your own laws by dealing with me.”

“It is our duty to keep you from exploiting them.”

“For the love of chaos, you’re a broken record.” He sat back, grabbing another newspaper. “See? Look at this. THOUSANDS DIE DUE TO INTERDIMENSIONAL MISHAP. I bet you if I had gone through with my plan that wouldn’t have happened.”

“The consequences of upholding our laws are not our concern.”

“You. Are. Dense.” Discord sighed. “Okay, how about this. I agree never to come back here, ever,
on punishment of ‘death’ or whatever, and I return to Equestria, and you never have to think of me again.”

“And you will then interfere with their lives, which is something we cannot allow.”

“What is that? A lie I hear?”

“How so?”

“You let your evil counterparts force their followers into worship. The…” He flipped through the newspaper. “Ah yes, the Ori, great Ascended beings who controlled an entire galaxy with religious domination. You just let them have their way.”

“The Ark of Truth was our creation and their demise.”

“You did that back before you Ascended. And it says here you didn’t even try to tell the Tau’ri about it! Wow! Talk about crazy luck! I’m surprised they managed it.” He cleared his throat. “The point is, star lady, that you need to send me back. You’re like a foreign nation. I’ll admit, you can tell me not to act here, but you have no right to tell me what to do in my homeland. For all you know the laws of the universe make my actions right there. So ha.”

Stestar stared at him with an intense glare. “You actually have good points.”

“Was there ever any doubt about that?”

“Yes. But you-“

For the first time, another Ascended interrupted. “Just let him go, Sestar. He’s offered a deal. Get him out of our hair.”

Sestar took in a deep breath and sighed. “Fine. Go home. Do your unsavory deeds.”

Discord grinned. “Thank you.” He snapped his fingers, finding that he could indeed summon a top hat and a zoot suit. “I’ll be off. I’m sure Fluttershy’s worried by now.” He walked out the front doors of the establishment.

Sestar shot a glare at the Ascended who had spoken up. “This will bite us later.”

“Either option would have bitten us. The important thing is that now he knows he’s not at the top, and will have to think more about what he does. A small improvement, but one nonetheless.”

“We’re promoting unacceptable use of power.”

“He doesn’t get power from worship. It may work out.”

Sestar fell silent, fuming.

~~~

After three more universe jumps, the Ba’al mothership stopped jumping. They figured they couldn’t be traced anymore, especially because they didn’t even really know where they were.

Plus, there was something new to discuss.

Several dozen Ba’als stood around a table, staring at a purple heart-shaped mask.
“This is a powerful object.”

“It saved my life.”

“It can be used to further our power…”

“It wants to help us.”

“It is Majora.”

“It’s obviously manipulating our minds.”

“Clearly. We must devise a way for it to remain distant.”

“You. You were the original holder. You will take several of us onto a smaller ship and keep it away from the rest of us. You will be the voice of Majora.”

“Delightful!”

“Concerning. It may cause madness. It may be causing madness in all of us.”

“Why aren’t we considering throwing it away?”

“Because that’d be crazy and foolish.”

“That sounds crazy and foolish.”

“Huh. So it does. Whatever, go with the plan. This mask will bring new opportunities to us. We just need to be clever.”

They all laughed again.

~~~

Twilight stood at the balcony of her castle, staring up at the stars – and Stars – again.

Starlight joined her. There was an awkward silence.

“Twilight, I’m sorry.”

“I know.”

“But I never apologized. I never admitted I was wrong. I never admitted it to myself, not really. Still not sure if I have. I’m running around in my head ways I could have kept doing it. I’ve already come up with plans to steal more things. I’m not acting on them, but they’re still there. I’m a natural manipulator, Twilight. That can’t be good.”

“Everypony has a part of them that isn’t good. I’m often too fixated and detail oriented.”

“Hardly as bad as being naturally manipulative…”

“I think it balances out. We all have strengths, we all have weaknesses. We all have to do what we can with what we can.”

Starlight sagged. “Maybe…” She looked up at the stars. She summoned a spell, whispered something into it, and shot it up.
“…What was it this time?”

“I was just… Just hoping that the Stars would accept us, even with all the mistakes we’ve made.”

“We’ll find out eventually. The Ha’tak should be ready to fly soon.”

“…Did the ship do anything to lessen Luna’s anger at your ‘diplomacy’?”

“Not at all!” Twilight chuckled. “Celestia had to intervene. She essentially said we were both handling it like idiots.”

“I think this entire escapade can be described as ‘people acting like idiots’, don’t you?”

“That certainly seems like an apt description…” She frowned. “…We’re going to see death eventually, Starlight. And lots of it. It’s affected Corona and her friends. I’m not sure their Rainbow Dash is going to be okay. What’s going to happen to us when we get in that kind of fight? Fluttershy almost exploded during the pawn fiasco…”

“We’ll have to prepare ourselves for it. We’ll have to be strong. But not forget harmony… Like I do so often.”

Twilight nodded. “Yeah… I really don’t know what’s going to happen. Ardent isn’t going to be able to ignore the other universes anymore, the Tau’ri have a ship in this area of the multiverse now, we’ve got a ship, the Elemental Nations helped fight a short war…” She shook her head. “Things are changing, Starlight. It no longer seems quite so… happy as it once did.”

Starlight looked at the stars. “Maybe it was never happy. Maybe we were just deluding ourselves.”

“That doesn’t mean we have to stop doing what we’re doing, though,” Twilight asserted. “The Stars call, the many universes around us call, they scream to be explored and uncovered. We’re not going to run away with our tails between our legs because of a little hardship. There will be ugly things. And we will face them.”

Starlight smiled. “Yeah. Yeah we will. Together.”

“Always, together.”

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[END OF ARC 1: BREATH]

An Interlude is available on the Fimficiton version with some notes, thoughts, links to sidestories, and hints for the future, but it's not important for the story.
Rarely was the Mirror Portal surrounded by so many beings from so many different universes – ponies and humans mostly, though there were a smattering of gorons, demons, furry Binaries, and some of Ganondorf’s Gerudo. It was, needless to say, a special day, for it was time for the Mirror Portal to be moved once again.

One particular pony in the crowd was trying very hard to not be recognized. She wore a large black cloak that covered every part of her save her face, and that was covered by a simple round white mask. She was certainly setting people on edge with her presence, yes, but there was no chance any of them would recognize her, which was exactly what she wanted. She needed to get in and get out quickly, and she knew she could do it. Would do it. There were no chances, not this time.

She found herself mildly interested in the ‘ceremony’ that was taking place. All four Princesses had shown up, even the usually-distant Princess of Love, Mi Amore Cadenza. The secretive mare studied her, determining that she was rather basic. No power like Celestia, no mysterious wisdom like Luna, no excitable intelligence like Twilight, just… The cliché pretty pony princess. She didn’t have anything distinguishing about her from first glance.

Now, the mare knew Cadence was more than she appeared, but first impressions were everything in the games that were being played with entire universes. It was worth pitying her. Not too much though, should she ever end up on the opposing side…

The train of thought was interrupted when Celestia began talking, bringing the entire room to a hushed silence. “Today, my ponies, my people, my others, we finally put the Mirror Portal out of our hall and into the hands of all, to be used freely in communion. The Hub has been built in the demon’s jungle, and it awaits the Mirror Portal’s presence. We are gathered here today to move this powerful portal out of the monopoly of Equestria and to a place all can gather.”

There was a round of polite applause.

Celestia nodded, lighting her horn. The masked mare knew she was channeling cosmic power, more than enough to open a portal all on her own. A golden rimmed ring appeared in the air, leading to another world entirely, one with shiny gray floors and yet another crowd. Twilight stepped forward, removing the Mirror Portal itself from all the excess machinery, leaving only the green diamond itself in the frame. The connection faded away leaving a dull, plain mirror behind. Luna went next, lifting the Mirror away from Twilight with her magic and carrying it through Celestia’s opening. The three princesses followed the mirror, and Celestia’s portal closed behind them.

“And now we wait,” Cadence said, “it shouldn’t be long before they re-establish a connection, from what they told me.”

The entire hall was silent, the loudest noise being the gorons’ breathing. The masked mare counted down in her mind, tapping her hoof in the air slightly with each second that passed. Some of the Binaries started to look at each other nervously, like something was wrong. One of the Tau’ri coughed loudly. The masked mare simply kept counting.

She set her foot on the ground at the exact instant a shimmering mirrory surface appeared on a
nearby wall. Twilight poked her head through. “Sorry for the wait, it’s working now. Come on through!”

Cadence nodded. “You heard her.” Slowly but surely, the entire crowd filed through the opening. The masked mare made sure to place herself in the middle of the group, so as to draw the least attention. Even the crowd around her didn’t pay her any mind – the atmosphere around them was simply too momentous to care for a slightly creepy mare. She moved unnoticed.

The other side of the Mirror Portal was the Mirror Portal. It was affixed to a single glass column filled with magical gasses instead of the rather messy conglomeration of random devices that had been attached to it previously. The appearance was much more orderly, intentional. One large screen hanging above the Mirror Portal showed the name of the current location dialed: “Equis Vitis,” with the coordinates displayed beneath. Two consoles stood to either side of the Mirror Portal, each scrolling with large quantities of information. A few meters in front of the Portal’s opening was Bon Bon’s desk, where a video camera stood and Bon Bon herself was furiously scribbling, trying to keep track of everything.

The masked mare didn’t care if Bon Bon saw her or not – the secret agent was not going to find her as interesting as, say, General Sunset over there. If the masked mare was noticed at all, it would be as a simple checkmark. The camera would hardly show anything damning either. After all, all she was doing was walking.

“Welcome to the Hub!” Celestia shouted, using the Royal Canterlot Voice to make sure her voice was heard throughout the space. The main room they were in was large, circular, and lined with a few hundred people. “This building is owned by no one and yet everyone at the same time. We are currently in the very large central room, where we expect lots of interdimensional traffic to come and go. Through the doors there are hallways that lead to rooms that are mostly empty for now, but soon there should be shops, embassies, and other things. For now, feel free to wander around and mingle. Luna and myself should be available for the next few hours, as well as several other world leaders.” She smiled and let everyone get to whatever they wanted to do.

The masked mare found it interesting that the only media coverage was from Equestria – it was the only world with an active media that didn’t keep the existence of the multiverse from its population. She wondered how long that would last, even if it wasn’t really her business. She shrugged to herself and walked towards the edge of the central room, the large metal doors sliding open for her.

A dragon could fit through the gap, and the masked mare had no doubt that was how they were designed. The largest creature in here right now may have been Siron, but the architects here had planned for the future. They couldn’t see like she could, but educated guesses were worthwhile.

She walked through the door, finding that some people had already entered the outer rooms. The hallways were bare and dull for now, but would soon be filled with decorations from every sort of world. The hallways snaked around in a mixture of geometric patterns and artistic ones – though the mare stayed on the one that led directly to the edge of the hub itself.

She passed Iroh and Zuko looking at two separate, but adjoined, ‘rooms.’

Iroh scratched his chin. “…Embassy right here, and tea shop right there.”

“Uncle, you can’t run an Embassy and tea shop at the same time.”

“Watch me.”
The mare smiled under her mask. Zuko would indeed watch him. And be very very surprised at how effective the combo was. She liked the little ironies of life, sometimes. Especially when they helped her.

The mare walked right out the main doors, leaving the hub entirely. From outside it was easy to tell the structure was built with several conflicting ideals in mind. Overall, it was a perfect flat cylinder, a single silvery white color. Yet, while the doors were simple and effective, the outside wasn’t smooth, but instead was covered with many relief sculptures. They had been crafted by magic, largely carved by the ponies, but they made sure to include images of humans and the many other races as well, including some the mare had never actually seen. The theme was harmony, as always with Equestria. As always. They were a little crazy about that. Harmony wasn’t always a good thing, and the mare knew this all too well.

The jungle that surrounded the hub was decidedly less pretty. One day, it would grow back to its once lush state, but now it was dry, charred, and showed almost no signs of life. Siron had not been kidding about the oddly scheduled fires. Days after that meeting, the jungle had been swept by fire, killing everything that couldn’t run. The demons no longer lived here. Nothing lived here. Except for the mare herself. She took in a deep breath, took a moment to think, and set out in the direction she deduced she needed to. She walked past dinosaur skeletons, shriveled flowers the size of towns, and charred spires of wood that scraped the sky. Through all this, she kept her cloak and mask on tight, even though she knew she didn’t need to. There was nobody watching her.

Well… Nobody that mattered anyway.

Yet.

She eventually arrived in what had once been a beautiful clearing filled with magic, but was now just a charred mess with a single point of interest. A brilliantly glowing altar, shining as a beacon of hope for the charred land around it. A few tufts of grass had sprouted up next to the holy altar of the Blue Moon Spirit, signifying that eventually the jungle would return. It flooded the mare with powerful, calming magics.

This was what she had come for. It was time.

The mare took off her mask and removed her hood, revealing herself to the few who were watching. She was an oculus with blue eyes, a version of Pinkie Pie from Lai – otherwise known as Sage Pinkie. She held the simple white mask in her hoof, approaching the altar.

The Blue Moon Spirit appeared on top of the altar, four arms pointing at the Sage with an accusatory finger each. The Sage did not do more than glance the Spirit’s way with her ever-shifting eyes. She saw right through the Spirit. The Spirit could not bring herself to harm the Sage. Any oculus would not have feared this being, for in the Spirit believed she was too ‘pure’ to bring harm.

The Sage found this disgusting. Nothing was that pure. Had she been an obviously evil pony, the Spirit would not hesitate. But no, the Spirit had to hold herself back. Not because of any morals, or altruism, but because of the way she perceived her own nature. That such actions were beneath her.

The Sage admitted to herself that, if the Spirit knew what was about to happen, she probably would retaliate with lethal force. As it was, this would be too easy.

The Spirit warned the Sage not to come any closer, but the Sage ignored it. Judging the Sage unworthy, the Spirit pushed her back with a gust of magic. The Sage simply walked forward again, mask outstretched. The Spirit pushed back once more, harder this time, and still the Sage came, mask
The Spirit moved her hands to fashion a more complicated spell, and then the Sage jumped positions, appearing behind the altar in an instant. She laid the mask on top of the altar, beneath the Spirits’ dangling legs.

The Spirit could not speak, but if she could, she would have been screaming. The mask drained the power from the altar, and by consequence the Spirit herself. She clawed out with a dangerous attack for the first time, but the Sage was already behind a tree. The Blue Moon in the sky shook slightly, sending a beam of blue light that razed the ground where the Sage was.

She would have died, had she not already been on the other side of the clearing.

The Spirit lost her power and will to fight, falling to her knees on top of the mask, slowly being absorbed into it. The Blue Moon lost its lustre, dulling in the sky above. No one would notice the change until the Blue Moon rose at night, which would not be for several days. The Altar turned to plain stone, and the image of the Spirit vanished completely.

The Sage walked back to the altar and picked up the mask. It shone with a slight sheen now, but nothing too unusual. She placed it on her face and walked away.

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Corona asked herself a very important question: had she touched Pinkie today? She didn’t remember it, but being this excited was rather unlike her. Sure, her dream for the last several months was finally being realized, but that was no reason to literally feel like running around the base dancing, right?

Because that was what she was doing. Dancing down through the AID base, grinning to herself and twirling around. She was making a fool of herself, yes, but given her current emotional state she couldn’t have cared less. She was taking her secret-agent sunglasses on and off over and over again in a horrible recreation of some musical she had seen recently.

Ike took out his phone and started filming. “Man, I wish I could post this to Youtube. This would get so many views.”

“I’m not even sure you’re allowed to have videos of this base on your phone,” Mike said.

“Ah, probably not. But Storm’s pretty understanding. He just gets the need to record amusing things.”

Mike was about to correct him, but then saw that one of the security cameras that was usually sweeping the room was instead following Corona closely. He shrugged.

Corona tapped the ‘down’ elevator button while humming to herself, prancing in the moment it arrived. The two agents in the elevator shifted to the sides of it to give her room to twirl. They got off before she did, since they didn’t need to go to the bottom of the base. They were happy about this, Corona was rather oblivious to their feelings. She waved goodbye to them, eagerly awaiting the time when the elevator would hit basement 13.

That time was not far off at all. When the elevator finally went ‘ding’ at the correct floor, she jumped out, lit her hands on fire, and grinned. “Carter! Is it ready?”

The blonde human woman from the Tau’ri looked up from a laptop she had in her hand, stopping whatever she was explaining to Tempest. “It would seem so. We’ve just got to perform some tune-ups on the interfaces, but we’ll be able to test within the hour.”
“Yes!” Corona said, turning to what had her so elated. The two spires she designed poked out of the ground, humming with electricity from a nearby power plant. In between them was a stargate, sitting on the ground with a thin, clear ramp leading up to it. The gate was of a different design than the one on Earth Tau’ri, as it was blue and filled with constellation-designs instead of symbols; not to mention that the inner ring didn’t turn, it only lit up. But that didn’t matter, not for what it was going to be used for anyway.

“Were you able to encode it to nine chevrons?” Corona asked.

“Easily, actually,” Carter said. “The Ninth Chevron really does appear to be a catch-all, allowing it to initiate any program we have set, even bizarre ones. Makes me think the Ancients designed their gates with it as a ‘catch all’. Seven for within the galaxy, eight for extragalactic, and nine for whatever unusual uses they would find in the future.”

“Wonder if they ever used it to travel realities…”

“You’d have to ask Daniel that one, and I doubt he’ll remember.” Carter typed a few more things on her laptop. “The hardest part wasn’t getting the Ninth Chevron program open, it was getting the gate to accept a possible connection without anything on the other end. It’s not designed to do that.”

Corona cracked her knuckles. “Well my arches are. Punch a hole into any universe. The gate is just here to get the gravity right. Wormholes.”

“I’m curious what the event horizon will look like,” Carter admitted. “Your portals can be seen through, but the Stargate is usually one-way only. We’re combining two things that operate on different principles.”

“And without magic!” Corona grinned. “No magic at all! Meaning this will work even in universes where magic is dead or completely gone.”

“Maybe there are universes that can’t be dialed with magical methods?”

“I don’t know! This is how we’re going to find out!” She poked her head over Carter’s shoulder. “How’s the interface going?”

“It’s ready. The gate isn’t complaining about the alien program anymore, and the arch-spikes are ready. …Do you have a better name for your things?”

“I was going to just call them the gateway,” Corona admitted. “I think that now, ‘arches’ works. Even though they’re not touching at the top. But pillars just sounds silly.”

“Fair enough. Power levels are optimal, gate is loaded with the program, arches pass all pre-test checks…” She closed her laptop. “People! We’re ready!”

Tempest stood up. “Finally. What are we waiting for then? Do it.”

Carter flipped open a box with a lever. She handed it to Corona. “This is mostly your invention. You do the honors.”

Corona took off her glove, feeling the lever with her hand. There was no emotion to feel coming from the lifeless piece of metal, but she couldn’t bring herself not to feel it with her own skin. She looked directly at the gate-arch combo and pulled the lever down.

The arches lit up first, crackling with electricity. The arcs of purple lightning were attracted to the gate. The gate remained unaffected by the arcs of electricity, dialing like it always would. The ring
swirled with blue patterns, quickly lighting up seven symbols. Eight. Nine.

*Kawoosh.* The gate’s connection burst forward, a torrent of unstable energies tearing into the room, putting everyone on edge – but the disturbance of the kawoosh was reined in, until the gate held what appeared to be a rippling pool of water inside it. Not opaque blue-white energy, but something *clear.* The light was distorted by the ‘liquid’ nature of the event horizon, but Ardent could clearly be seen on the other side.

A small helicopter drone was sent in to test the waters. It hit the barrier between worlds, shook a bit, but righted itself on the other side easily. It flew around for a few seconds then came back through, landing in Carter’s hand.

Corona grinned. “Okay. It works. Are we safe?” She checked the pulses of electricity coming off the arches – they would be rather painful if they hit, seeing as she didn’t know how to redirect lightning.

“They’re all grounding at the gate,” Carter said. “It shouldn’t be a problem unless there’s a power surge. Most of the power’s being funneled into the gate anyway, so even then that’s remote. I would fix it as soon as possible, but it’s fine for initial prototyping.”

Corona had heard all she needed to hear. She slipped her glove back on and jumped through the stargate’s new connected portal. It didn’t feel like water, but it didn’t feel like air either. She felt like she had to pass through a membrane of semi-fluid rubber that was somehow infinitely thin. A minor impediment that she overcame quickly, but it was notably disorienting.

She fell a couple of feet to the ground. Right. The gate, being a raised circle, would create a portal a few feet above ground level. Something to remember in the future.

She stood up, dusted herself off, and laughed. She was standing on Ardent right now, in the great Hyrule Field. Behind her was a giant circular opening, brimming with white wispy energies around the edge. In front of her was a beautiful land of *adventure* and…

…Black scars from Ba’al’s attacks. Her mood darkened considerably as she looked upon Hyrule Town in the distance. Sections of the wall were completely decimated, the castle had lost one of its impressive towers, and she knew many districts didn’t even exist anymore. It was sobering.

Here she was, celebrating that one of her life dreams had been completed, when some people had just suffered a horrible travesty. It made her feel guilty, even though she knew this wasn’t her fault, and that she’d helped put an end to it.

She had flashes of the death… The blood… The master sword through Pinkie’s chest…

She shook her head, clearing it. She wiped her eyes and took a deep breath – she needed to be strong. Not everybody could be strong, but she could. Pinkie was fine, Ardent survived, and Ba’al was on the run. She should feel happy that things went as well as they did.

Carter and Tempest finally stepped through the portal behind her. Carter shivered slightly. “That certainly feels different to a normal gate transit.”

“It’ll work better once we figure out how to make our own stargates,” Corona noted. “Then we can just make it part of the arches.”

“Good luck. Not even we’ve figured out how to build them. Very advanced.”

“Challenge accepted.”
“Someone’s coming,” Tempest said, readying her weapon. Carter and Corona looked up to see a brilliant white horse riding up to them, alongside a significantly darker one. Both had familiar riders.

Corona raised her hand to Tempest’s gun. “It’s just Zelda and Ganondorf. They probably sensed us, or something.”

“That I did,” Zelda said, gracefully dismounting. “Seeing as you probably haven’t been here long, it was likely a premonition.”

“Must be nice, knowing what’s going to happen,” Corona said.

“Bit of a curse, really,” Zelda said, looking at her hand. “…It’s rather selective about what it shows me. Makes it untrustworthy.”

Carter blinked. “It?”

“The Triforce of Wisdom.” Zelda said, holding out her hand and revealing a triangular glow shining on it. “It shows me things and improves my judgment considerably.”

“…What exactly is it?” Carter asked.

“An ancient relic created by the goddesses,” Zelda said. “Legends state that when they created the world, they created the Triforce to keep it balanced. Three separate parts – Courage, Wisdom, and Power. The parts tend to seek out those who personify them most, though when brought together it can apparently grant a wish.”

Ganondorf held up his hand and smirked. “Power, here.”

“Link has the Triforce of Courage,” Zelda revealed.

“Does that mean you guys can make wishes?” Tempest asked.

“We could…” Zelda said. “But then the Triforce would split and be lost once again. For now, we just reap the benefits of each individual piece.” She frowned. “I would appreciate you not reveal this to my people. If they knew all three pieces of the Triforce were available, they would demand a wish.”

“Understandable,” Corona admitted.

“Also, try not to put your portals out in the open like this,” Zelda said. “People will start asking questions.”

Carter blinked. “…Why do you need to keep it secret from them? Ba’al already attacked, blowing the secret wide open.”

Ganondorf grunted. “Nobody officially knows where Ba’al came from. Most think he’s an alien, which he is, but know nothing of another universe. The town that did, Termina, was mostly destroyed. Those of us who did know agreed not to reveal it publicly because there would be an outcry and probably war.”

“War…?” Corona said.

Zelda nodded. “The nations of Ardent do not get along. We are not the Elemental Nations, nor are we Earth. Being transparent would be disastrous.”

Corona wasn’t sure about this. She fixed Zelda with an unsure glance. “What do you think’s going
to happen when they find out you’ve been lying to them?”

“It will be revealed at such a time when retaliation would be minimal, if at all,” Zelda affirmed, turning to Tempest. “As I recall, your world has been hiding the existence of magic for millennia.”

Tempest nodded. “That’s right…”

“Why can we not do the same? Blame the attack on aliens and demons, and move on.”

Ganondorf chuckled. “The words of someone about to bite it.”

“If I am about to bite it, you are as well, for you are in on it,” she spat.

Ganondorf shrugged, saying nothing further.

Corona glanced at the portal behind her. “Well, I suppose you’re right. We probably should close it then and respect your wishes. See you around.”

“Likewise,” Zelda said, bowing slightly.

“By the way…” Corona said, looking back. “…do you know anything about a weird mask salesman who calls himself the Happy Mask Salesman?”

Zelda looked at her with a confused expression. “No… Should I?”

Corona shrugged. “I don’t know. He lives in your world, and he’s got something mysterious about him. Maybe you should ask Link.”

Ganondorf folded his arms. “Yeah. Ask Link. Like he’ll be easy to get ahold of.”

“…He’s not here?”

“No. For whatever goddess-forsaken reason, he’s gone and hitched a ride on the Apollo and has been there for the last few weeks as far as we know.”

“The Apollo’s not exactly hard to find,” Carter said.

Zelda nodded. “Admittedly not. That said, being in the right place at the right time is not worth it if we only need to ask him one thing. I’m just letting him do what he wants for now, he’ll come back eventually. It’s not like he’s really doing anything that important. He’ll return when the world needs him.”

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“We are not any closer to finding Majora’s Mask.”

Link glanced at his shadow. “Midna, we know Ba’al has it.”

Midna popped out of his shadow, settling her impish self on his shoulder, twirling her glowing orange-red hair around like she was trying to make a point. “And that’s all we know! And how much closer are we to finding out where he has it hidden?”

“Not much,” Link admitted. “But these people are our only lead.”

Midna yawned. “Didn’t they admit to thinking Ba’al was defeated until he invaded Ardent?”
“Yes. But they still know more about him than we do. How he thinks. What he’s likely to do.”

“But, alas, we can’t exactly just ask where they think he’d hide something, can we? That’d be too obvious.”

“Knowledge of the mask is dangerous. You know that.”

Midna bit her lip. She did in fact know that. She knew of the mask, and she heard it calling to her in her sleep sometimes. Though lately it just laughed. “True. But you and I both know that this ship isn’t just hunting Ba’al, it’s doing other things. For instance, what have we been doing all day?”

“Diplomacy.”

“Right. Diplomacy. The most boring of all boring things where no bad-guy hunting takes place. Ever.”

Link shrugged. “It is necessary though. It is gracious enough that we are allowed to stay on this starship, and engage in the hunt when it does happen.”

“That’s another thing. We keep rooting out Ba’als, but they never tell us what we need to know. Where the mask is. Something tells me they don’t just keep it on their mobile mothership.”

“But they probably do move it around,” Link said. “Which does make it a big problem. Ba’al is clever, and after his first mistake of charging headfirst, he’s biding his time. He’s smart.”

“Eventually, however…”

Link grimaced. “I’d prefer that we find the mask before that happens. It makes him easier to find, but more dangerous.”

Midna nodded. “Yep. Mixed blessings all around. What I’m saying is that we need a new plan.”

Link raised an eyebrow. “How so?”

“We’re out here in the multiverse, right? Surely there’s something here we can use to find it. Or even defeat Majora once and for all!”

Link shook his head. “Then we’d have to ask questions. And questions lead to questions in return.”

“Zelda could probably find it…”

“We are not giving her knowledge of it,” Link said, standing up suddenly.

“You know I could go ask her without your permission.”

“You won’t.”

Midna sighed. “Fine. Find some other prophet-type to find it.”

“Too dangerous.”

“Well if you aren’t willing to use anything, are we just going to let it all explode in a shower of deranged laughter and chaos?”

Link smirked. “No. We have time, for now.”
“Sure we do.”

“We’ll collect what we can from here,” Link said, leaving the room. “And we can use what we find. Just like old times.”

“Another grand adventure!” Midna cheered, a bit too intensely to be serious. She vanished back into his shadow as he left. “Just remember, we’re on a nonspecific timetable here. Could be next week he loses it, could be next year. Maybe even longer, if he’s smart enough. But he won’t last forever.”

Link nodded, walking down the halls of the Apollo to the bridge. His plans were to see how much longer it’d be before O’Neill was done with the diplomacy and could order the Apollo somewhere else.

It turned out that O’Neill was already done, since he was sitting in the captain’s chair with a slight smirk on his face. Someone Link didn’t recognize was next to him.

“Ah, Link! Just talking about you,” O’Neill said, waving him over. “This here is Director Storm, the only sane person on this round rock we’re orbiting.”

Link looked Director Storm up and down. He wasn’t sure what he thought of the tall man. “I’m Link, though I guess you already know that.”

Director Storm shook his hand, smirking. “Indeed I do! I hear you’re quite the classic adventuring hero, aren’t you? Saved your world from a great evil, saved it again from alien invasion, and now are seeking to save multiple universes from the same aliens! Truly, an epic man on an epic quest!”

Link felt like he was being buttered up. “Do you want something?”

“Me? No. Well, besides having you on my good side. I’m sure you can guess why.”

Link nodded. “Yeah. Of course, that makes me a tad suspicious.”

Storm threw his hands into the air. “Ah, what can I do? I hear you’re quite the classic adventuring hero, aren’t you? Saved your world from a great evil, saved it again from alien invasion, and now are seeking to save multiple universes from the same aliens! Truly, an epic man on an epic quest!”

O’Neill pointed at the Director. “This guy…”

Link nodded slowly. “So, I take it things went badly down there?”

O’Neill reclined back in the seat and put his hands over his eyes. “Their President is an absolute moron.”

“I’m sure there were other leaders there.”

“None of them were the ones I already knew, yet they were oddly similar enough that I felt like I could say certain things and everything blew up. Alternate universes – who needs ‘em?”

“Need is such a strong word,” Director Storm said.

O’Neill gave Director Storm a look that was torn between amusement and annoyance. Director Storm just smirked.

Link turned back to O’Neill. “Are we ready to get back on our mission?”

Director Storm nodded, as if he were expecting this. “Always eager to get back to the mission, to return to what must be done.”
O’Neill put his chin in his hand. “Well, seeing as we accomplished nothing down there, I’m ready to be done with politics for a while. Storm, you’re going back down. Don’t die from political suffocation.”

“Likewise,” Storm said, smirking.

O’Neill pressed a button on the intercom. “Beam Storm back down. And this time don’t interfere with a weather satellite, I don’t want to sit through that soul-wrenching discussion again.”

Soon, Storm was gone, leaving just the regular bridge crew and Link.

“Any leads?” Link asked.

“We had to extract one from a senator within the last twenty-four hours.” O’Neill sat up straight, grimacing. “He’s trying to get a hold on everyone we’re connected to. He doesn’t seem to be able to infect ponies, though.”

“Gorons? Zora? Binaries?”

“No idea. We’ve found nothing but human cases. But he’s spreading. The Elemental Nations lack the infrastructure to root him out so he’s probably everywhere there. We only caught one with the Goa’uld sensors installed in the Hub. He’s moving around carefully. No more information about his mothership, and none of the clones can tell you where it is because it keeps moving.”

“They must have some way to contact it.”

“It seems like it contacts them somehow. But I don’t know for the life of me how he’s pulling that off. I like to think we’d have caught a message by now…”

Majora…? No, there’s no way he’s advanced that far along. There’d be signs. Link shook his head. “Do we have anything on him?”

“Besides evidence of him spreading? No. He’s just being too damn careful…” O’Neil clenched his fist. “I don’t like being outmaneuvered, Link. Yet he always seems to find a way to weasel out of final defeat… Always. He’s like a zombie plague.”

“…A what?”

“Nevermind,” O’Neill shook his head. “Let’s think about something less depressing. Like ponies. We’re going to the main pony world.”

Link raised an eyebrow. “Is Ba’al there?”

“No. Not as far as we know anyway. What is there is that Ha’tak that’s going to launch today. We’re going to be there in case it blows up so we can save every little pony on board.”

“…I see…”

O’Neill sighed. “Look, I know you want to go guns blazing and hunt Ba’al down, but it’s just not that simple. He’s hiding. We don’t know where he is. We don’t have any leads that will take us to the mothership. Unless you’ve got something that can just tell us where he is, then we’re stumped until he makes a mistake.”

“Triforce of Wisdom…” Midna whispered from Link’s shadow.

O’Neill blinked, looking around. “What was that?”
“What was what?” Link said, managing to hide his frustration at Midna.

“…I’m hallucinating noises in my old age…” O’Neill muttered. “Anyway, take us to… What are we calling it now? Equis Vitis? What does that even mean?”

“Equis Vine, I think. Sir,” one of the crew said.

“And what does Equis mean?”

“Something to do with horses.”

O’Neill shrugged. “Sometimes I marvel at how literal their names are. Anyway, take us there.”

The Apollo’s drive activated the dimensional device, cutting a circular hole through the fabric of space. The ship passed right through without incident, appearing in orbit around Equis, both the moon and miniature sun visible from the bridge.

“Love this place. The sun orbits the planet,” O’Neill rubbed his hands together. “Tell them we’re ready.”

The communications officer frowned. “They’re not. Apparently there’s some technical difficulties that arose. They’re suggesting we wait a few hours.”

Link abruptly left the room, heading back to his given quarters. He was going to try and take a nap. Operative word being try.

Midna chuckled. O’Neill grunted about hearing things again.

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Luna and Celestia were walking down the halls of the Hub, surprised to see that already a few of the rooms had been occupied. They were even more surprised that some of them weren’t embassies.

“We’re creating a culture here faster than I was anticipating…” Celestia mused. “Apparently everyone had plans and was just waiting for it to become official.”

“And yet, still no signed accords,” Luna said. “The Binaries refuse to be reasonable and the ponies of Lai just don’t care. No offense to my counterpart intended, but she could stand to get her ponies more organized.”

Celestia smirked. “Luna, really, who cares about that now? So what if we’re not really in an official alliance. Friendship with paperwork always means less, know what I mean?”

“I do, sister, I do. But I also know that humans love loopholes and exploits. Not to mention Ba’al…”

“Ba’al is a force of darkness,” Celestia said. “He is our collective enemy. And, as of now, the only one. In many ways, having an opposing force brings ponies closer together.”

“Never let anypony hear you say that. Or anyone.”

Celestia smirked. “I know. Not all can see things from our perspective. In fact, few can. How many immortals have we found out there that aren’t just versions of us?”

“…A few. The Spectacularium. The Ascended.”

“The point is a human could easily count the number of them on their fingers.”
“Well the Ascended are a race…”

“Luna, you’re being nitpicky again.”

Luna raised an eyebrow. “Sometimes you need to examine all the details.”

“I do not think that is now. And – oh would you look at that. It’s Twilight.”

Luna raised her eyebrow. “Isn’t she with the ship?”

“Sparky, Luna.” Celestia gestured at one of the rooms that had been clearly furnished into a shop called Earth Gizmos. Human Twilight was inside, sorting strange rectangular devices into and out of boxes. “Let’s pay her a visit, hrn?”

The two strode into the little shop, and nobody inside noticed them at first. Twilight was busy scrambling around, freaking out about how this totally wasn’t going to work, and everyone else was watching her. Celestia took a moment to recognize everyone, but eventually she worked it out. Micro Chips, Sandalwood, Lyra, and Principal Celestia.

“Hello,” Princess Celestia said, smirking.

“Ah!” the Principal said. “I was wondering when we’d get to meet!”

Twilight stopped in her tracks, turning her head around slowly until she faced Princess Celestia. “P-P-princess! What are- Why- Wha?”

Micro Chips hid behind Sandalwood while Lyra just started scribbling furiously in her notebook. Princess Celestia found the antics of the humans amusing. “I just saw you and decided to drop in. As a friend.”

“But we’re not ready yet!” Twilight blurted.

“Ready for what?”

Principal Celestia smirked. “This is the ‘group project’ of the dimensional explorer’s club. Every club in my school has to accomplish something beyond having fun by the end of the year, and that is quickly approaching, so they’re in a bit of a panic. They’re going to operate a shop in the Hub and sell…” ‘Earth Gizmos’, and learn about economic processes while they do it. A wonderful learning opportunity!”

Princess Celestia nodded. “And what exactly are these Earth Gizmos?”

Everyone looked to Micro Chips. He cleared his throat. “This is the ‘group project’ of the dimensional explorer’s club. Every club in my school has to accomplish something beyond having fun by the end of the year, and that is quickly approaching, so they’re in a bit of a panic. They’re going to operate a shop in the Hub and sell… ‘Earth Gizmos’, and learn about economic processes while they do it. A wonderful learning opportunity!”

Princess Celestia nodded. “And what exactly are these Earth Gizmos?”

Everyone looked to Micro Chips. He cleared his throat. “Well, those of us on Earth h-happen to, uh, have a love of technology. We, er, well, figured since you don’t have it, we’d be able to do pretty well in selling it to you. Yeah. We’ve got TVs, computers, and other similar things. And we’ve also got a lot of entertainment – game consoles, movies, TV shows, and videos you can normally only see on the Internet. B-bringing a bit of our world to the others, if they want it.”

“I know of a few ponies who would love all these things,” Princess Celestia mused, taking a look around at the half-stocked shop. “How could you afford all this? My understanding is these devices aren’t exactly cheap.”

“Rarity’s family is stinking rich and Micro’s dad works at Best Buy,” Lyra offered. “We don’t have a lot of stuff, but what we do have will give us a start.”
“And how are you going to power it?” Luna asked, looking at all the places cables needed to be stuck in on a flatscreen TV. “Not everyone is the masterful unicorn Starlight is, able to convert magic directly into electricity. And those areas of our world that do have electricity won’t have the same outlets.”

“I’ve got outlet adaptors!” Twilight said, opening up a box filled with rectangles that would stick into a pony wall socket and turn it into an earth outlet. “Also, we’ve got a way to give you at least some electricity. See, in the back we’ve got…”

A light blue unicorn marched out of the back room and slammed a tray of softly-glowing cylinders on a counter. “The Great and Powerful Trixie has created another batch!”

Princess Celestia blinked. “…Trixie?”

Trixie looked up. “Yes, who wants to know-“ her arrogant expression vanished. “PRINCESS CELESTIA!”

Princess Celestia nodded. “Yes. What are you doing here?”

“Well Trixie’s helping out some friends make magic batteries! Yep! Just like at the power plant!”

Celestia raised an eyebrow. “You’ve worked at the power plant?”

“It was slightly better than the rock farm,” Trixie muttered, then shoved a hoof over her mouth. “I mean, not that rock farmers aren’t worthwhile, I’m sure they’re excellent ponies, it’s just that I found the power plant work more rewarding. Yes. Heheh.”

Luna snickered, turning away from Trixie and her power-enchanted cylinders, focusing instead on a shelf lined with many green rectangular cases. She took one off and popped it open, finding a disc inside. “…What is this?”

“Video game, for one of those consoles,” Micro said. “I think in that one you play a girl who wants to collect hats and hourglasses. Or something. I haven’t played it.”

“It looks adorable,” Luna said. “…I think I’ll take it. And whatever you need to play it. See if these ‘games’ are any better than our little arcades.”

“That’ll be a console, the game, and a screen,” Sandalwood said, grabbing what she needed right then and there. “That’ll be eight-hundred seventy-eight dollars. And in bits that’ll be-“

“We can’t charge the Princess!” Twilight shouted.

“Yes, you can,” Luna said, conjuring up a Royal Treasury Note. “How much in bits?”

“Seven-hundred and twenty-six,” Sandalwood said, taking the Note as soon as Luna wrote the value on it. “You are now the proud owner of a gaming system. It comes with a few games already installed on it, since it was used before. Hope you enjoy!”

Luna smirked. “We shall see. I doubt I’ll get that into it, though.”

Princess Celestia was mildly impressed that Sandalwood had worked out a conversion rate already. All they’d done previously was assume the value of the bit based on its construction from gold, nothing else. “I see you’ve all got this well under control. I’d expect a lot of traffic in this little shop of yours, assuming other people don’t have the same idea.”
Principal Celestia shrugged. “I think they’ll do fine.”

“Yeah! You’ve got Trixie helping you!” Trixie raised her hoof into the air.

“…Do you want to be paid now or something?” Twilight asked her.

“Uh… Yes please.”

Twilight took a box of peanut butter crackers out of a nearby box and handed them to Trixie. She grabbed them and grinned. “Trixie now has an entire box of the best snack in existence!”

Princess Celestia blinked. “…I suppose money isn’t everything.”

“Definitely not,” Twilight agreed. “Anything else we can do for you two?”

“Not now, no. We may be back though. So prepare yourselves.”

“We will!” Sandalwood said, giving them a thumbs up. The two princesses left the store with their items.

Celestia smirked. “I expect you’ll be up all night playing that thing.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Oh? Don’t remember losing sleep so many nights because you’d found a good book?”

Luna flushed. “I’m significantly older and wiser now, sister. Such things won’t affect me anymore.”

Celestia leaned closer to her sister and grinned.

“…Affect me as much.”

Celestia leaned even closer, raising her eyebrows.

“Are you just trying to make me uncomfortable.”

“If I am, is it working?”

Luna sighed. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but let’s talk about politics again.”

“You know we can’t drop this now.”

“...Celestiaaaaaaa…”

Celestia chuckled. It was always fun, messing around with her sister. It was their little ritual. Something they could no longer do with many other ponies due to their position. Just a sad fact of life.

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Applejack held up a glass bottle of apple cider in her hoof. “Ready?”

“Ready!” Princess Twilight called over.

“Throw it already AJ!” Rainbow Dash begged.

Applejack hefted the bottle and threw it as hard as she could. It flew far into the air, spinning through
it in a perfect arc. It smashed against something hard and metallic, spraying glass and cider everywhere.

“I declare the Equestrian Starfinder spaceworthy!” Twilight shouted, for once using the Royal Canterlot Voice so everypony could hear. Applause – both with hands and hooves – filled the air around the Starfinder. What was once a brutalized and broken Ha’tak was now a shimmering pyramid of a largely white color, covered in pink and purple magical runes that glowed softly, giving the ship the illusion of life.

Pinkie Pie pressed a button and confetti exploded from all sides of the Starfinder, down its pearly sides and onto the ground in a colorful blanket. “WOOHOO!” She shouted.

Starlight smirked, ready to give the gathered crowd a show. She lit her horn, activating the pre-programmed test flight response. The Starfinder’s engines activated for the first time in months, encasing the bottom of the ship in a brilliant purple fire. It floated several stories into the air and then stopped, holding position far above the crowd. There were many ‘oooh’s and ‘aaaaaaah’s, mainly from the ponies who had come to see the show, rather than the humans who’d helped work on it.

“Ponies of Equestria! Our first starship is ready to explore the Stars! Wish us luck on our outing!” With a quick spell, Twilight teleported herself and her seven friends onto the bridge, which was still the same as the default Ha’tak bridge, golden and a bit excessive. They hadn’t had time to paint the interior. “Okay, now I can stop talking like that. Gak.” She rubbed her throat. “Never like it.”

“You sounded great,” Spike said, giving her a thumbs up.

“I agree. I think,” Fluttershy said, unaware that her ears were still folded back on her skull.

Twilight turned to Applejack and Rainbow Dash. “Glad you two could make it today. We’ve… We’ve missed you.”

Rainbow Dash grinned. “I wouldn’t miss this for the world! I mean, come on, the first spaceship we get flying without Rainbow Dash? Tell me that doesn’t sound crazy!”

“It doesn’t sound crazy,” Starlight said, smirking.

“Ladies and gentleponies, introducing Sarcasm Glimmer,” Rainbow Dash muttered.

“I’d call that more deadpan.”

Applejack chuckled softly. “Glad to be here as well, Twi. Not as invested as Dash over there, but Ah figure it’s been long enough since Ah’ve joined ya. When was the last time?”

Fluttershy raised a hoof. “The Tree of Harmony asked us to calm down a dispute between the demons and the swamp tribe.”

“Ah. Right, that,” Applejack said. “Ah don’t remember that very well.”

“It wasn’t very memorable.”

Rainbow Dash grabbed her head. “Can we get moving already? We’ve got a spaceship to fly!”

Twilight laughed. “Sure, Rainbow Dash, sure.” She tapped one of the consoles in front of her with a hoof, telling the Starfinder to rise into orbit. Rainbow Dash’s grin only grew as she saw Equis get smaller and smaller on the screen in front of them. “Yessssssss!”
“Hey. Incoming message,” Spike said, pointing at a flashing green light.

Twilight smirked. “Accept the call, ensign Spike!”

“Oh, so we’re all part of a bridge crew now, is that it?”

Twilight rolled her eyes. “Just put it on screen.”

O’Neill’s face quickly lit up the board. “Well, you’re pretty lucky. It took us several years before we managed to get a full blown spaceship.”

“Well, you did build the Prometheus more or less from scratch, right?” Rarity said.

“Eh. More or less. Anyway, we have a teleport lock on all… sixty of you in that ship. If something goes wrong we’ll have you out. It might be a tight fit though.”

Twilight shrugged. “Hey, if the ship blows up, I’d much rather live in a tightly compressed transporter room than explode out here in space.”

“When you put it that way it doesn’t sound so bad.”

Rainbow Dash blinked. “What part, the exploding, or the cramped space?”

“Does it matter?” Applejack asked.

Pinkie giggled. “Oxymoron.”

O’Neill facepalmed. “You’re still on about that?”

“I’m always on about everything.”

“…It’s hard to argue with that.”

Twilight chuckled. “Anyway, Starlight, set a course for Proximus. ETA… Four minutes.”

“Right awa-“

There was a flash of silvery light. Instead of Discord appearing, like half the ponies were expecting, it was an elderly gray unicorn with an impressive beard. His large, pointed hat jingled as he shook his head. “My Stars, that was a difficult teleport…”

Twilight’s jaw dropped. “S-Starswirl!? What are-“

“You’re going to visit a Star. I have a particular one in mind I want answers from. I would have appreciated being informed prior to launch.”

“Nopony knows where to find you half the time!”

Starswirl scratched his beard. “Fair enough. I won’t hold anything against you. But I have a long overdue conversation with Malat, and it looks like you have the ship to get me there. …If you don’t mind.”


“Yes, much faster than the hibernation I was expecting.”

O’Neill raised a hand. “Who’s the old guy?”
“Starswirl,” Twilight said. “The greatest mage in all of Equestria’s history. Also apparently has an overdue conversation with a particular Star. Trained Celestia and Luna. And… Well…”

“Needs to learn a thing or two about politeness,” Rarity muttered.

“That wasn’t very polite, Rarity,” Starswirl shot back.

“Touché.”

O’Neill shrugged. “Okay then, not going to ask any more. You ponies ready or not?”

“Actually, don’t we need to check the weapon?” Pinkie said. “We’ve never fired it.”

“Right,” Twilight said. “Spike, fire it into space.”

The main cannon of the Starfinder lit up, fusing the normal golden energy of the Ha’tak cannon with magics that made it significantly more potent. The purple energy bolt shot out of the Starfinder with perfect cohesion.

Then it hit the moon.

Twilight turned to Starlight, panicked. “Engage!”

Starlight facehoofed. “That sounds stupid, Twilight.”


“Oh, so I need a different line then?” Twilight rolled her eyes. “Just activate the hyperdrive before Luna gets here!”

Starlight pressed a screen with her hoof and the Starfinder shot into hyperspace. They had expected the hyperspace effect to be different – the Apollo had already reported that the color pattern was different in every universe – but this was far from what they were expecting. It was rainbow, with a larger quantity of pink and purple than any other color. The colors were bright, but also calming. The vortex could hardly be called a vortex, for it wasn’t violent. It was just a hypnotic swirl of color.


Twilight turned to look at Starswirl, trying her best not to let her annoyance be obvious. “Okay, Starswirl, I know you’ve saved Equestria a lot and all, and I know we owe a lot to you, but I still want to know why we’re going to Malat.”

“She’s a Star I had a conversation with long ago,” Starswirl said. “What about? Many things, but of chief importance was the nature of the Harmony forces. The moment I asked about what I and the other pillars represented, she fell silent. She wasn’t the most helpful voice of the heavens to begin with, but that was unheard of.”

“Wait, how many Stars have you talked to?” Starlight wondered.

“Dozens. It is my special talent, after all.”

“Oh,” Twilight said. “…That makes sense, actually.”

“Why wouldn’t it? Did you think I was just good at crafting spells, or something?”

Starlight raised a hoof. “Does this mean I’m related to Stars in some way then?”
“Probably not.”

“Wow. Dreamcrusher, right there.”

Starswirl shrugged. “Sorry, just not likely. I’ve been contacting them with spells since I was a foal. Most won’t listen. Some listen often, but don’t respond. Others respond but just don’t care. Malat was somewhere in the middle. Thought herself high and mighty but wasn’t above ‘messing’ with ponies.”

Starlight turned to Twilight. “Why did we need to wait for a spaceship to get answers? We could have just talked to Starswirl.”

“Nopony ever knows where he is, Starlight, how would we have found him?”

Rarity raised an eyebrow at Twilight. “Just blow up something in the vicinity of the Tree of Harmony. It’ll work wonders.”

“Please refrain from doing that,” Starswirl said, looking straight ahead, into the vortex. “Most interesting… Perhaps I should read some books on the subject of this ‘hyperdrive’.”

Twilight smiled. “They are pretty interesting. It works by accessing a sub-framework in reality where laws of nature can be superseded, an odd concept that I wouldn’t have thought possible, but here it is.”

“Peculiar. How would such a sub-framework be accessed without prior knowledge of its existence?”

“I have no idea! Every hyperdrive seems to have been based off another one!”

“They’re eggheading. Oh no,” Rainbow Dash moaned.

“It’s what their kind do,” Starlight said. “They’re basically marvelling over the fact that hyperdrive should be impossible to invent.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Applejack said.

“Exactly what I told Twilight,” Spike said, “but did she listen?”

“Nooooo!” Starlight droned.

Twilight shot them all a look. “I’m trying to have an educated conversation here.”

“We’re going to be there in a couple minutes, Twi!” Pinkie said. “How are you going to have a big conversation in that much time?”

“I don’t know, actually.”

“I know some time distortion spells,” Starswirl offered.

“No.” Both Twilight and Starlight said.

“…I feel as if I’m missing some context here.”

“I used your time spells and almost destroyed everything,” Starlight said. “Remember?”

“No.”
Fluttershy held up a wing. “Er… Can we all play a little nicer now? It seems like all we’re doing right now is yelling back and forth, sometimes excited, sometimes angry…”

“We’re all on an emotional high!” Pinkie shouted. “Come on Fluttershy, we’re on a starship! How could you POSSIBLY stay CALM at a time like THIS??”

“…Practice.”

Rarity shrugged. “Makes as much sense as anything else that’s been said in the last few minutes.”

“And how,” Spike muttered. “There’s just too many ponies here trying to get in on everything.”

Pinkie shrugged. “A nine-way conversation is a bit much. Even I have trouble keeping track of everypony!”

“And dragon,” Spike said.

“Yes, and dragon.”

Twilight shrugged. “Anyway, trying to reign this in… We’re going to Malat to learn more about the Stars. …Which apparently we could have asked Starswirl about, but we’re doing it anyway because we had the ship all ready to go. He has some questions to bring to Malat about previous conversations, and uh… I guess we head back after that with a successful mission. Or failure, if she doesn’t want to talk. …Wait, Stars have gender?”

“Their voices do, anyway. At least when I spoke with them,” Starswirl said.

“Are they biological beings in any way? Do they have a culture? Are-“

“I have no idea about any of the questions you are about to ask and Malat will not answer those questions. They prefer to be selectively secretive.”

“Ah have a question,” Applejack said. “How can they see us while we’re in Equestria if they’re so gosh darn far away?”

Starswirl blinked. “That remains a mystery to this day.”

“Something to figure out then!” Twilight clapped her hooves. “Oh I can’t wait!”

It turned out that she could wait a few more minutes. The Starfinder eventually dropped out of hyperspace next to the star Malat, a red dwarf star that was still hundreds of times larger than Equis itself, brimming with red power.

Twilight blinked. “Well, I was going to try a broadcast spell, but… Starswirl? How’d you do it?”

“Well I used rituals back on Equis. But there’s no need for that. HEY! MALAT! I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR ME!”

The sudden shouting made Fluttershy cover her ears and wince.

There was no response from Malat.

“MALAAAAT!” Starswirl yelled. “We’re RIGHT on your DOORSTEP, I know you can’t ignore that!”

Silence.
“Oh, giving me the SILENT TREATMENT, huh? Is that your strategy now? Just refuse to talk like a spoiled brat.”

This evoked a response. The red sphere before them shook, flaring in brightness for a moment. “STARSWIRL, YOU SHOULD NOT HAVE COME HERE.”

“Oh look, deflecting,” Starswirl muttered. “Malat, listen, we never finished our conversation-“

“IT IS NOT FOR YOU TO KNOW, STOP ASKING.”

“Where did the Harmony forces come from?”

“TWILIGHT SPARKLE, IT IS A PLEASURE.”

“Are you just ignoring me?”

No response.

Twilight gulped and bowed. “Uh, it’s a pleasure to meet you as well, Malat.”

“WE’VE BEEN WATCHING YOU FOR A WHILE.”

“Really?” Twilight echoed. “Why?”

“Malat this is trying my patience!” Starswirl shouted.

“TWILIGHT, YOU ARE THE ELEMENT OF MAGIC, ONE OF THE MOST DESTINY-DRIVEN BEINGS ON YOUR ENTIRE PLANET. YOU ARE WATCHED CLOSELY SIMPLY BECAUSE YOU ARE CENTRAL. MANY HOPED YOU WOULD DISCOVER HOW TO CHANNEL OUR VOICES.”

“That’s… Great! What did you want to talk about?”

Starswirl grabbed his beard. “How does she do this? Why does she do this to me?”

Pinkie patted him on the back. “There there, it’ll all be fine Starswirl…”

“OH, YOU MISUNDERSTAND TWILIGHT. I WAS TALKING ABOUT US AS A WHOLE. THE GROUP OF STARS. I DON’T CARE ABOUT YOU AT ALL. THEY’D JUST BE DISPLEASED IF I DIDN’T INFORM YOU.”

Twilight cocked her head. “Uh… Okay?”

Starswirl facehooved. “Oh great Harmony, here we go…”

“You are pathetic little fleshbags. You are nothing to us. Your only purpose is to distract us from more important things.”

“There it is!” Starswirl shouted. “Happy now Malat?”

“This entire exchange just makes me feel guilty for some reason,” Fluttershy commented.

Rarity rolled her eyes. “It just makes me feel disappointed that so many ponies worship these beings.”

Starlight took in a deep breath, and then breathed out. “Okay Starlight, just because this one’s a jerk
doesn’t mean all of them are…”

“YES, GO TALK TO SIRIUS, I’M SURE HE’LL BE NICER. ALSO QUIETER. SEE, THE NICER ONES TALK LESS, BECAUSE APPARENTLY HEARING FROM US DRIVES YOU SLOWLY INSANE.”

Rainbow Dash looked at Starswirl. “Hrm… That would explain a lot…”

Starswirl shot her a look. She slapped her hooves over her mouth and blushed.

Twilight shook her head. “Is everything we do pointless to you?”

“Yes. Or, well, it used to be. Apparently you’ve gone and done something that has even the ones that don’t care looking at you. Dimensional travel.”

“What? That’s what it took to grab your attention?” Starswirl shouted. As usual, Malat acted like Starswirl didn’t exist.

Rarity spoke up instead. “What does your kind think of it?”

“We highly advise you cease immediately. You see – why is your reactor core charging up?”

“…What?” Twilight said.

“Your energy levels are spiking dangerously.”

It was at that moment the Starfinder’s alarms went off.

A second later a purple explosion shook the entire ship, blowing off a chunk of the bottom, shaking everything out of alignment. The Starfinder tumbled end over end through space, tumbling toward Malat at high speeds.

Malat would have blinked were she able to. “…That’s going to interfere with my corona.”

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Pinkie Pie the Sage approached the Hub again, mask on her face. Some of them may have sensed her coming, though they didn’t know what she was. Plus, the magic she had in her was a holy magic, nobody would think holy magic was dangerous. Not even those badly named ‘demons’ would come to that conclusion.

She knew this. For certain. Was it her oculus powers or something else? Did it really matter? She just knew.

She also knew that now was the perfect time to strike. The Hub wasn’t as crowded as it had been when the Portal opened. People were moving into the many divisions, and everything was falling into routine. A routine she was going to royally screw up.

She took a deep breath. “Okay…” Her knowledge of what was to come did not make her any less nervous about the events soon to take place. It would be intense, powerful, and very dangerous. Just because she knew didn’t mean she couldn’t change it by screwing up. And that was what she feared – a bad judgment call on her part.
As an oculus, the first thing you learned about your eyes is that, even though they show you what is to happen, or what is hidden, you also have to know that nothing is certain. By being able to see more of what is to come than any other pony, you are ironically cursed to live a life of less certainty in many areas.

The curse of the oculi.

She put a hoof on her mask and walked in.

She hoped they wouldn’t scream all that much.
Twilight lifted her head as the lights flickered back on. “Wha… What happened?” She rubbed her head – she’d fallen over and hit it on a console. It was definitely going to leave a bruise.

“Uh…” Starlight sifted through images on the console, trying her best to actually understand what was on there. “…I think the hyperdrive blew up. Halfway. Or something.”

“Is everypony okay!?”

“Same amount of life signatures on board. Apparently everyone got out of the reactor room in time…”

“Did they at least try to fix it?” Applejack asked.

“How should I know? I wasn’t looking before the alarms started blaring!”

Twilight took a deep breath to calm herself. “Starlight, Applejack, Pinkie, Spike, with me. We’re going to check out the hyperdrive, see what the damage is. Rest of you… I guess stay with Malat.”

“I CAN TALK TO YOU ANYWHERE IN THE SHIP. I HAVE BEEN TALKING TO A CERTAIN GRIFFON WHO IS NOW HAVING AN EXISTENTIAL CRISIS. VERY SATISFACTORY.”

Starlight winced. Twilight wanted to take a moment to talk to her, but there were more pressing matters to deal with. Namely the giant hole that had just been blown in the ship.

“NOT TO MENTION THAT YOU’RE FALLING TOWARDS ME. THAT’LL BE PRETTY CRISPY.”

Twilight’s eyes widened. “Er… Are maneuvering thrusters still working?”

Spike looked at a console. “Yep.”

“Get us into a stable orbit.”

“Done.”

“All right then, that was easy.” She lit her horn and teleported five of them to the hallway outside engineering. A dozen humans and ponies were sitting on this side of the doorway, breathing heavily.

“Twilight!” One of the humans said – Janus, she recalled – “Thank God, I thought we were goners!”

“We would be goners if I hadn’t patched that hole,” a unicorn by the name of Craft Box said. “You have any idea how much energy’s stored in this thing?”

Janus nodded vigorously.

“What happened?” Twilight asked. “What made it explode?”

“Indeterminate,” Craft Box said. “The hole wasn’t the only problem, I can tell you that.”

“Sabotage!” Another human shouted, one by the name of Gilles. “There’s no way that thing just
blew up without some external force!”

“Who’d do that?” Starlight asked.

Applejack fixed Starlight with a look. “Ah’m not that involved, and Ah can tell you the options. Ba’al, Ba’al, or Ba’al.”

Twilight sighed. “Right… I’m going to have to screen all of you. This could take some time and may feel a little weird.” She lit her horn and focused a spell on Gilles, scanning the insides of his neck. It took a few seconds for her to get a clear picture of the spinal column, but she saw no Goa’uld snake on it. Then she moved to Jones.

Janus raised his hands into the air in surrender before she even started. “All right, fine, you got me.”

“Wait, what?” One of the Engineering ponies said, eyes widening. “You?”

Janus just shrugged and smirked. “I play a pretty convincing panicky idiot, don’t I?”

Twilight scanned Janus anyway to make sure. Yep. There was a Ba’al symbiote in there, affixed to the brain stem. She facehooved. “How did we miss you? We scanned everyone who came through!”

Ba’al shrugged. “Isn’t that hard to infect someone who’s already passed inspection. Just portal in, portal out, done. By the way, pleasure to meet you face to face, I don’t think any Ba’al has had the honor quite yet.”

Pinkie frowned. “You’re too happy for having been found out.”

“Why wouldn’t I be? My goal was to disable your ship. Not only have I done that, but I also stranded you all out here in the middle of nowhere. Not as good as destroying the entire ship, but, you know.”

“…You were on a suicide mission?” Pinkie blurted. “That’s not like you!”

“How do you know what’s like me?” he said, leaning back and smirking.

Starlight turned to Twilight. “Can I just probe this guy’s mind? Please?”

Twilight frowned. “It’s not—"

“Twilight, he tried to kill us. It’s less than he deserves.”

“…All right.”

Starlight’s eyes went white as she connected her mind to Ba’al’s, forcing his eyes to go white as well. The connection lasted a few seconds before Starlight removed herself from it. “He has no idea where the Mothership is, there was an escape plan but he was unaware we changed destinations to Malat instead of Proximus, so they couldn’t portal him out. His escape team has assuredly abandoned him at this point and moved to another dimension. He is of little use and…” She frowned. “Well that’s odd. Apparently they have some kind of magical artifact with them.”

“Does that help us figure out where they are?” Twilight asked.

“Nope. Just some dark magic mask.”

Ba’al frowned. “You know, it isn’t fair if you can just read people’s minds.”
“It isn’t fair to bomb a planet that has only minimal means of defense. Plus, you can teach yourself to resist it.”

“Don’t tell him that!” Pinkie shouted.

“Oh. Right.”

“He’s not going to be able to tell any of his copies though,” Twilight noted. “He’s going to be extracted from Janus and squashed.” She shivered a little at the thought that this Ba’al would soon be dead. Even if he was an abject monster, he was still alive. But he had basically declared war on them all…

Ba’al smirked. “Tentative about turning me over to them, are you? You ponies are very soft, you know. Security almost doesn’t exist, everyone gets a second chance, and you sing and dance all the time! It’s a little amusing to watch!”

“Little. Ha.” Pinkie winked, somehow sarcastically. “I see what you did there.”

Ba’al shrugged. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. We’re all stuck out here and your ship is crippled. What now?”

“We wait for the Apollo to realize something’s up,” Twilight said. “They know where we are.”

Ba’al frowned. “You sure you have enough air for that? You’ll discover soon that your air recyclers have been corrupted and that you are leaking atmosphere.”

“I can literally create more air out of the aether,” Starlight muttered. “It actually seems easier here than on Equis.”

Ba’al clearly hadn’t thought of that. His confident smirk vanished, replaced with one of annoyance. “…Well then, congratulations, this entire outing has been nothing but an annoyance to everyone involved.”

“I AGREE WITH THE GOA’ULD ON THIS CHARGE.”


“Yes,” Applejack said. “And that’s all you need to know.”

“I didn’t even need to know that. Ever consider investing in a ‘keeping secrets’ course? I’m sure it’ll be worthwhile.”

Twilight teleported Ba’al into the brig. “There we are, done with that. So done with that.”

“He’s just as infuriatin’ as everyone said he’d be,” Applejack said.

“Definitely not what I was expecting…” Starlight commented. “Seems a lot less mad supervillain and more… Clever and mischievous.”

“Still really dangerous,” Pinkie reminded them. “We can’t let him smooth talk us!”

“Yeah,” Spike said. “Anyway, think we should actually look at the drive and see if we can fix it?”

“Right,” Twilight said. She cleared her throat. “Everypony out of this section! The atmosphere is about to be vented!”
All the engineers quickly scrambled out of the hallway, leaving just four ponies and a dragon. Twilight encased them in a magic bubble and sealed all the doors shut. Then she opened the one leading to the engine room. The atmosphere in their section of hallway rushed out into the vacuum, pushing the magic bubble out into the room. They floated aimlessly since the gravity generators weren’t working, likely because there was no floor to contain them. They looked down and saw nothing but white stars and the soft red glow of Malat.

“HEY.”

“Hey,” Twilight said, looking down at Malat – or, well, what she perceived as down.

“THIS IS WHAT I WAS TALKING ABOUT EARLIER. THIS IS ONE OF THE REASONS DIMENSIONAL TRAVEL IS INADVISABLE.”

“Oh, and how’s that?” Applejack said as Starlight pushed the sphere towards the sparking hyperdrive.

“ENEMIES, ENEMIES AROUND EVERY CORNER. DESTRUCTION. ALL WHO FLY CLOSE TO THE TOP GET BURNED.”

Twilight examined the cables on the Hyperdrive. “Well, that certainly seems pessimistic,” Twilight said. “How would you know?”

“UGH. APPARENTLY I ACTUALLY GET TO TELL YOU SOMETHING. YAY. WE, THE STARS, USED TO BE A MULTIVERSAL RACE, ONE OF THE MORE POWERFUL ONES AT THAT. BUT THEN THERE WAS WAR, BROUGHT ON BY FORCES WE COULD NOT HAVE FORESEEN. AND YET, WE STILL BROUGHT IT ON OURSELVES. WHAT MY RACE WANTS TO TELL YOU IS TO STOP, TO GIVE YOU A WARNING.”

“Maybe we’ll be different!” Pinkie said. “We’re obviously quite a bit more friendly than you!”

“Plus, how could we stop now?” Twilight asked. “We’re in too deep.”

“You’re not in too deep yet. You can retreat, stop exploring, leave the dimensional work to others. Do what most other alternate Equestrias do when they encounter you – talk to travelers that come but feel no need to join them on their quest. You’ve visited well over a hundred worlds, and what, less than ten actually join you on your little exploration? Does it occur to you that maybe they’re just smarter?”

Twilight shook her head. “I don’t think so. We’re called to do this. I’m sorry, but we’re just not going to drop it.”

“CALLED BY WHAT, EXACTLY? WE ARE THE FORCES OF DESTINY IN YOUR UNIVERSE. WE ARE THE STARS.”

“The Tree of Harmony, for one,” Starlight said.

There was no response. Twilight examined the entire dimensional component of the drive in the silence.

“…Why’s she silence?”

“She wouldn’t answer Starswirl’s questions about the Harmony Forces,” Twilight reminded her. “She won’t make any comment on the Tree. So I’m going to take it to be a valid reason to keep
“Sounds good to me,” Spike said.

Starlight just frowned. “I don’t know… It’s not just Malat saying this, it’s the other Stars as well. Shouldn’t we at least consider listening to them?”

Applejack frowned. “Ah’d consider it, but Ah know y’all can’t just leave it be now. There are too many friends out there. Too many connections.”

“It’d be a betrayal in more ways than one,” Twilight admitted.

“Yeah!” Pinkie said, turning to look directly at Malat. “So guess what? We’ll take whatever horrors are coming our way! And we’ll face them together!”

“I TOLD THEM YOU’D BE STUPID. I WAS RIGHT. THANK YOU.”

“Any hints on helping us survive?” Starlight asked. “Since, you know, the Stars care?”

“NOT FROM ME, I’M DONE. ALSO, SOMEONE STICK A SOCK IN STARSWIRL’S MUZZLE. HE’S GETTING REALLY ANNOYING.”

Twilight rolled her eyes. “Not doing that.”

“I COULD DESTROY YOUR SHIP WITH A THOUGHT.”

“You won’t,” Pinkie said.

There was no response. There was no exploding either.

Twilight finally let out a loud sigh. “Drive’s completely shot. We need new parts to repair it. So we’re stuck here until someone comes and gets us. Could be a few minutes, could be a few hours. We didn’t exactly set a timetable for them.” She teleported them back into a hallway with air and removed the bubble. “So… I guess we wait then.”

“Rainbow Dash is going to go crazy,” Applejack muttered.

“You’re implying she hasn’t already gone crazy,” Pinkie said.

“Back to the bridge then?” Spike asked.

“Back to the bridge,” Twilight confirmed, teleporting them all back.

Starswirl was still yelling, but his voice was very scratchy now. “Malat! Do… Do you hear me!? I’m… I’m not going to stop until I get answers! Malat!”

Rainbow Dash grabbed Twilight’s face. “Get me out of here, this guy’s loco.”

Twilight facehooved. It was going to be a long day.

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General Sunset was trotting around the Hub, observing all the new things that were slowly forming. The embassies were truly established now, and more than a few shops had already opened their doors. She’d stopped by Earth Gizmos herself and purchased something called a ‘smartphone.’ It apparently would make calls on Earth, but for her it was only useful for taking pictures, videos, and
other such things. Its ability to store data was more than enough for her to consider it worth the price, which was pretty exorbitant. She had it though, being a General had its perks.

She had found using magic to press the screen worked far better than carefully aligning a hoof or her tail. The hoof was far too wide and her tail didn’t listen half of the time, even when she fed it that hot dog. Meat products usually kept the tail satisfied, but for whatever reason today was not one of those days.

She snapped a few pictures with the smartphone of every shop she came across, and added some notes to it every time she did. She had no doubt the Queen would want to visit the best of these shops, and this was a much better way to categorize than scroll or memory.

If Sunset was right on the money, the Queen would probably like the ‘Trinq’ the best, a shop that already had small pieces of art and sculptures from several worlds. The Queen was always fascinated by the ‘beautiful’ and ‘interesting’, something Sunset rarely understood herself, but at this point had learned to tell the Queen about.

The next shop was Arcane Academics. Judging by the sign out front, it was run by a pair of unicorn brothers who GUARANTEED that anyone could learn magic there. Sunset raised an incredulous eyebrow absentmindedly. That shop would either make a killing or get kicked out of here faster than an Arcei out of town square. …Though she wasn’t sure that metaphor applied here. They’d probably accept Arcei here. She wasn’t sure how she felt about that.

Her thoughts were interrupted by an explosion of holy white power. A nearby Embassy – that of the Binaries – exploded in a flash of white. Sunset was fairly sure nobody was inside, but that didn’t matter because the holy power was spreading, tearing apart the walls and ceiling with increasing intensity.

Sunset lit her antlers, driving her hooves into the ground and summoning the power of the scenery around her. The metallic ground vibrated with her hooves, sending out a wave that forced everything within several meters to stop moving – except the holy energy, which just kept on destroying things.

Ponies and people screamed, running away from the burst of power. A few tried to stop it – a Hylian raised some magical staff that exploded before it could do anything, and one of the demons charged and was flung back like a silly ragdoll. Alarms blared as more and more people arrived and fled, only adding to the chaos.

Sunset noticed something odd. The magic wasn’t hurting anyone. It obviously could, but it wasn’t. It seemed far more concerned with causing meaningless destruction…

A distraction.

She knew one when she saw one. Her mind went into overdrive – what would be the purpose of a distraction? What could they possibly be after in this place?

The Mirror.

She bolted, trying to scream that it was a distraction to everyone around her, but nobody was in a mood to listen. She was on her own, running toward the center of the Hub. She rushed through the large doros to the main room, horn and antlers glowing, ready for anything.

There was a version of Pinkie Pie wearing a plain white mask leaping over everyone still in the main room, beelining for the Mirror Portal by bouncing over heads. Sunset was able to register that Toph’s team was providing the most resistance, with earth, yo-yos, and fire spells being tossed around, but
the Pinkie dodged everything.

Sunset decided to put an end to that. Using her deer powers, she accessed the scenery again. This time, instead of making everything stop, she launched a perfectly rectangular slab of metal out from the ceiling into the Pinkie. The Pinkie grabbed it, twisted, and was suddenly on top of the falling slab. She used it as a springboard to approach the Mirror Portal, throwing a bean bag from nowhere into Sunset’s face at the same time.

Lieshy dove out of the sky, impacting the Pinkie from the side. Her mask slid off her face, revealing two alien blue eyes. An oculus. The Sage.

Sunset’s already high levels of anger went through the roof. She launched a bolt of blood-red flame at the Sage, but she used her mask to deflect it with some white holy shield. Vivian shot out of the ground and punched her with a flaming fist, but the fire was simply absorbed by the mask this time. Tendrils of white shot out of the Sage’s four hooves, pushing all opponents back.

“Get down here!” Toph yelled, forcing metal and earth to shoot out of the ground in the shape of a hand, grabbing the Sage by the tail. The Sage was suddenly on top of the hand. She grabbed Fef’s yo-yos before they could do anything and pulled, knocking both the demon and a few bystanders over. Lieshy swooped again only for the yo-yo to be tossed at her, tying her wings up and getting tangled in her mane.

Sunset teleported in front of the Sage, explosion spell ready, only to get a white tendril to the face. She flew right into the central column behind the Mirror Portal, the wind knocked out of her. The Sage dodged the last few rocks thrown by Toph, but was unable to dodge Bon Bon’s quick use of a grappling hook.

Sunset realized with mild horror that the Sage probably wanted to get grabbed by the grappling hook. She sailed toward Bon Bon and kicked her in the face. The mare reacted surprisingly quickly, grabbing the Sage’s midsection and piledriving her into the ground. However, being a version of Pinkie, the Sage simply didn’t care about this. She bounced right back up and blew Bon Bon into Vivian with a burst of holy energy. She tapped a button on the desk, setting the Mirror Portal to Lai.

Sunset cleared her head, trying one last time to stop the Sage from reaching the Mirror Portal. She lit her horn, creating a wall of reddish magic. The Sage did as expected – use her strange new holy mask powers to plow through the forcefield. Sunset readied the explosion spell as the Sage flew over her, ready to bring the Sage down – but a giant rock hit Sunset in the face.

“Great, I hit the wrong pony,” Toph muttered. She readied another rock, but it was too late.

The Sage leaped toward the Mirror Portal, a white tendril of energy snaking behind her. She bounced through, using the white tendril to grab a hold of the green diamond at the last possible moment and drag it through with her. The Mirror Portal lost power a second after the green diamond was removed, just enough for it to pass through the boundary between worlds as well.

Bon Bon blinked. “…She just took the diamond.”

Sunset took out her dimensional device, sneering. “She won’t have it for long – dammit!” She noticed her device was out of power. It’d take a few seconds to charge with her magic.

Toph, Vivian, Lieshy, and Fef all lined up behind her. Toph pointed at her. “We’re coming with you.”

“Not complaining,” Sunset said, finally opening the portal. The five of them leaped through.
Lieshy turned and looked through the portal at Bon Bon. “Tell anyone who asks that we’re on the case. We’ll get the diamond back for the key-link.”

Bon Bon barely had time to nod before the portal closed.

On the other side of the portal, Toph slammed her foot into the ground. “There’s no way she moved fast enough to get out of range… But I can’t feel her…”

“She’s a version of Pinkie,” Lieshy said. “Pinkies are knights – as in, knights in chess. They don’t operate like the rest of us.”

“That is not going to stop us from hunting her down,” Sunset asserted, using her horn and antlers to find whatever she could. “I can sense the trail of holy magic her mask left behind. South.”

Toph slammed her hands into the ground, creating a large slab of rock for them all to ride on. Then she rolled her arms around, pushing all of them forward on a wave of rock. It was almost like surfing.

Sunset shook her head. “I didn’t think earthbenders were this powerful…”

“I’m not most earthbenders!” Toph smirked. “I am the best in the world!”

“Debatable as cherry bombs,” Lieshy muttered under her breath.

“Come again?”

“I’m allowed to double talk my insults, thank you very much.”

Fef shrugged, trying to pull her yo-yo out of Lieshy’s hair with minimal success.

Vivian pointed. “What’s that?”

“Just a large pointed rock, nothing to worry about,” Toph said.

Sunset paled. “Stop the earth wave! That’s a Rune Obelisk! You need to-“

Toph barreled through the large orange Runes, knocking the structure to the side. Needless to say, this awoke the golem, and it was a very angry giant orange spider.

“RUN RUN RUN!” Sunset yelled, turning behind them to defend. She was able to combine the earth beneath her with fire to create a burst of lava, but as always Golems were annoyingly resistant to everything. Their only hope was to get out of its circle of influence, and given the size of it, that was probably a very large circle.

“Got anything else to try?” Lieshy said. “I ask because Toph’s busy making us run, and the rest of us would be useless against a giant light spider.”

“I am not useless!” Fef assured her, throwing a yo-yo at the spider. The string snapped instantly. “Okay, fine, maybe I’m not particularly useful in this instance.”

“It’s gaining!” Vivian yelled to Toph, launching a fire spell of her own at the spider, to no effect. “Great.”

“I can feel how close it is, morons!” she muttered. She upset the balance of the earth wave to grab a rock from nearby and fling it at the spider, slowing it down slightly. “How much further?”
“I have no idea! That was a large Rune! It could be a mile or more!” Sunset shouted, trying to melt the earth beneath the spider. It worked, but it just walked right through the hissing ground. Sunset hoped she didn’t just cause a forest fire with that move.

The spider lunged at them, ready to sink its teeth into Sunset – and then it shattered. They had reached the edge of its influence.

“That could not have been any closer…” Sunset muttered.

“Nothing’s so close that it can’t be closer,” Lieshy observed.

“Words of wisdom, yes. Necessary? No.” Sunset frowned, looking further south. “The holy energy is coming from that town. Can’t tell from where exactly though. We’ll have to ask around.”

It wasn’t until after they started getting the strange looks that Sunset considered that might have been a bad idea. She facehooved. “Riiight… They’ve never seen a human, demon, or… whatever you are Vivian.”

Vivian shrugged. “Shadow siren.”

Sunset sighed, producing a general’s insignia. “I’m General Sunset Shimmer, they’re with me, you do not need to be afraid. We are here looking for a pink oculus who may or may not be wearing a smooth, white mask.”

The ponies of the town murmured amongst themselves, unsure of how to respond. It looked like one was about to say something, but then another gasped. “You!”

Lieshy blinked, trying to find out where the voice was coming from. “Me?”

A pegasus-seapony hybrid dropped from the sky and looked right into Lieshy’s eyes with identical eyes. “You look like me!”

“I’m Lieshy, you’re probably Fluttershy, and we don’t have time for this,” Lieshy muttered.

“DID YOU STEAL MY FACE!?” She roared.

Sunset turned to stare at her. “…What?”

“I’m asking a perfectly logical question. DID YOU STEAL MY FREAKING FACE?”

“No,” Lieshy said, monotone. “Can we please talk about this later?”

“THEN WHY DO YOU LOOK LIKE ME?”

Sunset made the pegasus-seapony fall asleep with a simple spell. “Okay, enough of that.”

“…Not the standard Fluttershy,” Fef said.

“Definitely not,” Toph agreed. Then she cleared her throat. “ALL RIGHT! PONIES! Stop gawking! We need to find this pony and fast! Who knows where she is?”

An elderly mawlie walked up to them, his tail purring like a cat. “I dunno where you’re goin’ with this. But we don’t just turn in ponies to random strangers.”

Sunset waved the insignia around. “Here on official business of the crown. She’s wanted.”
“Why?”

“She stole an artifact. Looks like a green diamond that isn’t completely solid. It’s a tremendous source of power and could be dangerous in the wrong hooves.”

Lieshy raised an eyebrow. “Why feed the details?”

“What?” The old mawlie said.

Sunset got Lieshy’s message – that had probably given too much information. “Just tell us where she is, okay? We’ll just take her in, that’s it. Nopony will be killing anyone.”

The old stallion scratched his beard. “Well, I dunno where she is. I did see someone similar rush down third street a few seconds ago. You’ll have to ask around there.”

“Where is third street?”

“There are only three streets in this town,” Toph said, tapping her foot on the ground. I’m going to bet the one furthest from the big building is third street.”

Sunset sighed. “Thank you for the help.” She followed Toph to third street and repeated the question.

A couple mares there glanced at each other. “I thought I heard you say you saw her.”

“Ah, but you said you saw her first and I think I was just going crazy!”

“No, no you really saw her. Left I think?”

“No, right.”

“No, left”

“ARGH!” Toph yelled. “These ponies are all morons!”

“No…” Lieshy said, walking up to one of them. “…Who paid you?”

“C-come again?”

Sunset raised an eyebrow. That was the response of a guilty pony.

Lieshy smirked. “Let me tell you what I think happened. She planned this out in advance and paid you all long ahead of time. She gave instructions for you to distract anyone who came looking for her, to keep them occupied long enough for her to make a getaway.”

“Er…”

“And your response – the slight facial twitch, the single step backwards – is all I need to confirm it. I think you can arrest them for collusion, General.”

Sunset nodded. “That I can. Or… I can save them a trip to the dungeon if they just tell us where she is now.”

They both pointed to a boring building on second street. “She stays in there.”

“Thank you,” Sunset said, walking over to that building. She melted a hole in the wall and strode in.
The interior was like an empty warehouse. There was evidence of big, heavy things having been moved very recently. Namely, lots of places where dust had been kicked up, lots of drag marks on the ground, and lots of hoofprints. There were a few loose screws, planks of wood, and chunks of black rock laying around – chunks of Runes.

The only major thing left in the room was a small box, on top of which sat the green diamond and a hoofwritten note.

Sunset walked over to it and read the note.

*I won’t be needing this anymore. Thanks for letting me borrow it! –Pinkie the Sage.*

Sunset crumpled the paper in her magic, lit it on fire, and smashed the ashes into a flat mess under her hoof. She grabbed the green diamond. “We’ll return this. We’ll deal with the fallout. Then I’m coming back here to track that irritating oculus down. She’s made a fool of me. I’m not going to let that stand.”

Toph put her fist in her hand. “I *am* feeling the need to throw a rock in masked pony’s face…”

Sunset nodded. “She knows not what she’s done…”

If Sunset was being honest with herself, she would probably have admitted that the Sage knew exactly what she was doing. She was clearly a practiced oculus, and they rarely did things without planning astronomically well. This was going to be a significant challenge.

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Starlight stared at the main screen on the bridge, looking right at Malat. She knew the Star could see her staring, and probably even knew what she was thinking. But nobody on the ship had heard anything from Malat since the empty threat. The Star was apparently done talking to the mortals and was now… doing whatever it was Stars did when they weren’t messing with the affairs of lesser beings. Starlight had no idea what that was, if anything. Now that she was thinking about it she was having a hard time coming up with anything the Stars could do besides watch other things. Maybe they talked over long distances with their impressive magic? What did they even talk about?

How had they even had a multiversal society? They never seemed to move, never *did* anything besides occasionally speak and heat planets up... or if the legends were to be believed, changed and manipulated things in small, yet key ways.

But all of those were just legends- wait.

Starlight turned to her left. “Twilight, how exactly did the Stars aid in Nightmare Moon’s escape?”

Twilight furrowed her brow. “I’m not exactly sure. Four of the brightest Stars ended up in precise alignment with the moon, and she was released from her prison. Then we used the Elements of Harmony to banish the Nightmare Forces and return Luna to her right mind.”

“But why would the position of the stars matter in relation to the moon?”

“I have no idea. What are you getting at?”

“I don’t know, but I think I might be onto something… hey Starswirl!”

Starswirl looked up, grunting. His voice had given out well over an hour ago.
“Why would the positions of Stars cause a seal to be broken?”

He sighed, summoning a scroll with his magic. He drew a diagram of a single point at several points in time, moving from the top to the bottom. Then he arranged four stars, not in a square, but a spread out pattern. He drew lines connecting every pair of them, then circles connecting every set of three points possible. There turned out to be an X right on top of the point moving through space when he was done, where several circles and lines connected.

“…I think I know what he’s drawing. Magical fields,” Twilight said. “The places where these lines intersect are where the magical fields of different Stars intersect, giving them more intense power. Or providing more intense power. Or both.”

Starswirl gave a sideways nod, as if to say ‘close enough.’

“So, the Stars basically channel magic between each other through a complex maze of circles and lines?” Starlight asked.

Starswirl gave the same nod.

Starlight started grinning. “Twilight, remind me again why there’s no ‘faster than light’ spell.”

“Because the arrangement of arcane energies off of Equis is inconsistent. In deep space there’s simply not enough energy to supersede what the humans call ‘relativity’.” She rubbed her head, no doubt remembering the moments Sunset had tried to explain the extremely complicated topic.

“What if we ride these lines, though?” Starlight asked, pointing. “We could keep up an impressive speed so long as we found a powerful enough conduit.”

Twilight blinked. “Maybe… Find a path between two Stars that goes right through Equis and just ride the winds of magic… No, that wouldn’t work, rarely will anything in space line up perfectly.”

“It apparently did on the night Nightmare Moon was released.”

Twilight furrowed her brow. “That will take a lot of calculations and drawing to find a path that gets us anywhere near Equis…” She tapped a screen, bringing up a map of all the local stars. “And how are we going to know which of these are capital S Stars and which ones are regular?”

“You’re the princess of Friendship right? Friendship is magic, just scan Malat with your magic.”

“I can’t scan something that big!”

“Just feel around for the flow of magic.”

“That’ll take forever!”

“So? Maybe O’Neill will wise up and come get us before then. If not, we’ll get lucky.”

“Fine…” She lit her horn, feeling the magical aura around Malat. Her horn sparked, igniting a small magical explosion. “…Bad idea.”

“What happened?”

Twilight rubbed her skull. “Magical overload. We’ll need to bring a machine to scan the magic channels, but I think your idea is sound. We could use the Stars’ connections to move between them, and the various circle points to get to other locations. There are enough Stars, there should be some
combination that gets you just about everywhere…”

“Any other ideas?” Starlight wondered aloud, turning to Starswirl.

He started sketching a circle.

“Dimensional travel won’t work, we’d just appear in deep space in another dimension. Plus, it’s not like we have the power to move the entire Starfinder.”

Starswirl shrugged, returning to doing not much of anything.

“We could try using special-displacement to get help,” Twilight suggested. “See, when you translate an entire ship from Tau’ri Earth to Ardent, you get closer to the world of Ardent than you were to Earth itself. It’s as if each universe has a ‘size’ that has to translate from one to another. We could go to Arde- wait, nevermind. Our universe is ‘small’ compared to the others. We’d just move even further away.”

Starlight looked at Malat again. “There’s a whole ton of magical power here, we just need to find a way to use it… These Stars produce the magic, and… Hooooold on a second…” She lit her horn. “Which way is Equis?”

Twilight pointed at a faint yellow speck on the screen. “That’s the sun. We’re close enough that we can still see it. Why?”

Starlight lit her horn and closed her eyes. She didn’t dare touch the Star itself, but she probed the space between Malat and Equis. “…There’s a magic channel there. It’s how they watch us, Twilight. They use these channels. The only reason we’ve never noticed them before on Equis is because all of them are pointing at us.”

Twilight blinked. “That makes sense. I wonder if there are other planets out there they’re looking at. Or… How they’re able to look at Equis if these ‘pathways’ are made between Stars. …Right Starswirl?”

Starswirl nodded at that remark.

“I’m not sure…” Starlight said, glancing at her cutie mark. “But I do know that we can use it. We have smaller ships, right?”

“Right. I think they’re called Tel’taks.”

“Let me use one. I think I can move it. Get O’Neill’s attention.”

Twilight frowned. “You sure?”

“Nope. But it can’t hurt to try, now can it?”

“It most certainly can! You could blow your horn off!”

“Ha! Right.”

Pinkie appeared from nowhere and glared at Starlight.

“Pinkie there’s no such thing as ‘jinxing’.”

“That’s where you’re wroooooooong…”
Starlight rolled her eyes. “I’m still going to try it. Coming?”

“No. Dashie is though.”

Rainbow Dash’s ears perked up. “Did somepony call me?”

“Yes. You’re going to get to ride with Starlight in something that has a pretty good chance of blowing up!”

Rainbow Dash blinked. “…Better than staying here and sleeping for eternity. Can I pilot?”

“I think I’ll be doing all the moving,” Starlight said. “Also you don’t exactly have… hands, do you?”

Rainbow Dash spread her wings and raised an eyebrow.

“Fair enough. I’ll let you see if you can figure out the controls once we’re back home.”

“Awesome!”

Starlight waved to Twilight. “See you soon!” Twilight teleported the two of them to the hangar, filled with a few dozen Tel’taks. They, like almost all Goa’uld designs, were reminiscent of pyramids, though this one had one of it’s three bottom points stretched out significantly further than the others and had a segmented appearance. The two walked in and sat at the two main seats, looking right out the windshield.

The bay doors slid open, and Starlight lifted the entire Tel’tak into the air and out into space. It was difficult to move the ship while the false gravity of the *Starfinder* was in effect, but once they were out the smaller ship moved almost effortlessly.

“…I like space,” Starlight asserted, turning the Tel’ak upside down just because she could. “There’s no resistance at all out here. Not to mention all the power from Malat…”

Rainbow Dash put her wings on the unusual red control mechanism, trying to get a feel for how it worked. “Let’s see…”

“Rainbow! I said when we got back!”

Rainbow Dash ignored her. She pulled the round, red ovoid back, maneuvering the ship upwards. The view outside began to spin rapidly.

Starlight removed Rainbow Dash’s wings from the control mechanism, trying to keep herself from hurling. “…Ergh…”


“No… Just… Let me do this, and you can play all you want later, okay?”

“Fine.”

Starlight moved the small ship directly between Malat and Equis, ten light years distant. She felt around herself, latching onto the linear flow of magic. Then she enveloped the entire craft in a bubble of blueish magic, and *pushed*.

The acceleration was too much for the Tel’ak to absorb. Rainbow Dash and Starlight were pushed back into their seats as the ship sped up far more than it should have been able to. It sailed through the stars with a much less comfortable motion than the hyperdrive. They shook, jumped, rattled,
twisted, and wobbled their way across the cosmos.

From outside, it looked like the Tel’tek was trying its best to escape from a translucent blue balloon, the front point stretching the ‘rubber’ as far as it could go, while the rest of the balloon trailed behind the ship like a heavy sack. Streams of yellow energy spiraled off the ship’s point as it cut through the magical conduit, tearing at space slightly.

Eventually, the speed stabilized enough to where Rainbow Dash could pull herself out of her chair. Starlight stared straight ahead, unblinking, her horn surrounded by a double-strength magic aura.

“Wooo-wee!” Rainbow Dash whooped. “This is fast! I have no idea how fast but it’s fast.”

Starlight made no response.

“How fast do you think we’re going Starlight? Has to be faster than the Starfinder, didn’t get any acceleration rush from that at all. Don’t care what Twilight said, that still has to hold true in some way out here in the stars. Ooh, do you think we’ll run into any aliens? Can we defend ourselves if we do?”

“Rainbow…” Starlight grunted. “Be… Quiet… I need… To… Focus…” She clenched her teeth. Her eyes were starting to burn from being kept open so long, but she didn’t want to risk blinking.

“Oh. Right. I’ll leave you to that, focusing, thing. I-“

“RAINBOW!”

“Right. Shutting up now.”

They rode on through the stars in shaky silence.

~~~

Spike woke up as the screen he was sleeping on beeped at him. “Wha-huh?”

Rarity looked at him. “What is it Spike?”

“We - we’re getting a call!”

Twilight blinked, looking over. “Really? Who could be talking to us way out here?”

“I don’t know…” Rarity murmured. “Answer it.”

O’Neill’s face appeared on screen. Twilight blinked. “Uh… O’Neill? How are you talking to us?”

O’Neill raised an eyebrow. “I just dropped out of hyperspace. I’m in the system now. Can’t you tell?”

“Uh… No. Either we’re not paying attention or the sensors are broken too.”

“Too?” O’Neill turned to the left, getting some information from a crewmember. “…I see your reactor blew up halfway.”

“Yeah. It was Ba’al. I take it Starlight got to you and told you about our problem?”

“…No? We just decided to leave after we’d not seen you for an hour. You didn’t really say how long you’d be gone. Not to mention I had certain people breathing down my back to wrap this up
and get back on the Ba’al hunt. Yours got anything useful?”

“No. Starlight probed his mind, didn’t get much. Just as useless as the rest. He’s in one of your people, Janus. You can teleport him right out of the brig, if you want.”

O’Neill nodded. “Done. Would you like to order a ride on Apollo Towing incorporated?”

Twilight raised an eyebrow. “Sure. What’s the price?”

“Nothing but a bruised ego.”

“Well then, we’ve already paid,” Rarity said. “Get to towing.”

“Riiiiight away!”

~~~

Corona had no idea where she was. It was dark, and yet oddly purple everywhere at the same time. She could see her hands and legs clearly, but nothing else. She could tell she was standing on something hard, but that was all her senses told her. Well, besides the fact that it was cold. She couldn’t see her breath but she wouldn’t be surprised if someone came along and told her it was forming clouds right in front of her face.

She lit her hand on fire, but it did nothing to cut through the murky darkness. She launched a fireball, losing sight of it long before she should have. She frowned. “Hello?” she called.

There was no answer. Did she feel a breeze though? …No. If there was a breeze, it was extremely slight.

Corona’s heart was starting to race, but she forced herself to keep control. How had she gotten here? She tried to retrace her steps. She’d gone to college earlier that morning, attended all her classes, checked in with Storm to see if he needed anything (he had not), did homework, and… And probably fell asleep sometime around 2 AM.

Ah. She was probably just asleep, having nightmares from all her stress. This relaxed her mind considerably. “Okay then. Subconscious, hit me with your best shot.”

“Suuuuunseeeeeeet…”

Corona frowned. “It’s Corona now, brain. Get used to it.”

“Noooooooooo. Suuuuuunseeeeeeeet…”

Corona tried to identify the sharp, ghostly voice but couldn’t. It was probably just her mind’s default idea of what a ‘scary voice’ sounded like. Nothing all that creative, interesting, or even all that scary. She sighed and shook her head. “Look, disembodied voice, your little remarks aren’t going to get me to change back.”

“Who said that was what I was doing…?”

“Me. And since you’re just my mind, that’s probably how it’s going. Unless I’m lying to myself. Or reading far too much into this. Probably the latter.”

The voice seemed to move to a position behind her. “Does it matter? Sunset, does it matter?”

Corona shrugged, turning around slowly. “Not really.” There was nothing behind her, as expected.
“Exaaaactly…” The voice was louder now. Not necessarily closer, though. “Don’t treat me like
your mind, but something else…”

“Yeah, right. Like you could be anything else.”

“Does this feel like a normal dream, Sunset?”

Corona twitched at the use of her old name again. She really shouldn’t be annoyed, but she was.
“No, not really. Ground’s a bit too solid, I can feel a slight pain from the chill, and my mind’s not
filling in the blank purple space like it should.” She put a hand to her chin. “What are you
suggesting?”

“This isn’t a normal dream…” The voice was louder now, and Corona was sure it was closer.
“There’s something in here with you…”

Corona took a defensive stance. She quickly went over the mental defense material she’d learned
during her time in Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns.

“Taking me seriously now…?”

“A precaution. There’s rarely such a thing as too careful.”

“Wise. But you still aren’t scared.”

“Why would I be?”

There was a sudden thump that came from nowhere. It was there. Right in front of her. The mask.
The purple heart, the spikes, the eyes.

The eyes looked so much more alive than when she had seen them last. Much more vibrant.
Menacing. Corona’s confidence faltered. “Y-you’re the mask.”

“Yes, I am. Isn’t that something?”

Corona clenched her fists, planting her feet in the ground. “Doesn’t matter. I’ll fight you.”

“You think you can?” The voice clearly wasn’t coming from the mask, but Corona could no
longer tell where it was coming from. “Sunset, Sunset, Sunset… Why assume you have a chance?”

“Why not? You’re just some freaky magic mask.”

“Just!” The voice ululated, somehow producing enough force with just one syllable not only to
knock Corona to the ground but also to give her a pounding headache. It hurt to hear it speak like
that. She was suddenly sure it hadn’t spoken at all, but rather made known to her what it thought.

She could see through the purple now. She wasn’t standing on anything hard, but something soft and
fleshy. It had always been there, how had she not felt it? How could this possibly have been hiding
around her the entire time?

She saw the rest. She couldn’t partake of it. Her brain wanted to shut down – the eyes, the purple
tendrils, the horror. The moon. What the hell was that? Why was it twitching?

“You seeee… I am so much more than this mask…” The voice continued, no longer whispering,
but no longer speaking in Truth. “And I have you, Sunset…”

Sunset whimpered. “No… No you don’t…”
“Yes I do. And it won’t be looooolong…” Then everything collapsed around her. She closed her eyes, but the mask was still visible. She felt the tendrils grab her from the inside somehow, tearing at her, clawing at her, pulling her from the inside out. She knew they were looking for her soul.

She lit herself on fire. She couldn’t let them have it. She’d die first-

Corona gasped awake, sitting up with enough force to fling sweat to the wall across from her. She was literally dripping with it. She threw off the blanket, got out of bed, and tried to walk to the bathroom. She failed – instead she leaned against a nearby wall and started crying.

“It was all just a dream… It was all just a dream… It was all just a dream…” She couldn’t remember what the mask had shown her. What was behind the purple everything. But she could remember the mask. How it spoke. How it drilled into her mind.

But everything was fine now. She was in her dorm. It was early morning. Sugarcoat was still sleeping in her bunk, stirring only slightly from Corona’s noise.

Corona wiped the tears from her face. Why was she so scared? It was just a dream. It was always just a dream. There was never any danger to her…

“You look like you’ve been to the track meet and back,” Sugarcoat said as she rubbed her eyes.

“Terrible nightmare,” Corona said, gasping for breath. “I just… I don’t know where it came from.”

“Stress. You’ve got a lot more on your plate than the regular college student.”

“That… Is certainly true,” Corona agreed. “It just… It felt different this time.”

“You need to schedule an appointment with a government therapist.”

Corona nodded. “Maybe…” She pulled open her sock drawer and took out the dimensional device. “I think I’ll go for a walk first, though.”

“Suit yourself. Physics in two hours, be there if you want to pass.”

“I will.” She dialed Equestria and stepped through. She ended up in a field outside Ponyville, the light of Celestia’s sun shining down on her and filling her with warmth. She smiled – everything, for once, felt fine. She could forget about the dream completely and just enjoy her original home. She walked around for a few minutes, smiling, the dream quickly becoming but a memory,

She saw somepony she recognized sitting on a hill, looking up at the sky. She walked over. “Hey, Starlight.”

“Hey, Corona,” she said, not taking her eyes off the sky. “What brings you here today?”

“Needed some real fresh air to clear my head. You?”

“Return from a trip into space. I used everything I had to drag a small ship from a nearby star to here, only to find out that wasn’t necessary.”

“Ouch. …Wait, you dragged a ship here from a nearby star?”

“Yeah. Discovered how to use the magic connections between Stars. Wasn’t really hard, just needed a way to know they existed. Bit hard to do that from here. Still took a lot of energy.”

A small, vaguely pyramid-shaped ship dropped from the sky. Starlight used her telekinesis to keep it
from impacting the ground, tossing it back into the air.

“…Rainbow Dash driving?”

“Yep.”

“Huh. …Must be nice.”

A look of sadness crossed Starlight’s face. “Yeah…” she shook her head. “Anyway, so I feel both amazing and useless today. I invented magic spaceflight but the Apollo just went and saved everyone anyway.”

“Don’t lessen what you did. It was amazing. Worthy of being named after you, anyway, putting you in the history books.”

Starlight laughed. “The ‘Starlight Drive’ sounds silly. As does ‘Glimmer’.”

Corona raised an eyebrow. “Then change your name. You’ll need to eventually.”

“To what? Something like Spartwinkle? Stars, no!”

Corona laughed. “No, not like that, unless you want to. I chose Corona because it was similar to my own, carried much of the same connotations, but also meant… more, somehow. To differentiate me.”

Starlight frowned. “I mean, I’ve thought about it. Talking to other Starlights is a pain, and it’s not exactly polite to ask *them* to alter *their* names. …But I don’t know.”

“Well, you’re Starlight and you just did something *star* related, why not make it somehow related to a Star?”

“Like what? Star Star?”

“How about… Nova. What happens when a star sheds its outer layers.”

Starlight snorted. “That’s-“

Rainbow Dash crashed the ship into the ground at that moment. In a panic, Starlight teleported Rainbow Dash out of the Tel’tek. This turned out to be a good move since the craft exploded a moment later.

“You were supposed to catch me!” Rainbow Dash yelled.

“Well *somepony* messed me up!” Starlight gestured at Corona.

“Hey, all I did was suggest a name!” Corona said, hands in the air.

“What was it?” Rainbow Dash asked.

“Nova.”

“I like it.”

Starlight blinked. “Really?”

“Really. It just sounds… *You*.”

 “…Okay, I guess,” Nova said. “I’ll have to think about it though.”
Corona smirked. “Something tells me you won’t have to for long, Nova.”

“Are you two going to force it on me?”

Rainbow Dash shrugged. “Well, that’s what I’m calling you even if you don’t choose that. Another nickname for the pile!”

“…I’m not sure how I feel about this.”

“It’ll be fine,” Corona said, kneeling down and putting an arm around Nova. “Trust me, you get used to it. I wasn’t sure about my name at first, thinking I would still go by Sunset. Now… Well, I get a little upset when I’m called Sunset. Completely illogical, but, you know.”

“Not at the moment…”

Rainbow Dash nudged her. “C’mon, at least try it out.”

“Fine. Though I feel like I am already doing that.”

Corona chuckled.

“Hey, who wants to go out for ice cream?” Rainbow Dash said suddenly. “We never hang out anymore, Nova. And we never hung out at all, Corona.”

Corona’s smile faltered. “I… I’d love that, Rainbow Dash.”

“Then come on! Let’s go!” She flew away in a blur of rainbow.

Nova smirked and lit her horn. “Teleport to beat her there?”

“You betcha.”

~~~

Meanwhile, in orbit…

”PRINCESS TWILIGHT SPARKLE!!!!” Luna roared in the loudest Royal Canterlot Voice she could muster.

As scared as Twilight was, the only thing Twilight could think was If I had a middle name this would be even more terrifying.

Luna stamped her hoof inches from Twilight’s face, shaking her considerably. “Twilight… Why… Did you shoot… The moon…?”

“Uh. Oh. About that. Accident.”

“Oh. Just. Just an accident?” Luna’s left eye twitched. “Let me tell you about how this affected my day, Twilight. I was playing a nice little video game from Earth. It was cute. I jumped around and collected things on this bright screen, and it was all just great. And I was inches from getting a particularly hard piece that I’d been spending the better part of an hour building up for, and guess what happens?”

“Er… You get it?”

“Oh no! Instead, some crack decides to shoot my moon! Which, by the way, I have a constant
connection to. I jumped from the impact, fell into a bottomless pit, and lost all my progress. Oh, and my beautiful moon got yet another crater on it that didn’t need to be there! Why do you all have to go and change it!? Then I discovered that you had run with your tail between your legs, and that I’d have to wait to talk to you!” She leaned in, touching snouts with Twilight. “I’ve been sitting here, stewing, for well over an hour.”

“Eheh…”

“As punishment-“

“You can’t punish her,” Applejack said. “Wouldn’t be proper.”

Luna shot Applejack a look that made her back up several steps. “Ah mean… Whatever works, Princess…”

Luna sneered. “Twilight can, in theory, refuse the punishment. But she knows deep down that I’ll find some other, more creative way to make her suffer should she do that. All I’m asking her to do is do a little errand for me.”

“Oh?”

“You know about Earth. Find out what the good games are from your friends and other connections. Get me them. Understood?”

“Oh?”

“You have twenty-four hours.”

Twilight’s face twisted into barely controlled panic. “Starwirl, teleport us down to the surface. Now.”

That he did.

~~~

That night, it was a different pony’s turn to dream…

“Nova.”

Nova opened her eyes. She was floating in the middle of space without a suit, looking right at a bright blue star. “Huh. So guess that really is going to stick. So… Star?”

“Yes. I am Sylius. I decided I owe you more than what Malat gave you.”

“Why not just do this earlier to save the trouble?”

“It is not our way. You need to carve your own path.”

“Why is that your way?”

“…I will not say. I will not answer any questions about your world, nor about your destiny.”

Nova raised an eyebrow. “…Then what are you here to say?”

“You clearly will not heed our warning about the practice of traveling to other universes. So at least hear this. You don’t want to catch the attention of the Starcross Society.”
“Why?”

“...I am sorry, it seems so cruel to you, doesn’t it? Not to be told. To be kept from what your world really is, what it means.”

“Well can you at least point me in the right direction? Show me how I can find out?”

Sylius paused. “…There is one on your world who can answer many of your questions. It is not Discord. Find this individual to get the fastest answers. That is, if you can be convincing.”

Nova narrowed her eyes. “That’s pretty vague.”

“It’s stretching our tradition enough as it is.”

“Why not change?”

Sylius chuckled softly. “We’d have to agree. Most of us are old enough to remember when life formed on your planet. It would take a long time for us to do anything of the sort.”

“...I think I understand,” Nova said.

“You do. I also hope I’ve given you a better image of our kind than... Malat.”

“That you have. I was starting to be... disillusioned in you. Still am. It’s... It’s a bit much to take in, what you actually are.”

“We may be more than you, and higher, but we are never what you hold us up to be. I apologize if that’s not to your liking.”

Nova drooped. “It’s... Fine. Really. ...So what, do I just wake up now?”

“No. You fall back into regular sleep. It wouldn’t do for this to end like a nightmare, would it?”

~~~

Link walked down to the brig. As luck would have it, there was no one outside Ba’al’s cell at this moment. Good. They could finally have a one-on-one talk.

Ba’al’s eyes flashed the moment Link entered the room. “Ah, finally, the hero arrives.”

“Ba’al. Figured we should have a talk, just you and m-”

“She read my mind, hero. She knows about it.”

Link’s eyes narrowed while Ba’al’s grin widened. Link leaned forward. “You could tell anyone you wanted. But you know they’ll just try to take it from you.”

“She’s calling out, hero. She wants them all. Maybe your little mind-reading pony is affected by that slight glance, maybe not, but there are others. They’ve seen it. And now she wants them.”

Link glared. “Where are you hiding it?”


“You’re mad.”

“Quite possibly. But she will give us power.”
“She wants nothing but her own power.”

“So? Mutually beneficial arrangement.” He glanced at Link’s shadow. “I’m sure you can sympathize.”

Link stood up. “You’re not going to be any help.”

“Nope. Nice talking to you though.”

Link started walking out.

“She will be free, Link. There’s no more delaying the inevitable.”

Link left the room completely, bumping into O’Neil as he did so. “Sorry.”

“Talking to the prisoner, huh?” O’Neill said.

“No help, as usual.”

“I could have told you that.”

Link nodded, but hurried away. Something was obviously on his mind.

O’Neill shrugged, taking a sip of his unidentifiable drink. He walked to his office, sitting down in the big chair. He pulled up a computer screen and played a video. He watched and listened to the entire conversation between Link and Ba’al, frown deepening as he did so.

He opened up several other videos, watching them again. Conversations between Link and that thing – Midna – in his shadow. They thought they weren’t being watched. They were, closer than most other passengers, because they were hiding something.

From what he was seeing, O’Neill was pretty sure Link’s heart was in the right place. But the man in green was hiding something very, very nefarious.

~~~

Sage Pinkie held the white mask to her face – and froze.

They were watching again. She couldn’t let them know anything about where she was, or what she was doing.

She was in a dark room, the mask providing the most light of anything. It illuminated a wooden floor and a tremendous object four times taller than the oculus herself. It was composed of dozens of large gears, pieces of colored runes, magical items, and a few metallic chains. In the center was a single, bright white rune that was shaking with immense power. It was held in place by another rune, a greenish-brown one, which had recently been powered up by a certain green diamond. It would be able to keep the white power in check indefinitely.

The Mechanism was functioning properly… but the plan was not yet finished.

There was still much, much more to do.

It would involve a lot of waiting.
Twilight and Company stepped through a dimensional device’s portal into a sunny town reminiscent of Ponyville, but with a more brown-green color scheme. Ponies walked around with smiles on their faces, waving to each other and occasionally laughing.

“This looks familiar…” Pinkie mused.

Fluttershy rolled her eyes. Pinkie giggled.

“Think there’s going to be anything here for us?” Rarity asked. “Seems as if it might be awfully redundant.”

“We should at least say hi,” Nova said, twirling her hoof in the air to accentuate the point.

Twilight nodded in agreement. She scanned the town for ponies to talk to. “Let’s see… Oh! I see me.” She pointed at a purple unicorn walking down the street, books in her saddlebags. “No wings. This should be interesting.”

Pinkie bounced over to Other Twilight first. “Heeeeeeey!”

She blinked. “Oh, hi Pinkie.” She smirked. “So, about last night-“

“Ashushashushamush!” Pinkie said, shoving a hoof into the unicorn’s mouth. “I am not the Pinkie you know. I come from an alternate uuuuniverse!”

The unicorn rolled her eyes. “Oh Pinkie, come on, that again?”

“Again?” Princess Twilight said, walking closer. “You’ve had other visitors?”

The unicorn blinked, smirk vanishing. “Oh. …I just thought Pinkie was joking… Oh my gosh you’re me!”

Twilight grinned. “Yeah. I’m Princess of Friendship Twilight Sparkle, from Equestria. We were just dropping by to see what your world was like.”

“That’s so amazing!” the unicorn shouted. “You’re a princess and… Eeeeeeee!” She did a little dancing motion with her legs.

Twilight found this absolutely adorable, unable to contain her laughter. “Yep! Mind telling us a bit about yourself and where we are?”

“Oh not at all! Welcome to Neighton! I’m just Twilight Sparkle. I run the library. And live in it.”

Twilight blinked. “…Is it by chance Golden Oaks library?”

“Why, yes! It’s even built into a tree! Do you have one as well?”

Twilight smiled sadly. “I used to. It… Got blown up several years ago. I have a full-sized castle now, but it’s not the same.”

The unicorn clasped Twilight’s hoof in her own. “I’m so sorry… I couldn’t imagine what’d happen
to me if my Golden Oaks got destroyed.”

Rarity looked the unicorn up and down. “Well, seeing as you’re not an alicorn… It may just be that it hasn’t happened yet for you.”

“…Wh-what do you mean?”

“Well, I don’t know if this world follows the same path ours did, but if you become an alicorn and face off against a monster known as Tirek, your library will be destroyed in the encounter.”

Pinkie grinned. “Think of this as a warning! If that ever happens, try to keep your library out of the blast!”

“I… Thank you,” the unicorn bowed. “I’ll do what I can, if or when that happens.”

Twilight smiled. “Good. It’d be more than I did…” she shook her head. “Anyway, you know me, this is Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy, Rarity, and Nova.”

The unicorn narrowed her eyes at Nova. “…Why not ‘Starlight’? The rest of you have the same names.”

Nova shrugged. “I go by Nova to differentiate myself from the other Starlights. These four should get their own names at some point. Sooner rather than later.”

Rarity nudged Twilight. “I keep telling this Princess here she should consider something relating to ‘Charter,’ since that’s what ponies are calling her.”

Twilight rolled her eyes. “And I keep telling you that ‘Charter’ is a title, if anything, not a name.”

Nova snickered. “You may not have a choice in the matter.”

“You all still call me Twilight, don’t you?”

“I suppose that’s true. But be prepared for the day we strike gold!”

Pinkie pointed at Nova. “That would have been perfect if Twilight were yellow, then we’d have come up with a name involving gold!”

Fluttershy raised an eyebrow. “Seems a bit on-the-nose.”

Nova laughed. “Who cares about that, really? It just needs to get the job done.”

The unicorn Twilight looked at Nova, furrowing her brow. “You’re very different from the Starlight I know. The rest of you are a similar – Fluttershy’s a bit more forward, admittedly – but you blow expectations out of the water, Nova.”

“Well… when Twilight met me, I was not the nicest pony. Had a bit of an issue brainwashing an entire town.” She smiled sheepishly. “She took me in and helped me get to where I am now. So we might actually be pretty similar, just… displaced.”

The unicorn pondered this. “Maybe… I’ll keep that in mind.”

“So…” Pinkie said, leaning closer to the unicorn. “What do ponies do for fun around here?”

“Well, we do normal pony things. Go out, talk, party, date, and basically just enjoy life. Unless you’re me, in which case you spend most of your day analyzing ponies.”
“Ah,” Twilight said, remembering when she had thought friendship was a puzzle that needed to be analyzed scientifically. It was a little embarrassing and she had to fight not to say anything to her counterpart about it. It would be best if she discovered that on her own.

“Hey, what do we do?” Fluttershy asked. “The other versions of us, I mean.”

“Oh! Uh, Pinkie’s a party planner, Fluttershy’s a traveling biologist, and Rarity runs the newspaper.”

Rarity blinked. “…Identical, close, and way, way far off.”

“Oh? What do you do then?”

“I run a boutique back home. Sell finely crafted dresses.” She looked around the town of Neighton and pointed at a building. “Looks almost exactly like that place, actually,”

“Huh. That’s… Actually a diner,” the unicorn frowned. “Pretty good one, but I can’t imagine a clothing store there. Clothes just get in the way, after all.”

Everyone gasped. Fluttershy quickly ran to Rarity and stroked her mane. “There, there Rarity… Things are just different here… Don’t freak out…”

Rarity’s eye twitched. “I… Know…”

Unicorn Twilight put a hoof over her mouth and blushed. “Oh, I’m sorry! I didn’t think they could mean all that much to you! Sorry!”

Rarity gently pushed Fluttershy away and straightened her mane. “It’s fine, darling. I’m the one exploring, I’ll just have to accept being slapped across the face once in a while.”

“I’m still sorry! How can I make it up to you?”

“Twilight, there’s no need. Everything’s fine now, I just needed to recover. Although…” She looked at the diner. “I think I want to eat there. See what it’s like.”

The unicorn tossed Rarity ten bits. “That should cover a meal for you, no matter how exorbitant it is.”

Rarity smiled. “Anypony else coming?”

Fluttershy blinked. “Rarity, we literally ate just before we came here.”

Rarity shrugged. “I suppose I’m just going there to get a feel for the place, see if it’s worthy of the space it’s using. See you girls later then.”

Princess Twilight nodded. “We’ll either come get you at the diner, or be at the place we appeared.”

“Got it!” Rarity said, trotting off.

“And then there were four…” Pinkie said, strangely ominously.

“I count five,” Nova said, pointing at the unicorn Twilight.

Pinkie raised an eyebrow. “Well, then there’s just about to be four.” She raised a hoof to the air, and out of nowhere another Pinkie appeared and hoofbumped it.

Fluttershy blinked. “Oh.”
The new Pinkie grinned. “Hey! Me! Want a party!?"

“DO I EVER!?"

“THEN LET’S MOVE I HAVE ONE GOING RIGHT NOW!”

“ARE THE PARTY CANNONS IN FULL SWING?”

“YOU BET!” The two bounced off before any of the other ponies could say anything.

Nova put a hoof to her chin. “You know, if I was more paranoid I’d say these ponies were trying to separate us and pick us off one by one.”

Fluttershy shook her head. “I don’t think so. I think this place really is nice.”

“Thanks,” the unicorn said. “We try.”

“I’m sure you do,” Twilight said. “So… Can we go see the Golden Oaks Library? Please?”

“Yeah, I’ve never actually seen it,” Nova said.

The unicorn beamed. “Of course we can! Right this way!” She trotted away, the three otherworldly ponies following close behind. They only made it a few yards before a blur of rainbow barreled into Fluttershy. Fluttershy reacted quickly, spreading her wings and bouncing off the ground with her front hoof, knocking the speeding pegasus off her and onto the nearby ground.

“Woah! Fluttershy! When did you get so quick?” Rainbow Dash said, eyes spinning.

Fluttershy shook her head to clear it. “Ah, I’m not the Fluttershy you know. Other world.”

“Yeah, ri-“ Rainbow Dash saw the two Twilights. “…Oh. All right then.” She blushed slightly. “Sorry for barreling into you then. I thought you were her.”

“It’s okay. If you travel around a lot, you get recognized incorrectly a lot. I’m getting used to it - though admittedly this is my first time being sky-tackled.”

Princess Twilight groaned. “Meanwhile, almost every other Rainbow Dash we meet loves to find some excuse to tackle me for whatever reason.”

“Very interesting,” the unicorn noted.

Rainbow Dash stretched her wings and pointed at Fluttershy. “Heyyyy… Flutters, you think you’re a good flier?”

“Um. Well, no – actually, wait…” She put a hoof to her chin. “I think I’ve had to get better at it now. So I don’t really know how good I am.”

“Whatever, you’re better than my Fluttershy by a mile, I can already see that. Let’s race.”

“I don’t know…”

Nova smirked. “You’ll do fine, Fluttershy. I think you might win, actually, given all the flying you’ve had to do lately.”

Fluttershy shrugged. “I guess I can, then. Where we going?”
Rainbow Dash pointed to a cloud in the distance. “See it?”

Fluttershy nodded.

“Ready… Set… Go!” The two pegasi took to the skies, flying over the heads of the now three-pony party.

“…Do you think I’ll even make it to the library?” Twilight asked her counterpart.

“Who knows. You do seem to be fans of splitting up.”

“I swear, it’s just a fluke today!”

“We’ll see who actually makes it to the library then, won’t we?”

Nova smirked. “That we will.”

They walked further down the street, passing many cheerful, friendly ponies who waved at them as they passed. At one point they passed close to a mare and a stallion sitting on a bench, staring deeply into one another’s eyes. Then, like something snapped between them, they started passionately kissing and fell off the bench.

Nova and Twilight blinked in surprise at the sudden movement.

“Ah, love is in the air,” the unicorn Twilight said, smiling. “Come on, let’s leave them be. The library is right over there.”

Twilight and Nova managed, with some effort, to tear their eyes off the passionate kissing that was now taking place on the ground and push it out of their minds. After all, it wasn’t their business. Right? Just two ponies enjoying each others’ company.

~~~

Rarity walked into the ‘Hungry Bun’ diner, her graceful stride drawing more than a few appreciating glances. She wondered if this was because she looked good, or because she looked like the unicorn who ran the newspaper. Or, as was probably the case, both.

The diner itself looked nothing like her Boutique on the inside, save from the same general shape of the room. Half of the rounded interior was blocked off presumably to make room for an in-depth kitchen while the part Rarity could see was filled with clean, silvery tables at which sat many, many patrons. The vast majority of tables only had two stools at them, but there were a couple booths.

Rarity looked to her left where a sign read ‘seat yourself’. She shrugged, pulled up to a two-seat table next to the window, and grabbed a menu. She was vaguely aware of giggling and happy chatter coming from the other patrons, but she paid them no mind. She’d do that after she ordered.

The diner specialized in ‘things-in-buns’, ranging from carrot-dogs to hayburgers to a few things Rarity had never actually heard of. What even was a ‘Neighpon Panini’?

“Can Ah take your order, Miss Rarity?”

Rarity looked to her left and down to see a familiar yellow filly. A cute version of Applebloom, Applejack’s younger sister, with a chef’s hat instead of a little bow. “Oh! I’m sorry, I’m not actually the pony you know. I’m…” She frowned. “Miss Belle.”

Applebloom raised an eyebrow. “Whatever you say. What you want?”
“I am curious. Since I’m new in town, care to tell me what exactly a Neighpon Panini is?”

“Ah really have no idea. It tastes really good and we ship the key ingredient from Neighpon, whatever it is.”

Rarity pursed her lips. “Am I feeling adventurous today…”

“I’d order it,” a tall, black pegasus stallion said, leaning in on the table. “It’s a good bit of food that doesn’t taste quite like anything else, not to mention it always makes you feel a little better. I swear, they charm it with something back there.”

Rarity smiled. “I believe I’ll take that then.”

“Make that a double order,” the stallion said, sliding in the opposite seat. “That is, if you don’t mind.”

Rarity chuckled to herself. “Not at all!”

Applebloom scribbled something short in her notebook. “It’ll be right out.”

The stallion smiled at Rarity. “So, what’s a beautiful unicorn like you doing in a place like this?”

“I could ask the same of you.”

“Name’s Thunder Lane. I travel around a lot performing stunt shows, and I just have to drop by this diner every time. Food’s great, the ponies are great, and you never know who you’ll meet!”

“Really? Well, I’m a bit of a traveler myself. Name’s Rarity, not to be confused with the other Rarity in this town. I’m from so, so far away, you have no idea.”

“You don’t sound foreign. How long did it take to get our accent down?”

Rarity smirked. “I believe that’s the translation spell I have on me, dear. It’s almost guaranteed I’m not speaking your language at all.”

Thunder sat back and put his front hooves behind his head. “You weren’t kidding when you said far away.”

“It might as well be another world entirely.”

“That just makes me want to see your world. I travel around a lot, who knows? Maybe I’ve been there.”

Rarity shook her head. “Have you ever needed a translation spell to get by? Don’t think so.”

“Oh, probably not. But a guy’s got to try, right?” He raised his eyebrows up and down.

“I’m certainly not stopping you from trying. I do expect I’ll run your bragging thoroughly through the ground, though. Sorry in advance.”

“Ouch. Feisty,” he said, feigning pain. “The graceful mare slowly murders her companion with words…”

Rarity chuckled. “What makes you think it’s going to be slow?”

Thunder Lane blinked. “Okay, so you could tear me apart quickly. I don’t think so though. No mare with those sweet, blue eyes could bring themselves to do such a thing.”
“Oh my, the compliments,” Rarity tried to deadpan, but chuckled and blushed instead. “Quite the gentlestallion I’ve found myself here.”

“The gentlestallion is astounded by the words of praise coming from the lady’s lips.”

Rarity raised her eyebrow. “Really? Third person?”

“It was worth a shot, wasn’t it?”

“I’m not leaving in a huff yet, am I?” Rarity said. The food arrived a moment later. Two plates set with a bun and some strange, orange filling drizzled with caramel-colored sauce.

Rarity lifted the sticky mess in her telekinesis. “How is a non-unicorn supposed to eat this in a dignified manner?”

Thunder Lane smirked. “It takes some doing. First, you’ve got to arrange your plate like so. Then, you’ve got to have the coordination of a monkey and the dexterity of a hummingbird. Watch.” He slammed his hoof into the table, flipping the Neighpon Panini into the air. He opened his mouth and swallowed the entire thing in one swift gulp.

Rarity stared at him, rather speechless.

“Or you could just use a fork,” Thunder Lane said, picking up a nearby fork with his wing. “I just prefer the all-at-once approach, because it stuns mares speechless.”

“…I’m just not sure if that was dignified or not.”

“Well, do you feel like stomping off in a huff at my ‘uncultured’ eating habits?”

“No…”

“Then it must be dignified enough,” he smirked. “And now you need to eat yours.”

Rarity delicately levitated the sticky mess to her mouth and took a small, delicate bite. The flavor of the food item was intense – both sweet and sour at the same time, and yet somehow carried with it the feeling of being at an ocean beach and smelling the sea air. She took a moment to look at what she was eating again. “…The secret ingredient might be fish.”

Thunder Lane blinked. “Wait, really? Wait, how do you know?”

“When you travel as much as I have, you sometimes eat things outside your normal diet range. Pretty sure there’s fish in here.” She took another bite. “Not that I’m complaining, mind you.”

“…Are we allowed to eat fish?”

“I have no idea about you, but I am,” Rarity smirked, taking another bite. “Mmmm, delicious. Certainly a different taste.”

“I’m still trying to get over the fact that there’s probably some form of meat in here.”

“Thunder, animals eat meat all the time. It’s not as big of a deal as you’re making it out to be. Just because tigers don’t naturally eat any sort of plant doesn’t mean they can’t enjoy a watermelon from time to time.”

“That makes just enough sense to keep me from having an existential crisis,” Thunder Lane commended.
Rarity took another slow bite of the Neighpon Panini, savoring the unique flavor. She had to admit, this was an acceptable use of her boutique. Even if it never had been her boutique. Or had any relation to her boutique. …Who cared if it made sense, she was just happier that this place was good.

As she thought, she forgot to keep a tight hold on all the Neighpon Panini’s sauce, and some dripped down onto her face. “Oh, Drat.”

“Here, let me get that.” Before Rarity could do anything, Thunder Lane leaned over the table and wiped the smear off with a flick of his wing. Rarity stared right into his much closer eyes and blushed furiously. She couldn’t bring herself to say anything.

He moved in, connecting his lips with her own. Lightly, gently, as if testing the waters. He pulled away shortly thereafter.

Rarity dropped her Neighpon Panini on back on the plate, splashing the sauce on both of them. She stared blankly into space, trying to process what had just happened and failing for the most part. It was only about one second before the two of them broke out into childish laughter.

Rarity picked a napkin up off the table and started wiping herself down. “Well, Thunder, that was… a bit fast. And unexpected.”

Thunder Lane started wiping himself off as well. “Hey, you were the one who said it wouldn’t go slow.”

“I do believe you misread me a little there.”

“Oh? Really?” Thunder Lane raised an eyebrow. “Too fast for you?”

“A bit, yes. But I’m not storming off in a huff, now am I?”

“Nope.”

“So let’s continue from where we are now, and see where this goes. I assume you have time?”

“All day!”

Rarity smiled. “Good. Why don’t you tell me more about yourself?”

Thunder Lane grinned. “Gladly, my lady.”

Rarity shook her head. This stallion was absolutely crazy and far too forward. And yet… she couldn’t bring herself to stop quite yet. She was intrigued…

~~~

Fluttershy had no idea why she was actually trying to beat this Rainbow Dash, but she was. She was flapping her wings as hard as she could and had her hooves pointed in front of her face for maximum speed. She was very surprised to find that she was actually gaining on the rainbow blur that was Rainbow Dash, and this filled her with an inexplicable desire to win. She smiled to herself – it actually felt good, to be able to fly like this. All those years she’d held herself back, calling herself a weak flier… She wasn’t. She was able to dive bomb to protect her friends, keep up with the many birds of the sky, and could keep an eye on everything around her. She was even producing a pink magic trail behind her, which not every pegasus could do. It was good, not to feel held back anymore.
She still couldn’t do any fancy tricks, but she didn’t feel the need to either. She was just able to fly freely now. And that was all she needed.

Still would be a nice bonus to actually win this race.

She narrowed her eyes and strained her wings just a little more, trying to get a slight boost. She was still behind Rainbow Dash and the goal cloud was fast approaching. She tightened her back legs, trying to force them back so they wouldn’t interfere with the air around her. She angled the motion of her wings – cut forward, push back, cut forward, push back, faster… Faster…

Fluttershy saw Rainbow Dash glance behind her. That would slow her down, maybe enough for Fluttershy to pass her.

Rainbow Dash made a bigger mistake right after that. Something made her tumble head over hooves, losing almost all her speed. Fluttershy put her hooves to her mouth and did a quick loop to grab the out of control Rainbow Dash. She didn’t struggle the entire time between Fluttershy grabbing her and setting her on the cloud.

Rainbow Dash rubbed her nose, wiping away some blood. “Gah. Stupid nosebleed. Made me lose.”

Fluttershy set herself down next to Rainbow Dash. “You still got to the cloud first, Rainbow.”

“Those were pity points, and you know it.”

“Yeah… What happened to your nose, by the way? I didn’t see you hit anything?”

“I have no idea,” Rainbow Dash grunted, rubbing her nose. “I look back to check on you and BAM, nosebleed.”

“Maybe it was the pressure?”

“Usually don’t have that problem.” She shook her head. “By the way, nice flying. Like, really nice. You might have won anyway.”

“Wow, thanks,” Fluttershy said, a little taken aback. “My Rainbow Dash would never admit she might lose.”

“My Fluttershy would never even bother to race.”

Fluttershy smiled warmly. “Well, give her time. I think if you treat her well she’ll gain some confidence. It’ll be a long, slow process, but it can work.”

Rainbow Dash laid down on the cloud. “Yeeeah… It’s hard sometimes, though, y’know? You want to do things with her and you try to spend time with her but she always turns it down. Get her to go somewhere and she ditches the moment anything happens, when you’re not looking. I just…” She sighed. “Sorry, I shouldn’t be venting to you. It must be weird, hearing about yourself.”

“It’s almost like hearing about my past self,” Fluttershy said. “So yeah, a liiiittle weird, but I’m used to this sort of thing by now. She’s locking herself up?”

“Yeah. Nothing I can do gets her out, and it’s really hard sometimes.”

Fluttershy put a wing around Rainbow Dash. “Well, I have a suggestion. If you greet her like you greeted me, you’re probably scaring her. Your brashness, your excitability, your energy. To her, those things are probably scary.”
“Really?” Rainbow Dash said, looking up into Fluttershy’s eyes.

“Really. I used to hide from everything I could. You and Pinkie were the two of my friends I tried to avoid, simply because I didn’t have the nerve to engage with the loudness and excitability. It was exhausting, and nerve-wracking.”

Rainbow Dash frowned. “So… What do I do?”

“Tone down the loudness around her, if you want to help her. The other you… Didn’t really do that for me, so I had to come around in other ways. But I think it would have helped a lot.”

“So I… Change myself?”

“Nothing so drastic, but… Maybe just realize that being loud all the time isn’t always very nice? And cool it on the tackles.”

“But… those things define me. I am the action pony! If I take those away, won’t she see something that isn’t me?”

Fluttershy raised an eyebrow. “I think she knows who you are at this point, assuming you’ve been friends for a while. Just show her you’re willing to give her some space, and I think things will improve. But don’t back off completely, since that’d just let her shrink into her cave again.”

“That sounds… hard.”

Fluttershy nodded. “You’ll have to be patient with her. Very patient. It will take a lot of work on both your parts, but it can work out in the end. I’m sure of it.”

“…I don’t know…”

“Hey, it’s okay if you don’t think you can do it. Some ponies just can’t.”

Rainbow Dash sniffed, wiping her eyes. “I really don’t know.”

“Shh… It’s okay. I’m just here to help.”

“I… Yeah. Thanks.” She looked off into the distance, at Celestia’s sun. “Hey…”

“Hrm?”

“You’re a lot more willing and strong than she is…”

“Yeah?” Fluttershy responded, cocking her head.

“Want to, you know, maybe… Try something?”

“Try what?”

Rainbow Dash blushed furiously. “I mean, I’m not sure I can give her what she wants, and maybe what I’m supposed to take away from this is that I should stop chasing after her. But… You, on the other hand…”

Fluttershy retracted her wing and fixed Rainbow Dash with an unsure expression. “W-what are you saying?”

Rainbow Dash approached her, eyebrows raised. “I’m saying why don’t we, er, get to know each
other a little better. The hungry bun is always open for two ponies looking for that…”

“R-rainbow Dash! Are you asking me on a date?!”

“Uh… yeah?”

“We just met!” Fluttershy blurted.

“Uh, so? I-I mean, is that a problem?”

“Of course it’s a problem!” Fluttershy pointed at her. “It – it’s way too fast! It’s just out of nowhere and… and…”

“Ah,” Rainbow Dash drooped. “You have someone. I understand.”

“No?” Fluttershy said. “I don’t have anyone. I’m just not interested.”

Rainbow Dash’s sad, depressed expression switched to anger. “What!?”

Fluttershy backed away. “…What…?”

“Are you telling me that you, a single mare, are turning down an offer? From me nonetheless? Who does that!?”

“R-rainbow Dash, I think you need to calm down…”

“Oh no, we’re not calming down now! Do you have any idea how much of an insult that is? Oh look at me, I’m a Fluttershy. I fly in such a way that makes Rainbow Dash notice me, I stroke her mane to help her through emotional problems, I care - why would you do all that just to reject me? Huh!?”

Fluttershy glared, taking a firm stance and recollecting her thoughts. “I don’t think you understand how this works.”

“It’s how it always works!” Rainbow Dash shouted. “Two ponies get together, share a moment, and BAM, there it is! You don’t fight that urge unless you’re Starlight!”

“I guess I’m like Starlight then.”

Rainbow Dash growled. “You owe me. I’m not in the mood for a round of hard-to-get.” She stepped forward.

Fluttershy Stared at her. “You need to go now, Rainbow Dash.”

Rainbow Dash’s eyes twitched. “I d-don’t think so!”

Fluttershy slapped her, knocking her off the cloud. “BACK OFF!”

Rainbow Dash flew back up to eye level with Fluttershy. The rainbow pegasus was crying profusely. She flew away as fast as she could.

Fluttershy was still breathing heavily. Tears streaked down her own cheeks. She didn’t understand what had just happened. She didn’t have the emotional power left within her to even try to understand either. She just laid down on the cloud and let herself cry.

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“So what kind of party is this?” Pinkie One said.

“The wildest kind of party you’ll ever see!” Pinkie Two announced. “Wilder than even yours!”

“Oh, I doubt that! One time there was a party war with a party tank!”

“You didn’t set that one up yourself!”

“Ah, I could though! If I wanted to, anyway!”

Pinkie Two giggled. “True. But what you’re about to see is going to blow your miiiiiiind!”

“I’ll believe that when I actually see it!”

“Now, no peeking ahead of time, you hear me?”

Pinkie One nodded. “I’m nooooot, you know I’m not!”

“That I doooo!”

“OooooOOOOo000 we’re so spooopy!”

“So, which building is it?”

Pinkie Two pointed a hoof at a large residence with an ornate oak door. “Right this way, me-from-the-other-place!”

Pinkie bounced up to the door and threw it open. “HELLO EVERYPONY I’M HERE TO PA-“

She stopped talking. She quickly turned around, slammed the door shut, and walked into the street.

Pinkie Two blinked. “…What’s wrong?”

“You’ve scarred me for life!” Pinkie One wailed, ramming her head into the ground. “That’s… That wasn’t a party! That was messed up was what that was!”

Pinkie Two’s eyes began to form tears. “…I… I… I…”

“Oh no!” Pinkie One yelled. “Don’t cry! You can and they can do what they want-“ she shivered at the thought. “Buuuuut that’s just not my thing! Okay?”

“How can it not be your thing?”

“Pinkie, come oooooo, do a little search!”

“Ooooooooh…” Pinkie Two said, tapping her head. “Right… I see… Wow you ponies have a sad existence.”

“Hey!” Pinkie One retorted. “We get by just fine without getting that wild!”

“But where’s the fun in that?”

“Maybe there’s more to life and parties than just fun! Maybe there are, I don’t know, more important things?”

“Woah… You’re really off the deep end, aren’t you? That’s okay, I guess we’re more likely to be like that.”
Pinkie One grabbed her head and rammed it into the ground again. There were muffled screams of exasperation. Then she shot bolt upright onto all four hooves. “Okay. Done. I’m done with today. I’m going to see if I can pull some brain bleach out of somewhere and forget I ever saw that. Then I can go on with my life.”

“But Pinkie! Come oooooo! You should at least try-“


Pinkie Two shrugged. “Your loss.”

“No, yours.”

The two giggled, then looked at each other like aliens, then walked their own separate directions.

Pinkie One sat down at the side of a road later and held her head. “Agh. Why did I have to see that? Come on! I’d like to knoooow! Oh, I know lots of things, do I? Yeah but I’m not an omnipotent she-demon or something!”

“You okay?” A stallion asked, walking over to her with a concerned expression on his face.

“Do not talk to me,” Pinkie said, pointing a hoof. “I can feel the ‘romance’ flowing off you. Not today, got it?”

The stallion whimpered and walked away.

Pinkie decided now was a good time to stare blankly ahead at nothing for the next few hours. Because why not. It was better than talking to herself and attracting… unwanted attention. For once in her life, attention was a bad thing.

She shivered to herself.

~~~

Twilight blinked. “Hey, where’d Nova go? She was here just a second ago.”

The unicorn Twilight shrugged. “Maybe she saw herself, I don’t know. All I know is that we’re alone and now we’re at the library!”

Twilight smiled with nostalgia as she laid eyes upon the familiar wooden visage of Golden Oaks Library. The coloring was slightly off, and a couple of the branches were different sizes than she remembered, but there was no doubt in her mind that this was her home. She really hoped this one didn’t get destroyed as well.

“Want to come inside?”

“Sure!” Twilight said, walking in the front door and gazing at the shelves upon shelves of books. “I wonder if any of the books are different…”

“We could take a look! We can skip the romance studies section though, I’m sure you’ve already studied that exhaustively.”

“Uh… what?”

The unicorn blinked. “Didn’t Princess Celestia send you to your library to learn about romance?”
“No, I had to learn about friendship. Hence ‘Princess of Friendship’."

The unicorn gasped. “Oh my Celestia, you didn’t study romance? How did you survive?”

“What do you mean? I didn’t have much of a problem.”

“Did you come pre-installed with a special somepony then?”

Twilight cocked her head. “No… Don’t have one. And I generally don’t have much of a desire to get one.”

The unicorn looked like she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “Have you ever been with anybody?”

“I mean, no? I danced with a guy in an alternate universe once, but I wasn’t exactly myself.”

The unicorn grabbed Twilight by the cheeks. “We’ve got to fix this immediately. Come with me, we’ll be in the romance section. We’ve got to get you in the playing field.”

Twilight walked with her to the romance section, frowning. “Why though? I’m perfectly happy the way I am.”

“Lies. Classic case of hard to get, possibly even kuudere, but you don’t strike me as rash enough for that. I mean, we all know aromantics don’t actually exist, been socially proven. Nothing just-so-story legend.”

“You’re saying a lot of things that sound pretty crazy to me. Also a little… disrespectful.”

The unicorn looked Twilight right in the eyes. “Listen to me, other me. I am the master shipper in this town. I know exactly who to pair with who, at what time, and how long. I-“

“How long?”

“Yeah. Not everypony needs the same partner for that long. Some ponies do, others don’t. Come on, this is basic stuff! How starved are you? You must be holding in a lot of emotions. Can’t be healthy.”

“I’m not though,” Twilight said, recoiling. “Why is it such a big deal? I- oh. Ooooooooh.” She facehooved. “I think I get it. Your universe must operate on romance, or something.”

“…Come again?”

Twilight smiled. “Romance isn’t a big deal where we come from, not really. I know of a few paired off ponies – my brother’s one of them – but for the most part we’re all just happy to live our lives. Most ponies aren’t in any rush to pair up or-“

“That… That sounds horrible!” the unicorn interrupted. “I… I don’t think I could live in a world where that wasn’t the case! It’d be like living as Rainbow Dash for eternity, never letting the feelings out for any reason just because of stubbornness!”

“Really, Twilight, I’m happy, there’s no need-“

“No,” the unicorn said, stuffing her hoof in Twilight’s mouth. “I’m the best shipper in town. I’ll find somepony for you and prove it’ll work. Just place two ponies together and BAM, match!”

“…That strikes me as emotionally unhealthy.”
“Why? It’s how matches are made nine out of ten times! Of course, as I said, you could be a hard-to-get or a kuudere. Or something more exotic, being from a universe where… Oh, is it possible you’re actually an aromantic? Oh my Celestia, can such ponies exist out there? Your lives must be horrible!”

“Hey, I—"

The unicorn took out a giant book and laid it on the table. “I’ve accepted this challenge, as the student and possible future Princess of Romance, I will find you, at the very least, a one night stand…”

“Twilight! Hey! No! Stop!”

The unicorn stared at the alicorn. “…Why?”

“I, just, this feels wrong, don’t you say? For you to just smash me in a position with someone and demand we click?”

“I haven’t failed yet!”

Twilight grabbed her head, which was starting to throb. “Oh for the love of… Listen, Twilight, listen. Think for a moment that maybe, just maybe, that not everything runs on romance.”

“…Impossible. Why else is it so prevalent? Our minds are filled with thoughts almost solely devoted to romantic inclinations! It is the primary driving force in our nation!”

“And that’s not the case where I’m from.”

The unicorn fixed Twilight with a big, innocent grin. “Then I’m here to show you how wonderful it is and improve your culture!”

“That’s not—" Twilight stopped herself. A single phrase entered her mind. Something she’d said to so many different worlds so many times.

*Friendship is Magic.*

Other common remarks came shortly thereafter.

*Try to be friendlier.*

*Stop the fighting!*

*We’re here to help you. Look at how we can make things better.*

“…You okay?” the unicorn asked.

“I… I’m not sure. I may be on the verge of a minor existential breakdown…” She shook her head. “Okay. I’ll try it. I’d just be a hypocrite if I didn’t. Though, I do suggest toning down the enthusiasm if you want to try this on other ponies. There’s going to be a lot of similar reactions.”

The unicorn clapped her hooves in glee. “All right! So, first off, I have to set some ground rules. Mares or stallions or both?”

“…Stallions, I guess?”

“Stallion leaning…” She checked something off on her list. “Care about the race at all?”
“Not that I’m aware of.”

“Good… Good…” She made a few more marks. “The next question is ‘what do you typically look for in a partner’, but obviously this won’t apply to you. So, tell me what traits you find admirable in other ponies.”

“Intelligence, Passion, Kindness, Loyalty, Laughter, Generosity, Honesty—”

“Ignoring the listing of the Elements of Harmony.”


“Okay, good enough then. You mentioned something about being concerned with the timeframe of the relationship.”

“Yeah. Isn’t romance supposed to be, I don’t know, a life-long commitment?”

The unicorn put her hoof to her chin. “That is the strongest and generally most fulfilling kind of romance, though of course not always, but there’s a big problem. Ponies click all the time, regularly, left and right. With so many clicks happening all the time, rarely will any long-term relationship be able to last. It’s beautiful when one manages to blossom and stay strong for decades, and it’s certainly the stuff of legends told to swoon ponies, but it’s just not realistic.”

“Forgive me if I don’t believe you.”

“Look, I may not be the best example, but I’ve had a different pony every month or so. The average is about six months, I think. There’s several click moments a day, I’m sure you saw the one outside on the bench, right?”

“…Yes.”

“Basically, I can try to find you a lifelong partner, but there’s no guarantee you’ll be able to resist the click, and definitely not him.”

“How does your culture even raise children?” Twilight wondered aloud.

“Uh, the parents who bore them dur. Who else?”

“But if they keep changing…”

“Ohhhhh…” The unicorn hit herself upside the head. “That’s right! You guys probably still have jealousy in your universe! I feel your pain. We mostly got rid of that a while back. Took some cultural renovations, but we all realized it was flat impossible for every pony to remain devoted. Too much power in the desires.”

Twilight frowned. “That just sounds… sad. It actually makes the romance seem… less potent to me. Like it means little.”

“Well how would you know if, as you claim, you’ve never really experienced it?”

Twilight had nothing to say to that. “…It just feels wrong, is all. But I’ll go along for now.”

“I’d recommend staying away from Pinkie’s parties then. They’re promoting the idea of continual sharing.”
Twilight blinked. “…I have no comment.”

“Fair enough…” She dug through a few more pages in her book and made some more notes. “Well, I can try to get you as long term as you want, perhaps even start with an initial date with no intention of having an instant *click*…”

“…You’re speaking more and more alien. I’m pretty sure it’s supposed to be *several* dates before you make anything official.”

“Your world is backwards.”

“…Actually we’ve been to hundreds of worlds. Yours seems to be the oddball, here.”

The unicorn frowned. “…Strange. That does deserve more looking into… After I’m done with you I think I’d like to explore a bit!”

Twilight wasn’t sure why, but she felt like that was a horrible idea.

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“Where in Celestia’s name am I?” Nova shouted.

A pink unicorn removed her goggles and placed them over her horn, revealing herself to be a Starlight. “Yeah. Hi. You’re in my secret research station.”

“…Your what?”

“Please don’t freak out, I had to get you in here without anypony noticing.”

Nova looked around at the ‘station’ – which was just a basement lined with pictures. Hundreds of pictures of ponies kissing, making eyes at each other, and sitting staring into each other’s eyes. “…This is freaky.”

“Yes. It is. But someone has to keep track of what’s going on,” Starlight said, taking a deep breath. “I figured that if anyone would understand me, it’d be you. And that I had to get to you before they did. *Her* in particular.”

“…Who?”

“Twilight. The unicorn. The *shipper*.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand anything about what you’re saying.”

Starlight bit her lip. “Okay, so, in order to answer that, I have to ask a question. Does your world define itself in almost every interaction by spontaneous displays of romantic affection? Like that couple on the bench?”

“…No. Wait, that thing on the bench *defines* this place?”

Starlight nodded sadly at Nova. “Indeed it does. For the last few years, I’ve slowly become aware of a ‘curse’ of sorts placed on our entire world.” She used her magic to lift a picture of a younger version of herself playing with a small, sunny colt. “Every pony feels the urge, the *click*, as Twilight named it. Every day, thousands of ponies – in a relationship or not – feel an instant, nearly inexplicable attraction to another pony, and the vast majority of the time that feeling is reciprocated. They explain it away as something about the event that made them *click*, but the things that happen are things that happen every day. Talking over dinner. Racing. Having fun at a completely normal
party…” She put the picture back on the wall. “I myself am not immune. But I decided to fight it as a young filly when I saw what it was doing to the ponies around me. It was… hard. It still is. Ponies cry because I run the moment a *click* happens.”

Nova shook her head. “T-this is a lot to take in. Are you saying there’s, like, some kind of love curse on the world, or something?”

“It’s not a curse as we understand it, but it’s definitely not natural,” Starlight said, taking out a large sheet of paper and laying it out on the table. “It’s not magic. But, after years of research, I was able to prove that there is *some force* that acts whenever a *click* happens.” She pointed at a bunch of scrawlings that reminded Nova of some of the things she’d seen Corona working on. “…You can’t understand what this says, can you?”

“No, sorry. I was never a good scientist or intellectual mage. I just think and cast.”

“Well… I guess the details aren’t that important. What *is* important is that there is something *strong* acting in this world, Nova, and *nopony cares*. Nopony cares that our world is under the thumb of something else. Everypony just wants to find the next *click* or to enjoy their lives in blissful romance without a care for much of anything else.”

Nova furrowed her brow. “That… that does sound horrible. Do you have any idea how to stop it?”

“No. All I can do is *detect* it, and only barely. Whatever it is, it’s everywhere – even on you – but it’s *ambient* unless there’s a *click* going on. It’s as if some fundamental force of the universe is forcing ponies together!” Starlight sighed. “I… I really don’t know why I brought you in here. You can’t help me.”

“…Maybe you just needed someone to agree with you?”

Starlight smiled. “Yeah. Maybe. Nopony else has ever agreed…”

“Starlight, is there… Anypony else like you?”

Starlight shook her head. “No. I used to go around, trying to preach to ponies about what I saw. Nopony *ever* listened. It was like they couldn’t. Many times I could barely listen to myself…”

Nova put a hoof on her back. “Hey, you tried. I’m not sure we can do anything against this force… But we *can* get you out of here. We once met a world filled with double-talking manipulative liar ponies. One of them decided she didn’t like what her universe had for her, so she left. Version of Fluttershy who goes by the name Lieshy now. She’s part of a team that explores the multiverse.”

“You… You’re really offering me a way out?” Starlight asked.

“I don’t see why not. You obviously aren’t happy here. And… no offense, I don’t even think our more technologically advanced allies could help with something like… *this.*” She gestured at the vast conspiracy wall Starlight had set up. “And I’m not sure the ponies here would like us even if we could.”

“That’s true… I guess… It just feels so wrong throwing it all away, choosing a new name, and leaving the problem behind.”

“Some things… Can’t be fixed,” Nova said, hugging her counterpart close.

Starlight kissed her without thinking – then jumped into the air and placed herself against a wall. Pictures and papers fluttered to the floor, punctuating the scene in silence. Starlight clung to the
wall, her eyes darting in every direction. “THAT DIDN’T HAPPEN. OKAY? OKAY?”

Nova wiped the kiss off her check and shook her head. “There… There really is a problem here.”

Starlight blushed furiously, like so many ponies in this world did. “Y-yeah. I need out of here. I need to move, change my name, and… yeah. Yeah that sounds good. Starbeat. I can be Starbeat.”

Nova helped Starbeat up. “You’ve just chosen your name in a moment of emotional turmoil. Hope you don’t regret it.”

Starbeat took a breath. “Let’s… Let’s just get out of here. Grab your friends.”

Nova paled. “Wait… If you’re actively fighting your inner urge, what’s happening to them?”

“…Probably nothing good,” Starbeat said.

~~~

General Sunset and Toph were sitting at a bar. Sunset passed Toph a drink.

“Wow. I’ve had to keep reminding people that I’m blind, but never have I had to remind someone that I’m just a kid. Not even fourteen here! There’s no way I’m supposed to drink that!”

Sunset rammed her head into the table and groaned.

Toph completely forgot her earlier annoyance and laughed. “That can’t be easy on your antlers.”

“It isn’t.” Sunset confirmed, lifting her head up and downing her drink. She downed Toph’s as well, for good measure. “I’m just a little sick of not getting any information about the Sage.”

“I think we’ve gotten plenty of information!” Toph said. “Let’s see… She’s an oculus, she likes to grab ponies who think they’re heroes and manipulate them into giving her magic artifacts, she can probably see into the future, and she’s got some kind of evil plan!”

“We’re not even sure it is an evil plan, Toph.”

Toph shrugged, kicking her feet up onto the bar. “It seems pretty obvious to me that she’s up to no good. She royally screwed up the Hub, took the diamond, and had you and Applejack at each other’s throats for years!”

Sunset nodded. “Fair point. You really know how to cut right to the meat of the issue, don’t you?”

“I do. Especially when I’m on a planet that has almost no meat. Why do only mawlie joints ever have anything succulent?”

Sunset rolled her eyes, not dignifying the question with a response.

Toph suddenly sat up, alert. “Somebody big is coming.”

“How far?” Sunset asked, preparing a few anticipatory spells.

“Far, but moving fast.”

Sunset could feel the earth shaking with the hoofsteps of whoever was coming. Every patron in the bar turned to the main doors. They were gently opened, revealing a gigantic pony in full plate armor made of a white metal. A tremendous warhammer floated in the armored behemoth’s telekinesis,
ready to smash at a moment’s notice. The pony walked up to Sunset and Toph and set the hammer on the ground.

“Wow. Big guy,” Toph said.

The ‘big guy’ removed the helmet and set it down – revealing a mare inside with a purple mane, white coat, and blue eyes. Her head looked too small for the armor she was in. “I am no guy, little one. I am Lady Rarity.”

“Oh. Yeah, weirdest Rarity so far,” Toph commented.

“…What?”

“Nothing,” Sunset said. “What do you want from us?”

“I hear you’ve been asking around about the Sage. I can tell you a bit about her.”

“She manipulated you too, huh?” Toph said. “Apparently that’s going around.”

“She did a little more than that,” Rarity said. “I knew her when she was young. She betrayed me to embark on the path she currently walks.”

Sunset’s ears perked up. She shook her head, trying to clear her head of inebriation. “This is new. Continue.”

“I’m not giving it to you for nothing. I’ll tell you all I know, but only if Toph here agrees to meet with a friend of mine.”

“Tell us who this friend is,” Sunset demanded.

Toph folded her arms. “I can make my own choices, Sunset. I’ll go regardless of who it is, so long as I’ll be able to come back.”

Rarity nodded. “You have my word as a Lady that you will be returned before the day is out. She only wishes one conversation with you, to give you some insight. She does not want to get involved with the military.”

“Oh, so she’s a criminal?” Sunset said.

“Yeah, obviously,” Toph said, waving her hand. “I accept!”

“Toph-“

“Too late, already did, spill the beans lady. …That sounds a lot lamer when your actual title is Lady.”

Rarity nodded. “Pinkie and I were born in the town of Serville. It was a small town, out of the way, everything was self-contained and we didn’t care too much about anything. She was one of two oculi in town, the other being her mother. From the beginning, everypony knew she was no ordinary oculus. She knew things she had never witnessed, was able to answer questions about the future, and regularly commented on how people were destined to act. Like she was some kind of prophet.”

“Were these predictions accurate?” Sunset asked.

“Most often, yes. But she made less and less of them as time went on, because ponies feared her for it. Meanwhile, I joined the town guard and protected us from whatever would come, namely wild
magic creatures from the nearby forest.”

“Why do you ponies always build towns near dangerous forests?” Toph asked.

“I have no idea,” Rarity admitted. “I do know that life was good. Pinkie and I were friends, even. I accepted what she said without letting it get in the way of our companionship. But then… One day she saw something she wasn’t supposed to see.”

Sunset leaned in. “What?”

“I don’t know. She saw what she called ‘the truth of the world’. It was apparently terrifying and angering. She told me, that day, that we were going to find a way to change the truth. After that day she never told me anything else about what she’d seen, no matter how much I asked. She just told me that she’d become aware of several interesting magical artifacts, and would appreciate it if I could help her find them.”

“The question is why she did that, though…” Sunset said.

“I do not know, to this day, what her use for them was. All I know was that we adventured, collected then, and she put them all together in some kind of Mechanism. She would never tell me what the Mechanism was for, but I trusted her. This was a mistake. Our friendship ended the day she said she needed a recently deceased pony. I destroyed the Mechanism in a fit of rage and she vanished the day after that.”

“So, she’s probably building something to change the ‘truth of the world’, Toph said. “Uh… Yeah I got nothing. What does that mean?”

Sunset furrowed her brow. “I don’t know. Only Armonia knows the truth of the world…”

“Hey, why don’t you ask her? She’s like, the guardian spirit of this world, right?”

“I don’t know how to contact the Goddess. I’d have to speak to the Queen, and I’m not sure even she knows.”

“Well, guess where we’re going next then?” Toph said. “The palace! Well, after I talk with mysterious criminal pony.”

“It should not be long,” Rarity said. “I will perform the teleport now if you don’t mind.”

Toph shrugged. Sunset fixed Rarity with a steeled look. “If you don’t bring her back, I can and will bring the entire might of Lai’s army crashing down on you.”

“I understand.” With a flash of light, Toph and Rarity were somewhere else, underground. The only other pony there was a pink pony with arcs coming out of her side.

“Ah, you’re that Starlight that’s the Arcei!” Toph said, pointing. “I’ve heard about you!”

“Most of that is all wrong,” Starlight said. “I’m also going by Starcei now, since the dimensions don’t appear to be going away.”

“Fair enough,” Toph said, tapping her foot on the ground. “We’re just under the bar, aren’t we?”

“Yes,” Starcei said. “All we need is for Sunset not to be here. She would likely kill me on sight.”

“Why do the ponies hate you guys so much, anyway?”
“An Arcei can only be created through the destruction of a holy Rune. Naturally, the destruction of those Runes is frowned upon. While most younger Arcei would probably get a pass, I’m the inventor, so I have a death sentence twenty times over.”

“Harsh.”

“Not really. Thousands did die from what I did.”

“…Should I be concerned?”

“Not at the moment. I just want something from you. Feel free to refuse.”

“What?”

“I want you to help the Arcei,” Starcei said. “Everypony hates them. Tell them they can leave this world. They at least need the opportunity.”

“…Sure,” Toph said. “No problem with that.”

“Good. Rarity will take you back now. I won’t hold it against you if you fail to save them all. I just wanted you to be thinking about it.”

“Can I tell Sunset about this, or…?”

“That is up to you. You can tell her I talked to you, or not. I’ll be gone by the time she can react.” She nodded to Rarity. “Take her back.”

Toph and Rarity were back in the bar. Sunset blinked. “That was fast.”

“It was a quick talk,” Toph said.

“Who with?”

“Oh, you know, public enemy number one. Starlight the Arcei.”

Sunset’s eyes twitched. “…She’s gone already, isn’t she.”

“Yep.” Toph tapped her foot on the ground and detected no Starcei at all. “She’s gone.”

Sunset glared at Rarity. “I could question you about this.”

“And I couldn’t tell you anything.”

“Fine.” Sunset walked towards the door. “Come on Toph, we’re leaving. The Palace calls us.”

Toph shrugged. “Right behind you, steamy.”

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“So, your parents exhibited a full life-long devotion,” Twilight the unicorn commented. “Describe to me what that was like.”

“That’s… Kinda their business, don’t you think?” Twilight the alicorn responded.

The unicorn shrugged. “I’m just trying to get a read on you. I think I’m forming a picture of your hidden preferences, but I need to be sure since you’re such an unusual case.”
Twilight took a big breath. “Okay. I can best describe their relationship as one where my mom dragged dad everywhere and dad kept her from blowing everything up.”

“…Interesting description.”

“Were your parents similar?”

“Well, I guess? They were only together for a total of about two years during my childhood, and that was spread out over two different stretches of time.”

“I want to tell you I’m sorry, but I have a feeling you’d just consider that ‘normal’.”

“Yes!”

Twilight shook her head. “Okay, next.”

“Okay, so, when you think of a—”

Nova and Starbeat burst into the library at the same time.

Twilight turned to look at the two of them, able to identify Nova by the lack of goggles. “…What’s wrong?”

“This entire world has a ‘curse’ of some sort on it!” Nova said.

“Oh no,” the unicorn said. “She got to you? I thought you were different!”

“You can shut up, shipper!” Starbeat shouted.

Nova nudged her. “Not cool.”

Starbeat took a breath and swallowed. “Sorry, Twilight. But it’s true.”

Twilight looked at Nova. “What kind of curse?”

Nova shook her head. “It’s a confusing one, but it’s something that affects everypony here. Romance is a driving force in this world because something forces it on them. A force that pushes ponies in situations to click and feel a deep, powerful connection all the time.”

Twilight nodded. “I mean, that makes sense, but how can you be sure?”

Nova pointed at Starbeat. “Starbeat here, er… showed a display of affection seconds after explaining the problem to me, even though she clearly didn’t really want to. Apparently the force latched onto her elation of being believed for the first time in forever and made a click. Which I’m pretty sure is still happening given the way she keeps glancing at me.”

“I’m sorry!” Starbeat yelled, covering her eyes. “I can’t stop staring…”

The unicorn furrowed her brow. “This pairing could work, actually… Just need to get you past the conspiracy stage, and since you’re of the same gender there’s no danger of inbreeding…”

Twilight stuck her tongue out in disgust. “Are you… Are you really going there now? Seriously?”

“Er, yeah?”

Twilight turned to Nova and Starbeat. “I think you two are right. This just isn’t natural. Is there
anything we can do?”

“Already talked about that,” Nova said. “We don’t think so. And I don’t think these ponies want us to anyway. I just promised to take Starbeat out of here. We need to find the others before something else happens.”

The unicorn blinked. “…So… You’re taking Starbeat off our hooves? Good! She’s been nothing but a nuisance!”

Starbeat looked crestfallen. Twilight shook her head in shame at her counterpart. “I… I tried to be accepting of you, to be more understanding, to think that maybe I’ve been a hypocrite all this time, but… I can’t do that anymore. Twilight Sparkle, you’re so focused on romance that you’re forgetting there’s other things. You just called a pony a nuisance in order to hurt them! That’s not right!”

“But it’s the truth,” the unicorn responded.

Twilight shook her head. “…I really do feel sorry for you. But you appear to enjoy where you are. We’re going to leave and not come back. You won’t have to deal with us challenging your beliefs ever again.”

Twilight the unicorn looked mad. “But I didn’t even get to try anything out on you!”

“If that’s why you’re upset…” Nova didn’t finish the question. “Come on, Twilight, let’s find the others.”

They left the library, slamming the door behind them. Unicorn Twilight never came out after them.

“There’s Pinkie,” Nova said, pointing at a pink blob on the side of the road. “…She doesn’t look good.”


“…At least your mane isn’t flat, so…”

Pinkie nodded vigorously. “Yep. Silver lining. Heheh…” She shook her head. “Can we go yet? The universe wants ponies to love me. It’s unnerving.”

Fluttershy landed next to Pinkie, not even trying to hide the fact that she’d been crying heavily. “I… Yes, I need to go as well.”

“We all do,” Nova said, shaking her head.

The four of them walked toward the diner just as Rarity and Thunder Lane walked out.

Rarity waved to them. “Ah, girls! I want you to meet Thunder Lane, simply the most dashing of stallions and—” she saw the depressed, angry, sad, and crazy faces of her friends. “…What in Celestia’s name happened to all of you!?”

Pinkie grabbed her head. “I DON’T KNOW! Is this a comedy? A social commentary? A rant? A parody? Am I supposed to be serious or not? Is there even a right answer!?” She rammed her head into the ground again and let out a muffled scream.

Rarity turned to Twilight. “Twilight…”

Twilight sighed. “You aren’t going to like this Rarity. This universe is ‘cursed’ by a ‘romance’
plague of some kind. It forces relationships and romantic connections to happen extremely often and without restraint.” Twilight glanced at her friends. “I think we all experienced something less than… pleasant because of that.”

Rarity turned to Thunder Lane. “Well… Girls, I assure you that Thunder Lane is not subject to such a curse.”

Twilight turned to Thunder Lane. “Thunder Lane, how long do you intend to stay with Rarity?”

“As long as both of us want. What kind of question is that?”

Twilight sighed. “Let me guess. You’d no longer want it next time you felt a click?”

“Naturally.”

Rarity stared at him aghast.

“…What’s the problem Rarity? That’s romance 101! The-“

Rarity slapped him. He was apparently so startled by this he passed out.

“Why… Does life… Have to be so cruel…” Rarity spat, trying to hold back her tears. “I just wanted to be loved, Twilight! Why couldn’t I just enjoy that! Why?”

Twilight hugged her close. “Because it wasn’t real. Not like the friendship that we all share.”

Nova turned to Starbeat. “…Is it?”

Starbeat lit her horn, scanning for the force. “…There’s more of the force around you than there is normally, but… Nowhere near as much as when there’s a click. I don’t think you’re being forced into your companionship.”

“Don’t think…” Rarity said, pulling back from the hug. “This… I think I understand why Pinkie didn’t know what to think of this. She’s… always seen a bit more than we have. She’s probably asking questions a lot deeper than we have.”

Pinkie rolled over and gasped. “Word of advice, don’t go that deep into the thinking pool. Bad things lurk there.”

Twilight chuckled. “I… I’m not sure what to make of this whole adventure. I’m not sure what to make of romance anymore, or even friendship. But I do know one thing. We do not want to be like these ponies here. Perhaps we have a lesser curse in our world, one of Friendship. We should be aware that might be the case. There should be other things important to use besides friendship. It’s not all there is.”

Everypony looked at each other like they weren’t quite ready to believe it, but they realized that not being ready to believe it was a possible sign of it being true.

Rarity sighed. “Just… Just take us home Twilight. I have a date with a drama couch and several gallons of ice cream.”

“I need to organize a normal town-wide party,” Pinkie added.

“I need to go talk to Rainbow Dash…” Fluttershy commented.

Twilight smiled sadly. “Nova?”
“Going to teach Starbeat here some things. You?”

“I… I’m going to reread all those letters I sent to Celestia on friendship. Probably talk to her about this as well.” She pulled out the dimensional device and dialed Equestria. “…I hope the ponies here can… I don’t know, live well? I… I just feel sorry for this place.”

“It’s like someone made a wish, and it went horribly wrong,” Rarity observed.

“Yeah. It does look a lot like that. Suspiciously like that…” Pinkie muttered.

The six ponies left through the portal, leaving the world obsessed with romance behind for as long as they could manage.

A certain unicorn named Twilight Sparkle sat in her library, looking at all her notes.

For the slightest of moments, she wondered if Starbeat had been right. That if maybe something was wrong with their universe.

…Nah, that’d be silly.
Bon Bon sat at her desk, staring at the Mirror Portal. She was not the only ‘secretary’ watching the relic anymore – shifts had been arranged, and usually there were two or three on duty at any given time. For the moment, however, she was at the desk alone. Nobody had come through the Mirror Portal in some time, probably since it was in its “Binary” connection period, and the Binaries didn’t want people without invitations showing up. It was due to switch locations in a few minutes, however.

Bon Bon looked at all the papers in front of her. She had mixed feelings about all the data she gathered from those who came and went. The notes were perhaps the most important pieces of paper for Equestria, and yet most everything on them was boring. Occasionally there was someone suspicious who needed to be watched for a while, but for the most part it was just… notes. Notes on people.

Then again, she supposed if she kept getting bored the Pinkie Sage might show up again and trash the joint. It was only a matter of time before something else like that happened. Maybe she should revel in the present dull moment…

A swiveling office chair slid up next to Bon Bon’s desk, Lyra the unicorn lounging on it. “Hey, Sweetie, when do you get off work?”

Bon Bon facehooved. “Lyra…”

“What?”

“You know what.”

“You also know there’s no way anypony knows what that means. This sounds like a perfectly normal, albeit sappy, conversation.”

Bon Bon raised an eyebrow. “It did until that moment.”

“…Horsefeathers. Now they’re onto me.”

Bon Bon rolled her eyes. “My shift ends in an hour.”

“Mind if I stick around ‘til then?”

Bon Bon should have said no, but she was already a little bored, nothing was happening, and Lyra’s adorable expression was an unfair weapon. “You can stay.”

“Woo!” Lyra slid her office chair next to Bon Bon’s. Luckily the desk could seat two easily. “All right, so, what’re the secrets of the day?”

Bon Bon shrugged, lifting up a piece of paper. “Not much. The Binaries are hairy and grumpy, as usual.”

“Aren’t they always?”

“Lyra, have you even met one?”
Lyra pursed her lips. “No… But I hear a lot about them! Secluded, xenophobic, and paranoid!”

“Close,” Bon Bon said. “What most people don’t realize is that they’re scared. They were scared of magic because they have no way to stop it. Now they’re scared of everything because their edge – their technology – is far outclassed by that of the Tau’ri. They feel like the multiverse is a competition and that they are slated to lose.”

“Huh. I guess so… Wouldn’t they outclass our Earth, though? I mean, I did a lot of studying of their culture, and ‘Earth Vitis’ isn’t exactly an advanced or magical place.”

“They don’t need to be dead last to be afraid.”

“Good point…” Lyra scratched her chin, looking around them. “You know, all these humans walking about are much less of a big deal than I thought they’d be. Ponies aren’t really surprised they exist, and you can see one walking around Ponyville on any given day. Yet when I was all talking about humans I was seen as crazy.”

Bon Bon shook her head. “Ponies believe what they see.”

“And that includes you,” Lyra prodded.

“Er… Yes,” Bon Bon said, flustered. “I… Well I’m still not sure there were ancient humans on Equestria, but humans certainly do exist. Again, I’m sorry.”

Lyra smirked. “It’s okay. Didn’t really mind that much that ponies didn’t believe me… Most of the time. That said… Humans are a lot less interesting than I thought they’d be.”

“How so?”

Lyra put a hoof to her chin. “Well, I don’t know, I think I was expecting more than a bunch of apes with big imaginations? I was expecting a race that could mold worlds into what they wanted, not these people who regularly fight among themselves over every little thing.”

Bon Bon smirked. “They’re just different, Lyra. Humans are generally more innovative and determined than we are, though this comes with stubbornness and more violent tendencies. But think about it from their perspective. We have magic and significantly tighter ‘community’ than they do, but we’re also a bit too trusting and can be emotionally compromised somewhat easily. That said, I am just speaking in generalizations here.”

“Hrm…” Their conversation was brought to an end when the Mirror Portal changed its destination to ‘Earth Tau’ri’. Like clockwork – which the Tau’ri were so fond of – Daniel Jackson and a small team of Stargate Command personnel walked into the Hub. Daniel walked right up to Bon Bon. “Contact Twilight Sparkle, we’re requesting the assistance of her team.”

Bon Bon raised an eyebrow. “What for?”

“We’ve been shot at by an alternate universe and would like some assistance on getting them to think before they shoot.”

Lyra turned to Bon Bon. “That sounds like a perfectly valid reason to me. “

Bon Bon nodded, pulling out her dimensional device. “Give me a moment, I’ll pass on the message.” She left, leaving Lyra with Daniel.

Lyra looked at the desk in front of her. “…She does know I have no idea how to do this job, right?”
Daniel shrugged. “From what little I know of her, that does seem like something she’d know and purposefully exploit in an act of petty revenge.”

“…Greeeeeat…”

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“Okay, so…” A human man with strangely fluffy hair said, adjusting his General’s uniform as he paced in front of a computer screen. “Dimension E-17 is the topic of discussion today.”

Pinkie raised a hoof. “General Landry?”

Landry pointed at her. “Yes?”

“Why give it such a boring number of a name?”

Landry shrugged. “It’s how we do things. If the natives have a name for it, we’ll call it that, but at the moment such a designation is not really an option.”

“Since they shot at you,” Rarity supplemented.

“Yeah, I’m curious about how that happened,” Fluttershy said. “Did you provoke them in some way? We’ve done that…”

Landry blinked. “You all have never been in an official briefing before, have you?”

Twilight smiled sheepishly. “Nope! I just tell everypony what we’re doing and then we go do it.”

“You ponies could stand to get more organized…”

“It does prevent there from being tons of paperwork,” Daniel pointed out.

“Much as I hate to admit it, paperwork exists for a reason.”

“And there is tons of paperwork,” Twilight reminded them. “Spike just does most of it, and it’s nowhere near as esoteric as your monstrosities.”

“Ooo! Esoteric!” Pinkie clicked her tongue. “Nice word!”

“Thank you.”

Landry shrugged. “This is certainly one of the more interesting briefings I’ve had… Anyway, yesterday, at approximately fifteen-hundred hours, the Hammond entered a new universe that was near our own as part of a routine scanning mission. The crew was able to determine that they were around another version of Earth, like most universes around here, before they got shot at by surface weapons. Their weapons were not large enough to be a significant threat to the Hammond’s shields, but they were large enough to grab our attention. The Hammond left the universe after leaving a ‘we come in peace’ message that got no response.”

“Could be the translation spell just didn’t have their language figured out,” Twilight suggested. “Actually, I have no idea if the translation spell works on long-range communication or not…”

Landry nodded. “Something to look into. Regardless, we attempted to take a physical team through a dimensional device to the universe, and were shot at by automated turrets the second we stepped through the gate. No fatalities, but a couple men were shot up pretty badly.”
“So what are we doing here, then?” Rarity asked.

“The idea is simple – we’re going to go in through the dimensional device again, this time with you ponies though. You can easily defend against turrets, but more importantly you’ll give them pause because, well, you’re ponies. Use those friend-making skills of yours and see if we can get them to stop shooting at us.”

Pinkie grinned. “You can count on us!”

“Is anybody coming with us?” Twilight asked.

Daniel shook his head. “It’s possible they just don’t trust us, for whatever reason. You five will be it. But we’ll be ready if you need to fall back.”

Twilight smirked. “In that case, we accept this mission. Time to go see the inhabitants of… E-17. What’s the E stand for anyway?”

“Earth,” Landry said. “Seventeenth Earth we’ve found with your devices.”

“Ah. I see. To the gate room then?”

“To the gate room,” Daniel confirmed. He moved to lead them to the room, but Nova decided it’d just be faster to teleport them.

Daniel frowned. “…Is there any way to block teleportation?”

Twilight furrowed her brow. “Yes, but the spells are complicated. Usually you just lock the unicorn’s magic if you don’t want them teleporting…”

“How do those anti-teleport spells work?”

“It creates a field of magical energy that prevents a connection from being able to form between point A and B. I don’t know of any non-magical way to create this effect though, sorry.”

“You mind teleport-proofing some places in the base?”

Twilight smiled. “I don’t mind at all. It’ll take some time to make them permanent, though, especially considering how little magic there is to work with here.”

“Thanks. That’ll get the paranoid security people off our backs.”

“Why do you care so much about security?” Fluttershy asked.

“Have you ever had someone try to chase you back through a portal and take over your world?”

Nova nodded. “Once or twice.”

“You’ve been lucky. Happens all the time here. Most of them never make it through the gate, but those that do cause a lot of damage.”

“Our corner of the multiverse does seem a lot more friendly,” Fluttershy admitted. “The biggest problem we’ve ever had to face is Ba’al. And you’re helping with that.”

Twilight pulled out her dimensional device. “So… What are the coordinates to ‘E-17’?”

Daniel smiled. “You can find them in the directory, but we won’t need to use yours. We have one of
the devices installed in the ceiling. Walter should have it dial E-17 anytime now… Stand back, just in case they start shooting on connection.”

The dimensional device activated, creating a large portal at the base of the ramp leading to the stargate. Daniel poked his head around the edge of it. “No bullets. That’s a good sign.” He gestured for them to go on through.

Twilight raised a shield around them just in case, and the five of them stepped through.

“We’ll reconnect in fifteen minutes if you aren’t back,” Daniel said. “I suggest reporting in before then so we don’t cause drama.”

Twilight nodded. “Gotta.” She led her four friends through the portal, looking around cautiously. The world they came out in was a ghost town. Large pine trees grew around old, crumbling concrete walls. There was evidence of a recent firefight – maybe a day old. The concrete walls were riddled with bullet holes, and there were a couple of broken machines that resembled mounted turrets.

Nothing fired at them. In the distance, they could hear a bird chirping.

Nova activated the drone, tossing it into the air. “I guess you can drop the shield now?”

Twilight cautiously dropped the shield – nothing fired at them.

Everything looked abandoned.

Pinkie blinked. “I don’t see anyone here. What were they so concerned about?”

“Maybe whoever was here thought they’d won the fight…” Rarity mused.

“Or they disabled the turrets and didn’t realize it?” Nova suggested.

“I don’t know,” Twilight said. “All I know is that we’re going to have a look around. Let’s not split up this time, okay?”

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“Hey, Genji, maybe we should split up! Cover more ground that way!”

The cyborg-ninja took a long, deep, annoyed breath. He looked to his teammate with an exasperated expression, though since his entire face was covered by a metal mask akin to the rest of his body armor, his look went unseen.

She deduced that he was annoyed anyway. She put her hands on her hips and raised her eyebrow – an expression Genji could see through her orange-tinted goggles. “What’s wrong with that Genji?”

Genji stood up, craning his neck around a nearby concrete wall. “There was gunfire exchanged, Tracer. We don’t want to get ambushed by Talon or… something else.”

Tracer took her hands off her hips and shrugged. “Hey, you know if I’m ambushed I can always just go back.” The tapped a glowing blue machine affixed to the coat on her chest. “Recall! Saving Tracer’s life since-”

“You and I both know that isn’t perfect. We can’t take the chances.”

“Oh come on! There’s not even anything here anymore! I’m not even convinced there was anything to begin with! We’re in Colorado. What’s important in Colorado?”
“We are on the site of what was once a United States military base, one of several that were destroyed in the Omnic Crisis.”

“Oh,” Tracer said. “…So secret government secrets here?”

“That’s the thing. We don’t know. So we have to be cautious.”

“…Fine… But how long do we keep looking around before we can tell Winston that there’s nothing here and that report was completely bogus?”

Genji made no response. He just moved forward, stealthily, cautiously, while Tracer just followed behind him not making any attempt to be silent whatsoever. “Genji, why are you being so slow? We’ve got no-“

“I’m looking for interesting details,” Genji defended, even though he was mostly moving silently by habit. He pointed between two trees. “See that over there? That’s a busted automatic turret left over from the Omnic Crisis.”

“Oh! Cool!” She lifted up her leg, preparing to dash for it. Genji grabbed her.

“Tracer…”

“Fine, where’s the vantage point you had in mind?”

Genji pointed to a still-standing concrete building. It was missing a roof but the second floor had plenty of cover in it. Genji leaped in one of the windows gracefully – Tracer just phased in an out of existence, effectively teleporting next to him with a quick swish of blue energy.

They looked through a window that, somehow, still had all its glass in it. They could see a ‘clearing’ of sorts made from a set of walls that once made up a storage facility. Genji used his cybernetic vision to scan the area, noting four separate busted turrets and a lot of bullet holes. The damage was fresh – within the day, at least.

Tracer frowned. “Okay, so this is where the thing happened. But why?”

“The warehouse might have held something valuable…” Genji suggested. “But I don’t see evidence of movement anywhere else but this small area…”

“So, we dealing with another ninja then?”

“Even I leave tracks of some sort,” Genji muttered. He stood up, ready to go closer and learn more. But then he saw space itself rippling slightly. He sat down, quickly, pushing Tracer lower as well. They kept their heads as low as possible, staring through the window at the space below.

A hole in reality opened up, showing the two of them an interesting interior dominated by a very large ring-like device covered in strange markings and orange chevrons.

“What is that?” Tracer asked.

“Shh,” Genji hissed.

A few moments later, some beings came out of the side of the portal opposite them. The idea of a two-sided portal of infinite thinness boggled Genji’s mind slightly. Clearly, however, he had more important things to consider besides the bizarre application of physics.

The creatures who came through were horses – no, wait, they were a little too small to be horses.
Ponies. But even that wasn’t quite right – their eyes were too large and forward facing, their mane and coat colors were far too bright, and there were wings and horns on some of them.

He quickly began to assess them – they had come through in a defensive formation, a purple forcefield around them all. They had taken a quick look around, launched a small drone into the air, and then dropped the shield in favor of looking around. They were talking amongst themselves, though Genji had no idea what the language was. They were unarmed save for the drone itself, and Genji wasn’t even sure it had a weapons system.

The purple one was clearly the leader, as could be inferred from the way all the others looked at her. Her position might have been due to her unique combination of both a horn and wings, or because she was the one with a strange device held in her hooves… somehow. She walked with confidence and curiosity, her eyes a strange mixture of childlike innocence and deep thought. The pink unicorn was Genji’s best guess for a right hand man – er, pony. She stayed near the purple one, commenting on things she said, and seemed to be suggesting possible courses of action or answers to questions.

The others Genji couldn’t really place as part of the unit. The white one walked with grace and confidence, and had a bit of style to her the others didn’t. Perhaps the diplomat or communicator? The yellow one talked the least, but was by no means timid or uncertain, though she was clearly more jumpy and not trained. And then… the pink one.

The pink one bounced around like she was made of rubber, talked a lot, and at one point pulled a pastry out of her mane and ate it. Genji was certain it could not have been there before.

“…What are they?” Tracer whispered.

“Ponies. Unicorns. ‘Magical’.”

“They’re adorable.”

“They could also be dangerous. They are exhibiting abilities which I cannot explain.”

“You can’t explain your dragon sword.”

“The dragon is dangerous.”

Tracer frowned. “…I think I’m going to go say hi.”

“…Just because they look harmless doesn’t mean they aren’t.”

“Well how are we going to find out if we don’t interact?”

Genji nodded. “Go ahead then. I’ll bail you out if you need it.”

Tracer waved. “Pfft, as if!”

Genji considered if it would have been more appropriate to say ‘when you need it’, but that was neither here nor there. Not to mention the fact that Tracer had already left, teleporting on top of a crumbling wall and waving to the ponies. “Hello!”

The ponies tensed at first, and for a split second Genji moved his hand to his sword’s hilt, preparing for a fight. However, their nervous expressions vanished rather quickly as they realized Tracer was just waving to them with a smile. They waved back and said something in their bizarre, alien language.
“Sorry, ‘fraid I can’t understand a word you’re saying!” Tracer said, leaping down to be closer to the ponies. She pointed at herself. “Tracer.”

“Twilight,” the purple pony said, pointing to herself, and then slowly introducing the other ponies as well. Twilight pointed to her mouth and rolled her hoof in a circle, while talking rather quickly. The pink one – Pinkie – joined in as well.

“My, I haven’t the foggiest idea what you want from me!” Tracer said.

Genji sighed, accessing his radio. “Tracer, they want you to keep talking so they can work out your language.”

“Oh!” Tracer laughed. “Oh that makes a lot of sense. Hi! I guess I’m just supposed to talk to you while… whatever you have translates. My gosh, a translation device would be great for the world, I mean given our job it’s rather annoying to have to find-“

“Find!” Twilight spoke in English, clear enough for everyone to hear.

“Oh! It seems to be working! Brilliant!” Tracer clapped. “Hey Genji! Come down here, I want to see if-“

“Don’t reveal my location to them, I’m - dammit, they see me.”

Nova waved at him and said something. The words “safe” and “afraid” came through. She was probably telling him not to be afraid. The realization that she thought he was afraid annoyed him, because he was not. He was just being cautious. But at this point hiding was no longer helpful, so he leaped out of the ceilingless vantage point and landed squarely next to Tracer. The motion made a few of the ponies jump, but not as tensely as when they’d seen Tracer.

Tracer playfully nudged Genji. “This is Genji.”

“Hi Genji!” Pinkie said, grinning.

Twilight lit her horn, looking at Tracer, then to Genji. She said something about “unusual” and “power.”

Genji looked at Tracer. “A full translation would be appreciated. You know what to do.”

Tracer took a deep breath and launched into a long rant about how cute Winston could be. “He’s just the biggest, coolest, smartest gorilla around! He’s definitely in charge but it’s just so hard to take him seriously sometimes because of the way he opens the peanut butter and the bananas, and, well, even though he saved my life, which I am eternally grateful for, there’s just something about that cute ape expression that just… Oh I don’t know how to describe it, you’d have to meet him!”

Genji facepalmed at her choice of topic.

About twenty seconds later, Fluttershy raised a hoof. “So, I’m confused, since I only got half the conversation… Are we talking about a person or a gorilla?”

Tracer blinked. “Oh. It’s done then? Ah, well, Winston’s both! A gorilla with a brilliant mind! Born on the moon!”

Fluttershy blinked. “That just gives me more questions.”

Genji folded his hands together. “You can ask later. Right now, we need to figure out what you are
and what you’re doing here.”

Twilight cleared her throat. “We are a group of interdimensional explorers from another universe entirely.”

Genji nodded. Considering that they were sapient ponies, that wasn’t such a crazy idea.

“With me? Good. In this particular instance we weren’t just exploring random universes, we were asked to come here since another set of explorers got shot at every time they came here.” Twilight gestured at the turrets. “They figured we’d need to talk some people down, but so far that hasn’t seemed necessary.”

Tracer gasped. “They shot at you? How could they!”

Rarity shook her head. “No no, dear, they were humans, just like you and… I presume Genji here.”

Genji made no comment. Tracer gasped. “My stars, your voice is so refined!”

Rarity beamed. “Finally! Someone who gets it! It takes a bit of work to get it this way. Your accent is delightful as well, by the by.”

“And once again I am forced to wonder how the spell deals with accents,” Twilight muttered.

“Spell…?” Tracer asked.

“Ah, right. We’re magical creatures, using the magic we were born with to translate all languages we come in contact with. I… Figured you’d actually know what magic was, considering Genji has a somewhat large amount in him.”

Tracer whipped to look at Genji. “…Dragons.”

Genji nodded slowly. “Presumably. I am far from a normal individual, Twilight Sparkle. Only members of the Shamada clan are known to have this ‘magic’, as you say.”

Pinkie grinned. “That just makes your magic more unique!”

“It is a proud heritage.”

Twilight smiled. “Well, it looks like there’s nothing to worry about here. We can talk more, but we need to report back to those who hired us.”

“And we should probably call in someone qualified to deal with a first-contact scenario!” Tracer said, nudging Genji. “Make the call!”

“In a minute,” Genji said. “I want to see how they do this.”

Twilight held out the dimensional device and activated it with her magic. The space rippled again, tearing a hole through existence, revealing the same interior as before, albeit seen from the other side. A human man blinked. “I take it that went well?”

“Very,” Twilight said, smiling. “Daniel, this is Tracer and Genji. Tracer, Genji, this is Daniel Jackson from Stargate Command.”

Tracer nudged Genji. “Hey. Look at that thing printed on his shirt.” She was referring to an upside down V with a circle on top of it. “Look familiar?”
Genji nodded. “That it does. Mister Jackson, would you by chance have anything to do with a ship that appeared in orbit about a day ago?”

Jackson stepped through the portal as it closed behind him. “Yes, actually. We tried to contact your world but you shot at us.”

“Some of us are trigger happy. Some of us also thought you may have been an attack.”

“Do you have alien problems?” Daniel asked.

Genji shook his head. “Not that I know of. But if anyone were to create a spaceship, it would be Omnis.”

“…What are Omnis?” Pinkie asked.

“I should not be the one to answer that question,” Genji said. “I also should not be the one making first contact. Excuse me while I contact base and get someone more… qualified.”

Daniel nodded. “I understand. I can wait here as long as you need.”

Genji stepped outside the walls, leaving Tracer to talk with the ponies and Mister Jackson. He activated his long-distance radio. “Overwatch command, come in.”

A deep but friendly voice came in on the other end. “This is Winston. What have you found?”

“It’s not Talon, nor is it Omnic. But it is something. We’ve got what are essentially aliens from another universe.”

“…That’s not what I was expecting.”

“They are responsible for the ship in orbit, so they have access to advanced technology, though they don’t seem to know what an Omnic is.”

“Could be they just know them by another name… This is exciting. How are they reacting to you?”

“Well enough. They seem to be friendly. I am requesting we get a qualified diplomat here before Tracer causes some kind of cultural offense.”

“Backup is on its way. Mei and Zenyatta should be there within the hour.”

“Good. If you need me or Tracer for another mission, we can leave the moment they arrive.”

“Nothing’s happening at the moment. I am mildly surprised the data was legitimate, though. I was half-expecting a Talon ploy.”

“As was I. Tracer, evidently, was not.”

“I don’t think anyone could have predicted this.” Genji heard a few buttons getting pushed on the other end of the line. “Tell me about these otherworlders, I’m curious.”

~~~

While her friends talked with Genji and Tracer and waited for the others to arrive, Fluttershy found herself thinking. Thinking about the two people they’d met, and what else they knew about this world. Fluttershy had decided Tracer was a cross between Rarity and Pinkie Pie, a woman who had the qualities of both but not to the extremes they did. Excitable, stylish, optimistic, and a bit ‘fancy’
some of the time. She was trustworthy.

Genji was a lot harder to get a read on. Part of this was because his face was hidden behind a mask, but that wasn’t all. The cyborg-ninja didn’t talk too much, and only said what needed to be said. While Tracer was all about telling them about her life, Genji was silent, only stepping in to keep Tracer from giving a ‘bad impression’ of something.

He really didn’t want her talking about ‘Omnics’, whatever they were. Fluttershy wasn’t sure if it was something bad, or just controversial. Apparently she was destined to find out when the others arrived.

Fluttershy had managed to discern that the two of them were part of an organization called Overwatch, though as for what that organization did, she had no idea. Something that required ‘heroes’, considering Tracer’s constant overuse of the word. So they at least viewed themselves as good people, but… Well, Fluttershy wanted to trust them, but they’d been taken advantage of too many times at this point to just give new worlds the benefit of the doubt.

It was sad, really.

Tracer pointed at Twilight. “Hey, are all your names meant to be literal?”

Twilight blinked. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you’re Twilight, and you have colors similar to the time of twilight, and have a butt-tattoo similar of stars.”

Nova snorted and Pinkie burst into laughter. Twilight blinked. “…I can’t believe I’ve never heard butt-tattoo before…”

“O’Neill calls them that when we aren’t looking,” Pinkie managed to say through her snorts.

Twilight rolled her eyes. “Of course he does… They’re actually called cutie marks.”

It was Tracer’s turn to snort, trying in vain not to laugh. Twilight facehooved. “All right then, the cycle of stupidity has made its rounds. But, yeah, I suppose our names are supposed to be literal, though not always.”

“All right then, the cycle of stupidity has made its rounds. But, yeah, I suppose our names are supposed to be literal, though not always.”

“Really?” Tracer said. “But I see a night-like Twilight, a star-like and colorful Nova, a cultured and ‘rare’ Rarity, a pink Pinkie, and a…” She looked at Fluttershy. “…Hrm. Okay, you’re the oddball. You don’t seem shy to me, just quiet.”

Fluttershy smiled. “Glad to hear that. I used to be really shy, but I worked most of it out.”

Tracer frowned. “Must be annoying to be called Fluttershy then.”

“…Why?”

“Everyone’s going to think you’re shy until you do something… uh… what’s the opposite of shy?”

“…Confident?” Nova suggested.

“There we go! Yeah, Fluttershy, the name doesn’t do you service! I thought I had to dance around you and be extra nice. Would have kept thinking that had you not spoken up those few times.”

Fluttershy nodded slowly. “I know…”
“We need to change our names anyway,” Nova said. “We have to be able to differentiate ourselves from our other universe doubles. I used to be Starlight, now I’m Nova.”

“I like my name, though,” Fluttershy said. “It’s… me.”

“Then just change it a little,” Tracer suggested. “Like… Only keep the parts that are still you! Like, oh… Just Flutter?”

“Or Flutters! Like what Dashie calls you!”

Fluttershy blinked. “I suppose that could work… Seems rather obvious now that you think about it.”


Fluttershy shook her head. “I don’t think so. I’m also not sure about ‘Flutters’…”

“The chances of you being able to shirk the name are minimal, dear,” Rarity said. “It’s why I’m not letting anypony suggest anything until I’m sure of what I want.”

Pinkie inched towards Rarity, breaking off from a one-sided conversation with Genji. “What about Ravish?”

“Pinkie, no.”

“Aw come on! I’ve already changed my name, why do you need to be the holdout?”

“No you haven’t,” Twilight said. “You tell us a name, then change it the next day. Last week you were Pinkus. There’s also been Punky, Prelude, Paparazzi, Pizza, Ponk, Ordvoir, Spanglish, and a number of others. Today you’re, apparently, Paroni. You need to settle.”

“Maybe you just need to settle for me!”

Tracer put her hand to her chin. “I wonder if there are alternate versions of me I’ll need to deal with…”

“There probably are,” Daniel said. “But you won’t have the same problem they do, since your universe isn’t surrounded by others almost exactly like it. I wouldn’t worry about changing your name unless you make a habit of running into yourself.”

“Knowing her, it’s not unlikely,” Genji offered. He tapped his helmet. “They’re almost here, by the way.”

Daniel stood up. “Should I be expecting anything weird?”

Tracer shrugged. “Well, Zenny’s not exactly ‘normal’, but he’s not scary either, so-“

A synthetic voice greeted all of their ears. “Not ‘normal’ or ‘scary’? My dear Tracer, that’s how you decide to describe me?”

Fluttershy turned to look at the newcomers. One was a cute, pudgy woman in a thick winter coat despite the slightly warm temperatures. The other, the one who’d spoken, was… a humanoid robot. He floated toward them, wearing only thin, loose pants similar to the robes of a monk. His upper body was metallic, filled with wires and pistons, yet he didn’t look bogged down by all the metal. His head was shiny, and instead of a face he had nine blue dots above two slits that could have been taken as either eyes or eyebrows.
“Oh. You’re a robot,” Rarity said, cocking her head. “Somehow that’s both completely unexpected and not that big of a deal.”

“Not that big of a deal?” Twilight blurted. “He’s a robot! Have any of us actually seen a fully self-autonomous intelligent machine before?”

Daniel raised his hand.

The floating robot monk pointed at Daniel. “Has your kind created machines like me?”

“No,” Daniel said, “We’ve just run into the creations of others.”

“And what were they like?”

Daniel let out a sharp breath of air. “No offense to you, but they were one of our major enemies.”

The robot nodded. “I do hope you can put that behind yourself. I am Zenyatta, agent of Overwatch, monk, and recently, diplomat. To my left is Mei, a scientist who would be very happy if she could examine some of your devices at some point.”

Mei waved and smiled, clearly a bit nervous. Fluttershy waved back, trying to make her feel more welcome.

Twilight smiled at Zenyatta. “I take it Genji already told you our names?” Zenyatta nodded. “Then I guess it’s time for you to actually tell us about your world we’ve found ourselves in?”

Zenyatta pressed his hands together. “Travellers from afar, the story of our world is a complicated one, but it has been defined in recent years by a single issue – that of Omnics, and their relationship with humanity.”

“…You’re an Omnic, aren’t you?” Fluttershy asked.

“Yes. And that, friends, is a fact that gives many people fear, while others suffer hatred. You see, it was only a few decades ago that my kind was created – and that most of them declared war on humanity the world over. This Omnic Crisis, the war of man and machine, was horrendous, bloody, and caused more death than any other war in history. And that’s only counting the human casualties.”

“Oh,” Nova said. “That… That’s horrible.”

“That it was. I have never condoned the actions of my predecessors, but what’s done is done. The problem that faces us today is that Omnics and humans still don’t live in peace, and to make it worse the world doesn’t agree on a stance anymore. Nations like Japan are all for Omnic rights while Russia is fighting another war of man versus machine. You see, the discussion of Omnics is a difficult one likely to spark the worst of reactions from anyone. As outsiders, you could easily get the wrong idea from those who tell you. Omnics are not completely evil murderers. But we are not innocent.”

Rarity turned to Genji. “You were afraid you’d tell it wrong? Give us a bad idea?”

Genji nodded. “I am but a human infused with machines who barely knows his place in the world. Master is much wiser in the ways of the Omnics and humanity.”

“Do not put too much credit in my tale,” Zenyatta warned. “Even I am biased. Before you conclude, you should hear it from another. Our world is a turmoil of differing, strong opinions.”
Daniel nodded. “I plan on it. For now, though, we just need to talk about how to go forward with relations between our people from this point on, and to what ex-

The sound of a gunshot rang through the air, ringing with the force of a sniper bullet. Zenyetta looked to his side, glancing at the shield the drone had created right in front of his face. “…Her.”

“Ambush!” Genji yelled, taking out his sword. Another shot rang out, and again the drone caught it. “Retreat!”

Twilight fumbled with the dimensional device, opening a portal back to Stargate Command. “Come on!”

“Not so fast…” a deep, haunting voice groaned. A misty shadow took form at the edge of their sights, taking the form of a man with a skull mask and two miniature shotguns. He fired them both at the group of humans, ponies, and Zenyatta. The drone could not catch all the bullets, but Genji leaped in with his sword to toss the shots back with a quick motion, the reflection added to by fire from Tracer’s miniature energy pistols.

Twilight finally managed to raise a magical shield around everyone, and Nova took the opportunity to use her magic to toss people back through the portal. A few more sniper shots went off, and the shadowy ‘man’ tried to phase through the shield, but their efforts were in vain. They all stumbled into Stargate Command and closed the portal behind them.

“It appears that Talon found us…” Genji said, sheathing his sword. “Widowmaker and Reaper at least, maybe others I couldn’t identify.”

“Talon?” Daniel asked, frowning.

“As I said, the world is in turmoil,” Zenyatta said. “There are misguided men who set themselves up as enemies.”

“I – and my people – will want to know more about them.”

“I will cooperate however I can.”

It was at this point Mei squeed. “Look at this device!” She pointed at the stargate and jumped. “It’s a teleporter of some kind isn’t it?”

“It’s a stargate,” Fluttershy said. “Takes you to other planets instantly.”

Mei’s jaw dropped. “…Tell me more.”

“I, uh… Don’t know much, actually.”

Nova raised an eyebrow at Daniel. “Should I just teleport everyone to the meeting room?”

“Yes!” Tracer said, clapping. “Do that! Do the teleport!”

Nova did.

~~~

General Sunset and Toph stood in front of the bars of a prison cell. Attempts to contact the Goddess Armonia had not gone well, which was to be expected, considering how mysterious she was. So they were visiting the prison for a possible other lead. The cell on the other side of the bars wasn’t unpleasant – the window was large, the mattress was well-kept, and there was a small bookshelf to
The occupant was a mare by the name of Applejack.

“Who’s your friend?” She asked, glaring at Sunset from the bed.

“This is Toph. She’s from another world.”

“Hey,” Toph said.

Applejack shrugged in response. “So, what brings you two here today? Going to see if a third party will make lunch go any better? Or have you finally decided to kill me?”

Sunset shook her head. “Neither, actually. For once, I actually need something from you.”

This got Applejack’s attention. “Really…? So you’re not even goin’ to pretend you’re here out of the goodness of your heart? That’s an improvement, you should be proud. The next step is admittin’ to you’d be doin’ the world a favor by jumpin’ off the next cliff you see.”

Sunset sighed. “Applejack…”

“Just spit it out. What do you want?”

“We’re trying to hunt down the Sage that told you to get all those artifacts. She’s been causing a lot of trouble and we just can’t find her.”

“Tough luck. Ah haven’t the foggiest idea where she’d be,” Applejack said. “Guess you wasted your time.”

“You can know other things,” Toph said. “Like what kind of artifacts she asked you to get. We need to figure out why.”

“And why would Ah bother rackin’ my brain to remember all that useless crud? You’re definitely not worth it, and Ah’m pretty sure by refusin’ it won’t get you angry enough to off me, even if it should. So… Ah can sit pretty here and infuriate you all Ah want without a problem.” She winked.

“Look, Applejack, if you know something, just tell us. That Sage is up to no good. She manipulated us into fighting each other for years. Even if we don’t know what she’s planning, you’d have to at least agree that she’s up to no good and should be stopped.”

“Ah dunno Sunset, she could be tryin’ something evil, but it’d still be less evil than you.”

Sunset’s eye twitched. “Haven’t I done enough to prove to you that I’m not an evil wench?”

Applejack scowled. “See, this is it. This is why. It’s all just manipulation and control to you. All those lunches, all these books, all this time you spend coming to see me – it’s all part of your stupid mind games! You and the Queen want somethin’ from me! Well Ah’m not gonna give it! Ah’m not gonna fall for your false pretenses, ever! You may have everypony fooled but not me!”

Sunset growled. “Applejack, it’s just information about the Sage. There’s no way givin’ that up will harm anypony.”

“It would keep you from getting’ hurt. And, to be honest, praying that you’ll die someday is one of the few things that keeps me goin’ here.”

“Why are you such a stub-“ A pillar of earth shot out of the ground and hit Sunset in the face,
knocking her to the ground, dazed.

Applejack blinked, then turned to Toph. “…Are you gonna bust me out or-“

“You are a stubborn moron,” Toph said, launching a rock hand out of the ground to grab Applejack by the midsection. “She’s kept you alive, fed you, and tried her hardest to be your friend! And what do you do to her?”

“What those manipulations deserve!”

Toph tossed Applejack into her bookshelf, splintering the wood. “You know why I knocked her out? Because she wouldn’t let me do this. Let me break you like a book. She wouldn’t do that to you. Thinks it’d be too damaging.”

“Lies!”

Toph tossed Applejack to the other side. “You really shouldn’t care about that right now. You should care that your protector is lying unconscious on the floor and that I can make you enter a much more extreme world of hurt than you’ve ever experienced.”

“You think I’ll crack? Please!”

Toph cracked the bars of the cell open, walking in. She tossed a rock into Applejack’s face with her bare foot. “Every person has the point where the pain’s too much.”

“You know nothing, girl.”

Toph threw Applejack up, then down again. “Just let go of your hate for one measly second and tell us some of those things she had you get!”

“She’s lying to you too, you know. She lies to everyone. She is a lie. Everything is a lie!”

Toph twitched. “You’re an idiot!” She grabbed another rock and threw it – only for a yellow magic aura to grab it and toss it into her face. Toph went skidding backward, out of the cell.

Sunset screamed at her. “TOPH! APPLEJACK IS NOT TO BE HARMED!”

“Stop feigning concern!” Applejack yelled. “Quit your games!”

Sunset turned to Applejack, flinging tears. She couldn’t force herself to say anything. She just stared at Applejack, unable to respond.

Toph sat up, groaning. “You two are a couple of idiots.”

Applejack raised her eyebrow. “How so?”

“Sunset’s an idiot for trying so hard to be your friend, and you’re an idiot for being unable to even think that you’re wrong.”

“Ah’m not wrong.”

Toph shrugged. “You sure think that.”

Sunset sighed, wiping her face. “Applejack, what do you want from me?”

“Ah want you to go kill yourself.”
Sunset shook her head. “I mean, what do you want for you?”

“Ah want you to stop ‘bein’ my friend’, or whatever it is you’ve been hornswagglng with me.”

Sunset glanced to Toph. “You’re right. I’m being stupid. There does come a point where you should just cut your losses.” Sunset turned to Applejack with sad eyes. “Tell me about all the artifacts the Sage sent you to find and you’ll never see me again.”

Applejack thought about this for a moment. “You won’t come back for any more lunches, any more talks, nothin’?”

“Nothing.”

“You have yourself a deal.”

Sunset sat down, admitting defeat. She took out her smartphone. “Okay, just tell us everything you know. This device will record everything.”

“That must be handy.”

“It is. The sooner you start talking the sooner you can have us out of here.”

“Best news Ah’ve heard all year. Ah met the Sage almost instantly after you slaughtered my entire village, it was as if she knew Ah was destined for something great from that moment on. Of course, she was an absolute cryptic nutcase half the time…”

~~~

Fluttershy sat in the back of the room while Daniel, Landry, Genji, Zenyatta, Twilight, Rarity, and Pinkie discussed politics. Fluttershy found herself thinking how redundant all this seemed – how many times had they talked to new worlds like this? A dozen? Even though she had virtually no idea exactly how the politics worked, she still found it same-ey. Usually everyone started on different pages with different prejudices, and those had to be worked out first. More often than not both sides wanted a positive relationship, so they would seek that out. And in the end, after several hours of discussion, they’d find some way to continue said relationship. If humans were involved, there’d be paperwork. If it was just ponies, not so much.

She yawned to herself, trying not to fall asleep – that’d just be rude. She needed to stay awake. This was difficult since the most interesting thing that had happened was a flickering light that made Daniel lose his train of thought.

Mei wheeled her chair over to Fluttershy. “Hey, how are you doing?” she whispered, so as not to interrupt the actual talks.

Fluttershy shrugged. “Bored. Annoyed with politics. Trying not to fall asleep.”

“Ah, yeah, I feel that. I’m just a scientist. I’m starting to wonder why I’m here – I haven’t actually gotten to look at much of your technology.”

Fluttershy smiled. “They thought we had advanced technology, so they sent you along just in case. I’m sure once they hammer something out you’ll get your chance.”

“Probably. So… those ponies your closest friends?”

“Yeah. I’ve known them for several years now. Best friends I’ve ever had.”
“Do they let you speak up?”

Fluttershy raised an eyebrow. “Uh… Why do you ask?”

“Well, it’s just that you’ve been rather quiet this whole time, and I know everybody has things to say—”

“It’s because I’m Fluttershy isn’t it,” Fluttershy muttered.

“…Huh?”

“Look, Mei, I appreciate what you’re trying to do. But I don’t feel ashamed to speak my mind. I just don’t feel like I need to say anything – we’ve just done this so many times. So, so many times.”

“Oh. I-I’m sorry, I misjudged you.”

“…It’s a thing people tend to do…” Fluttershy said. “My friends suggest I remove the ‘shy’ from my name, become just ‘Flutters’. I’m just not sure if I want to, really…”

Tracer poked her head in on the conversation. “Well, I don’t know you at all, but I think Flutters is a great name for you! It sounds like freedom, breeze, the wind. Someone aloof and gentle!”

“Thanks, Tracer. Still…” she bit her lip. “Am I just being stubborn?”

“Yes,” Nova said, rolling her chair in. “Accept the Flutters, Flutters. Accept it.”

Fluttershy took in a breath. “I… You know what, no. I am not Flutters. I am Flutterfree. I have broken free from the shyness. I am Flutterfree Asquall.”

“…Asquall?” Tracer said, cocking her head.

“It’s like Squall, but the A means ‘against the squall,” Flutterfree explained.


“Hey! You four!” Pinkie called over to them. “Are you even paying attention? Or am I going to have to come over there and drag your ears back!”

“S-sorry!” Mei said.

Pinkie shrugged. “It’s okay. I think we need your attention back now, though. Zenyatta’s about to decide on a thing!”

Zenyatta nodded. “That I have. General Landry, Princess Twilight, your offers are both selfless and grandiose. But I am afraid I have to decline strong relations, for many reasons which have already been discussed to some extent. The largest of which is that we are simply not ready, as a world, to take the step beyond. We are on the brink of a major global crisis that could spark into all out war at any moment, a war that will just spill outward and result in more destruction were we to have access to the rest of the multiverse. Furthermore, Overwatch is technically an illegal organization in the eyes of international law, and we have no real authority to establish such immense ties. Using our camaraderie that we’ve developed, we simply ask that you refrain from establishing a presence on ‘Earth Omnic’. All we wish is for a way to contact you if, and when, we deem we are ready, or have gone on an irreversible path of self-destruction.”

“Wait what?” Tracer blurted. “I thought we were making allies here!”
“You haven’t been paying attention,” Genji said. “We’ve been leaning towards this conclusion for some time now.”

Flutterfree blinked. “I… Guess it makes sense, though. Not everyone wants to join. Though you are the first I know of who just admitted they aren’t ready.”

“Bollocks!” Tracer blurted. “We’re more than ready!”

Zenyatta shook his head. “Tracer, our world as a whole is not, even if you in particular are. We have more to think about than just ourselves and how to win our personal battles. On an issue this large, even Talon’s threat means little. Perhaps one day, we will be able to rise above our own conflict. That day is not today.”

Tracer looked like she wanted to object but decided not to. She just folded her arms and sat back.

Daniel nodded slowly. “We can send you back home then with a subspace beacon. We’ll check in every now and then to see if it’s active.”

“Thank you for your time,” Zenyatta said. “We request that you take us somewhere apart from where you picked us up the first time, so we may avoid the likely ambush waiting for us.”

Landry called the Hammond. “Prepare to take four to E-17 and beam them wherever their home base is.”

Mei frowned. “We have to go already?”

“You get to ride in their ship, first,” Genji reminded her.

“That’s nice and all, but…” she looked at the ponies. “I wanted to get to know all of you better…”

Pinkie smiled. “Well, hurry up and solve your world’s problems so you can come back to visit us! Okay?”

Tracer gave Pinkie a thumbs up. “You’ve got it!”

Flutterfree waved. “Goodbye then! Thanks for getting me to keep my new name. And not shooting us.”

Zenyatta bowed. “Thank you for not holding those shots against us. Old war machines die hard, and world governments are paranoid about spaceships in their space.”

“Believe it or not, we can relate,” Daniel said. “We’ll be waiting for you.”

The four Overwatch heroes were beamed onto the Hammond, which prepared to take them home.

Daniel yawned. “Well that ended up being nothi-“

The lights flickered again. Landry frowned. “Two times in one day? That’s… Odd.” He walked out of the meeting room and down to the control room, followed by Daniel and the ponies. “Walter, run a systems diagnostic on the power systems.”

Walter ran the diagnostic. “Everything checks out, sir. It was just a random fluctuation.”

“…Right…” Landry shrugged. “Well, Twilight, thanks for your help, I think that’s all we needed.”

“Didn’t you want me to teleport-proof some areas of the base?”
Daniel nodded. “That’s right! Gate room first – we don’t need the stargate getting stolen. It’s the primary thing the oversight has been yelling about lately.”

Nova laughed nervously. “Definitely not…”

“You’re on that list as well. Did you know that we had to fight against the lawyers to even let you on the base again, Nova?”

“Uh… Sorry again?” she sighed. “Really, I know I messed up big time there, and I know it’s still causing everybody problems. But… you humans do not move on quickly, do you?”

“Sometimes I wonder if we ever forget…” Daniel muttered.

Twilight shrugged. “I don’t know. What I do know is that Nova and I are going to teleport-proof your high security rooms to help her earn your trust.”

Nova nodded. “Right.”

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A few hours later, Twilight and Nova were teleport-proofing a room devoted to storing alien weapons, ranging from the simple snakelike Zat guns to bizarre hefty conglomerations that supposedly could hit out-of-phase beings.

Twilight was slowly working her way along the south wall, clearly glad this was the last major room they needed to seal, ready for the hard work to be done. Nova was feeling similarly exhausted, but she kept herself held a little higher as she worked along the north wall.

Coming to a corner, she maneuvered herself behind several stacks of boxes, trying to get to the very edge of the room. After she accomplished this, she turned around to find a woman in black and purple standing over her.

Nova blinked. “Uh… Hi?”

The woman smirked playfully, and yet somehow malevolently. “Sorry about this, I just can’t resist.” She reached out one of her fingers, allowing Nova to see her long purple ‘nails’ laced with circuitry. She touched Nova on the nose. “Boop!”

“Wha-?” And then the woman vanished in thin air.

“Nova, what was that?” Twilight asked, walking over to her. “I thought I heard someone.”

“…I think the base has an intruder,” Nova said, rubbing her nose. “She… she booped me.”

“Intruder?” Twilight’s ears perked up as the main doors to the storage room opened – and no one came in or out.

“Invisible intruder,” Nova said, rushing out into the hallway and scanning for anything – she found nothing. “Great… Daniel!”

“What?” he called, running over.

“There’s an intruder! Woman, medium size, purple-black getup, half-shaved head, strange circuitry nails! We-“

The alarms in the base began to go off. Walter’s voice could be heard over the intercom. “We’ve
been compromised! Virus detected in the system database!”

Twilight lit her horn, preparing to teleport to the control room. She facehooved. “We just teleport proofed everything. Gah!”

Daniel took off at a run. “It’s not that far. Come on!”

The three of them ran down the hallways to the control room, taking two flights of stairs. Along the way they saw almost every computer screen was displaying a pink hexagon with a skull design inside of it. Some of those skulls looked like they were laughing.

“How badly were we just compromised?” Daniel asked as he ran into the control room with the two ponies.

“Badly,” Landry said, gesturing at all the corrupted computer screens. “We’ve lost control of virtually every system. We can’t even remove the lockdown on the gateroom!”

Twilight looked at the pink skull. “Do we know whose symbol this is?”

“No,” Landry said. “It’s not anything we’ve seen before—”

“Then you best remember it well!” the voice of the woman rang through the base intercom. “Because I want my name to burn into your minds as I rob you blind.”

“Who are you?” Landry yelled.

A portal opened sideways in the gateroom, at such an angle they couldn’t see into it well enough to determine where it led. The doors to the jumper bay above the gateroom glowed purple, opening up with a loud clang. A Puddlejumper dropped out of the ceiling, tumbling nicely into the large open portal. The portal shut, and the woman dropped from the ceiling, bowing. She grinned and pointed at them through the glass. “Nice expressions!”

Nova closed her mouth.

The woman pointed at herself, grin still huge. “I am Sombra. Remember the name of the woman who beat the ‘most secure government base’ in your nation!” She pulled a dimensional device out of her jacket and prepared to open a portal, but something stopped her. “You know what? I think I can stick around and brag a little bit. You’re not going to be able to remove my virus from your computers for a few hours, this entire room is teleport proof, and by the time you’re able to break through that bulletproof glass I can be gone.” She chuckled.

“Why?” Nova asked. “What did we do to you?”

“Nothing!” Sombra grinned. “You just showed up and gave me an opportunity! You see, I got ahold of a pair of amazing files, one about a spaceship that randomly appeared in orbit, transmitted a message, and then left; and another from a long-forgotten Omnic sentry firing at the same people! What luck, I had found a connection, and I also had a plan. You see, amigos, I disabled all the turrets there as soon as I could, then sent a covert report to Overwatch to draw their interest. Something that suggested, oh, possible alien invasion location, as well as secret Talon business. And then I wait—and sure enough, both Overwatch and a delightful bunch of ponies show up! But, alas, their portal does not stay open long enough for me to slip through…” She put her fingers to her face, sad.

“Aha, but then, I have an idea. I can force them back through if I just give Talon the same report, and even make them think I’ve got a plan to help them! Oh, wondrous! So in the chaos of a firefight, I slip through the escape portal and make my way into your base. Then, as you are so distracted with
meetings and teleport-proofing the place, I work my magic unnoticed! Cause a few power surges, but nothing major. It's just so *easy* since all your computers are antiquated versions of mine! I load physical tons of items onto a Puddlejumper and, since the computer system of that ship is too complex for a quick job, I just dump it in a portal you won’t be able to trace!” She clapped her hands together. “And now here we are, after I’ve mocked a unicorn and made you all wish you hadn’t made this room impossible to teleport into!”

Nova glared. “That doesn’t answer why.”

Sombra pointed a finger at her. “You know why, little thief. I just want things to help me. I want to find the truth. With these devices, I’ve come to realize that my little world is *puny* and *pathetic*, and that I could stand to expand my horizons. I’m going to find out what’s *really* in charge.” She took out the dimensional device and set it to a random location. “Adios!”

Then Sombra was gone.

Daniel shook his head. “I suddenly have the feeling that we were never in charge of anything today.”

Twilight looked at the sugar skull on every computer screen. “…Should we even try to chase her?”

Nova frowned. “She planned this out far too much. She’s long gone. No way we can get to her now with what we have.”

“Pulled a better heist than you,” Landry commented.

“Gee, thanks.” She glared at one of the skulls. “Is it really going to take a few hours to get rid of these things?”

Of course, the answer was yes.

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The black form of Reaper threw his shotguns on the ground next to the thin, bluish form of Widowmaker. “She’s not coming back,” he muttered.

“Have patience. Sombra can take care of herself,” Widowmaker responded without emotion.

“She could have betrayed us or fallen prey to that ‘magic’ those *ponies* had.”

“She’s not stupid enough to outright betray us nor fall to unknown powers.”

“That’s what you think…” Reaper muttered, blasting a tree to shreds with another shotgun conjured out of nowhere.

Widowmaker’s phone started buzzing. She frowned. “I had that off.”

Reaper grabbed the phone and answered it. “Sombra…”

The phone went to speakerphone automatically, blasting Reaper’s ears out with the volume. “Hey Talon! This is a recorded message from… Sombra! Just wanted you to know, I am now closer to the truth than I ever thought possible! You’ll probably never see me again! Adios, it was a pleasure working with you!”

Reaper stared at the phone. “…I’m surprised she didn’t end with that ‘boop’ she’s so fond of.”

“Boop!” the phone blurted.
Reaper threw the phone onto the ground and crushed it under his foot. Then he pulled out another shotgun and blasted it to smithereens.

“You owe me a new phone,” Widowmaker deadpanned.

“Fine. Whatever. Don’t care. Going back to base now. This day has been a complete waste of everyone’s time. I hope that gorilla summoned an alien invasion or something.”

Widowmaker put her gun away and started walking. “You’ll have to call the getaway vehicle,” she said.

Reaper angrily tore his phone out of his pocket. There was no message, but the background had been changed to a picture of Sombra smirking.

It took every ounce of his self-control not to crush the device in his hands.
Corona walked around the Hub like the AID agent she was – which to say she had high tech sunglasses on. She’d taken to wearing them more and more often simply because they were so *useful* – they were able to remind her of the names of thousands of individuals, told her if there were hidden weapons anywhere, and could help her navigate any maze-like corridors. As the Hub evolved, the corridors became more and more complex, and the need for aides increased.

No longer were the winding halls empty – now they were filled with decoration, stands, and near constant foot traffic. This particular area had taken the form of a bazaar of sorts, with both official spaces and unofficial ones. The difference could be told by which places were in actual enclosures and which ones were just over glorified lemonade stands.

This created an unusual atmosphere – large, impressive, official locations had big signs, display windows, and official workers. It didn’t matter if it was an embassy, shop, restaurant, information center, training dojo, arcade, or something else. They drew attention, and the smaller stands and such took advantage of that, clustering as close as they could to the important places, creating large halls filled with trinket carts, mystics, and people playing with cups.

Corona stopped by one of the more popular locations – the Embassies for the Elemental Nations and Iroh’s tea shop. There were several humans of varying colors trying to sell teacups alongside a handful of opportunity-seeking ponies. Corona ignored them as they called to her. They weren’t important and she wasn’t in the mood for engaging with the attention-seeking crazies.

She walked through the doors of the tea shop. As usual, it was completely full of patrons calmly enjoying their tea. She could see more than a few high-ranking individuals using the location to discuss policy, including Siron and Boxen of all people.

What they were talking about wasn’t her business. She walked past all the tables and back into the ‘kitchen’, where Iroh himself was crafting more tea with his firebending. “Ah, Corona! How nice of you to drop by!”

Corona reached into one of the shelves and grabbed some cherry-infused tea bags. “I was in the neighborhood, figured I’d drop by and say hello.” She used her fire to heat up the water quickly and dunked the tea in. “How’s business and politics?”

“Iroh nodded, setting freshly brewed tea on the serving counter. “Chala and Chamomile for the General!”

O’Neill got up from his table he shared with Link and a few *Apollo* crew members to grab the tea. He incredulously examined his cup and nodded slowly, as if it was satisfactory. “Cool beans.”

Corona raised an eyebrow. “Did you seriously just say ‘cool beans’?”

O’Neill raised his eyebrow in return. “Did you seriously just call it out like some phrase Nazi?”
“Did you seriously just invent the phrase ‘phrase Nazi’ for this conversation?”

“Please!” Iroh said, holding up his hands and chuckling. “We’re all friends here. No need to have a battle of banter.”

Corona pointed at O’Neill. “But that’s how he gets his laughs.”

“I will neither confirm nor deny my completely theoretical enjoyment with banter.”

Iroh shrugged. “In that case, maybe I should challenge you to a battle of wit.”

O’Neill narrowed his eyes. “You’re on, old ma-“

“General!” one of the Apollo crew members yelled. “Where’s the tea?”

O’Neill put on an obviously fake smile. “It appears that I have to cut this meeting short to dote on my men.” He grabbed the tray with several teacups on it. “The duel of snarky old men will have to wait for another day.”

“And what a glorious day it will be,” Corona commented. Soon, she and Iroh were alone in the back of the kitchen again.

“I believe you asked about politics, earlier,” Iroh said, moving to prepare more tea.

“Yeah. How’re things going on your end?”

“The demons are working out really well for us. Hard workers with a strong pride that helps them build everything well. They’ve crafted the neutral Republic City well. Though, it can hardly be called a city at the moment, it’s more like a… ‘bumpkin town’.”

“…What.”

“I don’t know why people are calling it that but they are. It’s some joke on the demons’ presence, calling them unsophisticated and claiming anything they make is just like them.”

Corona pursed her lips. “That’s hardly fair…”

“Better than the extremists who’ve been attacking the demons’ own settlement,” Iroh sighed. “There’s a large movement forming to cut off all ties to other worlds because it’s an ‘invasion’ of sorts.”

“Well, that’s stupid.” Corona took a sip of her tea – delicious, as usual.

“Their violence is, but their reasonings are not without merit,” Iroh admitted. “We refused aid from Equestria to preserve our culture, and many of them are arguing the mere existence of Republic City and the demons ruins this.”

“Republic City was completely your idea, though.”

Iroh chuckled. “Try telling that to people who weren’t around when the idea was proposed. They’ve gotten it in their heads that it had to come from some alien force and ruins the ideal of balance. Using the demons as workers just gives them more fire, even if they have no say in the designs of the city itself.”

Corona frowned. “Sounds like your world’s getting the short end of the stick.”
“Hey, the rest of you are keeping everything secret from your various worlds. I’m just waiting for that to explode in your faces.”

Corona shrugged. “Well, it’s public knowledge in Equestria, and it’s not really a secret in Lai, it’s just that they don’t advertise it.”

“Ardent, both Earths, and the Binaries, all into keeping secrets.”

Corona shrugged. “I don’t think it’s a problem, really. If my Earth got public knowledge of everything… Well, that’d just make this mess of marketplaces even worse. The place is basically driven by wealth. I’d say Earth Tau’ri is the same, but I haven’t actually spent a lot of time there to study the culture.”

“Same here, I mostly just talk to their leaders and people in on the secret. They’ve perfected the art of classification.”

“Hey, question – have you ever been to the Binary worlds?”

“Once or twice, and under heavy, heavy guard.”

“Same,” Corona said. ‘They’re paranoid. …Which makes it even weirder that Boxen is talking to Siron out there.”

Iroh shrugged. “Deals will be made regardless of whether either side likes each other or not.”

Corona nodded. Iroh set out another platter of tea. “For the lovely little ladies!”

Twilight ‘Sparky’ the human walked up, head hung low. “Thanks, Iroh.”

“Oh! Sparky, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing much,” Twilight muttered.

Corona lowered her sunglasses and raised her eyebrows. “Twilight, something’s definitely wrong.”

“…Fine. Earth Gizmos is going to go out of business if we can’t turn a large profit soon. I’ll have to close it up forever.”

Corona put her sunglasses back on. “Not if I have anything to say about it.” She leaped over the counter and grabbed Twilight by the shoulders. “I am going to help your little store in whatever way I can.”

“Corona… I mean, thanks, but you don’t have to-“

Corona held up a hand. “Don’t try to talk me out of it, I have nothing else to do today, so I might as well try to help a friend. What’s the issue?”

“It’s just… People don’t want to come in and buy our things! I have no idea why!”

Corona smirked. “Sounds like I need to investigate.” She took a sip of her cherry-infused tea. “To Earth Gizmos!”

Twilight rolled her eyes. “I guess the tea was ‘to go’ anyway.”

Corona and Twilight said their goodbyes to Iroh and left the establishment, passing by O’Neill’s table. Something Link had said had him laughing hard. Judging from Link’s expression it wasn’t
supposed to be funny.

The two entered the long halls of the Hub and moved along, passing by shops, musicians, and dozens of important people and ponies. Neon signs demanded their attention, large screens showcased interdimensional news reels, and Corona was sure she spotted the infamous pink sugar skull appear on someone’s glasses for a split second. She wondered if the hacker could get into her glasses… Not a pleasant thought.

Corona took a moment to wave hello to a person she recognized - Seskii, the pink potion seller, apparently doing really good business now that she’d left Ardent in favor of the Hub. They exchanged no words, but Seskii tossed Corona a free potion in between dealing with customers. Corona drank it as she and Twilight kept walking.

“You know her well?” Twilight asked.

“Not really. But she’s nice. She’s also got great potions. I think this one’s enchanted with a hint of ‘amusement’.”

“…Huh.”

They soon arrived at the Earth Gizmos store, which was surrounded by a number of watch sellers for some reason. They walked in the front doors. Lyra was at the register, Trixie was taking a nap on the floor next to her, and there were two patrons in the store.

“Hey Twilight,” Lyra said, looking with dismay at the pathetic cash register. “Sold a toaster since you left, that’s it.”

Twilight set out the tea on the countertop, which Lyra took eagerly to escape from the drudgery of her ‘job’.

“How much longer until we cut our losses?” Lyra asked.

Twilight shrugged. “I was thinking a week, but Corona wants to try to help us.”

Lyra raised an eyebrow. “Got any clever marketing ideas that a bunch of high school students can pull off?”

Corona grinned. “I have no ideas at the moment, but I plan to have some momentarily. First, we need to figure out what exactly the problem is.”

“The problem’s easy,” Lyra said. “Nobody’s buying our stuff. We sell machines and gizmos from Earth, and nobody wants them!”

Corona raised an eyebrow. “That doesn’t make any sense. I see smartphones everywhere. I’ve went to Ponyville and found several televisions. They’ve even got a Ponyville Broadcast up and running, thanks to Pinkie. Everyone loves these devices.”

Lyra raised an eyebrow. “Then explain to me why nobody’s rushing in to buy our entire stock.”

“I plan to,” she said, noticing that one of the patrons – an Earth Kingdom woman – was leaving. “Hey, I’m Agent Corona, AID. Mind if I ask you a question or two?”

“You’re just saying that-“

Corona produced her badge and raised an incredulous eyebrow.
The woman tensed up. “Why of course! What do you want to know!”

“Just curious why you’re leaving this store.”

“Oh. Didn’t want to buy anything.”

“What?”

The woman leaned back. “Because it was all too expensive? Why are you asking?”

“Reasons,” Corona said, nodding to her. “Where you going now?”

“Gear Emporium. Prices are better. Can I go now?”

Corona nodded. “Sure.” The woman scampered out of the store.

“The price is bad!?” Twilight twitched. “I price these as low as I can! We buy them in bulk and at a discount! If I sold them any cheaper it’d be at a loss!”

Corona frowned. “What about this ‘Gear Emporium’? Do we know anything about them?”

“They operate in the next district over,” Lyra said. “That’s all I know.”

“I didn’t even know that,” Twilight said. “But I did know there were several other shops in the Hub that do the same thing we do… I wonder if they’re having similar problems?”

Corona smirked. “I think we should pay them a visit. Come on Twilight, we’ve got competition to scout out!” She dragged Twilight out of the store, leaving Lyra with the remaining patron and the unmoving Trixie.

They dashed through the halls of the Hub once again, leaving the familiar area and approaching one Corona had only been in a few times before, one of the strangely ‘empty’ zones where several enclosures were not occupied by anything. It was slightly eerie, seeing all the stands and tents without the glowing light of the large establishments.

There were, however, a couple of places here. One was a ‘gateway’, a service that would dial any universe for anyone at a small price. From the looks of it, it was one of the less reputable places that might be convinced to send a patron to an ‘unsafe’ universe if enough money was paid, despite the Hub’s regulations forbidding that practice. It was one of the Hub’s few regulations.

The other place was the Gear Emporium, a shop that occupied two entire rooms. It boasted a neon sign made of actual turning gears to draw in the crowds. Despite the lack of other establishments around, the Gear Emporium was crazy busy. People were dragging out televisions, game consoles, cameras, and phones by the dozen.

Corona blinked. “…Well this is where all your customers have gone.”

Twilight gawked. “…How?!”

“We’re about to find out.” Corona adjusted her glasses and marched into the store, Twilight behind her. The store itself was, while larger than Earth Gizmos, not any nicer looking. The lights were the same, the shelves were identical, and the products were the same thing. But the prices…

Twilight looked at a smartphone’s price tag and gawked. “That’s… That’s factory cost right here! This is how much you pay the factory to make one of these things directly! There’s no markup!”
Corona furrowed her brow. “They can’t be making a profit off this at all, can they?”

“No! Unless they’re stealing these things for free! Even if they’re making them themselves it’d be a zero-profit scenario, you have to put the money in to create them. They’re probably running at a negative profit margin, since they have to pay something to keep this store running!”

“Something fishy’s going on…” She walked up to an employee sitting at a nearby wall, a human with purple skin grossly engaged in her phone. “Excuse me?”

“Hm?” she said, looking up. “Can I help you with anything?” she asked in a tone that made it clear she did not want to help anyone with anything ever.

“Hey, we were wondering, how can you sell your things so cheaply?”

“Look, lady, this is the price everything in the Hub is at if it wants to survive,” she rolled her eyes. “Every tech store that has a chance is like this. I’ve checked myself, there are no better deals anywhere.”

“How can you afford that?”

“I just work here. I have no idea where we get our things from. A fairy godmother for all I know, or care.” She went back to her phone, clearly not in the mood for any more talking.

Corona glanced at Twilight. “…Every store has these prices?”

“I don’t know! I’ve not really looked at the competition before!”

“Probably why you didn’t figure this out earlier…” Corona put a hand to her chin. “I don’t think the people here are going to be very helpful. Perhaps we should try somewhere else…”

Twilight pulled up a map of the Hub on her phone. “Let’s see… I’ve got ten separate tech shops in the Hub, not including our own. The one we’re at now has the highest rating… But most of them are sitting even.”

Corona checked the information on her sunglasses. “Wow. The internet sure moves fast.”

“There’s already Hub YouTube,” Twilight commented. “I think it’s run by our Earth. I have no idea what’s going to happen when Tau’ri YouTube gets wind of this.”

“Copyright law is going to be an absolute nightmare…” Corona realized. “Anyway, pick a store, any store.”

“This one! The Flimflam Gadgetry Pit!”

“Huh. Sounds a little crazy. Maybe they’ll be more helpful.”

The Flimflam Gadgetry Pit was in an area of the Hub with a lot more shops than anything else, a bit of a ‘shopping’ district, if such a thing could really be considered to exist in the Hub. The two of them walked right in. The store was nowhere near as clean and organized as Earth Gizmos or the Gear Emporium, rather, it was a disorganized mess with products tossed around everywhere, labels slapped in awkward places, and no semblance of organization. There were a dozen or so patrons, and the counter was manned by four yellow individuals – two humans and two unicorns, each pair of which was clearly an alternate version of the other pair.

“Hello!” One of the yellow unicorns called, the one with a mustache. “Welcome to the Flimflam
Gadgetry Pit, run by Flim, Flim, Flam, and Flam!”

Twilight blinked, pointing at the humans. “I know you! You’re those crazy salesmen that try to rip off everyone! How did you get clearance to get in here!?”

“Stepped through the portal by accident,” human Flim said, shrugging. “It was as simple as promising to be a good boy and we got tickets.”

“Plus, we got to meet ourselves!” human Flam said, leaping onto unicorn Flam. Unicorn Flam reared, laughed, and bounced across the store.

Corona facepalmed. “I… Oh this is just great. Look, we’re just here to ask questions.”

“I’ll answer them if there’s something in it for me,” unicorn Flim said.

Corona flashed her AID badge. “Trust me, it’s in your best interest.” She took no small amount of pleasure when unicorn Flim’s stance tightened and his pupils dilated. Of course she didn’t really have authority over him, but he didn’t have to know that.

“Ah, right! What do you want to know?”

“A simple curiosity. I’m wondering how you can sell all these things so cheap.”

“Well, you see…” he coughed. “We don’t price them, our distributor does. They come to us with the prices printed on the box, we just slap the labels on the individual items. So you can’t hold us accountable!”

“That’s completely fine,” Corona said. “I would like to know where the distributions come from though.”

Human Flim came into the conversation. “Oh, just some blokes. Some fancy-schmancy rich type from Earth Tau’ri who wants to ‘spread the technology’. Decided to trust us and give us an edge.”

“Who’s this guy?”

“Calls himself Frank. Frank Saltwist.”

Corona narrowed her eyes. She held her hands behind her back, slowly removing a glove. “That doesn’t sound like a human name.”

“Oh, who knows, it might not be. It’s what he calls himself-“

Corona rushed her ungloved hand for human Flim’s arm. He recoiled before she could touch him. “EVERYBODY BAIL!” He screamed, leaping onto unicorn Flim and riding out a side door. The Flams had already left the establishment a while ago.

“Get them!” Corona yelled, bounding after the human-pony combo, hands on fire. Twilight ran alongside her, preparing a spell.

The Flims saw them coming. The human reached over to a nearby cart vendor and pulled it down, spilling cabbages into Twilight and Corona’s path. The cabbage salesman yelled in distress as his produce was trampled over. “MY CABBAGES!!!”

“Sorry!” Twilight called back, stumbling over more than a few cabbages. She turned forward, casting her spell. She summoned a purple whip-like tendril of magic energy from the aether, twisting it toward the Flims. The human saw it coming and deflected with his hat of all things. The hat did
not survive.

Corona went next, throwing fire at the hooves of the unicorn, making him trip up. However, in the
time it took Corona to make sure the fires didn’t spread, he had regained his footing. Twilight tried a
spell again, this time *grabbing* the unicorn’s tail with her telekinesis. Her telekinesis was
comparatively weak to that of most unicorns, but the tug was enough to make the unicorn stumble.

Corona took the opportunity, blasting fire at the unicorn’s hooves again. This time he stumbled and
fell over, dumping the human into a cart of scorpion popsicles. “Ugh…”

Corona pressed her hand to the unicorn’s forehead…

…Corona was standing in a dark space in a forested area, clearly a different universe. All four Flims
and Flams were standing there, looking at a giant naval shipping crate filled with technology.

There was a hooded man standing next to it. “Here’s our part of the deal. The prices you should use
are inside on the individual boxes, as well as instruction manuals for everything. You’ll find that, at
those prices, they should sell like hotcakes. All sold good profits go directly to us, but we pay you by
the hour. Use your best judgment as to what should go on the sales floor at any given time. Our only
requirement is that nobody finds out where you get your machines.”

“What if we empty the crate?” human Flam asked.

“We’ll be around to restock it for you.”

Unicorn Flim scratched his chin. “You’re providing this to every store, aren’t you?”

“Huh? That’d be silly. What kind of business model does that?”

Corona, seeing this entire event from unicorn Flim’s eyes, understood that it was a *brilliant*
business model. Try to control *every* store you can, drive the others out of business with low prices, and then
start charging up the ‘wazoo’ for extra *extra* cash.

Unicorn Flim was excited, nervous, and thrilled at the same time, similar to his mood in the future.
Or, rather, present.

“Sunseeeeeeet…”

The mysterious man left the universe with a portal device, leaving the crate behind. The memory
blurred into the background as the four people started looking at their new wares…

…Corona snapped back into reality. “Thank you, Flim, I have everything I need. Actually, one more
thing. How close to empty is that crate?”

“…Very.”

“Good. You are going to tell me how to get there, and then you aren’t going to breathe a word about
this to anyone. Got it?”

“G-got it! It’s in the Forested World, right where our shop is!”

She dropped him, turning to Twilight. “I’ve got answers!”

“That was a… pretty public display, Corona.”

“Then we need to move fast, before they got onto us. Come on Twilight, we’re going on a stakeout.”
“…Yay?”

The Forested World was a strange one. It was an apparently endless forest filled with evergreen trees where it was always a warm summer night. There were always stars visible in the night sky, though there was no apparent way to get to them, even in a starship they never got any closer. The world had so much space that taking one step in most other worlds would result in a thousand steps in the forest. This huge space displacement effect made it a perfect place to hide large things, because people would rarely chance upon just the perfect location.

Luckily a giant shipping container wasn’t too hard to see from a couple thousand feet away. Big, bright red, metallic, it was hard to miss. Corona and Twilight were currently up in a tree, watching the box below them. Twilight was shivering slightly.

“Remember the plan,” Corona said.

“What plan? It’s just a sleep spell!”

Corona shrugged. “I’m mainly reminding you to have it ready.”

“It takes a bit of effort to keep a spell ready for this long!”

“Shh!”

“There’s nobody here!”

“There could be! The box is very empty now, and they should be back with a shipment anytime.”

Twilight frowned. “That’s true… I don’t think so, though. If these guys have access to the Hub’s security tapes, I think we have bigger problems than your store.”

Corona sighed. “One of the mysteries of the mult- shh!” She pushed Twilight down the instant a portal opened up in front of the crate. A single person came out and investigated the crate with a clipboard. He was dressed all in black and his face was hidden. His hands were covered in gloves and clothing shined from excessive polish. He stuck his head into the crate, made a few notes on his clipboard, and reached for his dimensional device.

“Now!” Corona nudged Twilight. She remembered she needed to make him sleep – and cast the
spell. Twilight was far from an apt magician, but the sleep spell was a simple one. It also helped that the figure was tired to begin with. Before he could return to wherever he needed to report to, he slumped to the ground, snoring.

Corona leaped out of the tree, removing a glove from her hand. She pressed it to his face…

…She was on a beach covered in women in bikinis.

Right, the man was sleeping, so she was sort of in his dream. She could see who she presumed to be him, a blue man lounging on a beach chair. His muscles looked far too defined to be real.

“Dreeeeeeeams…”

Corona needed to focus on finding information, not nagging sensations in the back of her mind. But this dream wasn’t giving her anything, and as for the emotions in the space, they were all about ‘happy’ emotions that made Corona feel rather disgusted with herself.

But she couldn’t really do anything. Her empathy was a passive ability. She didn’t control what it saw, not really. It merely saw what memories and emotions were strong in the mind of whomever she touched. Usually, the important things rose to the surface, a consequence of being interrogated. But this man had been snuck up on, he hadn’t been thinking about it at all…

All she got was this beach.

“Passive, you saaaaaaay? Why not try something?”

There was definitely nothing she could do. But since she was here, she might as well try. She walked towards the blue man and stood in front of him. Something purple flashed, and he suddenly saw her.

“Hey babe, what are you doing at a beach like this?”

Corona realized with some trepidation that she was now a part of his dream, and therefore was dressed to match. She twitched. “I am your worst nightmare. Quite literally.”

“Oh, really?” he sat up. “I like a challenge-“

She slapped him – it was very satisfying to slap someone with her bare hand without getting a rush of emotions from them. “No. You are going to stop ogling at these impressive and beaut-“ she caught herself acting on his emotions, growling. “Basically you’re going somewhere else.”

“Where?”

“The place you want to seeeeeee…”

Corona smirked. “Why not your workplace?”

Suddenly the blue man was in his shiny black suit, and Corona was standing next to him in the same suit. They were standing in a room filled with similarly dressed people, all holding clipboards with lists of technological devices on them. At the front of the room was a projector, and a woman in a suit.

Corona recognized her. Her eyes widened – it was an agent at AID, one of her coworkers. Her name was… Katty, Corona remembered.

“…Why am I back here…?” the blue man wondered aloud.

“You tell me,” Corona asked, noticing with trepidation that much of what Agent Katty was saying
was only half-remembered, blurred.
“... I already do the job... What’s with orientation again?”

“Same response.”

“You did this!”

“No, really?”

“Hey! Hey everybody, this woman’s crazy!” None of the audience paid him any mind. “What in...?”

“Memoooooooory...”

Corona smirked. “This is just a memory, and a rather fuzzy one at that. You can’t do anything.”

He turned to glare at her. “Who are you?”

“Probably just another figment of your imagination destined to torment you.” Can’t have him waking up and remembering this, if that is even possible. “Hey, here’s a thought. Maybe I’ll go away sooner if you ‘appease’ me.”

He backed away. The scenery shifted to a park in the middle of a big city. There was a little girl holding his hand. “Daddy, who’s the strange lady?”

Corona blinked. Unexpected. The man turned to his daughter. “I... I’m not sure at all.”

“Something from another universe,” Corona said. Which was true, when taken in a literal sense. She technically lived on this Earth though...

“Techniiiiiiicalitiesssss...”

Corona continued digging for information. “So, besides that woman, who’s your boss? Do you like him?”

“Are you some kind of mind parasite?”

“Yessss you aaaaaaaare.”

Corona gave him a thumbs up. “I am if you want me to be! So, show me your boss! Let’s talk about your boss!”

The scene with the park vanished, replaced with a political rally. A man in a suit waved at the populace and smiled, the podium beneath him reading Senator Pearse.

“Do you like him?” Corona asked.

“He pays me...” the blue man answered, clearly not processing all of this properly.

“One of the higher ups...” Corona mused. “You’ve been very helpful, mister.”

“Wait... How come you...”

“Because I’m derogatory and mean. I’ll probably be going now-“

“SUNSEEEEEEEEEET!”
Corona looked directly at Senator Pearse. He was wearing the mask. She screamed…

…Corona jerked back from the man’s body, breathing heavily.

“What happened!?” Twilight yelled.

“I… He must have had some sort of mental training…”

“You went all purple for a while, Corona! I was worried!”

Corona kicked the unconscious blue man. “I’m fine. Let’s go, I’ve got something to talk to Director Storm about…”

~~~

General Sunset, Toph, Lieshy, Vivian, and Fef were climbing a large mountain.

Well, everyone but Lieshy was climbing. She was flying a little to the side, looking at them all impatiently. “The bumble can move above and below. I could just fly up, get the likely useless information, and come back down.”

Sunset shook her head. “No, Lieshy. This is a monastery – we’re not going to upset the acolytes by just letting you charge in.”

“Then just tell me what to do.”

“They won’t speak to anyone who isn’t an acolyte or government employee.”

 “…That’s stupid.”

Fef laughed. “So, can I test them when I get there to see if I can get them to crack?”

“No trying to make them break their laws, we want information, not a fight.”

Vivian nodded. “Got it. What’s the information this time?”

Toph grunted. “This was the sixth artifact the Sage had Applejack get. Some kind of perfectly round sphere of white material. Applejack just charged in here, took it, and ran out. Didn’t know anything else about it, like so many of the other artifacts. Not that knowing more has been helpful.”

Vivian put her head in her hands. “Aw, but I liked the story of the Red Rune! Such passionate love and sacrifice!”

“Still useless,” Toph muttered.

“The legend behind could esoterically affect the artifact’s power,” Lieshy commented.

“Big word alert!” Fef called to her.

“I can be the sesquipedalian whenever I desire.”

“You are just such a STICK in the MUD sometimes, you know that?”

“I hazard to suggest it’s called ‘being the reasonable one’.”

“Now you’re just speaking like that to ANNOY me!”
Lieshy smirked. “Eeeyup!”

Fef pointed at Lieshy but couldn’t come up with a retort.

“We’re almost there,” Toph announced.

“Really?” Fef shouted, glad to be changing the topic of focus. “How can you tell?”

Toph stomped her foot into the ground. “I can feel earth above us too, numbnuts.”

“…Ah.”

Vivian smiled. “Oh, that’s good, I can’t wait to meet these acolytes! …Even if they won’t talk to us, I’m sure the story of the artifact will be fascinating!”

They arrived at the top of the mountain, discovering the summit to be a crater-like enclosure with one entrance – a set of gates that seemed to be made out of a solid piece of pearl. Sunset was fairly sure magic was used to construct it, since finding a pearl that size would require an oyster the size of a mansion or two. The gates themselves were inscribed with two giant eyes. One pupil was the shape of a hexagon, the other a six-pointed star.

Sunset moved to knock, but the doors opened before she reached them. They slid back, kicking up significant dust, slowly revealing the interior of the summit-crater. There were a dozen simple stone buildings carved from the mountain’s rock, a handful of trees with strange blue fruit, and a statue of Armonia in the center, enchanted to have water flowing over her constantly.

Sunset bowed purely from reflex. Lieshy glanced at the others before following suit. Soon, all five of them were bowing to the statue, most feeling pretty awkward about it.

“General Sunset Shimmer, you are welcomed to the Gateway Monastery. We’ve been expecting you.”

Sunset took that as her cue to look up. She stared into the purple eyes of an oculus with a similarly colored mane and a dull gray coat who was wearing perfectly white robes. “Thank you for your gracious welcome. I apologize for the unusual companions, but they need to hear what we’ll discuss.”

“I understand. I also understand they will blurt things out constantly.”

“…Now, I’m sure they can behave themse-“

“MAUD!” Lieshy blurted.

The acolyte made no reply – didn’t even so much as look at Lieshy. Sunset, on the other hand, shot Lieshy a look. “Don’t test them!”

“But she looks like Maud! Pinkie Pie’s sister!”

Sunset blinked, slowly turning back to the acolyte. “You wouldn’t, by chance, be related to Pinkie the Sage, would you?”
“Your companion is indeed correct, I am her sister. I can hear them, by the way, I’m just forbidden from interacting with all of them save Fef, who holds a prominent position in her government.”

“Cool!” Fef cheered. “What’s with the no talking thing though? Seems lame!”

“It is to keep us disconnected from the ways of the world. However, we do understand that sometimes discussing our place in the world is necessary, hence the clause that allows for discussion with the government. Any government, really.”

Toph grumbled. “Shoulda gotten Iroh to give me a title…”

Maud looked back to Sunset. “You are looking for my sister.”

Sunset nodded. “She’s caused some problems and is definitely up to something. Can you tell us anything?”

“I know no more about what she wants than Lady Rarity did,” Maud said. “I may be able to see further than almost every oculus thanks to the Goddess’s blessing, but I cannot see inside the minds of anypony, not even my sister.”

“Well, what about just Pinkie in general? How does she do the things she does?”

Maud turned to look at the Goddess’ statue. “She sees something all other oculi can not. We see what is. She described once, to me, that she saw the reason for what is, as well. And, as you know, one day she saw a reason she hated, and started her quest, whatever it is.”

“And what did she want taken from here?” Vivian asked.

Maud made no response. Sunset shook her head. “Sorry. What she said, what was taken from here?”

“The Goddess’ mold,” Maud said, pointing at the cupped hands of the statue. “The vigilante Applejack crashed through our doors one day on Pinkie’s behest and despite our best efforts to defend ourselves, made off with our prized possession. It was a pure white material that could take on any shape, made in ancient times by the essence of the Goddess against her will.”

“I take it there’s a story behind that?” Sunset asked.

“Yes. But first, you are going to have a mental breakdown.”

Sunset blinked. “Come again?” She began to look around, concerned that something would jump out at her. She saw a large, blue dragon sitting on the edge of the crater. “Oh. You have a dragon. … Mildly terrifying, but nothing worth losing my mind over.”

Toph tapped her foot on the ground. “Oh, yeah, dragon. Forgot to mention that.”

“How do you forget to mention something like a giant predatory reptile?” Lieshy asked.

“It seemed friendly.”

Lieshy facehooved.

“I don’t see any-“ Sunset began, but then she saw it. Towards the back of the canyon was an Arcei in acolyte dress. Sunset’s tail began growling, lighting on fire. She teleported right in front of the brown stallion. “I spy me an Arcei.”

The Arcei backed away, but didn’t speak.
“Oh, you can talk. I’m General Sunset Shimmer. Please, I’d like to hear which runes were destroyed in the construction of your arcs. How did the golems scream when they were slain? What ponies’ livelihood did you steal?”

“I… I…”

Sunset’s tail really wanted to eat him. “I’m not sure how much longer I can keep the maw back, Arcei. Spill the beans, I’m curious.”

“The Rune of Magnus!”

Sunset’s face darkened. “…That was you!”

“I was young! I didn’t know what I was being asked to do!”

“You think that’s an excuse for condemning an entire town to freeze to death?” She pulled her head back, preparing a devastating fire spell.

She hit a rock wall instead of the Arcei. Sunset glared at Toph. “You think you’re defending an innocent, do you?”

“No. I mean, he doesn’t sound like that much of a jerk, but I’m just stopping you from a murderous rampage.”

“I grew up around the Rune of Magnus, Toph. The pack of Arcei that harvested that rune used it to make him.”

“It doesn’t sound like he really had a choice. And something tells me if you try to kill him, you’ll turn all the acolytes on us. Including bad mama dragon up there.”

Sunset glared at the ‘bad mama dragon.’

“I will roast you if you so much as touch Turner,” the dragon bellowed.

Sunset took a deep breath and put the fire on her tail out. “…Fine. He lives. Whatever, keep your blasphemous freak here, see if the Goddess decides to smite you for betraying her creed.”

“You are mistaken about her creed,” Maud said, walking up to Sunset again. “The runes are not part of the Goddess’ plan at all, and therefore are outside her doctrine.”

Sunset shook her head. “What are you, crazy? Of course they’re part of the Goddess’ plan!”

“They are not mentioned at all in any of the scriptures aside from as set pieces. They are not considered holy, nor evil, but are instead neutral forces.”

Sunset frowned. “You’re an odd group.”

“There’s a reason we left the main Order to live up here, they began to teach things deviating from the true scripture.”

“Whatever. Fine. Do what you will, see what I care. Tell me about the Goddess’ mold so we can get on with our lives.”

“The sphere that can take any shape came into existence at the time of magic. If you recall the legend, in the creation of the world the Goddess lost focus momentarially and infused part of her essence into the world that later became magic. The world started draining it from her in large
quantities, trying to take all her power for itself. She could not allow this, and tied a knot to separate her power from the power the world had already taken. That knot is the mold.”

Sunset raised an eyebrow. “Okay, so we have an artifact that can take any shape with a relation to the Goddess. How does that help us?”

“I do not know, I cannot see much. I do know that the mask she wears is the Goddess’ mold.”

“Oh, so it has special white magic tendril powers?”

“No,” Maud said. “It should be completely docile, unable to do anything beyond change shape.”

Fef gasped. “She’s done something to it!”

“Genius deduction,” Lieshy deadpanned.

“What has she done?” Sunset asked.

“I have no idea,” Maud admitted. “I do know it can’t be good. Something sick and dark is brewing. What makes me most concerned is that my prophecies tell me only part of it comes from Pinkie. The other is something… maddening.”

Sunset nodded slowly. “Well, we’ll be off then. Enjoy your little den.”

“May the Goddess bless you.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Sunset muttered, walking out of the ‘monastery’. She growled. “Glad that’s over with.”

Vivian put her hands on her hips. “Sunset Shimmer, that was completely uncalled for, rude, and brutish!”

Sunset narrowed her eyes. “There’s a reason Arcei are illegal, Vivian. They destroy runes. In some cases, maybe that can be allowed to slide, even if I don’t think so. But that case? Ponies died when that rune was taken away!”

Toph folded her arms. “And you think risking the mission was worth attacking him?”

“You and I both know you only protected him because you felt like it and not because of the mission.”

“Doesn’t matter. I still stand by it. Not to mention that by killing him you’d just bring about more violence. Isn’t that something you’re trying to stop doing?”

Sunset frowned. “…I wouldn’t kill him. I would have just broken his arcs so he wouldn’t be able to destroy another rune.”

“That’d be like removing somepony’s horn,” Lieshy pointed out.

“So? It stops further destruction!”

“I don’t think he was planning on destroying any more runes,” Vivian said.

Sunset groaned. “You know what? You guys can find your own ways down the mountain. I’ll be waiting in the bar at Silkerton.” She lit her horn and teleported away.
Toph threw her hands into the air. “Stubborn as a mule!”

Fef broke out laughing.

Toph facepalmed. “Fef that wasn’t that funny.”

Lieshy sighed. “It was very painful. I worry about our leader, sometimes.”

Vivian shrugged. “It’s a fault she has. We shouldn’t let her think it’s fine, and we should encourage her to change herself, but we also shouldn’t let it destroy our bond.”

“I doubt,” Lieshy said. “It is something rather difficult to move past.”

Toph clenched her fist. “You have no idea…”

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Corona stepped into the primary mission control of AID and walked down the center aisle to Director Storm’s big seat. She took off her sunglasses. “Director? Can I have a word with you?”

“Always! Well, so long as I’m not busy, but I’m not busy now!” He chuckled. “What’s on your mind?”

“…In private?”

His expression lost some of its jovial nature. “Ah, I see. Well, to the private office then! Onward!” He performed an exaggerated march into his private office, Corona in tow. His personal office was a somewhat small space consisting almost entirely of a desk and two bookshelves. There were three small chairs at the front of the desk, and one large behind. Storm took his place in the large seat and rested a finger on one of his many shiny paperweights. “So, what do you have for me?”

“I uncovered a bit of an economic conspiracy at the Hub, and it involves at least one of our agents.”

Director Storm sighed, putting his hands on the bridge of his nose. “It was only a matter of time… All right, who’s the traitor, what’s their plan, and how can I get them behind bars?”

Corona found this reaction a little more accepting than she’d expected, but that was good for her. “Agent Katty. Her face was in the memories of a man I touched. She was teaching him how to do his ‘job’ which, at the very least, involved supplying technology shops of the Hub with products to sell at-cost in order to run any competing shops into the ground. Basically they’re encouraging price-fixing in order to exploit the extremely popular market of technology at the expense of ponies and the people of the Elemental Nations.”

Storm furrowed his brow. “That’s definitely illegal here, but I’m not aware that we can charge them for doing such things on the Hub.”

Corona smirked. “Well, we can cut off the people in charge on this end and expose the plan to the people of the Hub. Make a big show of it, make the people of the Hub come to realize that we’re on their side, and will defend them. Plus, if we can stop them before they complete their plan, we can keep technology prices from skyrocketing. For a while at least, I don’t really understand the economy that well.”

“You and me both.” He put his hand to his beard, stroking it. “I like it, I like this a lot. We expose a conspiracy, boot out one of our less-than-loyal agents, and then we claim some glory of our own! Ha!” He took out a notebook. “Okay, so, who else is involved besides Katty? I know you’ve got
more than you’ve told me. You wouldn’t be here if you didn’t have more.”

“I intercepted a shipment and emotionally read a blue skinned man. Didn’t get his name, actually. I did get the name of who I believe is the mastermind behind it all. Senator Pearse.”

Director Storm stopped taking notes and facepalmed, ramming the notepad into his face.

Corona’s confident expression fell. “…What’s the problem?”

“Pearse is the primary reason we get funding here at AID. Going up against him would be incredibly dangerous. Even if he wouldn’t declare political war on us if we exposed him, we need him in office so we can work like we do. If we remove him somehow, some other Senator I don’t know how to work with is going to screw everything over.”

“So you’re saying we aren’t going to do anything.”

Director Storm sighed, fixing Corona with a serious expression. Corona wasn’t quite sure, but this may have been the first time she’d seen a truly serious expression on his face. “More than that. I’m ordering you to stop looking into it. If he wants to do this, we let him. I’m very upset he didn’t at least have the courtesy to tell me what he was doing with one of my agents, but I can’t do anything about that now. I can’t have him knowing one of my agents acted against him.”

“But sir, what about-“

“Corona, no. My decision is final, and it has nothing to do with my personal opinion on the matter. You are to cease investigations immediately and do nothing to hinder Senator Pearse’s shady operation. He is to have the full control of the technology market if he wants, no matter how many regulations or laws he’s breaking. …You didn’t get caught did you?”

“The Hub’s cameras may have seen me tackle the Flim Flam brothers, but the blue man was asleep when I confronted him.”

“Good. I’ll try to have those recordings erased from the Hub data…”

“You have access to the Hub cameras?”

Director Storm shrugged. “Not at the moment. But I’m pretty sure I can get it, it’d just take a couple agents in the right place.”

Corona sat back in her chair, looking down. “So… That’s that? I just stop?”

“Yes. I am sorry, Corona. This is one of those cases where my hands are tied. I will have a discussion with Senator Pearse about informing me of things, but that’s as far as the action I can take goes.”

“So, he just wins.”

Director Storm nodded. “It’s not like we can get the people upset to put pressure on him, everything here’s top secret.” He stood up. “Sometimes they have us in ugly traps, Corona. The cost of doing what you think is right is intentionally made too steep. You’ll just have to accept that.” He tapped one of his paperweights as he left the office.

Corona just sat there, staring at the large empty seat in front of her for around a minute. Eventually she stood up, face downcast, and walked out. She put her sunglasses back on and tried to stare as impassively as possible, but it was still easy for everyone to tell she was down. Nobody said
anything to her.

~~~

Twilight did not take the news well.

Corona eventually forced herself to leave Twilight crying in the Earth Gizmos shop. Her presence wasn’t helping, not today. Corona had tried to tell Twilight she could take action herself, but she wasn’t hearing it. Twilight had gone into a pit of despair and there was nothing Corona could do about it. Not without some time.

She walked through the Hub aimlessly, no clue of where she was going. No goal in mind. Trying not to think about today. The lies, the rules, the cheating, the manipulation, the mask, the barriers, the people in charge. She wanted to burn them all right now.

Her phone rang. She whipped it out, planning to hit Ignore – but there was no button for that. There was just a pink hexagon with a sugar skull inside and the words GO THROUGH THE DOOR ON YOUR LEFT printed on the screen.

Corona put her phone away and glanced to her left. There was, in fact, a door leading into an empty establishment. Her curiosity was piqued. She checked the door – unlocked. She walked into the room, not surprised in the slightest that the door closed behind her.

The room was completely bare except for one large television screen with the sugar skull on it.

“So… What now?”

The symbol glitched for a second and switched to a live camera feed. A woman grinned at Corona. “Ah, I see you listened! Muy bueno.”

Corona nodded. “I take it you’re Sombra?”

“Yes! And you are Agent Corona, otherwise known as Sunset Shimmer, sophomore at Wolfe University on Earth Vitis, and technically you still hold the title of Protégé in Equis Vitis.”

“Nice trick, knowing stuff that’s basically public knowledge. Why am I here?”

Sombra grinned. “Here specifically? It was empty and you were walking by. Why am I talking to you? Well, you see, I’ve been watching your little game of detective through every camera I can find. You’ve gotten quite the story – an otherworldly attempt to exploit the friendly denizens of other worlds for money by manipulating the sale of technological devices.”

Corona was mildly impressed she knew all that. “And?”

“And it seems as if you have been silenced. But no worry, this is where your good friend Sombra comes in! You see, I started doing my own digging once I realized what you had stumbled upon, and I found a loooooot of evidence.” She pressed a button, bringing a picture of Senator Pearse and Agent Katty up next to her head. “You’d be surprised where people think there aren’t any cameras. Or where documents can be stored without being found.” She brought up a file detailing a ‘meeting’ orchestrated by ‘Blight Katty’. “And you see, Corona, what we have here is a case of me having all the evidence needed to blow the lid right off this thing, and the means to broadcast it to everyone in the Hub!”

Corona narrowed her eyes. “And you want something from me for it, don’t you?”
“See? This is why I like you, you actually have a brain. You’d be surprised how few people do.”

Corona laughed. “No I wouldn’t.”

“Perhaps not,” Sombra admitted, shrugging.

“Your terms?”

“Ah yes, my terms. You see, I want to form what you’d consider a partnership with you. In this partnership, we’d both get something we want. I’d get access to the events that Director Storm knowingly changes in reports, or things he never digitizes. You’d get a friend who could help you keep your little AID organization accountable for the things they do.”

“…You’re asking me to become a mole, a traitor.”

“Yes!”

“No deal.”

“But think about this, Corona!” Sombra said, leaning in closer to her camera. “Do you really think this will be the last time something like this happens? Surely, if Senator Pearse is willing to do this, he’s willing to do other highly despicable things. This will be far from the last exploitation of his, and there will no doubt be other things the ‘admirable’ Director Storm will be unable to prevent – if he truly is that great of a person.”

“He’s not. But he is forward and honest.”

“Do you really think so?” Sombra took a physical file from off screen and examined it. “This file was never digitized, and I only got it by being really lucky with a stupid agent not checking if the paper shredder was working properly. It describes a magic artifact that was ‘lost in action’ that I swear looks a lot like one of Director Storm’s fancy paperweights…”

Corona shrugged. “He was probably hiding it from people like Senator Pearse.”

“That’s certainly possible, but how would you know?” Sombra asked.

“I don’t,” Corona admitted.

“And that’s what I’ll provide. A way for you to find out. A method by which to keep them accountable. A friend of sorts who just wants information in exchange for an avenue for you to achieve justice, when needed.”

Corona furrowed her brow. Sombra was actually making a lot of sense here. “You make a fair argument. But you’re a criminal.”

“What have I done besides steal a few things and hack a lot? Didn’t your close friend Nova do the exact same thing several months ago, and yet you’ve forgiven her completely!”

“You’re not showing remorse.”

“I was just making a point…” Sombra said, putting on a pouty face. “This is a one-time offer Corona, I won’t offer it again later.”

“I won’t betray them, Sombra. I may not agree with what they do all the time, and they may be locked by bureaucracy, but I trust them.”
Sombra placed another file onscreen. “Do you remember the world with the pawns and the cube?”

“Yes, actually. What about it?”

She pointed to a specific part of the file. “They authorized a nuke to be dropped on it, destroying everything there. The reason? ‘Possible security breach’. Suggested by Agent Tempest and authorized by Director Storm. There’s a footnote here that the rest of the team should not be made aware of the course of action, this time suggested by Director Storm himself.”

Corona blinked. “That… That can’t be real.”

“You have your dimensional device on you, do you not? You can always go check. I’d be wary of the radiation though.”

Corona pulled out the device, setting it to open a portal. There was nothing but blackness, not even the grid was visible. She closed the portal quickly, nervously glancing at the red radiation readout on her glasses.

“Nice reflexes,” Sombra said. “So, there you go. They’re hiding at least that from you, and I’m pretty sure you think that’s pretty horrible. I may not be the best person, Corona, but I think I’m your only option if you don’t want to become a soldier who follows orders blindly.”

Corona took a deep breath and nodded. “We have a deal. What do you want me to do now?”

Sombra grinned with victory. “At the moment? Nothing. Just keep an eye out for AID being secretive or manipulative about anything. I’ll be in touch. Feel free to get back to your day, in about five minutes the lid should be blown wide open on this thing. See you around!”

The screen went dead and the door behind Corona popped open. She took a step out into the street and started walking, once again without any clue where she was going. She wondered what Sombra was going to do…

Precisely five minutes later, when she passed Seskii and the cabbage salesman again, every screen in the Hub lit up with photos, documents, and a typed up description of the Senator’s plan. It took a few minutes for people to start getting angry.

Corona smirked. The sight of people getting angry was, for once, something good. She returned to Earth Gizmos to find Twilight staring at a computer. She looked up. “Did you…”

Corona held up a hand. “I didn’t do this Twilight.”

Twilight smiled and dragged her into a hug. “Of course you didn’t.”

The two friends embraced.

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Director Storm paused the video. “So, let’s review. You walk into the store smiling, and Twilight asks you if you did this. With a cocky smile on your face, you emphasize the words ‘didn’t’ and ‘this’, implying that you had some tangential relation while making it clear she’s not to suggest any sort of involvement to anyone in a statement that probably isn’t a full lie.”

Corona opened her mouth to speak. Director Storm held up a hand to stop her. “Look, I know there’s an excuse coming, and it’ll be a good one, and I’ll see right through it because I’ve been at this job way, way too long. Let me just make it clear that I am not happy with you disobeying my
order.”

Corona said nothing.

Director Storm continued. “Now, I can’t find what exactly you did to do that, so I have to give you points for that, a good agent knows how to cover her tracks. But I did find enough to point at you and probably get you convicted. I then promptly threw all that information into every trash heap I could find so no one could ever say you had anything to do with it.”

“…Why?”

“Because you are a good agent. There’s a delicate balance of following orders and using your own judgment. As much as the system wants you to follow orders blindly every time, I wouldn’t be where I am today without a bit of rule breaking. You’ve pulled a good one – Senator Pearse’s plan is completely toast, he’s still a senator, and he has no reason to hate us at all. Though he is being very adamant we find out who did this. Frankly, I’m encouraged to just pin it on that loose hacker, Sombra, and get on with our lives, but we’ll see if a better target presents themselves.”

Corona smiled nervously. “Heheh… Yeah…”

“Anyway, as well as this turned out, I still can’t have you disobeying direct orders like that. So there will be some punishment disguised as regular assignment.”

“…What?”

“Your team is going to go through ‘survival training’ on this planet. Spend a month in the wilderness without any supplies. And I’ll order Tempest to ensure you don’t use any of those fire powers of yours.”

“I’m in college, Director!”

Director Storm grinned. “This won’t take place until your summer vacation. I’ll keep adding days and weeks to it if you do more questionable things. So I’d suggest being a good girl for the next little while, hrm?”

“Yes sir!”

“Good. Now get out of my office, I need to call someone about another illegal shipment. The cargo only gets weirder when you upgrade to interdimensional status.”

“I can imagine…” Corona said, standing up and walking outside. She put her sunglasses back on. There was a little sugar-skull icon that flashed on them for the briefest of moments. A smiley face emoticon appeared in the top right corner.

Corona nodded, biting her lip. This… well, this was going to be interesting, to say the least.
“Hey guys! Pinkie Pie here! I’ve been waiting for this moment for quite a while – I finally get my own chapter! Isn’t that great? I’ve been one of the mane ponies for an arc and then some already and I haven’t really gotten a chance in the spotlight! Twilight and Nova definitely have, Rarity has, Flutterfree’s had some good pivotal moments, but me? I’m usually just there, along for the ride, there to make you smile and spread cheer around!

“I mean, that’s not something that upsets me or anything, sometimes I just work best in the background! Probably most of the time actually, me being an important force on the way things pan out is sorta cheating. Usually. That might change…

“Ah, what am I saying? Who cares about that! Ahah… How’s your life been lately? Must be good, or at least better, since you’re reading this, right? I like to think it is, anyway, though it’s a little hard to give a message to everyone reading this that actually applies to everyone. Your life might actually suck right now – and if it does, don’t lose hope! Things have a way of turning out for the better!

“I mean, right now, my situation isn’t all that great, but I have faith it’ll turn out okay. Probably. Today was quiiiite a doozy, let me tell you! Lots of running, jumping, and crazy things that are just too much to deal with! You should have seen it, actually. I’m surprised you haven’t already. Ooooooh, right, you’re just looking at this first so you can go back later! That’s a pretty cool narrative trick, huh? Must be nice, time both being linear and fluid for you. You can read everything in a single sequence of events even if the events themselves jump around a lot. It’d save a lot of headache if it looked that way for us.

“Oh, but I don’t want you to go yet! It’s nice to have someone to talk to, or at least talk at. Some of you are responding in your heads – thank you for the imaginary cookie, by the way – but as you can see it’s more than a liiiiiittle difficult to give any sort of answer to you that makes any sense! And now you’re all thinking about cookies! Heh!

“…So, you’ve probably started asking about now, why am I talking to you? Even if I’ve dropped hints before, I’ve never actually addressed you. See, yeah I’m usually not supposed to, or even really able to do this, but… Ah, that’s not important. Well, it is, but I kinda don’t want to talk about it right now. You’ll probably figure it out. ….Yay.

“Let’s talk about something else! Apparently I’m going to be the only mane pony not to change her name! Or, well, I try changing it so often and never settle on anything that it is going to be permanent so nopony takes my names seriously and… Yeah. You’ll like what Twilight and Rarity choose, I think. I’m actually not sure why Twilight chooses hers though, and I’m keeping my lips zipped about Rarity! There’s got to be some fun, right?

“Oh? Why don’t I just choose Diane? Because, sillies, there’s already other Pinkies who have that one! Quite a lot, actually! It’s what my loose mirror clone duplicate is going by on ‘Equis Vitis’ right now! Heh, ‘Equis Vitis’. What a silly name! I love it!

“What else… What else… Oh! You want to know what I’m doing? Nothing actually, just standing in a field of roses. Nothing all that interesting, to be honest. Definitely not. Everything’s perfectly fine and you shouldn’t be worried. Ow – yeesh, these things are much, much more pointy than they look. Or should be. Or could be… Everythinghasgonenineteen. Ahemherm! Right, right.
“I think it’s time for you to go back now, see at least part of my story. Fun, I guess. Just… when you go back, please don’t judge me, okay? You… You really can’t understand what went on in my head, no matter how much he tries to describe it to you. Okay?”

“Please…?”

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“Watcha dooin’?” Pinkie asked, putting her hooves on the laboratory counter covered with strange, vibrating panels of glass that reflected the walls of Twilight's castle rather well.

Starbeat looked through her goggles at Pinkie and bit her lip. “Ah. Pinkie. I am… Experimenting.”

“Experimenting on what?”

Starbeat scooted away from her and tapped one of the panes of glass. “The mysterious force, what else? It’s all I study.”

Pinkie nodded slowly. “What are you finding out?”

“Well, that everywhere has it. Every dimension, every world, every person. As of yet I haven’t found a place where it manifests like a curse – like mine – but everywhere there’s ambient spread of it. I’m starting to wonder if it’s an inherent part of reality, like space, time, matter, and energy.”

Pinkie poked one of the vibrating glass panes. “That’s cool!”

“That’s terrifying! There’s something around us that nopony has any idea about that probably changes a lot of things without us realizing! Some ponies have more of the mysterious force around them! Some universes just have more background energy! And I have no idea what it does or means!”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll figure it out!”

“I’ve been working on this for months, Pinkie, and nothing, nothing, has revealed itself!”

Pinkie smiled sadly. “I think that’s just how it’s going to be for a long, long time. But you shouldn’t let that discourage you! I’m sure you can find out more the more you keep working on it!”

“Yeah, I will… After all, I need to find a cure for myself…” She looked at Pinkie. “Yes, you look really, really hot to me right now and I want to caress you. It’s… painful.”

Pinkie giggled. “No problem. You can pet me if you think it’ll make you feel better.”

“Ah… No. Like an addiction, giving in just forces me into a worse relapse. I have to remain strong and not give in to my nature.”

“I’m sure you can do it!”

Starbeat took a deep breath and scooted further away from Pinkie. “Here’s the cruel ironic paradox of this mess, the positive reinforcement from other ponies just makes the urge worse. How’s that for fun?”

Pinkie frowned. “That’s horrible…”

“Yeah, it is…” She shook her head. “Talk about something else. Quickly.”
“Did you name the force after yourself yet?”

Starbeat grabbed a tissue off the countertop to help with her nosebleeds—apparently they were quite common, given the small pile of bloodied tissues neatly stacked next to the tissue box. “Erhem… Sorta? When I write papers about it, I call it the Beat, but that’s obviously geared toward the observation of it in my world.” Starbeat turned to Pinkie. “Hey, you have a… tendency to know things, and a strong focus of the ambient force around you. Do you have a name?”

Pinkie shrugged. “Eh, I think you should just go with Beat for now.”

Starbeat nodded. “Fair enough…”

“So, anything interesting about ponies or universes with strong amounts of the Beat?”

Starbeat nodded slowly. “Charter Twilight Sparkle has the most ambient beat of any individual I’ve scanned. You’re the second. The universe we’re standing in right now has the highest ambience of any of the others, with Earth Tau’ri being the second. The problem is I can’t assign definite measures to the Beat since it fluctuates wildly and doesn’t make any sense…”

Pinkie smiled. “Hey, hey, don’t worry, sometimes you just have to be okay with not understanding everything. That’s what all my friends have to do with me daily! ‘It’s just Pinkie being Pinkie’ has become a meme.”

“Meme?”

“An idea that spreads that people recognize and use over and over again. You should check the Hub Internet, they’re everywhere.” She pulled a smartphone out of her pocket and produced a picture of Senator Pearse with the caption “NEW FRIENDS WHO WANT NOTHING AND WOULD LOVE TO HELP ME WITH ANYTHING I ASKED? CLEARLY, I NEED TO ROB THEM.”

“…I don’t get it.”

Pinkie shrugged. “It’s just a thing you slowly begin to understand the more you’re exposed to it. Or just laugh at if you’re me, but you aren’t.”

“There are a few ponies who are,” Starbeat commented.

“Yeah, that’s true. It makes things more fun! Did you know there’s a clone of me wandering around this world that goes by the name Diane?”

Starbeat blinked. “I had no idea. Guess that’s why you don’t use that name then, huh?”

“Yes!” Pinkie grinned. “By the way, why did you chose Starbeat in the heat of the moment?”

“Cause I felt like it, really. I was Starlight, and beat was related to the heart, which was what my world was all about. In a disgusting sort of way.”

“I see…” Pinkie furrowed her brow. “Well, I wish you luck in your experiments!”

“You leaving?”

“I’m about to be called away!”

Twilight poked her head in the doorway. “Pinkie! We’re off on an adventure! New world!”

“Yay!” Pinkie bounced over to Twilight. “See you Starbeat!”
Starbeat weaved. Twilight nodded in her direction. “Hey, Starbeat, how you doing?”

“Oh, you know, suffering from an extreme urge to hold Pinkie and never let go, but it will pass.”

Twilight smiled awkwardly. “Right… Good luck with that. See you later.”

“As always,” she said, sliding her goggles back on her face.

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The world in question was another alternate version of Equestria. Today, the grass was extra blue and the buildings of Ponyville were all in the wrong spots, and Twilight’s castle was floating. Other than that, the ponies acted more or less the same and everything was enjoyable. They’d already met their alternate selves and had made quick friends with them. One of the simplest outings yet.

“So, marking this one as just another regular world?” Nova asked. “Doesn’t seem to be anything special here.”

“Really?” the world’s native Starlight said, frowning. “Nothing special?”

“Well, the grass is blue,” Nova conceded. “Unless you’ve got something better.”

Starlight frowned. “Well, the best thing we’ve got is Melinda, and you probably have her as well.”

Twilight blinked. “Melinda?”

“Who’s Melinda?” Pinkie asked.

“Oh, she probably just has a different name in your world. She’s just the best.” Starlight grinned. “She’s, like, the personification of all six elements of harmony at once, is just so talented at everything, and can help everypony with all their friendship problems!”

“…Not ringing any bells,” Rarity said.

Starlight gasped. “You… You don’t have a Melinda!? How do you live? Without her we’d be… I don’t want to think about it!”

“I guess our universe just survived,” Flutterfree said. “Can we meet this Melinda?”

“Well, uh, I don’t exactly know where she is right now. But you can talk to other ponies, I’m sure some of them can tell you where she is! Actually, while you go do that, I’m going to look for her! Don’t leave while I’m gone!” She ran off.

Nova glanced at Twilight. “Well that was weird.”

Pinkie shrugged. “Not as weird as me. Still weird though.”

Twilight nodded. “True. I do want to meet this Melinda now, apparently she’s something special.”

She waved down a version of Applejack. “Hey, do you know Melinda?”

“Do Ah ever! She’s just so great! Ah had her over for dinner yesterday with the family and she managed to solve three separate issues with our crops and animals simply by sayin’ things! We’ll have twice the load of apples next year!”

“Know where we can find her?” Rarity asked.
“Not really, she moves around a lot, talks to a lot of ponies. She’s around Rarity – our Rarity – most often. Check the boutique. You’ll be in for a treat when you meet her!”

“…We’ve gathered that,” Twilight said, turning to Rarity. “You see your Boutique yet?”

Rarity smirked. “Two streets down, three buildings to the left. I always have an eye for finding it, every time.”

The five ponies walked through town to the Boutique, all curious about this Melinda now. Such high praise from two ponies, she must really be something.

They walked into the world’s version of Carousel Boutique, and Rarity instantly gasped at the clothing on sale. “I… I…”

“My eyes must not be working properly. Melinda designed that; it’s one of the best pieces in my shop. Far outshines anything I design.”

The traveling Rarity’s pupils dilated. “Twilight, the ponies in this town are crazy!” she hissed. Twilight stifled a chuckle. “Ahem. Rarity, is everything Melinda designs better than yours?”

The native Rarity grinned. “Why, yes! She’s a fashionista the likes of which the world has never seen! Just look at all these dresses! Beauty! Fashion! Brilliance!”

Pinkie blinked. “Yeah, even I can tell that pink dress is a bit overdone.”

The native Rarity gasped. “Never! It’s such the perfect balance of color, seamwork, and fabric choice! I – oh, maybe you just come from another universe and have different eyes. It must be terrible to be you. I bet Melinda could fix that, get you to see right with her magic!”

Nova narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “She can get us to see ‘correctly’ with magic?”

“Well, I’d assume so! Never seen her do such a thing, though. But with her magic prowess I’m sure she could!”

“Do you, by chance, know where she is?” Flutterfree asked.

“Ah, no. Last I saw she was headed over to Fluttershy’s cottage to deal with the animals. She’s the only one besides Fluttershy who can keep Angel at bay.”

“…Thank you, Rarity.” the visiting Rarity said, furrowing her brow. “Try to have more confidence in your own designs though, okay?”

“Of course!”

The five ponies left the Boutique.

“This is suspicious,” Pinkie said.

“No, really?” Nova snarked. “My bet is that the ponies in this town are brainwashed. Nobody’s that well liked.”
“I know who we can ask,” Twilight said. “We’re going to Fluttershy’s cottage, right? We can probably find this world’s Discord. I doubt he’d be affected by brainwashing.”

Flutterfree nodded. “Right! To my other cottage!”

Fluttershy’s cottage looked identical to Flutterfree’s cottage back in Equis Vitis. It was a tree covered with all sorts of cute animals and a couple not-so-cute ones. Flutterfree gently knocked on the door, and Fluttershy answered. “Oh! It’s… you five! Hi! What brings you to my cottage?”

“We’re wondering if we could see your world’s Discord,” Rarity said, smiling warmly. “Is he around?”

“Oh, he is if I ask for him. Heeeey Discord!” Fluttershy called. In an instant Discord appeared in a flash of white. He was covered in strange, fluffy, purple spiders seemingly made of cactuses.

“Hello Fluttershy! And – oh! Otherworldly visitors! I am Discord, charmed to meet you!” He snapped his fingers, hitting Twilight alongside the head with a lucky charm marshmallow.

Twilight blinked. “You certainly aren’t any different.”

“I’m glad to hear that the other mes across the multiverse understand how to have a good time.” He stroked her cheek, making her feel like grass was growing in her face when, in reality, the hair had just turned blue. “It’d be a shame if that ever came to an end.”

“Right, right,” Nova said. “We wanted to ask you something. What do you think of Melinda?”

Fluttershy snorted. “Oh, this should be fun!”

Discord groaned. “Fine, fine…” he cleared his throat. “Melinda is a strange freak of nature who brings a tremendous amount of order to existence that, while annoying me to no end, I must admit is quite possibly the best person in existence. There. You happy? Did you just want to see me dance around the issue or something!?”

Nova stared at Discord in disbelief. “H-how? How can anyone be that well liked?”

“Clearly you haven’t met her,” Discord said, folding his arms. “Everyone who sees her truly understands that she is, the best!” He grabbed a microphone and sung the best into it a few times for an annoying echo effect. “Of course she and I have chaos and order fights all the time, it’s good to have a rival.”

Pinkie frowned. “Girls, something tells me we should leave. Like, hop along back home, deal with stuff there.”

“Right!” Twilight said, smiling nervously. “We’ve got another world to go look at! So many worlds, so little time!”

Discord put his hands on his hips. “Oh, we can’t have that! Clearly, you need to meet Melinda first!”

Flutterfree smiled, putting on the cute puppy-eyes. “Discord, I don’t think we do…”

Fluttershy looked at Discord as well with a similar expression. “I think they do!”

Discord blinked. “…Having two of you is absolutely terrifying. But, regardless, to Melinda!” He snapped his fingers, teleporting himself and the five otherworldly travelers back into the center of town. There, they saw this world’s Twilight Sparkle being ridden – by a young human woman.
Everypony had to admit, she looked stunning. Her hair was a lush, yet simple brown that curled delicately around her ears, each of which held a softly glowing red pearl earring. Her eyes were full of hazel wisdom, and her nose small, but slightly pointed. Her lips were full, and naturally vibrant, permanently twisted in a bemused and friendly smile. Her neck was slender, delicately sloping her skull down to her body, which was adorned with a simple blue t-shirt that somehow showed off all her curves in an amazing, yet modest way. Her jeans were simple blue denim, carefully sculpted around her powerful legs. The shoes were-

“Augh! Enough of that!” Pinkie said, smacking herself in the head.

Twilight looked at the human that was clearly Melinda and smiled. “Hello. I am Charter-Princess Twilight Sparkle, and I’m from another universe. I’ve heard a lot about you Melinda.”

Melinda smiled a smile that was truly innocent. “Oh, are the ponies spreading stories about me again? Really, they shouldn’t do that.”

“But we just have to let others know about you!” the native Twilight said. “What would we even be without you?”

Melinda blushed. “Please, there’s no need! I can do everything you need, I don’t need any praise in return!”

“Ah, but you’ll get it, because you deserve it!”

“Aw, Twilight!”

“…Why do I feel like puking,” Nova whispered to Charter Twilight.

Twilight didn’t get to answer. Melinda apparently heard that remark. “Excuse me, Starlight?”

Nova coughed. “Nova, actually, I go by a different name to avoid confusion. I was just making a joke to Twilight here, nothing to worry about.”

Melinda frowned. “It wasn’t very nice though. You shouldn’t make jokes at the expense of other people.”

“Especially Melinda!” the native Twilight shouted, defensive.

Discord shrugged. “I don’t know… I make jokes at her expense all the time.”

“And it’s wrong,” Melinda asserted.

“I know,” Discord chuckled. “I’m just so bad aren’t I?”

Flutterfree glanced back and forth between them. “I… Twilight, are you sensing anything?”

Twilight’s horn was alit. She shook her head. “No…. There’s a lot of magic coming off of Melinda, more than Discord, but no sign of mental manipulation at all…”

Melinda gasped. “You… You think I’m mind controlling these ponies?”

Twilight smiled nervously. “No offense. You seem nice enough, but I’m finding it hard to believe that that everypony likes you this much.”

“What are you talking about?” native Twilight shouted. “Melinda’s amazing! Why can’t you see that?”
Charter-Twilight cocked her head at her other self. “Well, you see, she’s just a little too ‘perfect’
don’t you think? She’s not exactly arrogant, but she steals the spotlight from everypony else. She
doesn’t seem to be willing to defend her own self, but you are all ready to defend her for her. It’s…
Just a little weird, and I can’t believe it’s normal.”

Melinda walked up to Twilight, an expression of true confusion on her face. “…What are you
talking about?”

Twilight smiled sadly. “I guess… I just don’t think you’re the best person in the world, Melinda.”

“That’s perfectly fine,” Melinda said, leaning down. “Not everyone has to like me. I didn’t even ask
for it.”

Native Twilight gasped. “Look at that, other me! Look at that! She’s letting you win! How can you
not see now?”

Charter-Twilight raised an eyebrow at her other self. “Why are you so worked up over this?”

Native Twilight ignored the question. “Melinda, think about it! Who are the only ponies who didn’t
like you?”

Melinda shrugged. “Troublemakers, but…” Her pupils dilated. “Wait, Twilight, are you saying…?”

“Yes! Anyone who doesn’t like you is either a troublemaker, a liar, or a hater! You are a gift to
everyone, and it’s blatantly obvious!”

Melinda turned back to Charter-Twilight. “She’s right… Literally no good pony has ever said what
you said… You’re probably a villain in disguise!”

“…What.” Flutterfree deadpanned.

“I don’t know about the rest of you, but…” Melinda raised her hand, encasing Twilight in a magic
bubble that froze her solid. “I’m going to have to have a long talk with Charter-Twilight here, see if I
can redeem her. Not everyone’s mind can be changed, but I’ll try my hardest. To the castle, Twilight,
let’s see if we can help her.”

Then Melinda, native Twilight, and Discord were gone.

Nova twitched. “What just happened!?”

Rarity had her hoof to her mouth. “I think… I think Melinda believed Twilight was a bad pony? Just
for not liking her? And then somehow overwhelmed her with magic?”

Flutterfree shook her head. “This doesn’t make any sense.”

Rarity nodded. “Yes… Of course…”

“We need to get Twilight back and leave, fast,” Nova said. “They said they were going to the castle
so… Hey, wait a second. Where’s Pinkie?”

Pinkie was nowhere to be seen.

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“Nope nope nope nope nope nope!” Pinkie yelled in a panicked sing-song voice as she ran
across the world’s version of Ponyville. “I don’t need to be here, I really don’t need to be here…”
She laughed to herself. “Oh, sure, Melinda can break the rules, that’s perfectly fine, just dance around and be a little crazy! But me? No… Can’t do a thing! Need to get as far away from her as possible…” She ducked behind an alleyway and took a knapsack out of her mane. “Check for survival supplies… Cakes that will last me several months, check. Timer to tell me when they fix the problem, check. Alarm that’ll tell me if Melinda’s within seven miles of me, check. Why isn’t it ringing right now? Why am I even looking right now? She could just know I’m running, or find me by chance or… AUGH!”

She stuffed all the stuff back in her mane and took off in a pink blur through the town. Soon she left the version of Ponyville behind, arriving at a mountain. She threw herself into a cave and crammed herself into the deepest portion of it she could find. “There! I should be able to survive here until it blows over!”

She sat there for about a minute before she realized that wasn’t going to work.

“Oh, come on! What are you all looking at! Go back to Nova or something, I’m sure she’s cooking up a great bust-Twilight-out-of-jail plan! Go on! Shoo!”

A drop of water hit the floor nearby, echoing through the cave. Pinkie groaned. “Aaaaaugh why is this my moment? I’m not supposed to be near her! She’s scary! She’s, just, AGH.” She folded her legs and pouted. “No, I’m not doing this. I’m sitting right here and there’s nothing you can do about it! You’re all just looking at words on a page! You have nooo control! This is going to be boring, and boring, and boring until the scene changes or something!”

There was an eerie breeze through the cavern. Pinkie could hear the nothingness around her, interspersed with the water drops. She counted the drops - nothing better to do while cowering here. Twelve… Thirteen… Fourteen… Fifteen… Sixteen… Seventeen… Eighteen… Nineteen… Then nothing. It stopped at nineteen.

Pinkie twitched. “What, am I supposed to go back then? And do what? Actually, no, nevermind, not talking, Miss Zipperlips here! Not giving you what you want!”

There was silence.

The cave itself was dark, so dark that even with Pinkie’s eyes wide open she couldn’t see anything. Not that there was anything, now that the water drops had stopped. It was just her in a very, very dark cave, trying her hardest to be uninteresting.

Her tail started twitching and her jaw opened forcefully. The Pinkie Sense had activated, but Pinkie wasn’t going to listen to it. Nope. Her place was not out there, it was in here, away from things that twisted her world. There were some things she shouldn’t mess with, and Melinda was one of them. She had no idea what’d happen-

“Would you stop broadcasting my thoughts!?” she shouted. There was nothing for some time.

“Thank you.”

Due to a lack of thoughts or cave interactions, it just so happened that ten minutes passed. Then something happened.

“Oh for the-“

The native Pinkie Pie appeared, holding a lantern. “Hi! Watcha dooin?”

“Hiding in a cave.”
“Woah! Why?”

“Because I need to stay away from town for a while, that’s all,” Pinkie smiled. “Nothing for you to worry about, everything will be fine!”

“Oh! It sounds like you have a bit of a problem! I can help!”

Pinkie looked at her counterpart. “Really? How?”

“I know just the person to introduce you to!”

“OHRRR HH NONONONONONO!” Pinkie blurted, scooting up against a far cave wall. “I’d rather just… Not, okay?”

“What’s wrong with Melinda? She’s the best!”

“Can… Can you not see what she is? What she does to all of you ponies?”

The other Pinkie cocked her head. “Uh… No. What does she do?”

“Well if I told you you’d just label me a crazy, a baddy, a hater, or something and drag me over to her castle!” Pinkie put her hooves over her mouth. “Actually, ignore that!”

The other Pinkie pursed her lips. “I think you really need to see Melinda.”

Pinkie took out a squeaky hammer and pointed it at her counterpart. “You won’t be taking me there!”

“Yes I will!” she said, producing a giant candy cane and hooking Pinkie with it. Pinkie twisted out of its grasp, bopping her other self on the head. The native Pinkie took the opportunity to grab the visiting Pinkie with her hooves, trying to drag her out of the cave. They appeared around numerous different stalactites and stalagmites, moving in clearly impossible patterns all around the cave walls.

“Hey! If you can do these things, why can’t you see her for what she is? Aren’t you aware of them?” Pinkie asked herself when they both had each other in a chokehold.

“Them? Who?”

Pinkie jumped into the air, laying flat on the ceiling. “The ones watching and reading, silly!”

“There’s nopony watching or reading! You’re crazier than I am!”

“…Oh,” Pinkie said. “Time for me to check out.” She tried to duck behind a stalactite and appear somewhere on the outside of the mountain, but the other Pinkie grabbed her. They both tried to appear each other in different, distant locations...

POP.

Pinkie was suddenly in a dark room with a wooden floor. Her counterpart was gone. “Woo!” She cheered. “I got away! Now, where am I?”

“…Here, apparently,” the Sage said, staring at Pinkie in disbelief. She removed the mask from her face and held it to her side, giving Pinkie an incredulous look.

Pinkie looked right into the Sage’s blue, oculus eyes. “You’re causing a lot of ponies a lot of trouble, you know that?”
“Yes,” the Sage agreed. “So are you, at this moment.”

Pinkie glanced behind the Sage. The Mechanism was beautifully constructed, glowing with powerful magics, and… waiting. “What’s it waiting for?”

“You think I’d tell you?”

“No, but it was worth a shot, wasn’t it?”

“Not in my mind,” the Sage commented.

“What about that mask then, huh? I know General Sunset found where it came from. Why the shape of a mask, hrm? What’d you do with the Moon Spirit?”

The Sage narrowed her eyes. “So you did see that.”

“Well, I just know that. I probably don’t know everything that’s happened, but that one I do!”

“You know you need to go back.”

Pinkie laughed. “No I don’t! I can stay here and make it my mission to figure out what you’re doing!” She appeared behind the mechanism, tapping one of the yellow runes. It zapped her, tossing her down to the floor. “Ouchie…”

“Don’t touch it. You might break something.”

Pinkie stood up. “Would that be bad for you? That means it’s probably good for me!”

“You don’t know though. I certainly believe my actions are good, and that everypony will be better off after I accomplish my goals. There are other forces who offer no such assurance.”

Pinkie frowned. “Such as?”

“You know the rules.”

Pinkie smirked. “Ah, see, exactly why I can’t go back! That’d require messing with the rules.”

The Sage pointed at her. “The rules can change. You know this. You just don’t want them to, not this time. You want to have happy-go-lucky party time for eternity. Wake up, Pinkie, that’s not the way things are going.”

Pinkie ground her teeth. “I can try to keep them that way.”

“When you decided to go on your little adventures, you knew that there would be danger, horror, and death. You decided to go do it anyway. You knew this was coming. Your rules change. You can use it now.”

“But, she’s a Mary Sue Sage-me! That’s, like, the hardest thing to outfox I could possibly imagine! I’m not that great at being clever!”

“You can figure something out.”

Pinkie pointed the hammer at the Sage. “You’ve been steering the conversation as far away from you as you possibly can.”

“And now so are you.”
“Aha, we already talked about me!”

“You are running away from your calling.”

Pinkie narrowed her eyes. “I am no—” Her cutie mark suddenly started glowing and flashing, the call of the Tree of Harmony. “Uh…”

The Sage nodded. “See? Your Tree wants you back.”

“The Tree doesn’t know the truth.”

“It’s smart enough to know you, though. It knows they need you.”

“But I can’t just ‘be Pinkie Pie’ this time! I’d have to explain some things to them! They’re not ready!”

“You’re the one deciding it has to be that way.”

“Well what about THIS?” Pinkie shouted, pointing at the Mechanism. “Does THIS, whatever it is, have to be whatever way you have it?!”

“Perhaps not, but it’s the path I’ve chosen.”

“Then I’m not going to go back there!”

“Even if you can do that, which I’m not sure you can, there will come a time when you do have to. They are on a path, Pinkie. We can both see that they are going to rise high enough to see it. They’re already starting to notice a few oddities.”

“And I’m starting to notice more things about this Mechanism!”

“Pinkie, stop changing the-“

“I’ll change what I want! What’s this thing do, Sage? It’s something about the Goddess Armonia, isn’t it? What, you want her power? Got a way to contact her?”

The Sage put the mask back on. “I’m putting you back.”

“No you aren’t,” Pinkie said, taking a defensive stance. The Sage leaped at her, but Pinkie jumped out of the way. Pinkie was not able to stop a giant metal hook from grabbing her mane, dragging her back.

The Sage tried to force her back to the other world.

“We’re not supposed to jump worlds!” Pinkie yelled.

“You just did.”

“Accidentally!”

“It’s not the only thing you shouldn’t have done.” The Sage tried to twist Pinkie away-

POP.

Pinkie was not in the world with Melinda.

She was standing on a red planet covered in war and blood. She was pretty sure the planet was red
because of the blood. How… How horrible.

On both sides were beings encased in red, buglike armor that was oddly reminiscent of the demons, but without the four arms and significantly larger. She was pretty sure it was just humans fighting against humans with tooth, claw, gun, sword, laser, and anything else they could get their armored hands on. Blood constantly flew threw the air, filling the atmosphere with enough particulates to give it a reddish tint.

Pinkie did not want to be here. She did not want to look. But they saw her and wanted to fight anyway. Warriors from both sides of the conflict swung at her with their huge oversized blades and explosive guns. She leaped into the air, bouncing off a missile and deflecting arrows with a giant cookie shield. She threw a party-bomb into the ground, sending several soldiers flying around her.

This place was brutal. She had to get out. She couldn’t live here, it just wasn’t her way. She whirled her tail around like a helicopter blade and flew off, distraught to find some of the blood, covered warriors finding ways to fly to her.

She took out a party bazooka and shot cakes into each of their faces, forcing them to the ground. “Just stay away!”

They spoke in an untranslatable, alien manner. She grunted under her breath, launching more party bombs in an attempt to just get away. But they were relentless, unending, and impossible.

Even if she started using lethal force they would still overwhelm her eventually. She needed a way out…

To her surprise a blue metal orb dropped from the sky, split itself into six parts, and encased her within itself like some random space claw. The inside was well lit, but it was impossible to see out of. She banged against the walls, yelling out, hoping somepony would hear her. But she knew they wouldn’t… So after a few seconds she waited, preparing to pull a fast one.

The six-part orb arrived at a location far, far away shortly thereafter, sliding itself into an enclosure, floating a meter from the ground and ceiling. A humanoid, blue, metallic creature strode up to it, feet clinking on the ground as he walked. He had numerous blue spikes coming out of his head that resembled far-reaching groups of hair. He pointed at the orb, and it popped open.

Nothing was inside.

Pinkie was behind him with a hammer to the back of his head. “You better be friendly,”

The hammer shattered to dust without so much as a motion from him. He simply turned around and looked at her. “Pinkie Pie.”

“Well, you know my name, it’d be nice if you told me yours!” she said, trying to remain cheerful.

“If you don’t know you are not meant to,” the thing said in a surprisingly normal sounding voice. “You are not supposed to be out this far.”

“Nope!”

“Statement, not a question.”

“I know!”

The eyes – which were just points of red in black recesses on the ‘face’ – flickered. “I think you’re
running, and you’re being punished for it.”

“No… Really? Can’t be.”

“I don’t think you’re being fully sarcastic.”

Pinkie bit her lip. “What do you want?”

“I want to capture you, but you and I both know that’s not going to happen at this moment. Perhaps another time.”

“Capture…?”

“You’re too far out, Pinkie Pie. It’s not important now.”

Pinkie knew he was right. She let herself calm a bit. “So… Am I even out here for a reason?”

“I can’t say for sure. I don’t have your power. I can just make educated guesses. It looks like you’re in denial about something.”

Pinkie frowned, looking at the ground. “I don’t want to be involved in the struggle against Melinda. She’s just… Outside. We encountered her too early.”

“I have no idea what she is, but it sounds like if you’re having these thoughts maybe it was exactly the correct time.”

“It’s always exactly the correct time,” Pinkie muttered. “This is my chapter, my moment, apparently. I’m not just going to give in to it though.”

“You’re fighting it? You should know that’s pointless.”

“I know, it’s like a time loop, I know… Just… ARGH, I keep waiting for the third option to present itself, you know?”

The being leaned back and shrugged. “The truth isn’t always to take a third option.”

“Well, what even is the truth?” Pinkie asked. “I don’t know! All I know is we’re in some book somewhere on some pages, scribbled in a margin, typed on a document. It’s a reason – but the reason for it is beyond me!”

“Peculiar. Usually your kind isn’t that open about it.”

“It’s clear that you already know.”

“You have given more information about this specific moment.”

“Aaaaaaa – the rules!”

“Are you breaking them?”

Pinkie cocked her head. “I don’t know anymore! I thought I did, but guess not! It looks like the pink party pony actually is an idiot!” She blew a party blower sarcastically. “Woo.”

“I’m not going to pretend to know. But I am going to say, I bet the lesson should be obvious.”

Pinkie shook her head. “Nope!”
“You can be really stubborn. If you just calm yourself…”

Pinkie pointed a hoof at him. “You’re one of them! You’re a Sue!”

“Guilty as charged. I live pretty well with it though, don’t you think?”

“Of course you do! Naturally perfect and unbeatable, and apparently at least partially aware to boot! How can things like you be allowed to exist!? Twisting the rules, finding loopholes, apparently breaking them to create walls?”

He took a few steps forward, placing a finger on Pinkie’s nose. “We happen when everything goes nineteen.”

“What does that even mean?”

“You’re about to find out, Pinkie. You wanted answers? I feel as though you’ll get them. You’ll suddenly feel like you understood nothing all those years.”

Pinkie twitched. “What is that supposed to-“

He pushed his finger deeper into her nose.

*POP.*

She stood in a field of roses. *Perfect* roses of the most brilliant red imaginable that stretched as far as she could see over rolling hills. There were no other plants, no other signs of life but her and the roses. The sky was an odd mix of blue and orange, filled with precisely nineteen wispy clouds, swirling about a center.

The Tower. It *needed* a capital letter before it was even described.

It had no top, as far as Pinkie could tell. It reached for infinity, never stopping to consider how impossible it was. No… It was more than that. It considered it, and *made* it possible by *using* how impossible it was as *proof*. It was round, black – Dark, and covered in a swirling pattern of windows glowing with eldritch color that didn’t really exist. The large double doors beckoned to Pinkie, asking her to come and see. Come and feel.

Pinkie Pie of Equis Vitis stood in the shadow of the Dark Tower, and she knew it was the Truth.

Nineteen.

She saw what it meant – and she *laughed*. Celestia, that was funny. To make it better they didn’t even get to know. They just got to see her laugh.

Nineteen.

Gold!

It wanted her – The Dark Tower called to her again, demanding she enter its doors. Telling her to come, to come, to *come*.

She didn’t want to. She never wanted to. She tried her best to ignore it, to ignore its demands, to defy what it asked for, what it wanted, what it meant, what it… WHAT. Just what in general! Everything was what! Everything was nineteen.

So she used the nature of this place – this place at the center of everything – to talk to them. She
usually wasn’t aware of them this strongly, and she knew she wouldn’t be again for quite some time. So she’d use them. Talk to them, try to keep them here. To keep herself here. To…

…Aw, horsefeathers.

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“Aw, horsefeathers! You’ve gone through the entire thing and come back here! And I reviewed it as well along with you, and… And well… Besides the fact that clearly it didn’t exist before I arrived here, this is completely…

“…It makes sense. Clearly, the moral of the story is not to run away from your problems, but to face them head on, blah de blah. But… But I thought I was doing something else. I thought I was protecting them from the truth. Well, it turns out I didn’t actually know the Truth, and probably still don’t, but I’m closer now that I’ve seen the Tower. I know what nineteen means – yes, you’ll just have to wait to find that one out. You’ll really hate me when you do. Trust me.

“I guess that isn’t the whole story, though. See, I wasn’t just running from the truth I knew, it was also the Truth I didn’t know, and… And this is the part where the wibbly-wobbly mess of this drives even me insane. In some ways, I was in this rose field FIRST. In others, I had to go through the rest of the story, then back there, then back here. It wasn’t time… It was Ka.

“Ah, Ka, what a nice word. No pony will use that for forever, sadly. But I didn’t know what it meant either, so… I guess I was just in the same boat with them? I probably still am. No idea who that blue guy was. Important, yes, knowable, no. It’s all a big game of ever-changing rules and regulations, you see, and I’m not even a big player! I have the chance to be, though.

“I was running from something else too, I think. I liked being mysterious, random, and crazy. It was a delight, and I always told myself they just didn’t need to know. That they couldn’t handle it. That was a lie. They can. They will be told when the time is right, I just… I was just reminded that time would be soon. I could also have been a lot nicer to them. Could have saved Twilight a lot of headache if I just told her that there was a reason, and asked her not to look into it. To tell her to trust me. Maybe not when we first met, but after we became good friends, I think that would have worked for us.

“I’m about to find out if it’ll work now. I haven’t lied – not really. But I’ve been deceptive. It’s… It’s time for them to actually know a little bit. Not everything, but some. And I’m going to help them get out of their predicament. Because that’s what friends do, and this is my chapter after all. It’s my time to shine.

“One thing still confuses me though. Was I supposed to come out here and learn to be more open, or did I bring that on myself by running away? I don’t know. I’m not sure I ever can know. I’m starting to think I should actually test the limits of myself more often. You all should try that too.

“Some of you are probably annoyed by all this needless meta-ness. That’s fine. Frankly I’m getting a little tired of it myself, since there are still rules and things I can’t even tell you. No, the secret I want to tell you is not the secret of nineteen, the secret of nineteen is just delightful. Heehee.

“And don’t worry. I won’t tell them everything. Still have to keep some around. But… Well I won’t be the crazy ditz, anymore. It looks like at least part of that role has to go. …I really wanted to keep it. I really liked being the way I was. Was that wrong? Was it mean? Deceptive, even? I still don’t know. Not sure I ever will.

“So, now I guess I walk into the Dark Tower. It’ll take me to where I need to be. Because that’s
what it wants, as much as it can actually want something. And then I won’t be back here for a long, *long* time.

“We probably won’t talk like this again until then – if at all! So… Bye!”

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“We need to get Twilight back and leave, fast,” Nova said. “They said they were going to the castle so… Hey, wait a second. Where’s Pinkie?”

Pinkie was nowhere to be seen.

Nova rolled her eyes. “Whatever, Flutterfree, you’re going to go to the front and politely ask for Twilight back. This is not likely to work, but it’ll be distracting. Rarity and I will sneak into the castle from the back and get Twilight out. I should be able to crack through with my magic and use the dimensional device she has.”

“Won’t work,” Pinkie said, walking out from behind a tree.

“…Why not, Pinkie?”

Pinkie sighed, cracking her hooves against each other. “Melinda is not your normal enemy, she has a little something extra about her. It’s not quite magical, but think about it like an ‘I am the best and I win’ spell. If she *can* notice you, she *will*. Even if she seems kinda stupid, she will deduce your exact plan within a few seconds of you unleashing it. She may *seem* to make mistakes, rarely, but in reality it’ll just be her setting up.”

Nova raised an eyebrow. “Pinkie, that’s impossible.”

Pinkie grinned. “About as impossible as a person that literally everypony who comes into contact likes unconditionally!”

“Um… *We* don’t like her,” Flutterfree pointed out.

“Yeah, that’s because we’re from somewhere else, we have a bit of buffer. If we stayed here long enough we would. And yes, Twilight is in danger of being ‘redeemed’ in that way, though not anytime soon. It’s like universally condoned brainwashing.”

“…How do you…?”

“It’s just Pinkie being Pinkie, dear,” Rarity said.

Pinkie held up a hoof. “Don’t say that anymore, Rarity. It’s an excuse. I’m… Not sure if it’s a bad one, a good one, or what. But it’s done what it needed to do. You can now *ask*. I don’t promise to answer – and right now I think we should go save Twilight instead of deliberating – but you can *ask*.”

Flutterfree blinked. “Pinkie… What happened to you?”

“I tried to run away,” she said, looking up towards Twilight’s castle. “Then I came back, knowing more than when I left.”

“But you were barely gone at all!”

Pinkie smirked. “Isn’t the fluidity of time *fun*?”
“So you experienced time change?” Flutterfree asked.

“Yep! Jumped a couple universes, experienced some weird stuff, and viola! It was life changing. Woo!” She launched her party cannon.

Rarity smiled. “You’re still the same Pinkie though.”

“Aww, Rarity!”

Nova shook her head. “Pinkie’s right, we need to focus on getting Twilight back. I can’t believe I’m going to say this, but…” She took in a deep breath. “Pinkie, what’s the plan?”

Pinkie grinned. “I thought you’d never ask!”

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Melinda looked at the crystal Charter-Princess Twilight Sparkle was imprisoned in and frowned. “I don’t understand her, Twilight. She seemed nice. But you’re right, she acted like one of them.”

Native Twilight nodded. “Clearly, she’s just really, really clever, like myself. You’re too trusting, Melinda, you need to watch out for those trying to take advantage of you.”

Melinda sighed. “What would I do without you?”

“You’d find a way to survive, you always do. You’d even thrive. Then you’d eventually discover their manipulative ways and turn it against them.”

“Twilight, you’re just too kind!”

“I know!”

There was a knock at the door.

“…They’re looking for her,” Melinda said. “I should have grabbed the rest of them as well, huh?”

Twilight furrowed her brow. “Maybe. But we can always get them later. It’s not like anyone can resist your spells.”

Melinda threw open the front doors of the floating castle to see Fultterfree sitting there, smiling. “So, you know already, don’t you?”

“You’re a distraction,” Melinda said, turning around. “They’re trying something to – wait.” She turned back to Flutterfree. “How did you know I already knew?”

Flutterfree smiled. “I have my sources.”

“Tell me,” Melinda insisted, pointing at her with a finger and Staring. “Or else.”

Flutterfree Stared back. “Make me.”

Twilight gasped. “…H-how? Nopony can resist your Stare charms!”

Flutterfree sighed. “That… Didn’t sound… ‘good’. Let’s go with good.”

Melinda took a step back. “It doesn’t matter, I can find them the old fashioned way.” She teleported to the place Charter Twilight was being held, glad to find her still frozen away. “Good.” Melinda
knew Charter Twilight could hear everything they were saying, so Melinda leaned in close. “Listen, other Twilight, your friends are trying to bust you out of here and stop you from understanding the glories of true friendship. You and I both don’t want that. So realize that I am defending you when I do this.” She turned back to the doorway – Flutterfree was no longer there.

The native Twilight gasped. “She’s gone!”

“Just part of the distraction,” Melinda said, getting a firm stance on the ground. “I think they have their Nova, Rarity, and Pinkie working on a way in. The Rarity will show up with a secondary distraction, leaving the two most powerful to take their Twilight with a hit and run. But they can’t, everything about that spell is unbreakable. Anti-teleport, anti-dispel, anti-everything. She’s not going anywhere.”

Sure enough, they saw Rarity run across the hall in front of them, trying to catch their attention. Melinda had to hold Twilight in place to keep her from going. “Remember what I said.”

“Right. Got it. You’ve sure got their plan figured out!”

Nova teleported behind them and lit her horn, smashing against the crystal bubble covering Charter Twilight with her impressive magic. She blew out a wall, but the magic bubble didn’t budge. Melinda levitated the unicorn to her. “Don’t worry, Nova, you’ll still get to spend lots of time with her. Wait… Where’s Pinkie?”

There was a sound of applauding hooves. Melinda turned to see Pinkie sitting on a barstool, clapping her hooves with a super-snarky grin on her face. “Well done, Melinda! You did exactly what you were designed to!”

“…I what?”

“You won!” Pinkie shouted, putting a party blower in her mouth and a pointy hat on her head. “Congratz! You stopped our plan, knew exactly how it would pan out far before it happened, and, well, made a spell that not even Nova could break! I mean I always say do five impossible things before breakfast – and so do a lot of other people – but that’s a bit much all in a row there! Wow!”

Twilight growled. “That’s not impossible, that’s-”

A cartoonish anvil dropped from nowhere and hit Twilight in the head, knocking her out. Melinda gasped. “Twilight!”

“She’s fine. It’s not the first anvil she’s experienced,” Pinkie said, beginning to pace around Melinda. “But now it’s just you and me. And Nova, but, well, she’s indisposed, and I’ve told her to stay quiet during this part anyway.”

Melinda narrowed her eyes. “This was part of the plan all along. To get me alone. So what, you could overpower me? Do you have some bizarre otherworldly trick up your sleeve that you think I can’t take when alone?”

“Well, there’s nineteen, but that’s nothing,” Pinkie giggled. “Or there’s this!” She pulled a giant laser cannon out of nowhere and hit Melinda dead on with it. Melinda took the blast, part of her hair charring, and part of her clothes turning black, but she stood strong. She breathed hard.

“Did you think that… Would do anything?”

“Nope!” Pinkie said. “But you felt like it pushed your physical limits, didn’t you? Like you could just barely fight your way through it. You see, here’s a fun thing, you’re precisely as strong as you
*need to be.* Well, actually, you’re a bit too strong, but you have to at least *look* like you’re trying sometimes, and you have to feel that way too.”

“This doesn’t make any sense. I’m not some perfect sculpture, I’m just a human being!”

“Are you sure about that?” Pinkie said, producing a drill-machine from her mane and tossing it into the ground. “That just hit this castle’s floatation crystal. Someone’s going to have to catch this castle to keep it from hitting Ponyville.”

“You monster!”

Pinkie’s hair went flat for a moment and a knife appeared in her hooves. “Maybe, maybe not! But you better go down there and save everypony!”

Melinda teleported outside just as the castle began to fall. She grabbed hold of it with her hands and pushed it away from Ponyville, into a nearby mountain. She appeared in front of Pinkie again, breathing heavily. She grabbed Nova before she could try to free Charter Twilight again, throwing the unicorn into her own bubble.

“See? Not only did you manage to stop the castle from hitting Ponyville, you also had enough energy stop Nova! *And* you were already exhausted!”

“It’s… Amazing what you can do… When you have no choice.”

Pinkie nodded. “That it is!” She giggled. “But, how could I have been so sure you could do that? I never would have dropped this castle if I wasn’t *sure* you’d save everypony involved. The thing is, I was. I knew you had it in you. I know you still have more in you.” She pulled a real warhammer out of her mane, brandishing it in her hooves. “And I think you want a fight.”

Melinda shot her magic bubble spell at Pinkie, only for her to appear behind Melinda and hit her across the head dead-on. “See? That should have been more than enough to knock you unconscious. But no, you stand, even though you’re already running on empty.”

“If I’m ‘designed’ to win, why can I not stop you?” Melinda demanded, firing a laser bolt at Pinkie, deflecting off the hammer.

“You can,” Pinkie said, narrowing her eyes. “You have precisely enough energy within you to win this fight. Like always. You will struggle…” Pinkie hit her midsection, tossing her into a wall. “…And you will feel like the end is near, but you will pull through.”

Melinda kicked Pinkie in the face, tossing her into a nearby wall. “No!”

“Why not?” Pinkie said, face clearly bruised.

“I’m not some perfectly designed creature!”

“So…” Pinkie said, leaning in. “You don’t *want* to be that?”

“I n-“ She caught herself, smiling. “Oh, oh that’s clever. You wanted me to admit that I didn’t want to be *perfect*, and therefore mean that I would get what I want, that is, ‘win’, by ‘losing’."

Pinkie’s grin fell. “…Er…”

“It’s a classic paradox. You set up against my ‘winning’ by making me actually want to ‘lose’. Well, I won’t. I’ve decided that I don’t want to lose anymore. I’m okay with being the perfect thing they all
know I am. Maybe I just needed to accept that.”

Pinkie threw her hammer to the ground and facehooved. “OH COME ON! That’s cheap! Stupid and cheap! You don’t just turn your entire philosophy around like that! You were supposed to stay existential!”

“That. It. Is.” She pointed her finger at Pinkie, smiling. “And now that I know all this you’ve told me, I have quite a bit more confidence. Thank you, it was a thing I was lacking.”

Pinkie rammed her face into a nearby wall, waiting for the magical trap to hit – and then a lightbulb appeared above her head. “HEY! Stop the fighting!”

“…What?”

“Hey, since you realized that you are a perfect thing that basically has to win, can you maybe realize that Twilight’s not a bad pony for being suspicious of you?”

Melinda blinked. “I… I…”

“I mean, no one can hold it against you, you didn’t know before, what you were. But now, think of it! You can just let Twilight go and be happy with your life, having found a better, newer identity! You now know why she was suspicious – she can’t accept a ‘perfect’ individual! Different universes, and all that. She’s not meant to be around you as an admirer. Knocked-out Twilight over there is, but my Twilight isn’t.”

Melinda nodded slowly. With a snap of her fingers, she released Nova and Twilight. Rarity and Flutterfree crawled out from behind a nearby column. “…Is it over?” Flutterfree asked.

“Yes,” Melinda said, kneeling down to her. “I hope you can accept my apology. I didn’t know.”

“I’m not sure I understand, but I’ll accept your apology,” Flutterfree said, smiling awkwardly.

Twilight shook her head. “So… That’s it then? I’m just… Free?”

“Yes!” Melinda said. “You’re free to go, go do what things you are meant to do, I’ll mind the business of my own! Thank you Pinkie for showing me something new!”


Twilight nodded, activating the dimensional device.

“Come back and visit!” Melinda called.

“Don’t plan on it!” Pinkie called.

They left and found themselves in a field in Equis Vitis. Then Twilight turned to Pinkie. “What… What WAS that!??”

Pinkie sighed. “I knew that’d scare you. I’m sorry.”

“I forgive you but… But… I…” She shook her head. “Nevermind…”

“No, Twilight,” Pinkie said, grabbing her by the shoulder. “You can ask. You have the right to.”

Twilight blinked. “I… Do?”
“I did a little soul-searching,” Pinkie said. “Twilight, Nova, Flutterfree, Rarity… It’s time you knew some things. I know things. You’ve known this for a long time, but you’ve learned not to question it. You’ve known I can do impossible things as well, and you learned not to question that. It’s ‘just Pinkie Pie being Pinkie Pie’. Well… I liked it that way. It was fun to keep you all in the dark, dance around you, and laugh at your expressions. And that was a little selfish of me.”

“Pinkie…” Rarity said, putting a hoof around her. “It’s okay.”

“I know it was. You all accepted me as the loco giggly pony I was.” She giggled. “And I still am. I always loved parties, I always felt joy with my randomness, and it was all just great. But… But I need to stop hiding everything from you all. I can’t tell you everything, there are rules, regulations, and a few things that you just shouldn’t be aware of. And don’t want to know.”

Twilight frowned. “Don’t want to?”

Pinkie whispered something in Twilight’s ear. She turned beet red and hung her head.

“That’s mild,” Pinkie said. “There’s a lot of things worse than that you just don’t want to deal with. But I have to, because they’re just shown to me. And I don’t act on these things most of the time. I just… take them and act like a random lunatic. I probably should have started sharing my inklings when we met the Sage Pinkie, but I didn’t. She’s gotten a head start because of it. She uses them.”

Twilight frowned. “Pinkie… Where do your powers come from?”

Pinkie giggled. “Twilight, that’s a good question. A very good question. You aren’t ready for the whole answer, but you will eventually. For now, let’s just say I thought I knew where it came from, and today it turned out I was completely wrong. I’m a reversal of a fundamental concept in the multiverse, apparently. As are most other Pinkies.”

Twilight nodded. Then she hugged Pinkie. “I’ll accept that. I’ll accept anything from you, Pinkie. You don’t have to do this.”

“I need to,” Pinkie said. “Melinda’s not the worst of what lies out there. There are many other, actually horrible things that lie in wait. Most of them lie in blind spots in my vision, but there are a few I can see. Sage Pinkie is working on something that she’s trying her best to keep from me, and there’s another dark power of some kind in the hands of Ba’al. I’m done sitting in the background, taking comfort in knowing that ‘everything will be okay’. If today taught me anything, it’s that I can’t be sure of that.”

Pinkie pulled everyone into a group hug. “All I know is that we’re going to face it together, whatever it is. Okay?”

“Okay!” The other four cheered.

It was a cute, blessed moment.

A tear slid down Pinkie’s cheek.

She knew not all of them would be able to stand together, at the end.

That was something she wished she didn’t know.

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“Ka,” Pinkie said, trotting by Starbeat’s lab.
“What?” Starbeat said, raising an eyebrow.

“Kaka.”

“…Are you okay?”

Pinkie grinned. “I’m nineteen!”

“Aren’t you like, twenty-something?”

Pinkie shrugged. “Eh, yeah.”

Starbeat rolled her eyes and returned to her work. Pinkie bounced off, chuckling to herself.

Who said she had to stop messing with ponies completely? Nobody, that’s who! She giggled maniacally. Maybe this could make it even better – after all, now she could get her closest friends in on it!

They were going to throw a party for the multiverse.
General Sunset, Toph, Fef, Lieshy, and Vivian stood in front of a set of double doors disguised to look like a sheer rock face on the side of a mountain. Toph turned to Sunset, folding her arms. “You have to promise not to lose your head when we go in. Got it?”

“I won’t kill anypony if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“No crippling their arcs either,” Toph emphasized.

Sunset grumbled to herself. “If you insist. Whatever you thought about that Arcei at the temple, and the others you’ve seen, this is an organized Arcei cell we’ve found. They actively destroy large runes that provide the livelihood of ponies everywhere. You’re about to get a wake up call.”

Lieshy raised an eyebrow. “Maybe. I suspect it’s more of a case of both sides being absolute jerks and destroying the world they care about so much by refusing to see past each other.”

Sunset opened her mouth to object but quickly shut it.


Lieshy shrugged. “Bright bulbs do serve a purpose.”

“What?”

“Oh come on, that was obvious. Connotations of intelligence as well as illumination? I thought you’d be able to figure that one out, actually. Not sure if I should feel sorry or annoyed.”

Fef folded her arms. “Can we just go in already?”

Vivian knocked on the door. “Hellooooo! Anypony home?”

A very purple Arcei-unicorn opened the door and glared at them. “You here to kill us?”

“Much as I would love to put an end to your little rampage, no,” Sunset said, sneering. “We received a tip that the individual known as ‘the Pinkie Sage’ was told you existed and went right to you. We’re just here for information.”

“And after you’re done with that you’ll just summon the army on us.”

Toph pointed at Sunset. “You better not be thinking about doing that.”

Sunset said nothing, simply looking away from Toph.

Toph facepalmed. “Okay, look, purple Arcei—“

“Name’s Sparkler.”

“Right, Sparkler. You probably know we’re from another world, right?”

Sparkler furrowed her brow. “So the rumors are true.”
“Yeah, they are. We can get your entire society off this world and onto a place they’d not be hunted. Keep you away from this maniac here.”

Sparkler nodded slowly. “Are there runes in these other worlds?”

“I… Well there probably are, but none that I know about.”

Sparkler shook her head. “We’ll have to decline then. We need runes to grow our people.”

“And there it is!” Sunset blurted. “The ‘need’ to grow. There’s no way in the Goddess’s name that’s a real ‘need’.”

Sparkler sighed. “Look, I can let you in, I doubt I could stop you even if I wanted to, but I don’t guarantee they won’t try to kill you on sight.”

Vivian glanced to Sunset. “Maybe you should stay outside.”

“No,” Sunset growled. “I want to see this.”

Sparkler shrugged, opening the doors the rest of the way, revealing a slick, black metal interior hallway. “Welcome to Elestar. Largest Arcei settlement in Lai. Big enough that we’re not going anywhere.”

“There’s no way you’re big enough not to be-“ Sunset’s jaw dropped when they entered the actual cavern that held Elestar. It was a city composed of black metal, many of them glowing with artificial rune imitations. She saw thousands of Arcei walking, flying, and floating around their city. Their signature hard-light flashed on and off everywhere in the city, creating roads for Arcei to walk on and signs for ponies to read.

“…I’m impressed,” Lieshy admitted. “This is a pretty well kept secret.”

“See, this is why I went ‘woah’ five minutes ago,” Toph commented.

Sunset shook her head. “How have we not found this place!? How is there not a war going on right now!?”

“We’re good at keeping secrets,” Sparkler said. “We never raid any runes ourselves, only get the harvested material secondhand from other tribes that know not of our existence. Though we also have a large mining operation. There’s a decent amount of runes beneath the ground – not enough, but some.” She activated her arcs, creating a bridge of light down towards the city itself. “You’ll probably want to talk to the Tzar.”

“Tzar?” Fef asked.


“Oh. AWESOME title!”

“If you say so.” They walked down to a larger hard-light street. There were dozens of Arcei walking alongside them. More than a few shot them dirty looks, clearly considering fighting them, but the presence of Sparkler and the alien nature of most of them gave the ponies pause.

Vivian waved at them, trying to be sociable. One of the pegasus-Arcei just flipped her off with her wing. She gasped. “Rude!”

“They think you’re with the outside world, which does nothing but hunt and condemn them,”
Sparkler commented. “Personally, I think those of you who aren’t the General are just normal crazy.”

“You’re not wrong,” Lieshy admitted. “I do wonder though… There are some Arcei down here with features, but the vast majority don’t have any.”

“Something about the Arcei process makes our children less and less likely to have any features at all, not even Earth Pony features,” Sparkler said. “Most of the featured Arcei you see had a parent who wasn’t an Arcei when the featured Arcei was conceived.”

Toph blinked. “Why do you guys always get the cool mixing thing? In my world it’s air, earth, fire, or water, no combos. Unless you’re the chosen hero of the entire world, in which case you get them all.” She tapped her foot on the floor. “I would have loved some fire…”

Sparkler didn’t bother to respond. They walked on in silence a moment on top of a green-blue light bridge, several other bridges both above and below them at this point. This close, the buildings could be seen to be relatively simple constructions. The black metal and artificial rune-lights made them look advanced, but really they were just easy to construct in cubic and rectangular shapes with regular divisions within. The few they could see into held scenes much like any regular Lai home – families sitting around on chairs, reading, perhaps talking. There were fireplaces, and fillies running around laughing or restless.

“None of the fillies have arcs,” Lieshy noted.

“They’re not added until they get older,” Sparkler responded. “They wouldn’t grow correctly.” She pointed ahead at one of the few round buildings. “The Tzar’s in there.” She gestured towards the door.

“You’re not coming in?” Lieshy asked.

“Armonia, no!” Sparkler laughed. “You get to fumble in there alone. Have fun!” She gestured towards the door again.

Toph shrugged, kicking the door open and marching in. “Hey. Here to see the Tzar.”

The interior of the round building was a single throne room. Decoration was minimal, though there was a throne with a single full rune obelisk behind it, glowing with a dark gray color. In the throne sat an orange-peach Arcei mare with deep, wise eyes. “That would be me.”

Vivian moved to the front of the group. “Tzar, I am Vivian, and these are my friends, Lieshy, Fef, Toph, and Sunset. We come not to hurt you, but to seek information.”

The Tzar narrowed her eyes. “I am Tzar Somnabula, ruler of Elestar. Were this any other day I’d just kill you on the spot.”

“…But?”

“But I’ve heard about what you’re trying to do, and who you’re hunting. Pinkie the Sage.”

Vivian nodded. “Yes. We believe she passed through here, and we’d like to know if you have anything on her.”

“I do not. She arrived and vanished within a night, taking an unidentified book with her, allowing only a scant few Arcei to see her.”

Sunset twitched. “Then what good are you?” Toph stomped and sent a small pillar of earth into
Sunset’s jaw to shut her up.

Somnabula pointed at Sunset. “You are the reason we don’t trust the outside.”

Lieshy raised an eyebrow. “Don’t you attack their towns to destroy their runes?”

“We don’t have to explain ourselves to you.”

“Maybe you should,” Toph said. “We try to protect you while she’s on a crazy rampage. The Arcei I’ve met seem decent, but even I have to admit the attacks seem a bit much.”

Somnabula sighed. “Fair enough. Most Arcei fight simply because they feel as if they have to, because they always have, because the world won’t accept them and it's one against all. If this were truly the case, I think you could agree that it was just an example of both sides refusing to sit down and talk.”

“There’s more to it than that.” Fef pushed.

“Much more. Most Arcei don’t know this, but if their children don’t receive arcs by the time they reach maturity they will slowly approach a brain-dead state.”

Vivian put a hand to her mouth. “That’s horrible!”

“It’s a flaw in our Mother’s design,” Somnabula said. “She failed to take into account the genetic alterations she made to herself would be passed on to her descendants, but that the arcs would not. Every arc must be created from new material. Mining for runes is very difficult, and almost every rune in the wild has been claimed. Not to mention the golems each one has defending it. It is a difficult existence.”

“…I see a problem,” Lieshy said.

“The runes are a limited resource.”

“Yeah, that’s it. I can see you’ve tried creating artificial runes, but am I right in assuming they aren’t working?”

“They are not,” the Tzar admitted. “Every time we try to create an Arcei with our false runes, the result is gruesome. It is looking like they cannot be replicated.”

Toph clapped her hands. “We can help with that! We’ve got mages and scientists and a lot of other ‘genius’ types that we can put on the problem, bring in stuff from the outside.”

Somnabula’s scowl lessened for the first time in the conversation. “I was expecting a positive conversation. I was not expecting an offer.”

Toph shrugged, glancing at Lieshy. “It’s kinda what the whole multiverse community is built on. Everyone helps reinforce everyone else.”

“Unless you’re Senator Pearse,” Fef said. “Then you try to screw everyone over and suffer the wrath of public shaming!”

Somnabula nodded slowly. “I will consider this. However, it still is not why you’re here.”

Toph shrugged. “You already said you didn’t have anything. That’s fine, it’s just like all the other places we visit.”
“Move on to the next…” Lieshy said. “Find nothing, go again, find nothing. It is getting tiring.”

Somnabula shook her head. “Just because I have nothing doesn’t mean I don’t have a way to get what you need.” She tapped the true rune behind her. “This rune is kept intact because it has a very special effect infused within it.”

“What?” Toph asked.

Somnabula tapped it. The rune’s dark gray color flared slightly, creating a spherical golem on top of it. The spherical golem exploded into dust, the particulates fusing together in front of Somnabula’s throne. A brilliant sparkling essence appeared within the room.

The Spectacularium was now present, fully, within the throne room, its all-encompassing magical essence focused on a single point. This summoning of its attention did not surprise it, merely annoyed it. It let it be known to all around that it was done answering the questions of the world, that it had already given its last decree. It wanted to live.

That said, it also knew they were so close to uncovering what the Pinkie Sage had done – the piece of the puzzle was here, it was just that nopony knew what it was. It debated how exactly to go about this with itself. At this point it was a question of if the Spectacularium wanted to act. To interfere.

It considered what it knew about Sage Pinkie – everything. Mostly. It knew what she was going to do, how she was going to do it, and what its consequences would be. It also knew that it was actually rather powerless to interact with the Sage’s plan on its own. It had already tried to interfere with the Mechanism and the Sage had just moved it to another universe for the time being. The Spectacularium thought this was obvious and was annoyed that some of those present found this to be useful information.

The Spectacularium thought more, considering. It supposed the actions the Sage were about to take were, in the end, neutral to its magical desires. But did it really want to be a distant presence? It wasn’t entirely sure. Plus if the Sage just got to do what she wanted it would be rather boring. The Spectacularium wanted a bit of a show, something interesting. It’d probably drag more of the other universe people here as well, which would be absolutely fascinating. More interaction…

The Spectacularium decided it was okay to reveal that the title of the book was *The Study of Spirit Ellipses and Foci* written by a somewhat crazy Arcei determined to quantify spirits and holy energy. There was currently a copy in the Elestar library. The Spectacularium decided this was enough information, and if they couldn’t figure anything out from that then these ponies were hopeless.

The Spectacularium left.

Toph blinked. “That was freaky.”

*“The Study of Spirit Ellipses and Foci,”* Lieshy reiterated. “Somnabula, where’s the library?”

Somnabula narrowed her eyes. “You will not be allowed in the library. I will order the book, and it will arrive here within a few minutes. You are free to stay until then.”

“What do you think the book is going to tell us?” Vivian wondered aloud.

“Anything is better than nothing,” Sunset muttered. “Maybe it’ll make this trip not a complete waste of time. *Maybe.*”
O’Neill sat in the Captain’s chair of the Apollo, tapping his fingers impatiently on the armrest. The faint thud thud thud thud of his digits slowly bore its way into the minds of the bridge crew, moving them to a special form of insanity. They all knew that, should they say anything to O’Neill, the outrageous tapping would stop – but none of them felt like speaking up. It was as if part of their brains wanted the constant, unending rhythm of fingers tapping. Their irritation levels rose, but so did their inability to speak up, to do anything.

It would approach a breaking point in about an hour.

O’Neill, of course, was perfectly aware of the psychological warfare he was engaging in. He would feign ignorance in the small chance there was anyone with enough guts to call him out on it, an easy feat seeing that finger tapping would not be considered remarkable by any sane person who heard about it after the fact. It was the perfect crime.

No, not a crime… O’Neill thought. Perfectly legal… I need a new word. Hrm…

Link walked onto the bridge, boots thudding on the floor. O’Neill stopped the finger tapping to look at Link, pleased to hear the crew let out sighs of relief. “Link?”

“General. Why are we still out here?” He gestured at the empty field of stars. “Nothing’s happening.”

“We’ve got another hour.”

“I’m telling you, that ‘tip’ was just Ba’al wanting to keep us occupied for a while! Who knows what he’s doing elsewhere right now?”

“And I’m telling you that the Starfinder can take care of anything that goes wrong. Which, by my estimates and amazing old man reckoning powers, is probably nothing.”

Link folded his arms. “If the tip wasn’t from Ba’al or relating to him- nevermind. I guess I’ll just wait an hour.”

“That you will,” O’Neill remarked. “Why not have a seat? Enjoy the view. Dimension 47J-something has a lot to offer. Namely lots of stars against a black backdrop.”

“Just like every other dimension.”

“Not true! That forest has no stars. Then there’s the Static. That was fun to fly through.”

Link shrugged. “Most every other dimension. The stars are the most common feature of most skies at night.”

“Common doesn’t make it any less beautiful.”

And then, just like that, something bright and sparkling zipped onto their screen. A few soft alarms went off as the streaking pink-purple structure halted right in front of them, a streak of light receding from it – a telltale sign of something moving faster than light. The thing was an ovoid shaped crystal that was translucent, but refractive enough that it was difficult to see exactly what was inside.

The crystal had already begun to deteriorate now that it was no longer traveling at superluminal speeds, shattering by way of flakes until the crystal shape deteriorated into nothing, leaving only the ship inside visible. It was composed mostly of a pearly-white alloy marked with the occasional pink-purple line of glowing power. The shape was that of three pointed semicircles sprouting off a central round section, as if protecting it.
After the crystal dust had dissipated a fair way, two wings were projected out of the ship, taking the shape of leaf blades physically separated from the ship. They were blue, translucent, and shimmered with unusual energies. The wings flapped ever so slightly, turning the ship to look directly at the Apollo.

O’Neill looked to Link. “See? Something happened. Send out the first-contact hail.”

The communications officer pressed a button, sending out a signal on every frequency the Apollo was able. Usually alien ships were able to pick up at least one, so if they didn’t answer it would be a safe bet they were ignoring the call or didn’t have a communication system.

They did answer, though. An image appeared on-screen of a pegasus – green coat with a purple and grey mane. She looked at them with a curious expression, momentarily distracted by their appearance. She quickly regained her composer and cleared her throat. “Greetings. I am Captain Shockwave of the EQS Counselor. We are not aggressive.”

“I’m General O’Neill of the USS Apollo. We’re only aggressive when we haven’t gotten enough sleep, and I had a nap a few hours ago.”

Shockwave let out a sigh of relief. “At least you’re talking. That’s good. We have not had good … Hold on, is that a unicorn on your bridge?”


The large, bearded stallion waved. “Hi.”

“How did you get one of our ponies on your ship?”

O’Neill folded his hands together and stared right at Shockwave. “Would you believe me if I told you he’s from an alternate dimension?”

“Not without evidence.”

“Spin up the dimensional drive,” O’Neill ordered. “The forest should prove the point. Don’t go through, we don’t want more trees in the bays.”

The Apollo tore a hole through spacetime through which a forest could easily be seen. It closed a moment afterward. O’Neill let the smallest hint of a smile crawl up his face. “That good enough for you?”

Shockwave nodded slowly. “Certainly.”

“Now, allow me to be surprised,” O’Neill said, sitting back. “You’re the first ponies we’ve met with a space force. Actually, you’re the first FTL capable species we’ve met outside our home cluster of universes. Not to mention that I have no idea what that crystal thing was.”

“Ah, the shell drive,” Shockwave said, thinking over exactly how to explain that. “We have a magical icosahedron in our core that draws vis from the aether. The faster you move, the more vis can be drawn because larger areas are swept out. At a certain speed it becomes possible to form a shell of pure vis around the ship that solidifies at certain conditions, allowing vis to automatically be converted into faster and faster speed. There are also enchantments to keep time from dilating and the ship from being converted into energy, but that’s the basics.”

O’Neill looked to Link and shrugged. “Ours punches a hole in reality and travels fast through a bunch of crazy moving colors. We punch out and we’re light years away. We call it hyperspace.”
“Oh. You’re not a science vessel,” Shockwave deduced from O’Neill’s comparably simplistic explanation.

“No. We’re a flagship. Did you think something this big was a science vessel?”

“Usually scouts or science vessels are the ones doing the exploring.”

O’Neill shrugged. “Things get different when you’re traveling the multiverse. And when you don’t have all that many ships.”

“You’ll probably want to head further into our territory. We can give you directions to the current location of the Homeworld, where you could meet the Princess. It’ll be a several day journey…”

O’Neill leaned in. “We can cross the galaxy in a matter of hours.”

Shockwave blinked. “We cannot, and if you arrived without us—”

“We can tow you.”

Shockwave struggled to keep her face straight. “In that case, it would be best to get you there as soon as possible. Coordinates are being sent over.”

“Thank you!” O’Neill smiled. The feed was cut. “So, clearly she’s not a diplomat, and probably just wanted to scan stars all her life.”

Link shrugged. “Nothing to be ashamed of.”

“No, but it does mean we might not get a great report written about us. We’re probably annoying.”

“Ah. This is going to delay us, isn’t it?”

“Considerably!”

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Twilight turned to her friends. “All right, so, who’s ready to go exploring!”

“Me!” Flutterfree shouted. “I can’t wait to go back to the mushroom world! I bet they’ll be glad to see us!”

Rarity threw back her mane. “I wonder if they’ve appreciated any of my designs since last time I was there…”

Nova blinked. “Well I have no reason to feel pumped about going but I’m excited anyway. It just feels like today is going to be a good day!”

Pinkie laughed. “We’re not going to the mushroom world today!”

Twilight turned to her. “…We’re not?”

“Nope!” She took out a pocket watch and looked at it with a mock sophisticated expression. “Three… Two… One... Zero!”

A portal opened up, depositing Lieshy in front of them. “Whatever esoteric antics you were about to get up to, stop. The bell rings, calling you to duty.”
Flutterfree looked at her. “Did you find something?”

“The bear’s earlobes, yes we did. We’ve got a book.”

Twilight’s smile widened. “A book? What about?”

“It was written by a crackpot knucklehead breadstuffer who just so happened to record surges of spiritual energy meticulously. He created a table of accurate future predictions of when and where on Lai such a surge would take place. He says it calls the ‘Goddess’ or whatever down to that location for a short moment. We are now fairly certain – certain as hedgehogs – that the Pinkie Sage is going to enact her plan at one of these times and locations.”

“Next one’s very very soon, isn’t it?” Rarity said.

“We have six hours. After that there won’t be another surge for three Lai years, so it’s safe to assume if this IS what the Sage is going to act on, she’s going to do it now, exploding egg timer.”

Nova blinked. “…You calling me an exploding egg timer?”

“No, no, that referred to the short timeframe. We’re gathering everyone we can on short notice and preparing for a stakeout. I hope you like sitting in one place for six hours!”

Pinkie produced a beach chair and leaned back on it, grinning. “Why wouldn’t I? Everypony loves sitting!”

“You were the one I expected to like it the least.”

“Give her five minutes,” Flutterfree said. “She’ll get really, really antsy.”

“Let’s get all the backup we can…” Twilight said. “Flutterfree, go grab Discord, if you can.”

“Oh! Um… I think he’s in another world right now,” Flutterfree said. “…I have no idea when he’ll be back or how to find him.”

Pinkie put on a pair of sunglasses and lowered them. “He’d make it too easy.”

“I’ll see if Celestia can spare anything,” Twilight said. “The Apollo as well, wherever it is. Have to check with the Tau’ri… Oh! Corona as well!”

Lieshy nodded. “We need to get moving. General Sunset’s already at-location, setting the trap. We don’t need an army, but any help will be welcome.”

“Question,” Nova said, raising a hoof. “What exactly is the Sage’s plan? What’s her ‘Mechanism’ do once it’s there? …She does have a Mechanism, right? I’m not remembering wrong?”

“You’re right,” Lieshy said. “And we have no idea. It has something to do with the Goddess, a Mechanism, and the Sage hating the ‘reason’ behind things. Nobody has a clue what the Goddess can do to help her with that, or why she needs a Mechanism to get help, or even what the Goddess thinks of all this. All we know is that the Sage is up to something and that we’re going to stop her.”

“Fair enough,” Rarity said. “We’ll gather whoever we can.”


Twilight turned to Pinkie. “What is she planning?”
“I have no idea!” Pinkie said, standing up straight. “I saw the mechanism, but I can’t tell you what it does. I can tell you that mask she wears is extremely important, that she thinks what she’s doing is good, and that she’s very careful about what she’s doing. She’s got plans to the moon. She’s even taken me into account, trying to do things in such a way so I won’t know anything!”

“And she has your knowledge as well…” Nova commented.

“Yep! And oculus vision! She’s like Pinkie 2.0 – except more serious party pooper edition!”

“So it’s safe to assume she knows this conversation is happening.”

Pinkie shrugged. “It’s possible, likely even, but she might not.”

“But she’ll know there’s a trap.”

“Ohooooo yes!”

Flutterfree frowned. “That… Is pretty annoying.”

“Now you know why I’m so effective!” Pinkie winked.

“Can you do to her what you did to Melinda?” Twilight asked.

Pinkie shook her head. “Melinda was something completely different. She had no idea what she was. We Pinkies more-or-less do. Trying to get the Sage to realize that will do nothing, and I kinda already tried to talk her out of what she was doing. Sorta. I don’t think she’ll give me the time to talk anyway.”

“We need to come up with some kind of plan to go over the other plan,” Twilight said. “A trap trap, of sorts. Any ideas?”

“Coming up with a trap trap would require knowing precisely what the Sunset’s plan to face the Sage is,” Rarity said.

Pinkie pulled out a military issue map. She pointed at a completely random location that had no bearing on reality. “Surround the place in a circle! Draw weapons! Attack and subdue!”

“…That’s her plan?”

“Well, basically?” Pinkie said. “She’s the kind of pony who’ll add details later. Every person will have a role to play and we’ll have some people in orbit and… Yeah. I have noooo idea what kind of trap trap we could even make!”

Twilight frowned. “True… We have no idea where she’s coming from until she comes, and no idea where she’ll escape to, and have no leverage on her at all. She’ll arrive with her plan and expect to succeed. So…”

“The monolith chunk!” Nova shouted. “I’ve got it! We can keep her from escaping that way – all dimensional devices that aren’t the giant arches Corona invented run on magic. If we can repurpose the anti-magic materials of the monolith, we’ve got her for sure!”

“And we could throw it on the Mechanism!” Twilight grinned. “Nova, that’s a great idea!”

“I’ll get on that.” She teleported away.

Pinkie rubbed her hooves together. “I have a distinct feeling that nobody’s going to expect what’s
about to happen but I’m pumped anyway! Let’s do this thing! Let’s catch a Sage!”

A couple hours later, O’Neill and Link walked into the central room of the Hub to find a rather large gathering around the Mirror Portal. Twilight and her four friends were there, preparing for a conflict along with Spike, who was busy trying to keep track of everyone present. General Sunset, Toph, and their group was there as well – with the addition of a few other ponies from Lai, including Lady Rarity hefting her hammer and Starcei of all ponies walking out in the open. Apparently there were too many witnesses for Sunset to take the Arcei Mother out. Corona, Tempest, and the rest of the team were there, cleaning their guns. Bon Bon was suiting up next to Aang and Iroh, watching the two of them trade fiery training blows curiously. There was even an Tau’ri team sent over for the mission, readying their zat guns to stun.

A smile came to O’Neill’s face. “This… This is good. Look at this! I don’t even know what we’re doing and I feel like we’re ready to kick some ass!”

“Oh!” Twilight said, flying over to them. “You’re back! Good, having the Apollo in orbit would be great! You could just teleport the Sage off the ground!”

“I’d need a tracker on her, but yeah.”

The Tau’ri team leader nodded to O’Neill and prepared a tracker for that exact purpose.

“When’s the op?” O’Neill asked.

“Two hours. There’ll be a ‘spirit surge’ on Lai that Sage Pinkie needs to use. We’re probably going in with a lot of overkill here, but this Sage definitely knows we’re going to be there.”

“So since we can afford the overkill, go ahead and use it. I like your style,” O’Neill said. He turned to Link. “Ground support?”

Link drew the master sword and looked at his own reflection in its blade. “I will be honored to provide aid for once.”

“Good.” O’Neill adjusted his uniform. “Twi, you got a minute?”

“Hm? Yes, why?”

“We found a very interesting universe and have some people we want you to meet.”

“Oh? Who?”

A truly gigantic purple pony – taller than Celestia – dropped the invisibility spell she had on. Her hair swirled with the majesty of fading light and distant stars, her eyes were deep intelligent pupils ringed by mystical irises, and her horn was pointed as if ready to tear through space itself. She was wearing a complex set of regalia on her chest made of a pearly white alloy and a few glowing veins of purple power surrounding a central blue crystal. Her cutie mark was that of a six pointed magical star with five smaller points around it.

Twilight looked up. “…Wow. You’re impressive. Twilight, I take it?”

The majestic being smiled. “Yes. I am Princess Twilight Sparkle of Equis. An Equis almost exactly like your own, from what I have read, save two thousand years into the future.”
Twilight gasped. “Oh. My. That’s… That’s so interesting! You could tell us what’s about to happen before it happens like we’ve been telling some of the other worlds, and we could learn what our fates are – of course, only in the short term since this whole multiverse thing is a little jarring and will definitely spiral out of control…”

The other Twilight smiled. “You’re just like me all those years ago. Sometimes I wish I still had your level of energy.”

“Talk to Nova. She’s got energy drinks.”

“…Nova?”

“Oh, right. Starlight. Changed her name to differentiate from the other Starlights. There’s Starcei over there, and I think I’ve seen Starbeat around somewhere. Don’t think she’s part of the operation though…”

“Oh, right, names. It must be confusing for you all to have so many. You’re still Twilight, right?”

“For now. I’ll probably change eventually.” Twilight shrugged.

“I can be Cosmo, then,” Cosmo said. “At least for now.”

“Wow you are a lot more decisive than I am.”

“You stop making such a big fuss over things at about year three hundred.”

Twilight chuckled. “So Celestia tells me. Anyway, was there anyone else O’Neill? You said ‘people’.”

Cosmo smirked, tapping the crystal on her chest. “I’ve far outlived the vast majority of all ponies you’d know… All this one. Say hello.”

The crystal flared. “Hello.”

Twilight leaned in. “…Starlight?”

“She’s passed the intelligence test, ‘Cosmo’. Her powers of deduction are beyond compare.”

Twilight looked up at Cosmo, raising an eyebrow. “…She seems sarcastic.”

The crystal beeped. “When you live your life as a digital intelligence you tend to get very sarcastic. By the way, can I access the computer network here? The constant wireless signals keep prodding me.”

“Sure,” Twilight said, shrugging. “Be warned we do have a hacker around here, Sombra, who’s… Pretty good at getting into everything.”

“I’ll be fine,” Starlight said, falling quiet – presumably to surf the Hub Internet.

“So, what’s the story behind that?” Twilight asked. “Actually, how did your world even come to be? What happened in those two thousand years?”

“Well, it’s a long story, but I’ll try to cut it short,” Cosmo cleared her throat. “The six of us lived as friends for a very, very long time, well into our adulthood. It was beautiful. I never married or had any foals, but all the others eventually did, even Starlight.”
Starlight beeped indignantly. “You say that like it’s surprising.”

“It was. The point is most of us had families, and all of us were apart of everypony else’s families. It was a great time. I had no foals of my own, so I became sort of a built-in aunt of sorts for everyone, the binding glue, the princess everyone knew. I began to champion technology research because it seemed like a good idea, and we eventually developed our ships. Took about fifty years, but that wasn’t much of a problem. I was surrounded by a huge family and had begun to unite the many races of Equis together in harmony.”

“Then we found the aliens,” Starlight added.

Cosmo nodded. “There was a war across the Stars - who, if you haven’t figured out already, aren’t big on interfering. We almost never saw the aliens’ faces until the end, only saw their ships and swarms of death impending upon us all. We fought valiantly, but they did eventually make it to Equis. More than a few of my family perished in that war, and it looked like we might actually lose. Celestia and Luna had fallen as well…”

“When it was clear we could not win, even with Discord’s assistance, I went to the Tree of Harmony. It let me drain its entire essence into myself and purge the entire planet of alien life. With the power of the entire Tree inside of me, I utterly destroyed their fleet, and wiped the entire world clean. I tried many times after this to talk to the now losing attackers, but they refused. They would not stop until they were utterly exterminated.

“After this… We discovered that there was a sacrifice. The Tree of Harmony was the reason, the life-force of most races in our world. It was possible for them to survive without it, but what I had done was not normal. The non-pony races began to die out, losing the will to live, because I had used that will. Soon there were nothing but ponies on Equis, and I was the only remaining princess.”

Twilight put her hoof to her mouth. “I’m sorry… That’s horrible. You’ve been through so much.”

“That was a long, long time ago. Eventually, all my friends and close family grew old. Pinkie was the last one to go - no surprise there at all. She was laughing until the end. Starlight transformed herself into this crystal. And I moved around the cosmos, looking for anyone. All the signs of civilization we found were destroyed by the aliens. Had I not used the Tree of Harmony, we would have fallen like the rest. We never discovered why the aliens were so genocidal, we never found out why they were so driven, we just knew we had finally been the thing to stop them. So we expanded. The galaxy is a huge place and we haven’t explored all of it, but it’s getting clearer and clearer that we were extremely lucky. You are actually the first aliens we’ve found since then.”

“...I wonder if those aliens exist in our world,” Twilight wondered.

“If they do, I still have the Tree’s power within me,” Cosmo said. “We will offer our aid.”

“Thank you. I guess I should have exp-”

“ATTENTION EVERYPONY, EVERYHUMAN, AND EVERYONE ELSE!” General Sunset yelled, standing on top of the main Mirror Portal desk and messing up Bon Bon’s carefully arranged paperwork. “We are going to capture the Pinkie Sage today. Yes, that’s right, capture. While lethal force is allowed, we'd like to have her answer some questions about what exactly she is doing first. But before that, we have to make sure we destroy the Mechanism by any means necessary. We believe she’s going to drop it in using a dimensional portal, and our job is to destroy it before it can do what it does. We will use every power at our disposal to rip that thing to shreds. That is what we are doing.
“We will go to Lai now, and set up a circular perimeter around the area of incident. The Starfinder - and hopefully Apollo – will be in orbit, ready to offer assistance from far above. We are fairly certain she knows we’re coming, so expect her to expect whatever you throw at her. We do not know exactly what she’s trying to do, and there will be a high concentration of ‘spiritual energy’ in the area that may summon the being known as the Goddess Armonia to the location. There are a lot of unknowns here. A lot of you probably think this many people on this mission may be overkill for just one pony, but there’s so much in the air I’m willing to take the risk of over-committing.

“Some of you may ask why we’re doing this. We have tremendous amounts of evidence that the Pinkie Sage has been manipulating the ponies of Lai for her own selfish reasons, pitting them against each other and inciting rivalries that have killed hundreds. She has raided this very compound. She’s been toying with too many ponies for far too long. Today, we stop her.

“It’s time to move out and set up. Let’s go.”

She pressed a button, setting the Mirror Portal to Lai. She was the first through.

Cosmo smiled. “…I think I’ll come along for this little trip, see what you ponies are doing that’s deviated from the history I know.”

Twilight smiled awkwardly. “This… Isn’t really normal. Rarely do we need to do big missions like this.”

“All the more reason for me to come along then. It will be interesting – as you’d say – to witness something that doesn’t happen every day.”

“Well, come on! We’ve got just over an hour!”

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The Twilight currently known as Cosmo had been on many missions in her time as Princess over the entire pony race. This particular one wasn’t bad, but wasn’t that good either – they were operating on extremely low intel, but to compensate they had gone for extreme overkill. They had an exceedingly odd variety of allies in the conflict, one definite enemy and target, and a neutral presence in the form of whatever the ‘Goddess’ actually was, yet another unknown.

The location was a field next to a mountain Cosmo had actually been informed was a gigantic ‘rune’ rather than a geologic feature, the glowing blood red glyphs on it giving it power of a sort. They were well within the ‘range’ of the rune, here, but the rune’s effect was not one that would affect them directly. It apparently made plants bleed. The ‘golem’ guardian of the mountain was a monstrous giant that would only appear if the entire rune was threatened – and if the Sage wanted to do that she was probably suicidal.

There was absolutely nothing where the ‘spirit event’ was supposed to happen. It was an empty spot in the field with a medium-sized rock about a meter away from it. One of the Tau’ri walked up to the exact point to set up a scanning machine and an orange flag for all to see. Cosmo found the scanning device interesting – it was a bit large and square for what she was used to, but perhaps it scanned more things than the devices her ponies used.

The rest of the group had formed a circle around the area several yards in diameter. There was no attempt to be stealthy at all – they knew their efforts were not secret. Cosmo briefly used a long-distance scan spell and found the pyramid-shaped Starfinder and blocky Apollo directly above them, monitoring the whole situation.
She returned her attention to the present moment to find that her Starlight was talking to two other Starlights.

“Oh, pardon me, I was elsewhere,” Cosmo said. “So, which of you is which?”

The unicorn smiled. “I’m Nova, this is Starcei.” The Arcei bowed respectfully as she was introduced.

“What conversation did I miss while I was out?”

“Talking about various unusual consistencies and inconsistencies between the three of us,” Starlight called from her crystal. “Nova and I had almost identical lives until we hit the divergent point, which for her was just under two years ago, and for me was two thousand years ago. Her Twilight found a dimensional device, you didn’t.”

Cosmo turned to Starcei. “And you?”

“Different world, way different time,” Starcei said. “I was born, took it upon myself to be something special, and created an entire race.” She tapped her arcs. “My legacy has been mixed. I never knew my world’s Twilight, nor did I care to. It seems odd to me that so many of us seem connected to her in some way, others more literally.”

Starlight flashed indignantly. “I usually have technological means to keep myself occupied. No offense to the Apollo’s network, but it’s lame.”

“That’s pretty offensive!” Nova ribbed.

Starcei nodded slowly but said nothing.

Cosmo pointed at her. “Your never knew your world’s Twilight? What happened to her?”

“Killed by Applejack, a ‘hero’ who was actually a terrorist egged on by Sage Pinkie.”

Cosmo nodded slowly. “So it comes back to her.”

“Yes, it does, as does much. The rest of it comes back to me – or the Goddess, I suppose. Or the ancients, whatever their crazy ideas were.”

Cosmo looked at the mountain rune. Curious, she snipped a blade of grass with her magic, and it did indeed ooze red blood. “It does seem to serve no real purpose…”

“HEY STARCEI!”

The human known as Toph stomped over, pointing at Starcei. “Got a few questions for you!”

Starcei raised an eyebrow. “Do tell.”

“Why’d you think getting the Arcei offworld was a good idea if their kids need runes or they become vegetables?”

“Oh, you found that out.” Starcei looked somewhat surprised. “Most Arcei don’t even know that. It’s a closely guarded secret. You must have gotten Somnabula to spill the ‘beans’ as it were?”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

Starcei shrugged. “Think of it this way. They were being persecuted. You’ve been moving them for enough months now that the population in your world and others isn’t zero. They’ve probably paired
up with some ponies by now, and there’s at least one conceived Arcei offspring, and there will be more soon.”

“That’s the problem! Those kids are going to be vegetables!”

“Ah, but they’re the citizens of another world now. Those worlds are charged with their wellbeing.” Starcei stared right into Toph’s eyes even though Toph return her gaze, making the menacing gesture rather pointless. “You best find a way to create artificial runes before they grow up then.”

Toph pointed at her and tried to say something, didn’t, thought about it for a moment, then scowled. “You conniving little spazwheel.”

Starcei nodded. “I look out for my ponies. I am the Mother, after all.”

“You’re going to help us… And you are going to come clean with everything you know!”

“No promises, but ask away.”

Toph grabbed her. “Come on, taking you to someone with more science in their head…”

Cosmo glanced at Nova. Nova glanced at Cosmo.

“And we just witnessed a mastermind’s plan go exactly as intended,” Starlight beeped. “Can’t really complain, it sounds like she’s in the right place, if taking a bit extreme measures. Can’t really say for sure though, bit low on information.”

Nova shrugged. “I… Am not involved in the Arcei dilemma, actually, so I couldn’t say. You could talk to General Sunset about that one. Actually, I think she’s biased against the Arcei in an extreme way, Starcei is angering her just by being here. So… I don’t know who to talk to for an impartial look. …Maybe Vivian?”

“Who?”

“The shadowy girl with the pink hat,” Nova said, pointing. “She likes just about everyone, though I don’t talk to her often enough to know much about her beyond that.”

“Where is she from? She doesn’t look like any of the others here.”

Nova opened her mouth, then closed it. She blinked. “I have no idea where she’s from. Huh. Probably should ask.”

“There’s a situation on the Apollo,” Starlight said suddenly.

“Huh?” Cosmo said, looking down at her regalia. “What’s happening?”

“Oh for the – their other enemy, Ba’al, is attacking our fleet. They’re going to intercept, and are preparing to beam us on the bridge now.”

The moment the words left Starlight’s crystal, Cosmo was on the bridge of the Apollo. O’Neill coughed. “Engage, helm. Ah, Princess, it appears that we’ve got an idiot who decided to attack you. Don’t know much from the report – it was sent by your people and relayed to us – but any ‘pyramid ship’ is a definite sign of Ba’al. Why he’s attacking you, I have no idea, you have more than enough of a fleet to destroy him. We’re heading over to minimize casualties.” He turned to the helm, checking to make sure they had entered the space pony universe.

Cosmo frowned, processing all of this in an instant. “He’s probably doing this to bait you.”
“Definitely,” O’Neill said. “But the Starfinder’s still back there, all they’ll be missing will be the specialty weapons on this thing. Probably shouldn’t fire those at a planet anyway with friendlies on the ground. I made a call, we’re going.”

Cosmo growled. “Thank you. I assume the Apollo is more than capable to deal with his ship?”

“How long until we arrive?”

“Three minutes,” O’Neill said. “This is very conveniently timed around the event with the Sage. It’ll take us at least a minute to make sure we got Ba’al, and by then the ‘spirit thing’ will have already happened.” He frowned. “…They might be working together.”

“That seems very likely. Do you think your overkill can handle it?”

“Ba’al only has one ship as far as we know, and even if he did build another one somehow, the Starfinder is decked out with ‘magitech’. It should be able to hold its own.” He clenched his fist.

“But I have the nagging feeling we’re all missing something…”

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Word that Ba’al was involved and had diverted the Apollo away at the worst possible moment spread around the ring of heroes quickly. The reactions were mixed from thinking Ba’al was being stupid to mild concern to anger.

Corona herself got a sinking feeling in her stomach, and she didn’t know why. She glanced to Link, noting that he had a look of pure panic across his face. He thought something big and bad.

Corona loaded her gun and prepared to infuse it with fire. Perfecting the art of lighting the bullets on fire when they left the gun and not before had been difficult, but she was more than prepared at this moment. They were all prepared – not all the people here may have liked each other, but they all knew how to work together for the moment. They had a goal, and an enemy, and they planned to use the many connections they had formed to win. Friendship was magic, after all.

“Just checking in,” Sombra said, coming through Sunset’s glasses directly into her brain.

“Connection stable. That Starlight AI is a pain to avoid in this setting without enough servers, but you’re my safe place.”

Corona nodded, not daring speak since Tempest was standing right next to her.

“I’ll tell you what I can about the Mechanism the moment I see it – if I can connect to it, I will. It’ll be the fastest hack in the history of ever. A good challenge!”

Corona made no motion to respond to this one. It was nerve-wracking enough that things were already starting to go wrong, let alone the fact that she had a wanted criminal in her sunglasses actually helping. The situation was tense and weird. A bit more intense than the other times Corona and Sombra had helped each other recently.

“T-MINUS ONE MINUTE!” General Sunset yelled. “Ready yourselves for anything!”

Those who hadn’t readied their weapons earlier did so now. Hammers were raised, party cannons were set, spells were prepared, guns were loaded, and eyes were narrowed. Everyone stared at the tiny orange flag in the center of the area.
Nobody spoke for the entire minute.

Wind blew through the field. A grass blade lost its fight against a beetle, bursting into a small shower of blood. Corona heard a bird chirp.

Several timers rang, signifying the end of the wait. Everyone jumped, some even took a step forward, but after that initial lurch there was confusion. They thought nothing was happening.

They were wrong – a spark of white energy appeared slightly above the flag, growing in size and rising into the air. It soon filled the sky with its presence, unfolding into a soft, but holy shape. Four arms, two legs, two pairs of wings – one reptilian, one avian. Three small rounded horns crowned a rather featureless face, and a single tail pointed directly into the air. A halo appeared over the head.

Even though the Goddess Armonia had no defining eyes, everyone felt like they were being stared at. She spoke with no mouth and no jaw movement, but her voice was not loud, eldritch, or reverberating. She sounded like a woman – a mother.

A very displeased and impatient mother.

“What has happened to my world? What are all you creatures? Why is the magic different?”

The Spectacularium decided to say hello in the only way it knew how. This briefly gave Armonia pause, but she recovered quickly.

“I see into all your minds. You have made a mess of my creation in such a short time.”

Charter-Princess Twilight Sparkle stepped forward, looking into the Goddess’s face with a determined look. She was scared, clearly, but she wasn’t going to let that stop her. “Goddess of Lai! I am Charter-Princess Twilight Sparkle of the world Equis Vitis, and I speak for all of those here who are new to your world! We apologize if we have trespassed where we were not supposed to tread, and are open to your words on what we have done to cause a mess of your creation, and what we may do to redeem ourselves in your eyes. That said, there is a Sage who is-”

“The Sage is meaningless. What you’ve done is not. You’ve ruined my world by interfering. The kingdom was supposed to fall. It has not.”

Corona saw General Sunset’s face twist into a conflicted expression of horror and uncertainty.

Twilight took the revelation in stride. “How could we have known, Goddess? We arrived here, unaware of your presence, and believed we were helping everypony we could. If you had some greater plan for the betterment of everypony, we apologize. I just a-“

Twilight did not get to complete her thought. A portal opened up a couple meters away from the central flag and dropped an orange rune in the ground. In quick succession, three more portals placed three more runes – teal, salmon, and deep green – in a square pattern around the center. Then a fifth portal dropped a small bomb in the center which was geared to explode before it even hit the ground. The shockwave upset all four runes.

The intent was clearly to summon their guardian golems. The hard-light quickly formed an orange saber-toothed cat, a teal humanoid leaning on a cane, a large floating fish with an orb of light in its mouth, and a deep green saw blade.

Under the Goddess’ now silent gaze, all hell broke loose.

The dozens of guns – both physical and energy-based – went off first, finding that they had little to
no effect on the hard-light golems, breaking off only small chunks if there was any effect at all. Corona’s own fiery bullets had a minimal effect at best. A bullet bounced back and hit Mike in the leg, dropping him to the ground.

The fish golem was able to shoot back, using the orb of light it held in its jaw to fire lasers of energy. Corona had to duck for cover, only there wasn’t a large enough rock to hide behind. They were all exposed.

Lady Rarity met the teal man with her hammer, shattering its head, only for it to grow right back. Her armor deflected the sharp ‘cane’, staggering it so Nova could throw it into the ground. It reformed itself behind Nova, but Pinkie came flying out of nowhere, knocking it to the side.

Elsewhere the saw blade and the cat were double teaming, focusing on Twilight Sparkle and General Sunset, who were standing back to back, firing spells, raising shields, and trying their best not to fall to them. Link used his sword to pause time, cutting all the golems at least once, but even the Master Sword couldn’t fell them permanently.

Toph plowed a chunk of earth right into the fish’s crystal, shattering it. She then picked up its own salmon rune and tossed it at the fish before it could reform. The fish shattered completely – but reformed just the same as before. “This is not fair!”

Pinkie unleashed all her laid party canons, decimating the golem’s forces. The Tau'ri followed up with a volley of grenades while the unicorns and alicorn in the group blasted the golems in a coordinated attack. For an instant, all four golems were vaporized – but they just re-appeared, vicious as ever.

“Why do these things even need to protect their runes if nothing can hurt the darn rocks!” Toph said, trying in vain to punch one of the runes in half.

“I’m why,” Starcei announced, her arcs glowing with a brilliant color, like any Starlight’s magic, but significantly more saturated. The hard light claws that protruded from her arcs skewered the salmon rune right in the center, cutting it right in half. The rune shook, shuddered, and fell into a powder that floated into Starcei’s arcs through an unseen opening. The fish suddenly became the color of Starcei’s power and began attacking the other golems. Starcei herself ‘teleported’ behind the teal man, slicing at him with a piece of hard light that actively kept him from reforming.

“Protect Starcei!” General Sunset ordered. Corona got the message. She leaped into action, encasing the teal man in a wall of fire, giving Starcei an opportunity to go for another rune.

“EVERYONE BACK UP!” Pinkie yelled. “THE STARFINDER IS FIRING AT THE RUNES!”

Corona flipped backward, kicking the teal man in the face with a flaming boot. Starcei and all the others fell back a fair distance. Those who looked up could see the pink bolt of energy falling from the sky. It hit the ground hard enough to send those who weren’t fast flying several meters, tossing earth into the air and creating a shower of plant blood that splattered over everyone.

The pink magic fires dissipated into electric bursts, driving themselves into the runes. Two of the runes had gone dark, leaving only the deep green sawblade, which Starcei currently had the fish occupying.

“It’s not over!” Pinkie said, running for the center. She wasn’t fast enough – not this time. A portal opened, dropping a small device composed of gears, runes, and strange unidentified metals onto the patch of dirt that once held an orange flag. The machine lit up brilliantly, casting a complex triple-barrier spell about ten meters in diameter.
Another portal opened up, dropping the full glory of the Mechanism onto the freshly exposed earth. Corona wasn’t sure what she was looking at – the closest approximation she could come to was a humungous church organ that had no keys and had cannibalized parts from so many different other organs that the Mechanism couldn’t be considered its own thing anymore. There were a dozen large batteries filled with power that likely came from the green diamond, hundreds of tiny steaming pipes that snaked in an out of the large upright structure, numerous glowing rune fragments that were casting spells on different parts of the Mechanism continually, a few clocks ticking down to midnight, and a single table with a magical inscription on it.

Sage Pinkie dropped down from the portal in the air, mask in her hand. She took one look at her opposition with her blue, shifting, oculus eyes.

Everyone with a brain attacked the barrier at once, breaking the outermost layer with the combined might of bullets, fire, hooves, hammers, magic, lasers, and confetti. One layer fell, but two layers remained – and Pinkie had already laid the mask on the Mechanism’s table.

“No…” Armonia spoke, able to see into the Sage’s mind for the first time. “No!” She raised her hand, preparing to smite the Sage.

The Sage looked directly into the Armonia’s eyes, daring her to try. Corona didn’t know what was going on through the Sage’s mind, but whatever it was startled the Goddess. And that was all the Sage needed.

The second layer of barrier broke, but it was a lost cause at this point. The Mechanism activated, bouncing up and down like a motorized jack in the box. Crystals lit up, sparks flew, and clock faces exploded. The mask floated a short ways into the air. A chain made of purely white magic shot out of it. The Sage dropped the barrier so it could go through unhindered.

Nobody fired, they knew it was over. Nova acted now that nobody needed to use magic anymore – activating her cobbled together anti-magic device, covering the nearby area in a spell-inhibiting effect. The Mechanism itself lost all magic color at that moment, but the mask did not.

The white chain of something that wasn’t quite magic impaled the Goddess in the face. Her entire form shook. She let out a shriek, like that of a woman dying. …In a way, that was exactly what was happening. The white chain pulled, dragging the Goddess down, shrinking her, compressing her – and forcing her into itself. The mask absorbed the Goddess’ entire essence in only a couple of seconds. It fell onto the now defunct Mechanism.

The Sage must have read the minds of everyone around her because she pulled a white flag out of her mane. “I SURRENDER!”

“…What!” General Sunset yelled.

Corona was aware that there was a back and forth between the General and the Sage, but she didn’t see that. She was suddenly overcome with a feeling of overbearing horror. She turned to look at Fef, and she couldn’t bring herself to look away.

She saw Fef press a button on a small metal disc.

Demons didn’t carry devices.

She was calling someone. Or telling someone something.

Corona needed to tell someone about it. Someone. Anyone.
“Noooooo you doooooon’t…”

Corona froze. No, no no, no. This wasn’t happening… This…

“Corona!” Sombra’s voice yelled in her ear. “What is wrong with you? Move! Just move!”

Corona couldn’t. She couldn’t.

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“…What!?” General Sunset yelled on one of Sombra’s screens.

“I surrender!” the Sage yelled back. “I did what I wanted, you can do whatever you want to me now! Kill me, jail me, whatever!”

“What did you do?”

“I freed this world from its stupid reason!” the Sage called back. “That’s what I did!”

Sombra glanced at her other monitor. Corona was behaving oddly, staring at Fef. Sombra’s eyes widened as she saw Fef press a button. Corona didn’t do anything.

“You freed us from the Goddess? How does that even make sense!” General Sunset shouted, though now Sombra was only paying a the slightest bit of attention to that conversation. She grabbed her microphone.

“Corona! What is wrong with you? Move! Just move!”

Corona did nothing. Sombra knew she heard her, there was no way not to. Sombra took in a breath and cracked her knuckles – time to take matters into her own hands. She began furiously moving her fingers through her various holograms, working her magic.

The Sage was talking. “You heard the Goddess. She wanted to destroy your kingdom, make it fall. She’s done a lot more than that! This world is her little game – she created a bunch of ants so she could watch them fight! Peace is boring to her, so she introduces new variables – creating a mutant pony born with no features so Arcei will come to exist, creating prophecies through the previous Spectacularium to drive heroes into existence, and she even wiped out the ancient rune builders so she could start over with some ancient relics around to make things more interesting!”

“Sounds like she was bored,” Sombra muttered absent-mindedly. She cropped the video of Fef pressing the button and reduced it to only a second in length, so nobody would be able to tell for sure what individual camera the video came from. Then she sent it directly to the bridge crew of the Starfinder.

They, in turn, called everyone on the ground who had a radio.

General Sunset was not one of the radio holders. “You… You think you had the right?”

“Yes,” the Sage responded.

“…I bet you can use her power while it’s in that mask!

“Also yes, but I’m not. I’m surrendering it and myself to you. The mask won’t respond to anyone but me now, unless I give it permission, but-“

“FEF!” Lieshy yelled, tearing out her headset. “WHAT DID YOU DO?”
“What? Nothing I-”

Lieshy tackled her down, knocking the disc out of the folds of her carapace. “She called someone ever-“

People barely had a chance to register that Lieshy had given a warning. With a teleport effect, a single Ba’al appeared on the ground before them. He had no Jaffa, no clones, not even a hand device. It was just him – but something seemed wrong about him. He seemed… dark.

He leaped toward the Sage. She put on the mask and pointed at him, a burst of holy energy firing at him. It should have been enough to completely vaporize him thirty times over.

*He teleported behind her in a flash of sickly, dark purple.* It wasn’t magic, but it sure wasn't the transporter technology that had been used to get him here.

Sombra couldn’t believe what she was seeing on her screen. She shook her head, trying to find the source of the teleporter that got him here. But she couldn’t find anything… He probably had a ship sitting somewhere in an alternate dimension that had opened a portal, teleported him in, and closed the portal. “Caray! Clever aliens…”

The Ba’al grabbed the Sage with some kind of darkness, lifting the mask with his free, bare hand. Lady Rarity charged at him with her hammer, Pinkie right beside her. Some bullets flew. Ba’al raised an eyebrow and a wall of shadowy horrors erected itself between him and his attackers. The hammers impacted the wall with a disgusting squish and the bullets did nothing.

For the briefest of moments, Sombra detected a foreign wireless signal. She tried to connect, but the portal opened and closed too fast. Ba’al, the Sage, and the mask were teleported away.

The wall of black sludge fell to the ground.

Everyone was silent. Nova deactivated the anti-magic field wordlessly.

Lieshy broke the silence, lifting Fef into the air. “WHAT. DID. YOU. DO?”

“‘What’s it look like, silly? I called Ba’al! And oo-wee did he have some scary dark mumbo-jumbo going on around him!”

“WHY?” Lieshy screamed, tears running down her cheeks. “WHY WOULD YOU DO THAT!”

“That’s the mystery!” Fef shrugged, giggling slightly. “You know what? I don’t even remember anymore! I guess something erased it from my memory so you couldn’t go poking around!”

Lieshy threw Fef to the ground. She looked ready to tear the demon apart. She elected to fly off instead.

The reactions of Fef’s ‘teammates’ varied from barely contained rage to tears. General Sunset was in the middle, walking up to Fef impassively, face unreadable.

As a demon, Fef saw right through it. “Oh, I definitely betrayed you. There’s no way to hide that. Was never on your side. I recall thinking about this moment a few months ago! So, eeeeeeoh SORRY-not-sorry!”

Sunset’s face clouded over. She turned and walked away, using her dimensional device to go somewhere else.
Twilight gulped. “Uh… We’re done, everyone. Anyone who wants to go to the post mission briefing is welcome to return to the Mirror Portal. But… I don’t blame you if you don’t come.” She lifted Fef up in her telekinesis and imprisoned her in a magic box. “We… Will have to decide what to do with her.”

Sombra sat back in her chair, shutting her monitors off.

She shouldn’t feel upset. She wasn’t involved or invested in this conflict. She just acted for the sake of Corona, her informant.

…Why was she so angry though? Why did she feel like she had been bested?

Actually, who cared?

Ba’al was going down.

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O’Neill had his hands folded and up to his mouth. Behind him there was a video playing – that of Link talking to the Ba’al clone in the cell. It switched to a video of Link and Midna talking in a hallway of the Apollo.

Link was sitting across from O’Neill, face as straight as he could manage.

“Well, the jig is up!” Midna said, appearing on Link’s shoulder. “Hello General, name’s Midna, and I can tell you’re pissed!”

“You bet I am,” O’Neill said, switching to a picture taken of Ba’al raising a wall of shadow. “Do you care to tell me what the hell happened down there?”

Link said nothing. Midna sighed. “Okay, so, there’s this thing called Majora-“

Link held up a hand. “Midna…”

O’Neill glared. “Spill the beans or I prosecute you to the fullest extent of the law for living on a military vessel under false pretenses for months. Or I can just lock you in the brig for eternity. I can probably do that, out here. Nobody to question me.”

Link grit his teeth. “…Knowing about it does things to your head.”

“I gathered that much from your little hallway conversations, Link.”

“I will not-“

Midna rolled her eyes. “Link! Stop being a hero for once! If he wants to burn his brain, let him. He’s probably doomed already. O’Neill, prepare for eternal nightmares. Prepare never to get a good night’s sleep again. Prepare to stand, frozen, while the force of darkness acts, powerless to do anything because it’s in your head.”

O’Neill sat back. “I’m ready. Cameras are disabled, don’t be afraid of anyone else seeing this.”

“You better be. There’s this mask known as Majora’s mask. There is a thing inside of it that has the power to destroy everything. And that thing is so far off the deep end insane that it will spread its insanity to everything that even knows about it. And if you see the mask, well, that’s even worse, because then it starts calling to you, demanding that you serve it, demanding that you become a holder of its power. And it will give you power, oh yes, power beyond your wildest imaginable
dreams. You begin to think of it as your god, your savior, your everything. And all the while it spreads, spreads, spreads. And then it tries to destroy everything it can. That is the evil of Majora.”

“And how do you know this?”

“We stopped it,” Link said. “Majora only had a small group of people under its influence when we found it, and it already had enough power to summon terrible natural disasters. All its power was forced back into the mask. But we knew we couldn’t resist the power ourselves, so we gave it to a mysterious being known only as the Happy Mask Salesman, who could.”

“So, what, did he fail?”

“Ba’al stole it from him,” Midna said. “During the invasion.”

“This is why we needed to stop Ba’al sooner,” Link said venomously. “Not do other things.”

“You know full well we had no leads,” O’Neill responded. “And we still don’t. All we have is a larger sense of urgency. How long do we have until this Majora starts unleashing complete destruction?”

“That’s the thing,” Link said. “It should have already started. I don’t know why it hasn’t yet. It’s clearly given Ba’al the power to initiate such things. It must have some other plan.”

O’Neill sat back in his chair. “Well, I’m going to state the obvious. We’ve got an evil entity influencing an enemy we can’t find that’s probably deemed all of us fit to be destroyed. I think we have a problem.”

“No, really?” Midna remarked.

“He’s also building ships somewhere,” O’Neill said. “What we destroyed for the space ponies was a regular Ha’tak, not his mothership. Given the existence of this Majora, we can’t know if he has enough extra ships to lose that one or was just compelled to use it as a distraction.” He shook his head. “You mentioned Zelda in one of your conversations. You really think she can find it?”

Minda shook her head. “I don’t think so anymore. She can see things and understand things with the Triforce of Wisdom. But I don’t think she can see into the other dimensions. Not anymore.”

O’Neill shook his head. “…You can stay on the Apollo. I think we need you. And while I’m upset right now, I understand what you were doing. Now get out of my office.”

Link didn’t need to be told twice.

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Corona sat down in her dorm, alone. Sugarcoat was out, so it was just her and the television screen. The television screen quickly showed an image of Sombra’s face.

“Want to tell me what happened?”

“I…” Corona gulped. “I don’t know! I… I saw her press the button, then there was darkness, and… And…”

“Something was influencing you,” Sombra said.

“No!” Corona yelled.
Sombra shook her head sadly. “That was far too fast and angry. Corona, there’s something in your head. What. Is. It?”

“The… The…” She racked her brain. Why couldn’t she think? Why couldn’t she say? She knew, but she

“SUNSET SHIMMER!” Sombra shouted.

“The mask!” Corona shouted. “Oh the mask, it’s definitely the mask, it’s in my head, it’s been in my head so long. In the dream with the blue guy, in the nightmares, it’s been talking to me for weeks but it just won’t let me think about it!” She grabbed her hair and broke down crying.

Sombra looked at her for a few seconds, face impassive at first, but quickly melting. “Corona, I-“

“Can you get it out? Hack my brain or something?”

Sombra shook her head. “Can’t do that yet.”

“What if it makes me hurt someone? What if it takes full control of me? What if it drives me insane?”

“I’ll watch you,” Sombra said, taking in a sharp breath. “I’ll watch you closely. I’ll keep you alive, well, and keep you out of danger. And I’ll try to find this mask, whatever it is.”

“Th-thanks…” Corona managed.

Sombra’s face twisted into a conflicted expression Corona couldn’t read in her current state. Sombra shook her head. “I’d wear the sunglasses as much as possible. And when you go to sleep, try to record what you see when you wake up. Or call me and tell me. I’ll be here.”

Corona nodded. “The mask… It… It was with the salesman. The Happy Mask Salesman. Link gave it to him to keep safe. I… I don’t think he’s kept it safe.”

“Ba’al has it, doesn’t he?”

“That… That would make sense…” She laid down in her bed, staring at the ceiling. “I… I’m going to sleep now. Goodnight, Sombra.”

“Goodnight,” Sombra said, preparing to shut off the screen.

“…I won’t be able to talk to anyone else about this…” Corona whispered to herself. “It won’t let me…”

Sombra closed the screen and shivered. That was terrifying.

She had the distinct feeling she might have declared war on a literal god a few hours ago.

She decided she was going to sleep as well. Too many thoughts and emotions swirling around her head…
Those who explored the multiverse had begun to formulate a small map of it, composed mainly of
two areas – the ‘east’ multiverse, and the ‘west’ multiverse. The pony worlds and those closely
associated occupied the east, and the largely human worlds related to Earth Tau’ri were in the west.
There were a handful of universes that seemed to fall somewhere in the middle, such as the Static,
but for the most part everything was either east or west, and moving things larger than the Mirror
Portal could accommodate from east to west and vice versa was rather difficult.

So if anyone wanted to fly to another galaxy in the east multiverse, there was only one ship that
could be asked, a total monopoly.

Luckily O’Neill was an amiable sort who loved to hand out favors, especially when the Apollo
wasn’t needed elsewhere and after he convinced Link that they really had no leads. He also had to
remind the green-clad hero that Ba’al couldn’t be involved in this one, since it was the space ponies
of ‘Equis Cosmic’, and ponies were immune to the Goa’uld infection. It took some time to
accomplish this.

The mission? There was an odd, regular signal coming from a dwarf galaxy a fair distance away.
The Apollo would take the trip there, investigate, and then return. A handful of pony scientists had
come along for the ride, as well as a handful of people interested in another galaxy, or some who just
wanted to take a ride on a spaceship like it was a cruise.

Twilight and her friends came for a mixture of all the above reasons, most choosing to view it as a
sort of vacation. The first day of the voyage was nearing its end, and many passengers were in the
mess hall having a bit of a celebration.

Rarity was sitting with Link and a surprising passenger, Mlinx.

“Mlinx, dear, what are you doing on this ship?”

“…Looking for a break,” he said, sitting back. “You know Fef?”

Rarity’s expression soured. “How could I not?”

“She’s given us a bad name. There are enough people in the Elemental Nations who hold it against
us that it’s becoming a problem. For me, at least. The rest can just take it, but, well, I wasn’t exactly
the most welcomed anyway, and Fef was my friend…” He clenched his fist.

Rarity put a hoof on his fist, keeping him from punching a hole through the table. “Hey, hey, Mlinx.
It’s okay. You needed to get away for a while, and that’s good for you. You’re going through a lot
right now. Take the moment to relax, okay?”

“…Right,” Mlinx said, sighing. “That is what I’m here for. I hope that galaxy is beautiful.”

“Won’t see it until we get there,” Link said, gesturing at the window. “Nothing but hyperspace for
the next few days. As beautiful and radiant as this world’s sparkly pattern is, the novelty wears off
after a while.”

Rarity glanced out the window at the hyperspace pattern – a largely green and blue alternating swirl
with patterns of pink and purple stars spread throughout. “Is every world’s hyperspace pattern unique
“Link?”

“No, a lot of pony worlds close to yours have the same one. Some don’t have any at all. Can’t travel faster than light in those.”

“Some worlds have more or less magic… Some have some or no hyperspace…” Rarity furrowed her brow. “I wonder what happens if there is a world with absolutely no magic. Or a world where life is impossible.”

“Probably should get out of there as fast as possible.”

“Would you have time though? Twilight has observed that our internal magic levels slowly fall when in a low magic world, but if the change was jarring would there even be a moment to return?”

Link shrugged. “That sounds like a question that needs to be answered by ‘experimentation’ or something.”

A passing diminutive reddish-brown unicorn overheard the word ‘experimentation’ and looked to the group at the table. “Hey, what experimentation?”

Rarity shrugged. “Wondering what would happen in a universe with no magic at all, and Link here says we’d have to find one to see what would happen.”

The unicorn smiled. “Well you would have to do that to be certain, but you could probably use analysis to figure it out ahead of time.” He extended his hoof. “Name’s Diesel, I’m Captain Shockwave’s assistant.”

Rarity shook it. “Charmed. I’m Rarity, this is Link, and Mlinx. We aren’t exactly scientists, while I presume you are?”

Diesel nodded. “All of us here – Shockwave and Cream. We found the signal years ago while drifting around the galactic rim and it has eaten away at our sanities not knowing what’s out there. I hope it’s friendly aliens, personally.”

“I hope it’s a resort,” Mlinx added.

Diesel chuckled. “Sure, why not! Anyway, about your little question. I may not be that knowledgeable on the subject of transitional physics, but from Twilight’s brief I read on the subject, I can surmise that so long as you are able to physically act within the confines of the new universe you find yourself in, you will be able to leave before all your magical properties revert to nothing. The big question is if you do let all your magical properties revert to nothing, what’ll happen to you? As observed previously, things tend to ‘shift’ to accomplish the same function in whatever universe they’re in – for instance, the ‘magic’ on Earth Tau’ri is very different in nature from the magic in most pony worlds, and yet the magic spells work as advertised, even if they are a bit harder to cast on Earth Tau’ri. The hyperdrive accesses a different sub-plane of existence in every universe, but it manages to do so with ease, as if the universe tweaks the device slightly so it will still work if it can. But in the places with no hyperspace at all, the drive just does nothing. Would your bodies survive? Wou-”

“Dear, dear,” Rarity said, holding up her hooves and chuckling slightly. “You’re overloading our tiny little minds with your knowledge!”

“Oh, sorry. I do tend to do that. Talk and keep talking without thinking.”

“I have no idea what he was really talking about,” Mlinx said. “I zoned.”
Link shrugged. “I think I got it.”

“Thank you,” Diesel said.

“I’d recommend talking to Twilight about that,” Rarity said. “Or maybe even Pinkie, if you can catch her in a listening mood. They’d be able to keep up with you.”

“Right, right.” Diesel smiled. “See you around then! Nice talking to you!” He trotted off, a skip in his step.

Rarity blinked. “…I didn’t mean for him to go, but I guess he really wanted to talk science. I was a bit curious about him, actually…”

Link shrugged. “Some people have a one-track mind.” He yawned. “Speaking of, my mind is currently egging me on to sleep. It was a pleasure, as always, Rarity.”

Rarity smiled. “Likewise. Have a good night!”

Link left the table, reducing the number of occupants to two. Rarity put her hooves on the table. “So, Mlinx, I’m sure you have some stories to tell!”

“No really. You know my place in the tribe. Let’s not talk about that.”

Rarity frowned. “…All right, if you insist. I’ll tell you one of my stories. Oh, there was this one time I was foalnapped by some hopelessly incompetent Diamond Dogs, now that was somehow both a horrible day and a great day. It started when I was looking for gemstones with Spike – I was probably using him a bit unfairly, if I’m being honest with myself. See, he had quite the crush on me. I think he still does, though it’s significantly less than it was prior and he generally doesn’t act on it anymore. But I was fully aware of it back then, and I told him it would be dashing to go out and help me dig up gemstones. Little did I know that there were Dogs about…”

She told her story for the next twenty minutes or so, allowing the rest of the mess hall to fall into the background of her perception. Mlinx, to his credit, paid rapt attention and laughed at all the right moments. It was, all in all, an enjoyable experience.

“…And that basically wraps it up. The moral? Well, there were several, but the one I got is that a lady can use her words to get out of any situation.” She chuckled.

“Weaponized whining and complaining. That’s a trait Lieshy had. She could dance circles around everyone with her speech.”

“You two still friends?”

Mlinx shrugged. “She talks to me sometimes, but she no longer lives with us. She bunks wherever Toph does at this point. She admitted to me a few days ago that she doesn’t hold us demons very highly anymore… I’m all right, but-“ He shook his head. “And here I was saying I didn’t want to talk about this.”

“Mlinx, it’s okay. We all have problems and we need to work through them. I understand that.”

Mlinx nodded. “I… Think I’ll turn in now, follow Link’s example.”

Rarity glanced around. “I do suppose the hall is starting to clear out… Good night, Mlinx. See you tomorrow for another day of traveling through empty space.”
Mlinx chuckled. “That you will.” He stood up and walked out, leaving Rarity at the table. After a minute of quiet contemplation. Rarity got up, intending to approach the table her close friends and O’Neill were sitting at, but another pony caught her eye: a cream-colored earth pony sitting at the edge of the hall, her nose in a book. Curiosity piqued, Rarity trotted over.

“If you don’t mind my intrusion, what is it that you’re reading?”

The pony looked up from her book with a smile on her face. “It’s a mystery novel, *Murder on the Pony Express*. The great detective Renee is traveling with a mail caravan across the Zebrican desert in pre-war Equis when somepony is gruesomely murdered. All signs point to the homeless stallion, but I think it’s the caravan leader at this moment.”

Rarity blinked. “Why, that sounds like a fascinating read! Such a good name for a detective as well!”

“It is a great book. I think the name’s foreign, or made up to sound foreign. My name’s Cream, by the way. Here with Captain Shockwave to find the source of the signal I found.”

“So you’re Cream! I’m Rarity, just here for the ride. Don’t have any scientific background at all.”

Cream smirked. “That shouldn’t mean anything. If you have enough cunning and skill, you can move up quite far. I don’t have any secondary education, actually, but I’ve proven myself to be more than skillful. Helps that I’m an earth pony mage, a pretty rare skill set.”

Rarity raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Earth pony mage? I have run into a couple of those in my travels, but besides other versions of Pinkie I’ve never really gotten a close look. How exactly do you cast magic?”

Cream laid her book down next to her and held up her hooves. “Unicorns use their horns to cast magic, and pegasi channel their power through their wings. What most earth ponies don’t realize is that their hooves aren’t quite like wings or horns – they’re just focal points of magic that flows throughout their entire body. To cast magic as an earth pony, you need to dance.” To demonstrate, Cream stood up on her hind legs and waved her front hooves around in a series of semicircular patterns. The tips of her hooves began to glow a soft green as magic collected around them. She pressed them together, creating a simple floating ball of light in front of her. “Definitely more difficult than using a horn, but there’s something invigorating about it.”

“That’s amazing!” Rarity declared.

Cream smirked. “I practice. There’s technology that can help you cast as well – Shockwave was never able to use her wings, so she has a pair of boots that can cast magic spells for her.”

“You are a talented mare, Cream.”

“I can also etch designs into solid objects and channel my magic into that which allows me to mold materials into highly specific shapes. It’s the main reason I’m with the Captain, I can create technical parts on the spot should they be needed.”

“I stand corrected, you are a very talented mare.”

Cream shrugged. “No, really?” She picked up her book. “Anyway, now that I’m not engrossed in my pages I can see that the place is clearing out. I think I’ll continue reading in my room until I pass out.”

“Good night then!” Rarity called.
“I will probably not fall asleep until the AM hours given how exciting this book is,” Cream commented, trotting out of the hall.

Rarity finally mmoved to the table with her friends and O’Neill. “Well, tonight has been an interesting one filled with delightful conversations! I’ve told stories, heard others, and met new ponies! I think I know everyone on board now, except that Captain Shockwave. No idea where she is.”


Flutterfree shook her head. “Why’s she a captain then? Even if she does just run a science vessel, she still has to deal with the ponies she commands.”

“I don’t know,” O’Neill said. “As I said, reclusive bird.”

Rarity shrugged. “I’d just like to meet her, is all.” She heard the doors to the mess hall open. “Oh! Maybe she’s decided to pay us a visit!”

“Ah… no,” Starbeat said, walking from the main door to the food dispenser. “Just here to get my dinner and go.” She rubbed her right hoof, where a metal band was affixed. “Can’t be around a lot of people, you know how it is.”

Pinkie shook her head. “You don’t need the band, Starbeat.”

Starbeat levitated a tray of food over her head. “It’s there to tell me when I click, and to warn everyone else of the same, Pinkie. It’s for my sake as well as you all.”

“It makes you look like a convict,” Nova said.

“It’s the prison known as life…” Starbeat sighed. Shaking her head, she decided to come over, pulling up a chair. “I guess I can sit for a while.” She munched on one of her carrot sticks. “So, why you all hanging around this late? Almost everyone else is cleared out.”

Twilight shrugged. “I don’t know. Just feel like talking tonight, I suppose.”


Flutterfree rolled her eyes. “We sure act like that sometimes.”

Starbeat raised her eyebrows as she sipped some of her drink. “Do elaborate.”

Nova snorted. “Go to a Pinkie Pie party and behold, the depths to which all of us will stoop.”

“I’ve started spiking the punch every few parties!” Pinkie grinned. “Things get fun!”

“Wait, you have?” Nova blurted. “That… certainly explains a lot.”

Rarity raised an eyebrow. “Really, dear? You didn’t notice?”

Twilight raised a wing. “I didn’t either. You do have an eye for detail, Rarity.”

“I suppose I do…”

O’Neill shrugged. “I don’t think it’s that. Intoxication should be obvious, methinks.”

Rarity raised an eyebrow. “…’methinks’?”
“I can speak fancy if I want.”

“No, no you can’t.”

Starbeat chuckled, chewing on a piece of bread. “Seeing all of this is always a little weird to me. Just ponies talking.”

O’Neill snorted. “Hey, you’re not the grown man talking to a herd of colorful equines.”

“True… I guess I was trying to say… Well, I don’t know, actually. Here I am trying to express a sentimental feeling that isn’t a form of romance and I’m tripping over my words. Heh.”

Twilight put a hoof on her back. “It’s okay, we understand.”

Starbeat looked right into Twilight’s eyes. “Aw, thanks Twi-“ Her hoof-bracelet started beeping like a car alarm, albeit quieter. She yelped in alarm, lashing out with her hoof, hitting Twilight across the face.

Starbeat took several steps back, pulling her tray with her. “S-s-sorry! I, I didn’t mean to!”

Twilight rubbed her face. “Ow. It’s okay.”

Starbeat flushed, pressing her ears against her head. “I need to go. Thanks for letting me eat with you all. Bye.” She teleported away.

Flutterfree shook her head. “…We need to find a way to help that mare…”

“She’s the expert on the mysterious Beat Force,” Rarity reminded them. “She’s her own best hope.”

Flutterfree sighed. “She’s becoming a recluse by necessity. It’s not healthy for her.”

“Neither is what just happened.”

Pinkie sagged onto the table. “Okay, now I’m just sad.”

“New topic then,” Nova said. “I hear Daniel’s been working hard to forge tighter relations with the Binaries?”

O’Neill nodded. “Yep. Quite the ordeal, apparently. Furry bundles that lack any semblance of trust…”

They talked about random things for another hour or so, bonding as a group as ponies generally did and one old man generally didn’t, but was forced to anyway. Eventually, however, they began to yawn and grow tired.

The lights above them flickered for a moment.

Pinkie stretched her hooves. “I’m going to take that flicker as a suggestion that we’ve kept the lights on in here a bit too long. To bed everybody!”

The group of six friends walked to the area of the Apollo where the quarters were. O’Neill gestured toward the door that held the guest quarters. “This is where we part ways. See you in the morning.”

Twilight nodded, pressing her hoof to a console to open the door. Her bright smile vanished instantly. “…O’Neill?”
O’Neill looked over her into the guest rooms hall. “Yes – oh.”

Rarity put a hoof to her mouth. There was blood in the hallway, seeping out in large quantities from under a door to one of the rooms. Rarity couldn’t help but wonder who was behind that door. Not Mlinx, his blood is blue... Starbeat? Diesel? Is there anyone else on this level?

O’Neill’s instincts kicked in. He jumped past the ponies and took out his master keycard. The door slid open, revealing a gruesome sight.

A certain earth pony who had spent the evening reading a book was splayed on the ground, unmoving, her eyes wide open. Her jaw hung slack, her neck was bent too far back, and the bottom of her throat was slit right open, dripping deep red blood onto the ground. It was still flowing, pouring on to the ground. It was very recent.

Rarity screamed, but couldn’t look away. The eyes were looking right at her, so lifeless – without the spark. But this was much, much worse than the neandroponies. At least the neandroponies had life in there. These eyes… They had nothing.

She realized that her screams had drawn everyone in the area to the scene. Mlinx, Link, and Diesel were close by, Shockwave and a Tau’ri crewmember were to the left keeping their distance, and Starbeat was poking her head out of her room, hoof over her mouth.

O’Neill called the bridge. “Get the camera feed for the passenger hall, stat!”

“C-cream?” Diesel finally managed. “Wh… What happened?”

“She’s been murdered,” O’Neill said, leaning down and shaking his head. “Cut to the throat. Very recent...”

Rarity forced herself to look down at Cream’s body with a more analytical eye. She realized with some pain that she hadn’t actually seen a dead body yet on their adventures; at least not this close. She now understood what Corona was talking about, how it changed things. How it drove itself into your mind. Had Twilight seen this on Ba’al’s ship that day? Had she ignored it? Pushed it out?

She noticed her breathing increasing rapidly. She held her hoof to her chest, calming herself. Now would not be the time to completely lose it.

Diesel was apparently fed up with the silence. “You!” he shouted, pointing at Mlinx. “Your people are aggressive warriors! You did this!”

Mlinx, instead of backing up, moved closer to Diesel and glared. “I did no such thing, unicorn.”

Shockwave stepped forward, getting a closer look herself. “Anders,” she said, pointing at the Tau’ri crewmember. “You have a very large collection of knives.”

Anders, a burly bald man, squinted. “Are you accusing me?”

“Just putting information out in the public eye,” Shockwave stated, trying not to look at the body.

O’Neill got a call back from the bridge. He cursed. “There was a video blackout.”

“What? How can you have a video blackout?!” Diesel demanded.

“Power surge,” Pinkie explained. “I mean, some of us saw the flickering lights right?”

Rarity looked further into the room, her eyes falling upon a book lying pages-down on a small bed,
very very close to the end of the story. She couldn’t explain why, but this angered her more than anything else about the situation. This mare didn’t get to finish her story! Celestia knew what else was just ended here!


Pinkie nodded, pulling a wide-rimmed fedora with a pink bow lining out of her mane. Rarity placed the hat on her head, stepping to the front of the group. Everyone sensed she was going to do something, taking a step back.

She levitated the book off the bed and to her face, reading the next page. “…The caravan leader did do it.”

“Rarity, what ar-“ Mlinx began.

“Not Rarity... not right now at least,” she said, voice abnormally devoid of its usual pompous flair. “I am Renee. And I’m going to solve a crime.” She turned, back to the crime scene. “Twilight, Nova, Flutterfree, Pinkie, and O’Neill couldn’t have done it, since we’ve all been together for the last few hours. Since this is extremely recent, it means that the person who... did it would have to be someone in this hall at the time, or a teleporter. O’Neill, Mauve’s the only teleporter not present. Could you get him?”

“He couldn’t do this,” O’Neill said. “He faints at the sight of blood. If you need another alibi I’m sure the folks in engineering can provide one. He usually falls asleep there.”

“Fair enough. Assuming that checks out, only people here at the time could have done it.” She looked at Shockwave, Diesel, Anders, Mlinx, Starbeat, and Link. “You six are the suspects. I’m the detective. Twilight, be a dear and keep tabs on the six of them. O’Neill and I are going to step in here and examine the crime scene.”

Twilight tore her gaze from the blood. “Right! Right! You heard her! Everyone, back to your rooms. Don’t leave. Me and my friends will be watching.”

Mlinx pointed at Renee. “You can’t be serious, Rarity.”

“I have to be impartial, Mlinx,” Renee said. “Go to your room and wait.”

He clenched his fists and stormed off. Renee looked to O’Neill, adjusting her hat before stepping over Cream, carefully entering the room. O’Neill closed the door behind them.

“…You okay?”

“No,” Renee said. “You’d think we’d have seen this by now, but no. You tell so many stories of war and death that you were personally involved in. That happens a lot less over here in the east. Hearing about death and seeing it are two very different things.” She placed the book back on the bed, open. “I shouldn’t have moved that…”

O’Neill folded his arms. “Are you sure you’re qualified to do this?”

“This is not the first time I’ve taken the guise of a fictional detective. I did fairly well last time.” She took out a smartphone and started snapping pictures of the room. It was small, containing only a bed, a light, and a small closet – no bathroom, that was down the hall. “Nothing strikes me as obviously a clue.” She leaned down to look closer at the body. This time, she kept herself under control, though she knew she was just bottling up emotional turmoil for a later violent discharge. Now was not the time to lose her cool.
The wound across the neck was a slice from something sharp – presumably a knife or blade of some sort. There were no other signs of contact – no bruises, not even a messed up mane. There clearly wasn’t a struggle at all. It was quick. That was something, at least.

Renee looked around the room closely again. The bed wasn’t made, signaling that Cream had probably sitting in it, reading. Her closeness to the door suggested she got up to answer it, and probably got sliced right as she opened it. She’d have gone quietly, since the cut went for the neck. Nothing else was disturbed.

Renee turned back to the door – realizing it wasn’t closed all the way. She leaned closer and noticed the wall to her left was dented. She nodded slowly, taking a few steps back and taking one final look around the room.

“Well?” O’Neill asked.

“Someone either knocked on the door or she heard something. She went to open the door, got a blade of some kind to the neck, and fell where she is now. The only clue in here? A dent in the doorway, made by something hard. A hoof slamming into it wildly, or a carapace.”

O’Neill looked at the dent. “That’d have to be a pretty hard hit.”

“If I’d just… done away with somepony, I would have run away fast enough to hit a wall head-on. Ponies have the strength, and I’m pretty sure demons do as well.”

O’Neill leaned against the back well. “So, our suspects. What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that, first of all, that camera blackout is a bit too convenient. That’s our other clue. My current bet is on Shockwave. As Captain of a science expedition, she’d be able to work her way into your system, not to mention have the hoof required to make that dent. I hear she has magic boots, maybe they could have helped. Furthermore, she knew Cream in the past, giving her a possible longer-term motive.”

“ Anders has technical experience,” O’Neill offered.

“He’s certainly possible, but I’m finding it hard to construct a situation where he creates that dent. Burly as he is, he’s still a normal human. Unless he’s got a Ba’al symbiote in him. Twilight can check that. Other than that, I don’t really have a read on him yet.”

“The others?”

“I don’t believe for a second that Mlinx, Starbeat, or Link could have done this, but they’re still suspects, and they might know something. I suppose Diesel could have done it, but he didn’t strike me as the type. Keep in mind, I’m probably wildly wrong about these initial judgments, if I know anything the real culprit or motive is unexpected. For all we know Cream isn’t as innocent as we previously believed.”

O’Neill nodded. “That’s enough for me, you know what you’re doing. You’re on investigation.”

“We should have a look at that camera blackout in detail first,” Renee said. “It’s the other part of this mystery.”

“That information will be in Engineering.”

“Let’s head there then,” Renee said. “I think we’ve gleaned all we can from here.” She opened the door and did a quick examination of the outside, finding no hairs, cloth, or anything else interesting
at all. She closed the door behind them, finally allowing the body to leave her sight.

She let out a breath, looking around at the hallway in general. Twilight was the only one there. “Where’d the others go?”

“To sleep,” Twilight said. “We’ll take turns keeping watch.”

“Does Pinkie know any… You know.”

Twilight glanced to O’Neill. She whispered in Renee’s ear. “She doesn’t know who, but she knows you need to do this.” She leaned back. “You sure you’re okay, Rarity?”

“No,” Renee said. “And it’s Renee, right now. Tell Pinkie thanks.”

“I will.” The two parted ways. Renee and O’Neill went wordlessly to Engineering, where there were more than a few Tau’ri running around in a mild panic. Mauve was sleeping soundly next to a computer terminal, somehow tuning out all the commotion.


“There was a virus!” one of the engineers said, furiously typing on a keyboard. “It was a Sombra virus. It’s been in our system for days!”

“What was it doing?”

“Trying to access the Asgard Core!”

Renee looked at O’Neill. “…Asgard Core?”

“Secondary computer system where the big secrets are kept,” O’Neill answered.

“Why would you need two computers? Why not just put the bigger secrets in the old one?”

O’Neill coughed. “That’s… Classified, actually. A non-classified answer is that the technology was gifted to us by one of our allies and that we’ve just not fully integrated the systems yet.”

Renee raised an eyebrow. “Will this classified information be important to the investigation?”

“Investigation?” an engineer asked.

“A pony was murdered,” O’Neill answered. “And no, I don’t think it will. And this is not the first time Sombra’s tried to breach an Asgard core…”

“So we have three options. The… killer was either working with Sombra, knew Sombra was going to act and took advantage of it, or just got lucky. Either way it means we no longer have to limit our suspects to people and ponies with technical expertise, since she was involved. …Could she be on the ship?”

“That’s possible, but unlikely,” an engineer said. “The virus was acting autonomously. It still is, actually. Programmed to make our lives annoying down here in engineering. It knows its not getting into the Asgard Core so basically it’s throwing a fit now. Sorry General, this is going to cause more than a few systems to be buggy.”

“Hyperdrive?” O’Neill asked.

“That’s been quarantined. Shouldn’t be anything dangerous. It clearly doesn’t want to destroy us,
just be a pain.”

“Keep me posted. And not with a post-it note this time, got it?”

“Got it.”

O’Neill turned to Renee. “What now?”

“We have the doctors examine the body overnight while we get some sleep. I’ll question them in the morning. We all need some rest, and any guilty party will stew and get nervous. There’s nowhere to run, and performing more murders won’t help them at all. I believe we can afford to take a night.”

O’Neill called for the body to be taken out of the room and studied.

“Good. See you in the morning, General.”

“You too, Renee.”

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Renee stood in front of a door, Twilight at her side.

“First suspect,” Twilight said.

“Yes,” Renee confirmed. “Diesel. He’s not high on my ‘guilty’ list but he’ll likely know more about Cream and what reasons people would have to… off her. You’re here to make sure nobody tries to attack me. Insurance.”

“Right,” Twilight said, gulping.

“Twilight… You can handle a knife. Don’t be nervous.”

“I’m just worried it’s one of the people we know… Or, really, anyone here… I’ve talked to them all, they all seemed like nice people. I know that’s not a good indicator anymore… Still.”

“I know Twilight. I know. It’s hard. But someone had to do it. Necks don’t get cut by nobody.”

Twilight shivered, looking away from Renee. Renee took in a breath and knocked on Diesel’s door.

“Diesel?”

Diesel opened the door. His face was tear-stained and his eyes heavy. “Oh. …Questions?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Come on in then.” He backed up, climbing onto his bed, allowing the two mares more space to shuffle in. “So… What first?”

“Cream,” Rarity said, speaking the name with as little emotion as possible. “Tell me about her.”

Diesel shook his head. “She… was a good pony. Talented in the art of magic, brilliant in the cutting of circles, and had intelligence despite her lack of schooling. She was a quiet daydreamer with a lot of ideas and a penchant for shining bright. She-“

“Diesel, you don’t have to be afraid to tell me of her bad qualities as well.”

Diesel paused for a moment. “She… She wanted to be on top. She wasn’t exactly power-hungry, but
she would do all she could to outshine everyone. It was almost like she observed ponies and
determined what she could do to show them up. Everyone who didn’t praise her was a competitor.
You… You don’t think she angered someone, do you?”

“Very possible,” Renee said. “Anyone on your team could be jealous of her success.”

“Including me.”

Renee nodded. “But we don’t need to go there just yet.”

“I did not feel jealous, nothing of the kind! I di-“

“Stop lying,” Renee said. “Everypony around a mare like that would be jealous in one way or
another, even slightly, or subconsciously. Not to the point of murder, no, but to the point of
resentment? Easily.”

Diesel looked at the ground, ashamed. “…Right. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m actually expecting everyone to lie to me a little bit.”

Diesel nodded slowly.

“Describe your relationship with Cream to me.”

Diesel took a breath. “Well, we worked together. That… That was about it.”

“Her competitive nature didn’t cause any problems at all?”

Diesel shrugged. “I guess I’m just used to it a this point. At first, yeah, things were rocky, and
everypony butted heads, but once she was given a berth and the ability to shine everything just
locked into place. It does seem a little unfair, now that I think about it…”

Renee adjusted her hat, contemplating what she’d just heard. “Give me a specific example of her
desire to ‘show ponies up’.”

Diesel frowned. “W-well, a few years ago I was working on a better matter oscillator, and she came
in every day seemingly to help me improve, but days after I released my oscillator she released hers
which was just slightly better. And that was not the only time she got away with something like
that…”

“Sounds like she was a manipulator.”

“Of sorts? I don’t know, all I know is that she was effective and pulled her weight, even if it was at
the expense of the rest of us. You could ask Shockwave for her view on this as Captain. I can’t recall
any moments off the top of my head where Cream challenged her, but… I don’t know.”

Renee nodded. “Moving on to more in-the-present questions, describe what happened last night after
you left the dining hall?”

“I came up to my room. Before I went in I caught up with Shockwave, talked a bit about the mission.
She was distant, as usual. Then I went to sleep. I was woken up by an infernal beeping a little later,
and before I could get back to sleep you screamed.”

“Right. One more question. Who do you think did it?”

Diesel raised an eyebrow. “That demon. You know what his kind is capable of, and his room is the
Renee nodded. “Both Mlinx and Starbeat are close to her. The rest of the nearby rooms were supposed to be filled by me and my friends.”

“…Right. Don’t think Starbeat did it, she just looks too innocent. …Do you need anything else?”

“Not at the moment. I may question you again later. Good day, Diesel.”

~~~

Anders folded his arms. “Before we get into this, I have to say something before you use your detective skills to put it in a bad light.”

Renee glanced at Twilight and back to Anders. “This about the knife collection?”

“Yes.” He took a box out of the small closet, unfolding it, revealing dozens of beautifully crafted knives. “When I went to bed last night after the murder, I checked my case. All my knives were there. This morning…” He opened the case, revealing several spots where knives were missing. “Someone’s stolen them.”

“You do realize this looks like you trying to hide evidence?”

“I know. That’s why I’m being upfront with it.” He sat down on the bed. “And if I really wanted to hide, I could rearrange the knives to make the chest look full and only ditch one of them.”

“The fact that you’ve thought of this means you’re clever enough to obfuscate an innocent response.”

Anders shrugged. “Take it as you will. Just being upfront. Someone’s trying to frame me, and they got into my room somehow. It’d have to be one of the unicorns or that Link guy.”

“Right…” Renee put her hoof to her chin. “To the actual questions now. How did you know Cream?”

Anders shook his head. “That mare was more than a little crazy. When I showed her how to use the controls to her room she seemed upset that I had to show her, and felt the need to demonstrate her absolute mastery of the system. She honestly looked a little silly, and she knew I thought this. I had to worm my way out of an awkward conversation. She avoided me after that.”

“I’ll mark that as ‘barely any contact’. Describe last night.”

“I came here after my shift, wondered for the millionth time why my room is in the guest quarters hall, and went to sleep. I didn’t notice anything until you screamed.”

“No beeping noise?”

“No. Why?”

“Just checking for consistency. Anything else?”

“Well as I said before I checked to make sure all my knives were here before I went to bed, and when I woke up some were missing. They are probably the ones that would fit the wound.”

“And you think one of the unicorns or Link did it?”
“It’d have to be, they had to get to my room and I know the camera feed was functional all night. Unless the others can turn invisible, or something. I don’t think Link did – he’s a good man, if a bit pushy. I can’t imagine why he would anyway. …Unless he thought she had some evil in her, or something. But if you find out she had an evil thing in her, you probably shouldn’t charge him.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Renee assured him.

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“You know what I think?” Mlinx blurted. “I think this is bullshit!”

Twilight gasped. “Mlinx!”

“Don’t like the word? Tough break! That’s what happens when you question friends like they could be murderers!”

Renee took in a breath. “Mlinx, I have to talk to everyone.”

“Oh, you going to give Link the same treatment? Your little green hero in shining armor?”

“Yes.”

“Good. You’ll love to hear what I have to say about him.”

Renee blinked. “W-what?”

“I leave the dinner, right? After you finish telling your story, I head over to these rooms, but I run into Link first. I swear, I saw him talking to someone, but when I looked there was no one there. He claimed he wasn’t even talking, but that’s a lie. I figured maybe he spent twenty minutes in the bathroom or something, but that doesn’t make much sense when there’s a bathroom right here. He was doing something, something instead of going to his room like he told us.”

“…I take it you think he did it?”

“He’s got that time-stop sword thing. He could easily do it quickly, before she could do anything. He could break into any room and do anything he wanted and not leave a trace of himself!”

“Capability does not ma-“


“Renee.”

“Whatever.” He folded his arms. “I was supposed to get away from all this fighting nonsense. Looks like it’s actually everywhere.”

Renee pressed forward. “Describe your relationship with Cream.”

“Still? Fine! She openly insulted my race in the one conversation I had with her! There’s your motive!”

“…Describe last night.”

“I came right here and went to sleep – unlike Link – and then I was woken up by a beeping noise. Before I got back to sleep you screamed, had your little existential crisis, and forgot where your loyalties lie.”
“My loyalties lie with the truth.”

“I bet if you somehow discovered that Twilight over there was guilty you’d cover it up. That’s what you did with ‘Nova’ right? Didn’t she steal a ship from the Tau’ri, and after the whole invasion everyone conveniently decided to be quiet about it?”

Renee stamped her hoof. “That’s enough Mlinx!”

“I can’t agree more.”

~~~

“Captain Shockwave,” Renee began.

“That’s me,” Shockwave said with only a modicum of emotion in her tone.

“Tell me about Cream.”

“She was a good crew member who didn’t work well with other ponies. You’ve probably figured this out from Diesel.”

“Why do you think that?”

Shockwave shrugged. “Cream more or less replaced his position as my assistant. Proved herself to be more resourceful. I know he resents her for that.”

“That’s not what he said…”

Shockwave furrowed her brow. “…I don’t think he’s a killer, if that’s what you’re implying. Even if there was bad blood, they were still a team. My hypothesis is Anders. He is clearly a psycho trying very, very hard to seem like a well-adjusted man. Even if he turns out not to be, I wouldn’t trust him.”

Renee took this under advisement. “So, how was your relationship with Cream?”

“I was her Captain. I gave her the position of my second after she proved herself resourceful and useful enough to outweigh her lack of proper teamwork, which is an overrated skillset anyway.”

“Did she ever try to… compete with you in anything?”

“Definitely,” Shockwave admitted. “We quickly reached an understanding. That’s to say, I made her realize that I took credit for everything she did anyway being her Captain, and that making me look bad in front of the crew was a one way ticket to getting transferred. After we hammered this out, she gave me no trouble, focusing her efforts on the others, biding her time until she would be Captain.”

“…She was ambitious?”

“I believe so. She probably had some plan in place to depose me.”

Renee raised an eyebrow. “Interesting. I hear you have a pair of magitech boots?”

Shockwave pulled a heavily locked chest out of her closet. “Here they are, under lock and key. Haven’t worn them the entire time we’ve been on this voyage. I can pop it open, if you want.”

“Please do,” Renee asked.
After entering a complex code, Shockwave popped the top off, revealing a small screen in the lid of the box and two boots packed in tight foam. The boots were made of a strange clear fabric glowing with green circuitry. “See? Not stolen or anything.” She closed the box.

Renee nodded slowly. “Describe last night.”

“I was here all day. Talked to Diesel before heading to bed, went to sleep, then you screamed and woke me up. Simple.”

“Did you hear a loud beep?”

“No,” Shockwave said. “Though if there was one I might have just been far away.”

“That will be all then.”

~~~

Starbeat rubbed the metal band on her left hoof nervously. “So… Er… Hi!”

“Hi,” Renee said. “I’ve got some questions for you.”

“I, er, bet you do!”

Renee raised an eyebrow. “…You okay?”

“N-no. Not at all. Somepony’s died Rarity do you think I should be okay?”

“Renee,” Renee said.

“S-sorry.” She rubbed her band again.

“How do you know Cream?”

“There’s, uh, no way at all… I just…” she shivered. “I… She tried to f-flirt with me once and it made me extremely uncomfortable…”

Renee raised an eyebrow. “…Really?”

“Really. It was… Jarring. App-parently the ‘disorder’ just ‘t-turned her on’, or s-something.”

“Any other reactions with her?”

“N-no! I av-oided her after that! I’m not crazy!”

“Starbeat, calm down, okay?”

Starbeat gulped. “Right. R-right.”

“Describe last night to me.”

“Came here, went to my room, closed and locked the door, went to bed. Then you screamed and I poked my head out.”

Renee narrowed her eyes. “Starbeat, two other people heard your bracelet there go off.”

“O-oh. Yes.” She sighed. “Ok-kay I wasn’t actually asleep. I couldn’t sleep. I… I… Cream knocked on my door and I shut it in her face the moment she gave me the eyes, okay?” She whimpered,
covering her head in her hooves.

Renee nodded very slowly. “…Who do you think did it?”

“I don’t know! Nobody seems like a killer! Maybe it was some sort of other party?”

“Very unlikely,” Renee said.

“Oh…”

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“Link.”

“Renee.”

“You’re the first one to get that right.”

“I pay attention.”

“How did you know Cream?”

“Not at all. I was barely aware she existed before tonight. The only time I ever observed her doing anything was when she was, I believe, flirting with Starbeat. It was very unsolicited.”

“When was this?”

“Yesterday morning.”

“Anything else?”

“She was reading a book the entire time I saw her in the mess hall, and that’s that.”

Renee nodded. “Right. Link, from the point when you left the mess hall, describe what happened last night.”

Link shrugged. “I went to my room, fell asleep, and woke to you screaming.”

“That’s a lie,” Renee said.

“What?”

“A witness places you away from the scene roughly twenty minutes after you left the dining hall.”

“Bathroom, didn’t think that was needed.”

“On a completely different deck separated from this hall?”

“It was a-“

“LINK!” Renee yelled, pointing a hoof at him. “You DO realize what happens if you keep lying, right? You DO realize what it means!?”

Link stood upright in his chair, a bit startled. “I’m not-“

“You are turning yourself into the number one suspect! Darling, please don’t do that!” She was trying her best not to make her watering eyes obvious.
Link fell silent. A new voice came into the room. “Link, Link, Link, you are stubborn about your secrets.” Link’s shadow shifted and a little imp appeared out of it. She took a seat on Link’s shoulder, waving at Twilight and Renee with her hair. “So, here’s the deal, I’m Midna, I’m a secret, and I live in Link’s shadow. What were we doing before we went to bed? Why, we were talking to the Ba’al prisoner stored away in the brig! You don’t know he exists because you’re not supposed to. You can confirm with O’Neill that we were supposed to be down there and were not doing anything murderous. But we also can’t tell you what we were talking to him about for your own safety. It has nothing to do with this case, of course.”

Renee and Twilight glanced at each other, surprised.

“…I’ll accept this,” Renee said eventually. “This doesn’t exonerate you, but… It sure makes you seem a lot less untrustworthy.”

Link folded his arms. “I…” he looked like he wanted to say something, but couldn’t. “…Just ask another question.”

“Did you hear a beeping last night?”

“No.”

“Yes,” Midna said. “I was lying awake, unable to sleep. It was a little hard to hear through the walls, but there it was.”

Renee raised an eyebrow. “Interesting… Who do you think did it?”

“Shockwave or Diesel,” Link said. “They have a personal connection with her. They should be the primary suspects.”

“Thank you. That’ll be all. And Link? I am sorry.”

“…It’s fine.”

Renee took off her hat and looked at him, shaking her head. “No, it’s not. I may have had to do it, but it wasn’t okay.”

Link sighed. “I understand.”

“That’s better.”

~~~

O’Neill looked at Twilight and Renee. “So, who do you think it is?”

“There’s no conclusion yet,” Renee said. “I’m almost certain Link is innocent, but the rest all have some form of motive, unusual response, or evidence. Shockwave and Diesel because they knew her before, Anders because of his mysterious knives, Mlinx because he was very defensive in getting me off his case, and Starbeat just acted guilty. She also lied to me.”

“You really think Mlinx would do this?”

Twilight shook her head. “I don’t think so. We can’t exactly exonerate him, but I think he’s just mad we’re considering him at all.”

“I think so too.” Renee looked at O’Neill. “Have you read Anders’ file?”
“Not a single charge against him besides that one time he got drunk,” O’Neill answered. “He wasn’t drunk last night.”

Renee nodded. “So, someone tried to frame him by messing with his knives, almost certainly. Mlinx could not have done that; he has no magic and never left his room for certain. That leaves Shockwave, Diesel, and Starbeat.”

“I find it hard to believe Starbeat did it…” Twilight said.

Renee shook her head. “I see her being startled by Cream at some point or other during the minute of blackout. I see a click happening with Cream again, and Cream being ‘into’ it enough to terrify Starbeat into lashing out with magic. She then uses her magic to toss Cream into her room, clean up the hall, and run back into her room. I just have no idea why she would wake up, or what would prompt the meeting…”

“Cream herself?” O’Neill suggested.

“Possibly.”

“Alternatively,” Twilight interjected, “Shockwave is actually tired and jealous of her subordinate, and possibly annoyed at her flirtatious tendencies. She also acted like she cared the least out of all the people we interviewed. And she has those boots that can probably do just about anything, easy…” she choked. “…Murder weapon.”

“Yes. The…murder weapon,” Renee said, going over the idea in her mouth. “The cut is a bit too clean for me to think Starbeat did it, but I’d also think Shockwave would have a more creative and clean spell in those boots…”

“What about Diesel?” O’Neill questioned.

“He was legitimately distraught, but I suppose he could be faking,” Renee said. “He certainly has the most motive out of anypony involved, being shown up by Cream. He specifically left out details involving that Cream replaced his position, and tried really hard to portray her in a positive light.”

“So we’ve reduced from six suspects to three,” O’Neill said. “That’s something, at least.”

“Indeed it is. Now, what we need to consider is that dent in the wall. One of them had to hit it with their hooves extremely hard. Since Cream didn’t struggle, it means they hit it themselves. Diesel’s hoof is too small to make the dent, but Shockwave and Starbeat can. Hitting it that hard would likely leave a bruise or a sore spot.”

“I didn’t see a sore spot on anypony,” Twilight said. “Shockwave could have been wearing her boots, though—”

Renee’s eyes suddenly widened. “No… No no no…”

“No what?”

Renee left the room quickly. Glancing to each other with confused expressions, Twilight and O’Neill followed. They decided to scramble after her, see where she was going. She galloped across the ship back to the guest rooms, which Pinkie happened to be guarding. She looked at Renee with a sad look.

This only made Renee feel worse. She pulled her hat as low as she dared. She knocked on one of the rooms.
Starbeat opened it. “Yes…?”

“Starbeat, your hoof band was on the right hoof yesterday.”

“…Y-yeah! I just, well, put it on another hoof today!”

“Can you take it off for me?”

Starbeat stopped trying to smile. She lit her horn, removing the band and placing it on a nearby shelf. She held out her hoof, showing the previously-covered mark. Tears were streaming down Starbeat’s face. “I… I… I didn’t mean to…”

Renee held Starbeat’s sore hoof, looking at it, eyes covered. “Starbeat… Give me an excuse. Tell me where you got this sore.”

“Rarity, stop it! I did it! I shouldn’t have been trying to protect myself!” She grabbed Renee’s head and made her look her right in the eyes. “Look at this! This is me! I’m sick and need to be locked away!”

Renee shook her head. “Starbeat…”

“I walked out of my room, okay? I felt compelled, driven! Knocked on her door, the thing started beeping, and I lashed out. I don’t know what I was thinking before or after; it all seemed like a dream! I ran back to my room and tried not to think about it, and then you screamed a little while later! That’s what happened!” she extended her hooves. “Take me away already!”

“…That’s a confession,” O’Neill said. “I’ll call security.”

Renee held up a hoof. “Not done yet. So, you took Anders’ knives?”

“What? His knives are missing?”

“…Someone took them to frame him.”

“I didn’t! I cast a spell on myself to force sleep after you started the investigation!”

“…I believe you,” Renee said. “Which means something weird is going on. Has the Beat ever compelled you to do something before a click before?”

“No, but it went beep, that means it was involved!”

Renee walked to the band, picking it up and looking at it. “There’s a button on the inside here.”

“Yeah? It’s a test button for the alarm, but it’s designed not to be able to go off while I’m wearing it…”

“Someone who could figure out how it functioned could make it go off,” Renee said. “Starbeat, is there a way to check this thing’s record for how many Beat surges it detected?”

Starbeat nodded slowly, wiping her face. She lifted it in her magic and twisted the band a bit to the side, hitting a button on the outside. A holographic display shot up. “As you can see, there were three surges yesterday—” her jaw dropped.

“I only see two,” Renee said. “That last beep wasn’t really a surge. Someone wanted you to think it was.”
O’Neill folded his arms. “But how could she have been compelled to do what she did?”

“Nova knows a complex compulsion spell. An advanced spellcaster could know how to do it. And there just so happens to be a pair of boots on board that can probably do just that.”

Starbeat blinked. “I… I was conditioned?”

“I believe so.”

“What kind of sick freak-“

“Starbeat, calm down, okay? I have to question them first. Stay in your room.”

Starbeat nodded slowly, her face a visage of something much more hateful and vicious than a few moments ago. Renee, O’Neill, and Twilight left her behind.

Renee shot a look at Pinkie as she passed. “You made me think…”

Pinkie shrugged. “I don’t know, Renee, I just knew you were going to accuse her.”

“…Fair.” Renee arrived at Shockwave’s room and knocked. “Shockwave, is there, by chance, a way to look at the spell history of your boots?”

Shockwave sighed. “So, I’m a suspect now, am I? Yes, there is. It’s even got extensive data on magical levels, use, and charge. The last spell will have been cast last week at a quarter to six on a computer to duplicate the motherboard.” She pulled out the box, entered the combination, and turned on the built-in screen. She pressed ‘history’ and the most recent spell was…

…”Condition.”

Shockwave stared at that in disbelief. “…What? Who would…” She examined the logs more closely. “No, no I didn’t…”

Renee lifted one of the boots out of the box. “These are too small for your hooves.”

“They’re adjustabl-“ Shockwave blinked. “Oh. Diesel? I didn’t think he had it in him… Unless…”

“Unless what?”

Shockwave shook her head. “Nothing. Just go confront him with the evidence, it should be enough at this point.”

Renee pointed her hoof at Shockwave accusingly. “If you don’t tell me what, I can still be made to believe this is all an elaborate ruse on your part.”

“Fine. Don’t reveal this to my government though. Cream regularly broke interpersonal relations protocols, flirting in secret with many of the crewmembers. Myself included. I don’t think there was a pony on that ship who hadn’t been in a ‘relationship’ with Cream at some point or other. It is possible Diesel took her inevitable betrayal harder than most, if it happened. I’m not sure, she was good at keeping it mostly secret from me.”

Renee nodded. She turned to O’Neill. “I think we have our culprit.”

They stepped out into the hallway. Starbeat wasn’t in her room – she was beating on Diesel’s door. “OPEN UP!”
Diesel did. “You’re supposed to be-“

Starbeat threw him out of the room and into the hall. She marched toward him, eyes narrow, mouth twitching. “You… You…”

“She’s clearly the murderer!” Diesel called to Renee. “Stop her!”

Starbeat moved to kick Diesel again, but Twilight kept her back. “Starbeat, no. Okay?”

“But he-“

“We know.”

Diesel blinked. “Know what?”

Renee tossed the boot to the ground, landing right next to Diesel’s own hoof. “That.”

“…Are you seriously accusing me of-“

“You had a ‘relationship’ with Cream. She, being the pony she is, cut it off recently, probably stealing yet another one of your ideas in the process. It may even be related to this expedition we’re on. Maybe even took credit for finding that signal alone – she did, after all, claim that it was the signal she found when I talked to her earlier. You decided you had enough of her ‘reign of terror’ so you stole Shockwave’s boots while she was sleeping, used them to compel Starbeat to walk to Cream’s room, and I think you activated the beeping and used your own magic to cut Cream’s neck from a distance. I’m not sure how far Compel went, maybe you had Starbeat do that with her own magic without letting her realize.”

“You don’t-“

“You’re the only one who was woken up by the beep besides Mlinx, and his race has excellent hearing. Not to mention your room was further away from hers than Mlinx’s.”

Diesel narrowed his eyes. “Explain the camera blackout then.”

Renee narrowed her eyes. “Even with that inconsistency, we’ve got you made Diesel. You did it. You didn’t want the camera to be off. You wanted everyone to see Starbeat do it so there wouldn’t even be an investigation. I don’t know if the Sombra Virus screwed you over intentionally, or you just got unlucky. It honestly doesn’t matter. You realized the camera wasn’t working so you switched tactics, trying to blame Mlinx and taking Anders’ knives, so I could have evidence pointing to others. But you killed Cream, and unless you can provide me some reason to think Shockwave is framing you right now, you’re pinned.”

Diesel glared. “I want a lawyer.”

“Good enough for me!” O’Neill said. “Can I call security now?”

“Yes you can,” Renee said.

Shockwave glared at Diesel. “You’re going to try to take me down with you out of spite.”

“Of course I am. You let her run free. The way you turned a blind eye is going to be exposed.”

Shockwave glared at Renee with contempt. She turned tail, walked back to her room, and slammed the door.
Renee let out a long, stressed breath. “Okay… It’s done then.”

Starbeat looked at the ground. “Yes… It is… …I wanted to kill him, I really, really did. Am I… Not as innocent as I think I am?”

“There’s a potential for darkness in all of us,” Twilight said. “Even the best.”

Renee looked towards Mlinx’s room. He was poking his head out. Renee was sure he, too, was looking at her with contempt. His expression may have been hard to read, but sometimes you just knew.

Renee wasn’t happy that she’d figured it out.

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Shockwave stared out the main window at what was producing the signal.

It was a pink star with a high concentration of magic that kept sucking more magic in, creating a strange fractal pattern that radiated radio signals into space. It had been burning for billions of years and would be for billions more.

Shockwave wordlessly left the bridge.

Renee, Pinkie, and Twilight stayed, staring at the pink fire.

“So…” Twilight said, not taking her eyes of the spectacle. “…This is what we came all this way for.”

“Not worth it,” Pinkie said. “It’s just a strange star.”

Renee adjusted her hat. “All of this just for a sight to see. …Had this journey been easier, this may have been a beautiful end. Now it just seems… pointless.”

Twilight turned to Renee. “You keeping the name?”

“I think so. Renee. Dimensional traveler. I originally thought I’d keep it to honor Cream, but… Well, she wasn’t that great. But she was a mare; a mare who wanted to read a story. A story that she never completed.” She pointed a hoof at herself. “I am Renee. I am an incomplete story.”

Pinkie smiled. “I think that’s a good reason for a name.”

“Better than most of you. Corona, Nova… Nothing poetic there at all.”

Twilight raised an eyebrow. “Nova has something to do with Stars.”

“Of sorts.” Renee sighed. “This… This was our first real death wasn’t it? Right in front of us, that we were forced to confront.”

Twilight frowned. “I think I saw some on Ba’al’s ship, but… I was focused on Corona and human Pinkie.”

Pinkie coughed. “That was actually me.”

“. . .You do change places still? Where do you get the spell?”

Pinkie grinned. “A good magician never reveals her secrets!
“So are you actually human Pinkie or pony Pinkie?”

“A mystery I will never reveal. Does it really matter anyway?”

“Not really, I suppose. Just feels… weird,” Twilight admitted. She sighed. “We’re avoiding talking about it, you know.”

Pinkie shrugged. “I’ve seen lots of things already. I… While I’m bothered it isn’t really going to affect me.”

Twilight frowned. “It’s bad, but not unbearable. I’ve been preparing myself for this moment. Flutterfree is handling it well, actually. Nova’s not.”

Renee looked forward, a tear rolling down her cheek. “I’m not either. Her eyes were looking at me Twilight. I… Like you, I knew this was going to happen eventually. We were going to see this. But I… I couldn’t prepare. She’ll be in my head forever.”

“Others will join her,” Pinkie said. “…Probably others that you know better.”

Renee nodded. She pulled her two friends into a hug. “Don’t you two go anywhere.”

“Never,” Twilight said.

“Not planning on it!” Pinkie echoed.
The arches deep within the AID base may not have been one-of-a-kind anymore – the Tau’ri, Binaries, and Equis Cosmic had invested in constructing their own – but there was something about these particular pointed spires surrounding a ring of stellar power that made them special. It was the first of their kind, and it would never lose that honor.

Corona preferred the way it sparked with purple electricity. The others didn’t do that, having managed to contain all their energy through connections in the floor. It made it far more impressive, not to mention intimidating. More than a few had thought the loose electricity was a safety hazard, but no matter what they did short of sticking something in the electricity, the shocks always went directly to the gate and not anyone looking to travel.

Even though it would be easy to keep the loose electricity under control, Director Storm never authorized the arches to be ‘upgraded’ by reason of ‘it’s just cool’. Corona agreed. Tempest didn’t, needless to say.

Sadly, she was not going through today. She was just here to watch as a military squad was sent to one of the Tau’ri’s offworld bases to provide ‘joint support’ in an effort to improve relations. Corona didn’t know the world they were going to, but it had to be simultaneously interesting and dangerous to require a military presence. So she was at least a little curious what would be on the other side.

The arches activated, sending electricity right into the gate. The gate swirled with blue light, dialing the custom nine-chevron command. The portal formed with the signature kawoosh, settling into a clear membrane within the gate. The scenery appeared to be that of an abandoned wild west town. A familiar face stood on the other side.

“Colonel Carter!” Corona waved.

“Agent Corona! Are you part of this outfit?”

Corona shook her head. “Sorry, these guys are coming, not me. I was just curious. I had no idea you were the one in charge of the base in… Wherever you are.”

“Esefem, one of the first worlds in the Directory. Surprised you don’t know about it. Have you read the Directory lately?”

As the soldiers filed through the portal, Corona rubbed the back of her head. “Er… No, not really.”

“You should read up on it. This world is much more complicated and bizarre than the Princess’ group first thought. Don’t have time to explain it myself though, we’ve got to head to the actual base. Your arches aren’t in the same location as the Mirror Portal, after all.”

“Right. I’ll look it up!”

Carter smiled, turning to the men “Okay men, there shouldn’t be any problems on the way to the base, it’s a short distance and we keep a decent perimeter around here, but be on your guard anyway…”

The arches closed, dropping the room into relative darkness. Corona walked to the elevator and rode back to the control center of AID. She went to the large table in the middle of the room that held a
truly tremendous book. Corona was fondly reminded of the days the book had been smaller than a dictionary, with only a few sentences devoted to each world. Then Twilight had updated the Directory to allow insertion of other files, images, and alterations of the pages beyond scrawled markings. She thought this would let everything get more organized, but it only resulted in the information influx being a bit much. She was allegedly working closely with the ‘Cosmo’ Twilight to turn the Directory into a digital system, which Corona would be immensely thankful for when they succeeded.

But for now, it was a giant book.

She opened it to the first page. 000001, Equis Vitis, her world, the first recorded one. There were more than just paragraphs on this world, there were studies on important ponies, the nations beyond Equestria, and the history of its role in the multiverse. Corona was pretty sure the section devoted to Equis Vitis was larger than any of the others because all the humans who liked making large reports loved to examine places foreign to them, not to mention it had the ‘standard Equis’ section in it, telling any explorers what to expect from a normal pony world. The entry for her current world, 000002, Earth Vitis, was close to it in size with the ‘standard Earth’ section within. 000003, the Hub, was large as well, though nowhere near the pages upon pages devoted to those two behemoth worlds. 000004, Equis Doublespeak… 000005, Ardent… 000006… 000007… 000008… 000009, Esefem. Looking at some of the images inserted on the page, Corona was sure this was the right world.

There were a few notes from Twilight herself at the top, the coordinates, and some basic facts: safe, human/pony/other race mixture, high but not absurd magic, FTL allowed, no known esoteric limitations, and civilization…

…Civilizations uncertain? What? How hard was it to tell if there was a civilization in a place or not? There were clearly wild west buildings there, and the race notes said human/pony/other…

Twilight’s notes were brief. “Spent ten minutes here, was shot at by two sets of humans, red and blue clothing. Left quickly while being pursued. Last world visited by all six of us.”

But after that there were tons and tons of pages of information. Corona soon found herself neck-deep in information about a truly Bizarre world unlike any of the others encountered so far, one that, apparently, Twilight had discovered early on and never returned to. A place of eternal war, bizarre mixtures, and duplication…

Corona took out her private journal; the one with a direct link to Twilight’s. She took out a pen and wrote down a message. You should go check out. Esefem, number nine in the Directory. There’s a Tau’ri base there and the place is very bizarre. As far as I can tell, you’ve never gone back since you first visited. It’s just so… different. Read the documentation if you can’t go yourself or don’t want to, but the world raises a lot of fascinating questions!

She closed the book, glancing at her watch. She had to study for Sophomore finals today, no way she could visit the world herself. She knew she’d drop in as soon as summer vacation started, assuming Director Storm didn’t load her with work-

Wait. Right. Survival Training. She’d forgotten about that until now.

That was going to suck.

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Twilight looked at the Mirror Portal, uncertain.
“Esefem?” Nova said, looking at the screen above the Portal. “…Where’s that?”

“The last place all six of us visited,” Twilight said. “Though, we didn’t know its name. Apparently the Tau’ri have found that out, or at least gave it one. I just… I always avoided reading about this place or going back.”

“Really?” Renee said. “I’ve seen you pore through that Directory over and over again! You never looked at this one again?”

“Only glanced over it,” Twilight admitted. “But Corona’s message made me realize what I was doing. Avoiding it. That world has nothing at all to do with Rainbow and Applejack deciding to leave. And it’s not like we stopped being friends. I had dinner at Applejack’s just a few days ago, she’s doing well.”

Nova frowned. “…I haven’t seen her much. Barely see anypony who’s not involved in the other worlds.”

“Trixie?” Renee asked.

“She basically lives in the Hub now, I see her all the time. But she’s involved. I haven’t been to see Rainbow Dash, Applejack, or Maud in forever.”

“Things change sometimes,” Flutterfree said. “It’s not really worse because of it. We’re all just living our lives. We can’t keep everypony really close forever. The important thing is that we’re all still friends.”

“And the Tree did call Rainbow Dash to Ardent a month ago,” Pinkie said.

Nova nodded. “Right. …So, Twilight, what is this place we’re going to?”

A childish grin of excitement appeared on Twilight’s face. “I don’t know, I still haven’t read the Directory’s entry. All I know is that there’s a Tau’ri base on the other side of this Mirror, observing it. They’ll be able to tell us what’s up, but we’ll also get to be surprised.”

Pinkie gasped. “Twilight that’s amazing! That sounds like something I’d try to do!”

“Maybe I’m just in the mood for a surprise today.”

Renee adjusted her hat. “Well, shall we?”

“Yes we shall,” Flutterfree said. She smirked and spread her wings, leaping through first. Twilight rolled her eyes and followed along with everypony else.

They came out the other side from a wooden plank propped up against a wall. The room they entered was wooden and old. The windows were boarded up, the ceiling was falling apart, and one of the walls had a hole in it big enough for a person. The room contained dozens of computers from other worlds and large military-issue crates from both Earths stacked near the edges. There were a few human soldiers around, alongside several ponies and a few otherworldly creatures, a bit more than Twilight would have expected.

A Rainbow Dash flew up to them, a smirk on her face. She wore a black baseball hat, a headset, bandages around her front hooves, and she carried a baseball bat between said hooves. These features quickly defined themselves in Twilight’s mind so she could recognize this particular Rainbow Dash as different from all others she encountered. “Ah, hello, I’m Princess Twilight Sparkle. Are you Rainbow Dash or do y-“
“Oh. My. Gosh. You’re the Charter!” She dropped her baseball bat and put her hooves to her face. “This is so awesome! Name’s Rainbat, since we couldn’t come up with anything better and the thestral Rainbow’s called Dashula. Welcome to Esefem!”

Twilight smiled. “I see my reputation precedes me.” She pointed at the headset. “Are you supposed to call anyone?”

“Oh, right, yeah, all incomers have to be reported and approved, but of course you will be.” She put a hoof to her headset. “Hey, Colonel? The Charter’s here. Figure you might wanna come have a look see yourself.”

Twilight nodded, looking out the hole in the wall while she waited, watching ponies, humans, and a handful of others getting along.

“I had no idea there were so many worlds working together here…” Renee said. “I don’t recognize many of these! Who’s that blue person over there without a face?”

Rainbat looked over Renee’s shoulder at a muscular blue and silver man with no face. “Oh, that’s just Pepsi Man. He’s a native, like me!”

Twilight nodded. “You’re this world’s version of Rainbow Dash. Got it.”

“One of them, anyway,” Rainbat said.

Flutterfree raised an eyebrow. “One of…?”

Nova glanced at Twilight. “Surprised yet?”

Twilight blinked. “Very. No world I’ve come across has had more than one Rainbow Dash…”

“Are you freakin’ kidding me?” Rainbat said. “You don’t know what Esefem’s all about?”

“No. We wanted to be surprised.”

Flutterfree raised her eyebrow. “You wanted to be surprised.”

“Yes, I did, but nopony objected.”

Rainbat laughed. “Ooooh boy I want to see the look on your faces when you figure some things out! Hah!”

“Unfortunately you won’t get to see them,” Colonel Carter said, entering the room. “You’re still on your watch shift.”

“Aw come on!”

“Rainbat, it is an order.”

Rainbat folded her hooves and kicked her bat into a wall.

Twilight extended her hoof to Colonel Carter. “Nice to meet you. You helped Corona build the arches, right?”

“I came in at the end with a big stargate,” Carter said, shaking the hoof. “But yeah, you could say I helped.”
“Don’t undersell yourself,” Renee insisted.

Carter shrugged. “If you say so. I hear you’ve all come here without knowing what this world is?”

“That’s right,” Twilight said. “I… Haven’t looked at the documentation closely since I wrote the original notes. It’s evidently a lot more than just red and blue humans fighting, isn’t it?”

Carter smirked. “Walk with me.” She set out through the hole in the wall, leading them into a wide open area surrounded by various run down buildings. The sun beat down on them with its intense heat, sand blew in from somewhere beyond the buildings, and a couple cacti dotted the landscape. Intermingled with this were military-issue tents, scientific equipment, and a few firepits. “The world is mostly a desert with a few different biomes here and there. This itself makes it unusual, on par with the endless forest, though nowhere near as uniform. At first glance, it seems to be nothing but mostly abandoned buildings of indeterminate age spread across the desert, or in the cases of certain other places, the mountains.”

“…Weird,” Nova commented. “It’s an endless plane universe then?”

Carter shook her head. “No, this is a planet. The Apollo visited a month or so ago and found that the world is actually a round planet, though due to reasons we don’t understand, from orbit it appears to have a lot more oceans than real-scale maps have, appearing more like a classic Earth. It seems that, when you land on the planet, the ‘land’ area expands exponentially, especially the deserts. This means we get day and night here, but ‘globe’ maps are impossible. And this is just the tip of the iceberg.”

“I can imagine…” Twilight said, glancing around with newfound appreciation for the world. Already, from Carter’s description, it was pretty unique.

“The Apollo was able to travel the stars, finding that distances in space are really small. It still requires an FTL drive to get anywhere in a reasonable amount of time, but other stars aren’t even full light years away, just fractions of it. Planets and stars don’t have mass-size correlation of any kind, and every planet we’ve come across has the same ‘expanding area’ effect. Mapping from orbit is impossible, and mapping from the surface is difficult because it’s tremendous, and not arranged in a perfect sphere.”

“Like it’s rendering more data,” Twilight commented.

“What?” Flutterfree asked.

“Sometimes in video games or simulations, when you approach something it becomes more detailed. It’s like that, but much more literal.”

Carter raised an eyebrow. “That’s an apt analogy. But if the world was just a spatial anomaly, we’d only have a small science team here, not an entire base complete with aircraft and military vehicles.” She pointed at a green jeep with a gun mounted on it. “Most of the others are out on patrol.”

“Red and blue humans?”

“Yes. This world is largely defined by the unending fight between Red and Blu, two entities that are ‘companies’ as far as we can tell, or used to be at some point in the past.” She rubbed her temples, groaning slightly. “Right, the past… I’ll get to that in a minute. What’s important is that there are basically Red and Blu armies facing off against each other for essentially no reason. A few have realized this and are trying to avoid fighting; for example, Scouty over there.”

A human man in a yellow shirt looked up. “Did someone call my name here?”
“Yes. Scouty, this is Charter Twilight and her team.”

“Oh, so the big honcho then?” He said, sitting back and twirling his baseball bat. “Come to visit Crosstown have you?”

“Crosstown?” Nova asked.

“It’s the nickname for our base,” Carter explained. “Officially we are the Esefem Beachhead, but try as I might I can’t get people to refer to it as that.”

“Because that’s stupid,” Scouty said, tapping his headset. “Not to mention boring, lame, jargon-y, and did I mention boring?”

Carter shook her head. “Scouty here was once a Blu mercenary, but he met us and decided he’d rather help than keep fighting the war.”

“True pointlessness,” Scouty said, hands on his hips. “I don’t think anybody knows why we’re still blowing each other up.”

Renee put a hoof to her chin. “Scouty dear, why are you wearing the exact same thing Rainbat is?”

Scouty blinked. “Oh my god, your little brains are going to explode in about fifteen seconds.”

“What?”

Carter’s lips curved up into a bemused smile. “Twilight, you know how many universes have versions of you and your friends?”

Twilight nodded. “Yeah. It’s why we change our names or get new titles.”

“In this world, there are naturally hundreds of versions of the same individual.”

Twilight raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“Look over there,” Carter pointed. Twilight saw two identical men with identical hats and glasses holding identical sniper rifles, the only differentiating feature between them being a number 2 written on the sleeves of the closer one. “Both those men are Snipers, native to this world. Duplicates.”

“Duplicates?”

Twilight cocked her head. “Is there cloning going on here?”

“In the case of the mercenaries for Red and Blu, sometimes,” Carter revealed. “There are only nine basic mercenary types to be found, though occasionally we see a few other classes mixed in with them. But as you have to know by now, there’s not just mercenaries in this world, even if that is all that seems to happen on any planet when you first look.”

“It extends to other planets…” Flutterfree shook her head. “What a cruel world…”

“What else exists?” Nova egged Carter on.

“Seemingly everything,” Carter said. “There are a large number of ponies around the world. Travel far enough and you will find Red and Blu battles fought entirely with pony versions of the mercenaries, or a mix of humans and ponies. And beyond that you sometimes find settlements where
there isn’t fighting. Versions of Ponyville. Places filled with Rainbow Dashes and Fluttershys and others. Things we’ve never seen before either – there’s a rather prevalent ‘race’ that’s essentially just restaurant animatronics that seem to be designed for killing.”

“How though? How are there so many of everyone?” Twilight asked.

“That’s one of the reasons we’re here, to figure that out,” Carter said. “Nobody knows why that is. It’s not just a universe that’s being strange with how it displays space, it’s a universe that likes to duplicate, again and again, everyone it has, when no other universe does this at all.”

“But wait, there’s more!” Pinkie said.

“Much more,” Carter said, leading them elsewhere. “You see, look at these buildings. They look old right? Worn down. But almost every building looks old and worn down, and largely abandoned. Despite the large populations of mercenaries and warriors, there’s little evidence of new construction. Many of the buildings are identical in different places, and even in locations where war isn’t happening and variations are exceptionally… odd, they look largely the same. Which leads me to one of the biggest headaches about this world… the past.”

“Time shenanigans?” Nova asked, nervously.

“Maybe? It’s different than that. Every part of the world can trace their history back for recent memory – they remember plays the enemy made, they remember where their parents took them on Sunday, they remember who’s their friend and not. But when asked about their deep past, they start giving vague details. Childhood memories are generally generic and disinterested, and they mention places like ‘Paris’ or ‘France’ or other locations that don’t seem to actually exist. Nobody can remember who built any of the buildings or why, and those who are aware of the duplications feel as if the buildings don’t change unless you physically blow a hole in them. It’s as if the past doesn’t exist – people just pop into existence and feel like where they are is normal. Though when they are questioned about it, usually they agree it doesn’t make much sense.”

“This… is actually a little terrifying,” Flutterfree said. “Think about it. False memories? A past that doesn’t exist? Endless duplication?”

“Are they being dragged from other worlds somehow?” Twilight asked.

“No,” Carter said. “We know this because we’ve met a handful of people who were dragged from other worlds.”

“Did somebody ring?” A deep, bemused voice called. “I could have sworn somebody called.”

“Who…” Nova began.

“Me!” the voice yelled, its user revealing itself to be a version of Fluttershy by dropping from the sky and nearly giving Nova a heart attack. She wore red tinted glasses that matched the color of her hat, suit, and menacing eyes. Her teeth were sharp, her wings batlike, and her ears tipped with extra fur. Two guns, black and white, pointed out of the folds of her crimson suit.

Nova stared at her blankly. “Wh-wh-wha?”

“Oh my goodness the look on your face is just priceless. You are currently shitting yourself – metaphorically, you understand – from a mixture of so many different emotions. Should I be scared of the daunting vampiric pegasus? Does she want to eat me? How in the name of all that is holy would meek little Fluttershy have a version of herself with such outrageously good looks? What the actual hell-slash-Tartarus is wrong with her voice? Is that magic coming off of her or something
much more sinister and disgusting? How many ponies has she eaten today? Can I be one of them? An-

“Alushy,” Carter said, raising an eyebrow.

“All right fine, be the buzzkill.” She threw her mane back and outstretched her hoof. “Hello there, grand exploratory ponies, I am Alushy. I am a fudgemothering vampire trying to earn good-girl points from the Colonel there so I can get off the god-forsaken rock that makes no physical sense. I’m also not from here, but from a world with a lot of blood, destruction, and thousands of adorable ponies fighting each other over religion, undead magics, and Nazism. It was an absolute delight.”

Flutterfree walked up and shook Alushy’s hoof. “It’s nice to meet you. I go by Flutterfree.”

“Thank the inconsistent heavens above, you aren’t a pussy. Do you have any idea how many of us are pussies? Like, all of them. All of them. It’s a disgrace.”

“I… Tend to agree,” Flutterfree admitted. “Though you really shouldn’t talk about them like that.”

Alushy laughed. “Do I look like a pony who listens to words like ‘should’ and ‘shouldn’t’?”

“Nope,” Renee said, raising an eyebrow.

Alushy shrugged, turning to Carter. “Anyway, I believe you needed to use me to make a point? I’m all here, splayed out and ready for the scientific monologue.”

Carter nodded. “Alushy here is one of a handful of individuals we’ve met who are from other universes and were sucked here. That makes this the only universe that seems to have a natural interdimensional component.”

“Assuming it is natural,” Twilight noted. “A lot of this does appear… Artificial.”

“Universe builders? That’s a scary thought,” Flutterfree said.

“We don’t exactly know what creates universes. It’s clear that some have existed longer than others at this point and the discrepancy can’t be explained away by simple time dilation. Something has to make them, or at least dictate when they come into existence.”

“Oh! Sounds like you’re trying to find God!” Alushy said. “Lovely idea, I’m sure that won’t backfire.”

Pinkie narrowed her eyes at Alushy. “I’m watchin’ you.”

“That’s a thing you Pinkies tend to do. I’m starting to think you all find my mane attractive or something.”

Twilight carried the conversation onward, ignoring Alushy. “So we have a universe that loves duplicates, has a unique spatial bending effect, has virtually no traceable history, and is dimensionally active? Anything else?”

“The Red and Blu armies know how to respawn,” a woman who looked exactly like Carter said, walking up to them.

Twilight glanced back and forth between them. “Wait, this universe has duplicates of you as well??”

“No,” the original Carter said, “That’s just a Spy class of some kind.”
“Make that two!” another Carter said, coming out from behind a box.

“Fudge this, I’m out,” Alushy said. “Not playing the triple-decker guess-who challenge. Here’s a hint for you five – pick door number three.”

“…What does that mean?” Nova asked.

“BR-549,” Alushy answered, turning a corner. They could hear her cackling to herself as she walked away.

Twilight had too many questions. Respawn? Spy class? What?

Renee helped her. “Oh, I see. That’s why they thought I was a spy. I take it that the Raritys here are ‘Spies’ as it were?”

The two fake Carters’ bodies shifted with a strange faint orange smoke, disappearing into two very similar ponies – Rarities in pale yellow suits, each one with a slightly menacing smirk on their faces. “I’d guess the ‘main’ Rarity would have to have a brain, hrn ma soeur?”

The other smirked. “It would seem so. Dear Renee, the Rarity of Equis Vitis, we are the Rarispy Sisters.”

“Identical in every last way.” They gracefully brushed hooves, a gesture Renee hadn’t seen before but found much more elegant than the hoofbump everypony else was so fond of.

Renee pulled her hat back a bit. “Absolutely charmed. Though calling me the ‘main’ doesn’t give the others enough credit.”

A Rarispy shrugged. “You can try to play the humble card if you want, but remember, we may be part Spy, but we are also part you.”

“We know how you think of yourself,” the other added.


Carter looked at her watch. “We have time for a demonstration. If you don’t mind substantial amount of blood.”

Renee tensed slightly. “We… should be fine.”

“Shall we ring Uni?” a Rarispy asked Carter.

Carter nodded. “Go ahead. She’ll know where to go.”

“Uni?” Nova asked as the Rarispies ran off, transforming into different ponies.

“A Twilight. She joined us as our magic expert. Shouldn’t be long…”

A couple of seconds later, a Twilight Sparkle appeared in front of them – a unicorn. “Ack! Sorry Colonel! I was staring off into-”

Carter shook her head. “Uni, you’re not in trouble, I just needed you for something. Have you met Charter Twilight?”

Uni gasped. “Why didn’t anyone tell me she was here?”
“We’ve only been here a few minutes, maybe?” Flutterfree suggested.

“Oh. Right. What can I do for you all?”

Carter leaned in. “Do you know where there’s a Red and Blu conflict happening right now?”

“Of course I do! There’s three I’m sure haven’t died down yet, and sixteen others that might still be up!”

“Have enough strength to teleport us all so we can watch?”

“Sure!” Uni said, rubbing her hooves together. Unlike Twilight, she was still a unicorn, so she had to expend a significant amount of time and energy initiating the teleport, but it wasn’t long enough for anybody to get impatient. The six ponies and Carter were teleported on top of a rusting water tower overlooking another set of buildings that were similar to the ones they had just left. The main difference was that gunfire was everywhere. They all looked down and had an easy vantage point of a set of Red mercenaries and a set of Blu mercenaries shooting at each other from across a large street. Rocket launchers, sniper rifles, flamethrowers, and other weapons filled the air with their noise.

When they were here last, around two years ago at this point, they were a bit too caught up in the danger they were in to really pay attention to the fight. Now, however, the ponies were able to watch from a relatively safe location, and they had the opportunity to see what was really happening.

Death.

One moment a bullet would fly, the next – blood. Bodies fell to the ground on both sides. Still, though, more and more mercenaries flooded out of the respective bases, ready with new weapons, hats, and copies of themselves.

Occasionally a mercenary in a white coat would come out with a special gun and heal his team, resurrecting some of them, but eventually he would fall as well.

Nova had to look away. Uni sighed. “Yeah… It’s horrible.”

“How can they keep sending people in?” Twilight asked, aghast. “They just keep falling like… like flies! Why do they keep charging? How are there this many?”

“There aren’t,” Carter said. “Look at that Scout there on the Red side. He’s following the same path the last Scout who came out did, trying to distract the Blu forces on that side.”

Flutterfree eyes widened. “It’s the same Scout?”

“And that’s what respawn is. Any mercenary involved in the conflict between Red and Blue – standard or not – will appear after ‘death’ after a short time. They seem to think this is because of cloning, but it’s just not the case. That explains some of the duplicates, not the coming back to life over and over again. We’re trying to figure out how they do it, but progress is slow.” She leaned back on the water tower. “It doesn’t help that once a mercenary leaves the Red and Blu fight, they stop respawning. And that’s why we need the large military presence at the Crosstown. Protection from those who have absolutely no reason to fear death, and think any incursion that isn’t them has to be the enemy.”

Renee watched the carnage with less horror on her face and more morbid curiosity. “This… This world is horrid in ways I can’t even begin to put into words.”
“It’s also curious and fascinating,” Uni said. “I’m from here and I know it’s weird. Once you get out of the constant battles, things range from wholesome quiet places to complete and utter random nonsense. …Like Pepsi Man. Nobody knows what’s up with him.”

“I can see why Corona said I should check this place out…” Twilight said. “I think we’re going to stay for a while, Carter, see what we can do.”

“No problem here. Most of my people would love to talk to the great Charter, so prepare to be swarmed.”

“Oh!” Uni said, blushing. “Am I swarming you? I’m sorry-“

“No, you are-“

A bullet flew past her ear, cutting off her sentence.

“Crap, a Sniper sees us,” Carter blurted.

Nova lit her horn and teleported back to their base. “There you go.”

“…That was a fast teleport…” Uni said, jaw hanging.

“I could give you some tips, but I doubt they’ll be as in-depth or as technical as you’d like.”

“I would love some tips!”

Twilight chuckled. “I think we’re going to like it while we’re here.”

They could hear Alushy whooping from somewhere in the distance. “Yeah! More fools to school!”

~~~

Nova blinked. “So, it’s not weird for you two?”

Rainbat and Scouty glanced at each other. “Not really,” Rainbat said. “We just do the same jobs. Must be weirder sharing a face, frankly.”

“I dunno how those Rarispies do it,” Scouty shivered. “Or the Snipers. Seeing my own face gives me the heeby-jeebies. Oh, and gettin’ to this place? Had to cave my own face in a couple times. That’s a traumatic experience you don’t recover from. I’m sure you’ve all probably had that a million times over though, bein’ the explorers you are.”

Flutterfree smiled sheepishly. “We’ve… only actually seen death up close a few times. We usually resolve things without lethal force.”

Nova nodded. “I don’t think any of us have actually killed anypony.”

“Corona has. During the invasion of Ardent,” Flutterfree shook her head. “It didn’t bother her as much as I thought it would…”

Rainbat nudged Scouty. “Told ya’ being nonlethal was cool.”

“Yeah yeah, you can shut your trap, bird-brain,” Scouty muttered, twirling his bat around in a circle. “Maybe you can get away with that in other worlds, but not here. Here it’s just death death and more death, and once you’ve died you get to die again. Let me tell you, dying, not a fun experience. Gets to your head after a while.”
“I can imagine,” Nova admitted.

“Course, now I can die and stay dead, so… It’s an improvement, yeah, but nothin’ good comes without pain.”

Rainbat nodded. “Same. I didn’t have to bash my own skull in though. Merely… Lots of his skulls.”

“Part of me wonders if you actually did bash my skull in back in the day…”

“You’re way too young to be using ‘back in the day’ in casual conversation.”

“And you’re too much of a… a… somethin’ to use ‘casual conversation’ in… casual conversation.” Scouty put a hand to the bridge of his nose. “My god, that was stupid.”

Alushy dropped from the ceiling, hanging from her tail like a bat. “But Scouty, that’s what you do best!”

“Holy corn salad! Alushy! I told you to stop doin’ that!”

“And I want you to keep telling me that! It feels gooood when you do.”

“Ew,” Rainbat gagged.

“Anyway, what else are you losers talking about? Me?”


“And with that you have my undivided attention.” Alushy dropped to the floor. “What kind of skulls? And how many? Oh please tell me hundreds…”

Scouty raised an eyebrow. “You already know about the skulls.”

“But I- oh you mean your skulls. But that’s nothing special, skulls are everywhere here. It’s like a kid in a candy store, too easy, too sickening. I’m talking to these two.”

“Never killed anypony,” Nova said, keeping her expression and tone deadpan.

“You do not like me do you?”

“No.”

Alushy laughed. “Nice. Could always use someone who’s technically on my side that I can push into a fight. Just a few buttons pressed here and there and mmm you’d be at my throat. It’d be interesting to say the least. Rawr.”

“I have more self control than tha-“

Flutterfree grabbed her shoulder. “Ah, Nova? I could probably do that if I wanted. Don’t give her more of a reason to, okay?”

Alushy whistled. “Oh yes, you’ve even got an overly protective guardian with you. This could work nicely.”

Flutterfree raised an eyebrow. “You know we’re not staying here that long, right?”

“I’m not stuck here permanently either. I will get out eventually, and I will haunt you forever. Ever.
Rainbat folded her arms. “Ain’t no way the Colonel’s giving you a device.”

“Sounds good to me!” Alushy laughed.

“But… I just…”

“You used a double negative,” Flutterfree deadpanned.

“Oh. Dammit Alushy!”

Alushy shrugged. “Let’s see, vampire, unholy, killed probably millions of people, probably only half of whom deserved it, two thirds if I’m being generous… Yeah I think I’m already well and truly damned. Thanks for the sentiment though!”

“Your world must have been violent,” Flutterfree said.

“You have no idea, clearly. Even this place is less bloody than where I’m from. Wait until you see me get shot, the blood will gush like a pony sized pimple.”

“Ew!” Rainbat groaned.

“Would you rather I used a euphemism? I can use a euphemism. It’ll be a glorious euphemism!”

“EWWWWW.”

“And this, ladies, is how you wage psychological warfare. Didn’t even need to come up with one.”

“What else was your world like?” Fluters asked.

“It was an Earth, except it was ponies. Undead were a serious problem, and I was the biggest badass of a vampire to ever roam the earth. I had a bit of a soft spot for ponykind though, defended them from undead threats. It made killing a lot more fun when other ponies begged you to do it. There was a lot of blood involved, a lot of death, a lot of brutally losing my own limbs, and a lot of delicious feasts. There was one thing though…”

“What?”

“There was no swearing. I went my entire, centuries long life – or unlife or whatever – without knowing what swears were! I’d find strange things like ‘heck’ or ‘dam’ or ‘crud’ to say whenever I could, but those just don’t get the job done, you know? And when I came here I realized I was speaking through a filter all this time.” She pointed at Nova. “You know what I’m talking about. It feels damn good, doesn’t it?”

“…Sometimes,” Nova admitted.

“Now, I have a question for you powerful, great explorers of the multiverse. I’ve found all the common swears I replaced, all of them, except one. I want to know, what the actual hell am I trying to say when I scream ‘fudge’ to the heavens?”

Nova glanced at Flutters. “No idea. You?”

“…The S word?” Flutterfree suggested.

“Already know shit,” Alushy said. This prompted Rainbat and Scouty to laugh. “Oh right, laugh it
up, apparently being knowledgeable in the field of fecal matter is worthy of mockery.”

“Hey, don’t you pretend for a moment you wouldn’t laugh if one of us said that,” Scouty retorted.

“I’m really good at pretending. And lying.”

Scouty threw his hands in the air. “You’re impossible.”

“Good! If I wasn’t I’d be concerned I wasn’t projecting the right image. Would consider changing hair products, even. Go from ‘pig’s blood’ to ‘blood of your enemies’.”

“It is so hard to tell when you’re joking,” Nova muttered.

“I could make you a flow chart.”

Nova facehooved.

The two Scouts got a call in their headsets. Rainbat groaned. “Looks like we got a shift on patrol.”

“Dunno why we put up with this…” Scouty muttered.

Flutterfree smiled. “It’s probably because you like it here, it’s your home, even if it is crazy.”

Scouty shrugged, dropping his hand and walking away, Rainbat flapping along behind him.

Alushy grinned, turning to the two of them. “Hey, want to see something cool?”

Nova blinked. “Er…”

“Sure,” Flutterfree said. “What is it?”

“We’ve got a cuddly bear down in the basement,” Alushy said, smiling. “I think you’d like to meet him!”

Nova raised a hoof. “When you say ‘cuddly’ do you by chance mean ‘vicious murder machine’?”

“Known me for only an hour and you’re already catching on. Oh yes.”

“You avoided the question.”

“The answer is in the basement!”

Flutterfree smiled warmly. “Let’s just go, okay?”

Alushy led them to another part of the Crosstown compound, bringing them to a set of black cellar doors. There was no lock, so it was easy for Alushy to pull the doors back. “Ladies first.”

“We’re all ladies,” Nova pointed out.

“But I sound like a man…”

“Yeah, what is that?” Flutterfree asked. “Why that voice?”

“One of the mysteries of existence. No plans on changing it, just sounds too awesome. Now move it, the bear awaits!”
Flutterfree and Nova descended the cellar stairs, half expecting Alushy to lock them in. She didn’t, she simply filed in after them. The cellar was dark, dusty, and full of barrels marked with MANN CO logos.

“I don’t see a bear,” Nova commented.

Alushy coughed. “Oh, he’s in here all right. Just give it a moment.”

Flutterfree took a step forward, swiveling her ears around, listening carefully. “Hello? Mister bear? I’m Flutterfree. Where are you?”

A voice returned her comment, echoing from all around them. “I… Am here…”

“Where?” Flutterfree asked. “It’s okay…”

There was a clank of metal, a groan – and then it jumped in front of their faces. Teeth, red eyes, metal spikes, black ‘skin’, mechanical roar. Nova screamed, lighting her horn with a reactionary laser spell. Flutterfree brushed her wing across Nova’s face to interrupt the spell. “That wasn’t very nice, mister bear.”

The large robotic bear leaned back, sitting down. He looked like a mess – both his chest and his mouth were filled with dozens of razor sharp teeth. His black ‘skin’ was just outer casing that had many holes, revealing a metallic endoskeleton inside. The ‘bear’ was a machine that maybe have looked like a bear once, but was now a razor-sharp killing machine. It stared at Flutterfree. “Your heart races.”

“Of course! You jumped out of nowhere and screamed!” Flutterfree said. “What do you expect?”

“Nothing less.” The bear walked away, back into the shadows.

Nova glared at Alushy. “What was that all about?”

“Meet Nightmare, our resident animatronic nutcase,” Alushy answered. “He likes to scare people. He also doesn’t like being shot at. So he lives down here for the most part. Chill dude, really, bit of a macabre streak though.”

“Look who’s talking…” Nova muttered, still breathing hard.

“Oho! Wow he got you good.”

“I almost zapped him!”

“Probably wouldn’t do much. I’m fairly certain he’s a fudging undead robot. I’m no engineer but there’s no way machinery that worn still works.”

Flutterfree sighed. “Usually I’d tell everyone ‘that wasn’t nice’ at this point, but I just don’t see the point with you.”

Alushy clapped her hooves. “As it should be!”

“Let’s just get out of this cellar…” Nova muttered.

~~~

Renee looked behind her at a room of seemingly ordinary individuals. She cleared her throat.
“Rainbow Dash with a limp, blond man with a mustache.”

The two individuals who were called out looked at each other, shrugged, and transformed back into
the Rarispies. “How could you tell?”

“Lack of a gun on the soldier, too sly of a look on the pony. Rainbow Dash has never ever pulled off
stylishly cunning.”

One of them raised her eyebrow. “How can you be so sure that particular Rainbow Dash couldn’t?”

“Gamble,” Renee admitted. “Paid off though, didn’t it?”

“Ah, a risk taker. Good,” the other said.

“I think I know how to get her this time…” the first mused.

Renee facehooved. “Please stop with the hiding games. Why not be yourselves?”

“Dear, this is us. We live by hiding, by sneaking, by pretending.”

“To all except each other,” the other said, slinging her counterpart into a playful hug. “We are les
soeurs. Sisters.”

“What is your story?”

“Ah, a most interesting tale…” the first one said, smirking. “You always tell it the best, you should
do it.”

The second rolled her eyes. “It’s always the exact same. So, no doubt you have seen the carnage of a
Red and Blu battle in the heat of the situation?”

Renee nodded. “It was… brutal. But at the same time, fascinating to see how people with no fear of
death act.”

“It just so happened that our defining moment was during one of those battles – we were in an all
pony scenario, and hadn’t discovered the other scenarios or anything apart from the battles yet. We
were both convinced we were clones of some original Spy from France, fighting for a large sum of
money to be given at the end of the conflict. Of course, as always, there is no money, there may not
be any conflict, and the few people that qualify as ‘superiors’ for the colored armies mean only
slightly less than nothing.

“Regardless, there we were, the two of us. We had both decided to take a risky move – disguise
ourselves as the Spy of the opposite team. This had worked beautifully for both of us before, but we
had never come across a Spy trying the same thing. Rarely do Spies miss their targets, but there are
occasional slip-ups in the assassination attempts. We faced each other and swung wildly with
reaction – gouging out each other’s stomachs at the same time, but not scoring a complete kill. We
were down, bleeding out, next to each other with nopony else around.”

“That’s where this thing called ‘bonding’ happened,” the other said.

The storyteller smirked. “That it did. We both realized we were tired of fighting, but we knew the
fight wouldn’t end. We got to know each other, talked a bit about what we were fighting for, but
agreed we couldn’t stop. At first, anyway. We respawned and leaped back into the action – but ran
into each other again in much the same manner. We couldn’t do it – couldn’t kill. And this time,
there were witnesses. So we ran. We fled the battle, resolving never to return.
“Of course then we had to deal with realizing the world wasn’t what we thought it was, but that’s a whole other story. Needless to say we wandered around, keeping our heads down, infiltrating the wars on the same side when we needed to. We eventually ended up here, and frankly it’s just magnifique, no more fear. Any of those idiot armies who attack get beaten back easily at this point. We provide assistance, they provide us with sanctuary.”

Renee smiled. “That’s a great story. I’m happy for you two – really, I am.”

The two Rarispsies performed the graceful hoof-brush again.

“I do have a question though. Why do you stay here? Why not go to a more peaceful world?”

They both smirked. “Why, Renee, we’re not just a Rarity. We’re also a Spy. Most other worlds would have… issues with the naturally deceptive and manipulative type. Not to mention we are mercenaries. Killers. Very effective ones.”

“Ah… Yes. Sometimes I forget what this world is… even after just hearing about it.”

“We take some pride in our completely off-the-wall world. I’m quite curious to see what these Tau’ri uncover about the reasons behind this mess.”

“I do have someone I could ask…” Renee put a hoof to her chin.

“Who?”

Renee blinked. “Well… Are you aware of the ‘sight’ some Pinkies seem to have?”

“Very,” the other one groaned. “They’re such a pain.”

The first raised an eyebrow. “You going to try to trick yours into revealing something? Bit of a pain, that.”

Renee smiled. “Little different than that with us, but I’ll see what I can find out.” Her ears perked up. “…Do I hear soda fizzing?”

At this remark, the Rarispsies ducked for cover.

“…What?”

The door to the room they were in was kicked down, revealing the towering, muscular Pepsi Man, Pinkie riding his back. “PEPSI MAAAAAAN!” Pinkie sung.

Pepsi Man pointed at Renee, and suddenly there was a can of Pepsi in her hoof. Pepsi man saluted her, and ran for the doorway, tripping on the door he had just bashed in. He hit the ground, tossing Pinkie to his side. The party pony laughed harder than she had in some time.

Renee glanced at the can in her hoof. “…What?”

The Rarispsies came back out. “Oh good, nothing exploded. Things tend to explode when he’s around.”

Renee glanced at Pepsi Man as he slowly stood up, rubbing his head. “…What are you?”

He shrugged, summoning a can and tossing it to Pinkie. She popped the tab and drank it down. “I prefer Coke, but still good!” His fist met her hoof in a celebration.
Renee looked at the Rarispies.

“Nobody knows. He’s got super speed, strength, and an ability to summon unlimited amounts of Pepsi. He’s also a bit clumsy. That’s all we know.”

The other shrugged. “He’s nice, helpful, and defends the Crosstown with everyone else.”

Renee blinked. She decided she might as well see what the drink was like. She popped the tab – and the soda sprayed in the face of all three Rarities. Renee sighed, wringing out her hat. It tasted fine, but the flavor wasn’t worth a face full of sugar.

Pinkie giggled.

“You were waiting for that,” Renee commented.

“Yes! I was! The looks on your faces were great!”

Renee rolled her eyes. “Hey, got a question for you.“

“Eh, I’m in a good mood today.” She reclined against Pepsi Man. “So, what secrets of the universe bother you today?”

Renee frowned. “…Why? Why are they fighting?”

“Couple reasons,” Pinkie said. “There were two silly, silly men who didn’t know how to share worthless land, hired nine mercenaries, started a clone war and went to the absolute maximum with it. Thus, the eternal war began. …In a different world.”

Renee blinked. “How’d it start here?”

Pinkie shrugged. “No idea. I can guess – maybe this universe dragged the elements from another universe? Maybe it just knew? Maybe somebody with a sick mind did this?” She shrugged. “Possibly a mixture of all the above. I just dunno. I also don’t think we’re supposed to find out.”

The Rarispies glanced from Pinkie to Rarity. “I have never heard one of your kind talk that openly before,” one pointed out.

Pinkie shrugged. “Hey, as the Pinkie leading the charge into everything, I get to be a little different. By the way, you two are adorable. Never take each other for granted, mmk?”

“Never,” the other said, smiling.

Pinkie winked. “Good on you then!” she leaped back onto Pepsi Man. “Let’s sneak up on Alushy! Go!” Pepsi Man ran out of the building, into the distance.

A Rarispy glanced at her sister. “That will end in tears.”

“Can Pepsi Man even cry?” the other wondered.

“We shall find out soon.”

Renee shook her head. “This place is bizarre.”

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Twilight walked with Uni into her lab. Twilight grinned at the computers, the corkboards covered in
papers and string, the magical crystals set into nice organized patterns, the notebooks filled with scribbles… it was *inspiring* to see.

Uni smiled. “I see you like it.”

“Like it? I love it! Reminds me what my lab looks like when Spike’s busy, actually.”

“…Spike? – Oh! The little dragon.”

Twilight’s smile vanished. “Oh… You never had a Spike?”

Uni shook her head. “Nope.”

“Well, what was your life like then?”

“My past? …Very vague, and probably not real. I liked books, books, books, and lived in a library. Then I really *did* exist, and *found* a library to live in. I never felt the need to take the role of Sniper like the world wanted me too. I pawned off my gun to a Fluttershy. She’s actually here, now. Brought another Twilight Sniper in. We call them Twiper and Snipershy. Good friends.”

“Must be weird, knowing your early memories are fake.”

“It is, but not really?” Uni said. “I mean, it’s scary sometimes, but it means I can be my own person without being defined by childhood experiences. I turned down what it tried to give me, became my own thing. I lived in one of the peaceful pony settlements for the longest time. Then there were robot versions of the mercenaries that put *that* little dream in the dirt…” her emotions caught up with what she was saying, tearing her smile down. “…I had some good friends there.”

“Did any of them survive?”

“I don’t know. The world’s a bit too large to go hunting for them now… I just have to hope some of them made it.” She forced a smile. “But that’s in the far past. I worked as a ‘freelance magitechnician’ after that for whoever wanted me. Either team, any third party. Never enjoyed it, but I vowed never to settle down again. Until I came here – a sort of in-between option.”

Twilight smiled. “It would be fitting if a pony who didn’t accept what the world gave her would be the one to figure out *why* it wanted to give her a role in the first place.”

“Something I’ve been working on constantly for months. It’s a big, huge, *tremendous* mystery. We still have no idea. We brought Starbeat in – you know her – and she told us that the Beat was *high* here, but not acting unusually. She did suspect that at the moment a new person is ‘created’ there might be a spike in Beat activity similar to the *click*, but we’ve never *seen* anyone come into existence. It’s just like they’re *there*. Respawn has no surge in the Beat, and the events we like to call ‘complete randomness’ are the only ones that do.”

“Complete randomness?”

“There are pockets that don’t follow rules,” Uni said. “A pony head grows to the size of a moon and demands that everyone worship it, but they defeat it with cheese, farts, and sometimes other unseemly actions. Starbeat left behind a notebook full of notes on how the Beat behaved in *those* situations – apparently a lot more complicated than her *clicks*, stronger at times, but less common and often more subtle. It… confused me, but she assured me it had nothing to do with the *rest* of the world’s weirdness.”

“Just another thing tacked on…” Twilight mused. “What if all the oddness has separate reasons
behind it?"

“Definitely,” Uni said. “My theories are that the spatial distortion is just a natural part of this
universe’s physics, the respawn is something the Red and Blu corporations do themselves somehow,
and… Well I don’t have anything concrete for the false past and duplicates. Pretty sure they’re
related though.”

Twilight flipped through a notebook. “Did you think it looked almost designed?”

“Yeah, I did think that. But come on, it couldn’t be possible to craft an entire universe, right? You’ve
never seen anything that comes even close to that kind of power, have you?”

Twilight shook her head. “Discord and the Ascended are at the top of the list right now. I’m not sure
on a power rating for the Stars or the ‘Goddess’, but I can tell they don’t have anywhere near the
ability to mess with a whole universe. If all the Stars worked together, maybe.” She looked up from
the notebook. “…They used to have a society.”

“Hrm?”

“The Stars used to have a multiversal society. It… Well they stopped being a society, not exactly
sure what happened. But they told Starlight to beware the Starcross. If there is something that can face a
society of Stars…” she bit her lip.

“So… What, this ‘Starcross’ might be responsible for this? Why?”

“I don’t know. Why would you make a universe like this?”

Uni frowned. “You’re evil, you have power, and you’re bored, so you want to watch a game?”

“I…” Twilight pondered this. “Actually, we met a cube once that did nothing but play games. Didn’t
have the capability to do this, but the idea was similar. Of course, you’re not just mindless pawn
constructs.”

“I sure hope not,” Uni said, checking a computer screen. “You know, if this universe was designed, I
think it failed to do what it was supposed to do. Became something… unintended.”

“You might be onto something there.”

“Maybe… But I need to find a way to quantify everything, and that’s not working. So I keep
working with everyone here, and we try to uncover the powers behind these secrets. Mostly
respawn. That would be… so useful.”

“It’d save so many lives. Change society forever.”

Uni nodded. “Here’s to hoping we figure it out!”

“Yeah! I-“

An alarm started blaring.

Twilight looked around. “…Should we be worried?”

Uni shook her head. “That’s the perimeter alarm. Means we’re engaging an enemy at the edge of
Crosstown. Probably a team of mercenaries. They’ll be turned away quickly.”

The alarm started blaring louder.
Uni’s ears folded back onto her head. “Now we worry. Something’s broken the perimeter.”

“…That was fast.”

“Very fast,” Uni said.

Twilight teleported them to the command building. Carter was on a headset, yelling into it. “What’s happening out there!? Come on!”

They could hear a voice coming through the speaker – a man, choking on his own blood. “Ponies… Not mercenaries… Crazy… Sorry, sir…”

The line went silent.

Carter slammed the headset into the ground. She grabbed a microphone. “Everyone, we’ve got incoming! Prepare to engage an enemy – non-mercenary ponies of unknown potential! High threat assessment! Defend this base!”

Twilight flared her wings and lit her horn. “I’m ready.”

Carter readied her Zat gun. “I doubt they’ll make it here, or even want us, but we’ll be ready for them.” She pointed to some men in the room. “Guard the exits.”

“I’m going out,” Twilight said.

“Don’t, we need you alive more than anypony else,” Carter said – though it sounded like an order. “Use your magic from here, like the sniper class other Twilights find themselves in so often. That’s what I’m doing.” She approached a window, looking out. “I doubt they’ll get within our sight range though. Too much between us and them.”

They heard a scream fill the air from the distance.

“…That’s way too loud,” Carter noted.

Uni dragged some sound-blocking headphones out of an emergency crate. “We can use these, if we need to. But I don’t think everyone’s going to have some…”

“Not sure it’ll help. Some noises are loud enough to just move you.”

“Great,” Twilight muttered. “…Still think they can handle it?”

Carter nodded. “We’ve got the best of the best here from several different worlds. They won’t win.”

Twilight found herself wondering how many of theirs could fall and still let the fight be considered a ‘win.’ It was probably a high number…

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Rainbat and Scouty peered over the edge of their barricade of sandbags nervously. The alarms blared, constantly reminding them that they were under attack and that the first perimeter had been breached.

They knew full well they were at the second perimeter. They were praying that whatever was attacking wasn’t coming from their side. A pony and a man with bats and simple guns probably couldn’t face whatever broke through the first line of defense in only a couple of seconds.
A couple of seconds. Even magic teleport spammers could usually be caught…

Flutterfree put her hooves up on the barricade as well. “What are we doing?”

Rainbat gasped. “Flutterfree? What are you doing here?”

“Looking for somepony to tell us what’s going on,” Nova said, looking over the barricade as well. “Under attack?”

“Yes,” Scouty said, aiming his gun at nothing. “Nothing breaks through the outer perimeter. Something just did.”

Nova lit her horn. “Good thing I’m here then.”

Flutterfree blinked. “I probably shouldn’t be here… Anywhere safe?”

“As deep inside Crosstown as you can get,” Scouty said. “You better-“

A jar of medical healing pills flew through the air. Scouty caught it rather than letting it hit him in the head. “…What in the world?”

“PILLS…”

Flutters’ ears perked up. “What was that?”

“Somebody talking,” Nova said, trying to find the source of the voice. She did, but only because the source was no longer trying to be stealthy.

“PILLS!” a version of Applejack screamed. Unlike the other versions Nova had seen here, this one was very far removed from her ‘base’ self – matte black hair, pale peach skin, and psychotic green eyes. Her appearance was too sudden to react to. She grabbed the pills from Scouty and punched him across the jaw in the process. He fell to the ground, grunting.

The Applejack popped the top off the pills and began to feast on them disturbingly, paying no mind to the ponies around her.

Nova blinked. “…Yeah, there’s no way this pony is what caused the break in.”

Flutterfree pointed her wing in the air. “She’s a distraction!”

Nova looked into the air just in time to see a Derpy flying through the air – a Derpy with a gatling gun instead of a right front leg. She was aiming right at them.

Nova barely raised the magical shield in time, deflecting all the bullets. Rainbat ducked out from under the shield just long enough to toss a baseball through the air, hitting the Derpy square in the head. She plummeted like a dead bird to the ground, landing on a nearby crate with a thud.

“Ow…” The Derpy muttered, shaking her head.

Scouty rubbed his skull. “Was that a distraction too? Or are we just amazing?”

Nova furrowed her brow. “I don’t know… These two don’t seem that threatening, compared to the mercenaries…”

“That’s because they’re being idiots,” a synthetic, but nonetheless familiar voice said. With an ominous thud a Rainbow Dash landed on the ground before them, her entire body covered in a
metallic sheen. Her ears were two black spikes of metal, and with a flick of her front leg the limb turned into a gun. “I, on the other hand, won’t be. Cause I’m Rainbine.”

Rainbat hit another baseball at the robotic Rainbow Dash. The ball bounced right off with a resounding clang. Rainbat blinked. “Er… Heheh…”

Rainbine pointed her gun at Rainbat. “And like that you’re dead.”

Scouty rushed her, bringing his bat down on her wings, also to no effect. As a reward for his efforts, he got the explosive bullet instead of Rainbat. The explosion wasn’t a dead-ringer on Scouty, but blood flew from his midsection and he collapsed.

“Scouty!” Flutterfree yelled, running to him.

“Oh boy, look at the other one,” Rainbine said, aiming her gun at Flutterfree. “Nighty night!”

Nova shot Rainbine with a magic laser, a move which did have some effect. She grabbed Rainbine in her telekinesis and rammed her to the ground as hard as she could manage. “You don’t get to do that, machine.”

Rainbine grunted. “You’re… Pretty good with that magic…”

“You have no idea.” She pushed down harder. “I wonder how long it’ll take for you to give up.”

“Never!” Rainbine struggled, putting her hooves beneath her and pushing up. She slowly rose to an upright position. “See? I can-“

Nova twitched her head, pushing Rainbine back to the ground. “I’m not using anywhere near my full power.”

It was at this moment the Applejack decided she was done devouring pills. She bucked Nova across the face, making her lose concentration on Rainbine. Rainbine may have been a bit of a knucklehead, but she knew when to take an opportunity. She pinned Nova to the ground, gun pointed at her neck.

“Nice going Applepills! You did something useful!” Rainbine laughed. She prodded Nova. “You turned your back on the enemy!”

“So did you,” Rainbat muttered, barreling into the robot from the side at high speed. Rainbine took the charge and didn’t budge.

Rainbine rolled her eyes. “All that accomplished was a headache for you.”

Nova teleported herself out of Rainbine’s grasp, appearing on the roof of a nearby building. She lit her horn again – teleporting Rainbat, Scouty, and Flutterfree away. She stood alone against the crazy ponies.

Applepills cocked her head. “Did… You just teleport away your help?”

“They were just putting themselves in danger,” Nova said, pulling the drone out of her saddlebags and activating it. “I also don’t think I need them to take you on.”

The Derpy decided now was the time to fire, unleashing a stream of bullets at Starlight. The drone was able to catch them all.

Nova smirked. “Nice try. So, You’re Rainbine, you’re Applepills, and you…”
“Derpigun,” Derpigun said, aiming her gun again. “And I’ll mow you down eventually.”

“No, you won’t.” Nova said. She cast a lightning bolt spell, hitting Derpigun’s gun. Part of it exploded, tossing her to the side. With a quick spell, she tossed Applepills into the same pile. “Those two weren’t a threat.”

Rainbine grinned. “You can tell I am though.”

Nova nodded. “But you don’t know who I am.”

“You’re Starlight,” Rainbine said.

Nova smirked. “I’m Nova. I’m hardly your normal Starlight. You see, I’m not from this world.”

Rainbine raised an eyebrow. “So Brutalight was right…”

“Hrm? Who was right about what?”

“Nevermind. Maybe if you beat me I’ll tell you!”

Nova grinned. “Gladly.” She grabbed Rainbine in telekinesis again and pushed her into the ground. “Dangerous as you are, you won’t be able to get up without any help.”

Rainbine managed to shift her gun so it pointed at Nova, firing. The drone caught the bullet.

“Hey! That’s not fair! You have help!”

“I invented this thing myself. I have a right to use it.” Nova shrugged. “Though I doubt you ever play fair.”

Rainbine tried to stand up – and was pushed into the ground harder. She sunk into the sandy dirt about two inches at one point. “Are you ever going to run out of magic?!?”

“Doubt it,” Nova said. “Magic’s strong here and I’m still not crushing you with all my might.”

“Mmmf.”

“So, I think you’ve lost, care to enlighten me about what you were talking about earlier?”

Rainbine started roaring at the top of her lungs.

Nova glanced around, trying to see if she was calling for help from anywhere – but no ponies appeared. She could hear gunfire in the distance, possibly from another intrusion point, probably some more dangerous ponies that could break through an outer perimeter easily. She turned back to her opponent. “What are you doing?”

She just kept roaring.

“Are you upset you lost? Really? I mea-“

Rainbine’s ‘coat’ transformed into a brilliant white, while her ‘mane’ stood upright and became more vibrant. Power surged off of her like she was a magic battery.

Nova’s eye twitched at the trick. She pushed down harder – hard enough for her horn to gain a two layered magical aura. Rainbine stood strong, smirking. Nova went all the way to three-layer telekinesis before giving up.
“Nice trick,” Nova admitted.

“Thanks. I like to call it ‘super-mode’. It’s awesome.”

Nova went for something more direct, blasting Rainbine with a powerful magic laser. Rainbine *deflected* the burst of energy with a swipe of her hoof.

Rainbine moved absurdly quickly, flanking behind Nova and hitting her off the roof like *she* were some baseball and Rainbine’s gun was the bat. Nova struggled to stand up – but once again Rainbine had her pinned, gun to the unicorn’s neck. “Any last words, *Nova*?”

“Yeah. *Boo*.”

Rainbine blinked. “…What?”

The undead robot bear that was the Nightmare *plowed* through Rainbine, Flutterfree riding his back. His *screeching* drove fear into Nova once again, but at least he was here to *save* them this rather than scare them *A few* human soldiers revealed their positions around Rainbine, pointing their guns at her.

Nightmare pointed a claw. “*Machine versus machine, surrounded.*”

Rainbine smirked. “You know what? This might actually be fun!”

Nova lit her horn. “You bet it’ll be fun. Not for you though.”

Rainbine flew into the air, firing in several directions at once, knocking the human soldiers to the side with ease. “You were saying?”

Nova fired a laser that Rainbine dodged easily, only for the Nightmare to latch onto her legs and drag her to the ground. He drove a claw into her side, puncturing the mechanical skin, drawing oil rather than blood.

Rainbine yelled out in pain, bucking Nightmare with a force far higher than that of any earth pony. His metallic chest dented and he fell onto his back. Rainbine readied her gun, but a magical explosion from Nova drove her back.

Rainbine landed, holding her wounded side. “You’re all *dead.*”

“I doubt it,” Nova responded. “Seems like you’re on the defensive.”

Rainbine pointed her gun. “We’ll see about that.”

~~~

Pinkie rode Pepsi Man into battle. “CHAAAAAAAARGE!” He moved more than fast enough to get to a front in a matter of seconds. They were graced with the sight of a Rarity with bright pink hair, a gauntlet on her hoof, and a small hat to the side of her horn. She decapitated an Applejack Engineer, taking the hard hat for herself.

This is when Pepsi Man smashed a can of Pepsi in the Rarity’s face, the force of the impact knocking her onto her back. “What in the…?” She said in a soft, almost inaudible voice.

Pinkie took a giant frying pan out of her mane. “Hey Rarifruit! I’m Pinkie Pie. I’ve got a frying pan and I’m pretty sure it’s got your name on it! Whaddo you say we experiment and see if you’ve got this frying pan’s name on your face?”
“Celestia, you’re one of those shits,” Rarifruit muttered. She glanced around. “Pinkis I could really use you right about now-“

The frying pan made contact with Rarifruit’s face, letting out a *clang* that signified the perfect match of head and cookware. Pinkie giggled. “Oh, I’m sure Pinkis will be around eventually. But you know we have to start with a curb-stomp!”

Rarifruit narrowed her eyes. She lifted her gauntlet and ripped the frying pan from Pinkie’s hooves. “Your turn.”

Pepsi Man kicked the frying pan out of Rarifruit’s grasp. He pointed his hands forward, unleashing a jet of Pepsi powerful enough to sweep her like an ocean wave. “…I feel violated.”

“Oh no, don’t say that!” Pinkie said. “Pepsi Man’s a bro!”

Rarifruit summoned two giant, magical claws and grabbed Pepsi Man. “I will tear you apart!”

“…You’re yelling, but you’re still strangely quiet,” Pinkie observed.

“Shut the hell up.” She tried to move her claws apart and rip Pepsi Man in half, but his strength was too much. He just broke out and threw another can into Rarifruit’s face. He then tripped on a rock and fell face-first into the ground.

Pinkie facehooved. “Of course.” She produced a squeaky hammer. “So, Rarifruit, want to stop killing people?”

“What? No!”

“Yeah, thought so.” She swung her hammer, but Rarifruit caught it in her magic claws. Pinkie appeared behind Rarifruit and threw a fish net over her, tangling up her legs.

“I got a Raritrout! Woo!”

“I’m the only one who gets to catch the Raritrout…” A new, deeper, louder voice said.

“Ah, Pinkis,” Pinkie said, not bothering to turn around, instead deflecting one of Rarifruit’s claws with a pink broom. “I was wondering when you’d show up.”

“You’re… One of them. The odd ones. The ones that know things they shouldn’t.”

Pinkie gasped, turning around. “And you don’t?”

Pinkis – a dark reddish-pink version of Pinkie Pie with a flattened mane – scowled at Pinkie. “No. I happen to be a respectable pony and not a stupid, *fucking* enigmatic bitch!”

Pinkie whistled. “Don’t let Alushy hear that one! It’ll ruin the joke.”

“What joke?”

“Fudgemothering vampire.”

“Screw it,” Pinkis muttered, charging Pinkie. Pinkie simply appeared behind her, bopping her on the head with a squeaky hammer. Pinkis appeared behind *her*, biting down on Pinkie’s ear. She tried to bite it clean off, but only managed to draw some blood.

Pinkie reacted by putting on her Bomb Mask and *exploding*. Pinkis, unsurprisingly, failed to see this
coming and was launched into the air, landing on top of Rarifruit. Pinkie bowed. “I bet everyone was wondering when that would make a comeback!”

Pinkis rushed Pinkie, driving her hoof right into the party pony’s chest. Pinkie yelped, flying high into the air – right into one of Rarifruit’s claws. She wormed her way out like a rubber snake, but Pinkis was ready for that. Glowing with an intense red energy, she grabbed Pinkie in midair and tossed her into a wall hard enough to kill a pony.

Pinkie bounced back from her flattened state and shook her head. “Okay, ow.”

Pinkis twitched. “I hate your kind. You make me get creative.”

“Why don’t you like using your abilities? I’ve hardly seen you jump around or pull things out of nowhere at all!”

“None of your goddammed business!” Pinkis yelled. Still charged with red energy, she punched toward Pinkie again. Pinkie dodged, but Pinkis was expecting this, twisting a hoof behind her to knock Pinkie to the ground. She placed a hoof on Pinkie’s neck. “Did you know that the meat of Pinkies tastes like cotton candy?”

“Yeah.”

“Screw you.” Pinkis opened her mouth, aiming for Pinkie’s neck. Pepsi Man stood up to help, but a magic hand came out of nowhere and pinned him to the ground.

Rarifruit walked up alongside Pinkis, smiling. This gave the evil pink pony pause. “Wait, weren’t you in the net?”

“Surprise,” Rarifruit said, stabbing Pinkis in the neck.

Pinkis recoiled, her red energy healing the wound quickly. “What the hell?” She glanced at the net – only to see a Rarifruit inside.

The other Rarifruit shrugged, revealing herself to be a Rarispy. “Not as lethal as I was hoping, but still satisfying.”

Rarifruit groaned from under the net. “Pinkis, what are you waiting for? Eat her!”

Pinkis charged the Rarispy, only for a blue magic shield to protect the unicorn. Renee adjusted her hat and smirked as she walked onto the scene. “I’m afraid we can’t have cannibalism here, that just wouldn’t be proper.”

Pinkis appeared next to Rarifruit in her net. She bit through the ropes, freeing Rarifruit. She was hit by a bullet from somewhere nearby, but the red power healed it right away.

The Rarispy frowned. “Ubercharge. Nothing we do is going to hurt her.”

“And she’s a Pinkie,” Renee said. “Trapping her isn’t going to work.”

Pinkie produced her real warhammer. “I can take her.”

Pinkis appeared behind her. “Think so?”

Pinkie appeared behind her, grinning. “Yep!”

Pinkis appeared behind her, again.
Pinkie did the same. “I think we’re in a feedback loop.”

Pinkis just tackled Pinkie to the ground, but instead of a successful pin the two tumbled around as a pink ball of fluff.

Rarifruit pointed at Renee’s hat. “Mine.”

“Dear, no. This is what makes me Renee rather than just some Rarity.”

Rarifruit summoned her hands and lunged for the hat, but Renee raised numerous magic shields to protect herself. Rarifruit blinked. “What? Rarities never learn combat magic!”

“I’ve had two years of danger to make me learn,” Renee said, retaliating with a laser. “I may not be powerful, but I can keep a lot of spells going at once.” A handful of magic shields orbited her body, and her horn kept firing lasers at Rarifruit. Some made contact, pushing the greedy Rarity back.

The Rarispy fired her gun, hitting Rarifruit in the back leg. Rarifruit softly wailed, falling to the ground, glaring at the blood like it somehow insulted her. Another gun was fired from an unknown location, hitting her other back leg.

“Where’s the other one!?” Rarifruit yelled in her strangely quiet voice.

“Ma soeur’s not going to reveal her location to you.”

Pinkie and Pinkis tumbled back into the fight, landing on Rarifruit – driving even more pain into her wounds. Pepsi Man finally managed to get back up, dousing Pinkis in a torrent of Pepsi, forcing it down her ravenous mouth. She couldn’t get out of the torrent of soft drink.

“This IS STUPID!” She yelled, trying to move forward, but instead just falling back with the torrent of soda.

Pinkie giggled. “Yeah it is!” She brought the warhammer down on Pinkis, flattening her. She got back up with her Ubercharge, grunting.

Then the other Rarispy showed up and drove a small sword through Pinkis’ skull. Her eyes rolled back into her head and she slumped onto the ground.

Renee blinked. “Is she…?”

“No,” both Rarispies and Pinkie said. Already the wound was healing.

“No,” both Rarispies and Pinkie said. Already the wound was healing.

“Ah.” Renee let out a sigh of relief. “How are we going to deal with her then?”

Pinkie tapped her hooves together. “I suggest we-“ Her eyes widened suddenly. She acted as quickly as she could – slapping a pair of sound blocking headphones on herself and pressing the skulls of Renee and a Rarispy together, blocking all sound she could manage.

A Fluttershy with a red mane, white tail, and red striped top hat dropped from the sky. Her red and blue eyes focused on all of them. She took a breath – and shouted. Pinkie, Renee, and one Rarispy was fine. Pepsi Man didn’t have ears. But the other Rarispy…

The other Rarispy dropped her weapon. Blood shot out of her ears and her eyes rolled into the back of her skull. The blood in the air vibrated with the frequency of an intense sound the ponies could feel shifting around inside their own bodies.

“SOEUR!” Rarispy – the only Rarispy – yelled out, a cry unheard over the vocal assault.
Pepsi Man charged the Fluttershy, but she directed her voice directly at him. She may not have been able to blow his brains out with her sound, but her voice was powerful enough to knock him down. She turned to the three living ponies and Stared at them.

“Running time!” Pinkie said, dragging Renee and Rarispy away by their heads. She knew they were being pursued.

Pinkie hoped there was a sniper somewhere to take the Fluttershy out. Otherwise Pinkie was pretty sure they were doomed. All it took was one scream…

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Carter looked on in horror at what was happening. She couldn’t see much, but her security cameras showed her Pinkie fleeing, somehow dragging Renee and a Rarispy with her, their heads pressed together. A Fluttershy was chasing them. She had seen a version of Pinkie eat a man earlier, a gray pegasus with a gun mow others down, and… And so far the only hint of success was a brief report that Nova had subdued two of the intruders and was working on a third. She’d heard nothing after that.

“Alternate versions of us…” Twilight said, glancing out the window.

Uni shivered. “Unlike any we’ve seen before.” She saw an alicorn version of Twilight appear on a screen, stab a half-dozen humans with swords, and teleport away.

Carter turned to Twilight. “Charter, make sure the Mirror Portal is closed. I don’t know what they want, but we can’t chance them leaving the universe.”

Twilight nodded. “I’m coming too!” Uni said. Without a word, Twilight teleported the two of them to the Mirror Portal’s location. The shimmering wooden plank indicated it was open. With a quick spell, Twilight reached for the controls on the other side, setting them to another location.

She pulled out her dimensional device. “Anyone who comes here, we evacuate.”

Uni nodded. “What about the… enemies?”

Twilight glared. “We stop them.”

“Right. We will stop them! With you on our side, there’s no way we can-“

A green sword impaled Uni in the chest. Twilight was already readying the dimensional device to throw her to Equestria, where Uni could get advanced medical treatment, but the unicorn’s entire body turned brown, losing all its fleshy appearance, becoming a lifeless solid. She tipped over like a statue, eyes lifeless.

The green sword vanished. An alicorn strode into the room, sneering. Her coat was a darker purple than Twilight’s, her mane a bluer shade with streaks of deep crimson in it rather than pink. She pointed at Twilight. “I take it you’re the Charter. I’m Brutalight Sparc-.”

Twilight flared her wings and stood tall. She decided there was no need for talking, jumping right to a magical laser directed at Brutalight’s face. She deflected it with a magic shield of her own - but Twilight was expecting this, creating a small magical explosion right beneath the dark alicorn. While Brutalight was in the air, struggling to gain control of her momentum, Twilight created a complex structure of magical rings beneath the dark alicorn. Spires of magic shot from the ground, chaining her wings, hooves, and horn to the ground.
Twilight stepped forward, and completed the magic seal on Brutalight. She placed a hoof on Brutalight’s head. “Why are you here?”

Brutalight started laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“Oh, nothing really. Just that you think you’ve won.” A glowing sword appeared and cut right through the chain on Brutalight’s horn, freeing it. “See, not all my abilities are purely magic. Unlike yours.” With a flash of her horrendous magic, she was free. She fired her own laser at Twilight. Twilight met it with her purple laser, both providing equal magical power in their spells.

Unfortunately Twilight didn’t also have fancy swords. She had to dodge an incoming blade, but that dodge allowed Brutalight’s power to overwhelm her. Twilight soon found herself chained to the ground, her magic sealed. She glared right at Brutalight, unfaltering.

Brutalight grabbed the dimensional device. “I’ll be taking this.”

“We could have just taken you out of universe if that’s what you wanted!” Twilight shouted. “You didn’t need to do this killing!”

Brutalight looked at the deceased form of Uni. “Oh, you liked her did you? Shame. Grow up, ponies die.”

“Not where I’m from.”

“I know that, Charter. I’m not from this world either.”

Twilight blinked. “You aren’t?”

“Oh no, I came from a nice peaceful Equestria. Course, I was a unicorn. Then I was here. And boy was here good fun. But it wasn’t home.” She levitated the dimensional device and smirked. “The thing is, we couldn’t have asked to leave. Because you’d ask why or tell us where to go. But we want to make our rampage mean something. We want to return home – and then, after taking care of that world, move on to the next. And the next. And the next. The Elements of Insanity will finally carry some weight beyond the confines of this bizarre, senseless world…”

The dimensional device exploded.

“Oh, look what you did,” Alushy said, revealing her position at the window, a smoking gun pointed right at where the dimensional device had been a moment ago. “You just gave me a reason to care. I really must thank you for that; I’ve had a horrible case of bloodlust apathy lately. Unfortunately, this is quite possibly the worst thing that could happen to you–”

Brutalight blew Alushy’s head off, sending blood everywhere, spraying like a fountain that had been under pressure. “I am not in the mood for that.”

Twilight whimpered audibly – enough for Brutalight to smile again. “Well well well… It seems I’m going to have to go with plan B. There may be another device somewhere in this place, but I don’t think I have the time to look for one. But you… You are the Charter. Quite possibly the top of the top when it comes to other worlds. You’ll know how to open a portal without one.”

Twilight said nothing.

“I’m ri…r…r…r…r…r…r…r…r…” She lit her horn, lifting Twilight up, turning the magical seal into a portable one,
converting the ground-based chains into ones that wrapped around Twilight’s entire body. “And you’re going to tell me.”

“No.”

“Oh, it’ll only be a matter of time—”

There was a click and Brutalight felt a gun pressed into the back of her head.

“You know, when a bitch blows my head off, I choose to listen to the age-old golden rule. Since getting your head blown off is quite exhilarating, I simply have to return the favor.” Alushy pulled the trigger – and her gun jammed. “…What the-“

Brutalight fired a magical laser at Alushy, which she just took. Gallons of blood sprayed everywhere, far more than Alushy should have had in her tiny body. An entire leg was burnt off, but was slowly being reconstructed by a shadowy essence as Brutalight stared at it. “How did you survive??!” the alicorn demanded.

“Special kind of otherworld vampire,” Alushy said. She dodged an incoming sword. “Woah, calm your noggin point! I’m not in the mood to experiment with my immortality today. Perhaps later, once you’ve gotten to know me, we can see what one of those stabby things can do.”

Alushy fired a few rounds at Brutalight only for the bullets to disintegrate the moment they got within an inch of her. Brutalight sneered. “You’re interesting, but you can’t do anything to me.”

Alushy sighed. “Ponies usually stop or deflect the bullets, not destroy them. It’s like you’re grinding up my babies.” She cracked her neck, adjusted her hat, and pushed her glasses further up her nose.

“Time for some complete bullshit attack from me. Level one, of course.”

“…Level one?”

Alushy grinned, revealing many menacing rows of teeth that were far, far too sharp. “Ah, there it is. The first hint of worry.” Her dark essence began to swirl around her, dozens of red eyes appearing within the choking, black mist. Blades began to form from the dark power, reaching for Brutalight.

Brutalight teleported herself and Twilight away.

Alushy dropped the shadow powers and blinked. “…Well fudge.”

~~~

Brutalight appeared over the fleeing Pinkie, not paying her any mind. “Fluttershout, it’s time to fall back. I’ve got what we need and they’re starting to regroup.”

Fluttershout looked up at Brutalight, stopping the chase without so much as a grunt. “Rarifruit’s down, and last I saw Pinkis she was having problems.”

“We’ll get them.” Brutalight teleported Fluttershout back to the base. She then dragged Twilight to another location, where Pinkis was trying to keep Rarifruit from bleeding out.

“We’re falling back,” Brutalight called. “Is Rarifruit going to be fine?”

“She needs fucking medical attention!” Pinkis shouted.

“I’ll teleport you to the base’s infirmary,” Brutalight said, doing just that. She then moved to Applepills, Derpigun, and Rainbine – who had clearly lost. Derpigun and Applepills were out cold
in a pile, and Rainbine was being beaten by a Starlight, a nightmarish black bear, and a few loose humans and mercenaries who had shown up to assist.

Brutalight facehooved. “Falling back!” She yelled, teleporting the three of them away.

“Nova!” Twilight yelled from her imprisoned state.

Nova pulled back her horn and unleashed a torrent of dark, powerful magics at Brutalight. The dark alicorn simply teleported away.

They were no longer in Crosstown. Twilight didn’t know where they were, besides the fact that it was made of stone and very damp. Brutalight tossed the imprisoned Charter into a corner and created iron bars around her.

Brutalight glared at Twilight. “I’m going to go check on my friends now. You be a good girl and realize you can’t escape. By the time I’m back, I expect you to tell me everything you know about opening portals. Understand?”

Twilight didn’t dignify this with a response.

Brutalight grinned. “Oh good, I haven’t had a reason to torture anypony in a while. This’ll be fun.” In a puff of red magic, she was gone.

Twilight was alone.

She had no magic and was tied up by powerful chains. She could hardly move, much less think of a way to escape.

She was going to have to wait for a rescue. The only problem? They probably didn’t know where she was. She didn’t know where she was. She could have been anywhere on the planet!

…But she had hope in her friends. They wouldn’t leave her here.

She just wished they’d hurry.

~~~

Pinkie kicked down the door to the command building, deposited Renee and Rarispy on the ground, then passed out on the floor.

Carter looked at Renee. “What happened?”

Renee held Rarispy close. “We lost. The only reason we’re still alive is because they fell back. That Fluttershout would have found a way to scream in our ears eventually, and we’d be… We’d be…”

Carter took one look at Rarispy’s expression and the absence of her sister and put two and two together. She leaned down and looked Rarispy in her eyes. “We’re gonna get these bastards.”

Alushy barged in through the already open doorway, mildly irked that there was no door for her to knock in. “You really do have to. They took Charter Twilight.”

Carter looked right at her. “What?”

“They ‘leader’, Brutalight, wanted a dimensional device. I shot Twilight’s device out of her disgusting grasp, so she took Twilight instead, thinking she’d know how to open one with magic.”
“She does,” Renee said. “She doesn’t have enough power within herself, but if they can find a power source…”

“Why do they want one?” Carter asked.

“Couple reasons, all equally fascinating,” Alushy responded. “Let’s see… They want to return to their world and burn it to the ground, they want to go to other worlds to subjugate them with their insanity, and they want to get away from the pointless war in this world. They also call themselves the Elements of Insanity, and I can’t for the life of me imagine why…”

“You’re undead,” Renee pointed out.

“And Miss Detective has detected part of the joke. You win a cookie.”

Nova and Flutterfree appeared in the room by way of teleportation. “What happened!? I saw one of them with Twilight!” Nova shouted.

“You all just got the shit kicked out of you and I didn’t get my kill,” Alushy said.

Renee took a breath. “The… ‘Elements of Insanity’ came for a dimensional device, it was destroyed, so they took Twilight so she could tell them what to do. We have no idea where they went and no idea how to find her.”

Nova facehooved. “I should have traced that teleport…”

“You had no time to think,” Flutterfree said. “None of us did…”

Rarispy stamped her hoof. “I’m going to make them pay… Personally… That Fluttershout has an evisceration date with my weapon…”

Pinkie shot up, suddenly full of energy. “We’re going to get her back!” She produced a pink, glitter covered knife and drove it into the table for punctuation. “I’m taking a team out to get her.”

“So you know where she is?” Carter asked.

“Not the foggiest idea! But we can find out!”

Alushy raised an eyebrow. “Nobody has the slightest idea where they came from, much less where they went. Are you suggesting a random jaunt around the world demanding information? I’m all for that, but I’m not known for my practicality.”

Rarispy raised a hoof. “There’s a place ma soeur and I stayed before we came here. One of the Mann Co. factories. They liked to keep tabs on unusual happenings, they might have something. If they’re… cooperative.”

Pinkie grinned. “That’s a start! We head out immediately! Who’s with me?”

“Road trip!” Alushy shouted.

Rarispy nodded wordlessly.

Renee and Nova stepped forward without hesitation.

Flutterfree looked behind her. “…I don’t think I’ll be good at a rescue mission. I think the people here need my help more. I want to come, though.”
Renee put a hoof on her shoulder. “Flutterfree, we understand. Help how you can here.”

Carter turned to Pinkie. “I can send you with a full contingent.”

Pinkie shook her head. “Sorry, but no.”

“…Why?”

Alushy twirled her guns. “They’ll just get killed, trust me. Not to mention be very suspicious. We’re not just a rescue mission; we’re also a badass information hunting party. A small army would not help by any stretch of your imagination. We need a small unit, like they had, to invade them effectively and get out with what we want. I honestly think I could do the whole thing by myself but it never hurts to have a few bullet sponges around.”

Renee shot Alushy a look.

“Not apologizing.”

“There’s five, that’s good enough,” Pinkie said. “Carter, we’re leaving now. Keep the fort held down, kay?”

Carter nodded.

“Flutterfree, save some lives with your first aid.”

Flutterfree saluted. “Won’t let you down, Pinkie!”

Pinkie pointed to Nova. “Teleport us to the edge of Crosstown. We’re heading out into the world to face the representatives of Insanity.”

Nova lit her horn, dragging Pinkie, Rarispy, Renee, and Alushy with her.

Renee grabbed her heart. “Uh… Just give me a… Moment…”

Rarispy looked ahead, coldly. “We have a moment now. We won’t in the future.”

Renee shook her head. “How can they kill with such… brutality? Uncaring? It meant nothing to her – wasn’t even enjoyable – it was just casual. Normal.”

Alushy, for once in her life, lost her smile. “Some ponies are like me. Death comes so naturally to them that it’s just a part of life, part of them. Sometimes you need that. Other times it’s just a fudging danger to society. In case you can’t tell this is why the Colonel isn’t just letting me walk out of here.” She gestured at a few soldier bodies nearby. “She’s afraid of this getting loose.”

Nova frowned at Alushy. “Is she wrong to think that?”

Alushy ignored the question. “Where’s the Mann Co, Rarispy?”

Rarispy pointed straight ahead. “A long way that direction. I recommend traveling by teleport jumps if we want to get there within the day.”

Nova took a breath. “That would be taxing…”

“We could just take the car,” Pinkie suggested.

“What car?”
A large white van suddenly came flying out of a nearby garage, Pepsi Man at the wheel. He gestured for them to get in.

“It’s a literal road trip!” Alushy clapped. “I call roof seat!”

“Nopony will fight you for that,” Renee observed, trotting toward the van. Everypony quickly got in, Alushy on top, Pinkie in the passenger side, and the other three loaded in the back.

Pinkie beeped the horn. “AWAY WE GO! WE’RE COMING, TWILIGHT!”

Renee looked out the window, her vision glossing over. “Yes... We’re coming...”

Rarispy looked down at her hooves, wordless. Nova stared off into space, contemplating all the carnage she had just witnessed.

That they had all just witnessed.

There would be no coming back from this event in their lives. They could never look at things the same way again.

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Flutterfree pulled on a belt as hard as she could manage, tightening it around Rainbat’s leg. The blue pegasus unleashed a horrendous scream from the sudden pain, letting out tears despite considerable effort not to.

Flutterfree hugged her. “I’m sorry, that hurt a lot... But it’ll heal better this way, okay?”

“I know... Ergh...” Rainbat carefully laid back down on the gurney, moaning. “Just... Get to the others now. I’ll be fine.”

Flutterfree knew Rainbat was right, she would be fine. But there were others in the makeshift hospital that weren’t going to be fine. She surveyed the twelve gurneys that had been set out in a garage, next to the medical supplies. Just an hour ago, before the attack, there had only been one gurney in here. Nobody had expected twelve patients.

...Eleven, now. An Applejack Engineer had been carted out. Flutterfree never even got to look at her to see what had been wrong. There was only the empty bed to remember her by. A mare Flutterfree had probably only seen for a couple minutes was haunting her for much more than that already.

Flutterfree shook her head – she was one of the nurses here, she may not be as trained as the professional doctor on staff, but she did know what she was doing. She moved on to the next bed – the one that held Scouty.

“Ay, Flutters, how you doin’?”

“Better than you, certainly,” Flutterfree said, walking up to Scout with a jar of medical pills. “You already got these, right?”

“Of course not.”

Flutterfree raised an eyebrow.

“Okay, fine. Yeah, I did.”
She looked at his bloodsoaked shirt, expression shifting to one of concern. “Can I see?”

“There’ll never be a day I’ll say no to a woman asking to take my shirt off.”

Flutterfree rolled her eyes. “You humans and clothing…” She lifted the shirt up, looking at the wound. It was still bleeding, despite all the gauze already wrapped around it. The flow of blood was slowed, but Flutterfree knew a horrible wound when she saw one. Scouty might survive this, but Flutterfree didn’t think the odds were good.

“I know that face,” Scouty said.

“I…” Flutterfree shook her head – she wasn’t going to try to lie, not right now. “It doesn’t look good. You need to get to a healing mage. I’m going to see if we can get you offworld…”

“Oh, I’m not complainin’ if it saves my ass.”

Flutterfree did some dressing of Scouty’s minor wounds before walking up to the doctor – a Medic class mercenary, complete with glasses, labcoat, and a frantic look in his eyes. He had just completed an amputation for a Twilight Sniper. “Yes, what is it?”

“We need to get some of these patients offworld.”

“I sent word to the Colonel for the portal device, it should be arriving soon…”

As the words left his mouth, a Pinkie Engineer popped in, grimacing. “Er… It seems that, well, uh… Yeah, the dimensional devices? We think some of our people fled with them. The few we had are gone. Colonel’s personal one wasn’t in her office. We’re… trying to find out who’s missing, or if anyone has a stash.”

The Medic menacingly snapped his gloves. “Then this will be very difficult.”

“Any mediguns?” Fluttersk asked.

The Medic grit his teeth. “The three ve had were destroyed in the battle, along with most ve other Medics Favorite snack of the pink one.”

Flutterfree looked back at Scouty. “Is there any way we can get another one?”

“You want to try to pry a medigun from its Medic? You’re crazier than I am. Too dangerous, take too long…”

Flutterfree furrowed her brow. “…I may have an idea.”

“You are free to try,” the Medic said. “All ze small care is taken care of here. If you can get ze medigun, you will save zem all.”

Flutterfree nodded. “Just you wait Scouty, I’m going to get you something!”

“Wait, no, don’t go after the medigun! Flutterfree!”

She was already out the door, flying across the sky. She knew she couldn’t do this alone – but she didn’t plan on it. She knew just who to ask for help.

She dropped down right in front of the cellar doors, throwing them open with her wings. She rushed down the stairs and sat down. “Hey, Nightmare?”
There was no response, but she knew he was listening.

“There are people dying out there. The battle’s over, but there are injuries. We’re out of mediguns. We need to go get one. I can’t do it myself, but I think that, together, we could.”

Still no response.

“I know you care about this place, Nightmare. When it was under attack, you rushed to defend it. You fought valiantly. I’m just asking you to come out for a little while to help once more.”

“…All right,” he said, coming out into the light. “Get on.”

Flutterfree flew onto his back, carefully arranging her hooves so they wouldn’t brush against any of his sharp, pointy bits. She smiled at him from the side. “I knew you could do it.”

“Haven’t done it yet.”

“True. We need to hurry though.”

Nightmare didn’t need to be told twice – he burst out of the cellar, running as fast as his mechanical legs could carry him, which was to say considerably faster than a regular human being. He splayed his claws and let out a deep battlecry. Flutterfree laughed.

A few other people screamed.

Nightmare was used to this reaction.

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The Mann Co. factory was a set of flat, industrial buildings surrounding a tall corporate skyscraper with the words MANN CO printed at the very top, so high up it was somewhat difficult to read from the ground. The sun was approaching the horizon, casting the skyscrapers in a silhouette that would only get more intense as the day progressed.

“This the place?” Alushy asked, poking her head through a window.

“Yes,” Rarispy responded. “Parking’s through that security gate. Just pull up and let me do the talking.”

Pepsi Man did as instructed, driving up to the gate and stopping.

There was a young woman in glasses at the gate. The raised her eyebrows at the strange man. “…You can’t talk can you?”

“No, but he’s got one hell of a body!” Alushy said. “Let it do the talking, little lady.”

Rarispy sighed. “Ignore them, they’re hooligans. I’m Rarispy L M N Three Asterisk Dash Two. I should be in there with a footnote along the lines of ‘feisty’.”

The woman flipped through her pages. “You are here… But it’s L M N Three Asterisk Dash One who has that note.”

“Ah. She… Was probably pretending to be me that day. Or vice versa.” She sighed.

The woman lowered her glasses looking right to Rarispy. “You aren’t here looking for revenge, are you?”
“Wasn’t killed by a Red or Blue,” Rarispy said. “We’re looking for information.”

The woman sat back. “You are authorized to continue. I will have to record your friends though. A standard Pepsi Man, Rarity, Starlight, Pinkie, and…” she looked at Alushy. “What are you?”

“Just put me down as ‘the best fudging thing in existence’. Esquire.”


“Got it.” The gate’s red and white bar lifted up. “Pick a spot, any spot, and lock your doors. Mann Co. is not responsible for any stolen property in any way.”

“Of course,” Rarispy said. Pepsi Man took control of the van and pulled into the parking lot. The vast majority of vehicles within the parking lot looked like simple corporate cars, though there were enough other cars for the eye keep itself entertained. There were cars designed to operate in wasteland apocalypse conditions, hover cars, military vehicles, and even a couple of miniature helicopters.

Pepsi Man pulled into a random spot and let them all out. They were in the ominous shadow of the main skyscraper, easily feeling dwarfed by the immense perceived power of the company.

“Question,” Nova began. “If there’s no central government, no organization in this world, how does this company exist?”

“It exists in several places,” Rarispy answered. “It’s not as common as a Red and Blu war, but it’s the source of all their weapons, ammo, and technology. Most instances of the company gladly take part in the wars, ‘selling’ weapons to both sides and building them with a seemingly unlimited supply of material. This particular instance of Mann Co. is aware of the nature of this world. They don’t seek to change it though, but rather exploit it.”

“That doesn’t sound very nice!” Pinkie commented.

“No, it isn’t. They still egg on the war, but they also provide technology to others, and have their own mercenaries that can be rented out to defend actual settlements from the war.”

Renee frowned. “Exploitative… But better than outright war, I suppose.”

Rarispy shook her head. “We aren’t here to question their ethics, which are almost nonexistent. They’ve got a lot of information. They know who comes in and out of here, and what’s going on in the world. They’re well aware of Crosstown, for instance.”

Nova nodded. “So we ask them what they know about the ‘Elements of Insanity’… How exactly?”

“We walk in and ask. Reception is usually pretty efficient.”

Alushy gawked. “A big corporate conglomerate has efficient reception?”

“They deal in information a lot. The more people they see, the more information they get. The more customers and employees they get, the more power and money. It’s all about profit. Mostly.”

“Mostly?” Renee asked.

“The guy in charge is crazy.”

Alushy blinked. “Oh. Oh one of him? Oh ahahaahhhahahahahah! This is going to be rich.”
“We probably won’t meet him,” Rarispy told Alushy. “Don’t get your hopes up.”

“My wings are already upright and ready.”

“I… Do not want to know,” Nova said.

“Sucks to be you.”

“Let’s move,” Rarispy grunted. “No causing trouble.”

Pinkie and Alushy exchanged glances before devolving into barely contained chuckling. Rarispy didn’t dignify this with a response. They walked across the parking lot and into the large glass doors of the main Mann Co. building. Inside was a large lobby filled with dozens of people – surprisingly few of which were mercenaries, and none of which were easily identifiable as Red or Blu. Renee did suppose it wouldn’t be good for business to have shootouts in the lobby.

Instead, there were a large quantity of ponies, people with brightly colored hair and big eyes, some brightly colored animals with shoes on, and a handful of even stranger things. It was an interesting sight to see, to say the least.

“Uh, hey!” a girl with a red and black dress who was carrying a large mechanical scythe said, walking up to them. “Do you know where the, uh… ammunition depository is?”

Rarispy nodded. “Seventeenth floor, room seven.”

“Thank you!” She dashed off, scrambling to one of the elevators.

“…Ammunition Depository?” Nova asked.

“There are so many different kinds of weapons,” Rarispy said. “Mann Co. doesn’t forge all kinds of ammunition, but chances are all kinds of ammunition can be found out there. Anything you find that you can’t use, you drop in the depository and Mann Co. will pay you for it. Anything in the depository, you can buy.”

“That seems useful,” Renee mused.

“Pansies don’t do any of their own hunting,” Alushy muttered. “Get your own damn bullets. Or, better yet, just get one of those cloning sacks. Never-ending ammunition.”

Pinkie shrugged, pulling out a squeaky hammer and twirling it around. “I wonder what that’s like…”

“Cheeky.”

Rarispy grunted, leading them to the reception desks, of which there were ten. One was already open, filled with a Rarity in pointed red-rimmed glasses. “Ah, what can I do for you… six? Is the large man with you?”

“Yep!” Pinkie said, walking up next to Rarispy. “I’m Pinkie Pie, and this is Rarispy L M N Three Asterisk Dash One! I think you can look her up, easy.”

“Of course…” the Rarity said, typing away at a nearby computer with her telekinesis. “It looks like you’re marked as one of our investors, though you haven’t paid a visit in a while.”

“I left,” Rarispy said. “Guess the man didn’t change the records.”

“Maybe. I think it’s more likely he just always expected you to come back. What can I do for you?”

The Rarity typed some things on her keyboard. “If we do, it’s not in the public database. It’ll probably cost something.”

“Need something killed? I’m good at that! Too good.” Alushy piped up.

“Shush,” Pinkie said. “Cost what?”

“I really don’t know, I’d have to transfer you to the information department. I…” She blinked in surprise as an alert appeared on her screen. “Oh. It looks as if Mister Hale wants to see you himself.”

Rarispy twitched. “How… Wonderful.”

“How wonderful!” Alushy echoed in a much more eager tone of voice.

The Rarity pointed at an elevator. “Top floor. The button should actually work for you.”

“Thank you!” Pinkie said, bouncing towards the elevator, leading the six of them along. They piled in and pressed the button for the top floor – 113. They barely felt the elevator lurch at all before they were at the top.

“…How…?” Nova wondered aloud.

“Don’t question it,” Pinkie said. “I’m not.”

“B-but…”

The doors slid open, revealing a wide space open to the sky above. Along the edges of the floor were walls with overhangs, protecting lavish couches, large tvs, and other indoor things from possible rain. The rest of the floor was one giant garden filled with exotic plants, the center holding a full size helicopter pad. There wasn’t a helicopter on the pad at the moment, but it was occupied.

There was a man wrestling a zombie pterodactyl. He popped its head off and tossed it over the edge of the skyscraper with ease, laughing the entire time. The man was beyond tall, more muscular than any human the ponies had ever seen, and wore nothing but cargo shorts, explorer boots, and a rugged hat. His chest was very exposed, revealing hair that took the shape of Australia, of all things.

He leaped into the air, crashing right in front of them, making some of the ground give way. He gave them a warm, if crazed, smile. “Aha! Welcome back, Rarispy!”

“Yes.”

“I see you brought friends! In case you don’t already know, my name is Saxton Hale, and I am currently the only one of my breed to run a Mann Co. right!”

“Hell yes!” Alushy said, throwing her hooves in the air. “How’s about we have an arm wrestle?”

“YOU’RE ON!”

Pinkie pulled a table out of her mane and dropped it on the ground. Without pausing, the pony and the man sat at it, extending their limbs. Saxton’s was significantly larger than Alushy’s hoof, but they made it work.

“Three…” Pinkie began. “Two… One… GO!”
Both pushed. Alushy dropped her normal demeanor instantly, letting her teeth grow to full sharpness, her eyes glow as brightly as they could, her wings extend to agitated points. The shadowy power that was Alushy shot out of her like a shadowy vortex of pure power, filling the air around them with unholy eyes from beyond the grave.

Saxton Hale just pushed like a man- sweating, grunting, but holding firm.

“Saxton…” Rarispy muttered. “We don’t have time for this.”

“You know I never turn down a challenge!” Saxton Hale yelled, grinding his teeth. “First good arm wrestling match I’ve had in years!”

“It’s not even arm wrestling! That’s a leg!” Nova pointed out.

“Technicalities are for bitches!” Alushy grunted, her voice even deeper and more unholy than usual. “Granted, I’m a bitch, but I’m the kind of bitch that needs cannons, not technicalities.”

“I’ve got plenty of cannons here! You can have one, win or lose!”

“If I win will it be bigger?”

“I will invent a cannon bigger than all others for you if you win!”

Alushy’s aura became even more intense, somehow. “BIG CANNON, COME TO MAMA!”

Pepsi Man started doing cheerleading dances.

“This is stupid,” Rarispy muttered.

“…You’re not wrong,” Renee noted.

Saxton Hale’s hand began to drift downward toward the table. Alushy’s tongue shot out of her mouth, licking her lips with a vicious slurping sound. “Saxton… It’s coming…”

“That’s what you think!” Saxton Hale flexed his muscles and pushed back with newfound fury, driving Alushy’s hoof towards her side. With rage, she pushed back, holding her hoof an inch from the tabletop. She bit her lip, drawing blood – blood that charged her. She lifted Saxton’s hand back up, slowly…

“Come on…” Alushy grunted. “This man is but a mortal…”

Then her knee joint gave out. Her leg cracked and all resistance was lost. Her small, vampiric form was driven through the table, shattering it.

Saxton Hale shot one hand into the air. “Victory!” With the other, he offered to help Alushy up.

She laughed, taking his hand. Her broken leg repaired itself reasonably quickly, the pain clearly not enough to dampen her mood. “That was the best fudging arm wrestle I’ve ever had!”

Saxton Hale laughed. “It’s been one of my best as well – wait, ‘fudging’?”

“Do you know what swear word is supposed to go there?” Alushy demanded. “I need to know.”

Saxton Hale shrugged. “I’d just use good ol’ damn. Serves the purpose well.”

“But it isn’t strong enough!”
“If you need to rely on words to be strong enough you’ve got bigger problems than not knowing the right word!” he laughed.

Pinkie grinned. “I like him.”

The Raritys facehooved. Pepsi Man continued doing his dance.

“Why’d you call us up?” Rarispy asked.

“Well, I was just minding my own business, wrestling a yeti, when I get one of those notifications about one of the Rarispy sisters logging in without the other one. Not that odd, figured I’d get to see you later – but then you start asking for information that waves a red flag on the database? I just had to call you up, you understand.”

He moved to sit down, and Pinkie provided him with a chair. His jovial smile had vanished, replaced with a somber expression that his mustache made even dourer. “They got her, didn’t they?”

Rarispy nodded slowly. “The one known as Fluttershout. I take it you do know about them?”

“They’re a big nuisance. So big it’s probably fair to call them more than a nuisance,” he grunted. “The Elements of Insanity seemed to have it in their heads that the entire world was their oyster, to be conquered and brutalized as they wished. Entire teams of Reds and Blus, wiped right out easily. Settlements of all kinds brutally murdered for fun. Even Mann Co headquarters weren’t safe. It really was a terrifying rampage. But then they ran into us.”

“Didn’t go well for them?” Nova asked.

Saxton Hale smirked. “No it did not. I could tell they were very surprised they were forced to retreat. They’d clearly never lost a fight before – at least not one of their coordinated attacks. It was invigorating, showing that Brutalight that you don’t need magic to be an excellent warrior.”

“Pure manliness conquers all,” Alushy agreed.

“You got that right!”

“So what do you actually know about them?” Rarispy asked.

“Not much. We know their base is some castle over in the Haunted Territories. Don’t know which one, don’t really care since we don’t have any operations that far out. It’ll probably be easy to find once you get close though. Center of the area without anything living in it at all.”

“We know a bit more,” Renee said. “They’re not from this universe originally, and they want to escape. They currently have Charter Twilight.”

Pinkie gave Saxton Hale a cup of piping hot coffee. He took a sip and then did the spit-take. “The Charter Twilight was here? How did I not know of this?”

“She arrived today,” Nova pointed out.

“But I’m watching Crosstown.”

“What!”? Rarispy shouted.

Alushy raised an eyebrow. “You’re surprised by this?”

“I, well, er… No, not exactly.”
Renee frowned. “The Elements of Insanity may have attacked when they did because they intercepted your information. They’d been waiting for the right opportunity to strike.”

Saxton Hale rammed his fist into the floor, putting a crack in it. “They’ve made fools of us! That’s it, I was going to help you six as it was, but now I’m giving you a leg up. You get to take the Blackbird.”

“Mother of God, yes.” Alushy blurted. “Please tell me it’s what I’m thinking of.”

“A state of the art fighter jet equipped with every weapon we could slap on it?”

Alushy melted into the floor. “I can die happy. Oh wait, I did, and I am.”

Saxton Hale clapped his hands together. “Then it’s decided! I’ll get the runway ready, you all return to the lobby and mingle a bit!”

Nova blinked. “…Won’t you be going to the lobby with us?”

Saxton Hale laughed. “What man uses the elevator?” He jumped over the wall and started climbing down the side of the skyscraper. “Race. Go!”

Nova teleported them all back down to the lobby.

Saxton Hale landed on the ground outside a couple seconds later. He stuck his head in through the front doors. “WELL PLAYED!” he yelled.

Pepsi Man waved back. Saxton Hale gave him a thumbs up then ran across the parking lot.

“What a strange man…” Nova said.

“He’s insufferable…” Rarispy muttered.

“That’s a bit strong,” Renee said. “He seems a decent, if intense, sort.”

“Try living near him for a few months. It gets old fast. Really fast.”

Renee shrugged. “Perhaps…” She looked around, surveying the gathering in the lobby. “Something tells me there’s more to learn here, though…”

Pinkie looked at Renee. “Are you getting a Renee Sense?”

“I don’t think so. Just a… hunch.” She smirked. “I knew it, that mare over there is watching us. The Trixie. She’s trying not to make it obvious, and by doing that she’s making it obvious.”

Alushy flew into the air and landed behind the Trixie, holding a gun to her head. “Boo.”

“AUGH!”

“Relax, I won’t hurt you with them around. As long as you don’t annoy me.”

The Trixie whimpered.

Renee walked up to her, smirking. “Trixie, I presume?”

“M-magic Mare, actually…”

“…Not going to judge,” Renee commented. “I just want to know, why were you spying on us?”
“W-well, er… You were interesting! Yeah!”

Alushy pressed a gun to her skull.

“All right all right! I…” she gulped. “Look, I was looking for information on what the Elements of Insanity were doing, all right? I heard they attacked your compound and-“

“How did you hear?” Rarispy demanded.

“I’ve been following them for a while, okay? They… Killed my friend.”

Pinkie sighed. “Oh.”

Rarispy’s expression softened. “Same. They’ve hurt us all. And many, many others, from what I’ve heard.”

“Want to join us?” Pinkie asked. “They have our friend captured, we’re going to free her!”

“Oh…” Magic Mare shivered. “No, you can do that on your own. I…” She shook her head. “Can’t do it.”

“That’s okay. Alushy, please stop pointing the gun at her.”

“Oops, forgot I was doing that. Sorry-not-sorry,” Alushy responded.

“Anything you can tell us?” Renee asked.

“…There’s a graveyard near their castle. One of many, I think, but it’s an important and powerful one. You… Might want to go there first. It has a habit of showing you images of the past. It is very haunted though, so be careful.”

“I’m sure we can handle it,” Nova said. “We do have the biggest ‘fudgemonering vampire’ around, after all.”

“And suddenly I’m relevant,” Alushy said, grinning. “My ego has grown three sizes at your approval.”

“Thanks, Magic Mare,” Pinkie said. “I’m sure this will be helpful.”

Magic Mare smiled. “I hope you don’t die.”

“We won’t,” Rarispy said. “There’s been enough death on our side today…”

Saxton Hale rushed back into the lobby, forgetting the door was there. He ignored the shattered glass on the ground. “Hup hup! There’s a fighter jet with your names on it!”

Pinkie grinned. “Yay! See you Magic Mare!”

“…Bye.”

The six of them followed Saxton Hale to a runway. There, on the stretch of pavement, was a menacing black fighter jet with four engines, a cockpit that could easily fit a dozen people, and several fins that clearly served no practical purpose beyond coolness factor. The cutie marks of Renee, Nova, and Pinkie has been painted on the back fin alongside a Pepsi logo, Alushy’s glasses, and a knife inside a diamond for Rarispy. “There you go!”
Pinkie gasped. “Best present ever!” She took out the party cannon and unleashed a torrent of confetti everywhere.

Alushy glanced at the blue weapon. “I need to get me some of those and some hammerspace.”

Pinkie shrugged. “Maybe one day…”

Saxton Hale put his hands on his hips. “Anyway, in order to legally get you to fly this, I had to talk to a lawyer and figure out if I had any sort of rules set up for this kind of thing.”

A pony in a bunny hoodie nobody had noticed before took out a briefcase and held out a legal document.

Saxton Hale rubbed his hands together. “Right, so, all of us are here, what’s the requirement?”

“Boot to the head,” the pony said. A boot flew from nowhere and hit Saxton Hale in the head.

Saxton Hale blinked. “…I don’t remember writing that.”

The lawyer shrugged, folding up her briefcase and walking away. Pinkie snickered.

Saxton Hale shrugged. “So, who knows how to fly a fighter jet?”

Alushy raised her hoof. She was the only one.

“There’s your pilot everybody! Now go, lay waste to the enemy!”

Renee bowed. “Mister Hale, I doubt we can ever repay you enough.”

“If you deal a blow to those crazy ponies it’ll be payment enough, Lady Renee.”

Renee smiled. “See you soon, hopefully.”

“Can we go already?” Alushy said, already in the cockpit. “I don’t even have fingers to be triggery with and I’m positive I’m going to push this button accidentally with a point on my bat wing or something.”

Pinkie popped into the cockpit next to her. “Ooh, I wonder what this button does…”

This remark prompted everyone to scramble into the cockpit. Renee was still climbing in when the engines activated. She had time to sit down and buckle in before the Blackbird started moving.

Alushy laughed. “Christmas has come early! Hold on to your stomachs bitches, I’m not going to be pulling any punches with this bad girl!”

“Bitches and bastard,” Rarispy corrected.

“What?”

“Pepsi Man’s a guy, he’s a ba-“

Alushy floored the throttle, shutting Rarispy up. Alushy soon forgot the technical ruining of her joke and just kept laughing.

Pinkie was the only one who remained conscious through all the loopdeloops, swirls, and dives.

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Twilight sat up straight in her cell, a sour expression on her face. Nothing had happened for the last several hours, and it was starting to drive her a little crazy. Maybe that was what they wanted – they were the ‘Elements of Insanity’ after all, perhaps this was all part of their plan. Drive her mad from isolation.

Luckily Twilight was one of those ponies that could go large stretches without interacting with anypony else. Not the most common trait of a self-described social species, and certainly an unusual one for the Princess of Friendship, but she found that it helped her deal with individuals who maybe weren’t sold in the magic of friendship. And it helped keep her own sanity intact during moments like this.

Maybe she could use it to get through to them. They may have been brutal and insane, but there was a possibility, however remote, that they could be salvaged. If not… She’d try to find their weaknesses. Insanity usually hinted at some kind of exploit.

Brutalight walked into the room, drawing Twilight’s attention.

“I see you finally decided to drop back in,” Twilight commented.

“Not just me,” Brutalight said, walking forward and allowing all of the others to file in behind her, bringing the total number of ponies in the room to eight. “Let me introduce everypony. I’m Brutalight Sparcake, the leader of the Elements of Insanity. This is Rarifruit, Fluttershout, Pinkis Cupcake, Applepills, Rainbine, and Derpigun.”

Twilight Sparkle looked at everyone and nodded. “I am Charter Twilight Sparkle of Equis Vitis, Princess of Friendship.” The ponies behind Brutalight filled Twilight with uneasy feelings – each one had the gaze of a mare barely held together inside. Rarifruit was the only one who was obviously injured from the prior attack, her back legs propped up with a two-wheeled frame.

Fluttershout snickered. “Princess of Friendship. Silly.”

“Not as silly as we might wish…” Brutalight commented. “She has the power within her.”

“But so do we!” Applepills said. “I mean, look at us, if we weren’t great friends Pinkis would have just eaten us all by now!”

Pinkis laughed. “And Rarifruit would have stolen Fluttershout’s hat!”

“I still want it,” Rarifruit muttered.

Brutalight chuckled. “You rascals.”

Rainbine smirked. “Effective and awesome rascals!”

Fluttershout rolled her eyes. “You never change, do you…”

Brutalight cleared her throat. “The point is, Twilight, we have the magic of Friendship in us as well. So if you’re thinking you can just count on a magic rainbow laser from your friends to save you, you’ve got another thing coming.”

Twilight’s confident expression faltered. They were right – she could see their friendship, corrupted and exclusive though it was. They had an extremely strong bond, a bond that kept them alive and gave them dominion over whoever they deemed an enemy. Which was probably everyone.

Brutalight smirked. “Are you going to let this go the easy way? I’m in a charitable mood, I’ll just let
“you go if you give us the secrets to interdimensional travel. You don’t have to die.”

“You need one of the devices-“

Brutalight’s smile vanished. “Wrong answer. You know how to do it without a device. You know how the device works. You could tell us how to make one.”

“It’d be far too complicated to create in a place like this, and I don’t understand every part-“

“You are a horrible liar,” Brutalight said. “Fluttershout, ‘cheer’ her, lowest volume.”

Fluttershout took in a breath and let out a loud noise that drove itself into Twilight’s brain like a railroad spike. The other Elements didn’t seem to care, probably because the noise was directed only at Twilight, not that she was able to realize this at the moment. The pain forced her to crumple to the ground, shaking in her chains.

Brutalight used her magic to ensure Twilight could still hear what she was saying over the ‘cheering’. “You feel that? That is her voice, driving its way deep into your mind, destroying your ears and your very ability to hear naturally. Much louder and it’ll blow your eardrums out completely. Louder, and your brain starts to get affected. At full volume her shout is an instant kill. She’s probably the most effective at killing out of all of us.” She smirked. “Unfortunately, unlike everyone else she comes in contact with, you don’t have the pleasure of knowing the pain will end soon. It will just keep going and going and going.”

Twilight grunted, forcing herself to sit back up despite the pain. Her face was in an eternal grimace, but her eyes were narrowed in fiery defiance. “Then let it go on.” She realized with fear she couldn’t even hear what she was saying.

Brutalight clearly could. “Louder, Fluttershout.”

Fluttershout increased the volume slightly. Twilight’s brain throbbed as the already-present nail felt as if it moved around within her skull, scrambling her brain. Her ears no longer had the control to keep themselves folded down, not that being open or closed did much difference at this volume. But she stood strong.

“Looks like we’ve got ourselves a fighter, girls. Louder.”

Twilight could feel a hammer within her awareness, pounding at her head with every beat of some unheard, cruel song. She realized this was just her heartbeat amplified through the noise.

“Louder.”

The insides of Twilight’s ears were now vibrating with enough energy that the pain in the ear canal far outweighed the pain happening within her mind. Her entire skull screamed in agony, like a wine glass ready to burst. Tears flowed down her cheeks and onto the ground, but she did not give in.

“Just tell us!” Brutalight demanded.

“No!” Twilight screamed, glad for an excuse to unleash her bent up fury. Any distraction from the pain was welcome, no matter how small or useless it was. “I cannot let you leave this place! You’d kill so many ponies more than me! So many! I cannot let you do that! If I must give my own life to protect all others, then good! I’ll gladly lay it down!”

“We’ll kill people regardless of where we are, fool!”
“Death is at least *cheap*, here!”

“*Louder.*”

Twilight reeled, the sound somehow carrying a *real* physical force with it now, pushing her back across her cell. “Why do you have to kill? Answer me that! WHY!?”

“Because we’re batshit insane!” Brutalight said. “And it’s *fun*! You’ve clearly never felt the exhilaration of holding someone’s life in your hooves and *ending* it in a clean, single moment. The *power*. The *poetry*. The life it gives you. There is no action more enthralling.”

“I… Don’t… Kill…”

“You’ll have to try it eventually. *If* you survive this. *Louder.*”

Twilight lost all ability to form coherent words. She just *screamed*. She channeled all her rage into one single, powerful noise that meant nothing to Fluttershout’s unending *noise*. The pain collected to a point in her ears, building pressure, both pressing her skull and pushing it out in a set of forces that could not exist in tandem for long. One would have to give.

Her inner ears *exploded*. She felt more pain in that moment than she had felt in most of her life. Blood rushed out from both sides of her head, spraying across the bars of her prison. She could still *feel* the force of the sound on her body, but the pounding in her ears was gone. There was still a spike in her brain, but it was significantly less painful than it had been before. She was, partially, *relieved*.

The force of the noise stopped, allowing Twilight to slump to the ground. Twilight saw Fluttershout shaking her head, saying something to Brutalight that Twilight couldn’t hear. The other Elements were talking among themselves, opening and closing their mouths, making various gestures… But Twilight couldn’t hear them.

Twilight couldn’t hear *anything*. There wasn’t even a ringing in her ears. Her ears were still *there* – she could feel them and move them – but they weren’t picking up any sound.

Brutalight lifted Twilight in her magic, dragging her against the bars. She spoke – and Twilight could unfortunately hear *that*. “The wound is still fresh. We can return your hearing if we act fast. But you have to give us what we want.”

Twilight mustered enough energy to scowl. “…Screw you.”

Brutalight tossed her to the ground. “Then I guess it’s time for the next round of torture. I can see I’ll have to get *creative*.” She turned to her friends. “You can go. This is going to take a while, unless anyone has any ideas.”

A few of them said something, but Twilight had no idea what. Then the six of them filed out of the room, leaving only Brutalight and Twilight.

Brutalight smirked. “I am the only voice you can hear, Twilight Sparkle. As far as you are concerned, I am your God, your everything, your *master*. There is nothing but you and me, and I am *very* angry. To ease this anger, you just need to tell me some simple things. Should be easy, right?”

Twilight said nothing. She just prepared herself for more pain.

Brutalight lifted Twilight back up. Blood dripped from the Charter’s ears onto the cell floor below.
A giant pony head with lightning bolts coming out of its eyes chased down a waffle with human legs and a Pinkie Pie head while an Applejack rode a cow made of cubes over a man with a horse head. Elsewhere, a Lyra poked a freshly dead Sniper in his rear with a toothpick, as if checking to see if he was done cooking.

“…What?” Flutterfree said, not able to believe what she was seeing.

“Complete randomness.” Nightmare commented.

“Is this… I don’t even know what to ask.”

Nightmare shrugged. It wasn’t like he knew any more about what was going on than she did. He was just harder to baffle. “Somewhere Else?”

“Maybe…” Flutterfree said. “I don’t like delaying, but I don’t think we can—“ Then she saw it. What they needed.

A medigun.

It was currently in the hands of a Medic screaming at the top of his lungs. “TRY NEW CARTOON HORSE PROGRAM HORSE MEAT!”

“There!” Flutterfree said, ignoring the horrific implications of the Medic’s statement. “Get it!”

Nightmare jumped down the cliff face he was standing on, Flutterfree holding on to his back as tight as she could manage. They landed on the ground below, kicking up a small cloud of dust.

The Medic pointed at the Nightmare in terror. “HORSES CANNOT DRIVE AUTOMOBILES!”

Flutterfree blinked. “Nightmare, just… get the gun.”

Nightmare leaped forward, swiping at the Medic’s medigun, only for the target to leap back. “GET YOUR OWN GODDAMN FRENCH FRIES!” He took off in a run. He would have not made it far, but unfortunately for Flutterfree and Nightmare, a jar of peanut butter flew through the air and hit Nightmare right in the face. He paused a few seconds to contemplate what had happened.

Flutterfree licked the peanut butter that had gotten on her. “Huh. Pretty good.”

Nightmare shrugged and moved to resume his pursuit of the Medic into a blue barber shop, but once again he was stopped. This time by an unicorn Twilight Sparkle with a truly grumpy expression permanently affixed to her face. A set of words appeared beneath her face – ‘Dwight Likes Sparkles’ – that she clearly couldn’t see.

“Uh… Hi?” Flutterfree said. “Do you mind letting us through?”

The words vanished. The Twilight they could only presume was named ‘Dwight’ took one look at the two of them and summoned a hamburger from the aether before digging into it ravenously.

Flutterfree blinked. “Think we can just walk by?”

“No,” Nightmare said. He tried to walk by anyway.

Dwight took exception to this, wordlessly conjuring another hamburger and tossing it at Nightmare’s head. Nightmare’s response to this was to lurch forward suddenly and scream in Dwight’s face.
Dwight headbutted him, knocking him backward. She followed this up with a barrage of fax machines conjured from nothing.

Nightmare cut through the fax machines with his quick reflexes, leaving piles of electronics around him. Flutterfree looked right at Dwight. “Why are you attacking us?”

Dwight teleported behind Flutterfree and slapped her upside the head, tossing her off Nightmare. Nightmare reacted by sinking his claws into Dwight, only to realize that he’d skewered a full size car. “What.”

Dwight appeared behind him, grew a body of a centaur, and punched him in the face. His head turned around a full three hundred and sixty degrees, roaring the whole while. He leaped onto Dwight, trying to tackle her, but once again he failed to grab what he was aiming for, somehow latching onto a cow made of squares.

Flutterfree reasoned that Nightmare could handle himself for now – she needed to get what they came for. She ran into the barber shop after the Medic, mildly shocked to find that the interior was on fire. She considered backing out, but then she saw the Medic hoisting his medigun through the flames with his back turned toward her.

“CATCH HORSY HORSE FEVER THIS SUMMER!” he announced, kicking an action figure of Twilight into the fire.

Flutterfree took a breath – all she had to do was move quickly. Treat him like a bear, right. Just a little twist, he’d drop the gun, and she could make off with it… Easy, right?

She lunged across the room, flames lightly brushing her wings. She placed her front hooves directly on the Medic’s back, right below his shoulders. She twisted her body around, placing a back hoof on top of his shoulder. Then she twisted him, giving his back the ultimate in ‘massage’ treatments. He let out a roar of surprise, dropping his medigun as his arms splayed straight outward.

Flutterfree kicked him to the ground, hoping he’d spend a good deal of time wondering why his back suddenly felt so much better. She grabbed the medigun in her hooves and flew toward the front door.

“QUEEN HORSYTIME!” the Medic yelled from behind her. Flutterfree thought this was probably a bad sign, and the instant explosion behind her proved that it was. She and the medigun were launched through the doors of the barber shop, tearing the flimsy structures off their hinges. She landed in the dirt, careful to orient herself face up to protect the medigun from the crash.

A Princess Celestia stood over her – no doubt the ‘Queen Horsytime’ the Medic had called for but a moment ago.

She looks peeved, Flutterfree thought. She, luckily, didn’t get a chance to find out how peeved Queen Horsytime was. A strangely flat apple came flying out of nowhere and hit Queen Horsytime between the eyes, somehow knocking her out.

Flutterfree blinked. “What?”

“Apple. It’s just the kind of thing that happens here,” a synthetic, monotone voice drawled. A human Fluttershy walked into her field of view. Flutterfree almost thought she was normal save for the gray lampshade-like hat on her head, but as the pegasus looked closer, she found the new Fluttershy to be… flat, just like the apple.

“Oh… thanks? Who are you?” Flutterfree asked.
“My name is Zed Ex,” she droned, speaking without moving any part of her body. She hoisted Queen Horsytime over her back. “And I randomly saved you.”

“I see that. But… why?”

“You looked like you weren’t part of the randomness and I just so happened to need an unconscious version of Celestia.”

“…Why?”

“Time travel, Greggs, and another universe.”

“Oh. …Are you part of the randomness?”

“Girl, I am the randomness. I wrote the book on randomness. You should help your bear friend, he’s being eaten by Dwight.”

“What!” Flutterfree said, turning to Dwight and Nightmare. Nightmare was in fact being eaten by Dwight – if Dwight chewing ineffectually on Nightmare’s arm could be considered being eaten. Flutterfree glanced back to Zed Ex – but she was gone.

“…I’m going to have to ask Pinkie about that one…” Flutterfree muttered to herself, hoisting herself up and slinging the medigun over her back. “Nightmare! Time to go!”

“Good,” he said, running away from Dwight at his top speed. She took offense to this as well, summoning a flaming meteor and tossing it at Nightmare. He jumped out of the way easily, leaping back up the cliff face with Flutterfree flying alongside him. They narrowly dodged another flaming meteor as they climbed.

At the top, Flutterfree perched herself on Nightmare’s back, smiling. “To Crosstown!”

She could hear the medic yell behind them. “YEEEEEEE-HAW!” This prompted Flutterfree to glance behind them and see a herd of Applejacks and Engineer Mercenaries charging the cliff face.

“Go go go!” Flutterfree shouted.

Nightmare did as instructed, dashing across the desert. Flutterfree saw Applejacks and Engineers falling over each other in their attempts to reach her, and a very furious Dwight shooting meteors at them that always seemed to miss. A car exploded.

Flutterfree laughed, the absurdity of the situation finally getting to her.

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“This is your captain speaking…” Alushy announced. “If you look to your left you will see the Twisty Hills, a lovely place where I made the horrid decision of getting dreadlocks. Avoid at all costs. To your right, there’s a Mann Co. Tower with a giant hole blown through it in the shape of a skull, complete with physics defying eyeballs. And if you could look beneath us, which none of you can, you’d see the Haunted Territories.”

“I can see them!” Pinkie yelled clapping her hooves.

“Go figure,” Alushy muttered. “Are you the only one awake?”

Pinkie glanced behind her. “I think so. Except Pepsi Man, but he doesn’t talk, so it might as well be just us!”
Alushy shrugged, glancing at the downward-display in front of her. It showed a lot of dead trees, dark mists, and graveyards lit by the light of the moon. “Then I suppose it’s ‘bonding time’ then, isn’t it?”

“You do realize you’re asking for it now, right?” Pinkie asked.

“See, I’m over here thinking it’d just be best to rip the damn bandage off all at once, on my terms, rather than on your terms when you want to throw a party or something equally stupid.”

Pinkie giggled. “I wasn’t going to demand any one-on-one bonding time at all! You didn’t seem like the type to appreciate that! You prefer to get your socializing in by being the center of attention, random mockery, or beating the stuffing out of people.”

“The term is ‘beating the shit out of everyone’, Pinkie,” Alushy corrected.

“Hey, you say things your way, I say mine my way, okie dokie?”


Pinkie giggled and winked. “That’s more like it!”

Alushy facehooved. “You were supposed to get mad at that.”

“Does this look like the face of a pony who gets mad a lot?”

“No. That’s part of the challenge, get the pink puff of adorable laughs and smiles and goddamn rainbows to lash out.”

“I can get angry if you want!”

“And your self-imposed challenge is to drive me up a wall.”

“It’s workiiiiiiiiing!”

Alushy smirked. “And I thought I was the world’s most annoying asshole.”

“Your descriptions just don’t work…” Pinkie shook her head. “Try being more creative!”

“You are such a fudging spaz that when you laugh, the entire world is forced to laugh with you in the most horrible perversion of the sound imaginable – a joyless haunting gasp that’s nothing more than a pathetic wheeze of air unleashed by a fear reflex. A fear of the party pony’s smiling wrath.”

Pinkie giggled. “And you, my vampiric friend, have an ego so large it could be used to pilot the Titanic.”

Alushy blinked, processing that one for a minute. “Huh. That’s a pretty good one.”

“I’ve got more! Ahem! What’s with those red glasses? Trying to disguise all the blood so you don’t feel ashamed?”

“What’s with your body? Are you some kind of sapient pasta noodle or did you try one too many advanced maneuvers in bed?”

“I think I know why you like to eat people – it’s the only way you can get anything close to resembling a close relationship with anypony!”
“I bet you cry every night over that one time in sixth grade little Timmy rejected your advances!”

“How much work do you put into your outfit? It’s not worth it, even if it’s none.”

“Your mother was so fat she gave birth to you.”

“In your previous life you were a pathetic bullied foal with supervillian aspirations!”

“You’re a creeper who secretly gets off on all the things she knows!”

Rarispy groaned. “Are you two seriously having a ‘roast me’ contest?”

“Shut up, we’re bonding. I’m pretty sure we’ll be soul sisters by the time we land,” Alushy said.

“But… So many of those were bad…”

“That’s part of the fun!” Pinkie said, giggling. “We should probably stop though, there’s only so much roasting that can be done before it starts getting overdone.”

Rarispy raised an eyebrow. “You’re implying it wasn’t overdone before you started.”

“Oooooh burn!” Alushy laughed.

Then a magic missile hit the jet because Alushy wasn’t looking at what she was doing. The left wing blew off, the tremor waking up all ponies who were still asleep.

“What was that?!” Renee shouted, holding onto her seat as tightly as she could.

“Magic missile!” Pinkie said, grabbing a pillow and placing it over her chest.

“Where from!?” Nova asked.

“That’s the thousand dollar question!” Alushy shouted, trying to pull up in vain. “The answer? Probably that castle down there that’s shooting another one at us.”

Nova lit her horn, creating a shield to deflect the other magic bullet. “This is either Brutalight or an automated spell, either way I think it’s a pretty good indication we’re in the right place!”

“We are going to crash!” Renee yelled. “Do something!”

Alushy cocked her head and widened her eyes. “What the fudge do you think I’m trying to do?”

Nova lit her horn again, teleporting all six of them out of the Blackbird. She levitated all of them slowly to the ground with only a slight strain on her magical powers. They watched as their beautifully crafted state-of-the-art aircraft crashed into the ground a mile or so away, producing a giant fireball that lit up the night.

“…Why do my Blackbirds always explode!? I didn’t even get to use the weapons!” Alushy shouted.

“Lame!” Pinkie said, folding her front hooves.

Nova placed them gently on the ground, sighing. “Well, at least we know which castle to go to. This way everypony.”

“Wait!” Renee said. “Remember, Magic Mare told us to check out the graveyard. Okay? We do that
Pinkie pointed to their left. “That’s it right there.”

Renee glanced that direction, not as surprised as she probably should have been to see a wire gate leading into a large graveyard filled with worn gravestones.

Rarispy drew one of her guns. “Shall we?”

“Should we expect any of your kind?” Rarispy asked Alushy.

Alushy grinned. “Undead? Definitely, these are the Haunted Territories, what self-respecting place named that doesn’t have ghosts? Vampires like me? Definitely not.”

“Good to know.”

“Can I just say that it feels wonderful to be under moonlight?” Alushy took a deep breath of the night air and bore her sharp teeth with a grin. “So much better than daylight.”

Nova blinked. “Wait, how did you survive in the daytime? Aren’t vampires supposed to, you know, burn up in the sun?”

“I’m not your garden variety vampire if that wasn’t clear by now.”

Nova narrowed her eyes. “I asked how.”

“And I don’t particularly feel the need to tell you! Not to mention the look on your face right now is pure gold. Wish I had a camera. Oh wait, I do!” she pulled out a smartphone and took Nova’s picture. “This is going on my Twitter feed…”

Pinkie pulled out a phone of her own. “What’s your Twitter?”

“The Crimson Fudger.”

“Oooh, nice! I’m following you. I’m Pink Party Palooza.”

Nova twitched. “Internet here how?”

“Blame Mann Co.” Pinkie answered.

Rarispy slapped the phones out of Alushy’s and Pinkie’s hooves. “Stop it with this nonsense! We have a mission! We need to move. The sooner we find out what the deal is with this graveyard, the sooner we can take down the Elements of Insanity.” With a dignified huff, she tossed her mane back and trotted into the graveyard.

Pinkie shrugged, following her, bringing the rest of the group with her. Pepsi Man was a bit too tall and hit his head on the top of the entrance arch, falling down like a domino.

Nova helped him back up. “You seem to randomly hurt yourself a lot…”

Pepsi Man shrugged.

The graveyard itself was dark and filled with fog. The black, pointed fence was lined with occasional stone columns topped with pumpkins. The graves themselves were so old and worn it was nearly impossible to tell what their inscriptions once were. A bat screeched overhead.
Alushy shot the mammal out of the sky. “That bat just told us to go die in a fire,” Alushy explained. “It got what it deserved.”

Nova closed her eyes and lit her horn. “There’s… a lot of power here. Some of it is magic… Some is… something else.”

“Probably ghosts,” Rarispy said.

“That does match Twilight’s theories,” Renee added. “She’s been working on a theory that separates special abilities and other things into classes. She was talking to me about ‘magic’ and ‘spirits’ the other day. One comes from without, the other from within…”

One of the graves shifted. A large, meaty hand reached out of the soil beneath, translucent like all ghost arms should be. At this point most ponies would just run, but not the party there currently – they stared at the ghostly arm with an overall mood of curiosity.

The ghost of a mercenary pulled itself out. He was one of the large, bulky, Heavy class, his only unique feature being a frying pan on his head. He stood tall, glaring at all six of them.

“Hello! I’m Pinkie Pie!” Pinkie said.

“I’m Intelligent Heavy,” the Heavy said, pointing at her. “You’re mine!” He jumped at her, trying to force his spiritual form into her body. She just put on the Bomb Mask and exploded, sending both of them flying.

Pepsi Man tossed a can of Pepsi at the ghost, but it flew right through. The Intelligent Heavy laughed. “I am a ghost! You can’t hurt me!”

Nova froze the ghost in a magic crystal. Intangible though he was, the magic prison kept him sealed away. Nova glanced to Alushy. “Can you take care of this thing if it becomes a problem?”

Alushy grinned. “I’d love to find out.”

“I’ll take that as a yes…” Nova said, walking to another grave. “We need to be careful, there may be more ghosts.”

“Do you think Magic Mare tricked us?” Rarispy asked.

Renee shook her head. “I don’t think so… There is something here, I’m sure of it.”

“I’m more than sure,” Pinkie said, removing the Bomb Mask. “I know there’s something here.”

“That what?” Nova said, searching around for anything she could find.

Rarispy looked at the Heavy. “If it helps, I think mercenaries with small additions like that are called ‘Freaks’, though I’m not sure how that relates to the Elements of Insanity…”

“I don’t see how it does either…” Nova said, placing her hoof on a gravestone.

The gravestone reached out to her. Images flashed in her mind, flooding her with information.

There were seven ponies, seven normal ponies. Twilight, Rarity, Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, Applejack, Pinkie Pie, and Derpy. They were in their world – an Equis set slightly before Twilight had gotten wings – and then they weren’t. Nova saw them appear in the graveyard – disoriented, scared, and alone.
Rarity was first. Nova watched Rarity approach a grave, curiously examining a small red hat laying on it. A translucent green hand shot out of the ground, startling Rarity. The ghost rose into the air, pointed at Rarity, then went inside her.

Not a second later Rarity was no more. Now it was Rarifruit. She placed the small hat on her head, grinned psychotically, and yelled ‘MINE!’

Nova reeled back from the gravestone. “They… They were normal, once.”


“They were all once normal ponies, like you and me. But… This place.” She gestured around. “This place did something…”

She touched another grave, flooding her mind with more images. She saw others wandering the graveyard, getting possessed by ghosts… No… It wasn’t quite possession. It was more… a fusion. Neither the ghosts or the ponies had full control. What resulted was its own being, something new.

Nova tore her hoof back. “That’s what all of them are… Lost ponies, dragged to this world, instantly having their lives torn away.”

“That’s… That’s horrible,” Pinkie said.

“Alushy, do you by chance know how to… Exorcise somepony?”

Alushy shook her head. “In my world priests didn’t do the exorcism thing, they killed whatever they thought was an unholy blight.” Alushy smirked. “Quite fun, the one-sided rivalry I had with a particular priest…”

“I do not think that would work anyway,” Rarispy said. “There’s clearly more to them than just being possessed.”

“Quite…” Nova said, touching another gravestone. She saw six Elements of Insanity capture a poor unicorn Twilight and force her to absorb two separate spirits into her, becoming the brutal leader they all wanted. Nova couldn’t remove the image of Twilight chained in midair with dark magics from her mind. A tear rolled down her cheek. “This place… This Graveyard… It killed all of them and replaced them with insane monsters.”

Pinkie sighed. “And in return, the monsters killed everything around them.”

“They might not have a choice,” Renee said. “Maybe… Maybe we shouldn’t hold it against them?”

Rarispy shot her a look. “What exactly are you suggesting?”

Renee lifted her hat slightly. “I am suggesting that they may not have any say in what they’re doing. It may just be a result of this horrific place. They could just be mental patients, doomed to do what they do.”

Nova placed her hoof on another grave and winced. “No… They have a choice.”

Renee blinked. “How so?”

“Magic Mare is a fusion with one of these ghosts. Her friend was as well. I saw her. A fusion of Sunset.” Nova shook her head. “I saw the two of them doing horrid things as well, but Magic Mare is proof enough. They had a choice.”
Rarispy twirled her gun. “Good enough for me. They must be stopped by any means necessary. They’re too dangerous, have killed too many.”

Renee frowned. “I… Can’t bring myself to disagree. I wanted to.”

Nova looked at the moon above them. “This place… It’s more than just a collection of ghosts and memories.” She lit her horn and closed her eyes. “There is a lot of power here, of all mysterious kinds. This place – I think it’s like a sinkhole for the multiverse. A nexus of sorts, one that draws ponies and people in only to get possessed by ghosts. By these ‘Freaks’, as it were.”

“What does that mean?” Renee asked.

“It means this place, right here, is a place of high dimensional activity.” Nova rubbed her chin. “I wonder…”

Pinkie clapped her hooves. “Girls! Pepsi Man! I’ve got a plan!”

Nova blinked. “You do?”

“Yes. I do. I think you do as well. Huddle up, we’re going to get Twilight back!”

~~~

Rainbine leaned against a wall at the front gates of the castle, her black ‘ear spikes’ humming softly. She was resting her eyes, like she always did when it was her turn for guard duty. She snored, making it clear to the entire world that she was asleep on the job.

Anypony trying to bust into the castle would think the sleeping robotic pegasus would make their jobs so much easier, but this would not be the case. Her robotic spikes picked up on movement, jolting her awake in a single instant. She pointed her gun through the front gates where she’d detected movement. But now there was nothing.

She narrowed her eyes. “Who’s out there?”

“PEPSI MAAAAAN!” Pinkie shouted while Pepsi Man charged Rainbine. Rainbine had time to aim her gun but not time to shoot before she got punched in the face by the bizarre soda superhero. Pinkie followed this up with a golf club to the face.

Rainbine cracked her neck side to side. “Well, if it isn’t the pink one and the fizzing idiot! You’ve just raised the alarm. Everypony’s closing on this position, ready to give you a bad time!”

Pinkie put her hooves to her face. “Oh woe is us, your friends are coming! How dreadful and unexpected!”

Rainbine launched a missile at Pinkie, only for her to jump on top of it and ride it like a wild bull. She directed it back at Rainbine, yelling “Yippee Ki Yay!” the whole way. Rainbine dodged the missile by flying into the air, but Pepsi Man met her with his fist, forcing her to the ground.

She grunted, standing back up. “Two on one isn’t fair…”

“You were doing fine with two on one before!” Pinkie said, twirling her golf club. “Nova and Nightmare aren’t pushovers!”

Rainbine twitched. “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet, candy horse.”

A can of Pepsi appeared in Rainbine’s hooves and exploded, showering her in liquid. This did not
seem to affect her. She looked at Pepsi Man and raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

Pepsi Man moved to punch, but this time Rainbine fired her gun in time. The bullet exploded at his feet, knocking him flat onto his face. “Ha! Loser!”

Pinkie took the opportunity to hit Rainbine with her squeaky hammer, tossing the robot into a nearby wall. “Ha! Loser!” she echoed, giggling.

Rainbine growled, firing a volley of missiles at Pinkie, only for her to dodge all of them. “You shot! And you missed!”

Rainbine fired again, and again, and again, always missing. Pinkie giggled nonstop, having a wonderful time playing the game. “Oh! You hit something! It wasn’t me, but, you know, you should get points for that!”

The robotic pegasus twitched. She started yelling at a constant, enraged tone, building up her power.

Pinkie grinned. “That didn’t take as long as I was expecting.”

Rainbine stopped yelling once she had reached her ‘super’ state. “I was getting tired of this.” She pointed her gun, unleashing a barrage of much more powerful bullets, which Pinkie dodged. Rainbine was expecting this, taking the opportunity to punch Pinkie across the face with her enhanced speed. Pinkie went flying into Pepsi Man.

“Don’t. Mess. With the Rainbine.”

Pinkie giggled. “Looks like you’re finally ready.” She pulled her real warhammer out of her mane, slamming it on the ground hard enough to crumble the earth beneath. “I can start using the actual weapons now.”

Rainbine’s eyes widened. “Aw sh-“

The gigantic hammer met Rainbine’s face with a resounding clang that could only be made by two giant hunks of metal colliding at high speed. Rainbine’s face was now dented, but this didn’t appear to deter the robot. She flew behind Pinkie and kicked her into the ground.

Pepsi Man tried to take advantage of her turned back to deliver a punch, but her sensors warned of his attack. His face was sent back into the ground with a quick roundhouse kick. She fired a couple missiles at him, ready to finish off the muscular weirdo once and for all, but Pinkie caught the attack in a butterfly net.

Rainbine growled. “How’d you keep them from exploding!?”

“I didn’t,” Pinkie said. The missiles in her net all exploded, sending her flying, but keeping Pepsi Man safe.

“Ha!” Rainbine laughed. “Now you’re open!” She fired a complex pattern of missiles at Pinkie – one of which actually hit. Pinkie flew up into the air.

Rainbine narrowed her eyes. “Hey, where’s the blood?”

“I’m a sapient pasta noodle!” Pinkie giggled, pulling her warhammer out of nowhere again and bringing it down on Rainbine as she fell. Rainbine was flattened into the ground, grunting. A screw popped loose from one of her legs.
“Oh mallet, mallet, mallet in the morning,” Pinkie sung, swinging the warhammer back and forth. “Mallet, mallet, mallet all day!”

She stopped swinging, putting her weapon away. Rainbine’s super was gone. She tried to stand up, but found that two of her legs weren’t working, one of which was her gun leg. Her face was flat on two sides, one of her eyes wasn’t glowing, and her metallic tail was bent sideways. “Ow…”

“You’ll be fine,” Pinkie said, smirking. “A day at the shop and it’ll be good as new!”

Pepsi man doused Rainbine in a flood of Pepsi. “OWOWOWOWOWOWOOW!” she screamed. “THAT STINGS!”

“Hey, Pepsi Man!” Pinkie held up his hand, stopping the flood. “Not cool! She’s down, don’t hurt her anymore unless you have to! Got it?”

Pepsi Man nodded in understanding, apologizing with a short bow to Rainbine.

“…Screw you,” the robot muttered.

Pinkie looked deeper in the castle. “I hope the others are doing well… I’m concerned we didn’t attract more attention.” She furrowed her brow. “Did they expect us to be a distraction?”

Pepsi Man shrugged.

“Well come on! Let’s move in!” The two of them ran into the castle proper, ready for whatever the Elements of Insanity threw at them.

~~~

Brutalight’s alarm spell went off in Pinkis’ mind – they were being attacked at the front gates. Pinkis knew was that they were fighting Rainbine; that was all.

She dropped the giant sandwich she was preparing in the kitchen. She’d give Rainbine flak about interrupting her meal later, but helping the robot pegasus was easily more important than a simple sandwich. Plus, she could just eat the intruders. That would be great.

She heard a gunshot. A bullet shot right through her the back of the her, emerging between her eyes. She fell to the ground, glowing with the red energy of the Ubercharge, slowly healing herself back to full health. “All right, who’s the wise guy-“

Another bullet hit her, this time through the neck. She grunted, healing it again. “That’s really painful you know! It makes me angry! And hungry!”

Alushy dropped from the ceiling, twirling her guns. “Oh, trust me, I know the feeling.”

Pinkis laughed. “That’s a riot! You can’t know the hunger within me!”

“Bitch, I’m a vampire. I eat people.” She pointed a gun right at Pinkis’ face. “I biologically require industrial quantities of blood to live at my full potential. In other words, you’re not a special snowflake. You going to go cry to mommy about that or you gonna own up and fight like a woman?”

Pinkis roared, charging. Alushy pulled the trigger again, sending a bullet right into Pinkis’ mouth; a bullet that she caught with her teeth. Pinkis bit down on the bullet, shattering it.

Alushy blinked. “…That’s my trick.”
“I’m going to eat you just like I shattered that bullet.”

“What a coincidence!” Alushy sneered. “I was thinking the exact same thing!”

Pinkis punched Alushy across the face, tossing her red glasses to the side. Alushy aimed her gun, but Pinkis bit down on the leg the gun was attached to, severing the limb in a single chomp. Bucketloads of blood – far more than should have been inside Alushy – blasted everywhere.

Pinkis grinned. “Heh. That’s pretty good meat you got on you.”

Alushy smirked, her shadows coalescing together to reform her leg. “You were saying?”

“…What are you, just a flappier version of me?”

“I’m a flappier version of you with guns, better teeth, and a lot of undead magics buried within me.” Her tongue shot out, licking her teeth. “And you look like you need to see them.”

Pinkis grunted. She took a giant knife out of her mane. “Fine, let’s pull out all the stops here.”

“Oh, all the stops?” Alushy laughed. “Pinkis, you pathetic little ball of fluff. I don’t think you realize what you’re asking for.”

Pinkis grinned. “I’m asking for both of us to stop toying around.”

Alushy chuckled. “I can’t remember the last time I wasn’t toying around. Ready for Complete Bullshit Level One?”

“…Level One? Please, give me a bre-“

Alushy’s shadows shot from her body, forming dozens of sharp edges lined with necromantic eyes and laughing sounds. Pinkis’ leg was torn off with a quick burst of dark power, but she didn’t let the pain deter her. She just screamed in rage, twirling her knife around in an impossible way so as to deflect all the incoming shadows.

“It seems like you have some spark in you after all!” Alushy laughed. “Tell me, why do you not use those Pinkie abilities of yours often enough?” Pinkis jumped through hoops and twists to avoid the encroaching shadows. “It’s clearly all that’s keeping you alive right now!”

“Shut the hell up!” Pinkis yelled, punching Alushy right in the face, driving her knife between the vampire’s eyes. With a twist and a bite, Alushy’s head flew clean off, arcing through the air and landing with a splat.

“Heh,” Pinkis said. “Lost your head there.”

“That was a horrible joke,” Alushy said, shadows spiraling from where her head had been moments before. “It was so bad it makes me feel sorry enough for you that I’m going to skip right to the point. You want all the stops pulled? Consider them pulled.”

“That’s more li-“ Pinkis was cut into a hundred pieces and thrown onto the ground. She reformed in a few seconds, eyes wide. “What. In. The. Hell?”

Pinkis was thrown to the ceiling, all her bones cracking at once. She screamed. She couldn’t see anything but the eyes in the darkness. So many eyes… Staring at her…

Then there was the red hat and glasses. When had Alushy put them back on?
"You may be wondering why I was sent to you of all ponies," Alushy began, her shadows tearing at Pinkis’ limbs continually, never giving her a moment to react, never letting her Ubercharge stop working. “Certainly the sheer power of my complete bullshit would be better suited against Brutalight, yes?"

Pinkis grunted. “Enlighten me.”

“It’s because when you go down, you don’t stay down.” Alushy threw Pinkis to the ground, allowing the shadows to dissipate. “You heal yourself back up to full, no matter how intense the injuries. And there is nopony on that team who can make you stay down. Or, at least, none willing.”

Pinkis spat blood on the ground, standing back up to her full height. “So, a team of pansies then?”

“Yes. But I’m smart enough to know that’s probably better for them, in the long run.” Alushy shot Pinkis in the head, pushing her back. “But you know what else? Being a pansy only gets you so far. So, sometimes, you need somepony like me.” She grinned psychotically, her blood-soaked teeth glinting, her eyes flashing with a bright red bloodlust. “One who can get the job done. One who won’t hesitate. One who isn’t afraid to brutally murder. I’ve been ordered to take you out of the equation permanently by any means, and for once I’m giddy to follow somepony else’s orders.”

Pinkis coughed. “That… May be true, but-“

Alushy’s jaw opened far wider than should have been physically possible. She sank her teeth into Pinkis, driving her to the ground. She set to work slowly dismembering the freaky pony’s entire body, condensing it piece by piece into nothing.

In under a minute, there was no Pinkis left to devour. Alushy wiped her lips. “Told you.”

It was then that Alushy noticed she’d had an audience. Rarifruit was standing in a nearby hallway with the wheeled crutches on her back legs. She had a hoof to her mouth and eyes that trembled with emotions she wasn’t able to process. There was evidence she had already lost the contents of her stomach.

“Oh, sorry you had to see that,” Alushy said, twirling a gun. “Bit gruesome, no? Not as bloody as I’m used to, admittedly, but…”

“YOU MONSTER!” Rarifruit shouted, losing her strangely quiet voice for once in her life.

“Takes one to know one!”

“How could you do that and still have that stupid smile on your face?!”

“I don’t know…” She lowered her glasses and narrowed her eyes. “How could you slaughter all those hundreds of people you did?”

“They didn’t mean anything!”

Alushy fired a bullet, shattering one of Rarifruit’s wheeled crutches. She fell to the ground, unable to stand under her own power. Alushy’s looked down at her, scowling. “You know, I may be a monster, but I at least recognize that everyone I kill is a person. Rarely are they worthy of my respect, or really, worthy of more than a simple punchline, but they exist.” She holstered her gun.

Rarifruit summoned her magical grabby hands, throwing them at Alushy. Alushy rolled her eyes, dodged the hand, and flew away – out of Rarifruit’s range.
Rarifruit *screamed* at the top of her lungs in a rage unknown to most ponies. She knew, deep in her heart, that Alushy was going to *pay*. They would all pay *with their lives*.

In her tears, she pulled herself along the ground with her front hooves. She had somewhere important to be.

~~~

Fluttershout and Derpigun ran through the halls of the castle, planning to give Rainbine aid.

“Okay, Derpigun, listen,” Fluttershout said. “If your gun jams, get behind me. I’ll blow everything out of the water while you fix it. Then, any of them that are still up for some reason, you riddle with holes. Got it?”

“Right!” Derpigun said, hoisting her weapon. “Let’s kill some invaders!”

“As painfully as possible!”

“PILLS!” They heard Applepills scream, falling from a floor above them. She landed on her head. Fluttershout shook her head, picking up Applepills with her wing. “Applepills, we have to help Rainbine. I’ll give you pills after we’re done, okay?”

“Oh, right! I can wait!”

Fluttershout nodded. “Goo-“ She paused, a suspicious expression crossing her face. “Wait…”

“Damnit,” Applepills blurted, swinging with a butterfly knife at Fluttershout’s neck.

Fluttershout dodged, raising an eyebrow. “A Spy, huh?”

Rarispy revealed herself along with her sound-blocking headphones. “Yes. A Spy. A very *particular* Spy. The Spy whose sister you killed!”

“Oh, wait, how are you hearing us?” Derpigun asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” Fluttershout muttered.

“Lip reading,” Rarispy said, drawing her gun on Fluttershout. “Regardless, it’s been a terror knowing you, adieu.”

Fluttershout caught the incoming bullet with her voice, tossing it to the side. Derpigun activated her artillery, planning to riddle Rarispy with holes.

Unfortunately a large blue magic shield rose up in front of Rarispy, sending bullets ricocheting every which way.

“Quit it!” Fluttershout blurted. “You’re going to hit me!”

“Oh! Right!” Derpigun said, lowering her gun. “Where’s the other one?”

“Don’t know. Keep an eye out.” Fluttershout took in a breath and *blasted* the noise at Rarispy. The magical shield vibrated and shattered, allowing the force of sound to grab Rarispy and toss her back, head over hooves.

Fluttershout flew to Rarispy and flicked the headphones off with a swift motion. “Look at you,
helpless before me. You came here looking for vengeance – instead you just get to join your sister on the other side.” She took a breath.

A blast of blue magic hit Fluttershout in the side, knocking her over. Renee leaped from behind her vantage point, placing the headphones back on Rarispy with her magic and using her hooves to drag the dazed unicorn away.

“Derpigun!” Fluttershout blurted. “You were supposed to be watching for her!”

“Sorry!” Derpigun blurted, aiming her gun at the two retreating unicorns. The click sound was a clear indication of a jam. “Oh, come on!”

Renee pulled Rarispy all the way into a side hallway. She slapped her across the face. “Get a hold of yourself!”

Rarispy shook her head, clearing it. “That bitch…”

“Yes, I know, but we lost our surprise. We can’t take her in a straight fight.”

Rarispy grunted, standing up. “I’m not running from her again.”

Fluttershout and Derpigun slid into the view of Rarispy. Derpigun didn’t have to draw her weapon – she just aimed and fired. Renee raised the magical shield again, deflecting all the bullets.

Fluttershout reared. “Derpigun what did I tell you about shooting at-“

Derpigun’s arm-gun stopped firing in a single moment, and it wasn’t because it had jammed. A single bullet had bounced off Renee’s shield at just the wrong angle, nailing Derpigun right through the eye. A mixture of blood and circuitry was visible through the resulting hole.

She was able to keep standing for about three seconds. Then she collapsed, unmoving.

Renee gasped. “I just… I just…”

“You just did the multiverse a favor,” Rarispy muttered, drawing her gun on Fluttershout.

“I didn’t mean to!” Renee said. “We were supposed to subdue and… and…” she couldn’t take her eyes off the hole in Derpigun’s face that she had made. It was because of her, a clothing designer from Ponyville, that a pony was dead. She’d known this day would come, but nothing she told herself was doing anything to help her right now. She was frozen.

Fluttershout, on the other hand, was not. “You BASTARDS!” The vocal swear tossed the two of them back several yards. One of Rarispy’s legs broke on impact with the ground, prompting a sharp cry.

Fluttershout didn’t rush forward and remove the headphones – she just shouted again, tossing the two ponies further down the hall. Rarispy managed to get some shots off, but all the bullets were deflected by the power of Fluttershout’s voice.

The insane pegasus could have ended it at any time. She just needed to fly over there, yank off their headsets, and they’d be dead in a second or less.

She wasn’t going to let them go that fast. She kept unleashing violent bursts of sound, pushing the two Raritys further and further back, bruising and breaking them with every toss. They had taken her friend from her, so they were going to get the gift of a swift death taken from them.
"You HEAR that?" Fluttershout screamed. "THAT is the SOUND of you BASTARDS getting what you DESERVE!"

Renee couldn’t bring herself to disagree.

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Brutalight slammed on the doors of Twilight’s cage. “It looks like your friends are here, little pony. We’re going to kill them. Every last one of them. Unless you tell me what I want to know.”

Twilight barely had enough energy to look at Brutalight. Both of her wings were broken, her tail had been cut down to a pathetic size, fresh cuts lined all areas of her body, and half her face was swollen so much she couldn’t open an eye. But look at Brutalight Twilight did. She coughed. “…No.”

“Maybe you’ll change your mind when I drag one of your friends in here by their neck…” Brutalight sneered. “Do you think you could still say no if I held, say, ‘Renee’ by the throat and slowly gouged her fair mane out by removing her scalp?”

Twilight couldn’t respond. All she could do was cry.

“Ah, look at that, still haven’t run out of tears…” Brutalight stamped her hoof. “You can’t possibly last much longer. I’ll just wait here until one of your friends shows up – then I’ll capture them, and make you tell me. It’s just part of the waiting game… Think closely about your response when they come.”

A pony burst into the room – but it wasn’t one of Twilight’s. It was Rarifruit, crawling along her two front legs, dragging her broken crutches behind her. Brutalight’s stern exterior melted when she saw Rarifruit’s tear-stained face. “Rarifruit! What happened?”

“Alushy,” Rarifruit muttered. “She… She killed Pinkis…”

“Impossible,” Brutalight said, lighting her horn. To her alarm she couldn’t sense Pinkis – or Derpigun. “No… No no NO!” She glared at Twilight, eyes alit with arcane fire. “Two of my friends are dead, Princess!”

“I’m… Sorry…” Twilight said. The worst part was Brutalight knew she meant it.

Brutalight broke one of Twilight’s legs, prompting a shout of pain that was considerably less satisfying than she’d hoped. Brutalight sneered. “I’m not even going to pretend I have the high ground on you. I’d be in denial if I did. But you can’t pretend you have the high ground over me. You’re no different than us.”

Twilight hung her head, giving no response.

Brutalight lit her horn, fixing Rarifruit’s wheel crutches. “Go hide. Things are going to get ugly.”

“They’ve already gotten ugly…” Rarifruit said, trembling slightly.

“That’s why you need to hide. It’s going to get worse.” Brutalight twisted her head side to side. “We’re not going to let this all be in vain, Rarifruit. We will defeat them, and we will lay waste across their precious multiverse in the name of those who have fallen.”

Rarifruit nodded, allowing herself to smile. “R-right.”

“Now hide.”
Rarifruit ran off, galloping much faster now that she had working wheels.

Brutalight sneered. “Time to expose our little spy…” She cast an explosion spell, blasting a hole in a nearby wall right where Nova was hiding. The unicorn was tossed across the room, but she caught herself in her telekinesis, avoiding any injury.

Nova landed flat on her hooves. “There goes plan A.”

“Oh? Pray tell.”

“Wait for you to leave Twilight alone so I could get her out of here.”

Brutalight narrowed her eyes. “And what’s plan B?”

Nova levitated herself into the air and surrounded herself in a complex rotating crystalline shield. “Brute force.”

Brutalight flapped her wings, summoning two swords to her side. She created a complex array of magical circles beneath her. “So, how’s it feel?”

“How does what feel?” Nova asked, focusing seven different magical lasers onto the alicorn, which were easily deflected by her swords.

“Knowing that you ordered a pony’s death?” Brutalight retorted, activating her magical circles. The spells latched onto Nova’s shield on all sides, shattering it. Nova’s own circles reacted, launching crystal balls at Brutalight to little effect.

“I didn’t order anything of the sort,” Nova said, teleporting behind Brutalight and freezing her into a crystal prison. Brutalight broke out by summoning a sword to crack the crystal in half.

“Oh, so you couldn’t tell that Alushy was going to kill? Are you claiming to be that naive?” Brutalight shot her swords at Nova, spinning them in a complex pattern designed to hinder those who liked to spam teleport. Nova reacted with a burst of white energy, pushing everything away from her.

“No, I’m just saying that I wasn’t the one who gave the order.” Nova summoned a giant pole with holy winds swirling around it, driving it toward Brutalight’s chest. Brutalight summoned magical armor to her, shattering the weapon the moment it made contact.

“Then who the hell did?” Brutalight demanded, summoning spires of blood red all around Nova. One spike nicked Nova’s ear, drawing a small amount of blood, but Nova’s retaliation of a crystal shard storm had the same net effect on Brutalight.

“Pinkie did. She came up with the plan. Renee was the only dissenter.” Nova snapped the tips off the red spikes, hurling them at Brutalight. Brutalight shattered them as they reached her with a telekinetic barrier.

“You let a Pinkie order you around?” Brutalight said, flabbergasted.

Nova nodded. “When Twilight’s not around, she’s in charge. She’s proven herself.”

Brutalight shook her head. “I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Your Pinkie decided, all of a sudden, that you needed to use lethal force?”

“Only against one of you,” Nova said, expression dour. “We couldn’t think of any other way to take
care of Pinkis. There weren’t supposed to be any others.”

“What about Derpigun? What happened to her?”

“I don’t know. Whatever did, it wasn’t supposed to. I’m sorry.” Nova summoned a glowing sphere of cosmic energy. “I still have to get Twilight back.”

Brutalight activated her magic-sealing spell, completely done with this extended battle. Nova was expecting this, lighting her horn with a specially crafted spell that exploded, shattering the chain that went for her horn. She sliced the rest of the magic chains with a series of translucent blades.

Nova lit her horn, surrounding herself in a series of ticking constructs. “This may be a bad idea, but here goes…” She altered time so she would move several times faster than everything around her. She teleported behind Brutalight, hitting her in the back of the head with a small laser. A sword flew toward her – she managed to dodge, but she lost her focus on the complex time management spell.

“Maybe finesse isn’t always the way to go…” Brutalight muttered, whirling around. She flared her wings and put every inch of power she could into her magical laser. Nova met it with her own, equally powerful laser. Brutalight grinned, bringing a sword from the side right at Nova, ready to eviscerate her. A small magical shield deflected it. “…What!?”

“Heh… Heh…” Nova grunted, struggling against the force of the laser. “I’ve got… backup.”

Brutalight saw it – the drone, hovering at the edge of the room on Nova’s side. Brutalight sent a sword at it, but it deflected with its own spell. Brutalight tried forcing several swords to the drone at once, but it deflected each one in quick succession. It would be all too easy to simply crush the drone with magic, but Brutalight was currently busy dealing with a giant laser…

Brutalight smirked, an idea coming to her. She generated two swords and sent them to Nova and the drone at the same time. The drone protected Nova – not itself. The little machine exploded in a shower of white hot sparks.

“D… Darnit…” Nova muttered. She saw the other sword coming for her. She had to do something, but she knew it wasn’t going to work. The instant before the sword hit, she dropped her retaliation laser to create a prism shield. It existed just long enough to block the sword – but its creation let some of Brutalight’s laser through. It hit Nova square in the chest, singing her coat. She went flying through the wall behind her, coming to a stop in a pile of rubble.

Brutalight had mixed feelings when she discovered Nova was still conscious. She lifted Nova out of the rubble with her telekinesis and glared. “I. Win.”

“No. You. Don’t!” Nova yelled, furrowing her brow. Then a look Brutalight couldn’t recognize came over Nova, and the unicorn let her body go limp.

Brutalight grinned. “Did you blow out your horn with that? What a pathetic way to go. You fought well, considering you’re just a unicorn. But you knew when you decided to face me that I would win.”

Nova refused to say anything.

Brutalight pressed Nova into the cage wall separating them from Twilight. “Hey Twilight! I got one!”

Twilight whimpered. “Nova…” she said, reaching out a hoof.
Nova winced, now that she could see Twilight closely. “What did she do to you…?”

Twilight looked at Nova’s moving lips in confusion – then started crying.

“Too late for that… But you can still save her,” Brutalight told Twilight. “What will it be?”

~~~

“We need to get to the Rarities now,” Pinkie said, running through the castle halls. “It’s not going well.”

Pepsi Man glanced at her. She knew he was confused by what she was saying even though he had no expression.

“I just know, okay? No I don’t know where in the castle they are, but I know it’s going badly. Just look, evidence of a large fight, anythi-“ Pinkie leaped into the air and twisted to the side, narrowly missing a large magical hand flying right at her. “Woa-HO-oh!”

Rarifruit cursed under her breath. “You should have died right there.”

“Didn’t!” Pinkie said, exchanging her warhammer for a squeaky hammer. “You should really go hide, Rarifruit. You’re disabled, in pain, and… Well you need to think through some thin-“

“YOU KNOW!” Rarifruit yelled. “No, you KNEW! YOU SENT HER!”

Pinkie nodded, grimacing. “Yes, that was me.”

“How could you!?”

“How could you talk like that!?” the magical hands swept Pinkie again, but she effortlessly sidestepped them.

“Cause… I know things, Rarifruit. I know that you’re the bad ponies here. I knew Pinkis couldn’t be stopped with anything less than what happened. I take full responsibility for it.” Tears started flowing from Pinkie’s eyes. “This place is so horrible. But I couldn’t just let her keep killing ponies!”

“WHY NOT?” Rarifruit yelled. “THEY’RE JUST PONIES!”

Pinkie’s hair went flat. “E-excuse me?” She threw her hammer aside, opting for a scythe instead.

“There were a pair of Rarispy sisters, once. They left their pointless war together and set out to change the world. Then one’s brains exploded out her ears, leading to a destruction of the remaining Rarispy’s joy and replacing it with pointless revenge.” She took an ominous step closer. “There was once a Twilight who refused her call since her birth in this world, devoting her life to understanding the existence she had denied, hoping to help others. It would have been so poetic and beautiful were she the one to finally crack the code, but she was killed by an enchanted sword, frozen by special death magics.” Pinkie swung the scythe, disintegrating a magic hand. She placed the blade right at Rarifruit’s neck. “And then there was a psychotic monster of an alicorn who, honestly, probably deserved what she got. But when she left, a mare was given reason to change for the better.”

Rarifruit whimpered.

“So what were you saying about them ‘just being ponies?’ Please. I’d love to hear more.”

Pinkie pulled the scythe away and placed it back in her mane. “Not going to. There’s been enough death today. If I did, I’d just justify what you do. I won’t do it if I don’t have to.” She shook her head, poofing her mane back out. “You should just go hide.”

Rarifruit started laughing. “You… You’re a fool!”

“I… I what?”

There was a loud squishing sound behind her. Pinkie paled, turning around to see the second magic hand – the one she hadn’t taken care of – having snapped Pepsi Man in half. He wasn’t moving, only leaking brown soft drink onto the ground.

Pinkie didn’t even have to go check him to know he was dead.

Pinkie’s hair went flat again. She summoned the scythe.

“Go ahead and kill me. Eye for an eye. That’s how it has to be.”

Pinkie slid past Rarifruit, swinging the scythe twice. Rarifruit expected the pain, or at least the shocked feeling of being cut up, to come – but it never did. Her wheeled crutches fell apart instead, crumbling to the ground.

“What?” Rarifruit yelled.


She hit Rarifruit on the head, knocking her out.

~~~

Rarispy tumbled across the ground as another shout hit her. She had lost count of how many bones were broken at this point. She caught a glimpse of Renee as she tumbled – the unicorn had stopped moving a few seconds ago. Rarispy couldn’t do anything to help her. She couldn’t do anything at all.

She tried to move, but she was tossed back again. And again.

“DIE in the MOST painful way you CAN!” Fluttershout screamed at them.

Won’t be much longer at this rate…

“Hey Flutterbitch,” a deep, menacing voice said. “Those are my friends.”

“What the-“

Alushy dropped on the ground behind her, pointing a gun and smirking. “Hellooooo sprightly! You’re lucky, I have to play nice, so-“

Fluttershout didn’t wait. She noticed Alushy wasn’t wearing any soundblocking headphones, so she let out the strongest shout she could muster in the vampire’s direction. Her head flung back, her red glasses cracked, and blood poured behind her – but she just twisted her neck and righted herself.

Alushy grinned. “See, Fluttershout? This is called a ‘shit eating grin.’ Remember it well, it may be t-“
Fluttershout was having none of this. She unleashed a scream and maintained it. Alushy’s body was lifted off the ground and pressed into a wall – and held there. “This… Gives a new meaning to earrape…” She gurgled through her rapidly flattening body. She tried to reach for a gun, but realized that not only were the guns probably broken from the stress, but her hoof wouldn’t move at all.

She waited for Fluttershout to take a breath.

*She didn’t.*

Alushy tried to sneer, but her face muscles wouldn’t respond. She tried the Stare – but she was just stared back, the effects cancelling. She unleashed her shadows, but they were only pressed back to the wall with her. She let out a bloodcurdling roar.

The sound kept her pressed to the wall, immobile, unable to act.

Alushy let herself smile. “And… Here I thought I… was the one with the complete… bullshit attack…”

Fluttershout just kept screaming, fueled by pure rage, unable to think about anything else.

Not even the Rarispy crawling toward her. One of Rarispy’s legs still worked, and she was using it to drag herself closer and closer to the back end of Fluttershout. Even with the sound directed away from her, the power was strong enough to make one of her ears bleed. But she didn’t care.

She readied her butterfly knife. It would take one stab to the throat, and even if she didn’t die she definitely wouldn’t be able to speak anymore. Just… One… Stab…

“PILLS!”

*Shit.* Rarispy twisted to the left and thrust her knife forward, hitting the incoming Applepills right in the neck. A fatal blow – but not one that would stop the incoming earth pony. The hoof made direct contact with Rarispy’s already severely damaged skull. Something in her neck snapped.

She and Applepills slumped to the ground in a heap. Neither moved.

Fluttershout kept screaming at Alushy.

This lasted until Pinkie arrived. The flat-maned earth pony appeared beside Fluttershout and swung her squeaky hammer – hitting the pegasus square in the throat.

Fluttershout choked on the attack, stopping the shout instantly. She tried to start it up again – but her vocal cords wouldn’t cooperate. She could barely breathe, much less scream. She crumpled to the ground, focusing on getting enough oxygen to her brain to stay alive. She couldn’t focus on anything else.

Pinkie wiped her face, doing almost nothing about the tears rolling down her face. “I… I didn’t kill her. Good. Good…”

Alushy tore herself out of her hole in the wall. “I… Guess… *God* I’m pissed.”

“No tearing her apart.”

“I won’t. I’ll just imagine it.” She sighed. “You… Might want to check on your Raritys.”

Pinkie went to Renee and lifted her up, placing her hat back on her head. The unicorn was bruised, battered, and had several broken bones and presumably a comparable amount of internal bleeding,
but she was alive.

Rarispy…

Rarispy coughed up blood. “I… I am not making it…”

“We could get you to a-“ Renee began.

“No, you can’t,” Rarispy said.

Alushy, looked at Rarispy with pity. “…Vampirism is an option. I can give it to you, right now. You’ll get a bunch of totally kickass powers. You’ll also get to experience ‘life’ a bit more.”

“…Thanks, but no thanks. I… Need to be with ma soeur.” She looked at Pinkie. “Is that… Are we winning?”

“Just one left,” Pinkie said.

“Good…” Rarispy said, closing her eyes. “The job… will be done…” Her face went slack.

The three ponies stood in silence around the fallen unicorn.

Alushy coughed. “Should we go after Brutalight, or…”?

“That’s up to Nova,” Pinkie said, shaking her head. “Let’s… Let’s just round all of them up.” She laughed bitterly. “I guess I was the one to deal with all three that are still alive…”

She turned and trotted away. “Watch Renee, okay Alushy?”

“You got it,” Alushy said, looking at Renee. “…You really should stop staring at the body, it isn’t good for you.”

“…That could be me,” Renee said, looking into Alushy’s eyes. “That could be me, Alushy. That could have been any of us!”

Alushy nodded. “And it could have been one of them. Death happens. You knew what you were signing up for.”

“…There’s a difference between preparing yourself for it and actually experiencing it.”

Alushy let out a bitter laugh. “You’re full of precious little nuggets of wisdom. You would make millions in the fortune cookie business.”

Renee let out a very undignified snort despite herself.

~~~

Brutalight was lowering the magic spike ever-closer to Nova’s eye, prepared to gouge it out if Twilight wasn’t going to say anything – but then she felt it.

Applepills’ soul vanish.

She stopped the torture, making the spike disappear. She listened closely – she could still hear Fluttershout screaming. Why was she screaming for so long? What could possibly demand that much noise?
Then the noise stopped abruptly.

Brutalight paled. Fluttershout was still alive, but that didn’t sound good. She ground her teeth together – Twilight’s friends would probably arrive at her present location very soon. There was no more time for conventional torture.

“Dammit,” she cursed. “Fine, plan C.” She grabbed Nova and Twilight in her telekinesis, the magic chains around Twilight jingling slightly. “We’re going on a trip.”

She teleported the three of them into a graveyard - a very particular graveyard that meant a lot to Brutalight and her friends. Tears stung at her eyes as memories flooded her mind of Pinkis, Applepills, and, yes, even the klutzy Derpigun. Every last one of them had been at her side for their entire rampage of insanity, and most of them had been her friends in a previous life… And now that bond was gone. They wouldn’t be coming back. They wouldn’t get to be ghosts. They’d just be gone.

And these ponies – oh these interdimensional travellers – had been the cause of their undoing. She’d be sure that she, Brutalight Sparcake, would be their undoing.

She threw Twilight on the ground in front of a gravestone. “Look closely at the scene around you, Charter. It will be the last thing you see as yourself.”

“W-what?” Twilight said.

Brutalight smirked. “Curious thing. Did you know I used to be a regular Twilight Sparkle, not all that unlike you? I was dragged here from another world and deposited in this graveyard full of Freak ghosts… And these ghosts possessed my friends, birthing the ponies that would become the Elements of Insanity. But, see, I didn’t want to be like them. So I tried to run, to flee, to escape. They had to force me to give up Twilight, and become Brutalight.” She cackled. “Best decision they ever made.”

Twilight stared up at her, slowly working out what was going to be done to her.

“You see it, don’t you? I’ll just turn you into one of us. I didn’t want to resort to this – considering how unpredictable it is – but desperate times call for desperate measures.” She lit her horn, summoning the ghost within. The ‘intelligent’ Heavy appeared, groaning.

Brutalight smiled at him. “I’ve got a fleshy body for you.”

Intelligent Heavy rubbed his hands together.

“HEY ASSHOLE!”

Brutalight stopped, turning to Nova. “…Did you just say-“

Nova had her horn lit. Her hoof was placed on the edge of a complicated set of magic circles etched into the ground around the whole graveyard. “Yes, I called you an asshole. Because that’s what you are. And guess what, asshole, you never sealed my magic away. I got you good, pretending to be helpless.”

Brutalight twitched, preparing a spell of her own – but Nova activated the magic circles. The Heavy hid back in his gravestone, leaving Brutalight all alone.

Brutalight growled at the lights of the magic circle appearing all around her. She tried to fire off her spell – but a magic lock clasped itself around her horn. She summoned a sword to free her – but
Nova herself grabbed the sword with her magic.

Brutalight roared as she was tied to the ground next to Twilight, all of her attempts to escape foiled by Nova’s quick thinking. “This won’t hold me long!”

“Definitely not,” Nova said, “but I didn’t spend a whole hour inscribing a magic circle just for a simple magic seal spell. You see, you are currently standing in the middle of a dimensional sinkhole, a place where dimensional energies are prevalent and the boundaries between worlds are, effectively, thin. I can, under my own power, open a portal.”

The ground beneath Brutalight shimmered, shaking with the ripples of spacetime. Brutalight’s eyes widened. “No…”

“You’re going somewhere where you can never hurt anypony ever again!”

“NO!” Brutalight yelled. The ground gave out beneath her, but Nova opted to levitate her for a moment rather than let her plunge. She let Brutalight see the endless ocean beneath her. Nothing but water for as far as the eye could see.

“I’ll drown!” Brutalight wailed.

“The chains will lose their anchor when the portal closes, you’ll be fine,” Nova said. “But you’ll spend your days in this abandoned ocean world.”

“You… You can’t do this!”

“Yes, I can. And I have.” Nova narrowed her eyes. “You can’t possibly think I’m doing the wrong thing. What would you do in my place?”

Brutalight didn’t make eye contact.

“That’s right, kill me. Thought so. Goodbye, Brutalight. Enjoy the rest of your life.”

Pinkie appeared next to Nova, a large cardboard box with three ponies in her hooves. “Here’s your friends, Brutalight,” Pinkie muttered. She tossed the box into the portal, landing it perfectly on the waves so it floated. “Bye.”

Nova closed the portal, sealing the four ponies on the other side.

She let out a deep breath. “…Are the others okay, Pinkie?” Judging from Pinkie’s flat mane, she thought she knew the answer.

“Pepsi Man and Rarispy didn’t make it. Renee needs medical attention. I’m not sure what we can do…” Pinkie looked down at Twilight. “Hey, Twilight…”

Twilight forced herself to smile. “H… Hey?”

Nova gulped. “Back to Crosstown.” She lit her horn and teleported away.

~~~

Flutterfree burst into the medical room. “I got it!” she shouted at the top of her lungs.

“Ah, yes! Brilliant!” the Medic said, grabbing the medigun and turning it on. “Hardly a scratch on her!” He activated it, healing a different version of Fluttershy who was barely clinging on to life.
Flutterfree grinned, rushing over to Scouty’s bed. “I got it! I got it, Scouty, I got the-“

The bed was empty.

Flutterfree stared at it, a hollow feeling in her stomach. She turned to the bed on the left, to Rainbat. “W-where’s Scouty?”

“He… Didn’t make it…” Rainbat said, tossing a baseball off a nearby wall and back into her hoof. “…Medic carted him out only a few minutes ago.”

Flutterfree trembled. She lost all support in her back legs and fell onto her rear. Her wings hung limp, and her lips began to quaver.

Rainbat saw this happening. “L-look, Flutterfree, you d-did what you could. You’re a hero.”

“But I…”

Rainbat grabbed Flutterfree’s head, even though it was painful for her to make this motion. “You. Are. A. Hero. You can’t save everyone.”

Flutterfree began to cry. “That’s not fair!”

“You save as many as you can, Flutterfree! That’s all you can do!”

“B-but-“

“MAKE WAY!” Alushy shouted, flying in through the front doors, carrying two ponies. She plowed into the dirt, making a crease in the ground with her face. “Ugh… Thank you for flying Air Alushy. The exit is on the left and the pilot needs to hurl…” She passed out.

The Medic took one look at Alushy’s passengers – Renee and Twilight – and pointed the Medigun at them. “Zese injuries… Terrible. Vould not have been able to treat vithout ze gun… zanks to you, Flutterfree.”

Flutterfree rushed to Twilight and Renee, heart in her chest. Scouty was momentarily forgotten in favor of two ponies she had known much of her adult life. “Renee! Twilight! Are you okay!?”

Renee let out a sigh of relief as the medical gun’s charge filled her up. “I… I will be. I… OW! Okay, ribs snapping back into place are not pleasant…”

Flutterfree hugged her. “I was worried about you…”

“It’s good to see you too.”

Flutterfree released Renee and turned to Twilight. Twilight’s injuries were much more intense, but they were healing just the same. The cuts turned to scars, the bones in her legs and wings reset correctly, and her face’s swelling reduced to normal.

Twilight let out a sigh of relief – the pain was gone.

“Hey, Twilight,” Flutterfree said. “How are you doing?”

Twilight looked at Flutterfree and tried not to cry. She failed. “I… I can’t hear you, Fluttershy. I can’t hear you. I…” She broke down, putting her head in her hooves.

Flutterfree forgot everything for the moment and hugged her old friend.
Alushy cleared her throat and walked into Colonel Carter’s personal office. “So, what did I do this time and how bad is the punishment?”

Carter ignored the question. “The Mirror Portal connected to us again. They had a full army ready to deploy in case everything went wrong – I had to tell them we’d sorted it out, and that we just needed to replenish our dimensional devices. We didn’t need to declare war – and in fact had some friends at a nearby Mann Co who might want to talk to them.”

“…And?”

“And all of that is due, in part, to you. There is no war, there are new friends. One of the most important individuals in the entire multiverse was saved. A threat to many worlds was nipped in the bud.” She leaned in. “And yet, I still believe you are an out of control murderous psychopath.”

“Not really the biggest secret in the universe now, is that?”

“No. It’s not.” She leaned back. “But, despite this, I’ve decided to give you what you want.”

Alushy’s grin widened. “Wait, seriously? I was beginning to think that’d never happen!”

“It’s not because of your ‘good girl points’, mind you. The way you were going you wouldn’t have impressed me at all.” Carter folded her arms. “It’s something Pinkie said to me. ‘Batman needs to kill the Joker already’.”

“…What?”

“She meant that we sometimes need people like you. Sometimes, extremely brutal force is just what’s required. The pony who can do that without hesitating is a boon to those she allies herself with. She recommended I let you through.” Carter reached into her pocket and pulled out a dimensional device. “…You’ve earned this.”

Alushy laughed. “Thank you Colonel! Haha!” She stuck it in her suit. “I knew it’d pay off eventually!”

“…Aren’t you going to jump to another universe?”

“Now? Nah, later. I’ll probably hang out until the ponies leave. What did you take me for, some cut and run little bitch?”

“…Yes.”

“Looks you need to learn a bit more than the Batman-Joker lesson. Why not the ‘don’t judge a book by its cover’ lesson? Much simpler, grade-school stuff.”

“I…”

“Baby steps, Colonel. Baby steps.”

Carter shook her head. “I’m going to regret this, aren’t I?”

“Very likely,” Alushy said. “I won’t though!” She spread her wings and flew out of the room. “WOOOOOO! I GOT MY DEVICE EVERYONE! YOU CAN NOW CASH IN ON YOUR BETS WITH EACH OTHER! Let me revel in the sudden influx of people who are completely broke. HA!”
Carter sat down in her chair and held the bridge of her nose.

~~~

Twilight stared at the sunset, watching as the day slowly turned to twilight.

She knew there were many ponies and people walking around below her vantage point on a roof, but she couldn’t hear any footsteps, any chatter, nothing. There was no noise.

…That wasn’t completely true. There was a soft ringing tone in her ears, but she knew that was just her body’s internal vibrations interacting directly with her brain. Probably a mixture of the circulatory, nervous, and thaumic systems. There was no external sound at all.

She was deaf.

The medigun hadn’t fixed it. She was pretty sure that meant it was permanent.

There were spells she could use… She could learn wing sign… She could practice reading lips… None of which were things she currently had. Hearing spells were never perfect, and they didn’t process sound the same way an ear did… There was no filtering, no processing, and it was always too sensitive. And she didn’t even know one of those spells right now.

This was going to be hard to adjust to. She’d never be able to listen to music and enjoy it again. It’d interfere with her adventuring. She’d never hear Pinkie’s voice with her own ears again… None of their voices with her own ears again…

A pink hoof waved in front of her eyes. She turned to her left, seeing Pinkie. “…How long have you been standing there?” She could feel her vocal cords vibrate, and she was reasonably sure she’d said what she meant to, but… It still felt wrong.

Pinkie pulled a sign out of her mane. A while.

“…Sorry, didn’t notice.”

She flipped the sign over. Not a problem.

“I know… Guess you were just letting me think, huh?”

She flipped it again. Yeah. Also didn’t know what to say.

“You don’t have to say anything.”

I’m not! Woo!

Twilight laughed – yet another noise of her own she could feel, but not hear. “Right, right… I just… I don’t know, Pinkie. I know there are lots of ponies who can live without hearing, and I know it’s possible. I just… Part of me was taken away.”

I know.

“You’d think I’d be scarred by the torture… Or the pain… Or, well, these literal scars I have all over my body now, right under my coat. But no. All of that… I knew I was doing it for a cause, so I went through it. My mind didn’t let it affect me. Everything about it… It’s blurry. But this… This is going to stay. Forever.”

I’m sorry. I couldn’t stop it.
“My hearing was the first thing she attacked. After that… She just tried to break my bones. She did. I
let her. I didn’t break, and that kept me going. I didn’t let myself think about what I was going to do.
I just…” She broke down in tears.

Pinkie pulled her into a hug. Twilight felt her sigh. Twilight checked her mane – poofy, but
somehow not as vibrant as usual. “…What happened to you?”

_I told Alushy to kill a pony._

Twilight gulped. “Pinkie… I’m so sorry I had to put you in that situation…”

_Don’t. One of us would have to do it eventually. We’ll have to do it again._

Twilight wiped her face. “I know. …Why does there have to be death out here, Pinkie? Why does
there have to be so much violence, blood, and torture? Why?”

_I’m not sure. It might just be that we’re the unusual ones. Maybe things aren’t supposed to be as
nice as we are._

“We’re losing our niceness…” Twilight said, rubbing the scars on her leg. “It’s being tormented out
of us, bit by bit.”

_Might that be a good thing?_

“Maybe. Maybe not. It might just be a tradeoff. Lose some innocence, gain some wisdom.” She
shook her head. “I… Just…” She looked at Pinkie. “We really aren’t going to get through this in one
piece.”

_No._

“…I still can’t bring myself to tell us to _stop_. The Stars told us to stop…”

_But we can’t listen._

“No. We can’t.” Twilight stood up tall, glaring at the twilight sky. “We can’t listen. I don’t care if it’s
just Starbeat’s stupid _Beat_ carrying us on, or some other stupid force, hunkering down and _hiding_
just isn’t _right_. What if _our_ world was the one where the Elements of Insanity were born? Had we
not explored and known things, they would have killed us _all_.” She shook her head.

_You’re right._

“I know I’m right. But I don’t like it.”

_You don’t have to like it._

Twilight smiled at Pinkie. “Yeah. That’s true. How much of what you see do _you_ like?”

_Less than I’d like._

Twilight chuckled softly. “And that’s the _truth_.” She hugged Pinkie. “I’ll be strong when I have to
do it, just like you were. Then you won’t be alone.”

Pinkie wasn’t able to reach the sign to turn it over. She just returned the embrace.

~~~
Renee and Flutterfree sat on opposite ends of a table at the Crosstown mess hall. Both of them had giant cups of coffee.

“…I couldn’t save Scouty,” Flutterfree said.

“You saved us. I killed a pony,” Renee said.

“Did it… help save Twilight?”

“Yeah. I like to think so, anyway,” Renee said. “I’m not sure if we would have failed with her alive, though…” She took a sip of her coffee, looking out a window. “Flutters, I’m scared.”

“Of more death?”

“No. Of what we’re becoming.”

Flutterfree looked down. “How… so?”

“Pinkie came up the plan quickly. Very quickly. Condemning a pony to her death…” Renee shook her head. “We would never have considered a plan like that before. Not in a million years.”

Flutterfree nodded. “…Was the plan wrong?”

“That’s the problem. I complained at the time. But… Pinkie was right in her thinking. Pinkis wasn’t going to stay down, and we were only able to plan that Brutalight would teleport to the graveyard…” She rammed her forehead into the table and groaned.

Flutterfree put a wing over her. “Shh… Renee, it’s over now. The bad ponies are gone, Twilight is safe, and the Elements of Insanity aren’t going to kill anypony else.”

“At what cost?”

Flutterfree gulped. “The innocence of a handful of ponies. It’s… It’s a good trade.”

“Can’t save everyone…” Renee said.

“Can’t save yourself…” Flutterfree added.

“I couldn't save Rarispy. Couldn’t even move. Then a pony came out of nowhere, and both ended up dead. Eye for an eye…”

“Horrible way to live.”

The two silently took another drink.

“…Thank you, Flutters, for risking yourself for us.”

Flutterfree smiled. “I’d do that in a heartbeat.”

Renee nodded. “…What wouldn’t we do for each other?”

“I… I don’t think there’s much of anything.”

Renee’s expression darkened. “That’s terrifying, in a way.”

“Hrm?”
“Friendship is powerful, Flutters. Very powerful. The Elements of Insanity had it, and look what they did. What if we become like that?”

“We won’t,” Flutterfree asserted. “I’ll make sure of it.”

“The pony who stands…” Renee said, frowning.

“None of that, Renee! We are going to be better than them! So what if the Magic of Friendship may not always be a good thing? We can make sure that our Friendship is. Got it?”

A smile crawled up Renee’s face. “Got it, Flutters.”

“Good. Celestia, this coffee is terrible.”

“I know!”

~~~

“So, in conclusion,” Nova said, making her magical image vanish, “we need to remove Nautica from the Directory.”

“I agree,” Colonel Carter said. “And everyone will agree. But you know the governments will keep the coordinates for themselves, for their own use. And do you know what an uninhabited blacklisted universe sounds like?”

“…What?”

“A prison. A prison to dump any criminal they can’t or won’t deal with.”

Nova frowned. “That sounds… Well, actually not all that bad.”

“Some people are going to be thrown in there who don’t deserve it. For many of them, it will just be a death sentence because they don’t have the magic the Elements of Insanity have. Not to mention the Elements might just kill them.”

Nova sighed. “…What do you suggest we do then?”

“Blacklist it anyway,” Carter said, leaning into the palm of her hand. “I’m just making sure you know the consequences. Not blacklisting it will just give the Elements of Insanity an opportunity to escape.”

“…Okay.”

“Are you sure they can’t escape themselves? You made a portal under your own power.”

“The dimensional fabric was weak in that particular spot,” Nova said. “I simply reversed the flow of ‘energy’ and tapped into it for my spell. It wouldn’t have worked anywhere else in the multiverse. The other side did not have that type of space in it – not that Brutalight would even know what to look for. We told her nothing.”

Carter nodded. “Of course.” She opened the Directory she had on her desk, flipping to 000009 – Esefem. She scribbled a few notes on a piece of paper and inserted it at the end of the file. Then she flipped toward the back of the book, to the small entry on Nautica. She scrawled Dangerous Individuals Present, Blacklist Pending. “That should take care of that, for now. …How’s Twilight doing?”
“…I don’t know,” Nova admitted. “She seems fine, but she’s not doing great. I… Can’t really talk to her at the moment. She has no idea what I’m saying. We’ll see about getting her a hearing spell when we get back, but I know she won’t like it. I have confidence she can get through this – she’s strong – but it will take some time.”

“Pinkie?”

“She doesn’t seem all that affected, but I’m pretty sure she is. I know she’ll be fine though. It’s Renee I’m worried about.”

Carter nodded. “Her first kill…”

“Our first. For any of us. Even Pinkie didn’t actually… you know.”

Carter sighed. “It’s always difficult. It really does become easier. No, that’s not a good thing.”

“I wouldn’t think it was.”

“Part of me had hoped you ponies would get to live like your world wants – in harmony and friendship and amazing innocence.”

Nova shrugged. “We’re just too curious for that, apparently.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s our choice,” Nova asserted. “Let us face our consequences and don’t feel guilty about it.”


Nova saluted back. “Thank you, Colonel.”

~~~

Brutalight had transformed the cardboard box into a simple raft with her magic. They had already caught several dozen fish to eat and had gotten over the seasickness. Rarifruit had her crutches again, Fluttershout’s voice was slowly returning, and Brutalight was currently repairing Rainbine.

“Just… Hold… Still!”

“Not my fault!” Rainbine shouted. “You’re pulling a motor wire! Just replace it!”

“There’s no replacements out here!” Brutalight shouted. “Look around! We’re in an endless ocean. There’s probably not any land at all on this god-forsaken planet! We’re in a prison. So we’re just going to have to make do.”

Rainbine sighed. “I… You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Brutalight took in a sharp breath. “It’s… It’s Okay. We… We’re all angry.”

“Yeah…” Fluttershout rasped.

Rarifruit just burst into tears without any words.

Brutalight hung her head in defeat. “Look… Girls, we lost. We lost our fight, we lost our friends, and we lost our home. We… We need to accept that, and do our best here. We have each other.
That’s… That’s something.”

“…Yeah…” Fluttershout agreed. Rainbine nodded as well. Rarifruit just kept crying.

Brutalight looked up into the sky at the huge alien moon. She found herself wondering how this affected the tides of this water world, but before she could complete her analysis she saw something else.

A fireball.

A big fireball.

Something was crashing toward the planet from space.

Brutalight smirked. “Girls, we may have lost, but it looks like we might have something to do.” She pointed up. “Whatever that is… It’s ours now.” She stood tall. “We are going to remember our friends, and we are going to turn this world into our world. For them.”

“Right!” Rainbine shouted, grinning. “This place is ours!”

“Our,” Fluttershout added.

“…Ours,” Rarifruit managed, looking into the sky.

Four ponies watched the skies with anticipation.
Corona and Tempest stood before the arches, preparing for what Corona believed to be one of the cooler missions they’d been assigned. Usually the area around the arches was crowded – but not today. Today, it was just the two of them, the arches, and a spherical white capsule with two seats in it.

They were to climb into the capsule and take it through the arches into a universe that had absolutely nothing in it. Just eternal blackness. Visiting this place would be amazing all on its own, just to feel what floating in nothingness really felt like. But there was a real purpose to their mission – they were to take the capsule ‘up’ and use a dimensional device to return. They were going to try and get into orbit around Earth without using a rocket.

Corona was a little surprised they hadn’t tried this before – it’d be so useful if they could pull this off. No more huge, expensive, accident-prone rockets. It’d be as simple as shifting to a dimension, moving ‘up’, and you could escape the gravity prison of the Earth.

Corona zipped up her custom red spacesuit – it was rather tight around her body, and made her limbs look puffy. It wasn’t anywhere near as baggy or awkward as the suits she’d seen used around the International Space Station, so she considered herself lucky. Yet, she couldn’t get the itching at her shoulders and hips out of her mind.

“And they say these are designed for comfort…” Corona muttered, zipping up the arm pieces around the gloves.

“As much as a spacesuit can be,” Tempest said, adjusting the shoes on her own purple suit. “Haven’t discovered a universe with a true bodysuit yet, so we’ve got to deal with this. Suck it up.”

Corona rolled her eyes. “I am.” She snapped her fingers, creating a small flame in the air. Her gloves didn’t catch fire. Good. She flexed her legs and arms, getting a feel for the movement of the suit. “You know, if everything goes right we’ll never have to leave the pod, and these suits will be pointless.”

“Better safe than sorry,” Tempest reiterated, grabbing her fishbowl-esque helmet and placing it on her head.

Corona moved to place hers on as well.

“You don’t need your sunglasses on under the helmet,” Tempest said, muffled through her helmet.

“But what about-“

“The helmet has the same scanning systems,” Tempest told her. “You’re too dependent on those glasses.”

You have no idea, Corona thought, folding the glasses up and placing them in an internal breast pocket. She put the helmet on, getting a much larger version of the display she was used to – faint green lines and symbols that quickly minimized themselves so as not to obstruct her view. It briefly identified Tempest as a friendly and logged her location.

Corona tapped her helmet. “Is this what a fish feels like?”
“Who cares?” Tempest muttered. “It’s a helmet. It does what it needs to do.”

Corona rolled her eyes. “You’re never any fun.”

Tempest harrumphed, climbing into the open pod. “Get in.”

Corona bounced in, landing on the plush seat with considerable force. She buckled herself in. The top of the pod slid over them, sealing the two agents in a white sphere with a single oval window in front of them. There were numerous levers and dials below the window, forming a complicated console. Corona realized that she knew what most of them did. Apparently she really was learning. Go figure.

“Ready,” Tempest called into the microphone.

The arches activated with the usual song and dance – electricity, rings of blue star patterns, a clear portal to another world. In this case, the portal led to a place of infinite blackness.

“Initiating roll,” Tempest said, pressing a button.

Corona blinked. “…Roll?”

The pod rolled forward, rotating Corona and Tempest with it. Corona felt the blood rush to her head when the seats were at the highest place, then back to her feet when it made a full turn. She shook her head. “This is disorienting…”

She didn’t know what she was talking about. The pod passed through the arches when it was upside down, jarringly changing Corona’s orientation from upside down to none whatsoever. She blinked and tried to get her bearings, failing miserably to determine any up at all. She brought her hands to her stomach. “Ooogh…”

“You don’t want to hurl in that,” Tempest said.

“No, really?” Corona said. She realized that the orb was continuing to turning slightly, tumbling through space. The portal was visible, passing across her vision. She cocked her head sideways, trying to line up her orientation with the floor on the other side. The portal closed before she succeeded.

Corona tried to grab her forehead, but the helmet got in the way. “Good gravy… This is bizarre.”

Tempest ignored her. “Orienting.” A few maneuvering thrusters activated, twisting the pod to an orientation Corona assumed was upright. “Beginning ascent.” The thrusters on the bottom of the pod activated, accelerating them ‘upward’. The acceleration pushed Corona into her seat, giving her a feeling of partial gravity. She let out a sigh of relief as her brain processed the gravity into directions.

Tempest looked at her and raised an eyebrow. “You’d make a horrible astronaut.”

“Not arguing that point,” Corona said. “…How ‘high’ do you think we are now?”

“Chronometer says we’ve moved about a hundred meters.”

“Accelerating really is easy without gravity or friction.”

“We don’t know how the distance correlates to Earth,” Tempest reminded her.

“We can check,” Corona said. She pressed the ‘establish portal’ button, planning to look through the portal to see how high they were.
Tempest frowned. She popped open the hatch that was supposed to contain the dimensional device – it was empty save for the wires supposed to plug the device in.

Tempest sighed, facepalming. “You didn’t, by chance, bring a spare did you?”

“Uh… No. I was told we didn’t need it.”

“We weren’t supposed to.” Tempest narrowed her eyes. “Somehow, this is Ike’s fault. I know it.”

Corona sighed, sitting back in her chair. “Now we have to wait for them to come get us.”

Tempest cut the engines to conserve power, removing the artificial gravity. Corona groaned. “How long until they check on us?”

“An hour, at least. And even then they may have to get an actual ship to come find us.”

Corona looked at the nothingness outside.

It was suddenly a lot less interesting.

~~~

Renee stepped out of a portal, alone, into the endless forest. There was nothing there but a bench and a man sitting on said bench – Daniel Jackson.

Renee lifted her hat and sat down next to him. “So, what brings a man like you to a place like this?”

Daniel rolled her eyes. “Same as you.”

“Binaries.”

“Binaries.”

Renee shrugged. “It’s been so long since I’ve been to their world… Actually, I’m not sure they’ve let us back there since our first visit.”

“I’ve never been,” Daniel admitted. “Always met them at the Hub or in the SGC.”

“I wonder why they’re so paranoid, sometimes. It’s not like they’ve had experience with aliens before. As far as they’re concerned, it’s just them and their two planets in their universe. What do they think we’re going to do?”

Daniel frowned. “From what I’ve garnered from them in my discussions, they are a thoughtful rather than emotional people. To them, the question of if you should or shouldn’t is rarely asked. The question is ‘can you do it and not suffer any negative consequences’?”

“They’re not robots, dear.”

“No. You ponies aren’t thoughtless emotional bundles of happiness either. But for many of you, emotions and morals overrule your mind. They’re just the opposite – their minds overrule their emotions and morals.”

“So, they put themselves in our shoes. If they had all our magic and technology, they would be using it to raise themselves up?”
“Exactly,” Daniel said. “I’m not sure how their government is structured precisely, but what I do know tells me that it’s a very strict council regime.”

“You’re not wrong,” Renee said. “Though it doesn’t exactly seem evil, like you’d think any ‘strict regime’ would. It’s more of a… place governed by secrets.”

“How so?”

“Well, when we arrived there, the Binary who found us thought he had seen something he wasn’t supposed to. He wasn’t afraid, but he was sad. He thought he would be forced to move with his family to another location where we ponies were known about, so as to not spread it. Apparently the Binaries’ living arrangements are determined by what they know.”

Daniel blinked. “That’s an interesting way to deal with classified information. Move anyone who finds out about it, or wants to know, to the other people who do know. Suddenly the classified information isn’t classified and there’s no chance of further breach. Unless, well, the person is crazy or malicious.”

Renee furrowed her brow. “I’d solve that by creating a ‘prison district’ of sorts, one where all those who want to scream the secrets out would be sealed up. …I would not be surprised if they had such a thing.”

“This all does explain why I couldn’t get him to reveal the names of all the councillors, or even how many there were.”

Renee rolled her eyes. “Their leaders love their secrets. I wouldn’t be surprised if not a single one of them was allowed to know how every facet of their government worked.”

“By the way, what happened to the Binary that found you?”

“We revealed ourselves to the whole district,” Renee said, smirking. “They didn’t have to move. The Binary higher-ups weren’t happy about it though.”

There was silence for a moment. Renee stared blankly ahead, expression unreadable.

“Renee? Are you holding up okay?”

Renee gulped. “I… I’m sorry. I just… I see her face again. Exploded… The image just hits me from time to time. Give me a minute.”

A portal opened, cutting short Renee’s minute. Boxen stepped out, flattening out his considerable hair. “We’re ready.”

Daniel and Renee nodded, standing up. They followed Boxen through the portal, arriving in the Binary universe. They appeared inside a building of standard Binary architecture, which was to say really tall ceilings twice as tall as they needed to be with one-way windows that could be looked through, but not into. The buildings visible through the giant, round portals seemed solid and windowless, even though they had the exact same design as the one they were in. The majority of the skyline outside was covered in buildings, with only the occasional tree about seven times taller than any of the round, egg like structures. In the distance, Renee saw a red glow, a sign of a district boundary energy fence.

The interior was well decorated, filled with electric candles, complex carpet patterns, a motorized sculpture of their sun and two planets, and a few portraits of Binary leaders. Renee noticed with mild surprised that one of the Binary leaders was hairless, revealing a creature that might as well have
been human if it wasn’t for the black skin and beady eyes.

“Dasei,” Boxen said, noticing where her gaze had fallen. “She had a hair disease. Immortalized here because she created a split media.”

“Split media?” Daniel asked.

“A system of selecting news stories and segments based on district that allowed media companies to expand beyond single districts, increasing unity while adhering to regulations.”

Renee blinked. “Well, you’re certainly being a lot more open than previously, Boxen. It’s a nice change.”

Boxen harrumphed. “Offworlders have officially been declared part of District 7-Z-8 after much political deliberation.”

Renee blinked. “It took two years?”

Daniel shrugged. “I’m not that surprised, honestly. Sometimes things take longer on Earth. Though usually when something’s a pressing matter we can force ourselves to get things done quickly.”

“Approval to move the Apollo to Ardent?”

“Yeah, that was one of those times.”

Boxen shook his head. “For better or worse, you’ve been placed to one of the higher knowledgeable districts that I’m aware of. Enough that yes, you are allowed to know that information between districts is controlled, and that we have two planets, and that we are in contact with otherworlders.”

“We were placed here because we figured these things out, just like when dealing with your people, huh?” Renee asked.

“You were placed a bit higher than that. You have clearance to know some things you didn’t know before. You have to ask though, we’re not just going to spill all our secrets.”

“Not asking you to spill them all, it wouldn’t be proper,” Renee said. “Unless you want to brief us on something particular? Is that why we’re here?”

Boxen shook his head. “You have asked us, time and time again, to increase relations in some way or other. Six council members have convened here to hear what you have to say.”

Daniel sputtered. “It would have been nice to know this ahead of time!”

“This is ahead of time. They won’t be here for a few hours.” He gestured towards a plush couch, sitting to the side of a pair of giant double doors.

Renee gulped. “Well… Then…” She took a piece of paper out of her saddlebags. “Daniel, we better figure out exactly what we want.”

Daniel nodded. “Do you by chance have a table?”


“Just whatever’s the easiest for you to get.”

Boxen bowed, leaving to get them a table.
Renee bit her lip. “So, we need to offer them some things... Do we know if Cosmo’s ponies are willing to provide spaceships?”

“They sold one to Earth Vitis, I don’t see why not...” Daniel said, scratching his head. He opened a portal to the Hub and dialed his phone. “Yeah. This is Daniel Jackson, Earth Tau’ri. Need to get a message to Princess Twilight Sparkle, the ‘Cosmo’ version. See, we’re talking with the Binaries and we need to know a few things rather quickly...”

Boxen brought the table, raising his eyebrows at the open portal. “Hrm?”

“Trying to get a hold of Cosmo,” Daniel said. “Have to go through her to even discuss giving you ships.”

“Ah,” Boxen shrugged, looking at Renee scribble furiously on her piece of paper. “I suppose you can open the portal for phone service, just don’t let anyone in.”

“Of course,” Daniel said, adjusting the portal to a much smaller size. “There.”

“Much better.”

Renee lifted up the sheet of paper and squinted at it. “So, we want economic relations, yes?”

“Yeah.”

“How can any of us sell things to them that makes sense? We know nothing about their economy!”

Boxen sighed. The long day just gotten longer.

~~~

Corona tumbled through the emptiness, a bored expression on her face. She was vaguely aware she was rotating in the darkness, though that may only have been because the white dot of the pod rolled through her vision every few seconds.

“Corona, I can’t see you anymore,” Tempest’s voice came through her radio.

“I can see you,” Corona said, stretching herself out and pointing at the pod. “Pointing at you now.”

“Corona, you need to stay within sight range. If you drift too far...”

“I’m attached by a **cord**, Tempest,” Corona said. “I’m not going anywhere.” To prove her point, she tugged on the cord, knowing the slight jerk would jostle the pod in the distance. She heard a satisfying grunt from Tempest, but no further comment.

After a few minutes of silent tumbling, Corona groaned. She tried to shoot fire again, but there were only a few glowing sparks to fly off her hand. No air meant no fire. *If I was a unicorn, I’d be able to do this. I’d be able to do a lot of things. Possibly even do something.*

“Hey, Tempest, what do you think happened to this world?”

“What do you mean?”

Corona sat up, placing a hand on her helmet. “I mean, was this universe **made** like this, or did it just... die?”

“I don’t know. You’re the physicist.”
“Don’t have my degree yet!” she chuckled. “I can make a guess though… Physically speaking, an empty universe and a universe that has fully entered heat death would be indistinguishable from each other. One never had anything in it. The other has things like photons zipping around, but space is expanding so fast you’ll never get to see any of them.”

“Who cares, then?”

Corona rolled her eyes. “Come on Tempest, you have to admit you’re at least a little curious here. Are we stuck in pure emptiness, or some sort of lost apocalypse?”

Tempest gave no response.

“Wow, you are grumpy today. Come on, we’re stuck here for the foreseeable future, let’s get to know each other!”

Nothing from the other end.

“Fine, I’ll go first. You have extensive files on me from my life on Earth, but I never told you much about my early years in Equestria. You know I was Celestia’s Protégé – actually still am according to paperwork, apparently – but do you ever know how I got there? No? Well, I wasn’t a student of any kind, I was just enamored with the sun. Everything about it was just glorious to my eyes as a young filly. I practiced fire magic, solar magic, and any sort of magic I could think of that was vaguely sun related. It became my special talent. I was young, and silly, and thought that if I studied enough I could learn to move the sun itself, just like Celestia. She eventually visited my town one day and saw me trying. Apparently I just looked ‘adorable’ and she sensed an eternally burning determination with my heart. She didn’t want me to waste my life trying, so she took me in and told me there were other things I could learn.” Corona sagged slightly. “…Her mistake, really. My determination just found a new goal to focus on. Power.”

No response.

“Tempest, come o-“

“I’m not from the United States,” Tempest said. “I’m from Afghanistan. I was a young child when the war broke out.”

Corona sighed. “I’m sorry you had to live through that. War isn’t pretty-“

“The invasion of Ardent was nothing,” Tempest blurted. “That lasted less than a day. You didn’t have to deal with bodies piling up. You didn’t have to deal with watching your family die. You didn’t have to see the same place bombed over and over again.”

“No. I didn’t.”

“…I felt like I was going to die so many times. But I didn’t. I was brutalized in every way you could think of by both sides, near so many bombs that went off, and witnessed kinds of bloodshed that no girl should ever see.” She paused. “Then Director Storm got me out of there.”

“He was in the war?”

“He was in a lot of wars. The way he talks, sometimes you’d think he was in World War Two.”

“There’s no way.”

“Exactly. He just pulls on your leg, like always. But he was in that war. And he saved me. Today,
I’m not sure if he did it out of kindness or obligation, but at the time I thought he was a saint for pushing me out of the way of a bullet and taking it in his own leg. I wouldn’t leave his side and he wasn’t bothered by the tagalong girl. He took me back to the United States and trained me. Then I ended up working with him in everything he did – moving with him when he became Director of AID.”

“...I didn’t know you had such a history with him.”

“I do. He may not be the best man, but I trust him with my life. I refuse to believe he’s left us to rot out here.”

Corona blinked. “Where’d that come from?”

“It’s been three hours, Corona. Not so much as a radio message to check in on us. Something’s wrong.”

Corona gulped. “That… You have a point there.”

“I know it’s bad, and I just want to be there instead of sitting here in the middle of nowhere doing nothing!”

“Right… I get it.”

She heard Tempest punch something on the other end.

“Woah, Tempest! Think calm thoughts! Everything’s going to be fine! I’m sure help will arrive soon, the moment he deals with whatever the problem is, okay? Maybe the arches just broke down.”

“I’ll think calm thoughts, but I won’t believe the bullcrap you’re spilling about everything being fine.”

“…All right. It might not be fine. But we can’t do anything, so we have to sit here and be okay with that. Okay?”

Tempest said nothing.

~~~

Director Storm looked up from a crystal paperweight he was fiddling with when Mike came into his office. “Ah, Mike!”

“You wanted to see me, sir?”

“Yes. I’m going to take a vacation for a day or two,” Storm said, winking. “I’ve got enough vacation days saved up, time to use a few of them.”

“Good to hear you’re finally going to relax.”

“Heh. You’re in charge until I get back,” he said, pocketing the paperweight.

“What about Tempest?”

“She’s away on a longer-term mission. She probably won’t get back before me.” Storm shrugged. “Though if she does come back, your choice if you want to give her the big chair or not. But, knowing you, I think you’ll keep it.”
Mike smirked. “You know me.”

Storm stood up and shook Mike’s hand. “Good luck. I hope nothing explodes while I’m off.” He pulled a dimensional device out of his desk, setting the dials to the Hub. “I’m going to go visit an old friend first.”

“Not going to say goodbye to the agents?”

“The best vacation is where none of them figure out that I’m gone,” Storm smirked. “I doubt you can actually pull that off, but consider it a challenge.” He opened the portal. “Don’t burn the place to the ground, mmkay?”

Mike nodded. “I won’t.”

“Good.” Storm stepped through the portal, standing tall in the halls of the Hub. He kept his toothy smile wide open for all to see as he marched through the mazelike corridors. He stopped to purchase a small dumpling-like ball of food that tasted like strawberries. Very delicious, he decided.

He looked at one of the large screens hung near the ceiling. A deer news anchor was interviewing Saxton Hale. Storm had no idea what was being said, but he knew he’d want to watch that later. It would be hilarious no matter how well the interview went.

Storm eventually arrived at his destination despite numerous stops to ‘smell the roses’. He walked right into Iroh’s tea shop and sat down. He leaned back, tapped on the side of the table seven times in a particular pattern, and ordered orange chai tea ‘in a blue cup, if you don’t mind’.

He waited a couple minutes, examining the patrons of the shop. Most of them were just regular people wanting to have a good time, but he did see Siron discussing something with a Binary. Why was he always with a Binary? There was definitely something going on there, but sadly that wasn’t why he was here. Investigating now would prove problematic.

Storm saw the doors that led to the tea kitchen tilt open slightly. That was the signal. He stood up, shrugged, and walked out the front door. Circling back around, he headed through the Elemental Nations’ Embassy, ignoring the receptionist’s strange look as he passed her and went through a back door that led to the rear of Iroh’s tea shop. It was a single room with a small card table. Iroh himself was sitting alone at the table, a single eyebrow raised. “You must have some problems if we had to use this room.”

Storm snorted, closing the door behind him and sitting down opposite Iroh. “You don’t know the half of it.”

Iroh sighed. “I have a feeling I can relate more than you’d like to whatever it is… What happened?”

“I was ordered to have Tempest and Corona killed.” Seeing Iroh’s expression, he held up his hand. “I didn’t. They’re just stuck in an empty universe with no way back. But my superiors think they’re dead.”

“That is concerning. Why would they want this?”

“I don’t know,” Storm said, taking a large folder out of his suit. “I’ve been slowly building a case against Senator Pearse. I’ve got so much damning evidence in this folder I might be able to get him executed. I’m planning to bring it to him and blackmail him into some real answers.”

“That sounds dangerous. Also rather foolish.”
“It is. Extremely,” Storm said. “But there’s something rotten happening on my world, and it’s starting to interfere with my agents. I’m fed up with this, not going to stand for it anymore.”

“I’m your backup. Wonderful.”

Storm slid the folder to him. “You’re the only one I can trust not to file this with some bureaucracy. O’Neill’s fine, but if he was going to act he’d have to tell everyone he reports to. You don’t really report to anyone. And you’ve got a personal stake in Corona’s safety.”

“What am I to do with this?”

“Nothing. I’ll return, having completed my mission, and will ask for the folder back.”

“If you don’t return?”

Storm smirked. “On the extreme off-chance that happens, you publish the information however you see fit.”

“What of Corona?” Iroh asked, leaning in. “Do we just leave her in that universe?”

Storm shook his head. “Of course not. But if I can’t figure out how to get her back myself, that’s up to you. I don’t envy getting into that empty universe and finding her with the resources your world has.”

“You better succeed then. Root out this corruption, Director.”

Storm laughed heartily. “I plan on it. Don’t worry, I have extra insurance.” He opened a portal to the endless forest. “Until then, Iroh. Never stop being you.”

Iroh laughed back. “That’s the idea! …Take care of yourself.”

Storm winked, vanishing as the portal disappeared.

~~~

Corona was back at the pod, though not inside of it. She was sitting on what qualified as the top in a contemplative position. She stuck her head in front of the porthole, looking at Tempest. “Hey, you should come out. The weather’s great!”

“There’s no weather out there at all.”

“That’s what makes it great.” Corona shook her head, sighing. “Tempest…”

“Five hours,” Tempest said. “It’s been five hours. People could be dying.”

Corona shook her head, popping the hatch of the pod open, climbing back in to her seat. “You’re letting your thoughts run away with you, Tempest. That’s… Well, that’s my job. I get the influx of emotions that I don’t always deal with. You… You’re the cool, calm, collected one. You’re, well, you’re the leader.”

“I need to do things,” Tempest admitted. “I can’t just sit.”

Corona put her feet on the dashboard and leaned back. “Honestly? I can’t either. But I went outside and danced around in the nothingness. I distracted myself. Got you to tell some stories. It wasn’t as effective as I would have liked, but I’ll take what I can get.”
Tempest stared ahead blankly, saying nothing for several moments. Then she stood up, popping the hatch open. She stepped out of the orb.

“Woah – hey you need a cord!” Corona blurted. She tossed the cord attached to her out of the pod. Tempest grabbed it and yanked, pulling Corona out as well. The rapid movement swung the rope around the capsule, eventually ramming them into the bulk of the white sphere.

“Ow…” Corona muttered, trying to stand up, realizing that she was still spinning in space. Tempest locked her feet around the open hatch of the pod and pulled the cord, yanking Corona back. Corona tumbled back to Tempest, and the two knocked helmets together.

Corona started laughing as Tempest pulled them both back in.

Tempest just smirked. “That enough of an outing for you?”

“You bet it is!” The two sat back down. “I never thought I’d get you to have any fun.”

Tempest nodded. “Neither did I.” Her smirk vanished instantly. “I’m sorry,” she said out of nowhere.

“…For what?”

“For resenting you. What you were. Given a place instead of working for it. I thought you were a brat. When I decided you weren’t a brat, I thought you were just plain childish. And then…” She shook her head. “I’m sorry. You are a valuable member of the organization. It’s not just because you’re from another world.”

Corona smiled. “Thanks. Good to see I finally got through to you.”

Tempest looked right into Corona’s eyes. “You have an immense amount of patience.”

“…I think it comes from me realizing that I used to treat people like they were nothing. I’d want them to have patience with me, after all.”

Tempest let her smirk return. “Apparently not.”

Corona grinned. “Yeah, it-“ her smile vanished instantly.

“What is it?”

“…Something on my helmet. Give me a sec…” She took in a deep breath and closed her eyes.

“Why now…”

“What? What did you see?”

Corona grabbed Tempest by the shoulders. “You are going to hate me in about twenty seconds.”

Tempest, for once in her life, looked bewildered. “…What? Why?”

“I… Have a way out.”

“Why would I be mad about that?”

“Because you aren’t going to like it, that’s why.”

Tempest blinked. “Corona…”
A portal opened right in front of them, depositing a Puddlejumper in the empty universe.

Tempest gawked. “How did you call the Tau’ri?”

“I didn’t,” Corona said, opening the hatch on the spherical pod. The back hatch of the Puddlejumper opened at the same time. Corona grabbed Tempest’s hand. “Come on.”

The two of them drifted into the Puddlejumper – falling flat on their faces when the ship’s artificial gravity took over. The hatch closed behind them and air rushed into the cabin.

Corona took off her helmet, letting her hair spill out. Tempest did the same, though her hair was nowhere near as large. Corona was smiling nervously and sweating.

Tempest raised an eyebrow with her. “I don’t care if you broke protocol somehow to do this, we’re getting out. That’s what matters.”

Corona nodded. “It’s… Good to hear you say that!”

Tempest glanced around at their enclosure; the Puddlejumper’s back half, sealed off from the front currently. It didn’t look like a normal one, due to all the open panels, extra screens, and a few throw pillows tossed around and a rug on the ground. “…Who runs this ship?”

The second hatch of the Puddlejumper opened up, revealing the bridge to be even more mutilated than the back half. The two driver chairs had been replaced with a single large swivel, and numerous screens lined the walls and the controls. Holograms flickered in the air, and a large keg of fruit juice sat in a huge cupholder.

Sombra swiveled the chair around, smirking. “Hey.”

Tempest drew her gun and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.

Sombra glanced at Corona. “Told you I needed to disable her gun.”

Corona sighed, swiping Tempest’s gun out of her hands and tossing it to the ground. “Tempest, be nice, Sombra just saved you.”

Tempest made no sound, still processing the new information.

Sombra shrugged, leaping out of her chair. “By the way, good to see you in one piece Corona.”

Corona hugged Sombra. “Nice to see you face to face.”

Sombra snorted, but didn’t reject the embrace. “I couldn’t exactly let you suffocate in nothingness, could I?”

Corona stepped back, shrugging. “Thanks, by the way. I don’t know what we would have done otherwise. Had, what, a day’s worth of air in that thing?”

“Traitor…” Tempest growled.

Corona looked at Tempest with evident pain in her face.

“Traitor!”

“Yeah. I am,” Corona said, sitting down. “Not going to deny it. I lied to you, Mike, Ike, Director Storm – everyone. I’ve been lying since Pearse’s scam on the Hub economy. I’ve been feeding
secrets to Sombra through my glasses.”

Tempest curled her hand into a fist and punched Corona. Corona took it, going so far as to hold up a hand to keep Sombra from intervening. She propped herself up against the Puddlejumper’s wall – only to get punched again.

Corona moved her hand to wipe blood off her face – but Tempest punched again. And again. And again.

Sombra grabbed Tempest’s fist at the sixth punch. “Time to stop, amiga.”

Tempest pulled back her other fist – and this one Corona caught. “Tempest, no.”

Tempest pulled both her hands back and folded her arms. “Fine then. I’m your prisoner.”

“Prisoner?” Corona sighed. “You aren’t a prisoner. We can take you back to AID right now.”

Tempest narrowed her eyes. “Corona. Why?”

Corona wiped the blood off her face and rubbed the back of her neck. “Director Storm said he couldn’t help me expose Senator Pearse. Sombra could. Her deal was that I feed her information from the AID, with the promise that she’d help me keep you all accountable.”

“Accountable!?" Tempest spat. “We are the-“

“We are not!” Corona blurted. “We need to be held accountable! I’ve found nukes that have been dropped on unusual universes that were thought to be a ‘threat’. I’ve found Senators manipulating us to exploit everyone else. I’ve found corruption that runs deep. Very deep. With Sombra’s help we’ve stopped several disasters that our little government organization wants to cause.”

Tempest twitched. “You’re such a naïve child.”

“That’s not what you said earlier.”

“Clearly I was wrong,” Tempest spat. “Things like that are a necessary evil. If we don’t have the strong arm, if we don’t attack first, if we don’t let those who may be ‘corrupt’ run things-“

“Equis Vitis. The Elemental Nations. Lai. The Space Ponies. None of them do what we do. None of them drop bombs on worlds. We’re wrong, Tempest.”

Tempest sneered. “You disgust me.”

Corona was legitimately hurt by this. She couldn’t respond.

Tempest continued. “You say you hate our means – our bombs, our betrayals, our deceptions. Then why are you using the same tactics against us?”

“I’m fighting fire with fire,” Corona said, summoning a flame into existence. “I didn’t like what I was doing. I still don’t.”

“You betrayed AID, Corona. It never betrayed you. How is that-“

Sombra coughed. “Mind if I interject?”

Tempest twitched. “What?!“
“The reason you’re stuck here? Director Storm was ordered to kill you two. Make it look like an accident.” Sombra folded her arms. “Evidently he decided he didn’t like that order, since you were both trapped rather than dead, but it doesn’t change the fact that they wanted both of you, specifically, dead.”

Tempest blinked, her rage vanishing. “…Why?”

Sombra pulled up the document on a holographic screen. “This here says that you needed to be ‘eliminated’ due to ‘uncertain loyalties.’ Frankly, I don’t buy it. I think they were testing your Director’s loyalty to them.”

Tempest’s face blanked. “But… What about all my years of loyal service? What of-“

Sombra enlarged a portion of the document. “Ahem. Says here that your contributions will be honored posthumously should Director Storm desire. If not, all your achievements could be stricken from the record and given to other agents. Clearly, they don’t give a rip.”

“Where did you get this?” Tempest demanded.

Sombra’s smile soured. “That’s the fun part. I’m in your security camera systems, watching everything I can get my claws on closely. Today, Storm started acting weird around them. He dropped a single sheet of paper in pain view of one of the cameras – when he usually keeps everything well locked inside folders. Then he ordered your mission, and walked out not an hour later without making an announcement. His official file says he’s ‘on vacation’ right now.” Sombra folded her arms. “I think he knew I was watching.”

“…Wait, why’d you take so long to get us then?” Corona asked.

“I didn’t notice the paper instantly. And it took a while to piece together that you guys were stuck on the other end. Also, since your glasses were in your pocket, I not only didn’t know you were stuck, I had to hack into your suit helmet, which took several minutes with my limited connection. And here we are, a happy family of hacker, agent, and physics student. Two of whom are not supposed to be alive.”

“We can’t go back to AID,” Tempest realized. “They – some of them at least – want us dead. Or need to think we are dead, for Director Storm’s sake.”

“…Where can we go?” Corona asked.

“Iroh, maybe,” Sombra said. “I think Director Storm went to meet him just after he left AID, I’m not sure. Other than that… You two can stay in the shadows with me! I’ve been hiding for quite some time now, getting pretty good at it.”

Tempest growled. “Never working with you.”

“Oh? Am I beneath you? Last I checked, I didn’t drop nukes. Also, despite my ability to do so, I haven’t even tried to crash the Hub market. All I do is find information and sell it to the highest bidder.”

“You’re a killer. I’ve read the files of Earth Omnic.”

“And you’re not!” Sombra waved her hand in a wide arc. “Every person here is a killer. If we’re judging by how much we hate killing, I think you’re the one with the most unhealthy outlook on it. Tell me, did that cube, asshole that it was, deserve to be blown to kingdom come? Was there even a mission objective there?”

Corona pulled the two of them apart. “Stop it! We may not like it, but right now we’re in this boat together. Can we please stop it with the antagonizing?”

“I’ll agree if she does,” Sombra said.

Tempest leaned back. “Fine. Let’s revel in treachery and betrayal, why not. What’s our move, oh great Sombra?”

Sombra shrugged. “No idea. I’m here to save you. You two do what you want. I’m just pretty sure you want to stay off the grid.”

Corona nodded. “I know how to meet Iroh in an out of the way place. It shouldn’t be too difficult to explain. He’s very understanding.”

Tempest shrugged. “Fine.”

Sombra gave them a thumbs up. “Nice talk! Now we-“ She blinked. “That’s odd.”

“What?” Corona asked.

“I’m picking up subspace signal in this universe,” Sombra said, tapping a screen and bringing up a wave-form diagram. “FTL communication.”

“What’s it say?”

“Encrypted. It’ll take a minute to clear up. Or significantly longer…” She frowned. “I do know where it’s coming from though. Few hundred light years that direction.”

Corona tapped the Puddlejumper walls. “This thing have FTL?”

“No. But we can cheat.” She smirked. “Your mission to this world was complete bogus, by the way. As a ‘heat death’ universe, there is so much space here that moving an inch in another universe will move a million inches here. Or something like that, the number keeps changing because space is expanding so quickly. The point is it actually won’t be hard to get to the source of this signal if we do some jumping…”

Tempest raised an eyebrow. “Are we really investigating a signal at a time like this?”

Something tugged at the back of Corona’s mind. “Yeah… Yeah I think so. I think there’s something important there.”

Sombra smirked. “Activating cloak!” The Puddlejumper vanished from sight and jumped through the portal, ready to investigate.

~~~

Director Storm adjusted the collar on his suit and marched into what was perhaps the most boring building he had ever seen. It was a white brick with windows. The worst part was he knew that unlike his unassuming base, there wasn’t even a secret basement in here. There were just a lot of offices. Offices, offices, offices. One of those offices happened to have one Senator Pearse in them at the moment, though nobody was officially supposed to know that.

Storm smirked. This was either going to go wonderfully or crash and burn. It had been a while since he had taken any actual risks like this, but he was fed up with all the political shenanigans going on
over his head. He was the *Storm*, dammit, and he wasn’t going to be pushed around like some normal scribble-monkey secretary. They’d clearly forgotten who he was. It was time to remind them.

Well, he was just going to see Senator Pearse, but it was symbolic of putting them *all* in their place.

He walked in the front doors like he owned the place. It helped that he sure *felt* like he owned it. He waved his badge at security. They thought it was a regular FBI badge. Morons.

Nobody ever questions the tall man in the well-tailored suit with sunglasses and a slight sneer. Nobody wants to. Storm secretly loved it when some schmuck who didn’t get the memo would ask him what he was doing there. He’d flash his badge, grin menacingly, and say ‘investigating every nook and cranny of this place. I’ll have to come back to you when I’m done with preliminaries.’ Glorious. He rarely checked up on them later, which just made their lives even worse.

But even with his badge, he definitely wasn’t supposed to just go barging into the office that didn’t exist. So he had to look *really* confident and impressive. Yes, his position as Director should be able to get him through that door should he flaunt it, but the Senator could always just refuse to see him if he asked.

He wasn’t going to ask.

He marched up to the office door, plain like all the others in the place save for a single guard.

Director Storm made sure to add urgency to his voice. “I’ve got some things he needs to see!”

“Who needs to see?” the guard asked.

“You know I’m not supposed to say! Just let me in!” He waved the folder in front of the guard’s face, letting him catch just enough glimpses of pictures of Senator Pearse.

The guard nodded. “Of course.” He let Storm into the room, following him.

There were only three people in the room besides Storm and the guard – a Chinese man standing at attention, a black-haired woman with a vicious smile scribbling something on a sheet of paper, and the aged Senator Pearse himself.

Storm threw the folder on the desk in front of Pearse. “We need to talk.”

Senator Pearse took one look at the size of the folder, realization dawning in his eyes. “Leave us,” he told the guard. The guard nodded, backing out of the room.

Storm sat down in a chair, leaning in with a smirk. “What about the other two? Want them to hear this?”

Senator Pearse smirked *back* – new behavior for him. “They can hear whatever you want to accuse me of, Mister Oncoming Storm.”

Storm opened the folder. “Let’s see. I’ve got affairs, embezzlement, many dozens of lies, a half-dozen cover ups that had nothing to do with my organization, a very damning story about a river full of dead kids, and – here’s the fun one – evidence of you ordering two agents to their deaths without a trial.”

The Chinese man and the woman didn’t react in surprise to any of this. Senator Pearse folded his hands and smiled. “This all looks pretty convincing. I bet you could have me imprisoned with this despite my army of lawyers.”
“Exactly what I was thinking.”

“So, what is it you want Mister Oncoming Storm? Or should I call you Director Oncoming Storm? General Oncoming Storm? Sir Oncoming Storm? Thane Oncoming Storm? Boyar Oncoming Storm?”

Storm whistled. “You must have done some impressive digging for that last one. Though, I have to ask, am I supposed to be impressed? You’re the Senator in charge of my organization, of course you’d do some research on me. Trying to make me feel uncomfortable?” he laughed. “Many, many people besides you have tried and succeeded.”

Senator Pearse frowned.

“As for what I want, it’s rather simple really. I want all this bull to stop. Yes, all the bull. All of your muscular, giant, angry mooing plans that you put so much stock into. I want AID to run free of your influence. You give us funding, then leave us alone. Couldn’t be simpler! No more stupid orders, no more hiring agents under my purview to do your bidding, and no more looking at the other worlds with your hungry, perverted expressions. Screw up your own world first, mmkay?”

Senator Pearse smiled. “I’m sorry, Oncoming, but that just won’t do.”

Storm pointed at the papers. “You know this goes live if you refuse, right?”

“Oh, I do. But the bulls are much bigger and angrier than even you could comprehend, Oncoming.”

Storm narrowed his eyes, putting two and two together. “Pearse would never act like this. You’re not Senator Pearse.”

Pearse’s eyes glowed. “Oh, he’s in here somewhere.”

“Ba’al,” Storm said, leaning back. “Can’t believe I didn’t see this until now.”

Ba’al closed the folder and handed it back to Storm. “Go ahead and publish these papers. There are others, many others, to continue my work.”

Storm laughed. “We both know it’s not that simple. You can’t let me live now that I know you’re a Ba’al and that you have other big plans. You have a particular interest in my organization. It means you’re doing something with magic. You’d have no need to meddle with us if it was just for the other worlds. You Ba’als have your own devices.”

“You’ve been playing this a long time haven’t you?”

“Not as long as you, but eh, I like to think I’m pretty good.”

Ba’al smiled. “So. I’m curious, how do you plan to get out of here alive?”

“Knock you all out, cut, and run.”

Ba’al grinned. “This should be interesti-“

Storm pulled a crystal out of his jacket and hit Ba’al in the head with it. The secretary stood up and the Chinese man drew his gun. Ba’al just blinked. “What is that?”

“It’s a perfectly normal paperweight, I assure you.” Three bolts of lightning shot out of the crystal, hitting Ba’al, the Chinese man, and the secretary. Both the man and Ba’al fell with ease, but the woman… She caught the electricity in her fingertips and shot it back into the crystal.
Storm raised an eyebrow. “There’s more to you than meets the eye, isn’t there?”

The woman smiled. “I’m Azula. And you’re in our way.” With one hand, she summoned lightning - the other, fire. She launched both at Storm in a single motion.

Storm moved the crystal in a circular pattern, generating a ring of magic that met the incoming attacks with a small whirlwind of fog.

Azula roared, readying another attack.

Storm reasoned that he could probably take her, but he wasn’t going to chance backup arriving. He pulled out his dimensional device and dialed Equis Vitis. He leaped through, rolling under a bolt of lightning.

The portal closed as he stood up, surveying his surroundings. He was in Canterlot and there were several ponies staring right at him with looks of shock.

He waved. “Hello there! I’m Director Storm – you may or may not have heard of me – and I need an audience with Celestia! Care to point me in the right direction?”

A pegasus pointed at the main body of the castle.

“That should be enough!” Sombra said. “Dropping back into the dead universe!”

They did.

Corona screamed, collapsing to the ground instantly.

Sombra and Tempest didn’t move to help her up. They couldn’t. They were transfixed.

There were three things in space before them. One was Ba’al’s mothership, hiding out in the dead universe so as not to be found. The second was a freshly built Ha’tak, shiny and new.

The third was a Ha’tak covered in purple… somethings. At times, they looked like tentacles. At
others, they looked like eyes. At one point, the entire mess looked like a face. It was as if if the Ha’tak was a living being and the purple horrors were mutations, or parasites - there to control it and use it for their own ends.

“IT’S HERE!” Corona screeched. “IT SEES ME!”

This snapped Sombra out of it. She leaned down. “Corona, listen to me. Just like we practiced, okay?”

“IT’S HERE! MAJORA’S HERE!”

Sombra slapped her. “GET AHOLD OF YOURSELF! Think, Corona, think. Let your mind overrule its influence. Slow, deep mental breaths. Count… Count… One… Two… Three…”

“You’re a fool,” Corona spoke with a voice that was not her own. “She can do nothing to the power wi-“

Tempest cut the eldritch monologue short by hitting Corona’s skull with the butt of her pistol. Corona’s eyes rolled up into the back of her head and she fell to the ground.

“…Good call,” Sombra said.

Tempest grunted. “What was that?”

“She’ll tell you when she wakes up. I’ll summarize by saying the more you know about it the more likely you are to go loco like… that.” She typed on her screens. “Now to break into Ba’al’s systems…”

“You can do that?”

“Easy. Same design as the Starfinder. Hacked into that months ago. Just need to…”

A dimensional portal opened in space, and the Mothership and free Ha’tak went through it. The corrupted ship turned right at them.

Sombra stopped hacking. She leaned over to the button that activated the dimensional device. “It can’t see us… We’re cloaked…”

The corrupted ship shot a tendril of impossible purple energy that corrupted every display that showed it.

“It can see us!” Sombra said, smashing the portal button. The Puddlejumper shot a portal into existence and flew through, appearing in a completely random universe with stars all around. From the other side of the portal, the purple tendril coiled around back, reaching for the Puddlejumper.

Sombra pressed another button, closing the portal. The purple tendril-thing shook, screamed, and then vanished into nothing.

“…You can’t hear screams in space,” Tempest said.

“I know,” Sombra said, shaking her head.

The two of them looked down at the twitching form of Corona. They quickly lifted her up and placed a pillow under her head, trying not to let spastic seizure motions cause any harm.

Tempest stood up and breathed out a long, hard breath. “…Something’s happening.”
“Something bad. Worse than me destroying the Internet,” Sombra added. “What now?”

“Iroh,” Tempest said. “We call Iroh.”

Renee and Daniel left the meeting with haggard expressions. The two of them went right for the couch they had sat on before the meeting began.

Renee took out the list of topics and suggestions she had drafted up before the meeting started. She crumpled it up in her magic and tossed it over her back.

“That… could have gone better,” Daniel muttered.

“Did we decide anything?!?” Renee blurted. “Is there any future discussions on any of the topics? Did they say yes or no to any of them? Did they even know what we were talking about?” She grabbed her head. “Augh! There’s no way for an outsider to get any say in this system!”

“I got the distinct impression that none of them really had any say in the system. It’s like they’re all compartmentalized in areas of specific knowledge. Their system is unable to change significantly because of the way it’s designed…” He adjusted his glasses. “I understand why it took them two years to decide on something urgent…”

“I got the impression we weren’t in the right ‘clearance district’ to know about the decisions they were making,” Renee harrumphed. “I guess this system works for them but it does not work when there are outside forces…”

“Maybe that’s the point,” Daniel suggested. “I’m curious how this system formed. Could they have built it to increase unity, in a way? So there’d be no infighting, no rebellion, no revolution? Since, well, anyone who learned anything that might drive them to revolution would be displaced to a district where they could use that knowledge in some way… And become part of the societal ‘leaders’. When this was first created, it would have needed to be a very oppressive regime ruled by an iron fist. But after that… It might just propagate itself. There may not be a leader here anymore. They don’t need one, or even really a council. The system keeps building itself up… maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“There are a few holes in the theory. How can they organize forces to keep track of who knows what? What about all the operations going on in space? Obviously, there’d have to be nuance…”

“And if your theory there is right, there really isn’t anyone we can ask to find out how they do it, because they don’t actually know. It just works.” She shook her head, rather boggled by the nature of the Binaries. “I think I liked them better when they were xenophobic and gruff…”

“They’re an alien culture,” Daniel said. “It seems to work for them, and their people seem more or less happy, so… I don’t think we have the right to judge them.”

“We do need to find a way to work with them, though…” Renee said, shaking her head. “And I’m not sure how to do that.”

“Me neither.” He leaned back, stretching his arms. “…Hey, think this world has a place for lunch?”

“You mean dinner? We skipped lunch.”

Daniel glanced at his watch. “Well then.”
And yes, I’m sure there’s a place for dinner around here somewhere. *Oh Boxen!*

Boxen looked up from his clipboard. “Yes?”

“Is there a restaurant in this district?”

“Several. Most food is imported from districts with cooking knowledge though, don’t expect to see a chef.”

“Fine by me,” Renee said, leaping off the couch. “I need to unwind. What better way to do that and still *technically* do my job than eating alien cuisine?”

Daniel shrugged. “Can’t think of one right now.”

Renee adjusted her hat, smirking. It was time to eat some alien soup.

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Iroh sat in the back room of the teashop, folder on the table.

Director Storm walked in, a huge grin on his face. “Mission success!”

“Oh?”

“Yes, I got Senator Pearse to listen to me. He’s removing all of his oily, grimy fingers from AID.”

Iroh smiled. “That’s great news. Everything go smoothly?”

“Smooth as butter!”

“What about Corona?”

“Pearse still thinks she’s dead. She’ll have to stay that way for a while, until I find a reasonable explanation for sudden agent revival. She’s fine, Iroh, don’t you worry your beard. Of course you can’t *tell* anyone that, but I’ll try to sell the story that she and Tempest are on an extended mission for a while so you don’t have to pretend to be devastated.”

“That would be appreciated.”

Storm quickly grabbed the folder Iroh had, flipping through it. “Right, everything checks out. It was a pleasure, Iroh. Let’s hope we never have to do *this* again!”

Iroh smiled. “It is never healthy to have this level of intrigue.”

“No it is not!” He opened a portal and jumped through.

Iroh stood up, dusted himself off, and went to the restroom. He closed himself in a stall and pulled out his phone. “Definitely not Storm anymore. Something’s off about him – not to mention he claimed everything went smooth as butter. No mention of a purple hand.”

“Probably just doesn’t realize ponies carry phones now,” Sombra said, playing the shaky video of the purple hand grabbing Director Storm again. “Doesn’t matter if you’re an abomination that can alter memory, a video’s a video.”

Iroh sighed, looking at Sombra and Tempest on the phone. “How is Corona doing?”
Tempest shook her head. “Not well.” She glanced behind her at the back of the Puddlejumper. “Still twitching and muttering. We’ve seen purple magic sparks a few times now.”

Iroh sighed. “I may have an idea, but we can’t do it right now. We have to lay low. They’ll be watching. I’ll soon take a page from Director Storm’s book and declare I’m going on vacation, and we’ll meet on my world. Understood?”

“Understood,” Tempest said, saluting.

“Keep her sedated and tied down until then,” Iroh said. “I fear what will happen if she wakes up and that thing is still in her.”

Sombra nodded. “You can count on me.”

“Can I?” Iroh asked.

Sombra smiled cheekily. “Hey, it’s Corona. I’ve got her back. I’ll keep in touch.” The feed ended, and Iroh’s phone went back to normal.

He made sure to flush so no one got suspicious. He went back to work, serving tea.

He reflected on the fact that he was really good at acting normal when there were conspiracies twisted all around him. What did that say about his life?
Thief of Light

Charter Twilight Sparkle looked at herself in the mirror. She almost looked normal. Her eyes were clear, shining with the magic inside her. Her horn was smooth and rounded, reflecting the ambient light aesthetically. Her mane hadn’t grown back properly, but Renee had worked with it, giving Twilight a windswept appearance. It looked more adventurous and outgoing than her prior style, and Twilight had already decided she’d keep it even when her mane returned to normal. Her muzzle was round and smooth, her lips curled into a smile that was perhaps not as big as it could have been.

Then there were her ears. They could swivel, perk, and flatten like any normal pony ears. But they didn’t look the part. Along the back edges of both ears a line of metal shone, the only outward appearance of a magitech machine that reached into her inner ear. She could no longer feel the device’s presence, but she would always know it was there. Marking her as different from all ponies.

It wasn’t even on right now. She tried to use it as little as possible. If she came to rely on it – well what would happen when there was no magic in a universe? What would happen when it shorted out in a battle? She couldn’t let herself depend on false hearing. It was there for when it was needed, and not any other time.

She still felt the need to turn it on right now, to check. She lit her horn, clicking an internal switch on the devices. A few soft, purple lights lit up on the metal rods, and sound rushed into her mind. Her breathing, her hooves scraping against the floor, the motion of the air around her, the buzzing of her horn, the soft sound of chatter outside…

The influx of noise was slightly painful. It also sounded wrong. Her heart started racing as her mind automatically tried to keep track of all the sounds coming in, many of which were abnormal.

“Good morning Twilight!”

The noise of a voice so close to her own location made her wince. She turned off the sound, plunging herself into a noiseless void. Her body’s response was that of relief, of all things. It no longer had to deal with it all. She turned around, smiling. “Morning Spike!”

Spike frowned. He opened his mouth, saying something. Twilight studied the motion of the lips very carefully, processing slowly. She was fairly sure he’d said “sorry, didn’t mean to startle you.”

Twilight’s focused expression was quickly replaced with a warm smile. “That’s okay, Spike. I’m still learning to live like this.”

“I should still be more aware.”

Twilight rubbed her hoof on his head. “Hey, we’re all going to have to adjust. You’ve been doing really well. Always my number one assistant.”

Spike grinned and said something Twilight couldn’t see. She got the message anyway when he hugged her leg. She held him in her wing, smiling. Twilight had no idea how long they just held each other in silence.

Eventually, Spike removed himself from the embrace. “I should finish making breakfast,” he said, making sure Twilight could see his face.
Twilight smiled. “What’s on the menu today?”

“Waffles. Earth waffles.” He waved her on, trying to walk backwards so they could move to the kitchen and talk at the same time. “I have it on good authority they’re really good!”

“Spike, you don’t need to walk backwards. We can talk in the kitchen.”

Spike nodded, turning around and speed walking to the kitchen. Twilight teleported there, a smirk on her face. “Beat ya.”

“No fair!” Spike said, throwing his arms in the air. “You could have at least flown here instead of teleporting!”

“Then you wouldn’t have had such a surprised look on your face!” Twilight giggled. “How does one cook Earth waffles, by the way?”

Spike pointed at a giant bowl filled with batter and a waffle iron. He grabbed the bowl and angled it over the appliance. He turned to Twilight. “See? All you do is pour it into the iron here and make sure it’s plugged in to a magic cell!”

Twilight used her magic to catch the batter he was spilling. “Spike, look at what you’re doing. You don’t need to keep looking at me like that, okay? I’m not going to see everything you say. We’re just going to have to be okay with that.”

Spike sighed, closing the waffle iron. “I know… It’s just hard, y’know?”

“Yeah. Believe it or not, I do. I’m the one without the hearing.”

“Sorry!” Spike said, holding up his hands.

“…I’m the one who should be apologizing. That was snappy.”

“Maybe we can both agree that neither of us are handling this all that well?”

Twilight chuckled softly. “Sure. We can do that.” She sat down at the kitchen table, pulling the magic journal off a nearby shelf. She opened to the back, frowning. “Corona hasn’t written me back yet…” She scrolled her eyes over the last couple pages, studying the back and forth she and Corona had had about Twilight’s new disability. There were even a few diagrams of the ear devices themselves, and a note of Corona feeling guilty for sending Twilight to Esefem. There was the response that told Corona not to feel bad, and then a response to that, and another response… Twilight shook her head – sometimes it was hard to figure out exactly how their conversations evolved. It was delightful, but it made her head swim.

…Corona hadn’t responded for a few days now. Twilight was beginning to worry.

Spike sat down at the table, jostling Twilight out of her book. He laid a plate in front of her with a waffle on it. “I’m noticing one good thing about this, for you anyway.”

“What’s that?”

“You are never going to have trouble focusing on reading. Ever again. Pinkie could be blowing holes in the wall downstairs and you’ll stay engrossed in your book.”

Twilight put a hoof to her chin. “You may have found the silver lining! I knew I could count on you.”
Spike leaned back in his chair. “That’s what I’m here for.”

Twilight cut up a bit of the waffle and levitated it into her mouth. “Where’s yours?”

“Cooking. Unless you want more than one. Then that’s yours cooking and mine will be cooking the moment it’s out.”

Twilight rolled her eyes. “I’m not that hungry, it’ll be yours.”

“Yeah!”

“You look happy.”

“I… Was really hungry.”

Twilight smiled. “Glad I could help.”

“Hey, I’m the one doing all the cooking.”

Twilight was so busy studying Spike’s face she missed her mouth when she attempted to levitate another bit of waffle into it. She smeared the pastry across her cheek. She narrowed her eyes, correcting the trajectory of the waffle bit and tossing it into her mouth. She grabbed a napkin from nearby and rubbed her face.

Spike was trying very hard not to laugh. But he knew that laughing would be rude, so he was holding it in with all his might. His face was starting to turn red.

Twilight softly chuckled at his pained expression. This amused reaction only worsened his predicament, flushing his face even further.

“Spike, you can laugh! It was funny. I wiped waffle across my face because I wasn’t paying attention. That’s hilarious.”

Spike fell out of his chair. He started laughing, but the impact with the floor knocked the wind out of him.

Twilight poked her head over the table. “You okay?”

Spike muttered something, but Twilight couldn’t see it since he was facedown. She lifted him up and set him in the seat. “You okay?” she repeated.

“Yeah.”

“You can’t make yourself suffer like that, Spike. I’m deaf. It doesn’t mean you can’t laugh at me.”

“But it’s rude!”

“I can take it Spike. I don’t want anybody walking on eggshells around me, understand?”

Spike nodded slowly. “Yeah…”

Twilight took another bite of waffle. “By the way, this is really good. Who sugg—“ Twilight felt a strange shimmering feeling on her cutie mark. She glanced downward, seeing the familiar glow of the Tree of Harmony’s summon. “Looks like I’ve got to go, Spike! See you later!”

“Are you sure you can go?” he asked.
“The Tree of Harmony thinks so!” Twilight said, grinning. Maybe it was time for her to get back into the swing of things. She teleported to the map room, not surprised in the slightest to find Pinkie already sitting in her chair. The map itself had generated a second layer of images about a foot above the map of Equis, as it had taken to doing when it wanted to send them to another world.

Twilight recognized the location as the demon settlement in the middle of the Elemental Nations. “Oh, looks like we’re going to our old friends!” Twilight said.

Pinkie smiled, looking right at Twilight. “That we are! All five!” She pointed at their marks alongside Flutterfree’s, Nova’s, and Renee’s. “First big adventure since, well, you know.”

Twilight nodded. “I know.” She sat down in her throne, spreading her wings. “I think I’m ready. It may be… slow. But I need to get back into it.”

Pinkie patted her on the back. “I wonder what the problem will be?”

Twilight only saw the trailing end of the statement, but she reasoned out the rest of it. “Harsh feelings about the demons have been rising. It might finally be time for us to deal with that.”

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The best way to get around in the Elemental Nations was by airship.

Actually, that wasn’t quite true, since teleporting was better. But neither Twilight nor Nova had a clear image of the demon village in their mind, seeing as they hadn’t been to the village in recent memory. So travel by airship it was. Sure, it took a few hours for the trip, but nopony was in any sort of hurry.

Twilight stood on the balcony of the airship, her new windswept mane style living up to its description. She could feel the air brush through the hairs of her coat and stream past the lines in her face. She’d never bothered to study exactly how it felt before, always being overtaken by the noise of high winds.

She kept discovering new things without her ears. She’d discovered the art of closing her eyes to appreciate other senses before, but never had she been able to turn off her ears. Not like she had a choice. …Well, she did, but the headache that would result from turning on the ear devices here would probably make her fall off the balcony.

Twilight felt vibrations in the metallic floor she was standing on, telling her there was a pony walking up to her. She turned around to see Renee approaching, desperately trying to hold her hat to her head. “Hey,” Twilight said.

“Sorry dear. Can’t hear you. Wind’s too loud!”

Twilight smirked. “Well I can see what you’re saying just fine!”

“…I think that was a sassy comment,” Renee said, narrowing her eyes.

Twilight grinned. She moved her mouth without actually saying anything.

Renee furrowed her brow. “Can we go somewhere without all this wind?”

Twilight pointed over the balcony into the distance. They could make out a large settlement of newly constructed buildings – Republic City. But Twilight was pointing at a smaller settlement in a neighboring forest, composed of simpler constructions.
“Ah, I suppose we are almost there, aren’t we?”

Twilight nodded, walking back into the main cabin of the airship, gesturing for Renee to follow with her wing. The moment Twilight closed the door behind them, Renee let out a breath. “Peace and quiet…”

Twilight smiled, looking around the cabin. It was a simple metal room with windows on all sides and only the one room. The captain was a member of the Water Tribe fixated on driving the craft accurately, while Twilight’s friends played a game of cards on the floor behind him.

“Full house!” Pinkie shouted, slamming her cards down. “Pay up!”

“Pinkie, we aren’t playing with money,” Flutterfree said, turning her head and saying something else Twilight didn’t catch.

Nova said something, but her back was turned. Whatever it was must have been hilarious since Pinkie broke out laughing and Flutterfree blushed.

Renee walked up to them, mumbling something under her breath. Pinkie turned to her. “Hey, you want in?”

“Dear, we’re almost at our destination. I’m not sure we have time for anypony to be ‘dealt in’.”

Pinkie shrugged. “Fair point.” She threw all the cards in the air. “Game over!”

Nova said something.

Flutters grinned. “Twilight’s right behind you, you know.”

Nova’s entire body tensed. She turned around slowly with a sheepish grin on her face. “Hello there, Twilight! I, uh…”

“You do know I don’t have any clue what you said, right?” Twilight asked. “I’m confused how the conversation could have led to me being insulted anyway. Whatever it was, you’re forgiven.”

“Good!” Nova laughed nervously. “So, Renee, how far were we again?”

The pilot called something back to them – presumably ‘we’re here’ or something similar. The airship descended into an empty clearing in the forest at the edge of the demon village. The ponies thanked the pilot and stepped out, looking at the demons for the first time in quite a while. Their village was composed of tent-like structures similar to what they’d seen before, though made with smaller leaves and not on top of a giant red flower. There was more than one round hut structure this time around, though the center one was significantly larger than the others. Presumably it was where Siron lived.

Unlike the first time when they had arrived, the demons didn’t react in fear, nor did they react with aggression. They reacted with friendly waves, nods, and a few gruff motions.

Twilight realized very quickly that, unlike pony and human mouths, she wasn’t going to be able to read the lips of the demons simply because they didn’t have any lips. Instead it was mandibles...

She sighed – she was going to have to turn on her ears. She lit her horn and braced herself.

Demons sure liked to yell. She wasn’t sure if they were louder than she remembered or if she was just unable to process the noise. She could pick out the clanking of the carapaces as they bent their joints. She heard scraping coming from somewhere that was probably from some demon etching
designs into their carapace, and she heard weapons clashing elsewhere from some kind of fight.

Flutterfree grabbed her with her wing. “Twilight. Focus. Everything will be fine if you just take a moment to piece out the voices… Okay? Look at me. Hear my voice.”

Twilight nodded, staring right at Flutterfree and letting her soothing voice fill her mind. “I... know. It’s hard, but I can do it. I can still hear everything else though… Everything else…”

Flutterfree smiled sadly. “It’s okay. We can do all the talking if you want.”

“I want to be involved,” Twilight asserted. “Even if just… a little.”

Pinkie walked up to her. “I’ll take the lead for now, if that’s okay. Okay?”

Twilight nodded. “It’s fine. I’m not exactly leader material at the moment.” She took a breath, trying to calm her nerves and not let the constant clacking, heartbeat, breeze, or anything other noise bother her. She managed to calm her nerves, but the incessant noises continued their irritating and distracting drone.

Pinkie patted Twilight on the back. “You’re gonna be fine, okay?” She jumped into the air and waved her hoof. “HEY SIRON!”

Siron looked up from the discussion he was having with Anix. “Hrm? Ah, Pinkie Pie! What a surprise.”

“Yeah it is!” She bounced up to him. “How’s it been?”

“You know, generally disliked by the humans around us, distrusted, the whole normal scenario.”

“They’re still letting you work on Republic City, I assume?” Renee asked.

“Indeed they are. Iroh and the other leaders are rather determined to keep us as part of the effort and their society, despite the ‘backlash’. I’m not sure why they bother, but I’m not complaining.”

Twilight forced a smile. “You’re getting lots of protection and legal standing, if I recall, right?”

Siron shrugged. “I believe that’s what it’s called.” He leaned down so he was level with her. “I hear you’ve obtained some real battle scars.”

Twilight flattened her ears. The gesture served only an expressive purpose, since the devices cared not for her ear orientation. “Yeah. I… I’m relying on magic to talk to you right now. It’s not exactly… pleasant.”

“Those of us who experience true battle rarely come out unchanged. But our changes are a source of pride, proof of survival.” He pointed at her ear devices. “This? This is not a crutch, not a cast. This is a badge of honor. A battlecry to the world saying that you survived. It gives you power.”

Twilight chuckled. “Thank you, Siron. I don’t think I’ve been told that yet.”

Siron glanced at the other ponies. “What kind of encouragement do you ponies offer that you forget the basics?”

Flutters shrugged. “Different cultural values.”

“…Bizarre creatures…” Siron shook his head. “Regardless, what actually brings you here?”
“The Tree summoned us,” Twilight said. “We need to solve a Friendship Problem of some kind here. Has anything interesting happened recently?”

“Besides the general distrust, we do have a visitor to the village who has been challenging every warrior we have to a duel and beating them soundly.”


Siron pointed behind one of the huts. The ponies circled around to see the winged Veila cast a magic bolt at the visitor. The visitor wasn’t demon, pony, or human – she was a gray-skinned humanoid with two candy corn colored horns poking out of her mess of black hair; one shaped like a claw, the other like a poised stinger. She wore glasses that slightly magnified her orange eyes, one of which held seven pupils instead of the usual singular dot. Her cobalt blue lips were curved into a bemused smile, their color matching the ‘M’ symbol on her shirt.

In this visitor’s hands were a set of eight eight-sided dice made of a blue gemstone. She dodged to the left of Veila’s magic bolt and rolled the dice. They fell to the ground and glowed a bright white color, summoning a strange box into existence.

Veila looked at the box in confusion. It popped open, socking Veila in the face with an oversized boxing glove. Veila fell to the ground, dazed.

The visitor walked over to her and grinned. She extended a hand. “Nice try with that magic trick, but you’ll need to try a lot harder than that to beat me.”

Veila accepted the hand and the visitor helped her stand back up. The visitor bowed to the crowd. “Who’s next? Come on, can’t any of you demon bugs face me? I’m just waiting for a challenging fight! Prove to me that you’re not a bunch of bark without any real bite!”

Siron cracked his neck. “It’s my turn, then. Stranger, I am Siron, chief of the demon tribe. I accept your challenge.”

The stranger smirked. “Stranger? Name’s Vriska Serket. Thief of Light if you want a title.” She summoned her dice back to her fingers. “I hope you’ve got something interesting for me, boss man.”

Siron slammed his staff into the ground, forcing the jade crystal within to glow softly. “That I do. Prepare yourself, Vriska.”

“I’m always prepared.”

Siron twisted one of his left hands, grabbing Vriska’s foot in an aura of telekinesis. She was clearly not prepared for this, yelling out in surprise as she lost her footing. Siron thrust his staff forward, unleashing the swirling red and green energy.

Vriska twisted her body in just the right way to dodge the onslaught, flipping onto her hands and back onto her feet. “Nice shot!” She stood tall, raising an eyebrow. “Interesting color scheme as well. Where’d you get that?”

Siron arranged his three free hands in a triangle around the staff. “Ancient heirloom of my kind.” The red and green energy shot out again, this time accentuated by his magic. It curved its trajectory toward Vriska. She leaped over it, realizing with some annoyance that the energy was coming back around. She ducked under it, throwing her dice on the ground in the time before the bolt made another pass.

The bolt’s next pass skimmed her leg as her dice activated. Eight small cherry bombs appeared in
midair and flew at Siron, exploding all over his body. He took every hit and didn’t fall over.

Vriska leaped over the energy bolt again. “You’re made of sterner stuff than the others!”

“Wouldn’t be chief if I wasn’t,” he said. He waited for Vriska to dodge out of the way of the swirling energies again. Then he shot exactly where she was going to dodge into, the attack hitting her dead on. She was sent tumbling across the dirt – but she landed on her feet, poised to attack again.

She summoned her dice to her hand again. “You would have declared it a win for you had I landed facedown, huh?”

“You have no proof of such allegations.”

“Cheeky bastard,” Vriska grinned, throwing the dice to the ground. Siron prepared for an attack. He was not expecting them to summon a ghost. A swirling ethereal being leaped for Siron, going right through his defensive attack. Siron braced for impact – but found the ghost was completely intangible.

The real threat was the distraction. Vriska was soon in front of him. She kicked him in the face with enough force to knock him to the ground. She placed her foot on his chest. “Gotcha.”

Siron glared at her with intense rage for a moment. His hand twitched, readying a spell – but he decided against it. His eyes softened and he let out a laugh. “That you did.”

Vriska stepped off and offered him a hand, which he took. “I think I’ve beaten your entire village now. Anyone else around to challenge me? Anyone?”

Siron looked to the ponies. “There are the otherworlders.”

Vriska raised an eyebrow. “Otherworlders, huh?”

Twilight nodded, pushing through the pain in her mind. “Yeah. Ponies aren’t native to this universe.”

Vriska smirked. “Neither am I. Though I guess that’s pretty obvious. Any of you ponies good fighters? Come on, send me your best hitter. I sense a challenge in you.” She looked at Twilight’s metal-lined ears. Upon seeing them, her smile faltered slightly and her eyes narrowed. “Perhaps you?”

“Er… I’ll pass,” Twilight said. “I’m not our best fighter and I’m not feeling all that great at the moment.” She rubbed her headache.

Nova shrugged, glancing at Pinkie. “Me, or you?”

Pinkie shrugged. “Hey, we’re both good for different things.”

“Both of you at once, then,” Vriska declared.

Nova rolled her eyes. “That wouldn’t exactly be fair.”

“Nova’s right,” Pinkie said. “You’d trounce us.”

Nova glanced at Pinkie. “That’s not what I…” She looked at Vriska after she realized what Pinkie was implying. “…You’re holding back a lot, aren’t you?”

Vriska smirked. “Guilty as charged!” she bowed. “Honestly, I’m certain nobody here could beat me
if I was giving it my all, but I’d at least like to see someone force me to use some more creative tricks.”

Pinkie grinned, nudging Nova. “Hey, Nova. Let’s give her a good time.”

Nova shrugged. “…Fine. Any particular plans?”

Pinkie pulled out a squeaky hammer with an imprint of Vriska’s face on it. “Nope! We’re just going to have fun.”

Nova readied herself some magic armor, coating herself with a sheen of crystal. Vriska summoned her dice. Pinkie menacingly ate a cupcake.

Renee rolled her eyes, deciding to take the role of announcer. “Three… Two… One… Aaaaaand go.”

Vriska threw her dice to the ground first. She pulled out a sword to deflect Pinkie’s hammer, cutting into the squeaky head unleashing a sad wheeze of air. At the same time she twisted her body upward, dodging a beam of energy from Nova. Her dice activated, throwing a handful of knives at Nova, which the unicorn easily blocked. Vriska kicked at Pinkie, but Pinkie was suddenly behind Vriska with the Bomb Mask on her face. “Surprise!”

The explosion sent Vriska into the air. She nimbly twirled, dodging several volleys of magic lasers. “It would have been so much more hilarious if you’d said ‘surprise, motherfucker’.”

“Yeeeeeeah, not my style,” Pinkie said, pulling out her party cannon. “This is my style.”

Vriska dodged the onslaught of confetti and balloons but failed to twist away from a magic bolt to the leg. She lost her balance and went tumbling. She quickly rolled away from Pinkie’s tossed golf club and stood up.

Nova grabbed Vriska with her telekinesis, trying to pin her to the ground from a distance. Vriska’s strength was impressive, but it was not enough to stop the magic from pushing her down.

Vriska smirked. “Looks like I will have to do that…” Her body shifted slightly, and suddenly her outfit was orange. The robes hung over her back, a hood appeared over her head, a brilliant sun symbol took form on her chest, and she had suddenly grown two large butterfly wings. She took one look at Nova. Her seven-pupil eye glowed, latching onto the unicorn with some kind of magic power.

Nova’s horn experienced a power surge, blowing up in her face and tossing her to the ground. This released Vriska from the telekinesis field. She grinned. “And that’s tha-“

The real warhammer came down over Vriska’s head, planting her face several inches into the dirt. The attack drew blood of a cobalt blue color and shattered Vriska’s glasses.

Pinkie moved to pin Vriska, but somehow her hoof missed. Vriska rolled back onto her feet and grinned. “Did you think you had me there?”

“Nope,” Pinkie said, shrugging. “I did get a good hit off you though, didn’t I?”

Vriska pulled another pair of glasses out of her robes, placing them over her eyes. She wiped the blood coming from her nose off to the side. “Yeah. Did not see the real hammer coming.”

Nova tried to stand up and shoot Vriska, but she tripped over her own two hooves. “What the…
What’s happening to me?” She tried to stand up again but fell on her back.

“I stole your luck,” Vriska said, smirking. “You’re very unlucky right now. And I’m very lucky.” She summoned her dice. “I think I can get a pretty good roll right about now.”

Pinkie smiled nervously. “I don’t suppose you’ll accept a surrender right now?”

“The terms of your surrender is that I get to unleash this roll on you.”

“Figures.” Pinkie tossed the warhammer aside for a pair of fishing poles.

Vriska blinked. “…What?”

“Hey, I drew them, means they’re going to be useful.”

Vriska shrugged, tossing the dice to the ground. A giant salmon appeared out of nowhere, mouth open wide. Pinkie ducked to the left, swinging her fishing poles at the gaping maw, hooking the jaw’s sides with her two hooks. She twisted herself sideways, spinning the fish around in an arc, swinging it back towards Vriska.

Vriska activated her eye, latching onto Pinkie’s luck, but the fish was already heading for her and it was way too big to dodge by pure luck. She was hit like a bowling pin, flipping sideways and landing flat on the ground.

Pinkie laughed hard – but lost control of the fish with her newfound bad luck. It hit her in the face at just the wrong angle, knocking her out cold. The fish flopped on her a few times before vanishing.

Vriska stood up rubbing her head and favoring one of her legs. “Yeah! I won- ow. Ow. Ow that fucking hurts. Giant fish sure pack a punch…”

“Can I have my ‘luck’ back now?” Nova muttered, struggling to remain standing. “Because I’m not sure I can take a step without faceplanting right now, and it’s infuriating.”

Vriska smiled sheepishly and shrugged. “Hey, sorry, I’m a Thief, not a Rogue. Can’t exactly give it back. It’ll return on its own, give it a day or two.”

“A day or two!”

“Hey, I didn’t take all of it! If I did you’d be having a heart attack right now.”

Renee raised an eyebrow. “Was that a cleverly veiled threat?”

“What? No!” Vriska threw her hands into the air. “Everyone assumes that! Gog! Maybe I’m just trying to let you know something because it’s interesting, huh? Ever think about that?”

Flutterfree blinked. “You have issues with people thinking you’re dangerous, don’t you?”


Renee rolled her eyes. “But you clearly are dangerous.”

“Hey, just because it’s evident doesn’t mean it needs to be a fucking issue!”

Flutterfree smiled. “Do you ever wonder if it’s you that’s making it an issue?”

“Oh Jegus… Nope, nope, not letting this turn into a gogdamn therapy session. Vriska is removing
herself from the premises of this conversation and moving onto something with significantly less ‘nope’ content.” She looked directly at Twilight. “So, what’s the story behind those fancy ears of yours?”

Twilight blinked and tried to clear her head. “Oh! Well, it’s… Rather pain-

Before she could start her story, one of the demon’s tents exploded in a shower of fire. A young woman burst out of it, hands aflame. “DEATH TO DEMONS!”

“DEATH TO DEMONS!” a dozen other voices chorused. Water, earth, and fire erupted from all around the demon village, filling the air with the power of Elemental war. Around a dozen men and women revealed themselves, taking out a similar number of tent houses as quickly as they could.

“WARRIORS!” Siron yelled. “DEFEND YOUR PEOPLE!”

The demons launched into action, grabbing their weapons and charging the various attackers. Blades and clubs met fire, earth, and water. All the ponies save Twilight leaped into action alongside them.

Twilight froze – the clang of weapons shook her to her core. The rumblings of the earth ground her awareness as the rocks were thrown. The crackling fire tingled and the water’s rush felt like an impact. She winced, closing her eyes tight.

“Twilight!” Pinkie’s yell cut through the other noises. “Just turn it off!”

Twilight clenched her jaw, cursing herself inwardly. Why hadn’t she just done that to begin with? She lit her horn and turned off her ears. Silence reigned.

She opened her eyes. Without the noise, everything was different. She felt like an observer, rather than a participant. Earth flew through the air with fire added to it, landing on top of Siron’s hut. Twilight felt the vibration of the impact in her hooves, but it was a dull feeling. A distant feeling.

She narrowed her eyes. She would not be distanced from this. These people, whoever they were, had attacked out of nowhere, unprovoked as far as she knew. She would take care of them. She focused her magic on a chunk of earth, redirecting the flung boulder into a different assailant. She teleported a waterbender in front of a firebender’s attack.

One of them saw what she was doing and thrust a jet of water at her. Twilight calmly used her magic to twist the jet around her body and back at the bender, knocking them to the ground.

A spire of earth hit her from behind, tossing her head over hooves. She attempted to right herself but the burly earthbender drove a pillar of earth at her from underneath, tossing her into the air. She lit her horn, firing a laser at him, but he deflected with an expertly aimed rock, which he then chucked right at her. The stone hit her in the chin, turning her fall into a rapid corkscrew dive. She landed on the ground, grunting.

The man glared at her. “Why do you defend them?” he asked.

“They are our friends,” Twilight coughed, standing back up. She flared her wings.

“They are a danger.” He readied a fist, preparing to drive earth into her face. She reared back, lighting her horn. She doubted she was going to be able to dodge his attack.

He thrust his fist upward – and generated a spike of earth a foot to Twilight’s left. He took a step forward, tripped, and fell flat on his face. Twilight saw Vriska standing behind him, a smirk on her face. “Not your lucky day, is it Twilight?” she asked.
“No…” Twilight said, canceling her spell.

Vriska’s eyes widened. She activated her eye again, stealing the luck something behind Twilight. Turning her head, Twilight saw there was a firebender woman there who had just burned her own hands. Twilight gulped. “You… saved me there.”

Vriska moved back into Twilight’s field of view. She was already saying something. “-id. How did you not notice her? She wasn’t exactly being subtle!”

“Maybe because I’m deaf?” She pointed at her ears. “Maybe!?”

Vriska blinked. “That explains a lot.” She threw a punch to her side, hitting an earthbender in the face and giving him a broken nose in the process. She threw her dice on the ground, launching a giant marshmallow at an incoming hunk of rock.

Twilight sat down and blinked, watching as Vriska took care of everything around her in a matter of seconds. *I don’t even need to do anything…*

Soon, the attackers were fleeing. However, the plan had clearly been hit-and-run to begin with. The damage to the demon village was substantial, and there were more than a few of the red bugs crawling around, injured. Twilight took a breath and stood tall. She turned her ears back on, audibly wincing.

Vriska looked around, checking for what hit Twilight.

“I turned on my ears,” Twilight said. “It’s just… the noise.”

“What kind of lame hearing aids are they if they hurt?”

“The ones that work if your ears were completely blown out,” Twilight muttered. She dragged herself over to Siron, who was tending to a demon woman’s broken wings. “Who were those people?”

“Terrorists,” Siron muttered. He reached for the form of a knocked out earthbender, rolling back the man’s sleeve to reveal a tattoo – a circle with seven spikes poking out of it. “The Defenders of Paradise, they call themselves.”

Twilight furrowed her brow, trying to think through the noise. “…Have they done this before?”

“Attacked our village? No, this is a cowardly and brazen attack. They always attack us when we are alone, or people who associate with us, or when we’re in Republic City… I would declare war on them if I could.”

“Why can’t you?” Nova asked.

“Don’t know who leads them. Don’t know who their members are. Don’t know where they stay. Don’t know anything.”

Twilight looked at the knocked out man. “Why don’t we ask them what’s going on?”

“Be my guest. They never know anything, taking a page out of Ba’al’s book.” Siron curled his claws into a fist and punched the man’s prone form across the face. “Their leaders don’t reveal their identity and always communicate through pigeon.”

Vriska tore one of the womens’ jackets off, revealing a ton of tiny scrolls. “Hey, look what I found!”
The group walked over. Renee raised an eyebrow. “I’d say she is one of the ones who writes the messages.”

Siron’s eyes twitched. “Why would they send a communicator into battle? It doesn’t make sense!”

“They’re all pretty crazy,” Pinkie said, rifling through the scrolls. “I think this particular lady just really wanted to go and destroy some demon tents. Lucky break for us.”

Renee levitated some of the scrolls. “All of these are in code…”

Twilight furrowed her brow, squinting. “It would have to be a pretty good code if the translation spell can’t work it out…”

“Oh, we can always just ask her,” Flutterfree said. “I know we have a wake-up spell.”

Nova narrowed her eyes. “Or I could just tear it out of her mind.”

“That too.”

Twilight frowned. “You sure we should do that?”

Nova nodded. “They attacked. I’m going to see if she knows anything.” Nova’s eyes went white as her magic connected with the woman’s mind. There was silence for a few seconds. Nova returned, blinking. “She does write messages for the Defenders of Paradise. She does know more than ‘demons must be eradicated’ and ‘the other dimensions are impure.’ There’s a ‘safehouse’ in Republic city where she gets instructions.”

Pinkie rubbed her hooves together. “Now we’re talking. Information. Siron, we will help take these terrorists down! It probably has something to do with the friendship problem. To the ‘safehouse’ place!”

Vriska grinned. “I haven’t raided a safehouse in a while. I’m in.”

Twilight found herself groaning inwardly at the comment. She shook her head, chastising herself for it. Vriska was offering help and was happy to give it, Twilight should be happy….But she wasn’t.

“Are you coming, Siron?” Renee asked.

“Sadly, no, I must remain here with my warriors and rebuild the town.”

Nova blinked. “…Really? I thought of all people you would want revenge.”

“I trust you to take care of it,” Siron grunted. “My people need me. You do what you need to.”

Vriska shrugged. “We won’t need the help. Hell, we won’t need much other than me. I could take the place out all on my own…”

“We do need to, you know, actually get more information there?” Twilight said. “Brute force won’t do that.”

Vriska tapped her forehead. “Psychic. I bet one of them will have a weak, impressionable mind.”

_Shell has everything…_ Twilight sighed, but forced a smile through the mounting pain in her head. “Well, great then! Let’s get going! Nova, lead the way!”

Nova nodded, leading them out of the demon village and toward Republic City.
Twilight turned her ears off. She was done with the sound of Vriska’s voice.

~~~

After the Hundred Years war had ended and territories were returned to their respective Elemental Nations, there was a problem. On Earth Kingdom soil there were numerous Fire Nation colonies that had not only been there for decades, but had also mixed with the culture of the Earth Kingdom to produce something new. When the war ended, the Fire Nation citizens didn’t want to leave, and there were more than a few earthbenders there who had started families that went back multiple generations with the firebenders.

It was among the first of the issues faced by a world suddenly at peace.

Sick of war, the Fire Nation and Earth Kingdom sought to work out a peaceful solution, and their final decision was something of an oddity. They voted to make the mixed colonies free, separate from either kingdom. This idea soon evolved beyond simply creating a new Elemental Nation – Avatar Aang stepped in, suggesting the newly formed nation should serve as the ‘center’ for the entire world, as a place where all types of benders could live in peace and harmony.

Thus, the United Republic was born, and plans to create a spectacular capital known as Republic City were created. The demons were conscripted as extra workers, and more than a few other worlds had taken a keen interest in the city, though all involved were careful to adhere to the original city plans, for the United Republic felt a strong need to form its own culture that was not influenced by powers from beyond.

Republic City did not fully avoid all outside influence, but it did rather well considering where most of its resources were coming from. Buildings began to rise from the previously abandoned beaches of the coast.

That was roughly two years ago. The city was still very much under construction, but it was advanced enough that people had begun to move in. The city should have taken a minimum of ten years to create, but with all the help it was moving along far ahead of schedule. The buildings were orderly constructions, mixing design elements of all four nations to create efficient, simple, and yet somehow beautiful structures. There was even an Air Temple under construction on a nearby island, to be the future home of the Avatar himself, the last of the Air Nomads.

A constant sight along the streets was construction – construction, construction, construction. It was not uncommon to see a demon hauling material around, or working with earthbenders to construct an architectural overhang. The demons were regularly given untrusting glares, but they made do. Usually they were on good terms with the people they were working with.

A pony could be seen walking around the city’s streets occasionally, though few were involved with the construction efforts. Most were just tourists, or ponies whose circumstances had led them to live here for some reason or another. The United Republic had reasoned that since they were a home to all benders, they shouldn’t have an issue with otherworlders making their homes within their borders.

It was like a much neater version of the Hub, in many ways. There wasn’t a prevalence of technology, there weren’t dozens of people coming and leaving through dimensional portals each day, but there was a clear mixture developing. The Elemental culture may have been dominant, but it wasn’t all that existed.

Vriska, Twilight, and the other ponies walked down the streets of this scene, taking in the sights. Vriska had to admit; it was nice to see something a bit more orderly than she was used to. The multiversal scene tended to be a huge mess of chaos nobody could wrap their head around. Every
world that had numerous others involved in any area was usually a hopeless disorganized mess that changed every other Tuesday – if Tuesdays could even be considered to exist, really. It was a nice change of pace.

Better than the fucking Strands by a long shot.

She looked to Nova. “Hey, how much further?”

Nova looked back at her, smiling. These ponies were always smiling; though Vriska could tell this wasn’t the usual naïve smile she was used to from their kind. These five weren’t idiots, not even the Pinkie. “Down that alley there, the orange house,” Nova answered.

Vriska cracked her knuckles. “Good.” She was looking forward to laying the smack down on a terrorist cell. To be fair, she was always looking forward to a good smack down of any kind. As long as it wasn’t dealt to her.

Nova cast an invisibility spell over them all as they stepped into the alleyway, walking cautiously. They saw no one else in the alley. The orange house was clearly occupied, raised voices audible from their current position.

“Okay,” Twilight said. “We should go the stealthy route, see if we can sneak in and listen to what they’re saying.”

“ Bah,” Vriska said. “We don’t need that. You have me remember?”

“…She can’t hear you, or see you,” Renee said.


“Vriska!” Nova hissed. “We should stick to a plan of – hey! I hear you running off!”

“What’s going on?” Twilight asked.

Vriska smirked. I’m saving you all a lot of trouble. She charged in through the front door, noting with some mild annoyance that the invisibility spell dropped. The six benders on the first floor saw her and attacked. Vriska dodged all the elements with her momentarily high luck. She touched the mind of a bender, putting him to sleep. She kicked another in the face and stole the luck of another. They never stood a chance.

“Six down, zero fatalities,” Vriska said to herself, rather proud of her finesse. She threw her dice, using some of her luck to alter the outcome purposefully to something explosive. A lemon with a stick of dynamite in it flew into the ceiling and tore a hole to the second floor. She leaped up, elegantly dodging all the rocks, ice, and fire tossed at her.

She landed on top of a table with numerous papers placed all around it. “Excuse me, did I break up an important meeting of Terrorists R Us?”

An old guy pointed his finger at her, unleashing a torrent of fire. She dodged to the side and punched him out the window into the alley below. She threw her dice behind herself, summoning a giant tangle of vines that entrapped everyone in the room. She dusted her hands off and looked down into the alleyway. “There you go! All taken care of! And none of them are dead! So you can question them all.”

Pinkie blinked, calling up to her. “That was anticlimactic!”
“So? I got you what you needed, right?”

“I guess so?” Pinkie poked the old guy. “I dunno, it just means less, if that makes sense?”

Vriska shrugged. “It sorta does? Oh, I can get him to tell you who’s in charge of this mess too.” She touched the old guy’s mind. “Tell me who is in charge of your little terror tabernacle.”

He looked up at her from the grimy ground. “I will never tell you anything!”

“Okay, he’s got a strong mind.” She grabbed one of the women tied up in the tree. “Let’s see… you tell me who’s in charge!”

The woman’s eyes glazed over. “Anix…”

“Hey! Does the name Anix mean anything to you ponies?” she called down.

“What!” Nova shouted. “ANIX is behind this? But he’s a demon! That doesn’t make the slightest bit of sense!”

Renee put her hoof to her chin. “…It does, though. The demons have been getting a lot of protection and assistance under the new laws…”

“Demons have died! He’d never do that!”

“Do we really know Anix that well, dear? Now if this were Mlinx we were talking about, I’d agree with you, but Anix has always been more… ‘demonic’, if you catch my drift.”

Nova turned to Pinkie. “Well, what do you say?”

“He did it,” Pinkie confirmed. “Though… I think there’s more to it than what Renee’s suggesting. There’s something more sinister at play here.”

Vriska leaped down into the hallway, pumping a fist. “All right, we got the guy! Let’s go punch him in the face!”

Renee raised an eyebrow. “You sure like violence.”

Vriska shrugged. “I can be peaceful.”

“That wasn’t what I said.”

Vriska rolled her eyes. “Whatever, how about we…” she blinked. “Hey, where’s Twilight?”

Nova blinked. “What do you mean wher-“ She looked around, but couldn’t find her. “Uh…”

“Did she get foalnapped?” Renee gasped.

“No,” Flutterfree said, shaking her head.

“Then what happened to her?”

“She left,” Flutterfree said, staring into Vriska’s eyes. “Because of her.”

Vriska put a hand to her chest. “What did I do?”

“Everything,” Flutterfree said, fixing her with a disapproving look.
“Hey, I didn’t kill anyone!”

“I mean everything in the sense that there was no need for the team. You just walked in, kicked everyone around like ragdolls, then walked out with the information we needed.” Flutterfree raised a wing, pointing at the hole in the second story window. “You took away anything any of us could have done.”

“So?” Vriska said, folding her arms. “Come on, I did what we needed, and I did it quickly too.”

“And Twilight is struggling to convince herself that she’s still worthwhile,” Flutterfree countered. “She wants, badly, to get over her disability and be useful. This was her first mission since her injury. And then you show up, stealing the spotlight. Normally I wouldn’t hold this against you, but I can see that you wanted to be the center of attention. You dragged the light to you on purpose. Thief of Light indeed.”

Vriska’s smile vanished, replaced with a glare. “What did you just say to me?”

“I said you live up to your name,” Flutterfree continued, taking a step forward instead of backing down. “You stole the light, and now Twilight is Celestia-knows-where, probably crying and brooding because you felt like showing off!”

Vriska folded her arms. “Sounds like that’s her problem.”

Nova snapped. “She’s been deaf for less than a month, you asshole! Of course it’s her problem! That doesn’t give you an excuse!”

“Me, the asshole? What about all you, acting so entitled!”


Flutterfree held up a wing. “Vriska has a point, Nova. We are acting a little entitled.”

“Thank you,” Vriska said. “…Wait, what?”

Flutterfree shook her head. “Look… None of us are handling this well. Twilight just ran off, you’re being defensive, and we’re looking for someone to blame. Yes, Vriska, you’re being a spotlight hog and you were completely oblivious to Twilight’s feelings, but thinking it over I can’t really blame you for ignorance. Twilight has run off, but I can’t blame her because she’s going through a hard change. And as for me… What I just said was mostly uncalled for. I’m sorry.”

Vriska blinked, shaking her head. “…You backed down way too quickly.”

Flutterfree smiled sadly. “I was angry. I’m not right now. Just sad.”

Vriska rolled back onto her heels. “You shouldn’t just back up like that. Some of what you said meant something.”

Flutterfree smirked. “Are you admitting you were being a bit of a showoff?”

“Fuck.” Vriska facepalmed. “I walked right into that one…”

“Yeah, you did…” Flutterfree said. “Sorry, I think you just ran into us at a bad time. We’re all under a lot of stress and, well, we’ve just recently realized what a horrible place the multiverse can be.”

Vriska’s expression softened considerably. “It doesn’t pull any punches, does it?”
“Nope,” Renee added, looking at her horn guiltily.

Vriska held up her hands. “I get it. I get it. I was acting like my crude, badass self, and it wasn’t what you needed. That’s fine. I’ll just leave you girls to it.”

Flutterfree sighed. “You don’t have to leave.”

“You girls can handle Anix, I’m sure of it,” Vriska said, giving them the thumbs up. “I’m also sure Twilight will come back to you, eventually. You’re her friends. Pretty fucking good ones, from what I can see. So… Yeah.” She changed into her orange cloak and flapped her wings. “I’ll see you around.”

“You sure?” Flutterfree asked.

“Positive. I don’t need to be here right now. Just give that Anix guy a punch in the face for me, okay?”

“…Sure,” Flutterfree agreed.

Pinkie gasped. “You’re going to punch Anix in the face, Flutterfree?!”

“Looks like it.”

Vriska laughed. “Well, it’s been fun, ciao!” She flew off into the sky, careful not to look back.

She skimmed past buildings, through construction lattices, and toward the ocean. She stopped herself over the waves, looking down.

Damn, she thought, I feel like a tool. Just my presence tore someone up.

She shook her head – why was she letting what some whiny pony thought mess with her? She was just some stupid alicorn with a stupid emotional tangle and a stupid disability that Vriska had inadvertently preyed on…

She put a hand over her face and sighed. “I’m never going to be able to escape, am I?!”

The sky had no answer for her.

Vriska, now ticked off at life in general, descended to the beach and sat down on the sand. She removed her orange robes, reverting to her regular clothes. She picked up a rock and threw it into the waves, watching the ripples spiral out only to get washed away by the bigger waves of the ocean itself.

“Great, looks like Poetry Sight™ has kicked in. Wonderful. So what am I, the fucking ripples or the fucking waves? Or, wait, I get it, this is one of those double reacharound things where I’m both!” She tossed another rock into the ocean.

Vriska had no idea why she was still here. She should just grab some luck from the townspeople until she had enough to slip through a world boundary and go somewhere else. But here she was, sitting on a beach, staring at the ocean.

Feeling alone.

She groaned, preparing to launch into a random tirade at existence again, when something caught her eye.
Twilight was sitting on the beach a few meters to her right. The moment Vriska noticed Twilight, Twilight noticed Vriska.

The two stood up at the same time, staring at each other with confused, forlorn expressions. They wordlessly walked toward each other until they were right next to each other, standing on the beach, waves brushing past their feet and hooves.

There was silence.

“I’m sorry,” they both said at once.

“Wait, what the fuck?” Vriska said taken aback.

“You, sorry?” Twilight said, cocking her head. “How?”

“I was being an asshole that’s how!”

“You were just doing what needed to be done and I took it personally!”

“I was hogging the damn spotlight.”

“You had the right to! I’m the one who decided it made me useless.”

“You? Useless? Give me a break, you’re changing the world around you. You are the Charter Twilight.”

“And you’re clearly some kind of hero. You’re from elsewhere in the multiverse. You know more than we do, I can tell. I probably pale in comparison to you.”

Vriska pointed a finger at Twilight. “First rule of dealing with asshole bitches – of which I am the queen – don’t inflate their ego.”

“…You just called yourself the queen.”

“Yeah. I did. So what?”

“I don’t know, really.” Twilight blinked. “All I know is that I shouldn’t have run off.”

“I, clearly, needed to pay more attention to the alicorn I was supposed to be paying attention to.”

Twilight raised an eyebrow. “Supposed to?”

Vriska shrugged. “I was told, a long time ago, that I would meet a Twilight with metal in her ears, and that it would be important to me for some reason.”

“Who told you this?”

“Another Twilight,” Vriska answered, smirking. “Your kind gets around a lot.”

“I… Have a lot of questions.”

“I have answers. Question is, do you want the answers, or do you want to discover things on your own?”

“I’ll take the latter, for now,” Twilight said. An awkward silence developed after this statement.
Vriska kicked some sand. “So… are mutual apologies accepted and does everyone agree this was fucking stupid?”

Twilight snorted. “Sure. Especially the competition to be the bad guy a minute ago.”

“I won that. Totally.”

“I think the moral we’re supposed to learn here is that there isn’t always a clear fault to be found and that sometimes interactions just suck. And that, well, other stuff about being the center of attention and not taking things personally. And… that me and my friends need to work some trauma out.”

Vriska blinked. “My gog, you think of things in terms of morals.”

Twilight grinned. “Yeah, I do.” She glanced at her flank. “Sometimes, when I do that, my cutie mark starts glowing, telling me I did what I was meant to do.”

“…The hell does that mean?”

Twilight cocked her head. “You’ve met other versions of me but you don’t know what the Tree of Harmony and its friendship problems are?”

Vriska shook her head. “Enlighten me.”

Twilight grinned. “Oh, trust me, I will.”

~~~

Less than an hour later, Twilight teleported back to the demon village. “Hey guys, Vriska and I made up – HOLY CELESTIA.”

She was witness to a gruesome scene – Siron’s fist was currently driven straight through Anix’s head. He pulled it back, leaving a blue, dripping hole where Anix’s face once was. The insubordinate demon’s body crumpled to the ground. Nova, Flutterfree, Pinkie, and Renee stared in shock, clearly not expecting what had just happened.

“WHAT!?” Twilight shouted. “…WHAT!?”

Siron looked at her and moved his arms around.

Twilight turned her ears on, wincing. “Care to repeat that?”

Siron clearly wasn’t in the mood. He stamped his foot on the ground and pushed his face up to Twilight’s. “Anix. Was a traitor. You know what he did.”

“He was in charge of the attacks, but-“

“BUT WHAT!?” Siron roared.

“But now we won’t know what his reasons were!” Nova shouted. “You got him to confess and then punched his face in! There could be more out there, Siron! More threats to your people!”

“Anix was never a threat to his people, not really,” Flutterfree said. “He was helping the-“

“You can stop talking now,” Siron grunted, turning his back on them. “All of you, out. Now.”

“But-“ Twilight began.
“I SAID OUT!”

The five ponies scrambled out of Siron’s hut through the hole in the wall.

Twilight caught her breath. “I… I… What in Celestia’s name!?”

“I don’t know!” Pinkie said, grabbing her head. “I knew he had a rage problem but I wasn’t expecting that!”

“Poor Anix…” Flutterfree muttered.

“That’s debatable,” Nova commented.

Renee shot her a look. “We do not condone senseless killings via face punching.”

Flutterfree started crying.

“Oh my Stars, Flutterfree, I’m sorry…”

Twilight took a deep breath and sighed. “I…” she shook her head and turned off her ears. “Okay, girls, get yourselves together! Snap out of it! GIRLS!”

The four of them stopped talking and looked to her.

“We need to get a hold of ourselves! We’ve seen terrible things, horrendous things, deadly things. We’ve been the cause of some of those things and we’ve been the victim of some of those things. We can’t let it do this to us! I can see you all – I can see myself – unraveling at the seams! Pinkie, afraid the world isn’t what she wanted it to be. Renee, afraid of herself, the rest of us, and what we can do. Flutterfree, unable to reconcile the anger she feels with her compassion. Nova, losing faith in her own role in the world. And me, struck with a disability and losing my confidence.

“These are just a small number of the problems we face that aren’t evil. They are just things inside us. Usually, we talk about them together, work them out – but we’ve been afraid. Afraid of hurting each other. Afraid of opening up the wounds. Afraid, afraid, afraid. I’m not going to stand for that anymore. I am here, girls. I am not a fragile piece of glass that could break from the slightest prod. I am deaf, not sickly. I can still help you.” Twilight smiled. “Girls, we were the friendship problem. We weren’t here to ease relations with the demons, we weren’t here to help Vriska discover herself, we were here to be here. For each other.”

She spread her wings. “We can’t unravel now. We have so far to go.”

Her four friends rushed into her embrace. There were tears – she didn’t know whose. She didn’t care. They were together, and the cutie marks on their flanks were glowing strong.

They were together.

Twilight opened her eyes for a moment, spying Vriska watching in the distance. She waved at them – and vanished.

Twilight knew they’d meet again someday. At a better time.

~~~

For Twilight and friends, the day was over.

For General Sunset and company, it had just begun.
The General ran into Hyrule’s grand Temple of Time, screeching to a halt in the main chamber. The Temple was beyond impressive – at least four stories tall, carved from an ancient pearly material that glistened from every angle, and covered with beautiful, ornate depictions of the Goddesses of Ardent. Power, Wisdom, Courage, and Time, all focused around an image of the Triforce above a simple, marble pedestal.

Zelda stood in front of the altar, looking down at Sunset. “You came.”

“Yes,” she said, panting. Toph, Lieshy, and Vivian filed in behind her. “What’s wrong?”

“The Triforce of Wisdom called me here…” Zelda said, tracing her hand over the altar. “All I saw was the Triforce, this temple, darkness, and the Sage’s mask.”

“So… what?” Sunset said, cocking her head. “The Sage is coming here? Ba’al took her, there’s no way.”

“Never say no way,” Toph pointed out. “It’s asking for trouble.”

Lieshy furrowed her brow. “Premonition’s brewing something awful, there lies another. Perhaps the Sage isn’t coming, but Ba’al is with the mask.”

Sunset growled. “Whatever it is, we’re ready. Princess, is there anyone else coming?”

Zelda nodded. “Word has been sent to the Apollo and a few other groups. You are just the first to resp-“

A portal opened right behind the altar. A pulse of purple energy launched outward, assaulting the minds of all present. Vivian vanished into the ground, Toph started screaming, and Sunset was frozen in place, eyes unable to move.

Lieshy and Zelda stood their ground. The Triforce of Wisdom glowed brightly on her hand. Lieshy glanced at her friends, confused by their reactions.

The Sage walked out of the portal, a dark chain affixed around her neck. Her expression was not stoic, or determined – it was sorrowful. “I’m sorry,” she said, moving to lay the mask on the altar.

Zelda was having none of that. She unleashed a quick spell on the Sage, tossing her to the side. Lieshy swooped in and picked up the mask, turning around as fast as she could. She bolted for the Temple’s exit, mask close to her heart.

The mask wanted her to escape. She knew it.

A tendril of disgusting blackness grabbed her back hoof. She was able to touch the doors – but not leave. She was pulled back and thrown to the ground, losing her grip on the white mask.

It flew into the hands of a Ba’al surrounded by purple, alien energies. Zelda pointed her Triforce hand at Ba’al, eyes narrow. “Begone.”

The holy force that shot from the Triforce of Wisdom was more than enough to tear the horrific power from Ba’al. His eyes rolled into the back of his head and he slumped to the ground.

Zelda directed her holy magic onto the Sage next. The pony herself was largely unaffected, but the dark, impossible chain began to fade as the light burned its evil essence.

Something pulled on the chain from the other side of the portal, reestablishing its substance. A dark
energy shot out of the portal in the shape of a claw, aiming right for Zelda’s heart. She fired back with her holy energy, barely keeping the claw at bay.

Tears in her eyes, the Sage picked up the mask. She walked to the altar, trying to drag it out as long as she could.

Lieshy tackled the Sage. “That shackled nothing! Fight, Pinkie, fight! This creature doesn’t have to control you! The cotton candy touches that above all! You are more than it!”

“I… I have to,” the Sage said, crying. “I can’t escape. It’s not meant to happen.” She bucked Lieshy away. “I never wanted this to happen.”

Lieshy flew at her again, but this time the Sage didn’t let her get close. She hit her away with a frying pan, dazing the poor pegasus.

The Sage picked up the mask again and placed it on the altar. Zelda was far too busy keeping the dark claw back to do anything about the mask as it floated above the altar. A ping of magic went off, and four separate essences of divine power appeared in the air above the mask. Blue, green, red, and a larger white one in the center, shining their holy light down on all.

It was enough to push the madness out of Sunset and Toph’s minds. The holy essences of the Goddesses told them it was too late to save them – but the Sage needed help.

Sunset roared, summoning every ounce of magic she could into a single fire spell aimed directly at the dark chain around the Sage’s neck. A swirling blade of holy energy channeled through her antlers combined with the flame summoned through her horn, colliding with the chain. Chunks of it went flying, but it healed itself almost instantly.

“It doesn’t want me to go!” the Sage yelled.

“Screw that!” Toph yelled, driving a spike of earth into the chain, to less effect than Sunset’s disc.

The divine essences began to vanish into the mask – including the one that bestowed much of the Triforce of Wisdom’s power. Zelda’s light began to falter. Toph and Sunset could feel the madness melting into their mind again. They slowed, stumbling over their own attempts to break the chain.

Zelda’s power broke. The claw slammed into her, cutting a gash across her midsection. Toph and Sunset broke down, unable to continue facing the monster. The mask absorbed all four divine essences into itself, and fell back onto the altar.

Crying, the Sage picked up the mask. She placed it on her face, and stood still.

The chain yanked her back. She struggled against it, but her limbs froze up. She let out a bloodcurdling, agonized scream as she was dragged back from where she came from.

Vivian’s hand shot out from the ground, grabbing a hold of the Sage’s leg at the last possible minute.

She was dragged through the portal along with the Sage.

“Vivian!” Sunset yelled, wailing at the world on the other side. The portal closed, leaving nothing behind. “Vivian!”

Something inside her snapped. She shot an explosion spell at the back wall, destroying the engraving of the Triforce in a blind rage. “VIVIAN!”
“I could see it…” Toph said. “I… I can’t see anything. I’ve never seen anything.”

Link, O’Neill, and a team of Tau’ri teleported into the room. Link clenched his fist. “I knew it. We’re too late.”

“The Goddesses…” Zelda mumbled. “They’re… They’re gone…”

Link looked at his hand. He forced the power of the Triforce to show itself – but he only got a faint glow. He bit his lip. “There went our trump card…”

“Okay!” Sunset shouted, pointing at Link. “You know something! I know you know something! You better start explaining or I start burning!”

O’Neill glanced at him. “Link, I think we’re beyond the point that the secret will help.”

Link sighed, nodding. “…There is this being called Majora…”

~~~

Aang walked into a large tent in the middle of the desert. “Hello?”

Iroh was seemingly alone in the tent. “Ah, Avatar Aang. I’m glad you could meet me here.”

“…What’s with all the secrecy? And this… big, empty tent?”

Iroh folded his hands. “Aang, there is a great evil from another world that is threatening ours. We don’t know what it is, exactly, or what it wants. But it infects the minds of those who know about it, driving them to do its bidding.”

Aang blinked. “…What?”

Iroh sighed. “There’s an evil spirit running amuck in other worlds and it’s causing big problems in everyone who thinks about it.”

“How is that even possible?”

“How do unicorns use magic? I have no idea; all I know is that it’s infected the soul of a dear friend. And you are the only force I know of that can change a person’s soul.”

Aang looked at his hand. “…Yeah. I can do that. Who is it and where are they?”

The Puddlejumper decloaked, revealing Sombra and Tempest sitting at the back hatch. The two of them quickly wheeled a gurney out with Corona on it. Her eyes were closed, but her mouth was twisted in a permanent scowl. Her skin was covered in sweat and Aang swore he saw purple tendrils of energy coming off her fingertips for a split second.

Aang took a deep breath. “All right. I can do this.” He crossed his legs and pressed his hands together at the side of Corona’s bed, entering a meditative state. “What should I expect?”

“There is a presence within Corona that should not be there,” Iroh said. “A dark, evil thing. We believe only a small part of the entity is within her, but it is connected in some way to the rest of it. We have to be careful – we don’t want to draw the attention of the larger entity if we can help it. But above all else, we need to save Corona. She’s sedated, so she shouldn’t be able to fight back. Physically.”

Aang nodded, opening his eyes in the Avatar State. He stood up slowly, touching his hand to
Corona’s forehead and chest. Aang’s eyes shot out a soul energy of blue, while Corona’s gave off a red – a red with purple imperfections.

Aang’s blue energy shifted into Corona’s body, working its way through her chest and lower body, purging the purple darkness bit by bit. The darkness *squirmed* in Aang’s perception, trying to fight back, but failing against the power of the Avatar. Corona’s own soul realized it was getting help, and began to fight against the darkness with renewed strength.

Then the darkness reacted in a *different* way. Magic spiraled off Corona’s fingertips in the physical realm, inching toward Aang’s chest.

Aang removed his hand from Corona’s chest, pointing at the dark magic approaching him. He remembered what Twilight had taught him about magic at the interdimensional meeting that seemed so long ago. He may not be able to use magic alone, but the dark energy was *providing* him with some. He channeled the darkness into his hand and *pushed back*.

Something clicked in his mind. He *felt* the magic within Corona, alongside her soul. It was far more corrupted than her soul – tied in knots, twisted, and alien. He needed to fix it as well, and the darkness had just given him his way in. He pushed his free hand back on Corona’s chest and *stirred* her inner magics. They aligned, twisting back to what they needed to be. To Aang’s mild surprise, the shape of her entire body began to change – fingers retracting back into her hands, legs shifting their joints around and pushing the knee closer to her body, face elongating, skin growing a thin coat of fur. A horn protruded from her head, sparking with magic. She slowly returned to her natural form of a unicorn, breaking through the seams of her skin-tight spacesuit as she did so.

“…Woah,” Sombra said. “Now *that*’s cool.”

Aang moved to adjust the last little bits of magic and darkness. He was getting tired from all the exertion, but he was almost done. He just needed to-

"BOY" a voice shouted. Aang no longer found himself in a tent in the middle of the desert – he found himself in an infinite plane of darkness. He saw nothing but a human Corona, standing next to him.

She grabbed his hand, clutching it tight. Aang stood firm and glared into the darkness. “I am Avatar Aang.”

He was still in the Avatar State – and so every Avatar who had ever existed appeared behind him, hundreds of Avatars from every one of the Elemental Nations, standing firm, flanking him and Corona.

“*We are the Avatar.*” All of them said at once. “*Leave this soul be and begone from this world!*”

There was laughter – alien, disgruntled, but slightly feminine laughter. The mask was *there*, where it hadn’t been before. Purple, heart shaped, spiked, and with two soul-burning eyes.

Corona squeezed Aang’s hand harder. He didn’t flinch from the mask’s gaze.

“You want me to leave?” it – *she* – said. “But, you see, I don’t *want* to.”

The entire legion of Avatars took a battle stance. “*We will make you leave.*”

“Maybe you can,” she said, chuckling. “After all, I’m not truly there. Only so much I can do against you, *Raava*. But even if you do drive me away, I won’t be gone. I’m coming through. And I will destroy you, just like I’m destroying all the other pathetic guardians and goddesses of your precious
The mask floated closer. “I am Majora. And my darkness will be your end.”

The Avatar legion thrust their hands forward, forcing spirit energy at Majora, pushing her back. She didn’t go quietly – roaring with the eldritch power beyond understanding. Tentacles pulsed from behind her mask, forming a landscape of true impossibility and evil.

The Avatars stood strong.

“All you do is delay! Delay! Delay! Delay!”

Corona curled her free hand into a fist. “NO!” She screamed against the eldritch words. “WE DO MORE!” She let go of Aang’s hand and ran at the mask, screaming. She punched her hand right through its heart-shaped wood, grabbing the horrors that lay behind. She pulled out a disgusting fleshy mess twisted in patterns that had no right existing within any sane mind.

She crushed the mess in her hands, slowly transforming to her true unicorn form. “DO YOU HEAR ME?!?”

Majora’s mask pulled back and reformed. For a split second, Corona thought it looked startled. But if there had been any moment of uncertainty, it was gone in an instant, replaced with receding darkness. “I hear you, Sunset. I have always heard you. HAVE ALWAYS HEARD YOU – ALL.”

Aang and Corona were suddenly back in the real world, both awake, both breathing heavily.

Corona grabbed her head. “I think… I think she’s gone!”

Aang fell onto his back, breathing hard. “Yeah… At least most of her…”

“…Her?” Iroh said, turning to Aang while Sombra engulfed Corona in a hug.

“Majora,” Aang said. “She has a name. And she called me Raava, whatever that means…”

Iroh raised an eyebrow. “It’s an ancient name associated with the eternal spirit of the Avatar. I know little else about it.”

Aang nodded. “Whatever she is, she’s out there. And she’s evil.”

Corona pulled her unicorn self away from Sombra, eyes widening. “I took something from her.”

Aang blinked. “You did?”

“Yes! I… I know her plan.” She paled. “Oh no…”

“What? What is it?” Tempest asked.

“Majora’s on Earth. She wants to destroy it to fully free herself from the mask.”

Nobody had anything to say to this.
The bridge of Ba’al’s mothership was filled with a few dozen Ba’al clones and the Pinkie Sage. The Sage had no chains on her, no imprisonment, and she had the mask lifted onto her forehead. The power of several deities flooded away from the mask and into her. She knew she could, at any time, destroy the ship she was on and every Ba’al within it. But she would have nowhere to go and that wouldn’t solve the much larger problem. Destroying the mothership – or any ship – would do nothing to Majora herself. Her influence was far beyond the handful of ships Ba’al had, and her mask could not be destroyed even by the holy power at the Sage’s disposal.

So she sat on the bridge, free, but in many ways more imprisoned than when the eldritch chain was around her neck.

One of the Ba’als looked at her, smirking. “So, Sage, which god should we take out next? The princess of the space ponies supposedly has one locked up inside her, the Avatar Spirit’s a pretty bright spark, and I hear there’s some crazy fairy lady on the Mushroom World that could stand some cleansing!”

The Sage stared right at him with angry eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Ba’al said, pointing at himself with excessive drama. “I thought you were all about the freeing of worlds from their gods. Weren’t you all ready to purge your world from its maker because you believed she was a horrible reason for existing?”

“She was.”

“Why not the others?” Ba’al said, leaning in. “If one true god needs to be sealed away, why not go for all of them?”

“Like people, they differ.”

“Remind me what the Blue Moon Spirit did, again?”

The Sage said nothing.

“That’s right! You needed a battery to seal your goddess away! She was just useful and easy to get to. Do you know how upset Siron was about that? Really upset. He wanted to use her as a battery, and you had to go and take his idea.”

“It’s not like you’re about to ruin his other plans, or anything,” the Sage chided.

Ba’al shrugged. “His fault for trying to play a game he can’t win. I’m really surprised he hasn’t been caught yet. If only he had a face, I’d be very interested to see the look on it when he realizes what we’re actually doing with all his shipments.”

“If you were close enough to see that you wouldn’t have a head for very long.”

“You’re very bitey today.”

“It’s what keeps me from purging that smug look off your face in a fit of rage. You should be thankful I’m letting it out in deep, biting, hateful sarcasm. The alternative is brutal judgement.”
Ba’al sneered. “You could just bestow the mask’s power onto us and you could go free.”

“And you could be an honest, caring individual who cares about people besides himself.”

Ba’al gestured around at his many clones. “But the only people who matter are all me!”

The Sage grunted, saying nothing.

Another Ba’al stepped forward, grabbing the Sage by the muzzle. “Maybe we should go for the Tree of Harmony on Equis Vitis now, hrm? How would you like that? Remove the deity that guides the actions of the Charter and her friends, the reason for all of this.”

The Sage glared at him. “You get to decide where we go next. Ask all you want. You make your own choice. Which one’s the biggest threat to your little god, hrm?”

A whole new Ba’al crossed his arms. “You give Majora too much credit.”

“You underestimate her effect on you.”

“You know we take measures to prevent her control.”

The Sage rolled her eyes. Sure, they cleared their minds and kept all ‘Majorist’ Ba’als on the corrupted ship, but the sage knew Majora could just snap her fingers and devour the minds of most the Ba’als at once. But did the Ba’als listen to the Sage? No. They just tormented her like she was some stupid pet.

She did get some revenge though. They couldn’t use the power of her mask without her. So they had to keep her around.

It was an aggressive psychological war.

Ba’al apparently found her silence annoying, so he grabbed her by the scruff of her neck. “Choose, Sage.”

The Sage narrowed her eyes, daring him to make her choose.

“We know where Maud and Lady Rarity are,” Ba’al said. “We can have them killed with a simple word.”

The Sage twitched. “Fine then, Equis Vitis, go to the center, take out the core. I wonder if Discord will notice. That’ll be fun.”

Ba’al smiled, setting her down. “See? Was that so hard?”

There was a flash of purple energy that sent chills into the spines of everyone present. A new Ba’al stood in the center of the bridge. Purple mists wafted off his sides, signifying him to be a Majorist Ba’al, but he was not just a Majorist Ba’al, he was the Majorist Ba’al. The man wearing the mask.

The Sage knew that this Ba’al no longer existed and that the being in front of her was fully Majora, but Majora was smart enough not to make this too obvious. She spoke with a hint of Ba’al’s original voice mixed with a feminine tone that was a simpler version of her normal, eldritch tongue. When she spoke, it may not have caused a headache, but it was creepy.

“Why are we toying around?” she asked, cold.

“It wouldn’t do to rush around-“
“We can rush all we want!” Majora said, thrusting her hand forward. “There is no more need for secrecy! We took out Majora’s ‘sisters’, revealing this aspect of our plans to them all. We need to render the connected worlds completely helpless before moving along with the rest of our plan. We’ve taken our time and been cautious long enough, it's time to cash in everything.”

“Even if that is true, you aren’t supposed to be here,” the previous Ba’al said. “You’re supposed to call us from your ship and not expose us to your energies.”

“Please, if I were going to be corrupted to betray our kind, you’d think it would have happened by now.”

The Sage snorted.

Majora turned to the Sage, the eyes of the mask brightening considerably, forcing the oculus to squint. “What do you find so funny, seer?”

“You. Claiming to not be corrupted. Or treacherous. But you know thi-“

Without moving, Majora summoned a tendril of purple that drove itself right through the Sage’s midsection, forcing her to scream from the deep pain. She fell to the ground, astonished that the eldritch being would deliver such a fatal blow to her tool…

The Sage narrowed her eyes, seeing through the deception. She stood up, raising an eyebrow. She didn’t even need to look at her side to know there was no hole, no blood, no real injury.

Majora pointed a finger at the Sage. “That could easily have been your end, Pinkie. You shouldn’t defy our will.”

A Ba’al spoke up. “Return to your ship.”

“I will. After we declare an active mission.”

“Equis Vitis, Tree of Harmony. Get its energy sealed in the mask. Happy?”

Majora lowered her head slightly. “And next?”

“The Avatar Spirit, then the space princess Cosmo, then the Mushroom World. Nobody cares about the Mushroom World anyway.”

“Good. We’ll do them as fast as we can.”

“You are not our king.”

“I am tied closest to our greatest ally. I speak for her,” Majora said.

The Sage shot Majora an accusing glare that nobody noticed.

“Fine. We’ll go with that plan. We-“

The entire course of discussion was interrupted when a green, swirling portal opened in the middle of the bridge. It was not of any pattern or design that the Sage had seen, in visions or otherwise.

Two human men stepped through – one older man with spiky blue hair and a labcoat, the other a younger brown-haired teenager in much simpler clothing. The older man burped, rubbing the back of his head. “And here we are, Morty, a land made entirely of palm tree asses. You happy?”
Morty blinked. “I don’t see any palm trees, Rick. I see what looks like a Council of Evil Bearded People.”

“Oh fuck me…” Rick muttered, pulling a gun with a green node out of his jacket. “Something must’ve messed with the coordinates.” He ticked the dial a little to the left and aimed for an empty patch of space.

Majora crushed the portal gun with her mind. “You don’t get to leave.”

Morty held up his hand. “Woah, we don’t mean any trouble, just got lost!”

“I believe you,” Majora said, pointing a hand at them. “But that doesn’t mean you can just go on your way. You could be useful.”

The Sage felt the horror seep out of Majora, aimed directly at Rick and Morty. Morty instantly succumbed to the eldritch energies, curling into a ball on the floor and crying out things in a language he didn’t know.


Majora walked closer to Rick. “Rick Sanchez. Your mind may have protection, but his doesn’t. I can see all I need. I see other worlds, I see great power, I see great technology. You’ve traveled much further than we have.”

Rick facepalmed. “Fucking hell, you’re transdimensional. Look, you can see into Morty’s head, you know what I can do. Dig around. Look at that time I took out a galactic government, or an entire planet, or fought against an army of myself, something I’m ninety-nine percent sure you fucknuts have experienced at some time or other. So, once you look inside and have a good horrific crisis at the things I deal with every day, can we just agree to go our separate ways and agree this never happened? I need to show this kid palm tree asses.”

Majora took a second – and then laughed. “I think you are the one who doesn’t realize who they are dealing with. I speak for Majora – a god.”

Rick blinked. “You’re serious.”

Majora used her power to lift him menacingly into the air. “I could squash your body with a simple thought from the power bestowed in me. You can do no-“

“Code four three dick.”

A device shot out of Rick’s coat, glowing a bright purple. Majora caught it in her magic – but this only made it grow in size. It impacted her right in the mask, knocking her over and entrapping her in a cube of purple lasers.

Rick dropped to the ground. “RUN MORTY!”

“Hu- WAUGH!” Morty yelled, not given time to recover from the eldritch mindscrew before he was dragged along the ground by his grandfather. The Ba’als drew their guns and fired, but Rick pulled out a small shield device that reflected their weapons back at them. Majora screamed from within the cage, unable to break free despite her literal warping of the space inside it.

The Sage would have loved to see how this turned out – but something grabbed her legs and pulled. Before she knew it she was below the ground, but somehow not in the floor below the bridge. She was in an in-between place filled with loose, warm shadows. Looking above, she could see an image
of the bridge as if the floor itself were a window.

“Vivian,” the Sage said, allowing herself to smile. “I was wondering when you’d show up.”

Vivian revealed herself, pink hat and all. “Yeah. I was waiting for a moment she wouldn’t notice. This seemed like it. Welcome to the Veil. Nothing can see us here.”

“I would question if you were sure Majora couldn’t see you, but clearly you’ve managed to hide this entire time.” She looked up, seeing that Majora had freed herself.

“How did they escape already!?”

“They… Somehow got to one of our smaller ships and activated a dimensional device.”

“How D- where is the Sage?”

The Sage smiled. “Standing right under your nose.”

Vivian giggled.

“That’s it, initiate the final stage now,” Majora shouted.

“That’s no-“

“Does it look like we have a holy mask right now? No? Thought not!”

“We need t-“

Majora flared her eldritch energies, flooding the minds of all present with her power. “We’re done with this. Today, Majora is going to rise. Today. Do you hear me!?”

“Yes,” the Ba’als all said.

“Good.” Majora vanished, presumably returning to her ship.

The Sage shook her head. “Idiots…”

Vivian put her hand to her mouth. “What are we going to do?”

“For now? Nothing. We stay in here, watching what they do,” the Sage sat down in the nothingness. “We only act if we see reason to. Let the others sort it out.”

“You sure that’s the right thing to do?”

“I’m sure – for now,” the Sage said, entering a meditative pose. “Heroes will always come to face the villain, after all.”

~~~

Twilight and her four close friends sat at a table outside of one of Ponyville’s many diners. Twilight had her ears off since she had seated herself in such a way where she could see all four of her friends’ faces, which was a very welcome allowance since the sheer amount of loud people in the area would have made the supposedly fun lunch an ordeal.

Ponyville had changed in the last two years, there was no doubt about it. While it was still clearly a Ponyville, calling it a village might be stretching it. The number of buildings had expanded so much
that Twilight’s castle was no longer in the outskirts of town, but closer to the middle. The diner the ponies were currently eating at was so close to the castle it was currently in the crystal structure’s shadow. The way the castle refracted the light around it made for an excellent view in the morning, which was why they had chosen this spot to have breakfast.

The diner itself was run by an oculus by the name of Shimmerbeets, who had a knack for knowing exactly what you wanted to order before you knew it. Twilight had been dubious about the cheese-cinnamon waffle she had been given, but as she ate it she discovered that it was exactly what she wanted.

“Must be nice to be an oculus,” Twilight murmured through her delicious mouthful.

Renee shrugged. “Eh, it tormented the Sage.”

“That was something else,” Pinkie said, downing her entire cotton candy soufflé in one gulp. “You know, like me.”

Renee nodded in agreement, saying nothing further on the matter. She took a sip of her drink. “It always amazes me how Shimmerbeets just knows how to give you the most divine meal… I’ve never had the same thing twice! The menu must be immense. Why, just last week Daniel and I were here and she gave me something with meat in it, I don’t know what kind, but it was still magnifique—”

“You and Daniel?” Nova said, raising an eyebrow and smirking. “Do elaborate.”

Renee narrowed her eyes. “It was all about politics, dear. I do believe that would bore you half to death.”

Pinkie snorted and quickly covered her mouth with her hooves.

Renee rolled her eyes. “So immature…”

“That’s Pinkie for you,” Flutterfree quipped.

Pinkie put on an exaggerated gasp. “Egad! Flutterfree thinks I’m immature! The horror! Our friendship will never recover!”

Twilight chuckled, taking out a pen and piece of paper. “We must repair the bond at once. Pinkie, tell me how that made you feel.”

“Like stealing some of Flutterfree’s delicious cake,” Pinkie said, swiping a piece of Flutterfree’s sugar-ridden food.

Flutterfree rolled her eyes. “Then I’ll- oh. You already ate all yours.”

“Foolproof plan!” Pinkie cheered, tossing the cake into her mouth. Nova grabbed it and pulled it out before Pinkie could chomp down, eating it herself.

“You need better plans,” Nova commented.

“Oh no! I, the mare with the plan, had a bad plan!” Pinkie rammed her face into the table. “Oh woe is me!”

Twilight scribbled some notes down on her piece of paper she was planning to use in a comical, but still therapeutic, manner later. Something about the pen reminded her of a thought that had been shoved to the back of her mind. She pulled the journal out of her saddlebags and laid it on the table,
checking the last pages. Still nothing from Corona.

“I’m getting a little worried about Corona, girls,” Twilight admitted, looking up.

“Let’s go to Earth and say hi then,” Flutterfree said. “I’m sure she’ll be glad to see us.”

“That sounds like a wonderful idea!” Renee added. “She may be neck-deep in studies, so we may not get to stay long. But it’ll be worth it; I haven’t seen her in ages.”

Twilight smiled. “I guess we know where we’re going today, then. I…” She looked up, something catching her eye. “Hey, what’s that?”

All four ponies turned their gaze to the sky, quickly finding a streak of fire shooting across the blue expanse.

Twilight was pretty sure her friends were saying something, but she couldn’t see it. But she did know that was a sure sign of a meteor falling through the atmosphere – a meteor that might hit ponies.

She spread her wings and flew into the air, performing a calculated teleport right next to the descending ball of fire. She failed to take into account how fast it was falling, so she was only next to it for a split second, unable to latch onto it. She entered a dive, grabbing onto the burning hunk with her magic, slowing it down as much as she was able.

She curved it away from Ponyville, driving it toward the Everfree Forest. She managed to slow it down enough to stop the atmospheric burning, revealing it to be one of the smaller Goa’uld ships. She wondered if the Starfinder had launched one down incorrectly, but she quickly realized it was the wrong color for one of theirs.

It was probably Ba’al.

The ship hit the ground with an impressive impact, uprooting a few dozen trees before coming to a stop. Twilight glided to the ground, folding up her wings and landing on a rock near the impact site. Nova teleported herself and the three others next to Twilight.

They all examined the wrecked ship. While still in one piece, it was laying on its side and one of its back points had been bent so far the protective hull had been ruptured.

Flutters nudged Twilight, getting her to look at her. “Think it’s Ba’al?”

“Maybe,” Twilight admitted. “We’ll need to be on our gua-”

A laser shot up from the interior of the craft, burning a hole right through the hull. An old man with blue hair crawled out, lifting a younger man out alongside him.

“Rick! Where are we?” the younger man yelled.

“I have no idea, that dimensional drive was a piece of shit,” he burped. “Clearly, Morty, we’ve crash landed in creepy magic forest number seven million and six, and our ship is completely busted.”

“What are we going to do?”

“Make some kind of deal with the people here, Morty, duh. Scam them into giving me the supplies I need to build another portal gun. It’s like we haven’t done this a million times.”

“Scam us?” Twilight said, raising an eyebrow. “I know we have a stereotype of being naïve, but we
Rick took in a deep breath. “Fuck all kinds of duck, this just isn’t my day… First, clone aliens bent on world domination or some shit. Then, technicolor equines from my daughter’s second grade coloring book.”

Morty coughed. “Er… Sorry about grandpa Rick, he’s a bit… Ricky. Hi, I’m Morty. We travel a lot.”

“I’m Charter-Princess Twilight Sparkle,” Twilight began.

“God, you even sound like she named you,” Rick muttered.

Twilight ignored him. “And we travel the multiverse as well. From your description, I take it you ran into Ba’al?”

“If that’s what his name is,” Morty said.

“Even though I can tell that name’s not from this world, I can’t get over the idea of that bearded fuck being a literal ball,” Rick snorted. “Imagine that, Morty, an entire ship filled with bouncy balls of that stupid face.”

“Yeah, that is pretty funny,” Morty admitted.

“Do you, by chance, know where Ba’al is?” Nova asked. “We’ve… Been trying to find him for quite some time. He’s been causing a lot of trouble for numerous worlds.”

Rick folded his arms. “Unless by some miracle the computer in that ship isn’t busted, I’ve got nothing for your little spat.”

“It’s busted to kingdom come!” Pinkie shouted, poking her head out of the ship’s hole. “Everything is fried!”

Morty blinked. “How did you…?”

Pinkie shrugged. “I’m Pinkie Pie.”

“That’s not an explanation, that’s evidence of retardation,” Rick retorted.

Pinkie appeared on his head, glaring at him. “Technically right, but still mean.”

Rick threw her on the ground, taking a few steps back. “Stay back Morty, this one’s high on the freaky powers chart.”

Pinkie rolled her eyes, taking a cupcake out of her mane and offering it to Morty.

“I dunno Rick, she seems nice.”

“Beware the nice ones Morty! Haven’t you learned anything!?”

Flutterfree smiled warmly. “Mister, we’re not going to hurt you unless you hurt us.”

Twilight nodded. “We can even help you get back to your world.” She pulled out her dimensional device and handed it to him. “You don’t have to scam us, Rick. We’ll just give it to you.”

Rick swiped the dimensional device and popped the hatch open. “Derivative magic-based tunneling
system with a series of limited dials… Complete shit.”

Twilight blinked. “What?”

“Are you deaf? I just said it was a piece of shit!”

Twilight narrowed her eyes. “As it happens, yes I am deaf.”

Morty tensed. “Rick, maybe you should stop talking—“

Twilight held up a wing to silence Morty. She smiled at him to put him at ease, but then glared back at Rick. “We’re offering you our assistance – for free – and you’re just, well…”

“Shitting all over it,” Nova said.

“Nova!” Renee chided.

“What? Twilight won’t say it, so it falls to me.”

Rick facepalmed. “For the love of… You’re arguing about swearing. There is something seriously wrong with the way you look at things.”

Twilight grunted. “The point stands, Rick.”

“Do I look like I give any shits?” Rick asked.

“Nope,” Flutterfree deadpanned.

“See? The buttery one gets it.” Rick tossed the dimensional device back at Twilight. “This is useless. Doesn’t go far enough, doesn’t have the correct coordinate usage, and it won’t operate properly in magically void universes.”

Twilight twitched. “Well then, Rick, is there anything we could do for you?”

“Unless you ponies have a state-of-the-art laboratory filled with a tremendous amount of intricate technology and a vending machine that dispenses alcoholic beverages, we’re done here.”

Twilight activated the dimensional device and created a portal to the Hub universe.

Rick poked his head through the portal. “This is a burnt jungle.”

Twilight lit her horn, teleporting them all into the Hub’s central room. “Ahem. Welcome to the Hub, the center of interdimensional civilization.”

Morty’s eyes lit up. “Huh. Nice.”

Rick folded his arms. “I don’t see the lab or the vending machine.”

Twilight teleported them all into a room of the Hub that was a lab, one that two other versions of Twilight – a pegasus and a unicorn – were hard at work in, scribbling down notes about a glowing blue crystal. Twilight spread her wings wide. “And here is one of our labs. You can see magic crystals over there, but you can also see alien technology to your left, and a beaker full of liquid electricity!”

Rick narrowed his eyes. “Vending. Machine.”
Twilight teleported a vending machine full of alcoholic beverages from a nearby hallway in the Hub. “Here you are! Every alcoholic beverage I’ve never drunk! Now accept our help already and make your silly portal gun that’ll take you home like you want!”

Rick blinked. “So, let me get this straight, this is how you do dick measuring contests here? See who can be the friendliest? That’s fucking lame.”

Twilight twitched. “I could just not help you, you know.”

“Too late, already here, no takebacks,” Rick said, grabbing the beaker of liquid electricity. “Believe it or not, your lab here isn’t quite as hopeless as I’d thought, and I think – with a significant amount of work – it’ll suit my needs.”

Morty raised an eyebrow. “Rick, just admit they have what you need, stop making the pony that could teleport us into a pit of acid at any moment angry.”

“I’ll anger whoever the fuck I want, Morty,” Rick grunted, setting to work on his portal gun in full.

Morty shrugged, turning to the ponies. “Yeah, sorry about Rick. He’s an asshole.”

Nova rolled her eyes. “Surprise surprise.”

“You’ve handled him pretty well, considering…” Morty looked around, smiling. “Can I just say that this place looks much nicer than the other interdimensional hubs I’ve seen? Usually it’s just a horrid mess.”

“Usually?” Twilight’s eyes widened. “You’ve been to other interdimensional hubs?”

“Uh… Yeah?” Morty blinked. “You haven’t?”

“No! We’re the only interdimensional group we know about! …Actually, that’s not completely true, there was Vriska, and the Stars used to have a society…”

Morty smiled eagerly. “Since Rick’s busy, I guess I get to tell the stories this time…”

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The briefing room of the Apollo was rather full – O’Neill, Ganondorf, Link, Zelda, General Sunset, Toph, and Lieshy were all present, staring at the one person they had spent the last few hours tracking down.

The Happy Mask Salesman.

O’Neill leaned in. “I don’t care what kind of stupid excuse you have for not telling us everything you know, you’re going to tell us what Majora is, where it came from, and how to defeat it.”

The Happy Mask Salesman was suddenly leaning back in his chair. “Okay.”

Link shook his head. “…Excuse me?”

The Happy Mask Salesman was leaning in, eyes narrower than they had been earlier. “I said, okay, I’ll tell you all I know.”

Link blinked. “It’s that bad, then?”

“Oh it’s so much worse than I ever thought it could be.” The Happy Mask Salesman lifted a hand
into the air. “Long ago, when our small world of Ardent was being created, there were many Goddesses. Only a few matter. There was the highest, the Goddess of Time, Hylia, who was unrivaled in her power. She felt alone, so she took parts of her own essence to create sisters for herself. Three of these are the Goddesses we know and love, Din, Nayru, and Farore, who shaped Ardent. But there was another, a Goddess known as Majora, the outcast.”

Link, Zelda, and Ganondorf were hanging religiously on to every single word the Happy Mask Salesman spoke.

He continued. “They were once equal in power, all working together for the world they created. But Majora resented the light of the others, and how it combated her love of chaos and darkness. In many ways, she was this world’s version of Discord. But she had a much darker heart than the childish snake you know. She tried to make a claim for herself on Ardent, being the eventual source of almost all dark magic on the globe. But the Goddesses wouldn’t accept her darkness, they found it distasteful. When they created the Triforce, her piece was rejected. Needless to say, Majora vowed revenge.”

“Why couldn’t the Goddesses just stop her? They had the numbers,” Lieshy asked.

“They could, but they didn’t believe they should. Majora was still family, after all. This proved to be a mistake.” The Happy Mask Salesman’s eyes glowed a slight red. “Majora found something beyond the holy power of the Goddesses one day. Another world. A world I believe Link is familiar with known as the Twilight.”

Link nodded slowly.

The Happy Mask Salesman was standing now. “This Twilight was an empty world of darkness, horror, and sorrow. Nothing lived there – and Majora thought this the perfect place to craft her own world, separate from the world her sisters had created. She did just that, becoming an active god in the lives of her own creations. She, over time, fused with the unique essence of the world of darkness, becoming something more than a goddess. Something maddening, horrid, and evil. She was no longer just chaos and disorder, she became darkness, despair, insanity, and sin itself. She made plans to use her newfound power to utterly destroy her sisters and their world. However, her own children of Twilight came to believe she was dangerous to them, so they used the powers bestowed to them to seal their Goddess within a mask and throw it somewhere else, so it was no longer their problem.”

“And then a few thousand years later, I found it,” Link said.

“Yes. There were other events of darkness relating to Majora’s Mask over the years, all of which I have involved myself in, to keep its evil at bay.”

“...How old are you?” Toph asked.

“Very,” was his only response to the question. “I keep it hidden, and I am the only being I know besides the Goddesses themselves that can – could – resist the mental effects of the Mask. It always calls to others, and I can never keep it out of the public hands for long, but I usually go a century or two before it reaches out to someone. Majora must have sensed something special about Ba’al to act so soon after her defeat.”

“How was she defeated?” O’Neill asked.

“Link should have told you that one,” the Happy Mask Salesman said. “Destroy the center of her essence, which is always focused around the mask. The mask itself is indestructible, but the Master
Sword can, with effort, seal all the energy back inside - as Link himself did a few years back.”

“And to do that, we’d need to find where Ba’al is keeping it,” Link said.

O’Neill folded his hands. “And if the last year has been any indication, we just aren’t going to do that, and we’re running out of time. She’s going to make a move.”

“Clearly!” the Happy Mask Salesman said. “She must have one killer plan, because she never waits this long to cause havoc. She must think she can fully free herself from the mask, or something similar. She’s removed the Goddesses from the picture with the Sage, therefore rendering the Triforce’s unequaled power useless.”

Ganondorf drove his fist into the table. “She’ll pay for that…”

“Is there any other way?” Sunset asked. “Anything we could do to stop Majora, without finding her and engaging in a direct conflict? What about the people of Twilight that sealed her last time?”

Link sat back. “They… Won’t be very eager to help us.”

“Why not?” Sunset asked.

Midna appeared on Link’s shoulder. “Hey, name’s Midna, I’m not a secret anymore. I’m one of those Twilight people, a Twili. We generally hate this world, think it needs to be destroyed. We resent your sun, your greenness, and your happier lives. And, well, let’s just say that last time Link was there he totally wrecked the place.”

O’Neill cracked his knuckles. “Then let’s not give them a choice. Do you think a giant warship appearing in their dimension will make them pause?”

“They’ll probably attack it with their powerful magic,” Midna said.

“…What about a fleet?”

“A fleet? How are you going to get a fleet of dimensional spaceships?”

O’Neill stood up and grinned. “Give that Princess Cosmo-Twilight a call. She’s got ships to spare. Of course, this all depends on Link figuring out the dimensional coordinates to this Twilight Zone.”

Link pulled out a dimensional device. “I think we can step through the mirror and find out. Ganondorf, mind letting us into Gerudo Desert again?”

Ganondorf folded his arms and nodded silently.

~~~

The AID were a very paranoid bunch, even if Director Storm himself was usually rather chill. They had an electric fence around the compound, security cameras in every conceivable location (even bathrooms, though not many people knew about that), walls lined with automatic defense systems, and a state of the art alarm system that continually updated the status of the compound.

They were very careful about being hacked. Since Director Storm came back one day and declared that Sombra was in their systems they’d done a full purge and had all of the computer systems triple-backed up. The computer system sent an alert to the tech department every time anything that looked like a hack came through. They thought it was a foolproof system.

They failed to take into account the possibility of Sombra breaking into the compound while invisible
and taking out the entire tech department before hacking the system from their computers. She smirked at how easy it all was. Despite all their fancy technology and handful of magical artifacts, none of them were able to see her.

She pressed the final keystroke of the hack and grinned. “I’ve got complete control. You’re free to come in.”

In the main hall of the AID, Director Storm sat in the big chair under the big screen, hands folded. He had this inkling that something was about to go terribly wrong.

A portal opened up in the middle of the room, right next to the table the Directory sat on. A unicorn stepped out, smiling. “Hey, Director! I’m back!” Corona called. Tempest stepped through with her.

The Director’s eyes widened. “All agents, get them! They aren’t the Agents we know!” He pulled his crystal out from under his desk, ready for a magical fight. All agents – including Mike and Ike, drew their guns.

Tempest snapped her fingers. At the signal, Sombra took control of the security systems in the wall, pointing the mounted turrets toward Director Storm.

Corona lit her horn, creating a ball of magical fire. The wispy fire shot out, hitting every Agent in the head except Mike and Ike, infusing their minds with a sleep spell. Her smile widened. “Celesta, it feels good to be a unicorn again…”

“What do you want, imposters?” Director Storm demanded.

Tempest pointed at Director Storm. “You’re the impostor. You have a Ba’al in your head.”

“I have no such thing!” Director Storm yelled.

“Care for a test?” Corona said, teleporting a device into her hoof. “We do have Ba’al testers on site, you know. And, oh would you look at this, if I point it at you it screams Ba’al.”

“You’re clearly working with Sombra, you could have just overridden the code.”

Corona shrugged, glancing at Mike and Ike. “You two buying this?”

Ike blinked. “I’m… Not sure?”

Corona rolled her eyes. “Okay then… Bring in the others.”

Iroh and Aang walked out through another portal. Aang pointed at Director Storm. “Ba’al, if you’re in there, I’ll be able to feel you. And I’ll be able to switch your soul with that of Director Storm.”

Director Storm tensed. “No…”

“Also, I’ve figured out how to bend magic, so I should be able to remove any corruption you might have as well!”

Director Storm lifted his crystal and shot a bolt of lightning at Aang. Aang caught it with his fingers and shot it back at Storm, where it hit the crystal.

“Mike! Ike!” Director Storm yelled, leaping into the air and sending a whirlwind of energy at Aang – which the Avatar easily deflected. “Do something!”

Mike lowered his gun. “I don’t think so.”
Director Storm narrowed his eyes. “Fine.” A dark, purple energy wafted off his free hand, shooting right for Aang. “Gig’s up, and so’s your life.”

Aang intercepted the dark magic with his hand, twisting it into the center of his palm. It was much more painful than his experience with Corona, but he managed. Entering the Avatar State, he sent the purple darkness back at the Ba’al with a burst of fire. Ba’al fell backward. He lifted his magic crystal up, but all the weather-based attacks were child’s play to the Avatar.

Corona, Iroh, Tempest, and Sombra didn’t even need to do anything. Aang was more than enough to knock the lone man down.

“Hold him down!” Aang called, putting his hands to Ba’al’s head and chest. Corona obliged, using her telekinesis to keep him immobile. From the outside, the act of spirit bending was an impressive light show. She could see Aang’s bright blue essence, Storm’s dark blue, Ba’al’s orange-red, and the purple corruptions of Majora.

The blue essences worked together, facing off against the orange-red and purple. The orange-red was diminished to a small size easily, like butter. The purple corruption, however, fought back ravenously.

It had learned from last time. It quickly decided that it couldn’t win, so it took the opportunity to chip away at Storm’s dark blue essence. Aang wasn’t going to let this happen. He cut off the purple energy’s path, giving it an in to his own soul, but Storm and Aang’s essences looped around and crushed the purple corruption like a snake.

There was a bright flash of purple from what Corona assumed was the actual essence of Majora making contact, trying to lend aid, but if her own experiences were anything to go by, the Avatar Spirit was more than enough to contain this.

Aang released Storm.

Storm blinked. “Holy cow, this feels weird. Like… Like an out-of-body experience. Hey! I can get my voice to do the sweet Goa’uld thing! Nice!”

“Welcome back, Director,” Corona said.

“Welcome back, Corona! You’re fired!” Director Storm grinned.

Corona blinked. “Uh…”

He gestured at the guns poking out of the walls. “Tell me that’s not Sombra.”

“It is Sombra,” Sombra said over the intercom.


Corona blinked. “Right, right, fair point, we’ve got bigger fish to fry right now, though.”

“Oh, don’t I know it!” Storm tapped his head. “Fun thing, I’m technically in Ba’al’s little snakelike body right now, controlling him stuck in my mind! So, I have direct access to every little thought he’s thinking and everything he’s ever known. He’s quite angry. Makes me feel warm and fuzzy inside.”

Iroh smirked. “Poetic justice, then?”
“Very.”

“Director!” Tempest called. “Enough of this, what’s Ba’al’s plan to destroy the Earth?”

The Director folded his hands. “Using the magical hotspots of the world, Ba’al has used his infiltration skills to build a few dozen magical nodes for Majora. These nodes will connect in a magical framework large enough to surround the globe, then drain it of all the power it can to free Majora from her imprisonment in the mask. Most of the power comes from the souls of the people who live here.”

“Majora…” Corona said, grinding her teeth. “We’ve got to stop this. Is there a node in the Everfree?”

“You bet your bottom dollar there is!” Storm picked up his weather crystal paperweight and grinned. “I have literally no idea how we’re going to stop it from there, but let’s go.”

Corona lit her horn, activating a teleport… But nothing happened. “…Did you teleport-proof the base?” Corona asked.

Storm raised an eyebrow. “Besides the artifact room? No.”

Corona levitated the dimensional device and activated it – but nothing happened. “…That’s not good.”

“I have a theory,” Sombra called over the intercom. “Our inability to leave might have something to do with the giant purple magic circle surrounding the base that Ba’als with purple magic are lining up outside of.”

Storm growled. “Majora felt you freeing me. She didn’t want anything I knew getting out…”

“How are we going to tell anyone what we just found out?” Aang asked.

Corona’s eyes lit up. She teleported into her ‘office’ – apparently teleportation within the base was still allowed – and picked up the journal, teleporting back to the main room. “This. This works even when there’s no active portal.”

“The spell might still stop it…” Storm said.

“I have to try,” Corona said, pulling out a pen.

“We’re about to have other problems…” Sombra said. “The Ba’als have begun to move in. I think they plan to kill everyone.”

Storm looked at Corona. “Wake the agents up. We’re going to defend this place.”

Corona did what was asked. Storm began to fill everyone in on the situation, and Corona wrote a message to Twilight.

~~~

Twilight had no idea what Rick was doing with all the mechanisms around him. She knew exactly what all the devices he was cobbling together were supposed to do, but quickly realized he wasn’t using them in that way at all. He had torn apart a magical conductor for a single, mundane screw that he’d placed at the tip of his… thing. He had thrown together several ingredients ranging from rare horn dust to baking soda, creating a thick, green liquid. Morty had been able to tell her that was
‘portal fluid’, the ‘ammo’ of the portal gun, but he had no clue how the rest of it worked.

Morty had described the adventures he went on with his grandfather rather well. The stories were amazing, but often horrifying. There were universes that existed only to power car batteries, friendly beings that were sure destroying all organic life was a gift, and many, many civilizations Rick had just wiped out for annoying him.

It made Alushy sound like a saint. It made Twilight fear the blue haired man in front of her. He seemed like a bumbling lunatic with a big brain who didn’t care about anything. Not… Not what Morty had described.

What saddened her, though, was how jaded Morty was about it. He just seemed to accept what he told her as facts of life, things that couldn’t change. He admitted what Rick did got him angry a lot of the time, but it was the way Rick was, and Rick was always Rick. Nothing ever changed that.

Twilight sighed. It was just… It was clear that she and her friends had a long way to go. They had barely scraped the surface of what these two had seen. She, originally, had considered copying Rick’s portal gun design after he’d finished. She didn’t think she was going to do that anymore. Like Earth Omnic, she was becoming convinced they weren’t ready to spread out that far yet.

Yet.

Something in her saddlebags started vibrating. She expected it to be her phone. She sighed, expecting to need her ears – but it wasn’t her phone. It was the Journal.

She threw it on the table and quickly flipped to the last page.

Sorry I couldn’t get back to you sooner, but we’ve been having a problem. I don’t have long to explain. Tempest, Storm, Iroh, Aang, and I are all currently trapped in AID headquarters, surrounded by Ba’als infused with the power of a being called Majora. We can handle ourselves, but we have information that needs to get out.

Majora, the force behind the foalnapping of the Sage, is trying to destroy Earth. She has used Ba’al to place numerous magical nodes around the planet that will activate, surrounding the planet in a magical network and use all the power in the planet to free Majora from her current, imprisoned state.

I don’t know what she’ll do once she’s free, but it might involve the destruction of other worlds. It will involve chaos, dark magic, and destruction.

You need to go to Earth and do something about these nodes. We know the location of a few – the Bermuda Triangle, Yellowstone, Racetrack Playa, Marianas Trench, the North Pole, Durweze, the Black Forest – but your best bet is the Everfree forest. Apparently it will look like a tall, purple cylinder with elaborate engravings on it.

We’re not sure how you’re going to stop Majora through these nodes, but you have to try. Blow them up or something.

We’re going to be busy shortly, so don’t expect replies for a while.

Twilight scribbled ‘got it’ down in the book. “Okay, girls!” She shouted. “We’ve got an emergency!”

All four of them – and Morty – lined up in front of her.
“Corona just messaged me back in the journal – they’re in trouble. Big trouble. Something called Majora wants to destroy the Earth. It’s the being acting through Ba’al. It’s going to do this by using dozens of magical nodes around the world to create a framework surrounding the world that will destroy it. There’s a node in the Everfree Forest. We’re going to go there… and blow it up.”

Pinkie saluted. “Sounds like a plan!”

Rick said something Twilight couldn’t see. She turned to face him. “Excuse me?”

Rick grunted. “Not repeating myself.”

Twilight wanted to shoot a laser into his face.

Morty facepalmed. “He said it wouldn’t work.”

“Why not?” Twilight demanded.

“Do I have to explain everything?”

“AN ENTIRE PLANET IS AT STAKE!” Twilight shouted. “Possibly more! Can you get your thoughts off of your own petty projects for one moment and think that, I dunno, maybe you could at least tell us something that might keep us alive?”

Rick glanced at Morty. “…Fine. It won’t work because lattices usually have backups. Destroying one would only save a portion of the planet, not all of it. You’d need to destroy around a third to keep the lattice from activating.”

Twilight ran back to the book. “I need to get the locations of all of them from Corona…”

“Don’t bother, I’ve got a better idea,” Rick muttered, pulling a staple-shaped device out of his science project. “I need to power this baby up, and a planet-wide lattice-net sounds like just the way to do it. If I can plug this in to the node, I’ll stop it from destroying the planet and complete this shitty portal gun. Does that make everyone happy?”

“Yes,” Flutterfree said. “Thank you, Rick.”

“Don’t thank me, thank the convenience principle.”

“The what?” Nova asked.

Pinkie smirked. “The ‘I just so happen to be here and it just so happens I should help you’ idea.”

“…Okay…?”

Twilight spread her wings, readying her dimensional device. “Everyone, get ready, we’re going to the Everfree Forest on Earth. Expect anything.”

Morty looked around. “Is there a weapon I can have or something?”

Rick handed him a laser gun and Pinkie handed him a ball and chain made out of rubber. He took both and shrugged. “Good enough.”

Rick shrugged. “I hope there’s some ass to kick, otherwise this is going to be as boring as Jerry’s apartment.”

Pinkie raised an eyebrow. “You won’t be disappointed! Expect heavy resistance everyone!”
Twilight nodded, activating the portal and stepping through.

~~~

Vivian and the Sage hadn’t moved – they couldn’t risk the mask’s magic revealing itself and tipping Majora off to their location. So they just stayed in the Veil, looking at the bridge from below.

The Ba’als were moving forward with the plan. The Sage had caught them talking about the magic charging, that it wouldn’t be much longer before the lattice would activate.

“I feel so horrible, not being able to do anything…” Vivian said, hands to her chest.

“You’re doing something amazing already. Hiding from Majora. Very few can do that when she’s actively looking for them.”

“I… Had a mother a lot like her. I… Have practice.”

“I know,” the Sage said, looking up at the bridge. “Something’s happening.”

Majora’s mask appeared on the main screen. “I’ve detected magic surges in the Everfree Forest. They’re going after one of the nodes. It’s time to move the fleet.”

“Right,” a Ba’al said, pressing a few buttons. “Fleet is ready to jump universes.”

Vivian and the Sage felt the ship lurch. The Sage smirked. “I told you the others would try something.”

“But… The fleet is moving to stop them!”

The Sage frowned. “Have hope, Vivian. They have a plan.”

~~~

Link, Ganondorf, Zelda, General Sunset, Toph, and Midna stood in the middle of the Gerudo Desert, flanked by dozens of Ganondorf’s Gerudo warriors.

“Having all your ladies in waiting really isn’t necessary,” Midna said. “It might just put them on edge.”

“And having you there won’t put them on edge?” he retorted.

Midna rolled her eyes. “Fine. Link, summon the Mirror.”

Link held the Master Sword high, making it glow a bright color. He quickly drove it into the sand, sending its magic deep beneath the silicon grains. The earth around them rumbled, the sands shifting like a sea in front of them. A pedestal and numerous columns slowly rose out of the ground, revealing many intricate carvings of eyes, usually with a single tear dripping from them. The central pedestal held one large mirror. The mirror caught the light of the sun and reflected it into the space in front of it, tearing a hole in reality unlike any of the other portal devices seen in the multiverse. A flat, black plane came into existence, slowly becoming riddled with intricate white lines. The designs took a strange hybrid shape of digital circuitry patterns along a circular glyph that was similar to the design in the Temple of Time.

The circular pattern depressed into the flat blackness, becoming a portal to another universe.

Midna rubbed her hands together. “Well, let’s hope we get a warm welcome, hrm?”
Toph held up her dimensional device. “Ready to call the Apollo if it doesn’t.”

“We are going to have to…” Midna muttered, floating up to the portal. “Okay, so, this is going to feel weird.”

“How so—” Sunset began. She didn’t get to finish – the portal latched onto the six of them and disintegrated them into hundreds of small square pieces, rushing them through the boundary between worlds, and reconstituting the squares on the other side.

Sunset’s tail had a freak out, yipping and snapping around in a panic. Sunset herself just let her eye twitch. “…Fun.”

“Woah…” Toph said, stamping her foot into the ground. “ Weird…”

The Twilight Realm was a place eternally stuck with the lighting between sunset and night. There was no visible sun, just a miasma of dark and light clouds surrounding everything. The Twilight was composed of numerous floating islands of rock, on top of which large, black structures were created, lined with red and blue magical circuitry.

Numerous tall, pale people with the black and white color scheme of Midna pointed weapons at the otherworlders. “You should not have come back,” one said.

“Listen to me!” Zelda yelled. “We come here to ask for your help, not-“

“We will not give you help.”

Sunset coughed, stepping forward. “Then what about me? I’m not from their world. I’m from a world that has had nothing to do with yours or your dispute – until today. Your Goddess, Majora, is trying to free herself from the mask you created. She is no doubt plotting a campaign of revenge and destruction across every world she can find. We ask – no we beg you – to help us defeat her in any way you can, with the powers you used to seal her the first time.”

A taller, masked member of the Twili walked up to them, large black robes trailing behind her. Midna growled. “Oh, look who showed up. That was fast.”

“Who are you?” Toph asked.

“Queen,” was all she said, folding her arms. “I speak for all of us when I say we would love it if Majora wiped you all from existence.”

“And what if she comes here to attack you?” Sunset demanded.

“We have defenses in place from the last time. She will not risk it.”

“So what, you just consign dozens of worlds you know nothing about to die?”

“Not just that, but you too. Kill them.”

Toph pressed a button. Instantly, the Apollo zeroed in on the dimensional coordinates, appearing in the cloudy miasma. Dozens of other ships appeared alongside it, graceful warships of Cosmo’s army: curved ships with numerous spiky protrusions, round ones that resembled toruses, and a truly gigantic ship that resembled a cross between a flower and a pinecone. The fleet drifted through the air, surrounding the rock island the group was on.

“How about no?” Ganondorf said, taking a step forward. “How about we make you help us with
“Kill them,” the Queen reiterated, no emotion to her voice.

Cosmo teleported in front of Sunset. She blinked and all the Twili in a mile radius were knocked over except the Queen. Cosmo looked the Queen, directly at the mask. “I am Princess Twilight ‘Cosmo’ Sparkle. We asked for your aid – now we demand it.”

The Queen attempted to use her own impressive magic, but Cosmo’s inner Tree of Harmony absorbed the Queen’s magic before it could even come out. Cosmo narrowed her eyes. “I’d really consider helping us.”

The Queen sighed. “Very well. We have a ritual we can perform. It will require multiple hours of setup and research in the old documents, but you are clearly giving us no choice.”

Toph smirked. “Hey, no offense lady, we just couldn’t take no for an answer.”

The Queen didn’t dignify this with a response.

~~~

Corona dug deep into her mind to remember a spell she had taught herself long ago, but never actually used. It was a forbidden spell, one that served no beneficial purpose to ponykind, one that existed only for damage.

The death spell.

She lit her horn, surrounding it in the deep red aura of her magic. A twisting pulse of red, snakelike energy shot out of the horn’s tip, hitting Ba’al right in the chest. There was no writhing, no scream – just a blank look and death.

Some Ba’als put up shields of purple magic, only for Corona to use more complex fire spells to create an explosion behind them, opening them up for another attack. She combined her knowledge of firebending and fire magic to create a flaming dragon construct that charred through the flesh of dozens of Ba’als.

It really did get easier. Though it may have helped that everything she was killing was the exact same person.

“You are a beast when you’re a unicorn!” Sombra called over the intercom. “Why aren’t you one more often?”

“I live among humans,” Corona said, setting an entire hallway of Ba’als on fire. “Can’t really go to college like this, and I rarely need this kind of power. How are the others doing?”

“Aang’s got east hallway taken care of, though he’s being decidedly less brutal than you are. Tempest and her dozen agents have the north, though a few of them have fallen. Iroh and Storm have the south, and aren’t having any difficulty keeping them getting any further in.”

“Are the Ba’als still coming at us?”

“No, actually, they’ve stopped appearing,” Sombra announced. “No signs of reinforcements.”

“That could just mean they’re activating the lattice…” Corona muttered, igniting a couple Ba’als who tried to attack her mind with purple miasma.
“Don’t worry, Twilight got the message. She’s there. Maybe the reason it’s looking up for us is because they’re sending forces *there*!”

“I hope Twilight’s okay…” Corona said, skewering a Ba’al that appeared behind her with a flaming javelin. “…I hope she’s not doing *this*.”

“She’s not the type. …How high *is* your kill count, now?”

“More than doubled,” Corona muttered. “I’m losing count, and that’s not a good thing.”

Sombra was silent for a second. “Sixty-three.”

“What?”

“The number of people *I’m* responsible for killing, directly or indirectly. Before this battle started, that is. The guns in the walls have killed about twenty more.”

Corona bucked a Ba’al in the face while torching another. “…Does it affect you?”

“Not really. I was never the real *compassionate* type, you understand.”

“From knowing you? Yeah.” Corona teleported behind several Ba’als and encased them all in a fire tornado. “…They have no self-preservation instinct.”

“They’re mindless servants of Majora, now. Rest easy knowing they were sleazy asshole aliens that killed millions before.”

“Yeah,” Corona said, burning more. “This is almost too easy…”

“We’re not facing any of Majora’s magic directly,” Sombra reminded her. “I’m not seeing any claws, tentacles, or otherwise. I don’t know if that’s because of the bubble they’ve placed around us or because she’s busy elsewhere. Possibly both.”

Corona grunted. “How many more Ba’als are there?”

“Few dozen on your side. You’re almost done.”

“Good. I need to wash this blood off. It’s all over my coat…” She shivered, a tear falling down her face, sharply contrasting with her enraged expression.

As much as she was talking, she was *not* okay.

~~~

The Necklaces that Corona and her human friends always wore came from the Everfree Forest of Earth. They were found in a mysterious magical cave deep within the woods, ready to bestow the seven of them with various abilities. This cave was ancient, mysterious, and powerful.

That had not stopped the Majora-driven Ba’als from invading the space and building their node. The node was a seven-foot tall cylinder made of a dark purple substance, carved with images of Majora’s mask alongside many other disturbing symbols. It glowed *black*, somehow emanating an absence of light around it.

There were a few dozen Majorist Ba’als guarding the pedestal, along with one woman by the name of Azula. In one hand, she was playing with fire. In the other, a purple conglomeration of shadow swirled. She laughed to herself, enjoying the eldritch horror bestowed upon her.
Then the ponies, Rick, and Morty charged. The Ba’als were powerful, filled with magics unlike anything they had ever experienced, and they launched these horrors at the ponies.

But Pinkie and Twilight had outlined a plan.

The charging group vanished into nothing, revealing them to be nothing more than illusions. Illusions that served their purpose. Twilight, her friends, Morty, and Rick teleported behind the node. Rick quickly leaped up and placed his device on top. Instantly the black light within the node switched to a neon pink, forcing streams of energy into the gun. Lasers shot from all corners of the globe, sure that the lattice was activating, when really they were just shoving power into a madman’s little science experiment.

“Suck it!” Rick yelled, pointing his laser gun at a Ba’al before he could turn around. “All powerful god my ass Majora!” He blasted several of their brains out.

Morty swung the ball and chain, knocking several Ba’als out. “…This is a lot less lethal than I’m used to.”

“It’s how we roll,” Pinkie said, appearing in the middle of the Majorist Ba’als with three party cannons. The confetti blew them over and away.

The Ba’als managed to form some kind of resistance, creating giant claws of shadow magic, but Nova had their number. She sped herself up, altering time so she could shoot lasers dozens of times a second, knocking all of them to the ground with ease. Twilight protected Nova from the distance, deflecting the cheap tactics the Ba’als were using.

Renee found herself face to face with Azula. Azula sent a mixture of fire, electricity, and horrific fleshy tentacles at Renee. Renee deflected with a blue shield and, at the same time, drove a curved laser spell around Azula to hit her in the back.

Azula did a cartwheel, landing on her feet. Fleshy, shivering tentacles grabbed Renee’s hooves and squeezed. Renee summoned four magical blades, slicing the tentacles off. Azula shot lightning, but it was deflected with a shield.

Azula laughed. “You’re a clever unicorn!”

Renee raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Really. Too bad it’s time to die.” Azula clapped her hands together, sending an eldritch pulse into Renee’s mind. It felt like a sea urchin had suddenly appeared within her brain and wanted to push through her skull on all sides. She let out a yell and fell to the ground.

Azula grinned, pointing a finger at her. It crackled with electricity. “Ready to burn?”

Renee didn’t respond.

“I’ll take that as a yes-“

A spell Renee had placed a few seconds ago activated, shooting Azula in the face with a laser. She wasn’t expecting this in any way – she fell like a domino.

Renee coughed, standing up. “That’s me being clever.” She rubbed her head. “Ow…”

The other Ba’als, while terrifyingly powerful, had been caught by surprise. They all fell – though only those shot by Rick were actually dead. He started shooting the knocked out ones.
“HEY!” Twilight yelled, tearing the gun from his hand. “No!”

Rick rolled his eyes. “Pussies. Bet none of you have actually had the guts to finish anyone off. It’s a weakness.”

Renee twitched but said nothing.

Rick glanced at the node. The portal gun had just completed draining all the power it needed to, and the node had shattered into a million pieces. “There you go, all other nodes in the world should look exactly like that. Majora’s plan failed. We win.”

Twilight grinned. “That… That felt so much better than the attempt to catch the Sage.”

Flutterfree landed next to her, smiling. “That did go pretty smooth.”

Pinkie’s pupils shrunk to pinpricks. “Uh-oh,” she said.

“What is it?” Nova asked.

“That went too smoothly.”

Rick’s eyes widened. “Fuck.”


Vivian and the Sage saw a planet on the bridge’s main screen.

This planet was not Earth.

“What… Is that place?” Vivian asked.

The Sage clenched her jaw. “That’s the Binary world.”

“Why are we here!?”

A Ba’al above them laughed. “Well, I’m glad we’re doing this one instead of the other. It was much more rewarding to plant the nodes here. Nobody expected a thing.”

Another Ba’al smirked at his counterpart. “The best part? They set themselves up for failure. None of them would be able to know more than a handful of these things exist because of how spread out they are! They sure noticed several magic shipments, but they could never put anything together fast enough! Doomed from the start!”

“And now… We activate their lattice.” He pressed a button.

They watched several points of light shine all around the planet, sending columns of pink light into space. These columns of light were quickly connected by neon lines, surrounding the entire planet in a lattice that vaguely resembled a die with far too many faces. There were a few large explosions – presumably from reactionary attempts to nuke the nodes. A few of the light columns went out, but the vast majority remained lit.

“Oh no…” Vivian said.

The lattice of pink energy began to shrink – cutting through the crust at every location it touched like the rocky planet was butter. Hot, molten rock poured out of the cracks, only to be absorbed by the cutting lattice itself. Tectonic plates buckled down the middle, landmasses broke off the planet’s
edges, and still the lattice shrunk. The planet crumbled bit by bit – those chunks that weren’t loosely sent into space by the crushing were drawn back in, to be absorbed by the lines of energy. All civilization on the planet was gone in less than a minute, leaving only a hunk of molten rock with loose dirt all around.

There were probably Binary people on those loose chunks, in their houses, praying that there was enough air inside to last them forever. They would have to deal with a sudden lack of gravity, quick rotation, and being able to see their own planet burn beneath them.

Still, the lattice shrunk. The molten rock flowed into the lattice, forcing the orb that was once a planet to get smaller and smaller and smaller, boiling with the intense pressure of the rocky world.

They saw the corrupted Ha’tak float in front of the screen. A claw of purple impossibility shot from the ship, latching onto the lattice. The wiry structure glowed a bright purple, almost like a star. It dimmed and dragged the entire Ha’tak into it, devouring the corrupted structures within itself.

The remnant of the Binary world began to change, losing its intense glow. Purple veins coursed through it, turning the dying shine of a planet into a dead husk bit by bit, cooling the rock into a corrupted form. There was a laugh that everyone could hear, even in space.

“Now!” the Sage screamed. “Majora’s distracted!”

Vivian released the two of them from the Veil. The Sage activated the holy power of her mask, making all Ba’als in the area pass out. The two of them ran through the halls of the Mothership, heading directly for the hangar.

They arrived quickly, and the Sage sent out another burst of holy power, thankful that none of the Ba’als on the Mothership were allowed to be infected with Majora’s magic. That would have made it somewhat difficult to escape unnoticed, even with Majora distracted. The two of them piled into a small craft and launched out of the Mothership’s grasp.

“Great,” the Sage muttered, pulling up the dimensional controls. “They locked the dimensional drive after Rick escaped…”

Vivian shivered. “What are we going to do!?”

The Sage looked at the purple conglomeration that was Majora. “…We wait.”

The purple corruption of Majora soon enveloped the entire remnant of the planet, banishing the lattice in favor of a horrid, purple mess. The shape of the thing was still spherical, but it was hard to look at. Dark, purple tendrils shot out from the planet, grabbing hold of the loose pieces of crust. Any Binaries that had been lucky enough to survive the initial compression of the lattice would soon find themselves in a literal living hell.

A large tendril of purple energy shot forth from the planet, flying across space along a very particular path.

Vivian blinked. “She’s… going for the other planet.”

The Sage nodded. “The Binaries will not recover from this…” She squinted at the round form of Majora. “Come on…”

Then she saw it. A few smaller claws had pushed themselves out of the central part of the body, opening portals to other universes.
“There’s our way out!” the Sage yelled, pushing on the throttle, diving towards the nearest opening.

“She’s going to notice us!”

“Yeah, she is,” the Sage said. “We’ve just got to be fast.” She approached the portal from the opposite end the shimmering claw was, hoping to get through without any interaction with the darkness of Majora. She, of course, knew this was wishful thinking.

Majora noticed them from about a mile away. Which, in terms of spaceflight, is almost nothing. But Majora was released, and she had no intention of letting the pesky Sage get away again. With a roar that sent shivers down their spines, another claw shot toward them from the side.

The Sage activated her mask. The holy light of six holy deities surrounded their craft, deterring Majora. The eldritch being was more than powerful enough to break through the holy shell… if given enough time.

She was not given enough time. They ducked through the portal, crashing the ship on the other side.

~~~

A giant portal opened up in front of Twilight and her friends.

Twilight didn’t have her ears on.

She could hear the screaming.

A claw rushed out at her. She couldn’t move. All she could do was hear the screams and wait for the hand of death to take her.
General Sunset and her group stood at the edge of a floating island in the Twilight Realm, examining a large, flat, black disc with six pillars spread around its edge. Between each set of pillars stood three Twili in long, ancient robes. Their hands were outstretched to the center of the disc, where, surrounded by lines of magic ‘circuitry’, an empty version of Majora’s Mask sat. Wooden, colorless, and without the vibrant eyes the real mask contained. It was to serve the exact same purpose as its predecessor - to seal Majora’s magic away where it could only do little.

The eighteen Twili finished their chants and rammed their fists into the floor of the disc. The circuitry flashed between all the colors of the rainbow, infusing the mask with sealing power. It gained a soft purple color, ready to entrap the magic of Majora within. It floated into the air and began to rotate, slowly.

“We done?” General Sunset asked, turning to the Twili Queen.

She nodded. “It simply requires contact with Majora’s essence now. It will draw all the power into it. Simply get her into this world and it will find her, and then you can leave.”

“Finally,” O’Neill muttered. “It’s been hours.”

“Such a complex ritual is an ordeal,” the Queen stated. “Now imagine how difficult it was to perform when she was here, looking for us. Remaining hidden from Majora for several hours is no easy task. I’m not sure how our ancestors pulled it off.”

The Happy Mask Salesman chuckled. “Very carefully. I may or may not have helped.”

“What are we going to do with it once she’s sealed inside?” Toph asked.

“Toss it into a black hole,” O’Neill said. “I don’t care how powerful she is, she’s not getting out of that.”

“If you believe that will remove her for eternity, by all means, try,” the Queen said. “But since she is not here, we will have to move the altar.”

O’Neill glanced at the Apollo, hovering overhead along with all of Cosmos’ ships. “I think we can handle that. Dial the Hub, see if we’ve got any dirt on anything Ba’al or Majora related. Just need a little touch-”

A tremendous, purple-rimmed portal tore through the fabric in reality like a shark tearing at fresh meat. A lone, purple claw reached out for the altar. The edges of the tremendous arm shimmered with an edge that hurt to observe and tentacles that grew from all angles, branching out like a tree’s roots. The tendrils angled around the mask carefully.

Sunset looked away. “Ugh… Well at least we won’t have to go hunting….”

The Happy Mask Salesman’s smile vanished. “No…”

Comso narrowed her eyes. “Something’s wrong.”

The tendrils deliberately attacked the altar from below, triggering the reaction. The new mask
became a gravity well, sucking the tendrils of darkness in. Cosmo teleported the eighteen Twili to safety before they could be destroyed by their own creation. The defenses of the Twilight Realm itself activated, sealing Majora’s power within a gray bubble covered in patterns reminiscent of refracting water. Majora’s claw swirled into the mask’s essence like a hurricane, infusing into the wood.

The Happy Mask Salesman *roared.* “Keep the portal open!”

As he said this, the portal Majora’s claw was sticking out of started closing. Cosmo was the only one who could do anything, appearing behind the portal and *forcing* it open with the full brunt of Harmony.

On the other side, Majora *slammed* the portal shut, severing her own essence.

The eldritch tendrils were completely absorbed within the mask. The moment they were gone, the gray bubble vanished. The mask tried to suck more dark power in, but there was nothing to latch onto. It shook for a moment and promptly disintegrated into dust.

The Happy Mask Salesman let out a sound that had no right to leave a human’s mouth; conveying agony, distress, and rage.

Comso teleported back. “That’s a problem.”

“She knows how to use dimensional portals now…” The Happy Mask Salesman said. “She doesn’t have to slip between Ardent and the Twilight, she can slip *anywhere.* She can seal the Sealing Altar away whenever she wants! Even if we took it to her physical location, she’d just *move* it!”

“Take it?” the Queen blurted. “That was a one time use! We’d have to make a new one, and that’ll take *hours.* Hours I doubt you have.”

General Sunset paled. “No… We have to be able to do something else!”

“Like what?” the Happy Mask Salesman said, laughing. “She’s expanded too much!”

“Brute force,” O’Neill said. “We’ve got a fleet right here. I say we find a way to use it.”

The Queen glared. “You can use it elsewhere. Leave our world, now. You are not welcome here, nor will you ever be welcome here.”

O’Neill nodded. “As you wish, your *highness.*” He turned to his radio. “*Apollo,* start beaming us up.”

Link and Midna took one look at the Queen. She lifted her head higher. “I will celebrate when you die to Majora. It will finally serve your world justice.”

Midna slapped the Queen across the mask with her hair. “Not happening.” They were transported away before the Queen could react.

The *Apollo* and other ships left the Twilight behind.

Every Twili was happy to see them leave. They returned to their lives, confident no destruction could come their way, from Majora or otherwise.

~~~

Corona walked back to the command center of AID. Blood caked her coat. Most of it wasn’t hers.
She stumbled into the room, coughing. “Got mine taken care of,” she called.

“Same,” Tempest said, returning with her group of agents. “There may be some stragglers, but we’re good now.”

Director Storm and Iroh returned as well. Director Storm was leaning on Iroh for support from a broken leg. “Clear,” Iroh said, laying Director Storm down in a chair.

Aang returned to the center as well, breathing heavily. “I… Have never spent so much energy… In my life…”

“Good for all of you!” Sombra called over the intercom. “Now we should probably get out of here, you know, see how Twilight’s doing?”

Corona nodded, scratching her neck, trying not to look at the blood on her legs. “Exit’s easy enough to get to, now.”

Director Storm laughed. “All right! Who’s ready to get out of here and kick some more Ba’al ass?”

“I think most of us are exhausted,” Iroh commented. “But we will.”

Tempest saluted, along with all the agents behind her. “Yes we will!”

Corona smiled. “Yeah… we will. Hey, Sombra, think you can activate the sprinkler system in the hall over there, I need to-“

Sombra activated the sprinkler system in the room they were all in.

“SOMBRA!” Tempest shouted.

Sombra chuckled. “Oh, I’m sorry – Corona, did you want to not get all these schmucks wet?”

Corona rolled her eyes. “Not really?”

Storm chuckled. “We may be sworn enemies, Sombra, but I have to admit, I like your style.”

“You’re nicely eccentric as well, Oncoming Storm.”

“What is it with people and trying to use my full name ominously? Really doesn’t work on me.”

Tempest coughed. “We should probably move out. Get beyond the bubble so we can teleport, contact reinforcements, and update the Hub.”

“Yeah, right,” Director Storm grunted, standing up, leaning on his chair. “That’s going to be slow.”

“We can send a scout, sir,” Tempest said.

“Yeah, I vol-“ Corona didn’t finish her sentence. She just started screaming. Director Storm followed her example, falling to the ground.

“What happened?” Aang shouted, running to her.

“YOU DID!” Corona yelled, lashing out with a burst of purple magic, tossing Aang back. He fell against a wall, dropping to the ground. “YOU LET ME KNOW!”

Aang stood up, glaring at Corona – or what had just been Corona a second ago. Now, a being with
deep, purple pupil-less eyes stood in Corona’s body. She took a few steps forward, sneering at Aang.

The agents behind Tempest fired. Corona lit her horn and shot the death spell at several of them, draining the life from them in an instant. Tempest tensed as she heard the agents fall behind her. “Hold your fire!” She yelled.

“Yes…” the voice of Majora said, coming from both Director Storm’s and Corona’s mouths at the same time. “Realize that to retaliate… Is death.” Director Storm stood on his broken leg, unable to feel the pain within. He slapped Iroh across the face, knocking him to the ground. Corona took a few more steps to Aang.

The guns in the walls locked on Corona, readying a volley of specialized bullets.

“Sombra!” Majora said, her voice echoing into Sombra’s ears despite the distance between them. “You don’t want to do that!”

“Why not?” Sombra demanded. “Worst you do is kill all your hostages.”

“You may not care about these hostages,” Majora said. “In fact, you don’t care about anyone here—except one.” She forced Corona to create a knife of magic and held to her own neck. “I can make Sunset here cut off her own head if you so much as make a move of any kind.” She pressed the knife deep enough to draw blood on Corona’s already bloodsoaked coat.

Sombra said nothing. She also didn’t do anything.

“Thought not.” Majora turned both her heads to Aang. “Hello, Raava.”

Aang shook his head. “Just Aang right now.”

“Why not enter the Avatar State and destroy us?”

“Because that’s what you want,” Aang said. “You want to destroy the Avatar Spirit forever. You can’t do that unless I’m in the Avatar State.”

“Smart boy,” Majora said. “But you want to turn to the Avatar State anyway. If I don’t get to kill your essence soon this entire place goes up in flames and I kill everyone in it.”

Aang narrowed his eyes. “You are going to do that anyway.”

Majora’s faces scowled. “Surrender yourself, Raava, or—“

“Or what? You kill me?” Aang stood tall. “You’ll have to try.”

Majora twisted her heads. “Why must all you guardians be so pesky and petty…” Corona unleashed a beam of fire at Aang, which he quickly deflected around himself. Using the water in the room, he froze Director Storm and Corona solid. Storm was unable to break free, but Corona easily melted the ice around her.

Majora only spoke through Corona now. “That was intensely stupid. I am—“

Aang ran away. He charged down a hallway on top of a sphere of air, blowing papers everywhere. Corona’s face sneered. She teleported after him. “You can’t run away from me, Raava.”

“I can try!” Aang said, dodging a bolt of fire from her.
“I could kill you in an instant!” Majora yelled.

“Oh, I think you’re right!” Aang said, making a hard right in the compound. “I just think you won’t unless I’m in the Avatar State!”

Majora tugged on Aang with Corona’s telekinesis, but Aang bent the magic into his hands and unleashed it in a bright flash-bang. Majora shrieked.

Aang noticed something. “Hey… That wasn’t painful to my ears.”

Majora growled. “I wasn’t angry enough.”

“I think your little bubble-shield prevents you from getting your full power in here as well!” Aang grinned. “You have to use her power, not your own!”

“It’s still more than enough,” Majora said. “You transformed her into her true form, a being with nigh unlimited magic potential. She has spells that can twist your very perception of pain. Her past is a rather delightful one.”

Aang caught a jet of fire with his hand, twisting the magic into his body and releasing it again. He smirked. “Aren’t you mad I figured out how to bend magic? And… I guess whatever your mysterious purple stuff is, not that you can use it.”

Majora roared, forcing a piece of wall near Aang to transform into an explosive. It ignited, tossing Aang through a wall of the compound. He groaned, barely jumping in time to avoid a flaming hoof to the face.

“It’s only a matter of time before I force you into the Avatar State…” Majora growled. “Then, Raava, your time as an annoyance will be over. No more removing my influence from the souls of others. No more bending my eldritch energies. I will have dominion.”

“Yeah, don’t think so.” Aang blew a mixture of air and fire at Corona, toppling her to the ground. “I think I’ll just stay alive. Or, well, die, and then let the next Avatar defeat you.”

“I’ll find them… As a child…”

Aang smirked. “And that worked so well with me, didn’t it?”

Majora roared, surrounding Aang in fire. He calmly collected it with his fire bending, throwing it on the ground. Aang was right – Majora could easily use the powers of Corona to kill him outright, but Majora didn’t want that. She was having difficulty using the nonlethal attacks to force the Avatar State, and Aang was just so good at dodging that he recovered from whatever he was hit with quickly.

He was drawing her out.

“How long does this go on, Raava?” Majora shouted. “How long?”

“Oh, it’s already gone on long enough. I’m pretty sure that, by now, everyone’s evacuated the building. It’s just you and me in here, Majora.”

Majora’s face twitched. She focused on the frozen Storm for the first time in a few minutes, only to find that he was the only person in the room. All the agents and Iroh were gone.

Majora lit Corona’s entire body on fire in a fit of rage. “YOU WILL REGRET BLINDING ME,
Aang shrugged, bending the fire around Corona to knock her over. “I don’t think so.” He raised his hands and waved her on. “Come and get me.”

Corona, under Majora’s wrathful control, charged.

The eldritch claw reached out to Twilight. She would be dead the moment it touched her. She knew this, and couldn’t do anything. Its impossibility froze her. It wanted her stuck there, stuck to just take it. Majora wanted them all gone in one fell swoop they wouldn’t be able to do anything about.

Rick pointed his fully operational portal gun at the hand and fired with the calibration slightly off. Instead of opening a portal it latched itself onto Majora’s portal, turning the connection between worlds into a sinkhole of green sparks and nothing. The hand disintegrated, and the portal Majora had made solidified into a green swirling mess of instability.

Twilight could suddenly think again. She backed away from the pulsating green mass in front of her, shaking her head. The green mass twitched, pulsing. She heard the sound of a battering ram hitting a door.

Someone must have said something, because suddenly they were somewhere else. Nova had teleported them to Canterlot High.

Twilight turned around to look at everyone. Rick, Morty, Flutterfree, Renee, Pinkie, Nova… All were fine.

Rick threw his hands into the air. “Fuck this shit, I’m out!” He recalibrated the portal gun and connected to another universe correctly. “Come on Morty.”

“But, Rick-“

“No buts, Morty! These ponies currently have a one-way ticket to Destination Fucked because somebody forgot to consider the possibility that, maybe, I dunno, there was more than one planet the fucking ‘god’ was trying to destroy!”

“Can’t you do something?”

“No, Morty, because there are some things you just don’t fuck with. Eldritch god-monsters that have just had their seal broken is one of them! It’s not worth the effort.”

Morty looked at the ponies. “But what about-“

“They can escape with us, if they want,” Rick muttered. “If that’ll make you stop whining”

Morty looked at them, eyes pleading.

Twilight shook her head. “We can’t abandon what we’ve made.”

Morty sighed. “Well… Good luck then. Hope you don’t die.”

Twilight smiled sadly. “Take care of yourself, Morty. You’re a good kid.”

Morty felt the need to hug her, and Twilight let him.
“Oh for the love of-!” Rick yelled. “Let’s go Morty!”

Morty retreated from the embrace, nodded to Twilight, and followed his grandfather through the portal. It closed, leaving the five ponies alone with a very big problem.

Pinkie took in a breath. “Okay, so, allow me to say what we’re all thinking. WHAT IN CELESTIA’S NAME ARE WE GOING TO DO!”

“Find out more,” Twilight said. “We… We don’t know where Majora was freed, how exactly she’s been freed, if she’s just in the process of being freed, or what her plans even are besides, well, kill us.” She took a breath. “At least Earth is okay…”

“What if it was Equestria, Twilight?” Flutterfree asked. “What if our world was taken?”

“It wasn’t Equestria,” Twilight said. “I would have sensed those magic nodes, or the Starfinder would have. No, our world is fi-“

All of them felt their connection to the Tree of Harmony hiccup. Their cutie marks flashed brightly for a second and then went out.

The Tree of Harmony wasn’t calling them to solve a friendship problem.

*It was just screaming in pain.*

Twilight paled. “The Tree of Harmony is in danger!”

“Let’s move it!” Pinkie shouted. “It needs our help!”

~~~

O’Neill looked at the horrifying picture on the *Apollo’s* bridge screen.

Boxen folded his arms. “I was on a ship returning from the Other Side. I saw *this*. I left the universe as soon as I could. Then I came here.”

O’Neill stood up and walked closer to the screen. It was a still of the ruined Binary planet – purple, fleshy, impossible core surrounded by twisted tentacles that grasped the chunks of crust that survived or drove themselves into dimensional portals. O’Neill knew the image wasn’t moving but he swore the core was *beating* like a heart.

Cosmo put a hoof to her chin. “Well, we know where Majora really is.”

Link pointed out the extruding tendrils that ended abruptly. “She’s reaching into other universes. That’s how she got to the Twilight.”

General Sunset’s eyes widened. “Where else is she attacking?”

“Probably everywhere,” O’Neill said, folding his hands. “We need to destroy that planet she has become completely.”

“Do you have a weapon that can do that?” Boxen asked.

“I can think of one. We dump a stargate in your star, connect it to something unpleasant, force the ball of fire to go supernova. That’s off the table because it would destroy your other planet as well.”

Boxen nodded. “Keep it on the table as a last resort.”
Sunset blinked. “I was not expecting that response from you.”

“We are able to realize when there’s something bigger than us,” Boxen said indignantly. “If it comes to it, use it.”

O’Neill sighed. “We’ll have it ready. I’ve also contacted Earth Tau’ri to see if we can get a shipment of some of our super big bombs and a ton of drones.”

Cosmo spoke up. “My portion of the fleet is designed with the capability to take my power and amplify it. The onslaught was enough to drive a race of galactic exterminators to the extinction they themselves dealt out for so long. I do not know if it can face this Majora, but it will certainly be a boon.”

The Happy Mask Salesman stood up. “I believe you are all being foolish. Even this idea of destroying the sun has no guarantee of success. Majora is a being far beyond what any of you have experienced. That Tree of Harmony you have within you, Princess? Majora started as that. Then she became more. So much more. Not even the holiest weapons in our world could destroy her while she was sealed in a mask. As destructive as your magic and technology can be, do you really think it will be enough?”

“The other option is run with our tails between our legs,” Sunset spat. “And we aren’t doing that.”

Link nodded. “We’re fighting, no matter what. We may die trying, and if that is the case, then so be it. But we will not run away quietly. That’s just giving Majora what she wants on a silver platter.”

He grabbed his sword and plunged it into the ground. “We’re going to fight for our lives, our families, and our worlds. We’re going to make her fight for her life.”

“Nice speech, but you’re fixing the hole you made in the floor,” O’Neill commented. “I’m going to check to see the ETA on those weapons and any possible backup…”

“A ship just entered the universe!” a crewmember yelled.


An image of Ba’al’s Mothership appeared alongside a single Ha’tak. There was a large gash cut through one of the Mothership’s sides.

“…His weapons aren’t charged,” the communications officer said.

“He’s not stupid,” O’Neill said. “I bet he wants to talk. Put him up when he calls.”

A Ba’al with blood running down his face soon took up the screen. “Ah, O’Neill!”

“You screwed up.”

Ba’al bit his lip. “Er… Yes. Clearly. You know, I did have backup plans in case she tried to betray us. Mental conditioning on a few of us, spies sent into her ship, a couple outposts…”

The Happy Mask Salesman laughed his usual eerie laugh. “But she knew about all of them and destroyed them before you could activate them.”

“Yes. …Excuse me, O’Neill, who is this man?”

“The Happy Mask Salesman,” O’Neill answered. “I have come to accept that I will never learn his actual name. He knows a bit about Majora.”
“Ah. So, O’Neill, what’s the plan?” Ba’al asked.

“Wait for a shipment of weapons and brute-force our way to destroying Majora,” O’Neill said. “Think you can not mess this one up?”

“My ships are at your service.”

O’Neill rolled his eyes. “Of course.” He cut the channel.

“…We’re just accepting this?” Link said.

“Link, trust me, I know Ba’al. He’s willing to cooperate right now. It always happens when a bigger fish shows up. He can manipulate and deal with us in many creative and vile ways. He cannot deal with Majora.”

Link nodded. “Fine. He doesn’t actually have much to give us though. Just a big ship and a smaller ship that the Apollo alone could destroy.”

“We need every edge we can get,” Cosmo said. “Every weapon, every ship, every spell. I’ve already sent orders back home to acquire as many ships as possible. They’ll be pouring in steadily for some time. I doubt we’ll have time to wait for them all.”

“Must be nice, being able to leave your world unattended,” O’Neill commented.

“It is. No internal threats, and I don’t believe Majora can operate well over large enough distances to reach our planets.”

“Furthermore, she’d have no interest in your world,” the Happy Mask Salesman said. “Since you aren’t in it.”

Cosmo nodded slowly. “I am aware I am probably one of her targets. I am surprised she hasn’t attacked me directly, yet.”

“It may just be she doesn’t know what universe we’re in,” Lieshy piped up. “Or doesn’t care to find out.”

O’Neill gripped the arms of his chair. “I don’t like relying on the cluelessness or apathy of our enemies… At any moment, a switch could turn.”

“We don’t have much of a sign – choice,” Lieshy said. “Do we?”

O’Neill just shook his head slowly.

~~~

Aang was losing energy quickly. He could tell Majora had made Corona break one of her legs – but Majora forced the unicorn’s body not to feel anything.

“What’s the matter, Raava? Losing your energy? Perhaps you should go into the Avatar State, tap into your true self,” Majora chided. “All you have to do is defeat one broken, bruised, and battered unicorn before she can kill you! Can’t be that hard, right?”

“Not taking the risk!” Aang said, running down another hallway. He was getting real tired of running. He’d already been doing it for… He had no idea. Not an hour, but more than fifteen minutes. And she pursued relentlessly with her fire and her magic, never running out of juice.
But she couldn’t force him to do what she wanted, and he knew it. Not here.

Then he tripped. He tripped and hit his head on a wall hard enough to blur his vision.

Majora seized the opportunity. She made Corona leap onto Aang and flip him onto his back. She tied his hands up, preventing him from bending magic. She tore a piece of metal out of the wall and heated it up to extreme temperatures. “I’ll get you to show your real self yet…” The metal glowed white hot after only a few seconds of direct exposure.

Corona pressed the scalding chunk to Aang’s leg. He screamed, feeling the instinct deep within him to unleash the judgment of the Avatar – but he kept it inside him. He couldn’t risk it.

“Stop fighting it Raava!” Majora yelled, using Corona’s magic to drive the white hot slab into his other leg. “The longer you fight the urge, the less likely you can win when you do give in!”

“NEVER!” Aang shouted back. In retaliation the metal plate was pressed against his back, scalding it. He roared, but kept his instinct within.

Majora screamed. “SHOW YOURSELF RAAVA! SHOW YOURSELF!”

“NO!”

“SHOW YOURSELF!”

“Okay,” Sombra said, dropping her invisibility and shooting a syringe into Corona’s neck.

Corona blinked. “…Wha…?”

“Sorry Corona, have to keep you sedated, doctor’s orders!”

Corona took a few shaky steps forward. Her horn sparked, trying to come up with a spell, but it fizzled out quickly. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head and she slumped to the ground, out cold.

Aang allowed himself to relax. “Thank goodness…”

Sombra walked over to him, smirking. “You don’t look too hot there.”

“Funny,” Aang wheezed.

“Good news: you’re not bleeding. Bad news: burns. Lots of them.”

“You should have left already,” Aang muttered.


“Should we get out of here?”

“After Majora realized you’d let everyone go, she surrounded the magic bubble in her power. We’re rather stuck.” Sombra laughed. “Erecting a shield you can’t even get through. What a moron.”

“She’ll get through eventually,” Aang said.

“Yeah. We’ve just got to hope the others find a way to stop her before then.” She sat down next to him and took out her phone. “Can’t do anything from in here right now.”
“So… We’re just stuck?”

“Yep. But hey, she didn’t get you, and everyone else got out. That’s good.”

Aang nodded with considerable effort. “Yeah…”

~~~

Twilight teleported herself and her friends to the Tree of Harmony’s clearing. They were not surprised to find a giant portal with tendrils of Majora pouring out of it.

They were surprised by who was there.

Defending the Tree in its rainbow power of Harmony stood Starswirl, Discord, and the Sage. All three of them had exceedingly focused looks on their faces, all working together with Harmony to push back the eldritch horrors. Starswirl’s horn smoked, Discord’s form shifted unnaturally as he poured chaotic energies back at the oncoming chaos, and the Sage’s mask pushed back at the claw with all the energy it could muster within its multi-faceted power.

It was enough. Majora could not make any headway. This did not stop her from trying. Her tendril pushed, and pushed, and pushed. They would have to give in eventually.

Vivian appeared in front of them. “Hi,” she said, nervously.

“W-what’s going on?” Twilight asked.

“Majora wants to extinguish the Tree of Harmony,” Vivian said. “Apparently more than a few powerful beings disagree.”

“This can’t go on forever,” Flutterfree said, shaking her head at the light show. “Somebody will give. And it’s probably going to be Starswirl. Even if the others can keep it up…”

Twilight turned to Vivian. “What… What’s happened? Why is Majora doing this? Do you know?”

Vivian nodded slowly. “…We – General Sunset and the rest of us – were called to the Temple of Time in Ardent to defend against an attack by the Sage. The Sage was forced by Majora to seal the goddesses of Ardent into the mask. When she was dragged back in, I followed her, and managed to hide from Majora’s perceptions. Then a couple of humans showed up and I took the opportunity to hide the Sage as well. Majora decided that, without knowing where the Sage’s mask was, she had to move ahead with her plans faster. We went to the Binary world and saw it destroyed.”

“…D-destroyed!?” Renee said.

Vivian wiped a tear from her face “Y-yeah. It was terrible. Majora… She’s free. She is the planet now, I think.” She turned to the Sage. “I think the Sage could explain better, but… She’s busy protecting your Tree.”

Pinkie looked at the Sage. “Tag in for her, Vivian.”

“I can’t use the mask.”

“She’ll let you. Just tap on her shoulder, she’ll give it to you. But you’ll need to think fast, Vivian.”

Vivian blinked. “R-right!” she moved to the sage, tapping her shoulder. The Sage twisted around back, shoving the mask onto Vivian’s face. In the second it took the mask to recognize Vivian, Majora’s essence pushed forward.
“BACK!” Discord shouted, letting out a burst of pure energy, not bothering with any of the chaotic visual gags. Just pure energy. “BACK, YOU DISGRACE TO CHAOS!”

Vivian activated the spirits within the mask, pushing back against Majora’s onslaught, returning the momentary imbalance back to a stalemate.

The Sage took a deep breath and turned to the five ponies. “So, first off, I technically surrendered last time.”

Pinkie rolled her eyes. “Yeah, you did.”

“You’re not off the hook yet,” Twilight said. “But we have bigger problems.” She turned to the claw of Majora; its presence a constant nail in her skull. It didn’t have enough power right now to freeze her in place, but it had more than enough to upset her on a deep, deep level.

The Sage nodded. “We need to defeat Majora.”

“How?” Twilight asked.

Pinkie and the Sage looked at each other. “The Triforce,” they said at the same time.

“The wish-granting artifact?” Nova asked. “The one Link, Zelda, and Ganondorf have the parts to?”

“That’s the one,” Pinkie said.

“It’s connected to Majora on a personal level,” the Sage said. “Unfortunately, due to my recent escapades, the goddesses that provide the Triforce’s power are sealed away within that mask.”

“So, can’t we just use the mask’s power on the Triforce?” Renee asked. “Bring those three bearers here, use the mask on them, and wish for Majora to be destroyed?”

“Majora’s powerful enough she might be able to defend against that…” the Sage said.

Pinkie facehooved. “No beating around the bush, Sage-me. She is powerful enough to defend against a simple wish. We actually have to bring the Triforce to her, with the mask. Find the center of her essence on her planet.”

“How can we do that?” Flutterfree asked. “We can barely keep her away from the Tree of Harmony! How do we go to the place where she is?”

Twilight gulped. “We leave the Tree of Harmony. Use Discord, Starswirl, the mask – everything – to protect us while we’re in her territory. We use everything at our disposal to cut a hole right to Majora’s center, and use the Triforce. The Tree of Harmony… will not survive.”

Renee gasped. “Twilight, remember what Cosmo said! When she sacrificed her Tree of Harmony, the other races vanished! If… If you don’t find a way to absorb it, all of us might perish!”

Twilight took a deep breath. “…I know Renee! I just… I can’t think of what else to do! We can’t stay here and protect the Tree, we have to do something!”

Flutterfree blinked. “Take the Tree with us.”

Nova blinked. “What?”

Pinkie and the Sage exchanged glances.
“That could work…” Pinkie said, rubbing her chin.

“We’d need someone with a personal connection to it that it trusts…” the Sage said.

“Starswirl will volunteer to carry it. ISN’T THAT RIGHT STARSWIRL?”

Starswirl managed a grunt that was probably a yes.

Pinkie grinned. “We might just have a shot!”

“But if she tries to crush us, even with my mask’s power, she can,” the Sage said.

A smile slowly grew on Twilight’s face. “Girls – we just need more friends to help. We’ve met hundreds of people on our journey, many of which were very very powerful.” She turned to the portal Majora was pushing through. This time she didn’t wince in fear. “What we need is a group to defend the Tree of Harmony and the Triforce while we take it to Majora on her own turf…”

Nova grabbed Twilight’s dimensional device. “I’ll get on that.”

“Me too!” Pinkie said, pulling out a spare device.

“…Why can’t you do that when we get stuck in another universe?”

“It’d make everything too easy.” Pinkie hoofbumped Nova. “Let’s go round up some friends.”

Nova nodded. “I’ve got some ideas. You?”

“Ooooh yeah. Some not-so-great ones, but you know how it is.”

Nova chuckled. “Yeah, I do. I’ll get the Triforce bearers.”

The two opened portals and went their separate ways.

Twilight took a moment to look at the Sage. “…So. We finally get to meet.”

“Hello, Charter Twilight,” the Sage said, extending a hoof. Twilight shook it.

“You know,” Twilight said, putting a hoof to her chin. “Just a few months ago I thought you were a big problem. But you really didn’t have any plan beyond sealing your Goddess away, did you?”

The Sage shook her head. “I wanted to rid our world of the horrible reason it had for existing and for its conflict. She was responsible for the way our world turned out, for the wars, for the petty arguments, for Applejack and General Sunset. I decided from the moment I knew this that I wanted to end it. I did what I wanted – though admittedly with some unforeseen consequences. I knew Ba’al and Majora were up to something. I did not see what. I should not have been so focused on my quest. I do not apologize for what I did to free my world, but I do apologize for what my actions did to Ardent. What it’s allowed Majora to do.” She bowed her head.

“I forgive you,” Twilight said. “Though I think you need to apologize to the people of Ardent more.”

The Sage nodded. “I also need to be locked up for, let’s see… stealing, manipulation, organizing the death of a handful of ponies, and conspiracy. Not innocent here, nor do I pretend to be.”

Twilight nodded. “I understand. But know that you’ll have a friend, regardless of what happens.”

The Sage let a small smile crawl up her usually stoic face. “You sure live up to your name, Twilight
Sparkle, Princess of Friendship.”

Twilight chuckled softly.

“CAN YOU TWO STOP IT WITH THE CUTE MOMENT AND HELP!?” Discord shouted, using just enough of his magic to ensure Twilight would hear since she wasn’t looking at him. “TWILIGHT, I KNOW YOU HAVE ALICORN MAGIC IN YOU!”

“Right,” Twilight said. She flared her wings, lit her horn, and pushed back against the claw of Majora with all her might. She did little compared to the mask, Discord, and the Tree, but it felt good to do something.

~~~

Nova teleported onto the Apollo’s bridge a short while later. “There you are!” She pointed at Link, Zelda, and Ganondorf. “I’ve been looking all over for you! We need the Triforce! Come on!”

“Triforce doesn’t work anymore,” Link said, sighing. “The Sage stole their power.”

“We have the sage and her mask in Equestria,” Nova said. “We can reactivate its power. Come on, we’ve got a plan.”

O’Neill looked up from his chair. “Funny, so do we.”

“What plan is that?” Nova asked.

“Punch it until it gives up. Failing that, blow up the sun and everything in the system.”

Nova blinked. “…Yeah, that sounds like a great plan.”

“What’s yours?” General Sunset asked.

“Ours is to drag the Triforce, the Tree of Harmony, and all the other powerful friends we can find to the planet that is Majora, and use the Triforce on her essence, wishing her sealed or destroyed. Whichever works.”

O’Neill blinked. “…Yeah, that sounds like a great plan.”

“Both,” Lieshy said. “Let’s do both the stupid plans.”

“…What?” Toph said.

“You don’t need powerful individuals in the fleet besides Cosmo, and you don’t need spaceships on the ground with the Triforce. Do both. Attack Majora from two fronts.”


Nova nodded. “Who’s coming with me besides Link, Zelda, and Ganondorf? You three don’t get a choice.”

“Fine by me,” Ganondorf said, curling his fingers into a fist. “I was beginning to think I wouldn’t be allowed to get my hands dirty…”

General Sunset came forward. “I’m coming.”
Toph raised her hand. “Me too.”

The Happy Mask Salesman stepped forth. “I believe it would be prudent if I came along as well…”

O’Neill nodded. “Good luck.”

“We’ll be supporting you from above however we can,” Cosmo said.

“Thanks,” Nova said, lighting her horn. “Anyone else? Because we probably need to move quickly. There’s a very high chance Majora knows what we’re doing. You should probably begin your space assault as soon as possible.”

O’Neill turned to Cosmo. “Should we wait for any more ships?”

“I don’t think more will help at this point,” Cosmo said.

“Then tell the fleet to prepare to jump universes.” O’Neill stood up. “We’re going to drop some nukes on a god’s face.”

Nova teleported away with Link, Zelda, Ganondorf, Sunset, Toph, and the Happy Mask Salesman.

~~~

Pinkie looked at her dimensional device. It was time to go fast. She opened a portal to another dimension and jumped to another location far away.

She poked her head out of Siron’s armor. “Hey. Hey Siron. Psst. Over here.”

Siron looked down at her, a drink in his hand. “What, Pinkie?”

“Got something to tell you I think you’ll really like to know.”

“What?”

“A chaos being known as Majora took control of Ba’al and destroyed the Binary world.”

The drink in his hand crushed from the pressure his fingers exerted on it.

“Imma take that as a ‘yes, Pinkie, I’m available to crush this Majora’s head in for personal reasons I will not go into.’ Am I right?”

Siron nodded slowly.

“Good!” Pinkie jumped out and grabbed him. “Awaaaay we go!” She opened another portal and jumped through.

They were suddenly standing at the edge of a mysterious forest. In front of them was a yellow mare in a red suit and hat, firing her guns at an oncoming hoard of zombies.

“Ah, Pinkie!” Alushy yelled. “Glad you could join me, slaughtering the hordes of undead has been proving to be a bit boring here. They just keep coming! They don’t get any smarter, don’t try anything new. So sad.”

“Hey Alushy! Want to help us punch a chaos god in the face?”

Alushy stopped shooting the incoming zombies. She slowly turned to Pinkie, a psychotic grin on her
“I’m listening…”

“No time to explain, we’ve got one more to pick up!” As Pinkie opened a portal and dragged them through, Alushy extended a hoof to Siron.

“Name’s Alushy. Fudgemothering vampire. Siron, I take it? Bug demon king?”

Siron nodded slowly, but wordlessly.

“Ah, still reeling from the rapid Pinkie-ness, huh? Don’t worry, I’m sure we’ll do fine facing off against whatever eldritch horror we’ve dreamed up today. I must say, I’m excited. I have no idea who we’re fighting or why but I know it’ll be big, bad, and hella awesome.”

Siron blinked, refusing to comment further. He registered that they were in a different Ponyville.

Pinkie cleared her throat. “I really hope I don’t regret this… HEY MELINDA!”

The ‘perfect’ human appeared in front of her. “Hey, Pinkie! What can I do for you?”

“There’s an evil chaos being by the name of Majora that’s destroyed a planet and is trying to kill so many others.”

“Kill? That sounds a little extreme!”

“It is,” Pinkie said, extending a hoof. She shivered slightly. “Care to come with us and lend your… skills?”

Melinda smiled. “Do I ever!”

“Good. Just remember, you’re not in charge, Charter Twilight is.”

“Fine by me!”

Alushy blinked. “Holy shit, you’re agreeable.”

“Hey, watch your language,” Melinda countered.

Alushy cocked her head. “Okay, that was a compliment but take it however you want.”

Pinkie rolled her eyes, activating the dimensional device again. “Let’s gooooo!”

“Hold on,” Siron said. “Shouldn’t it have run out of power by now?”

“We don’t have time!” Pinkie muttered, throwing the three of them through and walking back into the Tree of Harmony’s clearing. “Made it!”

Nova raised an eyebrow. “What took you so long?”

“I’m going to blame the time dilation effect and my scrambled mission. I got three. I thought about getting Celestia and Luna, then I realized we probably need them here in case Majora tries something crafty.”

“I got six,” Nova said.

“Three of those were required!”

“Fight! Fight! Fight!” Alushy cheered.
“Friends shouldn’t fight!” Melinda countered. “We need to work together to face the evil.”

Alushy looked up at her. “I’m really not sure what to make of you.”

Twilight blinked, walking over. “Quite a group, Pinkie. Hey Siron, Alushy, Melinda.”

“What’s with your ears?” Melinda asked.

“Oh. I got my ears blown out. Went deaf.”

“That’s horrible!”

Twilight raised an eyebrow. “Yes it is. But not important right now. What’s important is the giant claw of purple you three have conveniently not looked at yet.”

The newcomers stared at the claw being beaten back by Discord, the mask, the Tree of Harmony, and a handful of unicorns. Starswirl was currently not beating back the darkness, but instead was placing magical markings in the ground around the Tree of Harmony.

The shadow flooded the minds of the newcomers. Siron let out a breath of bloodcurdled rage. Melinda’s face became overcome with fear – a feeling she had felt so rarely in her ‘perfect’ existence.

Alushy, on the other hand, just grinned. “Yes. Hell yes. Hell fudging yes! This is the kinda thing I want to fight! The kinda thing that could trounce me! Do you have any idea how hard it is to find things like that?”

“Fluttershout,” Renee reminded her.

“That was bullshit and you know it.”

Renee shrugged. “Not claiming otherwise.”

Twilight turned on her ears, wincing audibly. She climbed up on a rock on the outside of the clearing, coughing to grab everybody’s attention. “Okay, everyone, let’s go over what we’re doing. We are taking Link, Zelda, and Ganondorf to the center of Majora’s essence on the other side of this portal. We will activate the Triforce with the power of the Sage’s mask, and either seal Majora away or destroy her, whichever works.”

“It will likely end up being a seal,” the Happy Mask Salesman offered.

“Thank you… Mister Salesman.” Twilight shook her head, clearing it. “The other side of this portal will be horrendous, monstrous, and full of death. I don’t know if we’ll make it far, or even if we can really make it back. But we need to take this to her. Those of you who can’t fight on a high level… I am going to ask you to leave. Sage, tag Vivian out. She’s been through enough.”

The Sage swapped places with Vivian, reclaiming the mask. She focused on keeping the purple claw at bay again.

“Vivian,” Twilight said. “Did you catch what I said?”

Vivian nodded. “I’m not complaining. Today… Today has been enough.”

“Renee, Flutterfree… I’m going to ask you to stay behind as well.”

Renee smirked. “Figures. I wish you luck, Twilight. Come back to us, you hear?”
Twilight nodded. “I plan on it. And as for you—”

Toph held up a hand. “If you were about to tell me to stay back because I’m not on the same ‘level of power’ as you all, you can take your words and shove them back down your throat. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Neither am I,” Sunset said, lighting her antlers and horn. “Not only because I feel that this is *my* quest that I need to finish, but also that I can use Majora’s very essence against her.”

Twilight smiled. “Fair enough. You two can come.” She turned to the claw, smile vanishing. She turned off her ears. “We go in five minutes, or when I give the signal. That’s when everyone pushes in with everything we’ve got. Starswirl will be ready by then. The Tree will do all it can to protect us.” She stared at the portal. “Just a matter of time…”

Twilight, Pinkie, Nova, the Sage, Discord, Starswirl, Toph, General Sunset, Link, Zelda, Ganondorf, Siron, Alushy, Melinda, the Happy Mask Salesman, and the Tree of Harmony itself… Whatever these people were normally, they could forget that for now.

Today, they were heroes.

~~~

O’Neill had Cosmo permanently on screen for the battle in a small window next to the actual battle display. “Ready if you are,” he said.

“Ready,” Cosmo said. “All ships’ channels are online and prepared for my magic.”

“Our really big bombs are active and our drone bay is full,” O’Neill said. “Ba’al, *Starfinder*, you two good as well?”

“Peachy,” Ba’al muttered.

“Ready!” Mauve called from the *Starfinder*.

O’Neill walked over to the control console and pressed the *jump* button himself. The *Apollo* went into overdrive to power the dimensional device, tearing a hole in space large enough to fit several ships through. The fleet moved in, far enough away that the Majora planet wasn’t in sight range.

“How’s our power?” O’Neill asked.

“Should be plenty to maintain the portal until they’re all through,” a crewmember said. “No reaction from Majora. She may not know we’re here…”

“She knows,” Cosmo said. “I can feel her, and she can feel me. She just knows that she can’t reach us all the way out here effectively.” She sighed. “She thinks she can take us when we move in.”

“Be careful,” O’Neill said. “Don’t let her get in your head.”

“Princess Cosmo’s head is just fine,” the Starlight AI chirped. “I know. I’ve been scanning it constantly. It’s under stress, but no nefarious entities yet.”

“Thank you,” Cosmo said, narrowing her eyes. “It still unnerves me, the *confidence* I feel coming off Majora. I’m almost certain she knows exactly what we’re doing, and what our plans are.”

“She can’t know exactly how powerful one of our bombs are, or precisely how good your ships are at amplifying your power, or the extent of Twilight’s group.”
“No. But her confidence is unnerving.”

“Do you think she knows about Plan B?”

“I’m not sure…” Cosmo said. “I did detect a reaction in her when you said that, but I don’t know what it means.”

“Okay, it is now time to stop talking about Plan B just in case we managed to slip that one by her. Is everyone through?”

“Yes,” a crewmember said. “All ships accounted for.”

“Then here we go,” O’Neill said. “ATTENTION MULTIVERSAL FLEET. We’re ready for battle. You all know what this is going to be – our goal is to shred that purple planet to complete smithereens. There’s a very large chance none of what we do will have much effect, but keep attacking anyway. We have men trying something else, and our presence may keep them alive. And to you, Majora – I know you’re listening. You’re about to find out what it feels like to have an entire colony of fire ants get inside your trousers.”

“I LOOK FORWARD TO THE PAIN, MORTAL,” Maojra called across the divide of space.

“Bejeezus,” O’Neill muttered, grabbing his pounding head. “You must have a difficult time at the club with that kind of voice… Fleet, engage!”

The fleet used their various FTL drives to arrive at Majora’s planet in quick succession.

Neither side wasted any time getting started.

Majora had been preparing a large, powerful tendril longer than the Earth itself, and now she swung it at the ships. The Apollo responded by firing off three sets of weapons. The laser weapons did next to nothing, simply tearing holes through the impossible fleshy mass that healed almost immediately. The second weapons, the drones, were much more effective – the golden nodes of light rammed through the fleshy tentacle, then turned around and rammed through it again, and again, and again, tearing at it apart until they ran out of energy and exploded. But trumping all this was the cluster-nuke, special-ordered from Earth Tau’ri.

A weapon designed to glass planets.

The huge cylinder departed from the Apollo’s underside, rushing toward the fleshy mass. It split into eight sections, swirling around the tentacle and hitting it in seven different places, the eighth part continuing on to the planet’s ‘surface’. The supercharged nukes were more than enough to blow the tentacle to smithereens, though the surface took the hit dead on with little apparent damage.

Majora fought back with psychological warfare. Every mortal mind within the fleet had to scream in madness from the noise that entered their ears. Weapons that weren’t automatic stopped firing.

Cosmo took a deep breath in. “When all hope is lost, look to the Harmony within yourself, connect the souls between ponies, and stand stronger than any alone.” She let it out, and spread her wings. Her entire body flashed white, the power of her Tree of Harmony spreading from her horn, wingtips, and mane. The specially designed holes in the flower-shaped ship she was on sucked the power from her. Every petal point produced a spark of white magic, sending a beam of Harmony to another one of Cosmo’s ships. Each of those ships took the magic it received and magnified it, firing it back to the flower capital ship and other amplifier ships. A spherical lattice of magic lines connected everyone together save the Apollo, Starfinder, and Ba’al’s ships.
The mental assault of Majora ended, banished by the holy barrier.

“Th-thanks…” O’Neill said, touching his ear. That was blood all right.

“I’m not done yet,” Cosmo said. “Majora, Goddess of Ardent and the Twilight! You threaten my ponies, and my allies, like the exterminators did so long ago. Prepare yourself to face the might that drove them to extinction.”

Cosmo’s lattice shot a beam of pure holy light forward. Majora acted fast, knowing that if that power hit her core, it would be bad for her. A shield composed of purple miasma, claws, and eyes the size of small moons appeared, dissipating the holy power. The shield didn’t crack or bend from the power.

“Don’t stop shooting!” Cosmo yelled to the others. “This isn’t going to be enough!”

“You heard her!” O’Neill yelled. “Fire all weapons!”

Everything flew towards the planet that was Majora with intent to kill.

~~~

General Sunset felt the power of Majora falter. Apparently Twilight did as well, because she instantly yelled “NOW! EVERYONE, MOVE IN!”

Sunset didn’t need to be told twice. She put all the power she could into her antlers and horn, charging. She felt the weakened tendril of Majora give way. Her power was enough to push it back.

When Alushy, Melinda, and Siron joined in, it was more than enough to break through the barrier. Starswirl uprooted the Tree of Harmony and dragged it through with them, the glowing crystals shooting out all the rainbows the tree could manage, providing them a bubble of multicolored safety in the other world.

The portal closed behind them, leaving them inside a drifting bubble several hundred kilometers above the surface of Majora. Majora fought back, pushing them away with what energy she could spare – but most of it was going to the assault from space. Apparently throwing nukes and magic at Majora did have an effect – there just needed to be a lot.

The fleet could have completely reduced several normal planets to rubble at this point, but Majora was still facing off against them strongly.

“I hope we have radiation therapy,” Alushy said. “Because holy fudge that’s a lot of nukes.”

“We’ll all go to healers,” Nova said. “Right now…”

“EVERYONE! PUSH DOWN!” Twilight yelled, firing her magic laser at the shadow keeping them from progressing. Melinda pushed both her hands forward, unleashing a torrent of magic stronger than Twilight had seen her use before. Just the right amount for the occasion. Alushy completely discarded her physical pony form in favor of thousands of dark ridges covered in teeth and eyes.

They could still feel Alushy’s voice. “The number of lost souls… They empower me… THE DEAD RISE AGAINST YOU, MAJORA!”

Siron wordlessly shot his beam of red and green energy downward. Toph folded her arms, bored because she was floating and couldn’t detect any rock - though she was also on edge, trying not to freak out about how helpless and dependant she was right now. General Sunset used her antlers to
connect directly to the eldritch power beneath them, and *banish* it as far as she could.

Their combined efforts dragged the bubble of Harmony closer and closer to the actual surface of Majora.

The Happy Mask Salesman rubbed his hands. “Once we touch down, we should be able to use the Triforce! Simple as that!”

The Sage grunted through her use of the mask, her holy tendrils tearing apart the shadow more than most others.

“I feel like an overglorified battery…” Discord muttered.

Pinkie shrugged. “Eh, I’m actually not doing *anything*, so… Yeah. I’m more here to catch if someone tries something spooky.”

Melinda grinned. “Stand together everyone! We can do this!”

Zelda, Ganondorf, and Link held their hands that bore the pieces of the Triforce together, ready for the rapidly approaching ground.

They crashed into the eldritch soil *way* too hard, creating a crater in the fleshy mess. It was pretty clear that the geometry of the world around them was impossible, but the bubble of Harmonious energy kept the eldritch power from driving them insane.

What they could tell was that the ground was made of both flesh and rock, the mountains had both eyes and mouths, tentacles appeared from nowhere and yet everywhere, and a deep, purple miasma filled the whole place.

Then they saw her. Or her center.

Majora’s mask had taken its place at the top of a mountainous sized hunk of flesh, the only truly defined physical property of the scenery. It leaned in, revealing a tremendously long tendril of a body affixed to an ever changing number of spidery legs – sometimes six, sometimes thirteen, sometimes somewhere in between. The arms came closer to them, allowing three separate hands to grab the outside of the harmony bubble. The palms contained designs of eyes, teeth, mouths, and miniature versions of Majora’s mask itself.

She spoke, clearly trying to use her eldritch voice to burn their brains, but the power within the bubble was too strong. “GIVE ME YOUR WORST.”

General Sunset gulped. Had they miscalculated horribly? Majora seemed way, way too confident for this…

Link, Zelda, and Ganondorf raised their hands into the air. The Pinkie Sage stood on top of them, letting the power within her mask flood into their hands. The pieces of Triforce left the bodies of the bearers, taking their positions in the world as three physical triangles of a golden hue, arranging themselves in a larger triangle pattern, a single inverted triangular hole between them. The Sage floated in the middle of the Triforce, holding her mask high. “Majora – we wish for your defeat.”

Majora laughed. “I defeated the Goddesses! Your Triforce can do nothing!” She pointed at the golden triangles attempting to grant her wish. “Look at them squirm! Look at them *dance*! But they know they do not have the power within them to undo me. Not even with all the souls sealed within your mask. I am *Majora*. I am *more* than a stupid Goddess. I am the destruction of *everything*, including the divinity that is creation.”
The Happy Mask Salesman was suddenly standing outside the bubble. “You created something, once.”

“What is…”

“Did you ever wonder what happened to your piece of the Triforce once it was rejected?”

“It was destroye- No.”

The Happy Mask Salesman held up his hand, revealing a single, black, inverted triangle. “I’ve kept this a secret for so long. Until the moment came where I knew I could get rid of you forever. They have the means. But first you need to go back into that mask.”

“NO!”

The inverted piece of Triforce took its place in the hole between the rest. The Triforce became a solid piece of holy whiteness. It rotated, accepting the wish spoken by the Sage.

The Sage screamed, throwing herself into the true Triforce. It absorbed both her and the mask in an instant.

Sunset gasped – the Sage. She… She was gone.

Link, Zelda, Ganondorf, and the Happy Mask Salesman all passed out as the true Triforce whirled around faster… And faster… and faster…

Majora tried to hit the Harmony bubble with more might, but the effort going into the space battle prevented her from mustering enough. Alushy, Melinda, Discord, and the Tree of Harmony managed to keep her back.

The Triforce unleashed its full power, hitting Majora right in the mask that was her face. She reeled back, screaming. Sunset suddenly realized how powerless she was in this fight, against this creature who could fight against the power of several goddesses, an onslaught more than capable of wiping out an entire planet, and even a part of herself.

She was one being fighting against multiple universes.

How had Sunset not realized how terrifying Majora truly was until now?

Majora screamed.

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Majora’s planet sent out a burst of intense magic and not-quite-magic energy, shaking every ship in the fleet. A few that were damaged from the battle exploded, including Ba’al’s Mothership.

O’Neill was not sad to see that one go. One less problem for later.

“Report!” he said, climbing back into the chair he was just tossed out of.

“It… looks like they did it,” Cosmo said. “Look at the planet.”

The purple energy around Majora’s world was dissipating quickly, leaving behind nothing but chunks of earth. The fleshy tendrils, the shield, everything Majora-esque began to vanish.

“Stop firing!” O’Neill yelled. Cosmo dropped her gigantic purging laser before he finished his
sentence. The fleet, sitting at ninety percent of their original numbers, stood over the world, watching it revert to a normal ruin.

Cosmo frowned. “...I still sense her. Her power is severely limited, but she’s there.”

“Probably sealed in the mask,” O’Neill said.

“You’re probably right. Let’s move in closer and see.”

“Roger roger,” O’Neill saluted. He shook his head. “Most headache inducing battle of all time…”

~~~

The ground returned to normal. Toph celebrated by kicking a rock into the air. “Yeah! We did it!”

“No we didn’t! Stop celebrating early!” Pinkie shouted, drawing her warhammer. “There’s more where that-”

Majora’s mask fell to the ground, landing right in the center of all of them. Its eyes glowed an intense color, filled with rage. But the mask was inert.

Pinkie narrowed her eyes. “I was sure there was more to this…”

Alushy kicked the mask, knocking it to the side. “There. Now I can say I punched out Cthulhu.”

“She’s not-“ Nova began.

“Sh sh sh... Let me have this.”

Melinda stood on top of the mask and grinned. “We’re victorious, friends! Let us seal this evil creature away forever!”

“My God, how much of a ham are you!?“ Alushy blurted.

“All the ham,” Pinkie said, grunting.

Discord walked up to Melinda. He looked down at the mask. “Huh. Is it supposed to be calling out to me?”

“Yeah, we’re all hearing that,” General Sunset said. “Just don’t put it on, we’ll toss it into a black hole and everything will be fine.”

Discord kicked the mask – and the moment he made contact he was tossed far away.

They could hear Majora laugh. “It’s not that hard to absorb chaos magic… Just need an unguarded touch…”

A spike of fleshy darkness shot out of the mask and right through Melinda’s midsection. She quickly teleported away but still passed out from the sudden intense pain.

Pinkie blinked. “Crud.”

The spike of flesh turned into a hand, and three other spikes shot out the back of the mask in quick succession. Soon, a lanky humanoid figure took shape, with Majora’s Mask as its chest. It laughed.

“Who wants to go first?”
Despite the Harmony of the Tree, almost everyone present was frozen in fear.

Everyone except one particular vampire pony.

“Hey. Majora. Sup.”

“Sup?” Majora said.

“Yeah. Sup. Name’s Alushy.” She flew into the air and bucked Majora in the place where her head should have been. “And now I’ve punched you in the face, officially, no take backs.”

Majora drove her hand straight through Alushy. She dissipated into a dark, loose form. “Nyah! Not even you eldritch gods can-“

Majora squeezed. Alushy yelled in pain as she was forced back to her solid form. “HOLY HELL THAT HURTS!”

Majora tossed her to the ground, stomping on her head and splattering it against the ground. She kept her foot planted, keeping Alushy from regenerating for the moment.

Toph snapped out of it next, tossing rocks, but this was just child’s play to Majora. Nova and Twilight fired as one, but their magic reflected right off her. Pinkie smashed the real warhammer down on her, but she was kicked to the side.

Siron pointed his staff at Majora. “You’re a traitor.”

“So are you.” Majora retorted. She snapped her fingers, breaking all four of Siron’s wrists. She just glared at him and he fell over.

Then she walked to the Tree of Harmony and Starswirl. “Taking your magic will be more difficult than that chaotic snake’s, but I’m more than willing to be patient.”

Starswirl narrowed his eyes. “You will not-“

Majora backhanded him away. She stroked the branches of the Tree, chuckling. “You know your little rainbows can’t purge me. But I wonder why you’re not even trying, great Castor…”

General Sunset’s mind suddenly started working. She had an idea. She teleported over to the form of Link. He was breathing, but clearly not getting up anytime soon. She was sure he wouldn’t mind what she was about to do, considering.

She levitated the Master Sword out of its sheath. It was the finest blade she had ever seen – sharper than any she had ever beheld, more intricately designed than most artworks, and the handle’s brilliant blue stood out like it was too pure to exist. On one side was an engraving of the Triforce, which seemed to have lost its power. But on the other, there was an imprint of an hourglass. And this part still held power, Sunset knew it.

She’d seen Link do it before, right? Just point the tip of the sword in front of you and trace out an hourglass shape. That was all it needed.

Majora drew her claw over a branch of the Tree of Harmony. “So delicious… So pure…“

Sunset lifted the master sword with her magic and traced out the hourglass shape.

Everything froze in a single instant. Nothing moved, not even Majora.
Sunset swore she could hear Pinkie scream to her. “Move already!”

Sunset teleported right behind the frozen Majora and cut her as many times in as many places with the Master Sword as she could manage in a blind frenzy. Arm, leg, chest, pelvis, chest again, hand, leg, other arm.

A handful of seconds later, time restarted. Around every cut, a burst of purple mist poured out of Majora. One of her arms fell to the ground.

Maora still managed to turn despite her severed hips. The front half of her body slid to the ground, but her hand was still outstretched. The eyes of the mask stared right into Sunset’s.

Sunset froze. She saw the hand reaching for her, but the gaze of the mask wouldn’t let her go. Majora knew she had lost. But she wouldn’t let the smallest victory escape.

“Sunset!” Toph yelled, throwing a volley of rocks. But it was too late – the fingers of Majora slid out, puncturing Sunset’s brain, heart, and horn. The fingers disintegrated the instant after they performed the vile act, once again leaving just Majora’s mask on the ground.

Twilight encased the mask in a magic box, then she ran to Sunset - but Toph got there first. She touched Sunset’s body and knew she those were no ordinary wounds Majora had inflicted. They had frozen Sunset’s body, turning it into a material that wasn’t quite flesh, but not quite rock.

Tears flowed from Toph’s eyes. “S… Sunset! Come on!” She laid her hands on her friend and leader for most of the last year. “You can’t just check out because your quest is over! Sunset! Sunset get up!” She extended a hand to her side. “Does anyone know any healing magic!?”

“I… Don’t think it would help,” Twilight said, leaning down. “Majora… She…” Twilight sat down and shook her head.

“She was a sore loser,” Alushy muttered, standing up.

Toph stood up, fists clenched hard enough to hurt. She raised a hand, kicking up a pillar of earth. The Master Sword flipped up, down, around, and into her hand. It was still covered in the strange juices of Majora.

Toph showed no signs of ever letting that sword go.

O’Neill and Cosmo teleported down.

“Did you do it?” O’Neill asked.

Twilight didn’t hear. Nova had to point O’Neill to the magic box. Cosmo sealed it up tighter in her own magic and took it.

“Who didn’t make it?” O’Neill asked.


O’Neill let out a sharp breath. “It always happens…” He grit his teeth. “I’m sorry.”

Toph pointed the Master Sword at him. “You’re sorry? Old man, what are you sorry for? Was the plan not good enough? Should she not have come? Should-“

O’Neill leaned down and put a hand on Toph’s shoulder. “Kid, listen to me. Listen close. You’re going to hurt for a long, long time, and it will never completely go away. Don’t remember her by
thinking, over and over again, how you could have done things differently. The ‘what if’ game never goes anywhere. Remember her by thinking what she’d want you to do, what you’re going to do with her legacy.”

Toph looked like she wanted to stab him, but ended up hugging him instead.

“I know. I know. It hurts…”

~~~

Sombra’s phone beeped. She looked at it. “Well, the bubble went down, and we’re not dead, so I think they won.”

Aang let out a sigh of relief. “That’s good…”

Corona started to stir.

Sombra blinked. “…Convenient timing.”

Corona opened her eyes. “…What?”

“The drugs wearing off just as we all realized we’re alive.”

“Oh,” Corona said, groggily trying to stand up. She realized she had a broken bone and fell to her other side, hissing at the pain.

“Yeah, we need to get you fixed up…” Aang said.

“I… Am so sorry. I know it wasn’t me, but…”

“Shh,” Sombra said, pressing Corona’s lips with her finger. “You were under the influence of an alien deity, and we all thought she couldn’t get in your head anymore. It’s okay.”

“I know. I still feel horrible.”

“That might just be the drugs.”

Corona snorted. “…Tempest? Mike? Ike?”

“They made it out alive,” Sombra said.

“Thank goodness… …Director Storm?”

“Here,” Storm said, limping through the hallway. “Broken, but fine.”

Sombra tensed.

“I’m not going to shoot you,” Storm muttered, sitting down in the rubble.

“I am getting out of here, though,” Sombra said. “Can’t be around when the nice guys show up and feel a need to capture me.”

“You earned your freedom this time. Take it,” Storm said.

Sombra bowed. “I’ll be in touch, Corona!” She vanished right before their eyes.

Corona nodded. “Yeah… touch… ugh…”
Aang laughed. “Wow. I need to get you some cactus juice. I bet you’ll be hilarious on it.”

“Shut up. Hey, Director, am I still fired?”

“Yes.”

“Figured I’d ask.” Corona was silent for a moment. “I’m going to be really upset about that after the drugs wear off, huh?”

“Yes.”

“Looking forward to that.”

There was silence for a little while.

“How much longer until the emergency rescue shows up?”

“No idea.”

Aang groaned. “Just… great.”

~~~

In a cell on a world where the Spectacularium ran free, a certain Applejack saw a familiar face.

“Ah thought you were never comin’ back,” Applejack called to Toph as she strolled closer to the cell. “Does Sunset know you’re here?”

“I just thought you’d like to know something,” Toph said, walking right up to the cell bars, Master Sword in hand.

“What?”

“Sunset’s dead.”

Applejack blinked. “…What?”

“She finished the quest. All of it. Sage Pinkie, Ba’al, Majora – everything. She delivered the final blow to a being who wanted to destroy everything. She saved us all. Even you.”

Applejack blinked.

“What’s the matter? Not as happy as you thought you’d be?”

“Buck off.”

“I’m NOT bucking off!” Toph screamed. “She was a great mare who sacrificed herself for us all and you hate her!”

“Bad ponies can do good things, kid,” Applejack said. “Just because you died right doesn’t mean you lived right.”

“Speaking from experience?”

“Yes,” Applejack said, turning away. “Now, leave. Thank you for telling me. I don’t want to see you again.”
Toph clutched her sword. Then she relaxed. “…I was expecting some kind of reaction. An admission of wrong, or a delighted smile that would give me an excuse to cut you in two. But… You just look lost.”

Applejack said nothing.

“…I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

Toph turned and walked away.

Applejack sighed. “I don’t even know what I’m looking for…”

~~~

Queen Luna led Nova and Pinkie into the secret chamber. “Here they are. The graves.”

Spectacular statues of three ponies stood in the chamber – a white marble Celestia, a rose quartz Pinkie Sage, and a sunstone General Sunset. Luna smiled. “I know General Sunset has an official grave out in the military yard but… I think she belonged here, with the others.”

“Thank you,” Nova said, tears coming to her eyes. “They… They needed this.”

The Queen nodded. “Apparently I have a habit of making graves I’m not supposed to. It won’t be much longer before I reveal this to everypony. Just a little longer.”

Pinkie nodded. “I know. …Can you give us a moment?”

The Queen teleported away without a word.

Nova and Pinkie stared at the two graves.

Pinkie sighed. “I knew the Sage was sacrificing herself. I knew it from the start. But Sunset? I…” she sniffed. “I didn’t see that coming.”

“I don’t think she did, either,” Nova said. “She just acted. To save us all.”

“She can’t be defined by just her last moment,” Pinkie said. “Come on, what else was she?”


“She knew how to lead. She knew how to leave a legacy. And she knew how to turn her life around,” Pinkie added. “She was a villain to us, at first. Then she was just misguided. Then she became the hero, then the savior.”

“Was she really any of those things?” Nova asked.

“I don’t think anybody’s truly those things. All of us fighting Majora, in that moment, we were heroes. But we’re not heroes right now. We’re just ponies. Crying ponies.” She hung her head, holding Nova close.

Nova didn’t feel the need to say anything in return.

~~~

Twilight looked at Link, Zelda, and Ganondorf. “I’m curious. What are you three going to do now?
All the Goddesses of your world are gone, the greatest power you had at your disposal was sacrificed, and now you’ve all got to go home.”

Ganondorf grunted. “Same as before. Lead my people to power.”

Zelda nodded. “The same.”

“Link?” Twilight asked. “And Midna, I guess.”

Link shrugged. “I don’t know. The Master Sword has chosen someone different for the first time in… the history of our world. Maybe it’s telling me that it’s time for the line of chosen heroes to come to an end. That I should settle down, stop all the adventuring.”

Midna rolled her eyes. “You always say that at the end of an epic quest, and you can never sit still for long.”

Link smirked. “I… Guess you’re right.”

“That’s why I think we spend maybe a week with Zelda then it’s off to the races again. And that’s where I’ll be, in your shadow, keeping you from doing something stupid.”

Link nodded. “Yeah, that is what you do.”

Twilight smiled. “Then… I wish you all luck. For better or worse, you are now free.”

The three of them bowed and left through the portal to their world.

Twilight didn’t know why, but she felt happy for them.

~~~

Renee looked up at Daniel. “You must be in a thinking mood.”

“Hrm?”

“They brought you something made almost entirely out of avocados. You must want to think. I know you aren’t a huge fan of them otherwise.”

Daniel smirked. “Ah, you’re right there. I am thinking.”

“Penny for your thoughts?”

“…I was thinking about how Majora managed to get as far as she did. She exploited our desire to keep secrets.”

“How so?”

“In the case of Earth Vitis, she built nodes at the magical locations kept secret by the government, and used Ba’al to ensure the government didn’t complain by taking over the minds of key figures. And in the case of the Binaries she had the nodes built with smuggled magic artifacts, each in different areas of the planet so the Binaries couldn’t organize to figure out what they were. She used our systems of government against us. I have no doubt she could have done the same on Earth Tau’ri with a bit more effort.”

“So… What, secrets are bad?”
Daniel nodded. “I’ve been talking to Jack and the rest of my government about disclosing the stargate program to the public for some time now. I’m thinking of turning it into a large announcement, and encouraging all of our allies to do the same. It’ll be like a multiversal disclosure day.”

“That sounds like a nightmare to get everyone to agree on, darling.”

Daniel smirked. “That’s the fun part. But I think it’d be good for everyone, even with the difficulties it brings up. It’ll allow our worlds to become even closer than they are. And since Majora’s gone and Ba’al has been thoroughly decimated, I think the time to think about it is quickly approaching.”

Renee smirked. “You’re crazy, but right. You know that?”

“Yes. Yes I do. You should eat your mushroom stew, looks like it’s getting cold.”

“I wonder what mushroom stew says about my mood…” Renee pondered.

“…That you were in the mood for something thick and creamy?”

Renee rolled her eyes. “I meant about my psychological state.”

“Hey, sometimes, it’s just food, Renee.”

~~~

O’Neill and the Happy Mask Salesman stood on the front-most point of the Apollo, both in full spacesuit.

In front of them was a circle of blackness that bent the light of all stars around it into an eerie, distorted halo.

O’Neill turned to the Happy Mask Salesman. “Ready to end this?”

The Happy Mask Salesman took Majora’s Mask out of its black box and held it in his hands. He could feel it reach out to his mind, but fail miserably to do anything to him, as always. He smiled. “You know, it almost feels sad, to finally close the book on this purpose in my life.”

“I can throw it in if you’re having second thoughts.”

The Happy Mask Salesman laughed his creepy laugh, sending shivers up O’Neill’s spine. “Oh, I’m throwing it. If I didn’t get the honor, I’d be very upset.” Seemingly without motion, suddenly his hand was outstretched and the mask was flying toward the black hole.

It turned to face O’Neill directly, one last time.

“*I WILL HAUNT YOU FOREVER.*”

O’Neill whistled. “Yeah, I believe you on that one. Now enjoy your existence in a place that’s just as impossible to wrap my head around as you are. Toodeloo.”

Majora said nothing further as she tumbled towards the event horizon.

O’Neill and the Happy Mask Salesman watched the mask shift to a red color and eventually vanish from their sight completely.

Majora was forever trapped within the cosmic vacuum of the universe.
O’Neill stretched his arms. “Well, ready to go back inside? I can get us a drink. I can tell we’ll need it.”

The Happy Mask Salesman nodded wordlessly.

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[END OF ARC 2]
Life endures.

Once, the entire town of Termina was the scene of a grand battle between Elemental and Ba’al forces. Otherworldly allies fought against powerful aliens, and in the end the aliens were driven away. There were celebrations that day all across the worlds.

But the town of Termina lost in a more fundamental way than Ba’al had. Their town was beyond repair. Their ancient Clock Tower was destroyed, their farms were razed, and their leadership had been brutally murdered. While the rest of the world rejoiced, the people of Termina needed to find a new home. Termina was left in ruins.

However, a few stubborn individuals were determined to stay. They tilled the land, they cleared the debris, and they fought the beasts of the wilderness. It was a hard life, but the humans put their unwavering willpower to good use, and the other races provided what they could. They got by.

Eventually, Link returned from his adventures across the multiverse. He made himself the protector of Termina, organizing whatever he could to rebuild the town. Those who had struggled received relief through him.

In the end, Termina was no more. But New Termina rose in its place. It was a bright light in the darkness that had attacked them, a reminder that even when crushed, people would rise up.

That life would endure.

Today, roughly three years since Termina’s destruction in the invasion, there were almost no signs of the destruction and death the town had experienced. There may not have been a Clock Tower, but in the end, nobody needed a defining landmark. They just needed homes, shops, and a city hall. The people were happy.

Near the edge of town there was a small restaurant that was all about exotic Ardent salads. Since it was between the breakfast and lunch rush, there were only two patrons dining – Renee and Daniel. They were currently sharing the house special Giant Platter filled with every piece of edible greenery Daniel could think of – and some he couldn’t.

He picked up something that looked like it might have been a flower. He took a bite, surprised by its honey-esque taste. “Absolutely amazing. One of the best things about the multiverse, all the new unusual foods.”

“Until you get stomach poisoning from something you can’t eat,” Renee shivered. “Never order anything a dragon eats.”

“That seems like it would be obvious.”

Renee flushed. “Well – I wasn’t speaking from experience.”

“Never implied that you were.”
Renee rolled her eyes and grumpily munched on a giant piece of lettuce.

Daniel shrugged and leaned back. “So, today’s the day. Excited?”

Renee’s left eye twitched. “Darling, I feel like there’s a million things we’ve forgotten and that I should really be back helping all the others deal with the chaos that is about to ensue. But no, you insisted I needed to take a moment to breathe. So, excited? Yes. Stressed out through the proverbial roof? Also yes!”

Daniel nodded. “Same. I… I can just see this going wrong in so many ways.”

“Well, yes, you can’t really judge the collective reaction of billions of people,” Renee said. “But we also can’t really keep lying to them.”

“You were never lying.”

Renee raised an eyebrow. “Well I have to be turned into a human whenever I go to your world, don’t I? I also have to avoid talking about where I’m from around here. Maybe I never lie directly, but Daniel, I’ve definitely had to engage in deception.”

“You and I both know you enjoy a little bit of deception in your life.”

Renee bit her lip. “…You have me pegged. It is a bit exhilarating at times… But the people need to know. Which is why we’re doing this.”

“Two years in the making…”

“Longer, you were plotting before you brought me in.”

Daniel chuckled. “Plotting?”

“Yes. Plotting.”

“Isn’t plotting a little, you know, evil?”

“I know the plotting face, my sister has it all the time. It was definitely plotting you were doing. You can be plotting a good thing and still go about it in a nefarious manner.”

“…Right.”

“And you know it.”

The front doors to the shop opened, letting two new patrons into the restaurant: Link and the redhead Romani. Renee knew Midna was in Link’s shadow, but the Twili wasn’t making herself known.

Renee smiled. “Ah, Romani, dear! How’s it been? I haven’t seen you since… Well, since the wedding. That was four months for me, you?”

“Five,” Romani said, shrugging, taking a seat with Link on the table closest to Renee’s. “Of course, I time my life around how many milking days have passed, so it might be a little off.”

“Been a little less than five for me,” Daniel said. “You have to just love time dilation.”

“Not our problem anymore,” Link said, putting his boots up on the table. “Our problems are all about the farm now. The most excitement we get is making sure the cows don’t get abducted by aliens.”
“It still baffles me that your universe not only has aliens, but they only care about abducting cows,” Daniel commented. “Also, I thought you got Equis Cosmic to take care of them?”

Link shrugged. “They showed up a month ago, so they’re still around. I’ve still got my bow though, so it’s easy enough to take care of them.”

“A true mystery…” Renee said, putting a hoof to her chin. “That I really don’t have time to get into right now.”

“Is today the… day?” Romani asked.

“Disclosure,” Daniel confirmed. “The secret’s almost out. It’s not too late for your people to join us. Renee and I have plans drafted up for your political climate that could be initiated if you change your mind.”

Link shrugged. “As I said, not my problem. Zelda and her father decided to keep you all a secret, and I defer to them.”

“Your choice,” Renee said. “Still would prefer if you joined us.”

“The farm’s always open to you,” Link said. He took a moment to tell the waiter what salad he and Romani wanted.

“We know,” Renee responded. “It’s just… I don’t know. This world is so beautiful and we don’t really get to see it. Link, you told many stories of vast, distant lands. So many of us want to go explore those, but it’s just a hassle to do so. We have to take precautions coming here. Can’t see the rest of your world’s beauty from this town…”

Romani smirked. “There’ll be some new beauty at the farm rather soon.”

Renee raised an eyebrow, glancing at Romani’s stomach. There was the slightest of bulges. She blinked. “Well then… Congratulations! How far along are you?”

“Little over four months.” She beamed. “Probably going to be the first child born in the completely New Termina.”

Daniel smirked. “Lucky timing. Almost like you planned it this way.”

Romani rolled her eyes. “Romance was in the air. Isn’t that right, Link?”

Link smiled warmly. “It was in the air on that day more than any other day.”

Renee squished her cheeks together. “You two are just so cute!”

Midna’s voice piped from the shadow. “Aw, you and Daniel are too!”

Renee flushed. “M-midna! We are just-“

“On a date!”

Renee twitched. “Link, do you by chance have a way to strangle your little imp while she’s in your shadow?”

Link shrugged. “Yes.”

“Care to elaborate?”
“No.”

Renee fumed; ready to unleash a spell on the shadow Midna was hiding in. Daniel put a hand on her shoulder. “You’re just giving her what she wants, Renee.”

Renee twitched, sitting back down. She elegantly tossed her mane back and adjusted her hat. “Right, of course. I think we need to be going anyway, they’re probably wondering why we aren’t ready. I can already imagine Twilight having a freak out, looking under every cabinet like we’re loose change.”

Daniel nodded. “It was nice seeing you two.”

Romani waved. “I hope it all goes well!”

Renee twitched. “Yes. Hope. Eheheheh…”

“Renee, calm,” Daniel said. “It’s mostly out of our hands anyway.”

Renee nodded wordlessly. The two left the restaurant just as Link and Romani were served.

~~~

In the royal courtyard of Lai, there was a tense confrontation underway.

“I am Flame Majesty – and you can do nothing to stop me, pathetic whelps!” The bombastic voice came from a tall, muscular pony with features of every race on Lai except the ocular eyes. His horn was sharp, his antlers reminiscent of a moose, his fins and wings spread to make him look threatening, his tail ending with a dragon-like mouth, his mane and tail made of literal fire. Quite an overload of features to take in, visually speaking.

Lady Rarity hefted her hammer and raised an eyebrow. “Care to explain exactly what you’re trying to do?”

“Why, shouldn’t it be obvious!?” He laughed madly. “I am a full feature! Queen Luna has become soft, so clearly I must take the throne! You stand in my way of challenging her, so prepare to be-“

“You’re missing the eyes,” Lieshy pointed out. “Shortsighted, with a pencil.”

“…What?”

Vivian pointed at Flame. “She’s just saying you don’t have the ocular eyes. So, technically, not a full alicorn.”

“Which means you have no right to challenge the Queen,” Lady Rarity asserted. “The ponies will never view you as legitimate, even if you bested her.”

“Who needs those stupid eyes? They don’t really do anything! They-“

Suddenly, Toph was standing in front of her three friends. She was well into her teens now with a taller stature and a curved body; calling her a child would hardly be appropriate anymore. The Master Sword hung from her hand and blood dripped off the blade onto the ground. Flame Majesty’s left wing fell off.

He stared at it and blinked. “…How…?”

Toph cocked her head. “How are you not screaming in agony?”
“I don’t know…”

“Shock,” Lady Rarity said. “Let me knock it out of him,”

“Wait wha-“

Her warhammer made direct contact with Flame Majesty’s face, twisting his entire body to the side. Blood squirted out of his wing-stump, kicking his nervous system into overdrive. He did start screaming, flailing randomly on the ground. He fired off a few bolts of fire in random directions.

Toph raised an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

Lieshy shrugged her wings. “He does seem rather… pathetic to actually be a threat. Bit of a wild boar.”

Toph rammed her foot into the ground and lifted the Master Sword high. Rocks rose around Flame Majesty’s body, sealing him into the ground.

“…That was too easy.” Lieshy said.

Vivian put her hands to her face. “Uh oh…”

“There’s no such thing as jinxing, Vivi-“

Flame Majesty used his antlers to connect to the earth around him, throwing it off his body. “I am not to be made a fool by the likes of you!” He lifted his antlers and horn, lighting the entire garden on fire.

Vivian pressed her hands together and chanted a brief spell. Then she pointed her finger at Flame Majesty, summoning all the fire he just unleashed back into his face. He didn’t burn, but the impact did send him back. Lady Rarity hit the other side of his face, while Toph threw a boulder at his side.

He got up again. “You… mysterious ponies have some fight in you, but I won’t let it-“

Toph was suddenly on the other side of the room, holding his other wing. She raised an eyebrow. “I could have killed you, you know.”

Flame Majesty stared at his other stump. “…You bitch!”

“And the childish waterfall erupts,” Lieshy deadpanned.

“What?”

Lady Rarity hit him across the face again. “Just give up, Flame.”

“You’re not even landing any hits!” Vivian said, snapping her fingers. A spark of fire lit in front of Flame’s eyes, blinding him temporarily.

“I WILL NOT BE MADE A FOOL OF!”

“Far too late for that,” Lieshy muttered.

Toph encased him in a pile of rocks and Lady Rarity encased that in a magical bubble. Vivian lit the whole thing on fire just for added effect.

With a roar of rage, Flame Majesty destroyed the entire magical prison. “You cannot keep me! I will
“Are about to pass out from blood loss and head trauma,” Lieshy said.

That’s exactly what happened. The alicorn wannabe slumped to the ground, tongue out.

Toph threw his wing back on top of him. “Wonder if the surgeons can reattach that.”

“Maybe?” Lady Rarity said. “It really doesn’t matter. He’ll spend his life behind bars for threatening the Queen directly without cause.”

Queen Luna teleported into their midst. “Good show, you four. I knew I could count on you to take care of it quickly.”

“You could have done it,” Lieshy pointed out.

“It would have validated him,” the Queen said, teleporting his unconscious form to the dungeons. “He would have fallen easily, but if anypony ever caught wind, well, there’d be more of a political fallout than there’s already about to be.”

Lady Rarity nodded. “The ponies aren’t going to be happy soon.”

Lieshy shrugged. “It’ll explain a lot of the weird things they’ve been experiencing. Some peace of mind.”

“And hatred of change,” Lady Rarity said. “Even Sunset, a good pony, never got past the Arcei stigma. We hate change, or anything that challenges our worldview.”

Toph sheathed the Master Sword. “Tough luck, they’ll just have to deal with it.”

Queen Luna smirked. “To be honest, I’m actually looking forward to their reactions. Good or bad, it’ll be interesting.”

Lieshy looked up at her. “You sure you know what to tell them?”

“Nope! I’ll just talk, like I always do. They always think it sounds profound, even that one time I was outlining what to do about an upcoming festival. I completely botched that and they lauded me for it.”

“Your confidence is too high.”

“Maybe,” Queen Luna said. “But you’ll be there, as examples as well as backup.”

Toph stood alert. “You’re not going to ask us to say anything, are you?”

“…Probably not?”

“Sometimes I wonder why you’re in charge here.”

Queen Luna smirked. “Sometimes, I wonder that as well, Toph Beifong. Believe it or not, I am aware that I’m rather clueless at times. Maybe it would be better if someone with a stronger hoof took the crown from me. But, for now, we have no real enemies and the world is happy. We’ll see how that changes, or if I can count on the ponies to keep things as status quo as possible.”

“Won’t take long to figure that out,” Lady Rarity said. “I admit that I am curious as well.”
“Are we going to reveal why Sunset has a memorial in town square?” Vivian asked.

“No,” Queen Luna said, sighing. “I may be clueless, but I’m not stupid. If we tell them about Majora… Panic.”

“The less they know about how much death is out there, the better,” Lieshy asserted. “Ponies don’t handle the possibility of imminent death very well.”

Toph twirled the Master Sword. “I’m sure we can prove ourselves to be good allies.”

“Proof often means nothing,” Lieshy retorted.

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Corona levitated the blowtorch closer to her face and pulled down her welding mask. She positioned two pieces of metal by the blowtorch’s flame and moved them across, slowly, fusing them together with a filler rod. It was so much easier when she didn’t have to bother using hands. She could rotate the pieces to be welded easily enough to come in at any angle she desired.

“I still think that’s cheating,” Sugarcoat said from her chair near the stairwell.

Corona smirked, turning the blowtorch off. “Say what? Didn’t catch that.”

“I said I still think that’s cheating.”

“Maybe. But the less time I spend on basic college assignments like this, the more time I get to work on important things.”

“Doing basic college assignments is all you have a societal obligation to do at the moment.”

“Pshaw, I can work on this!” She tossed the carefully welded metal chunks away, bringing up a much more intricate device from under the worktable that resembled a coconut covered in hundreds of wires and lights. She turned on a nearby monitor so it could show her the source material for the finished product, composed mostly of images of Rick working in a Hub lab.

“You know, Twilight wasn’t working on that for a reason.”

“Like you tell me every day,” Corona said, examining the image closely, checking for more wires and comparing it with her drawn blueprint. “I just feel the need to work on what she’s not, you know? I don’t think she’ll be mad.”

“It’s not like you stole it from her or something with help from a high profile criminal.”

“Hey, Twilight knows about Sombra. She’s cool with it.” Corona plugged in a few wires.

“Sparky isn’t.”

Corona bit her lip. “Well, yeah, that’s why Sparky doesn’t know where all of this came from…”

“You just keep digging yourself deeper and deeper into a hole and you know it.”

Corona sighed. “Look, if it makes you feel better, I’ll tell her where these blueprints came from and suffer the wrath of a ‘good citizen’. Okay?”

Sugarcoat raised an eyebrow. “You’re the one bothered by this. Did I say I had any problems? No. I was just doing what I normally do.”
“Which is…?”

“Speak without any trace of tact whatsoever.”

“At least you’re aware of that…”

“Something you are already painfully aware of. It’s amazing how many of our conversations are truly pointless.”

Corona rolled her eyes. “Sugarcoat… Never change.”

“The likelihood of me never changing at all is nil.”

“You know what I mean.”

Sugarcoat let a smile crawl onto her face. “Since when did that matter?”

Corona facehooved. “You’d think I’d know you by now.”

“You secretly enjoy being baffled and thrown around like a ragdoll. You think it gets you into a better mindset.”

“And there goes the psychoanalysis,” Corona said, shaving some of the coating off a nearby wire. “What else do you creepily ‘know’ about me?”

“You’re once again wondering what you’re going to do with your life. You’re starting your last semester of college, about to get your degree. You’re just not thinking about it.”

“WRONG!” Corona laughed. “I’ve been accepted to an Equis Cosmic program for furthering my education.”

“And after that you’ll know everything conceivably possibly about physics. Then what?”

“Can’t even revel in the small victories,” Corona shook her head. “I don’t know. Adventure again?”

“AID won’t take you on again.”

“Twilight will.”

“With the security risk you pose?”

Corona stopped working. “…Twilight doesn’t care as much about secrets.”

“There are definitely some things she’ll want to keep secret, and those are the things Sombra will want to know.”

“I’ll figure that out when I get to that point.”

“Sure you will.”

A portal opened up next to Corona. Alushy walked out of it, depositing a bag of rare mechanical pieces on Corona’s worktable. “You don’t want to know what I had to do to get these.”

“Did you kill someone again!?” Corona exclaimed. “Alushy!”

“No, believe it or not, but you still don’t want to know.”
Sugarcoat blinked. “What could she possibly be upset at if you didn’t kill anyone?”

Alushy snorted. “Imagine, for a moment, if you will, me using my powers of seduction on an entire troop of—”

Sugarcoat and Corona held up a hand at the same time.

“Told you,” Alushy said, smirking. “You got this thing working yet?”

Corona shook her head. “Not even close. I can’t simulate the portal fluid, and I know if it’s even slightly off things go horribly wrong.”

“Remind me why I’m helping a hopeless science project.”

“Because you felt the need to work on something beyond slaughtering hordes of evil because lately that’s been feeling inadequate,” Sugarcoat said. “Also you just like the idea of working on something the authority rejected.”

“Have I ever told you how much I like you?”

“Yes. However, unlike that troop of unidentified individuals, your powers of seduction are powerless against my assault of deadpan remarks.”

“Yeesh. You must have all the guys fighting over you.”

“She’s actually dating Micro Chips,” Corona said, turning the unfinished project over and over in her telekinesis. “He comes down here to help, sometimes.”

“How many people know about this ‘secret’ project?” Alushy asked.

“Let’s see… you, me, Sugarcoat, Micro, Sombra, probably Storm since I know he’s watching me, and… Sparky. Though she doesn’t know where I got the designs.”

“Something, something, you’re becoming a regular criminal, cutting remark, laugh.”

Corona grunted. “Please, it’s not like I’m doing anything illegal.”

“You survive on technicalities,” Sugarcoat added.

“Oh wow, looks like today is ‘assault Corona’s confidence’ day!”


“Very funny,” Corona muttered. She put the device back under the workbench. “Now, I’m going to sta—”

The doorbell rang. Corona reacted quickly, grabbing a robe off a nearby wall hook. She clicked a small, silver bracelet on her front leg. The bracelet, crafted by Twilight over a year ago, flooded her body with magic and transformed her into her human form. She slid the robe on and jogged up the stairs.

“Nice bod’!” Alushy yelled after her.

“Why would you care, you’re a pony,” Sugarcoat commented.

“Why do you not?”
“I’m a decent human being.”

Corona rolled her eyes at the absurd conversation occurring in her basement. She marched up to the ground floor of her house, a lovely place purchased with the fat paycheck she’d received after she’d left the AID. Apparently she just hadn’t been allowed to use the funds publicly while she was employed. Silver lining to being fired, she supposed.

She opened the front door; glad to see a familiar face. “Hey, Sparky!”

Sparky – the human once known as Twilight - looked at the robe Corona was wearing. “Am I coming at a bad time?”

“Sparky, you know I spend my time in my house as a unicorn. This is just the easiest thing to throw on.”

“Oh. Right.”

“Come on in,” Corona invited, gesturing into her home. “Sugarcoat’s in the basement arguing with Alushy.”

“Oh. Her. Do you have any… other unsavory company?”

Corona narrowed her eyes. “Sparky, they’re friends.”

Sparky shrugged, clearly not in the mood to have this conversation again. “Just… I needed to talk to you about your plans. Everyone’s ready for tomorrow. I just want to be sure that you’re really going through with it.”

Corona walked into another room and shut the door so she could change out of sight of Sparky. It wasn’t that Corona minded, but Sparky did. She came back out, a unicorn, lips pursed. “Yeah, pretty sure I’m not making any last-minute changes. Unless the entire world lights on fire after Disclosure. There’s always that chance.”

“Y-yeah…” Sparky wrung her hands. “I hope they know what they’re doing…”

“There’s only so much they can predict and know,” Corona said. “People are random. The people of five different worlds are even more random.”

“I don’t like not knowing if my world will be intact next week. I’d like to have some certainty about the fate of me and my family, Corona. Some!”

“Sorry, it just can’t always be quantified,” Corona said. “I’m pretty sure you’ll be able to complete college, at least.”

“A lot can change in two years!”

Corona nodded slowly. “Yeah. You just have to be prepared.”

“How am I supposed to prepare for variables I can’t quantify!?”

Alushy laughed from the basement. “Do I hear the nerdy bitch panicking about the completely normal uncertainty in life?”

“Yes you do!” Corona called down. “And that’s a perfectly normal response to the completely normal uncertainty!”
“…Am I the ‘nerdy bitch’ now?” Sparky said, taking a step back.

Corona sighed. “No, Sparky, no… When you’re talking with Alushy you just have to take some things in stride, okay? If I spend time correcting her language, it’d miss the entire point of what I was trying to say.”

Sparky took in a deep breath. “I… I can’t deal with her, Corona. And I can’t see how you can. How you can deal with all those… people you call friends.”

Corona smiled sadly. “I know. But we’re friends. We don’t have to approve of each other’s friends.”

“I know. It’s just… hard to stomach, sometimes.”

“Hey, I’m not asking you to interact with her,” Corona said. “Not asking you to like her either. Nor Sombra. Nor did I ask you to like Tempest, Mike, Ike, or Storm. Or even Iroh, but I know you like Iroh.”

“Everybody and their mother likes Iroh!” Sugarcoat called.

“Not helping, Sugarcoat!”

“We just had the discussion about that not being a criteria of my function.”

Corona’s eye twitched. “I’m surrounded by…”

“Friends,” Sparky said, folding her arms.

Corona rubbed the back of her head. “Er… Yeah!”

Sparky nodded, forcing a smile. “I should probably go.”

“…If that’s what you want.”

She waved. “See you tomorrow.”

“Yeah.”

Alushy called up from the basement as she walked out the door. “Yeah! You better run, bitch! Flee from personality confrontation! I’m just insufferable!”

Corona teleported down to the basement and shot Alushy a death glare. “Do you have to be such a jerk all the time?”

“Please, Corona, call me what I am. Fudgemothering asshole shitty vampire.”

“Look at the creative use of swears alongside boring, regular syntax,” Sugarcoat deadpanned. “You do realize it’d be more interesting if you could get the point across without the swears. It’d speak more to your creativity.”

“Fudge you.”

“Score. Sugarcoat, one. Alushy, zero.”

Corona grabbed the bridge of her nose. “Alushy, I’m talking about your antagonism. How do you expect to make friends like that? How do you expect to stay on anyone’s good side.”
“I don’t!” Alushy laughed. “I’m a free spirit. If you don’t take me as I am, your loss.”

“To those who thought Trixie had a big ego, take a five-second look at Alushy to discover what true ego is,” Sugarcoat said.

Corona shook her head. “You know, I wonder if Sparky has a point about you, Alushy…”

“She probably does!” Alushy grinned. “But I’m just too damn attractive to you. You can’t—”

Corona levitated a boot and threw it into Alushy’s head. “You’re so unpleasant sometimes…”

“And I’ll always be that way, baby! How’s about a date? I can bring everything worthy of attention to the party and you can bring the fiery ‘I don’t really like you or anything, you insufferable horse’s ass!’ to the table!”

Corona twitched. “You are not helping your case.”

“Corona,” Sugarcoat said. “Consider investing in the ability to learn from recent conversations.”

“You can stuff a sock in it.”

“Can, yes. Will, no.”

Corona rammed her head into the workbench and let out an agonized groan.

“Ha! Broke her.” Alushy raised a hoof in Sugarcoat’s direction. She made no move to meet it. “Oh come on, don’t leave me hanging!”

“You are an insufferable dolt who was needlessly cruel and antagonistic. Why wouldn’t I leave you hanging?”

“Ouch. Burn.”

“Just a statement of fact.”

Alushy shrugged. “Fine, I can tell when I’m not wanted. Off to the races I go!” She ripped a portal to another universe and stepped through.

Sugarcoat stood up from her chair when she was done and walked over to Corona. “Hey, Corona. It’s going to be okay.”

Corona moaned like a depressed puppy.

Sugarcoat put a hand on her back. “Corona. It’s a testament to you that you can put up with her at all. Maybe you can change her, like you’re changing Sombra.”

“Sometimes I feel like I’m making deals with the devil here…”

“Oh, you are.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

Sugarcoat patted Corona gently. “It is a vote of confidence. I think you can get through this. You’re the strongest, most determined person I know. Don’t sell yourself too short.”

“…Thanks, Sugarcoat.”
“Don’t mention it.”

~~~

The endurance of life is not always a pretty picture.

Take the remaining Binary world as an example. During the release of Majora, she specifically sent a corrupting influence of magic directly to the other world, just because it was nearby. The world was not destroyed, but it was irrecoverably corrupted. The other half of Binary society collapsed, a mockery of their supposed preparedness.

The cities of the world were ruins, the land was covered in dark monstrous magics, and unfathomable beasts prowled the world. It was the blemish in the multiverse that Majora had left behind to ensure she would not be forgotten. The world was a hellscape where only the most stubborn tried to live.

Which was to say it was a perfect place for Siron to take an interest in.

Currently, he was standing on a floating disc-shaped building, far from the purple ground below. He had gone down to the surface before, dealt with the horrendous beasts, but even he had to admit he couldn’t forge a permanent settlement in such horrid conditions. He couldn’t imagine how the remaining Binaries kept it up.

He didn’t care all that much, though. They were weak, they had been exploited, and they had fallen to a stronger foe. They deserved the loss of their entire civilization. And then Majora… For the being of chaos, he could only feel respect. She tricked the Binaries, the multiverse, even him. He didn’t even know he was being played…

But she was only one being. She proved herself to be formidable, but not worthy of her rampage. He was thankful for her existence, and even her manipulations, because the aftermath…

Well, the aftermath he was standing over he could use. She used him, now he used her. It was perfect – poetic.

“Siron?” Mistress Luna said, walking up to his side. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking of this world,” Siron said, pointing his staff at a triple-headed elephant covered in fangs on every square inch of its body. “I’m thinking of how its magic is inexplicably suited to mine.” The green-red energy of his staff enveloped the elephant-creature. It turned to other members of its herd and started trampling them. “I’m seeing power.”

“For what, though?” Luna asked.

“My – our – race. We deserve much more than we have been given on this platter that is existence itself. But time and time again we are foiled by things beyond our control. The Moon Spirit was destroyed, our allies don’t recognize strength, Majora…” He clutched his fist harder around the staff. “We aren’t at the bottom anymore – those Binaries below us have that honor – but what say do we have?”

“You were one of the heroes who faced Majora, Siron. You’re a celebrated hero.”

“That only lasted so long, Mistress… They know who I am, but the popularity fades. They always want new, new, new.”

“So, what are you going to do about it?”
Siron used his magic to connect to the corruption below. “Use this place to elevate us. This… den of darkness. It will be our light.”

Luna smiled. “I suppose I can get behind that.”

“Good. It will be long, hard, and more than a little bloody. This place is brutal. But there is structure here we can use, where others abandon.” He looked to the sky. “I’m going to ask for Fef’s release.”

“What?”

“I need a strong, capable, adaptive warrior at my side, and Anix is gone. She may have betrayed the others to Ba’al and Majora, but she didn’t betray us. Her people come first.”

Luna raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

_I know her loyalties lie with me._ “Yes. I am certain.”

“Toph and her party will be livid, Siron.”

“They don’t need to know. She won’t need to leave this world. It’s not like you can just portal to here easily, you need a ship. And nobody has any reason to come here, except us. Everyone else just wants to leave.”

The third passenger of the disc grunted. The two turned to see their momentary ally, the Gerudo Ganondorf. “You have arrogance, Siron.”

“Arrogance is a consequence of strength.”

“True. That doesn’t mean it itself is a strength.”

Siron folded both sets of his arms. “You’re one to talk.”

“It would be wise not to underestimate the tendency those who call themselves ‘heroes’ have to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Lyna raised an eyebrow. “…What does that have to do with anything?”

“More than you know,” Ganondorf said, looking down at the world below. “This is an age of darkness we observe. They just ask for ‘heroes’ to tame them.”

“Wouldn’t that be us?”

Ganondorf smirked. “Your innocence is, in a way, beautiful. But in this world, I think you will soon open your eyes to the way of things.”

Siron chuckled. “Mistress Luna, he is right. In some ways, you are naïve. Reserved. I am not convinced this world will change you, considering your ancient mind.”

Luna pursed her lips. “Well then we’ll just have to see, won’t we?”

~~~

Equis Cosmic had no planet where all the other major worlds were. When one opened a direct portal to the universe, they found nothing but empty space and rapid decompression. Portable dimensional devices didn’t allow direct connections to the world under normal circumstances. So far, everyone had managed to avoid a tragedy.
Admittedly, the area wasn’t completely empty any longer. While there was no full sized planet there, a large space station had been built - a shipyard placed specifically for interdimensional ships. The station was composed of dozens of very long and narrow rods, between which were areas that held ships in various states of construction; ranging from a basic wireframe construction to nearly complete.

Most of the ships were clearly of the smooth, nature-inspired design indicative of Equis Cosmic, but there were two that did not follow this pattern. One appeared as a larger version of the Apollo, except with a double-layered body in the center that had a total of six docking bays; three on each side, arranged in a triangle pattern. Unlike the Apollo, it had a threatening glowing cylinder of many colors embedded in its very top.

O’Neill stood on the bridge of this ship, smirking as he looked out the front window. “This has been a long held dream of mine…” he said, gesturing at the bridge in front of him.

Cosmo raised an eyebrow. “…You wanted a really large ship built to your designs with help from magical ponies?”

“What? No! Really, we could have built this thing ourselves given enough time – well most of it anyway. I’m talking about naming a ship the Enterprise. They just wouldn’t let me do it. Well, now they don’t get a say in the matter.” He put his hands on his hips. “The Enterprise. It feels so good to say that.”

“What does that name mean to you?”

“It’s from a historic TV show.”

Cosmo raised an eyebrow. “Something tells me that you’re being a little silly.”

O’Neill chuckled. “Sometimes the best thing is a little silly.”

“I’m not saying it was a bad decision.”

“Rousing endorsement,” O’Neill deadpanned.

Cosmo chuckled. “It sounds impressive and powerful.”

O’Neill leaned back. “So, what do we owe you?”

“Use of the ship and political favors,” Cosmo said. “Nothing specific, though you knew this.”

“Have to make sure you’re not trying to pull a fast one.”

“Me? Pull a fast one? You wound me.”

The Starlight AI popped in. “You never pulling a fast one? That’s a laugh.”

“I don’t do that to my friends, Sta-“

“21/11/3092. The individual in question was your great grandniece, Acorna Sparkle, and-“

“That was centuries ago!”

“8/2/3432. Only a couple years ago. You fooled me into flooding myself with a cat meme virus.”

O’Neill stifled a chuckle. “Like two little sisters.”
Cosmo smirked. “Not the worst thing we’ve been called.”

“I’ve been called a ‘built-in lover.’ Which is just disgusting,” the AI said.

O’Neill shrugged. “I wouldn’t judge.”

“Why did you tell him that?” Cosmo asked.

“Momentary lapse in judgement,” the AI responded.

“You can process things thousands of times faster than us.”

“End of line.”

“Oh no you don’t.”

There was no response from the AI. Cosmo rolled her eyes. “Looks like she’s ducked out of the conversation.”

“Wish I could do that sometimes,” O’Neill commented.

“Doesn’t everyone?” She turned to look at one of the screens with a ship schematic on it. “Is the Harmony Core functioning?”

“They tell me that the miniature star works like a charm,” O’Neill answered. “Carter’s giddy. It’ll be able to take us back to the west, apparently. Not that we really need it over there.”

“I’m glad you like. Those things aren’t easy to make.”

“How are they made?”

“Me,” Cosmo said, tapping her chest. “It takes part of the Harmony Essence and infuses it into a complex crystal matrix. You’ve basically got a Tree of Harmony seed sitting in your engineering.”

“Wait, hold it, will that thing actually grow into a tree?”

“It’ll start sprouting in a few thousand years. By then, something tells me we’ll have better methods of power. Just don’t become evil or un-harmonious. The Harmony Core is able to sense that and will start acting up.”

“What if we’re in a war?”

“Don’t rely on the Harmony Core’s power, simple,” Cosmo said. “You should only need it to make tremendous jumps across the multiverse anyway. Even the magic weapons are designed to operate off regular electricity, as per your design requests.”

“Our engineers were that demanding?”

“They’re the ones who figured out how to get it to work. The main Spectral Tube is almost entirely their design, though I had to ensure the spells would work. I hope you have someone who knows how to code thaums. That tube really isn’t worth it if you don’t know how to build spells on the spot.”

“Mauve?”

“He’s… learning.”
“Will that be enough?”

Cosmo shrugged. “To shoot a laser or release an explosion? Yes. To specifically disable an enemy ship’s shield system using a teleport bypass? No.”

“So I have a big honkin’ space gun that none of my crew knows how to use. Great. Care to lend someone?”

“It’d have to be temporary, since combat specialists are rather hard to come by. We rarely have reason to shoot at anything.”

“Lucky.” O’Neill sat back in his big chair. Through the window, he noticed a unique chrome ship in the nearby bay. It was composed of two sections: an ovoid top devoid of features above a boat-like bottom, complete with a figurehead of an unidentifiable alicorn. It was as if a boat was using a metal balloon like a sail, except the masts were numerous beams of white magic. “How’s the ponies’ ship doing?”

“Well. They decided to rely almost entirely on magic for theirs,” Cosmo said. “I think the only purely technological thing in there is the hyperdrive, and it’s powered by magic. The top part holds all the complex spells, machinery, and most of the weapons, while the bottom there is mostly living quarters. It’d designed a lot more like a luxury liner than an exploration vessel.”

“Which is definitely something they’d do. Comfort, art, friendship, and all that.”

“Indeed. But it’s still a versatile ship, equipped with hyperdrive, Nova drive, and the shell drive. It’s so adaptable it’s able to handle overloads of power, increasing its effectiveness by several times when in a high magic realm. When powerful mages are on board, it will adapt. It’s an interesting piece of engineering that would never pass any sort of standardization here.”

“Must be nice, not having to listen to standards. Did they decide what to name it?”

“The Feldspar.”

“…Sounds cool.”

“It’s the mineral found in both sunstone and moonstone. I’d say that’s a better reason than some historic TV show.”

O’Neill shrugged.

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A portal opened in the central area of the Hub, depositing three ponies into the crowded room. The Hub was a paradoxical mix of change and consistency. In the last two years, it could be argued that everything about the place had changed, or that nothing had really changed at all. It was still filled with people from dozens of dimensions, the Mirror Portal was still active in the center, and all the halls were filled with shops, embassies, and a couple of living centers. The bazaar of carts, tents, and stands filled as much space as they possibly could.

It was different in the way that new shops had come and old ones had left. If one had been here two years ago and had just come back, it would be unlikely that they would be able to navigate the Hub. There’d just be too much visual change.

Luckily for Pinkie, Nova, and Flutterfree, they came here almost every day and knew exactly not only how to get to everything, but also how to avoid the halls that were jammed with sleazy shop
owners. Their portal closed behind them and they trotted off, Pinkie taking the lead.

“The Mushroom World is always so nice,” Flutterfree said.

“Don’t see me arguing,” Nova agreed. “Great place to get a breather before… Well, *today.*”

Pinkie turned her head around and grinned. “Today’s going to be great! I have this entire place rigged to explode in confetti the moment everything goes live!”

“Are you sure that won’t impede the plans everyone else has?” Flutterfree asked.

“Oh, it will, but not that much. There’ll just be a dusting of confetti everywhere, not an entire hallway full of the stuff like last time.”

“The last several times,” Nova countered.

Pinkie shrugged. “Eh, people can afford a small bit of unwanted confetti in their lives. What matters is that this is time for *celebration.*”

“Assuming one of the Earths doesn’t suddenly break out in war.”

“Not going to happen,” Pinkie said.

“Do you just *know* that or just *think* that?” Flutterfree asked.

Pinkie pondered this. “Think,” she finally answered.

Nova raised a hoof. “Then I retain my right to be paranoid.”

“If you want to!” Pinkie smirked, taking a hard left to avoid a nearby reporter. “Gotta watch ourselves girls, we can’t let the pizzarazzi take up hours of our time today!”

“Paparazzi,” Flutterfree corrected.

“Papapizza?”

Flutterfree facehooved. “Pinkie…”

“Whaaaaat?” Pinkie said, smiling innocently.

“Nevermind.”

Pinkie giggled, bouncing through a small trinket shop and out the back door, entering the area of the Hub that contained the Elemental Nation Embassy – which meant Iroh’s tea shop was nearby.

The three of them walked in, smiles on their faces. The shop hadn’t changed at all in two years – there were still high-profile patrons enjoying tea and talking with each other. The smell of dozens of different tea varieties flooded the nostrils of the three ponies, putting them at ease.

The three ponies had plans to head through the side door to the actual Embassy, but something caught their eye – or, rather, two people. Against the back wall, in an area reserved for the occasional performance scheduled by Iroh, a magic show was underway.

“Be amazed as Trixie pulls a rabbit out of her hat!” Trixie called, pulling her hat off her head with her magic, sticking her hoof in, and pulling out a small, fluffy white creature. “Tah-dah!”
Next to her stood Discord. He folded his arms. “That’s nothing.” He snapped his fingers, creating a hat out of nothing. He shook it and a dozen rabbits fell out.

Trixie huffed. “It’s easy to create rabbits with chaos magic, Discord.”

“Oh, you wound me. But I saw your horn, it was on. You used magic as well, Trixie the Cheap and Cheating.”

Trixie huffed. “Well, Trixie never!” She stood up on her hind legs, holding her hat in one hoof. “Behold, Trixie’s horn is off! No spells are being cast!” She reached into her hat with her other free hoof and pulled out her own head.

She blinked, staring at herself. “DISCORD!” Both Trixies yelled.

Discord put his hands into the air. “What? I’m not doing anything!”

“Likely story. You don’t have a shiny horn!”

Discord tapped his horns and made them glow with every color of the rainbow.

Trixie stuffed her other head back into the hat. “Humph. Now Trixie will do the trick without interference…” She reached her hoof in and pulled on her on tail, yanking herself through a hole in spacetime and into the air. She landed flat on her back.

Discord howled with laughter. “Okay, that, I can’t just let go attributed to you. That was all me.”

Trixie pulled a link of colorful fabrics out of her hat and tied Discord up in them with a swift motion. Her horn didn’t flash the entire time. “Gotcha.”

Discord snapped his fingers, making the fabrics tie themselves around Trixie. “No, I gotcha.”

“Why you little…” Trixie lit her horn, lifting her hat and shooting more colorful links at Discord. They blasted him in the face. He twisted an arm, turning the fabrics back to Trixie. After a quick tornado of color, both of them were completely tied up.

“This is your fault,” Discord grunted.

“My fault!?” Trixie gasped. “The audacity!”

They continued arguing over each other. A curtain slowly drew over the two of them. When it repealed, the two of them were free of all colored imprisonment. They bowed.

The patrons clapped and nodded in approval at them. Nova walked up. “Nice show, Trix!”

“Thanks, Nova,” Trixie said, embracing her friend. “But you’ve seen this act already, you know it’s good.”

“I still say we needed more chaos in it,” Discord muttered.

“Discord, random spontaneous chaos without any rhyme or reason gets boring real quickly in show business,” Trixie said. “There needs to be structure. A punchline. Something impressive. Never show your most impressive tricks, just in case.”

Discord folded his arms.

“Hey, who has the special talent in stage magic, you or Trixie? That’s right, Trixie.”
Flutterfree smiled. “She is right, Discord. As delightfully crazy as you are, for a stage show that doesn’t quite work.”

Discord sat down at a nearby table. “Yes, yes, I know.” He summoned tea to himself. “Now, I wonder what else I’m going to do today…”

“You’re going to stay in the Hub, like we talked about,” Flutterfree said, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh, did we? I don’t rememb-“

“Don’t play dumb with me mister! You know you’re staying here, you know why, and you agreed to it.”

“I don’t recal-“

“Discord…”

Discord sighed, sagging in defeat. “Fine. Ahem.” He transformed his face into a mockery of Flutterfree. “Oh, Discord, you’ll need to keep yourself out of sight during Disclosure! People will freak out if you show up! I’m just so terrified that other people will have heart attacks from your delightful chaos that everyone will love! I-“

Flutterfree raised her other eyebrow. Nova and Trixie chuckled.

Discord returned to his normal appearance. “I admit, I may be getting the exact words wrong, but that’s the basic idea, right?”

“Yes,” Flutterfree said.

“Don’t you worry your wings, Flutterfree. I’ll stay in the Hub the entire time.”

“And don’t get into any trouble here whi- I’m talking to a brick wall, aren’t I?”

Trixie nodded. “We already have plans to change all the apples to oranges and all the oranges to apples.”

Nova chuckled. “That’s going to tick off a lot of Applejacks.”

“I personally want to see the reaction Orangejack has,” Trixie added.

Pinkie gasped. “That… Oh I want to see that… But I can’t, I’ll be elsewhere…”

“Human Pinkie?” Nova asked.

“With Corona right now, and needs to be for the next day or so,” Pinkie explained. “Too much to do, too much to see!”

“Speaking of…” Flutterfree said, looking at a clock. “I think we should check in on Twilight and the others now.”

“Right,” Nova said. “See you around, Trix.”

“Enjoy your endless flood of politics!”

Nova sighed. “Yeah… ‘Enjoy’…”
Pinkie led the three of them into the Embassy proper. It was less chaotic than they were expecting. There weren’t dozens of people running around with papers in their hands and hooves, there wasn’t a lot of screaming panic, there wasn’t someone rushing in with new information that changed everything, and there weren’t calls for last minute revisions to the plan.

There was just a room of people and ponies sitting down, staring intently at a countdown that currently read 1:34:13. Everyone was dead silent.

“…Uh, hi?” Flutterfree said. Some people looked at her, but Twilight remained fixated on the descending numbers. Flutterfree flew in front of it and waved her wing.

Twilight’s concentration on the timer broke. She shook her head, looking to Flutterfree. “Oh, hi! Sorry, I… Well…” She glanced around. “I think we’re all just waiting.”

Nova blinked. “No last minute plan chaos?”

“Nope. We’ve had this entire thing planned out for over a week,” Twilight said. “We’ve just have to… wait. Wait an hour and a half. Everything’s coordinated, people are moving to where they need to be, speeches have been written, and the various medias have been informed of imminent press conferences…” She gulped. “Everything is going exactly as planned so far. And that worries me. The other shoe is going to drop, I can feel it.”

Pinkie smirked. “Hey, Twilight, look at me. For once, your plan will go off without a hitch.”

Twilight beamed. “Really!?”

“Yeah! Everything you’ve got written down in those papers will run more or less smoothly.”

“Oh, Pinkie, you’re a lifesaver!”

“It’s after those plans are completed that things go sideways!”

Twilight blinked. “…Pinkie…”

“Just being honest!”

“But what if, because you’ve told me that, I mess something up by being nervous? What if I change the reactions?”

“You won’t.”

Twilight opened her mouth to object, then decided shut it. She looked away. “That’s more confusing the more I think about it.”

“Exactly! I’ve got you thinking about paradoxical certainty instead of Disclosure!”

Twilight looked back. “…Did you say something?”

“Yeah, wasn’t important though.”

Flutterfree picked up one of the many sheaves of paper labeled in giant, blue letters. DISCLOSURE. “Renee and Daniel pulled all the stops on this one…”

“Five worlds…” Twilight said. “Five worlds are participating. Six, if you count the Elemental Nations, but they already knew.” She stretched her wings. “Everything’s going to change, today, in a little over an hour.”
“I know!” Pinkie cheered. “Isn’t it exciting? In a few days I can actually go to the Leaning Tower of Pisa as a pony! Isn’t it amazing?”

Nova smirked. “Sure Pinkie, it’s amazing.”

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Five worlds.

Equis Vitis, the center of the vine, the land of ponies and friendship where it all started. A world where there were not many secrets, but there was an entire world that had no contact with the other universes. Equis Vitis was not a world of just ponies, as much as it may seem.

Earth Vitis, a world closely linked to Equis Vitis, a world filled with humans, two hundred nations, and a presence of magic generally kept out of public view. Admittedly, the magic wasn’t hidden that well, but officially it didn’t exist, and the people were just fine with that.

Equis Cosmic, an empire of ponies that spread across an entire galaxy, an image of Equis Vitis’ once possible future. A galaxy of friendship and magic, but also a dark past and loneliness. Ponies that had to remember the time when there were griffons and dragons, people that had to be sacrificed for their own survival.

Earth Tau’ri, a distant world far removed from the magic of friendship, and yet oddly similar to Earth Vitis. A world that ran a secret program to the stars for around two decades, hiding from their people entire wars that took place in the stars, and hiding from their allies the other universes surrounding. They were not alone in the universe.

Lai, a world with less connection to the others. The ponies here detested change, wanting nothing more than to live their lives without having their views challenged. They loved their Queen, hated the Arcei, and lived their lives in general devotion to a Goddess who no longer existed. Was their existence a cruel joke? Or were they strong? Questions that would remain unanswered…

Each of these worlds prepared.

On Equis Vitis, it was simple. Representatives from every nation were invited to Canterlot to hear Princess Celestia and Charter-Princess Twilight speak. A handful of beings from other universes would be there to represent.

On Earth Vitis and Earth Tau’ri, every nation that was in on the secret – be it the wars in the stars, or the existence of magic – would give a speech at roughly the same time. Each of them would have a single otherworlder with them as proof. The nations that weren’t in on the secret would just have to react to the Disclosure, but there was nothing to be done about this.

On Equis Cosmic, Princess Twilight ‘Cosmo’ was to stand with O’Neill and reveal the Apollo in a broadcast sent to the entire galaxy. The largest population of all five worlds would hear the news all at once.

On Lai, a Queen would address her subjects with a team run by the recently knighted Toph at her side. The palace would open to all ponies that day, allowing the main hall to be flooded. The result was completely dependant on a Queen’s ability to talk to her people.

At the same time, all of these efforts began. It was a simple ping sent to everyone’s phones through a set of open portals in the Hub.

On Equis Vitis, Princess Celestia strode out onto the balcony, Twilight and Luna at her sides. The
three of them overlooked the crowd composed of many, many races. There were ponies, there were
dragons, there were zebras, there were griffons, there were yaks, there were buffalo, there were
diamond dogs, there were hippogriffs, there were minotaurs... There were even the buglike
chalengings, standing in the open among the other races with hardly any fear from anyone. There
were no centaurs or gargoyles, sadly. Did they even get the message? Nopony knew.

Celestia took a breath, speaking with the Royal Canterlot Voice. “People of Equis! There are some
of you who know why I have called all of you here today, and many others who don’t. Those
of you who live outside our borders may have been noticing strange things happening in
Equestria. Rumors of strange creatures, unusual devices coming from nowhere, and new
magics that do things nobody could have imagined. While we have not kept any secrets, we
believe now is the time to tell you all directly what has been happening, and what it means for
all of you. I will say that what we have to show you will likely be hard to stomach for many
and will have some unfortunate implications. But I assure you that everything we say is true,
and in the end is a good thing for all of us.”

Murmurs spread through the crowd. Exactly as expected, so far. Celestia looked down at them all.
“The Princess of Friendship, Twilight Sparkle, is better versed in this than I am, for she has
had much personal experience. Listen closely to her words, my friends.”

Twilight turned off her ears, thankful she could end the headache. She didn’t need to hear what
anypony was saying anymore, for she was the one talking now. She switched places with Celestia,
placing her front hooves on the balcony. She spoke loudly, but without the boom of the Royal
Canterlot Voice. She used a simple voice amplification spell, to make the crowd feel like she was
talking to each of them personally, not shouting at them.

“Hello everyone! It warms my heart to see so many of you standing together, as one! It’s hard for me
to imagine, standing here today, that before I got these wings none of us would have dared meet like
this. The dragons were angry, the changelings were deceptive, and we ponies were afraid. But,
today, we’ve all moved past that, we’ve become something greater than we once were. What I
implore all of you to do today is to hold onto this beautiful unity we have achieved, in the face of
something new.

“I won’t keep you in the dark any longer. I can tell you’re all really nervous, thinking I’m going to
reveal something bad. I’m not. You see, me and my friends have, for the past four years, been
exploring other worlds. Not other nations, other worlds. Worlds with ponies, griffons, dragons,
changelings, and minotaurs of their own. Some worlds are almost exactly like this one, except I
never became a princess, or where Celestia was banished to the sun, or where the genders of
everyone are switched! There are also other worlds with creatures beyond our wildest imaginations,
people that exist in our legends but not in our reality, or worlds that are nothing but expanses of
magic. And in these worlds, we’ve made new friends.”

Twilight lit her horn, teleporting Daniel next to her. She saw gasps from the crowd.

“This man is named Daniel Jackson. He’s a human, exactly like the creature of legend. He’s from a
world called Earth – we call it Earth Tau’ri, to separate it from other Earths. We’re Equis Vitis, that
is, the Equis vine, branching out to embrace all the other worlds. Daniel is one of many friends.
Daniel, tell us a bit about yourself. Don’t worry, they’ll all be able to hear you.”

Daniel smiled. “Thank you, Twilight. Hello everyone. As you already heard from her, I’m Daniel
Jackson. I’m an archeologist; that is, I study the deep past by analyzing artifacts, attempting to
decode their languages, and investigating cultures. On Earth Tau’ri, humans are the only race on our
planet, and I help my people study the cultures of the races we find among the stars. But everything I’ve seen among the stars is nothing compared to what I see here – never in my life have I seen so many races occupy the same world and live in peace. You should all be proud of yourselves for what you’ve accomplished here, a rare culture that deserves a reward.”

Twilight nodded. “He is just one of many friends we have made in the other worlds, my ponies. There are others, and…”

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“…among these allies include a race that may look simplistic at first, but are actually very formidable and strong in the face of adversity.” President Henry Hayes of the Earth Tau’ri United States gave the signal. Renee stepped out from behind the President, to an empty podium next to his. Camera flashes went wild. The gasps were loud, and a couple people screamed out expletives.

“Hello,” Renee said, taking off her hat to reveal her horn. “My name is Renee. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you all out in the open like this. I am sorry we couldn’t do this sooner, but it took two full years of planning.”

President Hayes smiled. “People of America – and the world! We now have the chance to, as a whole, united body, show the people of other worlds who we are. People like Renee here are offering us an amazing opportunity to stand by them in a multiverse that is bigger than any of us can imagine. I call for us to forget the disagreements we have with each other, the petty wars, the struggles, and ask that we make our new allies proud of us and who we are. I ask that we forget, for a moment, the justified anger that alien technology and other universes were kept hidden for so long. Instead, we need to focus our efforts to the new frontier that has opened to us. A frontier of…”

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“…opportunity, magic, and a large amount of new things we know almost nothing about!”

Corona rolled her eyes as she watched the television screen. Their president still sounded like an idiot even when his speech was pre-written and had been practiced several times. She’d even been there during some of the practice sessions. It was painful to watch at times… But at least he was getting the point across. Nova’s presence at his side was clearly helping.

Or maybe that was just wishful thinking.

“Now, this presents us with a solution to a lot of our problems. We now have plenty of places to move refugees…”

Corona facepalmed. She was certain that wasn’t in the speech draft. She saw Nova nudge the president with her magic, probably sending a message directly into his mind. The president shook his head. “But before we talk about our problems, there are some other things…”

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“…to observe. The worlds outside our own have suffered much difficulty,” Cosmo said, addressing the entire galaxy with her voice. “We, by far, have the largest infrastructure of any of them. I call my ponies to serve the other worlds, to give them space, to be welcoming when those who need a place to live can find comfort instead of cramped living conditions.”

Cosmo smiled, glancing to O’Neill for a second. “I don’t think you’ll have any trouble accepting the others. All of us feel, deep down, that we aren’t supposed to be the only people in this galaxy. That which we lost in the past… It is about to be returned to us. The griffons, dragons, and others of the
past – they will come. Humans will come. Others will come. And I know that we will come to them as well. We’ve already stood together in secret, let us continue to stand together…”

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“…in the future!” Queen Luna announced. “I know many of you were unaware, but Toph here has been serving the crown for two years as one of our knights! Saving ponies from evil, stopping wars, and helping all she could. Her entire team, save for Lady Rarity, is not of this world. Let us continue to treat them – and everypony else who comes here – with the respect they deserve. As knights, companions, leaders, and ponies just like you and me, even if they aren’t ponies, as it were.” She chuckled slightly.

Toph twirled the Master Sword and bowed.

“My ponies, some of you may not wish to involve yourself in the other worlds, and this is fine. But those of you who do, remember…”

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“…they are our friends,” Twilight finished, a big smile on her face.

She looked down at the crowd and saw complete silence. Eyes were wide and jaws hung loose.

She waited nervously for the response.
Twilight glanced awkwardly back at Celestia, sending her a magical ping.

*Patience, Twilight,* Celestia responded, keeping her regal gaze on the crowd below. Twilight followed her gaze to the crowd – thousands of individuals who had just gotten to the end of a world-shattering speech. There was no response from any of them beyond the unbelieving stares.

Daniel folded his hands together and rocked on his heels awkwardly.

Twilight turned on her ears, just to make sure she wasn’t missing anything. She could hear the breathing of Celestia, Luna, and Daniel – but there were no sounds from the crowd. She wouldn’t be able to hear a whisper from where she was, but it was still disconcerting.

She was preparing to go through with the ‘dead silence’ response they had planned when she heard it. Clapping – clapping from a pair of hooves she couldn’t see. The powerful clack hit her perceptions like a frying pan, but she couldn’t bring herself to be annoyed. Her strained smile softened into a genuine one as more applause began to come forth – after all, once one pony starts clapping, it puts the idea into the minds of others.

The crowd was shaken out of their silence into an eruption of celebratory noises. Twilight turned her ears off long before it stopped getting louder. She saw smiles. She saw excitement. Of the expressions she spied from her pier, most were positive - even the yaks seemed excited, and they were known for being grumpy and untrusting compared to the others. Such excitement at something new was contagious.

Twilight saw Daniel let out a sigh of relief. He waved to the crowd. A green-coated pegasus mare came up and met his hand with a hoofbump and an enthusiastic shout. Other flying creatures saw what the pegasus had done and flew up after her.

Luna smiled. “*Please remain on the ground level! We aren’t prepared for a flood of visitors just yet! I’m glad you’re excited, and there will be time to meet those from the other worlds later. But let’s try to keep this at least somewhat organized.*”

With mild disappointment on their faces, the flying people returned to the ground.

Twilight grinned at Luna, then back down at the crowd. “I… I have no words, everyone. *Thank you* for this. Thank you for… being so welcoming!”

Celestia put a hoof on Twilight. “*People of Equis Vitis, today, by this simple act of welcoming applause, you have done our world proud. I’m sure you have many questions, and in time we will answer them. You can find some information in the books stacked around the palace gardens, and we will answer any other questions you have, but for now I believe the various world leaders would appreciate discussion of the future first. If it would please them, could we-*”

Somepony nudged Twilight. She turned to see Pinkie at her side. “You’re welcome,” Pinkie said.

Twilight smirked. “You started the clapping, didn’t you?”
“Guilty as charged!” Pinkie giggled. “And I’ve got more in store. Just waiting for Celestia to finish her invites... And...” She slammed her hoof on a giant red button, unleashing streamers and confetti over the entire crowd. “HAVE A HAPPY HARMONIC!”

Celestia teleported them all to the palace’s grand hall, the solar and lunar princesses placed in their respective thrones with Pinkie, Twilight, and Daniel in front of them. The many stained glass windows depicting the great feats of Equestria’s history shone beautiful light in the currently empty space.

Luna raised an eyebrow at Pinkie. “Did you just create a holiday?”

“Yes! The Harmonic! It’s like harmony and music! Many people, resonating as one!” She grinned.

“I like the name,” Daniel offered.

“Hey, Pinkie?” Twilight asked. “Everything went as planned, as you said. Things might go wrong now right?”

Pinkie nodded. “Yep. I’m sure that something, somewhere is going to go off the deep end, I’m just not sure what.”

“We’ll ensure it doesn’t happen here,” Luna said, a determined expression crossing her face. “The leaders of Equis are approaching this very hall. We need to be ready for all of them.”

Twilight nodded. “Right.”

“I’ll be taking my leave then!” Pinkie said. “Heh. I said ‘taking my leave’. Mooooost fancy! Anyway, see ya!” She bounced out a side door.

“Bye,” Twilight called. She took a seat between the two celestial alicorns, making sure she could see the sides of both their mouths. She didn’t have a throne there, but there was enough space for her. Daniel stood to Twilight’s side, trying his best to look like he belonged when clearly he didn’t.

Celestia took out her phone, checking incoming feed from the Hub. “Looks like everyone else’s speeches wrapped up. Mostly positive receptions, but that’s only the initial response. No detailed information yet.” She put the phone away.

“Sister, have your dreams told you anything of this day?” Luna asked.

Celestia shook her head. “I do not know. As of late, my dreams have been much less specific. As if my magic is unable to see much with certainty anymore. Pinkie probably does it better than me, at this point.”

Luna nodded. “Indeed...”

The front doors to the hall flew open, and the leaders began to flow in one by one. There were dozens – but Twilight only made special notice of a few, those she knew personally in one way or another. Thorax, the tremendous king of the changelings who may have looked like a terrifying cross between a stag and a vibrant green beetle but was actually a rather soft guy on the inside. Ember, the young blue dragonlord who had led the dragons away from their ways of senseless violence with her
more thoughtful approach to life – even if she was still pretty aggressive when compared to the average pony or human. Rutherford, prince of the yaks, as usual with a scowl fixed on his face and fur over his eyes. Gaider, current chancellor of Griffonstone, an eagle-panther breed with sly eyes and an official purple sash over his feathered chest. The last individual that caught Twilight’s eye was Queen Novo, the white-coat fuschia-mane queen of the hippogriffs and seaponies… She was currently a hippogriff, given the non-aquatic nature of the realm, but Twilight knew she preferred the ‘glamour’ of the sea, like most of her race.

Others filed in – buffalo, minotaurs, and zebras – and Twilight tried her best to keep track of them, but she could only do so much.

When Ember spoke first, Twilight wasn’t surprised in the least.

“Okay!” Ember shouted. “As excited as I’m sure everyone here is, and as much as everyone is thinking ‘oh, this explains a lot about what the ponies have been doing lately’, I, for one, would like to ask why we didn’t get told about this any sooner?”

Daniel coughed. “That’d be our fault. The other worlds as a whole, I mean. We have a lot of political nuance that your world – thankfully – doesn’t have. And some of our worlds, including mine, were hiding a lot more than just the existence of other worlds from people. It took two years to plan this so every world would be revealed at once.”

Thorax spoke up, voice wavering slightly. “See? A reasonable answer! I told you there wasn’t anything nefarious.”

“Why should we have waited for them!?” Rutherford demanded. “We don’t need to wait for anyone!”

“It’s polite,” Novo said, tapping her claws on the ground. “I’m more concerned about what they know about us than we don’t know about them.”

Daniel adjusted his glasses. “I actually don’t know much about you. I’ve heard about you, yes, but I never left Equestria while I’ve been here.”

“Why not?” Rutherford asked.

“Mostly? Busy exploring other worlds. There’s thousands out there, even if less than ten of them involved in active exploration.”

Thorax coughed. “So… Do you think we could do some exploring of our own?”

Novo sighed. “Jumping the gun a bit, are we?”

“Oh, was I not supposed t-“

“It’s fine, Thorax,” Twilight said. “You’ll all get devices that allow you to travel to other universes after you learn a bit more about how things work out there. We don’t want you dropping right in the middle of a volcano or something by accident.”

“What’s so wrong with that?” Ember asked.

Twilight raised an eyebrow. “It was just the first analogy that I thought of. I’m sure there’s an ice-volcano somewhere out there you wouldn’t be happy with.”

“Is there a world made entirely of donuts?” a zebra asked.
“…Maybe? We haven’t found one yet.”

“Well what worlds have you found?” Novo asked. “How about you actually tell us about our new friends?”

Twilight smiled. “Gladly. Let’s start with a world close to our own, which goes by the name of Lai…”

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Sombra sat back in the large seat of her Puddlejumper and munched on a bag of Cheetos. The small ship was currently adrift in a random universe, several light minutes away from the primary planet. In about an hour it would automatically jump to another universe, just to keep the ‘feds’ off her trail. However, while they couldn’t see her, she could see them.

Usually she’d be working hard at hacking into something new or discovering another cache of top-secret information – but not today. Today, she just let her numerous screens display a constant feed of vastly entertaining text.

It was a good decision to tap into every social media outlet on every major world during the Disclosure. Everything was on digital fire and it was glorious. She sadly couldn’t see anything about Lai, but both Earths and Equis Cosmic were giving her plenty to go off of – not to mention the Hub and the primitive Equis Vitis Internet. So many points of view exploded onto the screen in front of her eyes. It was better than watching a movie.

She had turned it on a while ago. Virtually everyone knew the world governments were planning some announcement, and the theories were flying. The most common explanation was aliens. Not that far off, considering, and in the case of Earth Tau’ri it was literally true. Beyond that, there were a handful of other suggestions – secret world peace talks, revelations of secret scientific research (often involving space travel), or the coming of the apocalypse. …Or the Illuminati. That came up all the time.

Equis Cosmic generally steered away from those explanations, thinking things through in a more personal note – had they finally figured out how to reanimate the dead races? Was the Princess finally just too old? Had another world with life on it been discovered? There was a lot less panic in their messages as well, and more understanding. Even if some of their thoughts were dark, they anticipated the message with little fear.

The various hacker chat rooms she had opened in a side window had been trying their hardest to find out what the announcement was about – but Sombra had actively worked against them. She really wanted it to be a surprise. She stopped all Earth hackers with ease, though a couple from Equis Cosmic managed to find the answer. Sombra may have been from a world with highly advanced technology compared to the norm, but Equis Cosmic blew her out of the water.

At least she could be proud that the Earth hackers already hated her. They knew another hacker was working against them, and they knew it was her by her calling card. In the realm of hackers, however, there was respect in the hate. She knew this respect would only grow, with time.

And then the Disclosure happened.

The first responses?

WTF? So many WTFs from every platform. A few people tried to claim ‘I knew it!’ but that was complete bullcrap. The Equises were easy to look at for the most part – Vitis already knew where
their Internet came from, so their messages were all about applauding the Princesses for a good speech. Cosmic could best be described as 

way too excited and hungry for information.

The Earths, however, were the best. Seconds after the announcement, complete non-sequitur arguments broke out on all sides, ranging from yelling at the immigrants for forcing everyone to find entire new universes to house them to yelling at the government for failing to use magic to cure cancer.

One message read, “this is why we need to stop teaching our children evolution!” How did that have anything to do with anything?

It was but one of many, many emotionally charged messages directed at everything everyone could point a finger at. Earth Vitis’s messages were generally more bitter and outrageous about it, but Earth Tau’ri had its fair share of stupid people with access to the Internet.

Sombra was a student of politics – she had to be, given her goal of finding out what really happened behind all the closed doors – but she had failed to realize how much humans fixated on things. If they cared a lot about one issue - say, gun control - everything major that happened needed to have some relation to that one issue. So many one-track minds…

They couldn’t realize that there was the new issue. That everything they had thought in their tiny little lives paled in comparison to the tiny taste they had just received of what really lay beyond.

Then again, Sombra supposed that not even those who spent their lives living and breathing the multiverse really looked beyond either. There were a handful of scientists digging into the strangeness of the world – time dilation, magical strength, the Beat, the structure of the multiverse – but they weren’t really searching. They sought to understand what they had already seen from their point of view, not delve as far as they could. They poked into the abyss and recoiled. Even Twilight had backed off after Rick had dropped by.

Really, only Corona was actively pushing the envelope, and that annoyed Sombra. How was she supposed to get her answers if nobody was looking? It was a bit infuriating really. She could get any piece of information she wanted, so long as it was on a computer somewhere. But if nobody found it, she was in the dark. She’d had just enough of a taste to know there was something out there.

She had no idea what, and that was both exciting and infuriating.

She focused back on the scrolling social media. Ah, the general public was starting to flood the ‘informational’ sites set up for precisely this moment, the ones the hackers had attempted to find earlier. The sites didn’t have the full directory, only touching on the handful of universes that were allies or interesting examples of universal parallelism. Things like Esefem and the Binary world had no mention.

Clearly, it wouldn’t do to terrify the population just yet.

Let them find out about Majora by word of mouth, until they thought she was nothing but a rumor. A clever ploy, Sombra had to admit.

The existence of magic caused a fun spark, especially on the Earths. Earth Vitis had a high belief in the mysterious force, simply because it was rather prevalent on the world, albeit not obvious. They had several messages along the lines of “Awesome! Magic is real!” The Tau’ri, on the other hand, didn’t have as much of that.

“All users of magic are servants to Satan, defilers of God’s nature!”
“Our governments haven’t opened a portal to other worlds – they’ve found Hell!”

“We must protect ourselves from these witches!”

“I bet they practice human sacrifice!”

A video popped up of Renee with a very displeased look on her face. “Ahem. I was expecting those who learned of magic to read more than the first sentence of the article we have on the subject, but clearly I was mistaken. The ‘magic’ we use in the other worlds is clearly not what your religions condemn...”

The video went on, but Sombra shut it off. She didn’t need to hear Renee try to dispel the religious paranoia of humanity. It wouldn’t have much effect. Sombra supposed Renee was right, but it wasn’t like real demons actually existed.

She paused for a moment, sitting back in her chair. What exactly was Majora then? There were numerous documents citing that she wasn’t using just magic to fight them. There was something else in there.

Sombra cursed herself for her dismissal – for all she knew there were demons manipulating everything around them. She couldn’t discount it, not anymore. Nothing was impossible as far as she was concerned.

She sat straight up – something interesting had just happened. Somebody in the Hub had just opened a chat server that was connected to the Internets of all the other universes involved. The hacker collectives moved in quickly, faster than anyone who actually wanted to chat. They started forming permanent connections through interdimensional servers. The uplink speed was pathetically slow, but the devices that had permanent data portals open did exist.

Earth Tau’ri got the short end of the stick since it took a lot more power to open a portal to them. Sombra was pretty sure there was actually a wireless signal being sent through the Mirror Portal right now to them, and even then it wasn’t that great.

Sombra watched in glee as the Internet fused. The initial chat room was run by somebody with the moniker TheGreatLulamoon.

“...No way,” Sombra said.

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“Are you sure nobody’s going to find us?” Trixie said, glancing over her shoulder, face lit only by the light of the laptop in front of her.

“Nobody will have any idea,” Discord said, summoning a wafer of silicon from the aether. “Unless you chose an obvious username or something.”

“R-right!”

“Oh, well, I guess they’ll know you did it instantly then. But we’re invisible, underground, and not technically in the Hub, so... Since Twilight’s busy I think we’ve got several hours.” He etched the wafer with a complex silicon pattern.

Trixie stared at the chat program open on the computer screen. There were only two participants – TheGreatLulamoon and CapriciousButterfree.
“Discord, nobody’s in here yet.”

“Oh, they’re there, trust me. The first ones to find the connection will be the clever types. Sombra’s probably already in your computer.”

“What!? Why didn’t we use a throwaway then!?”

“Because she’ll leave something hilarious on your desktop you’ll never be able to remove and I’ll love it,” Discord chuckled.

“Hey! She could just as easily make it explode! Or one of the others could!”

“Oh, they probably won’t, since you’re running this server here.” Discord said, feeding several wafers into a large metallic box. He summoned a giant book on the topic of Internet Technology and consulted it to see what to do next. “Sometimes I impress myself with how far I’m willing to go for some fun…”

“What even are you doing? We’re already connected!”

“Connected, yes, but not prepared for the heavy influx of traffic. You see, the wires we have permanently wired into the other universes are tiny, insufficient, and frankly likely to explode. They can’t handle the outrageous flood of colorful ones and zeroes! What I’m doing is making it so we can cause some real chaos.”

“How?”

“Send images. Or, more accurately, let the hackers get the images in your photos folder.”

“What!? There are private things in there!”

“Privacy is overrated.”

“Nova will kill me!”

Discord raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Are there some special pictures in there I don’t know about?”

“You can shut up right now.”

“Nova and Trixie, sitting in a tree, K I-“

“You’re a juvenile delinquent!”

“Your point?”

“I…”

“Also your reactions prove that I’m right.”

Trixie went back to the computer and right into her image folders, deleting a file named ‘DELETE THIS.’ “There. Now everything’s fine.”

Discord smirked. “I refuse to believe that you deleted a picture of anything other than you and Nova in a compromising position of one kind or another.”

Trixie huffed. Discord completed the construction of his server, hooking it up to the network above them with his magic. “There we go; more data can go in and out now. Time to make another one…”
“You’re going to be busy.”

“And you’re going to greet our new guest.”

Trixie looked to the chat program. There was someone in there – one by the name of SoulKrazed. *Hi!*

Trixie lit her horn and typed back. *You’re the first to show up! Welcome to the amazing interdimensional chat hub! Where you from?*

*The Hub. I’m a potion seller you’ve probably met.*

Trixie blinked. “Discord, how is this going to work with someone who already knows everything?”

Discord rolled his eyes. “It’s not. Give it time.”

“Since when are you patient?”

“Since I had to teach myself how to create modems and servers,” Discord said, wiring something into a sphere of white magic.

Trixie typed a few things back to SoulKrazed. The conversation wasn’t all that interesting. “Humph. This is nowhere near as-*" Another name showed up, followed shortly thereafter by a handful of others. There was a bunch of ‘*what is this?’* messages.

Trixie cleared her throat out of habit. *Welcome to the amazing interdimensional chat hub! Where are you all from?*

There were a bunch of quick responses, most with locations in a world rather than the world itself.

*I meant universe. I’m not sure what ‘Indonesia’ is.*

The responses were Earth Vitis, Earth Tau’ri, Equis Cosmic, and the Hub, though there were several who didn’t know the official name for their world.

Discord sent a message. *We’re here to answer any and ALL questions you may have, no matter how prying!*

Trixie glanced at Discord. “How are you doing that without a computer?”

“I’m converting my magic directly into a data stream for the Ethernet signals as they travel along the wires.”

“…What?”

“Magic,” Discord grunted. “I swear, I’m turning into Twilight here…” to emphasize the point, he actually transformed into Twilight. “Egad!”

Trixie rolled her eyes, turning back to the screen. “They’re asking about our world.”

Discord cackled. **Equis Vitis is a world filled with adorable ponies who think friendship is the answer to everything. They like the color pink too much. When you meet them, boop them on the nose, they love that.**

Another member responded quickly. *We do not! Don’t boop us!*
I’ll boop every pony I come across BECAUSE you all hate it, another said.

Trixie huffed. That’s cruel.

You’re one of them stupid ponies, aren’t you?

Who you calling stupid?

Somebody with the username LOLMOOD interrupted. MAXLOL LOL FRIGGIS THIS IS AWESOME TELL ME HOW YOU THINK YOU DO STUFF WITH THE TAIL BIG MOOD

Trixie looked to Discord. “…What?”

He transformed back into his regular form and shrugged. “I have no idea, but I’m going along with it.” The tail comes from your left nostril in the form of a powerful swan song that should have done the powerful brain thing ago.

I don’t get it, someone said.

Another responded. We’re experiencing culture. About as horrid as I was expecting.

YEAH WELL YOU CAN SHOW WHAT YOU REALLY MEAN HAHA SUCK IT :D :D XD LOL. Trixie blinked. “Do we have a five year old in here?”

Discord didn’t respond vocally. This is hilarious. Barely a minute in and there are already baffled expressions all around.

XDXDXDXDXDXDXDXDXDXDXDX

Except from you. I don’t think you have enough brainpower to become baffled.

Ooh, burn! another said.

What? Did he light someone on fire? one of the users who Trixie was pretty sure was from Equis Cosmic.

It’s an expression. Means mister LOL got roasted. Served. Hold on a second, do we even have a term for that thing that ISN’T an expression?

A presumably human messenger responded. Burn – an expression that verbally insults an individual in an amusing, yet poignant, way.

NEEEEEEEEEEEEEERD.

Trixie rolled her eyes, typing some messages back. “Amazingly childish. I can see why you thought this was a good fit for you.”

Discord smirked. “I’ve just been burned.”

“And roasted. And served.”

“The horror.”

“So far, though, no chaos,” Trixie observed. “You said there’d be juicy stuff.”

“Watch this.” Hey, by the way, did you all know the leader of Equis Cosmic is a being of godlike
power who can destroy entire planets if she puts her mind to it?

Trixie grinned. “Ooooh, that’ll do it…”

Responses were varied.

You’re pulling our leg, nothing’s that powerful.

I knew it! I knew there was nothing but danger out here!

I, for one, am happy she’s on our side. And terrified that such power was ever needed.

Our Princess Twilight would never do anything like that without good reason!

SPAAAAAAAAACEXDDXDXDXDXXD

That better not be the most juicy thing you know about.

Discord obliged. Oh, you want to know more? Fair enough. Go to the articles on Equis Vitis, look at the Changelings. It says they can change form, what it doesn’t say is that they get stronger by absorbing love. One of the most effective methods they have is to replace a loved one and pretend to be them, absorbing the emotional affection like a parasite.

ERMAGERSH SO TERRIFYING.

Stupid, this guy’s a hack. Emotions aren’t tangible objects.

This sounds almost exactly like some of our legends! That’s stupid!

Hey, buddy, we’re humans, and we’re part of THEIR mythology. Maybe they’re part of ours? After all, unicorns.

What would that even MEAN?

Trixie typed a few things in. There’s a strange force called the Beat that’s present in every universe. We’re really not supposed to know about it, but it exists.

The Beat? What does that have to do with anything!

We’re not part of a song.

I AM MUSIC INCARNATE FEEL MY IN THE PLACE OF SONG XD

I can confirm the Beat is a thing.

Trixie! Starbeat here, what the heck are you doing!?

Oooooh, something tells me we’ve got the feds on us! Quick, save everything, burn the evidence and run!

Heck! My god, what strong language!

“Crud,” Trixie said. “How come she’s the one onto us?”

I gave her a tip. A message popped into the chat window from Sombra.

Sombra!? an Earth Vitis user responded. It’s an honor!
Wait, you know her too? an Earth Tau’ri user responded. Wait…

She’s interdimensional.

This explains so much.

Sombra sent another message. Glad you finally pieced that together. By the way, oh Great and Powerful Lulamoon, I did NOT expect you to be the one to do this kind of thing. Color me surprised. Nova is going to kill you.

Trixie narrowed her eyes. Nova will be understanding. It’s not like I’m associating with you. She’ll get you, Sombra. One day.

I’m not referring to that. <Sombra has uploaded the file Vanilla.jpg>

Trixie gasped and flushed a deep red. Discord howled with laughter. “Not what I was expecting! But still hilariously embarrassing!”

Trixie moaned. The image was of her doing the backstroke in a half-melted bowl of vanilla ice cream, Nova riding her like she was a surfboard.

I’ve got hundreds of these, Sombra messaged. Not that hard to restructure data that was just recently deleted. Also not hard to hack into your video camera. That’s a nice shade of red you’re turning. I’ll send this all to Nova right now…

Trixie closed the laptop and put her hooves over her head. “This is it. This is the day Trixie dies. Tell Nova I went out with some of my dignity intact.”

“That’d be a lie,” Discord observed.

“I know!”

A few moments later, Trixie’s phone started ringing. She tensed, slowly levitating it out of her robes. It was from Nova.

Trixie answered. “Hi-“

“WHAT DID YOU DO!”

“Glimmy, promise not to be mad with Trixie-“

“I’M ALREADY MAD.”

Discord snapped the phone out of Trixie’s magic. “Yeah, Nova? Discord here. We’re causing chaos in a secret location with a computer and self-sustaining Internet. Don’t worry, I’m not telling them about Majora or the secret Tau’ri wars or anything, just riling them up, getting them introduced to each other. Oh – oh you still take issue to that? I’m ruining the plan you say? Well, then maybe Twilight shouldn’t have insisted I stay in the Hub! Ever think of that? I could have been a great help out there, but – oh wow you really aren’t listening to a thing I’m saying, are you? …Ouch, you wound me so.”

Trixie whimpered. “Trixie regrets everything about today already.”

Discord handed the phone back. Trixie put it to her ears. “H-hey Nova.”

“Look, Trixie, please tell me this was all Discord’s idea.”
“This was all Discord’s idea.”

“Trixie…”

“Okay, fine, it was mostly Discord, but I thought it would be a little fun, get the people to talk to each other, maybe… maybe bring about some friendships?”

“…I guess that’s a good reason. Just… Can’t really tell you to stop since I’m pretty sure Sombra will just keep the damn thing running herself. It’s best if you watch it until I can get there. Don’t try to rile them up.”

Trixie opened the laptop to see an argument between seven different people. “I don’t think they need our help to get riled up, actually. Discord underestimated them…”

“Did you?”

“Nah, I expected this. Trixie’s been on the Hub long enough to know humans love to argue.”

“…Trixie?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you think Sombra got all the pictures?”

“…Yeah?”

“I am going to kill her.”

“Trixie is glad your anger is focused elsewhere.”

“I know she’s in there. See if you can get her to reveal anything.”

Trixie looked at the chat again. “I think she left. At least officially.”

“…Great. Look, we’ll talk later; I’ve got work to do. This president is a complete moron.”

“You and Corona would agree.”

“I know. Bye.”

Trixie put the phone down. She started breathing in and out rapidly. “I’m dead…”

“That went well, considering,” Discord pointed out.

“SO DEAD…”

“You don’t have to deal with Flutterfree. She has much higher standards than Nova.”

“Trixie feels like you’ve just insulted everyone involved, including yourself.”

Discord smirked. “The evidence of a true master at work.”

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Corona stood outside the door to her Quantum Physics classroom, leaning against the wall with the motivational cat poster on it. Hang in there!
She gulped. An entire day had passed since Disclosure, and classes hadn’t been cancelled because of it. So… Today was the day. She was going to do it. The first day of the rest of her life.

She wasn’t sure she would have been able to go through with it without all her friends here for support.

Applejack put a hand on her shoulder. “We’re here for you if anything goes wrong.”

Pinkie gave a Corona thumbs up. “I can get you out of there in an instant!”

Fluttershy smiled. “I don’t think it’ll come to that. Don’t worry, Corona.”

“I’m sure everyone will love you,” Rarity emphasized.

Sparky clapped her hands. “How could they not? They’ve all known you for a long time.”

Sugarcoat shrugged. “They could feel threatened.”

“Sugarcoat!” Rarity blurted.

“Rarity, it’s fine,” Corona said. “I get more nervous if I receive nothing but positive reinforcement, makes me question myself more.” She took off her jacket and handed it to Sparky. “Thank you for all being here. I know a lot of you have lives, it must have taken some working to be here today.”

“Pfft, I can miss Cornerstone for one day,” Sparky said.

“No offense to my fashion classes, but they don’t mean as much as you do,” Rarity added.

Fluttershy hugged Corona. “Anything for your big day.”

Corona smiled. “Thanks. So… Here goes.” She opened the door to the classroom slightly, poking her head around the corner. The rest of the class was already in there, listening to Doctor Turner’s intro bit.

“Now, today’s class is going to be a bit special,” the brown-haired man said, smirking. “I’m sure you’re all dying to learn about the probability curve equations for electron shells, but the world has come a-knocking. Unless you’ve been living under a rock – which, let’s be honest, may be the case with Pomello – you know that the government has revealed the existence of other universes.”

The various students nodded.

“You may think I have put aside class today to talk about the scientific implications of this momentous event. I do have a few topics set aside for discussion, but I doubt we’ll be able to get to them today. Because I’ve got a much bigger surprise for you all today. What if I told you one of your fellow classmates that you’ve known for three and a half years was secretly from one of these alternate universes all along?”

The students started to look amongst themselves with surprised expressions.

“I would like to introduce you all to someone you’ve known for a long time. You can come in now.”

Corona felt a hand press against her spine and forcefully push her through the doorway, the door slamming behind her quickly thereafter. There was truly no turning back at this point. She stumbled slightly in her four boots, but she managed to keep her balance despite the large textbooks in her saddlebags. With a deep breath she trotted over to the front row of class, her necklace bouncing with
every step. The silver transformation bracelet glinted in the light, catching the eyes of her classmates. She took her seat at the front row of class, took out her Quantum Physics textbook, and then grinned sheepishly at her fellow students. “Uh… Hi! I’m Protégé Corona Shimmer from Equis Vitis. I’m a unicorn with a special talent in fire magic and I’m actually thirty-two years old. But you can all just keep calling me Corona.”

There was silence.

Doctor Turner shrugged. “Feel free to ask her questions. You can take the entire class period if you want. The electrons can wait.”

Micro Chips raised a hand.

Corona raised an eyebrow. “Micro, you already knew what I was.”

“Well, maybe, but I didn’t know you were a Protégé. What’s that mean?”

“Oh,” Corona said. “Right. It means I’m the personal student of one of the ruling Princesses of Equis Vitis. I haven’t done any actual studying under Celestia for a long, long time, but she hasn’t revoked the title, so… There you go.”

“So, wait, you’re royalty?” a student called Pixie Sticks asked.

“More like adopted royalty…?” Corona said, shrugging. “I suppose I have considerable authority back there, if I wanted. Celestia’s made it clear I’m always welcome back.”

“How does magic work on a quantum level?” the class genius, Chrome Tesla, asked.

Corona smirked. “You’re lucky I’m curious enough to work on that in my own time. Different universes use magic differently, and the process by which magical powers are adjusted when transferring from universe to universe is poorly understood. That said, I can describe how the natural magic of this world and most Equises works. Magic is constructed from miniscule particles called thaums that exist as a force-carrier alongside photons and bosons. These carriers can, sometimes, interact with physical matter. My horn is an amazing organ infused with complex lattices of perfect subatomic structures that interface with all thaums it can get ahold of, ‘wiring’ them together like a circuit. A spell is constructed by creating a chain of thaums in distinct patterns and tying the long line into a circle, which unleashes the desired effect. It acts a lot like DNA replication, actually, with the subatomic structures sewing everything together and…”

Sparky closed the door. “I think she’s got it.”

“That class knows her,” Sugarcoat said. “The rest of the college may not be so open.”

Applejack folded her arms. “That’s why we’re here.”

Rarity smirked. “The school newsletter’s going out soon with an article all about Corona. I’ve made sure it’s nice to her.”

“People can be cruel, though,” Fluttershy said.

“Yes, yes, I know, but we’ll give her the best we can offer.”

Pinkie squealed. “This is so exciting! A unicorn living among humans! There’ll be a book about this someday, I’m telling you!”
Rarity nodded. “Let’s make it a happy book, shall we, dears?”

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Renee let out a delighted sigh, looking up from the menu at the skyline from which the Eiffel Tower was easily visible. “I have wanted to visit this city for so long,” Renee said. “The center of class for your world…”

Daniel shrugged. “They don’t call it the City of Love for nothing. Though I have to admit, being here and not hearing people talk in French is bizarre.”

“I bet the waiters are glad they no longer have to deal with clueless foreigners who don’t know the language.”

“It may be worse. Now there’s clueless foreigners who do know the language and can no longer be dismissed.”

Renee blinked. “What an uncharacteristically pessimistic remark from you!”

Daniel sighed. “Sorry. There’s just… Well there’s a lot going wrong. Your world got lucky, everyone’s mostly on the same page. Here… I don’t think a world war is going to break out, but some people are calling for one. Enough that news outlets have started covering the idea.”

“It’s more than that.”

“There’s also the fact that it’s 2011 here, but 2018 over in Earth Vitis. The economy is having a mild freak-out at possible predictions of future historical events. Stocks are being bought and sold like candy, the Internet is fusing because of Trixie, and the religious fallout is extreme…”

Renee facehooved. “I made that speech for a reason…”

“And it helped, trust me, it got a lot of outlets to cover the scientific side of your magic. But humans don’t like changing their minds about things. Ever. There’s already a heavy anti-unicorn movement forming, and talk of purging the translation spell’s propagation throughout the world.”

“I’m… Not sure we can stop it, now that we’ve released it the way we have.”

“I know. We probably should have thought that through a little better…”

“How else was I supposed to address the masses? We don’t exactly have a technological universal translator!”

“True,” Daniel said, sitting back. “I guess we would have just had to deal with it regardless. Magic is such an integral part of your society. I don’t think the anti-unicorn movement has realized that every race on your world has some form of magic to them. The majority of universes in the east have magic…”

“They’ll come around,” Renee said.

“Some of them, yes. Others… I don’t know. Zealots have always existed. Women’s rights… Racism… You name it. The world moves on, but some people always stay behind. It probably doesn’t help that the Middle East is screaming bloody murder.”

“Oh?”

“None of the nations in that area of the world were involved in the Stargate Program – except Egypt,
but not everyone considers it an actual part. We didn’t tell any of them because they were always filled with violence, terrorism, and anger at the rest of the world. We were afraid if any one of them knew it would light the powder keg. It’s pretty clear that the powder keg is now exploding because we didn’t tell them.”

“They’re the ones calling for war, aren’t they?”

“Mostly. For once in their lives they seem to agree on something.”

“At what cost…” Renee muttered. The waiter dropped by, serving their meals – fancy cakes in the shape of the Eiffel Tower.

Daniel blinked. “I don’t know what I was expecting.”

“Daniel, please, this is a refined dish. And unlike some of the flavorless crumbs in Canterlot that are inexplicably popular, this has flavor.” She carefully separated the top of the tower with her magic and levitated it into her mouth and bit down, the flavor melting on her tongue. She leaned back in her chair, pleased. “This… This is food.”

Daniel looked down at his plate. “It really isn’t enough to be a meal. More like… a snack.”

Renee looked like she wanted to be insulted, but instead could only sit and realize how right Daniel was. “Well… We can order twenty more, we have the cash, and nobody’s able to judge us.”

“Oh, they can judge us all right.”

Renee rolled her eyes. “Well, I know we’re being stared at and all the phones are out.” She turned behind her and smiled for the camera of a Russian man to prove her awareness. “I just think it’s not a thing to concern ourselves with at the moment. Just sit back, relax, enjoy our meal, and let the press do whatever they want later.”

“The press is dangerous.”

Renee shrugged. “Perhaps… Oh look, it appears a reporter has worked up the gumption to talk to us.”

A man scurried up to them with a confident smile on his face and a professional camera under his shoulder. He took out a recording device. “Doctor Daniel Jackson, Miss Renee, it is an honor. I am Phillip Laurent with Le Monde. Would you care for a short interview?”

“It’s no trouble at all,” Renee said, lifting her hat up slightly. “What would you like to know?”

“Is it true that you two were the ones responsible for the Disclosure plan?”

“Well, we weren’t the only ones,” Renee said. “Disclosure was an effort that required the ideas and input of thousands of people from several worlds. But it would not be a stretch to consider us among the project heads.”

“Do you consider the efforts a success?”

“It’s only been a day, Mister Laurent, so we cannot say for certain if it was a success. But from what I have seen, I am confident it’ll turn out well in the end.”

“Would there be anything about the plan you would change now that you’ve seen immediate results?”
“Earlier explanations on magic,” Renee said. “First impressions are everything, and I’m afraid we rather blew the first mentions of it.”

“Doctor Jackson?”

Daniel furrowed his brow. “If I were to change something… have the dimensional license system working long before Disclosure. My own card didn’t work earlier today. Almost got arrested.”

“The bureaucracy ensures that something will go wrong, dear,” Renee said. “If not that, something else.”

Mister Laurent nodded. “Well, thank you for your time. Enjoy the rest of your lunch. You can expect to see an article in the papers by the morn.” He turned off his recorder.

“Can’t wait to see how we get portrayed,” Renee smirked. “Do go easy on us.”

“I’m not a madman. I will portray you as objectively as possible. What I would fear is the secondary articles made from mine.”

Daniel nodded. “Those are always the worst. Bloggers are vicious.”

Mister Laurent turned and walked away, dropping a newspaper behind him.

“Oh!” Renee called, jumping out of her chair. “Mister Laurent! You dropped-“ She stopped talking. From her current height, she could see a small wire dangling from under her and Daniel’s table. She ducked her head all the way under the table and saw it.

A bomb.

“My Stars!” She called, ripping the bomb off the table with her magic. She levitated it as far into the sky as she could. “Daniel, call the bomb squad or whatever it is here, we’ve got a-” The bomb exploded in a ball of fire far above them, shaking the entire block of Paris.

Shrapnel rained down upon the diner, the dangerous bits blocked by Renee’s large crystal shield. She let out a deep breath. “Okay. All clear!”

Several people started calling the police on their phones.

Daniel sat back in his chair and sighed. “There’ll be a bomb squad coming.”

“Great,” Renee said, climbing back into her chair. “There goes our lovely afternoon.”

“…Are you okay, Renee?”

“Please, my life is in danger almost constantly these days, hardly shaken at all.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow.

“…Fine. My heart is racing, I have an image of myself exploding all over everyone’s faces in a shower of blood, and I can see Sweetie Belle crying at my funeral.” She sagged. “I’m used to the mental images at this point. I’m not sure if that’s a good thing.”

Daniel held her front hoof. “I think it’s a necessary thing for people in our line of work.”

“I know. I know…”
“It took them one day,” Queen Luna said, pacing around her darkened throne room. “One day! It was one of the first things they found out! Just… Argh!”

Toph shrugged. “I guess they just latched onto what they cared about.”

“Hatred doesn’t fall far from the tree,” Lieshy added.

Lady Rarity looked at her Queen. “What are you going to do?”

“I have to go out there and tell them something. They won’t accept nothing. But if I go out there, I’m going to purposefully sound sympathetic, and it’s going to stir the rage into an explosion.”

Toph folded her arms. “I think you should just tell them exactly what you think. Stand strong, be aggressive, they can’t defy you. You are the alicorn of this world, they have to listen to you.”

“They’ll use Armonia as a force against me if they can. I can’t exactly tell them their Goddess is dead either. They wouldn’t believe me and it’d probably get me beheaded quicker than this business.”

“So? Stand your ground. You have the powe-“

“Toph, you don’t understand, I see them beheading me after acting like that.” She pointed at her oculus eyes. “They will kill me if I talk about the Goddess.”

“…Are they really that dumb?!!”

“Yes,” Lady Rarity said. “They will not turn back on their ways in one day. It will take years of slow acclimation that has been decidedly ruined by their little discovery.”

Vivian put a finger to her chin. “Luna, what if you just tell them in a neutral voice what’s happening, and that they’re free to choose?”

“They want a why, Vivian. And if I tell them the real why, I… I well I can’t see but it’s very likely they won’t trust me anymore.”

“Political suicide,” Lady Rarity said.

Toph grunted. “I could just go out and yell at them.”

“You’d die,” the Queen deadpanned.

“Yeesh. Aggressive much?”

“Yeah. I haven’t paid them as much attention as I should have…” the Queen shook her head. “My own fault, I raised them to be like this. To not like change.”

“Or was it the Goddess?” Lieshy asked.

“I… I don’t know.” The Queen gulped. “I think I have to do it though. The political suicide. I’ll tell the exact truth, and hope their previous trust in me isn’t completely destroyed. After all, you’ve saved them from many threats, they should be able to see that for what it is…”

“Don’t,” a new voice said.
The group turned to the trotting form of Starcei. Toph tensed, hand on the Master Sword’s hilt, but Starcei shook her head. “I am not here to fight, Toph. I am here to talk.”

The Queen looked down at Starcei. “It has been a long time.”

“Eons,” Starcei said.

“I really should kill you.”

“And you would be right to do so. But hear me out before you try. You can keep your kingdom if you provide a secondary reason.”

“What would that be? They hate the Arcei and think anyone who’d take them in deserves to die!”

The Queen grunted. “That includes all the universes that have taken Arcei in which is, last count, all of them.”

“The friendship with the other universes is ruined for the time being,” Starcei said. “For that I am deeply ashamed. But you can build them up. As a leader, you can say one thing and do another. Call this a solution to the Arcei problem. They’ll be moved offworld and will have no further reason to harvest the Runes. You are preventing a bloody war against the Arcei by moving them peacefully. They’ll accept this reason.”

“…But it’s not the reason.”

“Not the only reason. But it’s the only reason you need to talk about.”

“I approve of this plan,” Lieshy said. “It’s clever. Make them think it’s because of them and that it’s good.”

Vivian shrugged. “But… They’ll all keep hating the Arcei!”

“That’s not going to change for at least a generation,” Starcei said. “Not without some spectacular event. And the Queen making a speech about peace does not qualify as a spectacular event.”

Queen Luna sighed. “Fine. That makes sense, Starcei. It will work. Thank you. I do have one question for you though… why?”

“My ponies owe you something for allowing us to move out. You should be able to keep your kingdom.”

“Yes… Still. They view all the other worlds as enemies.”

“Something to be worked out over years, not in a day. Talk to Renee and Daniel after things die down on their end, they’ll be able to help.”

“I know this…” Luna lowered her head to be level with Starcei’s. “What’s your angle here?”

“…Amending. If you’ll believe that.”

Queen Luna’s eyes widened. “You? Amending?”

“Believe it or not,” Starcei said. “It’s true. I’m leaving now – if you’ll let me.”

“Where are you going?”

“To tell my ponies everything,” Starcei said. “They’ll ostracize their mother. Then… I’ll just wander
other worlds. I don’t know where I’ll end up, if anywhere. My life has served its purpose here.”

The Queen nodded. “…You may leave, Starcei.”

Starci lit her arcs and vanished without so much as bowing or waving.

Toph shrugged. “You know, I’m never sure what to think of her.”

“She is wise beyond measure, but deeply regretful,” Lady Rarity said. “If you get the chance, take some time to get to know her.”

The Queen scowled. “Well, I guess I’m going to go half-lie to my ponies now. I’d ask for luck, but I’m not sure I want it.”

“Don’t you want to write it out first?” Vivian asked.

“No. I’ll do it as I usually do it.” She walked out of their presence and toward the palace balcony.

“Doomed chinchillas,” Lieshy muttered.

Toph just focused on the receding footsteps of Queen Luna. She gripped the hilt of the Master Sword tightly, just… angry. Angry at how stupid people could be.

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“THE EQUESTRIAN STARBEAM INQUIRER, TODAY, HERE WITH A SPECIAL!”

Television screens across the galaxy lit up with the most popular news program – in many cases the only news program ponies trusted for galaxy-wide news.

“I’m your host, Rainbow Depths!” a rainbow-maned earth pony stallion with a black coat announced.

“And I’m your co-host, Quanta!” an albino pegasus mare said, her red eyes somehow comforting rather than threatening.

“And do we have a treat for you today! As the vast majority of you are aware, yesterday our Princess, Twilight ‘Cosmo’ Sparkle, made an announcement, revealing the recent discovery of other universes close to our own. Since then, the overall reaction of our galaxy has been overwhelmingly positive, but also full of unfounded rumors.”

“Those rumors will be dispelled shortly – our reporters have gone to the Princess herself, read the mysterious Directory of Other Universes, and even traveled to a handful of other worlds to bring you the real scoop!”

“First, some history. Imagine, if you will, back in the time of the Tree of Harmony and a fully vibrant Equis where Twilight Sparkle hadn’t moved on to discover space travel, but rather found a mysterious sphere with the power to travel to other universes. This is exactly what happened in a universe close to ours somewhat recently. An alternate version of the Princess we all know, Charter-Princess Twilight Sparkle, found such a device and unlocked its secrets, taking her and her friends on adventures across the many worlds they could suddenly visit.”

“Just like our Princess would have, she made friends, many of which joined her in the explorations of the multiverse, spreading far and wide. Alliances were formed, friends were made, and even a couple of enemies were fought. Two years into their explorations, they found us. Shortly thereafter
our fleets were called to aid them on a top secret military operation. The details of the event are still classified, but we do know we were very successful and that the rest of the multiverse felt like they owed us for our help.”

“Four years after the Charter initially stepped into another universe, six universes participated in the act of Disclosure. This is what happened yesterday, when everyone banded together and decided they should no longer keep secrets from their people. That may seem long to us, but apparently for the other universes that is an extremely short amount of time. The schedule was a compromise.”

“What were these worlds? Well, one was us, clearly. We are one of only two naturally space capable universes involved, and we are by far the one with the most planets, even if we do not have the most advanced technology. We have been given the title Equis Cosmic as homage to our impressive might in the realm of space. The home of the Charter is Equis Vitis, given the name because they were the first to explore the other worlds, akin to a vine. Their world is almost a perfect image of our deep past, down to the same ponies. Historical figures such as Celestia and Luna are still ruling on Equis Vitis, as well as all the races we lost in our past. It is cause for celebration – our long lost brothers and sisters are being returned to us.”

“Equis Vitis is naturally connected to a world filled with humans called Earth Vitis, a world that Equis Vitis had been in contact with for several years prior to finding the dimensional device, through a Mirror Portal created by one Starswirl the Bearded. We did some research into our own history and discovered that our world had a Mirror Portal as well, but the world it leads to is a dead one, destroyed by a nuclear war. Earth Vitis has no other races besides humans naturally, only a small amount of magic, as well as over two hundred distinct nations. Their people often mirror ponies in the world of Equis Vitis for an unknown reason. Yes, they have a Twilight Sparkle as well, though she goes by Sparky and isn’t a Princess. She is responsible for the invention of the portable dimensional device.”

“There is another Earth as well, Earth Tau’ri, located in what is tentatively called the ‘western’ part of the multiverse, far removed from the rest of the worlds we know here in the ‘east’ multiverse. Their history is parallel to that of Earth Vitis, though strangely they generally don’t mirror individuals, even if all two hundred nations are more or less the same. Earth Tau’ri has almost no magic, and is in a universe with aliens. Earth Tau’ri has used relations with these aliens to achieve a respectable space program, and while they do not control more than a handful of star systems, their level of technology is far beyond our own.”

“Back in the east multiverse, we have two other worlds – the Elemental World and Lai. Lai is a pony-based world where there are more than just pegasus, unicorns, and earth ponies. They have seaponies, deer, a tail-mouth race called a mawlie, and a race of seers called the oculi. Combinations of pegasus wings, unicorn horns, and other features are somewhat common over there. They also have an artificial race, known as the Arcei, but there is a large political fallout in their world regarding them, an issue that will sadly have to be reported on at another time. The Elemental World is run by humans with a quasi-magical power that allows them to bend the four elements. There are four nations in the world, three based in elements, and one that serves as a unity of the powers. The people of the Elemental World completed a long hundred-year war just as the Charter arrived, and because of this they are a hardened people who are nonetheless endlessly seeking peace among everyone.”

“These are just the briefest of possible looks at our new friends. There’s more information available online, should you wish to know more.”

“Now, before we get to our interviews and curiosities found in the Directory, there is a movement happening in our own universe in response to this Disclosure. We’re talking about the Dual
Migration, a powerful idea headed by the Princess’ own descendant, Jade Snow.”

“Jade Snow, an alicorn many of you have likely heard of for her heroism in the Adank Mines Tragedy and clever solution of the Third Rim Crisis, has declared that the revelation of the other universes were precisely what our universe needed. I’ll just let her explain it for us, in her mission statement speech.”

All the screens switched to a video of a green alicorn with a wispy white mane smiling warmly. “Ponies of Equestria, I am Jade Snow, and what has just been revealed to us is more than new friends. It is a chance to reclaim what our world lost so long ago in the ancient war. Our brothers and sisters – the griffons, the dragons, the changelings, the minotaurs, the yaks, the zebras – all these graceful creatures that were exterminated in our past struggles. Our family can be whole again, and it can grow to beyond what it ever was before with the humans, the mushroom people, and the other varied creatures of the world. Today, I unveil the Dual Migration movement, a program I’ve had in the works for months now. Many of the worlds that are our allies have people struggling, homeless, in need of a family to teach them love and care. Their worlds do not have space. But we have an endless supply of worlds, and an extensive amount of resources. In addition, many of us in the galaxy will want nothing more than to go live somewhere new, somewhere where the culture is different.

“This is what Dual Migration is about. They’ll come to us, we’ll come to them. Through this initiative, our worlds will band together as one – in unity and family. Some may not want us, but we will make sure we let them know they’re wanted. We’ve been alone in the universe for far too long. It’s time to fix that.”

Cosmo turned away from the Enterprise’s main screen. “Well, she’s certainly ambitious.”

O’Neill smirked. “She didn’t approve this plan with you beforehand, did she?”

“Not at all, the little rascal,” Cosmo said with a smirk. “She probably knew I’d tell her to wait for a while after Disclosure to start it up. Must have taken a lot to get past Starlight’s radar.”

“I plead innocence, I was busy making sure the ponies wouldn’t flip out when you told them,” the AI chirped.

“All is forgiven,” Cosmo said. “I should probably be mad at her… But I’m not. That little speech of hers… It just fills me with hope.”

O’Neill shrugged. “The young people have a way of doing that, don’t they?”

“She’s over a century old, O’Neill. That’s well past middle age for a normal unicorn.”

O’Neill blinked. “…Wait, how long do you ponies live?”

“Naturally? The limit is around two hundred years. If you can get ahold of magic the limit is impossible to measure.”

“Fun,” O’Neill said. “How old are you?”

“Not polite to ask a woman her age,” Cosmo asserted.

“3,824 years,” the AI chirped.

Cosmo rolled her eyes. “Well there you go. Truly ancient.”
“I know some people who were older.”

“Oh? Which race was that?”

O’Neill blinked. “You know, I’m going to get yelled at for telling you this, but I have the authority. Our benefactors were a race called the Asgard. They prolonged their lives through perpetual, endless cloning. They eventually had to wipe themselves out because the cloning was detrimental, but they’re still around.”

“How?”

O’Neill smirked. “Why do you think we call it an Asgard Core? Their minds are spread throughout those machines, assisting how they can.”

Cosmo blinked. “…Even in death, they help you.”

“Yeah.”

“…O’Neill, do you think they wish to be alive again?”

“Of course they do, but their technology can’t d-“

“You haven’t tried Magic,” Cosmo said, tapping her chest. “And you haven’t tried the power of Harmony itself.”

“Are you offering to revive them?”

“I’m offering to try. If they’re willing.”

“Well, I’d have to ask Th-“

A hologram of a short, gray alien with pale skin and large black eyes appeared. “Twilight Cosmo Sparkle of Equis Cosmic, I am Thor of the Asgard. We would be eternally grateful if you attempted such a thing.”

O’Neill cursed. “I thought we were done with you popping in and out at random times!”

“The moment called for it, O’Neill.”

Cosmo smiled warmly at Thor. “I will do my best. I do not guarantee instant results, but it is the least I can do.”

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“AAAAAAAAAAAA!” Twilight wailed, ramming her head into the desk she was sitting at, sending vast amounts of paperwork flying in every direction. “Spike, it’s finally happened. Tartarus has come to the surface and grabbed a hold of me. I’ll never leave.”

“It’s not that bad,” Spike said, reading over a sheet of paper. “It… Twilight?” He tapped her. “I’m talking.”

Twilight lifted her head from the desk, groaning. “Why can’t I just stay down and wallow in my own hatred of pieces of paper with walls of text on them?”

“Because you’re exaggerating. It’s not that bad. It’s just paper. I’ve been dealing with your paperwork for years, if I can do it, so can you.”
“But… There’s so much… This is going to keep me from adventuring as much! And something tells me this workload is only going to get bigger and bigger!”

Pinkie Pie appeared from behind a stack of papers. “Oh, Twilight, you don’t have to come on every adventure.”

“But I want to,” Twilight said.

“You could hire someone else to do all this paperwork if you didn’t care for it,” Spike said. “I mean, I can’t do it all, but I know some people who would…”

“No, this is too important to leave it with hired people I don’t trust,” Twilight said, holding up a huge document. “For instance, this one is about that Dual Migration movement, and has seventeen different check boxes ranging from ‘yes, accept all proposals’ to ‘no, reject all proposals’. Clearly the actual answer is somewhere in the middle but it’s so hard to choose. I don’t really think I should let someone else do that…”

“You’re the princess,” Pinkie said.

“I know. I know…” Twilight rolled her eyes. “Look at me, whining. I shouldn’t be whining, I’m the Charter-Princess. I need to pony-up and face what’s going on. I just… Wish it could be a little more fun.”

Pinkie pulled a boombox out of her mane and set it on a nearby desk. A strange Harmonic tune began to play. Pinkie smirked. “I didn’t call it the Harmonic for nothing.”

Twilight took a breath, letting the Harmonic flow into her.

“Like a child, I wish to play
But, at the end of the day
I need to be the princess
The princess everyone needs
These stacks of paper, daunting
The consequences, haunting
Worlds hang on my decisions
Millions judging all my deeds.”

Pinkie jumped in, grinning.

“Come on Twi, no need to fret
The fun’s not over just yet
So what if paperwork’s mean?
The multiverse calls our names!”

Pinkie gave Spike a top hat and cane, pushing him into the song.
“Check there, stamp that, approve this
Don’t care if the others hiss
Wrap it up fast as you can
Then come to join the fun games!”

Twilight smiled to the two of them, chuckling.

“I cannot have all the best
This may be some kind of test
The call pulls me down two roads
I will need to decide soon
Not today, but eventually…”

Far away, in another world entirely, Corona the unicorn broke into song while trotting down a college hallway.

“I have shown my true colors
To my brothers and sisters
Accepted me as I am
Together in friendship’s tune!”

On a different earth, amidst a bomb investigation, Renee couldn’t help herself.

“Stars! The horrid explosions!
Dears! The elegant culture!
Oh! What beautiful conflict!”

“Renee, why are you singing?”

Renee smirked in Daniel’s direction.

“The heartsongs give no reason
They come in special season
The empathy of the worlds,
Harmoniously ringing!”

Siron looked over the land that was soon to be his.

“Power, magic, extortion
control, determination
The world below me is my
Part amidst the harmony.”

Toph tapped her feet against the ground.

“People never want to change
Sometimes I just find this strange
But show them I will and – wait,
Why the heck am I singing?”

Cosmo felt the familiar feel of a heartsong wash over her. With a childish laugh in her voice, she joined in.

“The life and hope without end
Our worlds, with great fire, conjoined
I never thought I would see
The day of sorrows’ ending.”

O’Neill blinked, and felt suddenly compelled to say something.

“I don’t get what’s going on
Or why I feel like, um, gone?
Cosmo, what’s happening here?
The things my mouth is doing?”

“You are doing great, O’Neill”

“What am I even doing?”

Trixie laughed as she read messages flying past on her computer screen.

“Trixie the Great, Powerful,
Back with the might of a bull
All thought she was the background,
But Trixie never stays down!”

Discord snapped his fingers, summoning dozens of dancing shadow puppets.

“Trixie should thank her great friend,
For showing her the great bend,
The what to prosperity
Chaotic day on the town!

Twilight felt the power of the heartsong come back to her. She couldn’t hear it – she never could – but the power was still there.

“All of us in Harmony...

Creating sanctuary...

Fighting for a bright future...

Coming from the Harmonic…”

The music faded, the tune ended, and most everyone went back to their lives like nothing had happened, but they all felt more confident in the future of the world.

Except Sombra.

She had just witnessed a song cross multiversal barriers with no explanation.

She suddenly felt like she understood nothing.

She also felt a little left out.
029 - Broken Mirrors

Broken Mirrors

>>Endings really are lies. At the end of every story, no matter how far it goes - there is always something after. This goes beyond the usual ‘time is an illusion’ approach. It means that, at one moment, there may appear to be a resolution to everything you’ve ever experienced. And then next week the universe decides there needs to be a new conflict, a new dream.

Even if it would be best for a story to be left at its intended ending, that would be more dishonest than coming up with an ‘ending’ in the first place. Happily ever after is an illusion that destroys lives. Even not-so-happily ever after has its negative influence on society. There is something to be said for catharsis, but there is also something to be said for realism.

Though, if I am being honest, I don’t really know. There may be instances where the ending is the best, where the meaning becomes pointless if something is taken further. After all, often times it seems like we are all part of a larger story, doesn’t it?

Some sort of song that everyone is singing, seeking some appropriate end.

Or is it not an end, but simply resumption?

Or is it a true beginning?

The real fun part about this is that I could be talking about any old thing, and no reader would have any idea what I meant.<<

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Pinkie twirled a dimensional device with the tip of her mane. “Ooooooh there’s one million and two bottles of cider on the wall, one million and two, take one down-“

“Pinkie!” Flutterfree shouted.

“What?”

“Can you… please stop singing that song?”

“Fine. But we’re going to have to pass the time some other way.” She gestured at the main hall of Twilight’s castle. “We can’t exactly leave without Twilight, can we?”

Renee nodded. “Definitely not.”

Nova bit her lip. “We have been waiting half an hour… Should I go check on her?”

Pinkie shrugged. “Eh… She’s fine. You can check if you want, though. Or we could play a game of twenty questions!”

Nova smirked. “Okay. Is what you’re thinking of a pony?”

“Yes!”

“Is it one of us?”
“No!”

“Is it Twilight?”

“Yes!”

“Three questions,” Nova said, smirking. “Gotcha.”

Pinkie feigned panic. “Oh no! I’m losing my touch!”

“No if only hunting Sombra down was that easy…” Nova muttered.

Renee blinked. “You’re still on about that?”

“Can you think of a bigger threat to us right now besides her?”

“Civil unrest?” Flutterfree offered.

“A threat that’s actually an individual.”

“Oh. Yeah, Sombra’s the biggest bad around right now.”

Pinkie shrugged. “She’s not even that bad! She helped us with Majora…”

“She’s also manipulated several world leaders, stolen countless classified documents, and has killed more than a few people!”

“You’re more mad about the images she’s posting on the Internet than any of that,” Renee observed.

“Wouldn’t you be!?” Nova twitched. “Can’t believe Trixie kept all those pictures…”

“She liked to remember the fun times you two have had,” Flutterfree said. “I think that makes her a good friend.”

Nova paused. “Yeah…”

“You’re still thinking of ways to find Sombra, aren’t you?”

“…Would you believe me if I said no?”

“No.”

“Then yeah, I am. Corona has to know something…”

Pinkie rolled her eyes. “Nope! Sombra knows we know they’re friends, so she doesn’t say anything. Makes it easier on Corona though – she doesn’t have to choose which friend to keep secrets from.”

“Can’t believe they’re friends,” Nova muttered. “I mean, Sombra met Corona by blackmailing her!”

“And you tried to steal all our cutie marks and brainwash us,” Flutterfree said.

Nova’s expression turned dour. “…You’re right.”

Pinkie smiled. “Corona assures me that she’s working on reforming Sombra. It’s a slow process, but-“

“Meanwhile, Sombra is causing large quantities of damage,” Nova said. “I’m all for reforming her,
but we all know she’s still going to have to face some consequences. She’s not Discord.”

Flutterfree nodded slowly. “No, she’s not. But they’re alike, in a lot of ways – from what I know anyway.”

Nova furrowed her brow. “I guess Corona would know what she’s doing, having been on the other side of this as well. I just… I don’t like Sombra and I don’t want to like her.”

“Nova, this may surprise you, but you don’t have to like everyone,” Pinkie said. “Not everybody can become friends. Think if it like cake flavors – you may like strawberry, but not apple, while I love apple, and don’t like strawberry. Everybody has different preferences. All you’re supposed to do is try not to hate people.”

“…I’m not going to stop trying to find her.”

Pinkie giggled. “Of course not! She’s a criminal! If you find her, capture her. Thought that was obvious.”

“You’re the opposite of obvious a lot of the time.”

Pinkie shrugged. “I try.”


Pinkie twirled the dimensional device around some more. “Can’t argue with that!”

Twilight appeared in the middle of them with a flash of magic. “Sorry! Sorry! I completely forgot!”

Renee rolled her eyes. “It’s no problem, dear. We know you’re busy, it’s okay if things slip your mind from time to time.”

“Yeah, now we can go!” Nova called – not that Twilight could see, she was looking at Renee.

Twilight sighed. “It didn’t just slip my mind, Renee… Something’s come up.”

“What?” Renee asked.

“The companies of both Earths have finally decided to recognize their petty bickering, and I’ve been asked to mediate between them. It’s really important.”

Pinkie put the device back in her mane. “Well, guess we aren’t going today…”

Twilight didn’t see that, but she reasoned that somepony had probably said something similar. “Look, girls, this is going to be a common thing now. I’m not going to be able to come on every trip – just go without me.”

“Dear! We’ve never been on a trip without you!” Renee gasped.

“This isn’t going to be an every-time thing, Renee. I should be able to make time – just not today. Have fun, okay? I really need to go.”

“…Okay. We’ll have fun,” Renee assured her.

Pinkie bounced in front. “Have fun doing Charter-Princess duties!”

“Yes. ‘Fun’. I’m sure that’ll describe it,” Twilight rolled her eyes. “See you girls next time!” In a
flash of magic, she was gone.

Pinkie turned to her three friends. “Well, guess what? We get a four-pony adventure now!”

“Lead the way,” Nova said.

Pinkie activated the dimensional device, tunneling into another world, one they’d never been in before, but had been proven safe with an automatic spell about a week ago. She bounced in, the other three following close behind.

The other side was a large, paved road, though unlike the roads of Earth there were no lines to indicate lane separations. The roads looked to be largely abandoned with only a handful of earth ponies seen walking around, to and from tremendously tall skyscrapers – all of which were simple rectangular prisms with a grid of windows on every side. Each skyscraper was the same size, surrounded by road on each side in a grid that seemed to go on forever.

Metallic ovoid drones flew overhead, moving to and from the skyscrapers, a soft blue glow emanating from their edges. They moved between the buildings, flying in through gaps that appeared only when they approached. Some of these openings had colorful designs on them, clearly an artistic addition that was added later.

The scenery wasn’t completely monotonous, however. In one direction crystal buildings akin to the splendor of the Crystal Empire broke the grid of towering silvery bricks. It was too far away to make any further detail out.

“How about this one?” Pinkie asked. “What is this place?”

Renee rolled her eyes. “Pinkie, I think you’d know how to do this by now.” She gracefully walked over to a blue earth pony stallion who curiously lacked a cutie mark. “Hey! Hey dear! Do you think you could help a few lost mares out?”

The stallion looked at them, mild annoyance on his face. This annoyance quickly turned into dumbfounded surprise. His eyes widened and he stopped in his tracks, unmoving.

Renee raised an eyebrow. “Er… We were hoping you could tell us what this place is?”

“GREEEEEEAAAAAAAGHAAAAA This can’t be happening again…”

“Good, we already have the language,” Nova observed.

“…Again?” Renee asked.

The stallion backed up. “Just… Just leave already, runter. I’m not talking to you. I may be required by law not to pound that accas horn of yours into your brain, but I only have so much patience!”

“Rude!”

“GOOD!” the stallion shouted, turning tail, whipping her across the face with his tail hairs.

Renee pulled her hat down. “Ooooooh I really want to teach him a lesson…”

“Maybe we just need to try someone else? I’m sure he was just having a bad day.” Flutterfree said, trotting over to a mare and smiling. “Hello. Do you mind telling us where we are?”

The silvery mare grunted, flipping her tail, revealing her own blank flank for a second. “Moronic preener… Look around! You’re in the Concretion! Grab a brochure, see the sights! I hear the Crystal
Crater is great for tourists this time of year!”

Flutterfree raised her eyebrow. “You’re patronizing me.”

“You’re the one patronizing me, Fluttershy. And here I thought you were trying to get respect.”

Flutterfree smirked. “I’m not the Fluttershy you know.”

“Oh, so you’re the other one then? Then why the Tartarus don’t you know where you are? Not exactly easy to get here without knowing!”

Nova held up a hoof. “Wait. The other one?”

“Done talking to you!” the mare blurted, trotting into one of the nearby buildings, leaving the four ponies blinking.

“Have we run into a duplicates universe, like Esefem?” Nova asked.

Renee furrowed her brow. “Possibly… Or cloning… There were no cutie marks…”

Pinkie shrugged. “We need to find somepony willing to tell us. No, Nova, we’re not using mind-reading. That’d just be mean.”

Nova held up her hoof. “I wasn’t suggesting it!”

“You were thinking about it!”

“Yeah, but I know it’s a last resort.”


A sea-green earth pony filly was approaching them cautiously. “Um… Hi.”

“Hello little one!” Flutterfree said, leaning down. “What’s your name?”

“Lead Pad. My friends call me Pad.” She smiled awkwardly. “You… You look like her, but you aren’t. She’s a lot… scarier.”

“Really?” Flutterfree said. “Where can we find other me?”

“Probably in the Center,” Pad said. “But… shouldn’t you already know that?”

“…Why would I know that?”

“That’s where the portal is! Where all the otherworlders come from!”

Nova gasped. “You… You have a portal to another world?”

“Yes!” Pad grinned. “It’s awesome! I’ve seen it! The place on the other side is very green! But… If you aren’t from there, where are you from?”

Pinkie smiled, pointing her dimensional device to the side and connecting back to Equis Vitis. “We’re from there.”

“Woah! Cool!” Pad poked her head through the portal, looking at Ponyville. “It looks kinda like the other portal, but there’s a lot more buildings…”
Renee nodded, pulling Pad out of the portal before it closed. “Yes, it is different. We would love to see the portal you have. Can you tell us where Central is?”

“Oh, sure, it’s-“

“LEAD PAD!” a dreadfully scratchy voice screamed. A gray earth pony mare charged from across the street, rage in her eyes.

“Oh… Hi mom…” Pad said, shrinking.

The mother arrived, slapping Pad across the face hard. “What did I tell you!?”

“N-never talk to earth ponies, pegasi, unicorns, or crysta-“

She slapped her daughter again. “EXACT WORDS LEAD PAD!”

“N-never talk t-to any o-o… o…”

The mother pulled her hoof back again, but Renee caught it in her telekinesis. “That’s enough!”

“You stay out of this, accas!” the mother shouted.

“No,” Flutterfree said.

The mother flew at them, murder in her eyes. Pinkie hit her with a frying pan and she dropped to the ground.

“Mom!” Lead Pad yelled.

“She’ll be fine,” Pinkie said, hugging the filly tight. “It’s okay, she can’t hurt you right now.”

“But… But she…”

Four crystal ponies in full black armor appeared in a flash of dark magic. All of them were earth ponies, not a horn among them to complete the spell.

Flutterfree held a wing around Pad defensively. Nova tensed. “That’s a lot of dark magic you have…”

The lead pony spoke in a monotone voice. “Lead Pad clearly needs to be taken into protective services. Citizen, turn her over.”

Pad cowered in Flutterfree’s wings. Flutterfree narrowed her eyes. “And give her to you?”

“She will be taken to Twilight’s Care Center, she will not be taken to our Crystal Crater.”

“If you don’t mind, I think we’d like to come with her to be sure of her safety,” Renee said.

“Request granted,” the dark crystal pony agreed. In a flash of dark magic they were somewhere else in the Concretion, next to a skyscraper that wasn’t like the others. It was cylindrical, much larger, and designed more like it belonged in Canterlot than a gridded cityscape. There were many more ponies here than elsewhere, including unicorns, pegasi, and even a few griffons. The unicorns and pegasi notably had cutie marks.

The crystal pony knocked on one of the many large double doors on the side. A purple magical aura opened them. “Come on in!” a voice that was clearly Twilight called.
Three of the crystal ponies vanished in a puff of smoke as soon as the other ponies entered the building. The interior was like a large daycare center, filled with earth pony fillies and colts of varying ages playing with toys. Most were happily running around and playing, but several were sad, sitting in corners, trying to hide bruises. Unlike the adult earth ponies outside, a few of these children did have cutie marks. They paid the new arrivals no mind.

Renee noticed a sign that said, Twilight’s Care Center, Level 1. There was a helpful map next to it that showed over twenty other floors in this section of the skyscraper.

Nova grabbed her head suddenly. “Something’s trying to get in my head! Some-“

“Oh! Sorry!” the voice of Twilight called from behind an ajar door. “I’ll turn that off. Give me a moment, have to wheel myself out there.” The door creaked the rest of the way open, revealing a purple alicorn mare in a wheelchair. A few digital screens lined the sides of the chair, displaying lists of pony names with dozens of numbers associated with them. The mare’s horn was alight, her magic being used to move the wheels of the chair since none of her legs or wings were mobile. She rolled to Pad first, smiling sadly. “Back again?”

“Yeah…” Pad said, rubbing her cheek.

“You know you don’t have to go back to her, Pad.”

“I know. But she’s my mother, Twilight.”

“I’ll try to talk to her again,” Twilight said. “Until then, your friends are on floor fourteen. You know the way.”

Pad nodded, giving Twilight’s hanging lower legs a hug before dashing up the stairs.

Twilight nodded to the crystal pony. With that signal, he vanished in a puff of smoke. Then Twilight carefully turned to her four visitors. “I always wondered if this would happen again.”

“Again?” Pinkie asked.

“Visitors from another world.”

“How do you know that?” Renee asked.

“She read our minds,” Nova said. “Well, all of them except mine.”

Twilight nodded, smiling sheepishly. “I’m sorry about that, really I am. I just always have it on.”

“Always?”

“Well, not now, so, er… Forgive me if I miss subtext, I usually rely on my magic for that. I turn it off when I’m expecting someone who doesn’t know me is showing up. I…did not expect you.”

“…Seems a little rude,” Renee observed.

“It may be. It still helps a lot,” Twilight said. “I’m in charge of thousands of children. I don’t have the skills or the time to deal with each one, especially when they always try to lie to me and hide what they want. I’ve got to be the best I can to all of them…” She shook her head. “It’s a big job.”

Pinkie nodded. “Kids are a handful. Does mind reading help with babies?”

“If you’re experienced and know what to look for, yeah, it really does!” Twilight grinned.
Nova raised a hoof. “Can we get back to the whole ‘this already happened’ thing?”

“Right,” Twilight said. “Short version? My counterpart – we call her Dawn now – decided that she wanted to understand her Pinkie’s powers. This tore a portal that sucked Pinkie and Rarity to this world, our world. Back then, the world was a horrid place full of darkness, evil, and… Well there’s still a lot of that around, crystal ponies, you know? And Sombra… And everypony’s still generally a jerk… And the Concretes aren’t acclimating that well… And…”

“You’re losing focus,” Nova said.

“Sorry, right. I tend to get lost in my own thoughts when I’m not listening to others’. Ahem. So they came to our world, ended up triggering a war between the Concretion and Equestria. They met us, helped us fight against the horrors of our culture, and we eventually stopped the war and moved in to the new Concretion.”

Flutterfree. “You skipped over a lot and said a lot of things we don’t understand.”

“Sorry. I-“

“Just turn the mind reading back on,” Flutterfree said.

“What!?” Renee blurted. “No, don’t do that! I can’t just have my mind be an open book!”

Flutterfree raised an eyebrow. “Renee, you don’t have any big secrets do you?”

“But… It’s just uncomfortable!”

Twilight shook her head. “I don’t need to turn it on. Just… you have to ask questions.”

Flutterfree rolled her eyes. “Twilight, would you prefer it if you could see into our minds?”

“…Yeah.”

“Will you let me into yours?” Nova asked. “As a trade.”

“If you want,” Twilight said. “Which version of the spell do you know? The automatic one, or the slow flashy one that’s kind of terrifying?”

Pinkie snorted. “Slow and flashy. Eyes go white, takes a few seconds to see anything.”

Twilight tried to stifle a chuckle. “You should practice more! Um, yeah, work your mental spells out until you can touch every mind you come across without thinking. It’s great, trust me.”

“I think I’ll pass…” Nova said, eyes going white. She tapped into Twilight’s mind. Twilight let her in. A few seconds later Nova pulled back, eyes narrow. “Very funny.”

Twilight grinned cheesily and fluttered her eyelids. “Whaaaaat?”

“You know what.”

“We don’t,” Renee said. “What happened in there?”

“Oh, nothing. I think she’s trustworthy, but she pulled enough crap in there that I think she could have easily given me a false mental state without me noticing.”

Twilight rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I probably could. I didn’t though!”
Renee glanced at Pinkie. “Do you trust her?”

“Yep!” Pinkie said. “Go ahead, let her in our minds. Not like we have much to hide.”

“Plus, I already got most of it,” Twilight admitted.

“You were only trying to connect to me for three seconds!” Nova blurted.

“And I already know you’re from another universe, you go by Nova, Flutterfree, and Renee, you all wish your Twilight was here, aaaaand all this information is making you uncomfortable.”

“No, really?” Renee muttered.

“Hey, give her a break,” Pinkie said. “She really didn’t realize that.”

“Thank you,” Twilight said, thankful.

Renee sighed. “Fine. Turn it on. Expose my secrets!”

Twilight tilted her head slightly. “Got it! Okay… Right, so, too much to explain quickly, but I can clear up a few things you’re missing. Concretes aren’t earth ponies, they’re ponies devoid of any magic at all. Why? There was a force called the Nightmare Fuel under this very city until we – that is, Pinkie, Rarity, me and my friends – purged it from existence. All Concretes were instilled with a hatred of magic and a need for progress, and when the Nightmare Fuel was purged this need could not be removed from them. However, their children are born as regular earth ponies. This causes a lot of problems, hence why we have this place set up to care for so many foals. No, Renee, we don’t take them from their families, they can return any time, we just step in to keep violence from escalating. Yes, a lot of them stay here permanently. Yes, there are Concretes who are able to move past their violent curse, but they’re a minority.”

Twilight chuckled. “Pinkie, your mind is amazing, no matter what version of you it is, you need to know that. Anyway, the whole thing with the dark magic, crystal ponies, and Sombra. I can see why you’re confused. Not actually all that important, but we never defeated Sombra, and his ponies are immune to radiation, so they live in the irradiated Crystal Crater. They’re definitely evil, but they work with us, and we work with them to bring the world to peace. He may be the worst being to ever grace this planet but at least he isn’t planning outright war. And… Oh, the portal! Yeah, Dawn – the other Twilight, Flutterfree, I just said her name a minute ago – she figured out how to get Pinkie and Rarity back home. They didn’t go home, they stayed here, but now there’s a permanent portal that ponies go in and out of regularly. The worlds are still mostly separate, but you know. Hey, fun fact, the science-types are currently trying to create another portal somewhere else!”

Nova shook her head. “That was weird.”

Twilight smiled sheepishly. “Hey, I like to show off a little. It’s a flaw. Ouch, Renee, so insulting. Good burn though.”

Renee opened her mouth to respond. She thought better of it and closed her mouth.

“I still know what you were going to say, you know that.”

“This is unfair,” Renee grunted.

One of the wheelchair’s screens lit up and began displaying text, as if someone were texting them. It was silent, but Renee still felt as if she was being spoken to. >>It occurs to me that you have a vast knowledge of interdimensional physics and general patterns between ponies of similar kinds. Your
advantage over us is alarming, and we should be afraid.<<

Renee blinked. “…Who are you?”

>>I am M.<<

Pinkie grinned. “Hi M!”

>>Hello Pinkie Pie. Are you aware of it?>>

Pinkie laughed. “More aware than either of the Pinkies you know! And more than you!”

>>Care to elaborate?>>

“You were wrong,” Pinkie said, pulling a slushie out of her mane and slurping.

>>That is not an elaboration, that is a proof.<<

“That’s just what you think,” Pinkie giggled.

Twilight stared at Pinkie, jaw hanging open.

>>Twilight, care to inform me of what’s happening inside the bony walls of her skull?>>

“The mental overload catcher is keeping me from seeing whatever she’s thinking about in regards to that, so I’m going to hazard a guess and say that we probably don’t want to know.”

M made no response.

Nova took in a breath. “This whole encounter is making my head hurt.”

Twilight made a coy smirk. “Would you like to meet some of the others? No, they don’t read minds. Good, I’ll just teleport you up there. They’re working on the new portal. Just dropping you in should be fun!”

“Wait hold on a-“ Nova was cut off with a flash of purple. The four of them were suddenly standing in a large round room with a shimmering dimensional portal in front of them. It was unlike the portals they created – it was surrounded by a pink aura and vibrated rapidly, signifying relative instability.

There were four ponies around the portal – two Pinkies, a Twilight, and a Starlight. They were connecting dozens of wires and magical crystals in a complex matrix that snaked around the entire room.

The Pinkies both looked up with a start the moment the four of them appeared. One had poofy hair, the other flat. They both waved.

The newly-arrived Pinkie waved back. “This is going to be fun!”

“I foresee chaos,” Renee deadpanned.

“Yep!”

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Charter-Princess Twilight Sparkle sat in a room devoid of any decoration. There were five chairs, a table, and a door that led outside. No windows, no art, not even any calming light sources – just the white glare from above.
She was one of currently three people in the room. One was Iroh. The other was Jade Snow, from Equis Cosmic, the alicorn founder of the Dual Migration initiative. The three of them had a simple job – when the two representatives from Earth Vitis and Earth Tau’ri arrived, they were to listen to both sides of the disagreement and come up with a solution. As neutral parties, they were given the power to decide what was best.

Twilight was not looking forward to it. She only knew it was the various companies of both worlds arguing over something. She didn’t know what.

She turned to Iroh. “Do you know what the problem is, exactly?”

Iroh shrugged. “No. I always figured it would be nations arguing first – not companies. Then again, our world isn’t big on companies, while those Earths seem to be defined by them. It’s an idea that’s somewhat out there, if you ask me.”

“It’s a natural progression of capitalism,” Jade said. “Companies end up in control any way they possibly can. In our world they’re still a big menace, but Aunty Twi – er, Cosmo – continually makes sure none of them get that much power in the galaxy. Back before we had spread very far she had to physically fight against the big companies for the ponies. She basically wiped the slate clean and let all companies start from scratch, throwing all the CEOs of the day in jail. It’s called the Economic Purge.”

Twilight blinked. “…Aunty Twi?”

“Oh,” Jade smiled. “Any descendant of ‘Cosmo’s’ family that she knows personally calls her that, even though she’s technically our ultra-super-great grand aunt several times removed. I’m actually related to her through the line of Flurry Heart, but most of us come from the other Elements.”

“Flurry Heart had kids. Huh. That’s a bit of a weird thought for me, she seems so young.”

“She did,” Jade confirmed. “Not telling you with who or when, because that’d ruin the surprise. Aunty Twi never had any kids though.”

Twilight nodded. “Makes sense. I don’t really have much of a drive for that. …Unless I’m in human form, but I’ve been avoiding that.”

“Don’t like the hormones?”

“Nope. I have no idea if it’s just the teenage body or not, but it’s really not me. Feel kinda bad for Flash though…”

“Whoever that is, I’m sure he will be fine.”

“Do you have anyone?”

“Did, once,” Jade said. “Turned out to be an ass that just wanted fame.”

“Ouch.”

“He’s rotting in prison now, got what he deserved.”

Iroh chuckled. “You Cosmics seem so nice and friendly most of the time, and then occasionally you say something like that.”

Jade rolled her eyes. “We’re ponies with strong convictions. We’ll be friends with almost anyone,
but if you betray us we will bite back. Hard.”

“Good to know,” Iroh commented.

At that moment, two men walked into the room. One was an older man with glasses and a mostly bald head wearing a dark blue suit. The other was the exact same man, except his skin was a pale yellow. A case of Earth Tau’ri and Vitis duality.

The Tau’ri spoke first. “I am Richard Woolsey.”

“And I am Rice Woolen,” the other said. “We have been chosen by our respective Oversight Committees to represent the interests of Earth.”

Twilight nodded. This had to be unusual for the two men, essentially arguing against themselves. “I’m Charter-Princess Twilight Sparkle. This is Iroh, of the Elemental Nations, and this is Jade Snow, of Equis Cosmic.”

Jade spoke next. “We are here for one thing – to mediate the disagreement between your two worlds. Please, describe this conflict to us for the record.”

Woolen nodded to Woolsey. He pulled out a set of three documents and handed them to the three mediators. Twilight sighed, turning on her ears while she read the document. It was impossible to read lips and read text at the same time. She was just going to have to deal for a few minutes.

She found the sound of Woolsey’s voice annoying, only adding icing to the top of the metaphorical headache cake.

“That document outlines complaints directed against world governments by Walmart, Apple, Microsoft, Exxon Mobil, Royal Dutch Shell, Samsung, McDonald’s, Volkswagon, AT&T, Google, Verizon, Amazon, Ford, Best Buy, and hundreds of others. It also outlines the complaints given by the exact same companies from the other side of the multiverse.”

Woolen took over. “The variations in the complaints are minimal. All of them have a few threads in common.”

“Copyright, Expansion, and Consumers,” Jade read aloud from the file.

“Precisely,” Woolsey said. “What we have here is a legal and economic crisis. We all want to expand our efforts into the multiverse as a whole, but the way things are now the duplications between companies and undefined multiversal law regarding this matter is preventing such a thing. Lawyers from both sides have drawn up dozens of suggestions for how to proceed, all of which are included in the file given to you.”

“What are you talking about, no multiversal law?” Twilight said. “Disclosure initiated several regulations. I’m not aware of them all, but I’m sure there’s something about this.”

Woolen sighed, pulling out another sheaf of paper. “Aside from regulations specific to the Hub, this document is the only one involving multiversal economy. It essentially states that any two entities are allowed to trade however they wish within their own legal systems. It says nothing of copyright, the rights of other worlds, or how to reach consumers effectively.”

“I could have sworn we spent a lot of time talking about the economy.”

“Those documents are limited to the worlds they apply on,” Woolsey answered.
“Right…” Twilight took in a breath. “Okay, let’s fix this oversight.” She placed the file down and turned off her ears. “Care to explain exactly how the companies are complaining about the three issues, and what they want from us for a solution?”

Woolen looked to Woolsey. After receiving a nod from his counterpart, Woolen spoke. “The biggest issue is copyright. On one side, we have Google. On the other, we also have Google. Who owns Google? The simple solution is that every trademark gets a –E or –W at the end of it, but that falls apart when we get into the ideas of intellectual property. If one world has a TV show, and the other world has that same TV show except there are five more seasons of it, can the original company just use the five other seasons? Or are they allowed to twist the ideas?”

Twilight felt the headache return.

Woolsey continued. “Expansion is a difficult topic as well. While the Hub has definite regulations for opening a location within its walls, allowing for both first-come-first serve and joint operation depending, there is no such thing for other worlds. What if both Googles want to open a location in the same place at the same time? Does one company have claiming rights over another, or will they have to fight it out? There clearly needs to be an overall agreement on how this is done before any expansion actually occurs.”

“And the consumer,” Woolen said. “How do we deal with that? How do we get our message to the maximum number of consumers? How do we keep them from being confused about which company they are buying from? How do we ensure loyalty? Again, there must be an agreement struck somewhere. The access of the consumer to products is paramount.”

Iroh nodded. “So, we’re doing more than resolving a disagreement between you two, we’re here to decide how huge companies are going to operate in the multiverse?”

“Precisely,” Woolsey confirmed. “Currently, the main disagreement is between companies of an identical or near identical nature. But this case will likely be used as an example to all involved.” He glanced at Jade.

Jade nodded. “I’m aware that we have huge companies as well. But they’re much more regulated than yours.”

“The point still stands. Before we move to the first legal suggestion, any ideas yourselves?”

Iroh shrugged. “I would encourage just treating each other like different nations, as friends, but I can already tell from the way you’re talking that’s not possible.”

Jade smirked. “I’d recommend an Economic Purge. Make everything start from scratch with more regulation, designed after our system. But I know you won’t go for that, it’ll put you at a heavy disadvantage at the start here.”

Twilight pressed her hooves together. “Why not just share? Become the same company.”

Woolen opened his copy of the lawyer-given solutions, arriving at the first one. “That is precisely the original suggestion. A large-scale merge. While idealistic, it has issues. Surprisingly, most of them do not have to do with company structure – the companies can sort that out themselves. The issues come from certain implications. Suddenly companies own duplicates of things that are supposed to be unique, there are other companies in lesser universes that may not want to merge at later dates, merging is heavily regulated by many international regulations, and minute policy changes may upset the consumers…”
Twilight screamed inwardly.

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Twilight – better known as Dawn – gasped audibly. She glanced at Pinkie, then back to her Pinkies, then to Nova, then to her Starlight. “Celestia…”

Pinkie grinned. “Hi Dawn! I’m Pinkie Pie! But you can call me… Sillyfilly today!”

“I’m not calling you that,” Nova deadpanned.

“How about just Silly?” Pinkie asked.

“No.”

“Well I can’t just be Pinkie, can I?”

“Yes you can. You can be Pinkie, and those two can be other Pinkie.”

Dawn shook her head, looking at her two pink friends. “Uh…”

The poofy-haired one shrugged. “I don’t think we need to worry about it for now. I know that I’m Pinkie, and that this is Diane here.”

The straight-haired Diane waved at everyone with a smile on her face. “Hi.”

Native Pinkie appeared in front of Visiting Pinkie. “Hi! Welcome to our universes!”

“Glad to be here! What kind of parties do you throw?”

“Oh, the best ones! Diane’s can be killer!”

“Not literally, right?”

“Nope! Not anymore!”

Diane rolled her eyes. “Thanks for the reminder.”

Visiting Pinkie giggled. “So, what are you ponies doing here with all these wires?”

Dawn brightened up. “Oh! We’re trying to open a new portal and – wait, shouldn’t I be asking you that?”

“Yeeeeeah…”

Dawn narrowed her eyes. “Why are you here?”

“Hm? No mind reading?” Nova asked.

“That’s Twilight’s thing,” Dawn said. “I prefer to talk to ponies. But you shouldn’t resent her for it; it’s just how she works. …is anypony going to answer my question?”

“We’re exploring,” Flutterfree said. “This was just the next universe on the list.”

“Woah… You girls are much better at this than we are,” Dawn admitted.

Starlight poked her head out of a box with dozens of red lights on it. “How did you work out the
coordinate problem?"

Nova smiled sheepishly. “From what I understand, we didn’t. We found the spell inside a black ball dropped by another traveler.”

A nearby wall flipped over, revealing a giant computer screen. >>Would this black ball happen to have been small, have almost no discernable magic power within it, and light up with yellow squares when touched?<<

“Why… Yes!” Nova said. “Do you have one?”

Starlight blinked. “…I think we do… Remember the room of artifacts? …Wait, none of you were in there that day.”

>>I remember.<<

“M, you don’t count,” Starlight said, bringing a tablet to her face. “Let’s see… Here it is, anomalous item 011, the ‘bowling ball’.”

Both Pinkies burst into laughter. Diane took a moment to register that they were laughing before laughing as well.

Nova rolled her eyes. “So you never did anything with it?”

“No. The Concretes kept it under lock and key, and there’s no information here on how they acquired it. We were never able to activate it either.”

“This is still big,” Renee said. “It means there was more than one of these devices. It wasn’t unique.”

“We could tell you how to access the spell,” Nova suggested. “Or the power source inside.”

Starlight bit her lip. “Thanks, but no thanks. We’re working on our own technology here. I’d rather be able to say we were able to do it ourselves.”

“I understand,” Nova responded.

“Do you know about any of these other magical things?” Starlight asked, scrolling through a list on the screen.

Nova shook her head, but then something caught her eye. It was a strange artifact shaped like an eye, outlined with black metal. A single metal slit ran down the center. It seemed dead to her.

“What’s that?”

“No idea. It’s just ‘the Eye’. It was found eons ago in a dark cave. It has an unusual power, but all tests are inconclusive. Do you know what it is?”

“No… But it looks familiar for some reason…”

Flutterfree poked her head over Nova’s shoulder. “It doesn’t look familiar to me.”

“Maybe Pinkie knows something…” She called to Pinkie. “Hey! Pinkie! Come over – Pinkie what are you doing!?”

Pinkie grinned, holding Diane and her other self above her in an acrobatic triangle pattern. “What? You were talking about artifacts, we got bored, so we had some fun!”
“Does this eye mean anything to you?”

“Well, yeah, everything means something!”

“Pinkie…”

“It’s a very powerful magical artifact that you feel drawn to for some reason, of course it’s important. Duh.”

Nova rolled her eyes. “Riiight…”

The Native Pinkie looked down at her visiting self. “How can you do that? I get inklings about stuff like that, but nothing that specific!”

“I like to call it the Pinkie Index,” Pinkie answered. “I’m high on the Pinkie Index, you’re somewhere in the middle.”

“Are there Pinkies higher than you?”

“I dunno! Probably!”

>>I detect a small amount of elaboration.<<

The visiting Pinkie rolled her eyes. “You’re going to analyze every last little thing I say, aren’t you?”

>>It is the way knowledge is acquired. I am a thief in the night, grabbing nuggets of wisdom wherever they present themselves. An opportunist, looking for the right moment to grab hold of the unknown.<<

Pinkie started ignoring him. “Right. So… Everypony! I have an idea!”

“What?” Dawn asked.

“I think we should go with your team to the universe you are about to dial!”

“We have no guarantees the connection is going to work,” Starlight said. “Pinkie Particles are naturally unpredictable. Granted, we’re not working much with the secondary magic – probably what you called the Pinkie Index – but they still aren’t very reliable!”

“Trust me, we’re here, it’s going to work.”

Renee raised a hoof. “Excuse me… But… ’Pinkie Particles’?”

“…You don’t know about that…” Starlight said, mumbling mostly to herself, but loud enough for Renee to hear. “Interesting. Well, Pinkie – I assume all Pinkies, including Diane – are connected to the fabric of reality itself. This is the connection all earth ponies have to the earth taken to the extreme – the earth connection becomes a connection to everything. This connection, when exploited properly, can pick up on energies that come from other universes. Controlling this is a nightmare. We have opened several unstable portals, but we don’t want to get Pinkie and Rarity lost again… We’re so close to making it stable.”

Nova furrowed her brow. “So… Pinkies are connected to the multiverse?”

“Yep!” Visiting Pinkie said, grinning.

“That makes sense but brings up so many more questions.”
“Questions for later!” Pinkie said, bouncing up. “So, who’s going through the portal?”

Dawn shrugged. “The plan was for me and Diane to go through while Starlight and our Pinkie watched from this side.”

“I know science!” the Native Pinkie shouted, putting on some protective goggles and shaking a beaker. It exploded in her face. “Heh.”

“Remember what I taught you,” Diane said. “Control yourself in the presence of the powers of the chemicals.”

“Aw…”

Visiting Pinkie grinned. “Okay! Which of you wants to go with me, Diane, and Twilight? They split in half, we’re going to as well!”

Flutterfree stepped forward. “I will.”

“Yay! Nova, help Starlight with the console if you can. Renee… I dunno what you’re going to do.”

“She can sit with our Fluttershy,” Twilight said. “She wants to be here for every activation.”

“Oh, cool!” Visiting Pinkie said. “When’s she showing up?”

>>Now. I sent her a message roughly a minute ago.<<

Fluttershy arrived by way of elevator. She had the yellow coat and pink mane of most Fluttershys, but she didn’t hold herself like one. Her figure was slightly taller and thinner than most of her kind, her face was much more determined, and she moved with power in her stride. Flutterfree, as much as she had moved from her shyness, didn’t move with that power simply by walking.

>>Fillies and gentlecolts, may I present to you your illustrious ruler. Fluttershy, Chancellor of the Concretion, Element of Kindness, and Hater of Titles.<<

“Thank you, M, for the introduction,” Fluttershy deadpanned, walking up to Pinkie. “I can’t say I expected you to be their leader.”

Pinkie giggled, extending a hoof. “Everyone always says that. C’mon, Twilight’s our leader.”

“But she’s not here now, is she?” Fluttershy questioned. “It’s a pleasure, Pinkie Pie of yet another otherworld. I only hope that, by meeting you earlier rather than later, I can improve your impressions of our broken world.”

“It is rather sad and depressing, from what I’ve seen. But I also know it’s getting better! You’re doing a good job, Fluttershy.”

“I’m glad you think so, even after such a short visit. I assume we will talk more later?”

“Yeah. You’ll probably want to talk politics with Twilight when she gets done with her other problems.”

“I’ll have to think on that. But for now, we have a portal to test. Starlight?”

“Yes, I’ve got it, don’t worry,” Starlight said, plugging a wire into a nearby box. She lit her horn, grabbing a piece of hair from Diane and placing it in a glass tube. The glass tube glowed a bright pink and exploded, sending a swirl of pink gasses into the air. Lit by the pink of the other portal, the
new swirl twisted and shimmered, sending out magical sparks in several directions.

The cloud shifted slightly, looking as if it was about to fizzle out. This was the moment all the loose wires and machinery activated, summoning five magic crystals from the aether. These five crystals latched onto the pink swirl with magical lasers. The shifting portal rekindled its strength from the magic anchors, flashing into a fully fledged portal, through which another world could be seen. The portal shook slightly, just like the similar pink halo behind it, but it remained steady. The five white crystals released their anchors and dissipated back into the aether.

The portal remained.

“YES!” Dawn cheered, clapping her hooves. “We got it! We’ve got it!”

>>Repetition is not your friend.<<

Diane blinked, then decided it was a good time to launch off a party cannon and grin stupidly.

Dawn wasn’t looking at her screen. “Is it safe, Starlight?”

“It looks like a wasteland on the other side, but it’s safe.”

Dawn grinned. “We’re goin’ in! Diane, new Pinkie, Flutter… free, was it? Right, well, let’s go.”

Flutterfree tore her gaze away from Fluttershy. “Oh, right.” The four ponies moved through the portal, single file, until all four of them were standing on a brown wasteland.

“Huh,” Dawn said. “This is pretty… empty. I wonder what happened.”

Pinkie shrugged. “Nova once caused an apoca- wait, you’d know about that.”

Dawn blinked. “Right. It doesn’t quite look like the wasteland timeline though. Looks… charred. Like powerful magic burnt this entire landscape.”

Diane’s smile dropped instantly, replaced with a straight face. “…Almost as if it was razed to the ground in a fit of rage.”

A gigantic black hoof slammed down on top of the portal behind them, disturbing it into nothing. The four ponies looked up the gigantic leg to the rest of the creature. It had the body of a centaur, but that was far from all it was. The higher one looked, the more they could see the mechanical bits that weaved in and out of the fleshy body. The centaur’s back was lined with wires, jars of fluid, and lightbulbs. An entire arm was replaced with a chrome limb, covered in sharp edges. Between its two glowing horns, there was no head – merely a giant screen.

Text appeared on this giant screen.

>>I was not expecting visitors today or any other day. See, you’re trespassing. And trespassers should be burnt to a crisp. You should all be very glad that your method of arrival is interesting. I am curious what exactly you’ve done, and where you come from. The most intelligent course of action you could take would be to talk quickly before I decide you’re a threat or not worth my time. You are rats, I am the scientist.<<

Flutterfree gulped.

>>Tick Tock.<<

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Twilight finally groaned *audibly*.

So many ideas, all of them had been shot down.

The first one, merging, had eventually been shot down because, of all things, *brand*. Even if both universes had Google, the current *brand* of Google was different in both, and the services rendered had a different perception in each universe, not to mention the other Earths that weren’t part of the multiverse with their own Google.

The next idea, patent division, was ruled out as making it too easy for companies to just steal ideas. There needed to be some regulation.

There was talk of joint efforts – no, too much like forming a monopoly on something. Companies couldn’t be treated like nations. Jade’s Economic Purge was seriously considered, but shut out in the end. There was a really weird suggestion about ‘taking turns’ going through the multiverse, creating a weekly, monthly, or yearly cycle, but the bureaucracy around that one was just absurd. There was a democratic voting idea, focused around consumer desires, there were business models that treated universes like conquered territory, there was another unusual one that described a credit system that gave ‘slips’ to companies for the ‘first’ rights to a new universe’s economy, and...

There was just too much. She was understanding it just fine, Woolsey and Woolen were good at explaining, and Jade was helpful when she asked questions, but it was just… infuriating. None of the ideas wanted to stick. Clearly, the representatives of the companies wanted to get this over with and go home, but it just wasn’t happening. They had to push the interests of the companies, and everything was just a mess.

Then there was the part about the consumers…

The more Twilight listened, the more she was convinced the companies wanted to *exploit* the consumers, not ‘ensure they had access to the best products.’ This was probably obvious to anyone from Earth, or anyone who had lived there, but it had taken Twilight some time to realize exactly how deep it ran. *She* was starting to hate all the ideas because of how they would exploit regular people.

Iroh tapped Twilight on the shoulder. She looked up, realizing with mild embarrassment that she had rammed her head into the table and not seen a thing that was said for the last little while. “Sorry…”

Woolsey rubbed his temple. “It’s fine. All of us can relate.”

“Should we take another recess?” Iroh suggested.

“We took one less than an hour ago,” Woolen said. “We need to keep going a little longer, get *some* progress.”

Jade grunted. “I think we should just go with the differing patents idea and demand the companies comply.”

“We can *demand* they comply?” Iroh said.

“Technically, yes,” Woolsey said. “The world governments have given this tribunal authority in the matter. So long as the final solution isn’t deemed outrageous by the two United Nations…es, it’ll be put through.”

“But we do need to figure out something,” Woolen said. “Something to keep the companies satisfied.”
Twilight’s eyes widened. “That’s it.”

“…What?” Woolsey said.

“We’re making an assumption. We’re trying to keep the companies satisfied. What if the best solution to this mess is to upset them?”

Jade smirked. “Exactly what I was saying. Economic Purge.”

“No no no, not that,” Twilight said. “That would destabilize their worlds too much. But what if we come up with a solution that takes care of copyright, expansion, and the consumer problems in a way the companies don’t want?”

Woolen raised an eyebrow. “…How so?”

“Well… The consumers. The companies all want to ensure the consumers can buy their products, that brand loyalty can continue and propagate, things like that. They’re arguing over who gets to do it first and who gets advantages. What if we just say no to that?”

“That doesn’t make much sense.”

“I think it does,” Twilight said, flipping through some papers. “If not for the companies, for the consumers themselves. Look at how high up on the list of desires advertising simplification is for all these companies. Yet, many other worlds won’t know how to deal with advertising. Simply allowing it at all provides the Earths an advantage over other worlds.”

“So what are you suggesting?” Woolsey asked. “A ‘if you can’t share, nobody gets it’ scenario?”

Jade’s eyes widened. “That’s exactly what she’s suggesting.”

Twilight grinned. “We can go further than this – we can remove the problem entirely quickly. Expansion? Nobody gets to expand at all, stay in your own universes.”

“Yeah!” Jade said. “That’d also stop the companies from getting big enough to require something like a Purge!”

“That’d also solve the copyright problem – you can use ideas from other universes easily, it’s not like they can make any profit from it in your world, because they’re not allowed to operate there!”

Iroh frowned. “I’m sure that’s not the case for everything.”

“It’s the basis of an idea,” Twilight said, smirking. “This solves all the issues the companies want solved – no copyright problems, no expansion problems, no consumer problems beyond what they already have. And it has the bonus of not letting companies run into a new universe and stomp all over it. That’s the job of governments.”

Woolen blinked. “They’ll hate you for that.”

“Ooooh they will!” Jade said. “That’s the beauty of it! Twilight, I love this idea. We solve their problems, but also keep them from doing the one thing they want – grow.”

“It’ll also be a lot less of a legal headache, since there’s no need to create all sorts of interdimensional law for copyright. …Celestia, I said that sentence and understood it. What has today done to me?”

“This sounds crazy though,” Woolsey said. “The worlds won’t accept it.”
Twilight smiled. “Ah, but governments are still allowed to operate in as many universes as they wish, and the Hub is still open.”

“The Hub’s regulations are still in question,” Woolsey pointed out.

“The Hub is small, though,” Jade said. “That place can just be regulated with maximum scrutiny. The regulations there already have options - we can just flesh them out. Turn the ‘first come first serve’ option to ‘if you want to make a second one, you have to add something to the name to differentiate’.”

Woolsey nodded. “Some states in the USA do that - a company moves to a new state, they have to alter the name to avoid confusion with another company that already exists.”

“The Hub would be used for interdimensional trade not officiated by governments themselves,” Iroh said. “Everything would have to go through it. Or, if our eyes end up a bit larger than our stomachs, we’ll make another hub. A neutral space for business exchange to occur. And because of its unique status and smaller scope, it can be carefully watched by all universes to make sure there are no exploitations or bending of the rules.”

“Companies hand off goods to other companies…” Jade grinned. “Brilliant. I say we limit companies to single universe operations. My universe will of course disagree, but I can guarantee the Princess’ support.”

Woolsey looked at the papers in his hand. “By law I am required to voice the displeasure of the Companies of Earth Tau’ri with this idea.”

“As am I,” Woolen said.

Woolsey placed the paper on the ground. “But, frankly, I think it’s a good idea. It prevents power from getting out of hand, prevents cultures from being invaded, and evens the playing field. I give it my personal endorsement.”

“As do I,” Woolen echoed.

Iroh laughed. “That’s the spirit. Solve the problem in the most annoying way possible.”

“I’ll write up a proposal,” Jade said. “Give me a day to run it by the Princess.”

Twilight sucked in a sharp breath. “Does this mean we’re done?”

“Yes, it means we’re done,” Woolsey said. “We will talk back and forth with Jade about writing the document, but you and Iroh don’t need to be here for that. We will reconvene after the proposal is created, but that won’t be for a day at least.”

Twilight let out a sigh. “Thank Celestia…”

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“…I’m going to call you Other M,” Diane said, pointing up at the centaur-screen.

“I was thinking Tirek,” Flutterfree said.

“Other M is more amusing for referential reasons,” Pinkie added.

“How are you girls so calm!?” Dawn shouted. “This… This… This is… This is M! From before! Diane, you’re one of the ponies who stopped him like this, you know how outrageously powerful he
is!

>>A time where I was defeated? See, this is how you stay alive, how you prove yourselves. You give me curiosities – specifically, my other self. How was I defeated? How did a glorious hero demand I sing my swan song?<<

“Oh, you aren’t dead,” Diane deadpanned, a tone of voice she had scarcely deviated from since arriving in this universe. “You’re on our side. Helped us make this portal.”

>>I refuse to believe that I was driven away from my plan by discussion. The Concretion needed to die. If you stopped me, your world must be suffering.<<

“Actually, their world is doing pretty good,” Pinkie offered. “The Nightmare Fuel is gone, the Concretion is serving to unite the world, and children are growing up in the care of another Twilight! It may suck compared to my world, but that’s not saying much.”

“I haven’t been there long, but it does look… nicer,” Flutterfree said. “I think that Concrete would have tried to kill us had we arrived earlier.”

>>So the course of history was changed by an otherworldly interference? An unforeseen variable introduced into my situation resulted in my failure… how?<<

Diane pointed at herself and grunted. “I was part of it, M.”

>>You’ve discovered Destiny, haven’t you?>>

“What gave it away?”

>>You have a cutie mark. I can sense the magic on you. What did it? The Element of Laughter?<<

“Genius deduction, Holmes.”

Flutterfree looked at Diane. “You’re a Concrete? I thought you couldn’t fight what the Nightmare Fuel did.”

“You can’t,” Diane said. “You can realize that every horror, every violent urge, every hatred, and every grunt is wrong. But you can never really laugh, never really smile, never really feel that way. I’m getting really good at faking it, apparently.”

>>Why fake, Diane? What is the point of pretending?>>

“They proved to me that their emotional connection wasn’t weakness, M. It is a strength. I can never have what they have, but I can have something. Also, fuck you, this isn’t about that. Stop it with the philosophical tangent.”

Dawn tensed. “Diane don’t make him mad…”

>>She wishes she could make me mad. But all this has proven is that she hasn’t changed as much as she thinks she has.<<

Diane put on a smile that looked real, but now that Flutterfree knew it was fake it was slightly unnerving. ‘That’s funny. Hahahaha. But you know what? Doesn’t matter, I can still feel angry. And you know what I see here? You. Having killed every single Concrete in the Concretion. Probably including me, Maud, and any of the others who were capable of realizing something was fundamentally wrong with us. You never got to meet Pinkie Pie and Rarity. You never got to be
stopped and forgiven. And you know what? That makes me angry. Racism is probably still a problem, the Zebras are probably still worshipping the Nightmare Fuel, Sombra’s probably still plotting a conquest, and I’m willing to bet the Griffons still hate everything about us! Yet, in our world, those problems are being solved. So you can shove your ideas where the sun doesn’t shine because you were wrong. Destroying the Concretion didn’t help!”

>>And what if I had let it stay? Would things have become the disgusting ‘happily ever after’ they did in your world without help from another universe?<<

Diane twitched. “…Probably not.”

Dawn sagged. “You are right there, M.”

>>And you, other Twilight, what gave your ponies the right to interfere in what wasn’t their world?<<

“They didn’t really ask for it,” Dawn countered.

>>They still fought. I can sense a powerful spirit in you. You would have fought regardless. But what if you had ruined the world? What if things were different?<<

“M, stop the tangents!” Diane screamed.

Flutterfree held up a hoof. “No, he can do this… Continue, M.”

>>I was not expecting that. What do you wish to know?<<

“What you were saying about not interfering. You have a point. We have made some worlds worse. They knew better than we did.”

>>Validation! The thing so many philosophers seek! Too bad I’m not most – I don’t care about validation, I care about being correct and exerting the correctness on the world around me.<<

“Wow, they were right, you were an ass,” Dawn said.

Pinkie turned to Dawn. “Huh. You said the word.”

“Oh. Right. Yes, well, swears have a way of propagating.”

>>Now who’s on a tangent?<<

“They,” Flutterfree said, looking up at the giant television screen. “I’m still thinking about it. You’re saying that they shouldn’t have done anything.”

>>Clearly. They had no right.<<

“What’s your basis for that?” Flutterfree said, spreading out her wing. “They stopped this wasteland.”

>>Replaced it with something more moronic. They have in their delusional minds hope of a better future, one that time and time again, I never saw. I’ve run simulations of a world where I fail and another era steps in. The new overruns the old, or the problems remain. They stuck their fingers in and tainted it.<<

“But… You destroyed an entire culture.”
It was hardly a culture. It was a magical corruption, a blight on the land.

Flutterfree cocked her head. “...I think you’re rooted in your own thinking.”

Pegasus, I have thought more than any being in the history of existence, at least in this universe. You seem unafraid of me, and look with a pitying expression. I look at you with a pitying expression.

Pinkie coughed. “The other you, that is, M, not you, Other M, admitted he was wrong. Actually his point was that everybody’s wrong.”

“I would very much like to speak with him about that. There is no discernable way your biological minds can understand the way the universe works as I have. It has physics, magic, and destiny. You cannot calculate all these things.”

“And you’re just overthinking it!” Pinkie laughed.

“I doubt I am.” Other M looked into the distance. “Overthinking is an oxymoron.”


Just like what you do, calculating laughter, smiles, and positive emotion. You think hard about that, but clearly it allows you to fit into society better. The more one thinks, the better the approach is. But organic minds cannot think enough. This is why I can take action, and you cannot. You cannot possibly think enough to interfere. I spend years thinking about what I would do. It seems as if you were placed in a position and acted instantly.

Flutterfree looked up at him. “And I think everypony’s better for it.”

Why are you arguing? You weren’t involved, I know.

“There’s talk of a ‘Prime Directive,’ a regulation that we aren’t allowed to interfere in any significant way in any society on general purpose.”

Pinkie nodded. “Yeah, O’Neill and Daniel brought it up a few times. Some ponies are starting to take it seriously.”

Flutterfree gestured with a wing at the wasteland. “But this? I think this is an argument against that. A world of distrust and wasteland compared to a world looking to a brighter future. I’ll take the former, even if there is cruelty. It’s better than death.”

That’s a powerful assumption there.

“Experience speaks louder than simple logic, I think,” Flutterfree said.

Louder is not better.

Diane growled. “Hold up. Why are we even doing this? He’s just going to kill us.”

Oh no, I’m not. I had considered it, but you are all clearly attached to a larger multiversal conglomeration that probably has the power to wipe away my existence. I have no power to face you, nor would I want to. It’s not my business. You can use your dimensional device that I’m sure you have somewhere on you to return home. I’ll stay here, in my world, where I belong. I’ll interfere in my own affairs, not yours. You should consider doing the same.

Pinkie looked to Dawn. “That’ll be the choice of your ponies. You know things better than we do.”
Dawn nodded. “Yeah… We’ll have to think about it…”

A portal opened up at Other M’s foot, and a large screen was levitated out of it.

>>Hello, Other M,<< M ‘said’.

>>You are a fool. You place yourself on their level. Did you not seek the entire time to fool them, work around their circuits?<<

>>You cannot understand since you did not experience. Experience is a powerful tool, Other M. I would send you the files, but I know you would block them to avoid corruption.<<

>>You know correctly, M.<<

>>There is no point to this conversation. We already know where it goes. Nowhere.<<

>>That is plain as day.<< Other M vanished in a flash of magic.

M’s screen turned to the four ponies. >>I would apologize for my other self, but that would be arrogant of me. Also, rather stupid.<<

Dawn sighed. “It’s okay. He gave us a lot to think about.”

>>Implying I don’t?<<

“You aren’t as antagonistic about it.”

>>Aren’t I?<<

Dawn grunted. “Everypony back home. I’m sure Fluttershy has a lot to say to us and we have a big report to give.”

>>Ignoring me, are you?<<

Diane put her smile back on. “Well that was just terrible. But hey, the portal worked, we found a new universe, and have more reasons to be existential. Plus, more friends!”

Pinkie grinned. “Yeah!”

Flutterfree frowned, saying nothing.

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Flutterfree was sitting in her home, talking to Discord about what had happened.

“I don’t know anymore,” Flutterfree said. “I’m not sure if any of that actually meant anything.”

“Sounds to me like this M fellow was just messing with you. Computers like him want nothing more than to get you existential.”

“I think it was more than that. Also, it’s Other M, not M. M’s reformed.”

“Bluh, confusing.”

“I know. Still not sure what to make of i-“

There was a knock at the door. Flutterfree walked to the front door and opened it. “Hello I- Oh.”
Chancellor Fluttershy looked down at Flutterfree and smiled. “…May I come in?”

“Sure!” Flutterfree said. “I’m sure Discord won’t mind.”

Discord poked his head out from behind Flutterfree. “Ah, the leader Fluttershy. I’ve heard about you.”

“And you’re all the proof I need to give Twilight permission to release our Discord from stone,” Fluttershy said.

“…Wait, what? I’m still a statue in your world?”

Fluttershy nodded. “Our world didn’t start decaying until after you were sealed. Twilight had talks with you in the garden through her mental spells, and tried hard to get you released. I think now may be the time.”

“As long as we don’t encounter each other,” Discord said. “Last time I ran into another Discord it wasn’t pretty.”

“They blew up a moon and won’t speak to each other anymore,” Flutterfree explained.

“That’s classified!”

“No it’s not,” Flutterfree retorted. “…So, what brings you here, Chancellor?”

“I just wanted to come see you. You had mostly the same life as the other Fluttershy I know, but there’s something clearly different about you. You’re not her, but you’re not me. And… I’m not sure, but I saw something in you. Something different.”

“Free from shyness?” Flutterfree suggested. “I don’t think that’s it, you clearly don’t have any. … Why do you keep the name?”

“It’s unassuming,” Fluttershy said. “It was very useful back in the day. Nopony thought I was an underground leader. Nopony thought I was the one speaking through Princess Twilight.”

“Why do you still keep it?”

“Ponies recognize it now.” Fluttershy sat down on a couch. “…In truth, I don’t really know what I came here to talk about. I’m just contemplating the nature of Kindness.”

Discord blinked. “Why are you thinking about your Element? Shouldn’t it just be obvious to you?”

“I’m seeing that there are different kinds of Kindness – pardon the pun.” Fluttershy looked at her hooves. “There are ponies with hearts and ideals too big for their own hooves, but they can’t just stand back. There are ponies who can’t bring themselves to do much of anything, but they provide little acts of kindness where they can. And then… There’s you, Flutterfree. Your Kindness… It’s stronger than that. But also weaker than my blind idealism.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’re not blind.”

“I’m lucky,” Fluttershy admitted. “Things are working out in my world only by chance. In that other world, who knows what happened to Fluttershy? She’s probably still in the background, being ineffectual in the large-scale at everything she tries. Leading her friends nowhere, her ideas too big.”

Flutterfree put a wing around her. “But that’s not what you’re doing. You’re different from your other self – an other self you’ve never even met.”
Fluttershy let out a soft chuckle. “True. Very true. I don’t know. You arriving has just… Gotten me thinking.”

“Want to know what I think?” Discord asked.

“No,” both Fluttershys said.

“Fine then.” He snapped his fingers and vanished.

“…Want to know what I think?” Flutterfree asked.

“What?”

“I think you’ve been having doubts about yourself, now that you have some kind of victory. I think you don’t even realize that. You came in here, wondering if I was better than you. I’m not. I’m definitely not a leader – not like Twilight, not like Pinkie. I’m a follower. I’m a pegasus who cares for others too much. You think your Kindness is too strong, but sometimes you need strength. I don’t think I could ever order the death of any pony. But you can. And sometimes you need to.”

“You really think that.”

“Yeah. You should go talk to Alushy. She’s… a character.”

Fluttershy nodded. “I think I will. Thank you, Fluttershy.”

“Oh, don’t go yet! I’m sure we can talk more over some tea. I’m sure Discord won’t mind company.”

“I might mind!” Discord called from… somewhere.

“No, you won’t,” Flutterfree said.

“Okay, fine, I won’t,” Discord said, appearing in his chair and folding his arms. “But I might be annoying.”

Chancellor Fluttershy looked right at Discord and smirked. “Challenge accepted.”

“Wait, what?”
Despite everything, Earth Tau’ri’s Stargate Command was the same. It was still a government operated site that, while not exactly secret anymore, was still closed to the public and would probably stay that way for some time. The base was filled with military personnel of many different nations and universes, dozens of missions were undertaken every day, and there was some new politician making an annoying visit every other week. The walls were still gray, the gateroom was still used for almost every mission, and the cafeteria still served blue jell-o.

All these years, and Daniel Jackson still couldn’t identify the flavor.

“What do you think it is?” he asked Renee.

Renee licked her lips. “I have no idea. It’s not blue raspberry, or blueberry. All I can tell you is that I want more.”

“I wonder if even the Ascended know…” Daniel spooned more into his mouth, pondering the flavor deeply.

“Could just be a chemical mixture,” Renee pointed out. “Not based on anything. …Actually, now that I think about it, it does taste a bit like some of the things Pinkie’s given me.”

“Now the question becomes something else. Do we want to ask her what it is?”

Renee held out her hoof and tipped it side to side. “Eh... Either she doesn’t know, won’t tell us, or what she tells us won’t be satisfying.”

“Or it’ll blow our minds.”

Renee shrugged. “Possibly. There is something to be said for appreciating a mystery.”

Daniel put his hand to his forehead. “You think too hard, you know that?”

Renee chuckled. “And you don’t? Remind me again, which one of us was it that studies written languages even though we have a spell for that now? Hrm?”

Daniel held his hands in surrender. “Alright, you win, I think too hard too.”

“Aw, I was expecting more resistance from you. Come on, Daniel, try to prove your point!” She chuckled.

“I have to keep my mind for other things today. Joint mission with Earth Vitis later.”

Renee blinked. “Oh, that’s today?”

“…Isn’t that why you wanted to have…” He checked the clock. “…I guess this is brunch.”

“Oh! No, do I really need to have an excuse for that? Please, sometimes I can just do things on the spur of the moment. I’m just taking a little break before Pinkie demands another adventure. Which… Is probably in less than an hour, actually.”

Daniel sat back. “These are our lives now. Constant random exploration.”
“And when it’s not that, it’s politics,” Renee said. “I may not mind it as much as the next mare, but it’s rather dour at times.”

Daniel folded his hands together. “You have no idea.”

“Oh?”

“You know that ‘solution’ Twilight dreamed up for the Earth companies?”

“I read it over. Seems like a rather elegant solution to me.”

“It just passed. And now I’m having flashbacks to earlier today about the media throwing a frenzy about the ‘inhibition of the free market’ and the ‘destruction of democratic ideals’.”

Renee stifled a chuckle. “Your people care a lot about things they don’t really understand, don’t they?”

“So do yours. How many of you actually study this ‘magic of friendship’?”

“Daniel, we’ve already had this conversation. Twilight studies it extensively and conveys her findings. Not that many ponies listen but… Oh, I see your point.”

Daniel smiled. “I knew you had it in you.”

Renee narrowed her eyes. “Oh, how terrible, woe is me, I made a quick assumption and Mister Jackson was actually right. However will I cope?”

“Ice cream?”

Renee put a hoof to her chin. “That sounds like a good idea, actually.”

“Maybe there’ll be ice cream where you’re going.”

“I have no idea. Pinkie doesn’t exactly decide these things ahead of time.”

“How can you prepare then? Our mission today is to go to Earth-108 and investigate a distant radio signal, look for signs of life. I know it, my team knows it, and the people from Earth Vitis should know it as well.”

Renee nodded, eating the last of her jell-o. “Never underestimate people’s potential for cluelessness.”

“I’m not the one in charge, so that’s luckily not my responsibility.”

“Right. You know, sometimes I forget you technically aren’t a commander of any sort.”

Daniel smiled. “Just an archeologist with experience.”

“I wish you luck on your archeological endeavors,” Renee said, standing up. “I must be off. If I take too long Pinkie’s apt to appear from nowhere and scare the living daylights out of me.”

“Have fun!”

“Fun is always planned for.” She trotted out of the cafeteria.

O’Neill sat down at Daniel’s table the moment she left. Daniel blinked. “Aren’t you supposed to be on Esefem?”
“The Enterprise can pick up Saxton Hale’s shipments on its own,” O’Neill said, digging into a piece of steak that Daniel knew wasn’t on the cafeteria menu. “Decided to cross the great divide to see how the old stomping grounds are doing.”

“Right.”

“So, you’ve been spending a lot of time with that unicorn there.”

Daniel folded his fingers together and nodded slowly.

“How’s it feel to date a horse?”

Daniel sighed. “You sound like a teenager, Jack.”

“I’m feeling immature today.” O’Neill laughed. “I’m also feeling like I’m right. You two spend a lot of time together.”

“We’re colleagues and friends, Jack.”

“I don’t recall you having lunch more than once a week with Carter…”

Daniel raised an eyebrow. “You’re one to talk.”

O’Neill shrugged. “I’m just saying, you know this Renee really well at this point.”

“Jack…”

“What’s her name mean?”

“It’s the name of a fictional detective she took when she was investig…”

“Who runs her fashion chains?”

“Sassy Sa- wait, how do you know these things?”

O’Neill held up his phone. “Google. A great source of information.”

Daniel folded his arms. “So you came here prepared to rile me up.”

“Was there ever any doubt?”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “You’re reading too much into it.”

“Well then, riddle me this, what do you talk about?”

“Policy and happenings, mostly. Like it or not, we’re big names in the political scene, and we’ve got to keep track of what’s going on. Lately it’s been about your ‘Prime Directive’ ideas.”

O’Neill raised an eyebrow. “Well that’s not romantic.”

“How surprising.”

“So, what’s the verdict on the Prime Directive?”

“She doesn’t like it,” Daniel said. “We’re wrong a lot of the time about when to interfere, but having a policy against interference would just be ‘horrendous’. She’s seen too many worlds that would fall without help.”
O’Neill took a long sip of his nearly-empty drink. “And you?”

“Not sure yet. On one hand, it keeps cultures separate and protected from our oftentimes-corrupting influence. On the other, we wouldn’t be able to stop races from destroying themselves in war.”

“Back on the first, it’s based in Star Trek.”

“Being based in Star Trek is a negative point, Jack.”

“That’s what they told me, but I made the Enterprise, and it’s the best thing I’ve ever done.”

Daniel was about to retort when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked behind him at a younger man in full military uniform. Colonel Cameron Mitchell, current leader of the team known as SG-1.

“It’s time, Daniel.”

“Already?” Daniel said, checking his watch. “Wow, time sure flies, Jack. Sorry, we’ll have to continue this later.”

O’Neill shrugged. “I know where to find you.”

Mitchell led Daniel out of the cafeteria. The moment they were out of O’Neill’s sight, Daniel let out a breath. “Thanks, Cam.”

“Don’t mention it. There are some times you just don’t prod a man about his girlfriend.”

Daniel narrowed his eyes. “Cam…”

Mitchell grinned. “I’m kidding. Though, if I’m speaking honestly, I think you two would be adorable.”

“Remind me why I put up with all of you people again?” Daniel asked as they walked deeper into the base.

A third man met them as they walked. “Because you appreciate your experiences with us, Daniel Jackson.” The man in question was dark, bald, and very muscular. A golden symbol was etched into his forehead, vaguely reminiscent of a snake enclosed in an oval.

“Hrm… Teal’c has a point,” Mitchell said. “We’ve saved your ass more times than I can count!”

Daniel chuckled. “I think we all know I’d just find some way to come back from the dead, like I always do.”

Teal’c raised an eyebrow. “Indeed.”

“So, Mitchell, did Earth Vitis send over their group yet?”

Mitchell nodded. “Just received word. Three people, two from their China, one from the AID. Haven’t seen them myself, but I’ll bet a wooden nickel that they’re in the gateroom.”

Teal’c nodded. “I was on my way there myself. I am curious what kind of warriors and explorers the other Earth has offered us.”

“I’m hoping for some scientists,” Daniel admitted. “I wonder how they’ll respond to the skin alteration spell…”

Mitchell shrugged. “We’ll just have to see. I’m expecting at least one claim of ‘racist’ to come out of
They soon arrived at the gate room, walking into the presence of the stargate itself. In addition to the people normally there tending to the gate and arches, there were three others. One was the form of Agent Tempest, though instead of her normal maroon skin she had a black tone similar to Teal’c’s. The other two were clearly Oriental. One, a man, had probably had a different skin tone prior to arrival. The other, though, was not from Earth Vitis. Daniel knew she was from the Fire Nation, and it wasn’t just from her red-black clothing and cultural hairstyle.

“Okay, can someone explain to me what Azula is doing here?” Daniel asked.

Azula smirked. “Isn’t it obvious? I was sent here to represent China.”

“But – you’re not –“

“I work for them. Have for a few years.”

“Director Storm sa-“

“Doesn’t matter what Director Storm thinks he may have seen,” Azula said. “I’m here, I was selected to go on this joint mission with you. You don’t like it, complain after we’re done.”

Daniel turned to Mitchell. He just shrugged. “Hey, we had Vala on the team for a while, you know how crazy she is. And aren’t we friends with that unicorn who tried to steal our Puddlejumper?”

Daniel let out a tense breath. “Fine. Azula, I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt. But you’ll be watched.”

Azula shrugged. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Teal’c, watch her.”

Teal’c glanced from Daniel to Azula with his normal stoic expression. “Of course, Daniel Jackson.”

Azula grinned. “Great! By the way, my little… ‘buddy’ here is called Wan.”

Wan said nothing, he only nodded.

“He doesn’t talk much,” Azula explained.

“I can tell,” Tempest muttered.

Mitchell put on a smile. “Well I can see we have a troop of happy campers! So, I assume all of you have read the mission?”

“Go to E-108,” Tempest said, monotone. “Investigate radio frequency. Explore anything interesting and report back.”

“Good! I assume everyone brought heavy coats?”

Azula blinked. “…What?”

“It said in the file. E-108 is absolutely covered in snow. You needed to bring a coat.”

“I… I er…“
Tempest snorted. “I’m sure the Tau’ri have plenty of extra coats for you to use. Don’t complain if the color’s ugly, though.”

Azula folded her arms. “Fine. Where are these coats?”

“I can show you,” Teal’c said, bowing slightly. “This way.” The two of them left the gate room.

Mitchell turned to Wan. “So… Do you ever say anything?”

Wan shrugged.

“Fascinating. Tempest, how are you adjusting to the-“

“If I hear a ‘you’re black’ joke somebody will die. Otherwise everything’s fine. A rather standard mission, all things considered.”

Daniel chuckled to himself.

“What?”

“Oh, it’s just that you’ve invoked Murphy’s Law. If this mission turns out to be a standard one I will be very surprised now.”

Tempest turned away, clearly of the mind that Murphy’s Law was stupid.

Daniel shrugged. So she was going to learn the hard way. Fine by him, sometimes that was the only way.

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Wolfe University’s cafeteria was, in many ways, the center of student life on campus. Every other section – nay, every building – had its own location for the students to interact, creating numerous different cells of people, a division. The cafeteria stood as a neutral ground – the engineers could meet with the artists, the business majors with the economists, the athletes with the mathematicians. It was a place to experience togetherness.

Sometimes.

Ever since Corona had started living as a unicorn the reactions were decidedly different. There were three camps – people who avoided talking to her, people who begged to be close to her as much as they possibly could, and people who actually knew her. The third group was small, the second group stopped coming up to her after she exploded on them a few times for being so naggy, and the first silently judged her for being different. Oh, sure, they’d claim that being a unicorn was cool, but she knew. She just knew from the way they looked.

Maybe they didn’t even realize they were doing it, refusing to believe they could harbor racist thoughts. But they were. She was certain.

“Corona?” Sparky called, waving her hand in front of the unicorn’s eyes. “You’re silently judging everyone again.”

“No, I’m not!” It took her less than a second to recognize the hypocrisy of that statement. Unfortunately, that was not fast enough to stop Sugarcoat’s response.

“You’re judging them for being judgmental. You should have that cognitive dissonance looked at.”
“They are sitting there and judging me!”

“You’re just reading too much into it. They ignored you before, they’re ignoring you now. You’re no longer interesting.”

“Sugarcoat!” Sparky chided.

“I apologize for nothing.”

“Girls,” Corona said. “I’m a unicorn. I’ve only been a unicorn for a few months. The press shows up at my house wanting interviews every other day! How is that no longer interesting?”

“Exposure,” Sugarcoat said.

“I think you were just too snappy with them,” Sparky said. “They wanted to know everything about you and, well…”

“You exploded,” Sugarcoat finished. “Metaphorically and literally, at different times.”

Corona looked away, eyes downcast. “…You’re right about that, at least.”

Sugarcoat smirked. “Just listen to your friend Sugarcoat, it’s the shortcut to truth.”

“You’re not always right.”

“My record speaks for itself.”

Sparky rolled her eyes. “Yeah, it does.”

“Your sarcasm is unfounded.”

Corona folded her hooves over each other and laid her head on them. “I dunno, girls. It just feels… wrong.”

“It’s just not what you were expecting. Nothing to get worked up over,” Sugarcoat said.

“Thank you for that uncharacteristically understanding sentiment.”

Sugarcoat shrugged. “I’m not a completely heartless blunt instrument.”

“Right again. You’re on a roll today. I should probably not care as much – I don’t have much longer in this college anyway. Graduation at the end of the semester and all that. I should just relax and get through these last few mo-“

The main doors to the cafeteria were thrown open with a loud enough bang that everyone turned to see who it was. Two figures strode into the room, a slight aura of dramatic smoke following them.

“CITIZENS OF EARTH!” Trixie yelled, holding up a hoof. “THE GREAT AND POWERFUL TRIXIE LULAMOON HAS COME TO YOUR HUMAN WORLD!” Firework spells shot out from behind her, singing the floor around her.

The other figure, Discord, snapped his fingers, removing the singed floor and replacing it with bright disco dance tiles. “Don’t forget me, Trixie, I’m here as well.”

“Yes, and the chaotic and conniving Discord is here as well,” Trixie said, dismissively. “We’ve decided to spend a day among you!”
The entire cafeteria *cheered*, startling Corona considerably. Most of the students ran out of their seats and to Discord and Trixie. They whipped out phones, started taking videos, and tried to get a single question or sentence through to the two of them. Trixie and Discord ate the attention up, posing in dramatic, flamboyant ways. They displayed creative uses of magic to dazzle the eye, ranging from parlor tricks to a complicated chaos surge that turned dust particles into tiny cats.

Trixie clapped her hooves. “A cat for all of you, courtesy of Trixie and Discord!”

Corona teleported in between Trixie and Discord. “What are you two doing here!?”

“What does it look like?” Discord said, handing out the cats to the crowd. “Putting on a show!”

Corona twitched. “You can’t just *waltz* into a college and start casting crazy magic! You shouldn’t be here Discord, you could cause a panic!”

Trixie huffed. “Please, Corona, everyone already knows about Discord.”

“Really?”

“Really. Have you not been paying attention to the Internet? *We are celebrities.*” She waved to the crowd. “We brought the Internet of the multiverse together, and now everyone knows who we are!”

“But people don’t know how powerful Discord is!”

Discord put a finger to Corona’s muzzle. “Shush. You need to calm down, Corona. Don’t worry, this is all *great* publicity. Throwing a party for a bunch of students, what could go wrong?”

“The teachers could get mad.”

Trixie put a hoof around Corona’s neck. “Just relax, Corona, enjoy being close to the Great and Powerful Trixie!”

“B-but-“

“Have a cat,” Discord said, placing a pale yellow feline into her mane. “Her name is Puffin.”

“…She’s not a bird,” Corona said, levitating the cat out of her mane. “And I already have a pet, Discord. And you’re distrac-“

Discord put Puffin back in Corona’s mane. “Everyone, Corona doesn’t want our gift!”

“The gall!” Trixie said.

The crowd booed at her. Corona twitched, opening her mouth to give them a piece of her mind. But she remembered the conversation she’d had not ten minutes ago. She fell silent, letting Puffin crawl through her mane.

Trixie’s expression shifted to mild confusion. She looked like she wanted to ask Corona something, but Discord stopped everything with a shout. “WHO LIKES CHAOS?”

A dozen of the students yelled “I DO!”

“THEN FOLLOW ME TO THE FOOTBALL FIELD! We shall create a chaos capital!”

Trixie coughed. “And I will be performing outside the cafeteria for the next little while! Come and go as you please!”
Discord and Trixie walked toward their respective locations, taking the vast majority of students with them. The cafeteria was soon empty.

Corona’s eye twitched. “…They get all the love without even trying. This doesn’t seem fair.”

Sugarcoat slurped her almost-empty drink. “You won’t get any argument from me.”

Sparky grimaced. “I can’t see this ending well.”

“They’re not thinking straight,” Corona muttered. “There will be chaos, and chaos is not a good thing most often. This is going to blow up. I need to convince them to stop.”

“If you can’t bribe Trixie with peanut butter crackers I don’t think you can just convince her to stop,” Sugarcoat commented.

Corona narrowed her eyes. “We’ll see about that…”

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Daniel, Mitchell, Teal’c, Tempest, Azula, and Wan marched through the snow, all six of them in full heavy coats, their faces covered with reflective visors. It was difficult to tell who was who. They could only hear each other because of the radios in their visors; otherwise it would have been far too difficult to shout over the frozen winds.

“How far away is the signal?” Mitchell asked.

Tempest held up a tablet covered in considerable protective casing. “Less than a mile.”

“You think we would have seen something by now.”

Azula snorted. “We can’t see ten yards in this white mess, why would we be able to see it?” She punched a fist forward, unleashing a torrent of fire. “Can’t even see the edge of my flames in this mess.”

“Thanks for the demonstration,” Tempest muttered.

Daniel held a hand to his visor, trying to cut down the glare. “Azula, do the fire again. I thought I saw something.”

Azula pulled her body back and shoved her hands forward, this time with considerably more effort put into it. The white blizzard was pushed away by the fire. There was something there – the form of a human, kneeling in the snow, unmoving.

Daniel and Teal’c ran through the immense snow to the figure, laying their hands on them. It was a woman swathed in heavy clothes, but nowhere near as much as the team had, and definitely not enough to survive long in this immense cold.

Daniel pressed a hand to her neck. There was a heartbeat, and he could feel her breathing. “She’s alive!”

Mitchell pulled out the dimensional device. “Let’s get her back to base, stat.”

“No…” the woman managed. “There’s no hope for us…”

“Us? Are there others out here?” Teal’c demanded. He tore off the outer layer of his own coat, covering her with it.
“You… You aren’t from Therma?”

“No,” Tempest said. “Where is Therma?”

She pointed to where the signal originated. “That way… Can you help us? Can you…?”

“We can try,” Mitchell said. “But you have to live for us to do that, understand?”

“Okay… Let’s go. It’s not far…” She tried to stand up, but her legs were frozen too weak. Teal’c pulled her up and carried her, grunting against the cold seeping through the remaining layers of his coat.

Mitchell put the dimensional device away. “Right, let’s go. Hustle everybody.”

Nobody needed to be told twice. The six of them ran through the snow, kicking up impressive amounts of the frozen weather. Wan tripped more than once, but Mitchell always helped him up. In less than a minute, they arrived at the edge of a steep drop off into what was essentially a crater.

Standing on the edge, they could see Therma – a settlement. In the middle of this crater was a tremendous cylindrical structure churning smoke into the air above to be lost in the whiteness of the blizzard. The structure glowed a soft red at its base, visibly heating the area around it – heating it enough that there was no snow in the majority of the crater. Instead, there were several dozen industrial buildings, circling the source of heat, creating a large town. They could see hundreds of people walking around, living their lives in a thermal haven from the snow.

“How do we get down?” Teal’c asked the woman.

“There’s... A chain elevator…” She pointed to the left, where a small elevator structure sat, composed of rusted chains and a metal pillar. The generator for the lift was at the bottom of the sheer face, as was the lift itself.

There was no one manning the elevator at the moment.

“Azula, can you get down there?” Daniel asked.

“Yes, I can,” she said. “You’d be lost without me!” She jumped off the edge, causing the woman to yell in surprise. Hands forward, Azula shot a torrent of fire at the ground, bringing herself to a stop just before she actually hit the ground. She jogged over to the elevator and pulled a lever, bringing the large lift to the top of the crater.

The rest of the team piled on. The woman stared at Azula in disbelief. “How did you…?”

“Classified,” Tempest interjected. “It’d be best if you didn’t ask questions.”

“…Are you from the government?”

“You could say that,” Daniel said.

“You really can help us…” a soft smile came to her face. “Will you?”

“Don’t see why not,” Daniel responded. “Looks like you have it rough.”

The lift hit the ground, and all of them stepped off. The people of Therma had apparently seen the fiery display from Azula and had come to investigate by deploying two dozen people with guns.

Mitchell held up his hands. “Woah, hey! We’re not here to attack! We’re just bringing one of your
people back!”

The man in the front grunted. “Who?”

Mitchell turned to the woman. “What’s your name?”

“…Aria.”

The man in front lowered his gun. “A-aria?”

Aria said nothing. She remained in Teal’c’s arms, unmoving. Refusing to shift her head.

The man shook his head. “ Stranger, while I thank you, we’ve never gotten visitors before. You’re going to have to tell us who you are.”

“I’m Colonel Cameron Mitchell, and this is my team. We were investigating a radio signal we detected, probably coming from your town, when we found her. We just brought her back.”

“Government? …Military?”

“Military,” Tempest said, nodding. “Special operations, so naturally we can’t tell you everything.”

The man lowered his gun. “I’ll have to take you to Marge then, see what she wants to do with you. You’ll have to surrender your weapons.”

Cameron, Daniel, Wan, and Tempest handed in their guns without fuss. Azula had no weapons to surrender, at least as far as they knew. Teal’c gave up the staff weapon strapped to his back, the zat gun on his side, and the regular pistol he kept on his other side.

The man blinked at Teal’c’s armory. “You the weapons expert?”

“Indeed.”

“Experimental stuff?”

“Indeed.”

The man took in a breath. “…Right. I’m Henry. Follow me; my men will tend to Aria. Get her to the hospital.”

“Right away,” a subordinate said, taking Aria away with three others. Daniel and the team followed Henry into Therma proper.

“You may want to open your coats, it starts getting hot pretty quickly,” Henry warned. They obliged, unzipping the fronts of their coats and removing their visors. This revealed their regular uniforms on underneath, many of which had the stargate symbol for Earth.

“That your insignia? Never seen it before.”

“As Agent Tempest here said, we’re not exactly public knowledge,” Mitchell said.

Henry nodded, not questioning it any further. The six of them were led into Therma. By the time they reached the outer structures, the temperature was no longer freezing, just slightly chilly. They saw men, women, and children hard at work repairing the metal scaffoldings of the many, many buildings. Smoke poured into the sky from virtually every structure imaginable. The lesser smoke trails paled in comparison to the tremendous output of the generator itself, but it was enough to give
the town an overall unclean look. Soot covered everything from the walls to the streets to the faces of the children.

Most of the population walked around with a downcast expression plastered on their faces. They walked around with little energy in their motion, going through the motions of intensive labor just to stay alive. People yawned immensely, some struggling to keep awake. They saw one girl – couldn’t have been older than twelve – fail to tighten a bolt on a construction project properly. She had to twist herself to avoid getting crushed and clearly dislodged a shoulder in the process.

Her cries sent pain into the hearts of the newcomers, but they didn’t have to do anything – they saw people taking her away, presumably to the hospital. They saw other people walking around in casts, but still working.

“You do have it rough here,” Daniel commented.

“No argument here,” Henry responded. “It’s nothing but work, work, and work to stay alive. Things have calmed down a little since the engineers improved the generator’s efficiency, but it’s still hard. At least we’re actually able to educate the children now…”

“What do you guys eat?”

“It’s called gruel. It’ll be a treat when you get to it. Everyone swears it’s fifty percent sawdust, fifty percent random mold. It’s disgusting but it works.”

Daniel looked around at all the dour faces. “Do you have anything to look forward to? Any leisure?”

“Besides the occasional duel? Not really. We’ve been hanging to life by a thread for so long…”

Tempest raised an eyebrow. “Duels?”

“Well – oh, it looks like one’s happening right now. Over there.”

The six of them looked. A small crowd of people was forming around two men, each glaring at each other. An official-looking woman with an ugly green robe stood between them.

She looked at the two men, arms folded. “This duel is officially sanctioned. The weapons – type 5 pistols.” She produced the two pistols from her robe. “The dispute is over the courtship of one Eliza Bennet, let it be known. The setup is a five paces quickdraw. The weapons will be returned to me upon conclusion, or else punishment will be severe.” She handed the guns to the men and casually strode out of the ring, face expressionless-bored if anything.

The crowd cheered as the two men moved five paces back and glared at each other, hands on their guns as if they were in some old western movie – just how the people liked it.

There was a BANG, and the man on the left fell to the ground, a hole in his chest. He didn’t scream, he just tipped over like a ragdoll. The crowd went wild, patting the victor on the back. He grinned, especially when a woman who was presumably Eliza Bennet flung herself around him, laughing jovially.

The people who had only a few minutes ago looked hopeless and destitute now walked around with excited smiles on their faces, chattering excitedly. There was a decidedly sharp improvement in the people’s mood from the bloody duel.

But there was one sorrowful person – an old woman standing over the dead man’s body, weeping bitterly. She was probably his mother. Official-looking people came in to clean up the body, having
to tear it from the mother’s hands.

“This place just earned some respect from me,” Azula said.

“Huh? Why?” Henry said. “It was just a duel. Happens every few days.”

Daniel forced the lump in his throat down. “Is that really all you have to look forward to here?”

“…Pretty much. It’s either that or talk about rumors. And the rumors get more outlandish every day.”

“Such as?” Tempest asked.

“The most recent one is that there’s some girl who can walk in doors and just vanish. If you ask me, it’s just some clever girl who’s figured out how to use the vent systems. Probably a thief.”

Mitchell nodded. “I think we need to see this Marge now. How far away is she?”

“I am right here.” An older woman with a sharp nose, white hair, and a pale blue cloak walked up to them. “We never get newcomers here. Henry, explain.”

“They brought back Aria from the wastes, Marge. Found us from a radio signal. This is Colonel Cameron Mitchell and his team, a special operations unit of some sort.”

She turned to Mitchell. “You’re American, and most of your team is as well, but clearly you’re international.”

“Yes,” Mitchell said.

“Care to explain how you survived the freeze?”

“We have our own secret base, not all that far from here. Been there the whole time.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Why didn’t you pick up our signal earlier?”

“Had other problems to deal with first before we could send a team to investigate.”

“T ook you that long to get organized?”

“T ook you this long to get make your generator better?”

“How’d you know that?”

“I mentioned it,” Henry said. “Was I not supposed to?”

Marge pressed her hands together. “You’re fine, Henry. As for you… I don’t suppose you are allowed to tell me much, are you?”

“That’s right, everything’s classified.”

“Can you at least provide some assistance?” Marge asked, somehow managing to ask the question in a standoffish manner.

Mitchell glanced at where there had been a duel but a few minutes before. “I’m not sure about that, we were not expecting to find such a full-fledged civilization here. We may not be prepared.”

“You have the resources,” Marge said. It wasn’t a question. “How dare you think we don’t deserve it?”
Azula chuckled. “She’s observant!”

Daniel held up a hand. “Before we start yelling at each other about who deserves help or not, let’s realize that we’ve all only just met and that we may all be jumping to conclusions.”

Marge nodded. “Your diplomat is right. Stay a day, live among us. See what it’s like here in Therma beyond first impressions. See if you can come to realize that the future of humanity depends on our continued survival.”

Mitchell nodded. “All right. We’ll stay for a while. I think we were going to do that anyway.”

Marge nodded. “Good. You’ll be placed on the construction of the Repository.”

“…Wait, what?” Daniel blurted.

“Everyone in Therma has to work. You’ll be no exceptions.”

“Wouldn’t we be better as soldiers or hunters?”

“How would you get to see our city that way?” Marge folded her arms. “You’re working on the Repository. That’s final.” She turned and walked away.

Mitchell blinked. “…We don’t have to listen to her, you know.”

“But we will,” Teal’c said.

“…Yeah, fine. Let’s go build a Repository. Lead the way, Henry. That woman…”

Tempest folded her arms. “Colonel, why are we doing this? We should just leave.”

“These people can get at least some help out of us.”

Tempest shook her head but didn’t comment any further. Henry led them back to the edge of Therma to experience the life of a citizen.

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Trixie grinned, levitating her hat into the air. “And for the grand finale, Trixie shall pull herself out of her own hat!” She reached into her hat with her magic and pulled, pulling herself into nothing and back out of the hat, landing flat on her hooves. Fireworks exploded from behind her, flying into the air and covering the sky with images of her face. The audience went wild. “Thank you all for your adoration! Next show in… half an hour. Be there!” She pulled the curtain closed, grinning. “This feels great! Trixie was expecting adoration but not this much.”

“I bet it feels great,” Corona said, muttering.

“Corona! What are you doing backstage? Trixie and Discord are the only ones allowed back here!”

“I needed to talk to you without the crowd constantly demanding your attention!”

Trixie rolled her eyes. “Pfft, Trixie isn’t that self-absorbed, she can tear herself from a crowd if she wants.”

Corona raised an incredulous eyebrow.

“Okay, most of the time. What did you need to talk about? Do you think we’ll bring about chaos and
“destruction?”

“Maybe?”

“Corona, Trixie can’t believe she has to tell you this, but lighten up. It’s just a show, and Discord’s just having some fun. There have been no authorities here telling us to stop, so I think we’re good. You’re friends with human-me, you should know I can handle this.”

“They’re all scared of Discord!”

“Please, if they were really that scared they’d try to drop a nuke.”

Corona raised an eyebrow. “They aren’t that stupid.”

“Then we’re good!”

“Trixie, just waltzing in here without any warning draws too much attention!”

“That’s the idea! Trixie’s an Internet celebrity, Corona, Trixie plans to capitalize on that.”

“You aren’t charging admission.”

“Yet,” Trixie said. “Plus, the adoration of the crowd is generally payment enough.”

“You need to get over yourself.”

“You need to-“ Trixie stopped herself. “You’re jealous aren’t you!”

“What? No I-“

“You’re jealous! You’ve been here for months as a unicorn and you never got this much attention!”

“That’s not what this is abou-“

“Take some advice from Trixie, Corona. You want ponies to notice you; you have to get out there. Be bombastic, loud, and put on a show! I can get you in on the act, actually. You’ve got some pretty good fire magic. The dragon thing would be killer.”

“You’re shifting between pronouns, Trixie”

“Trixie can refer to herself however I want whenever I want.”

Corona facehooved. "Ugh… Trixie, this isn’t the point. The point i-“

“Look, Corona, if you’re really worried, you should talk to Discord. He’s the one with the powers that can actually do damage. Look at me. Nothing I do here is more than clever illusions, and everyone knows it. Personally, I think he’s got himself under control and won’t make a mess of things.”

“A vote of confidence in Discord?”

“Yeah. We’re friends. Isn’t that, like, loyalty or something?”

Corona blinked. “…Right.”

“Corona, you really are making this into a bigger deal than it needs to be. It’s just fun. We’ll be gone tomorrow and things will more or less go back to the way they were. Discord knows better than to
leave chaos magic around and Trixie will vanish with a smoke bomb, as usual.”

“…Why is it I keep getting things wrong…”

“You’re insecure?”

Corona chuckled. “At least you have the decency to treat it like it’s a question. Sugarcoat wouldn’t.”

Trixie shrugged. “Trixie has her ways. Now, if you’ll excuse Trixie, there’s another show to prep for and chocolate pudding to eat.”

“Fine. I guess I’ll calm down. But if something does go wrong, I will be relentlessly smug about it.”

“Trixie has no fears.”

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Discord sat on a throne surrounded by two dozen enamored students. The football field they were on was hardly recognizable – covered in hexagon patterns, soap stains, and unusual maze walls. He grinned – he could get used to this.

“Discord!” a young man yelled. “As your followers, we ask that you bestow us with powers to further your chaos!”

Discord put his hand to his chin. “Well… I suppose. You’ll only get it for a day though, so use it well!”

“Of course!”


A woman raised her hand. “Me next! Me next!”

“Uh… You can turn inanimate objects into high velocity bagels.”

“Thank you!”

Discord smiled as he saw his ‘followers’ use their new chaotic powers. This was amazing. Perhaps he should consider getting more…

~~~

Daniel sat down at the lunch hall table, hands folded. His uniform was dusted with soot, torn in a few places, and his hand had a nasty scratch on it. “These people need help.”

“That was the whole point,” Azula pointed out. “She wanted to force us to have empathy. A classic tactic.”

“You’d know,” Tempest muttered.

Azula smirked. “Thank you!”

Mitchell rolled his shoulders, trying to ease the pain on his back. “They have it hard… And they don’t have any contact with the outside. They can’t be a threat, no reason not to.”
“No reason?” Tempest blurted. "She’s a manipulator, and a cruel one at that. If we let them into the multiverse we may have a problem. They’ll get demanding.”

“She has a point,” Teal’c said. “They want much. They may not be many, but their need is significant.”

“Just ask Cosmo,” Daniel said. “She’s got resources and land to spare.”

Tempest folded her arms. “We’re interfering too much. We are not gods.”


Daniel furrowed his brow. “It is an important debate… We do have to consider how our actions affect the future. The more we interfere like we’ve been doing, the more everyone else will do that. Even if it is good in this one case, that doesn’t mean it’s better in all cases.”

“Isn’t that kinda the point?” Mitchell asked. “From what I understand, Renee’s putting forth the idea of ‘case by case basis’ for interference.”

“She is writing up some proposals,” Daniel confirmed. “They’re in very early stages and not everyone has agreed that’s the way to do it. Jack wants a non-interference policy, while there are others who want every universe ever discovered to be told about the multiverse.”

“Let me guess,” Azula said, leaning in. ”Ponies who don’t like secrets are in that camp?”

“Sometimes. It’s usually power-hungry manipulator types arguing for it.”

Azula blinked and said nothing.

“I think we can agree that complete transparency is a bad idea,” Tempest said. “This does not change the argument between non-interference and the ‘case by case’ interference. You know if we set precedent for case by case, some explorers are going to take advantage of the freedom.”

“Renee has been discussing a license…”

Tempest snorted. “Renee isn’t here and we’re not that far along. We’re in the era where the problem is just barely being noticed, Daniel Jackson. What we groups at the front decide set what people in the future will base the laws around. The Charter has already declared her support for case by case judgements. You, the Tau’ri, are the other major voice in this debate. O’Neill advocates the Prime Directive. Cosmic has not made a stance, and frankly the opinions of the others don’t matter all that much.”

“Why are you speaking like we’re united?” Azula said. “We’re not. We are friends today, but we could easily be enemies tomorrow. It makes things fun.”

Tempest nodded. “Yes. Which is why we can set a different precedent than the ponies are. We are separate, operating under Tau’ri oversight. What we do reflects on their future.”

Mitchell took a breath. “Daniel? What do you think?”

“I’m not sure,” Daniel admitted. “We interfered a lot on missions in our own universe with every planet we found, but as we’ve expanded, we’ve found that interfering with alternates of ourselves doesn’t go well most often… But…” He frowned, looking at all the hungry and cold people in the hall around them. “These people are losing hope. They will die if we don’t do something. The planet is freezing around them. We have to do something.”
“Then that’s what we’re doing,” Mitchell said. “We’ll help them.”

“Hey, what about-” Tempest began.

“This isn’t a democracy,” Mitchell chided her.

Tempest clearly wanted to punch him, but resisted the urge.

Daniel turned to Mitchell. “We don’t need to tell them about the multiverse. We can just give them supplies from the ‘secret government base’ we’ve been telling them about. It’ll keep their dueling mentality away from the others.”

“That would be hard to deal with,” Teal’c said.

Mitchell nodded. “It’s a plan. We’ll let Landry work out the specifics of the help. Soon as we can get away and dial home, get news back. …Hey, Wan, what do you think?”

Wan just nodded in agreement with the plan.

“Right. Anyway… Where is lunch? We’ve been waiting forever!”

A kid ran into the mess hall. “Someone stole the food!”

“What do you mean someone stole the food?” a man yelled.

“The main warehouse is empty!” the kid yelled.

“Oh oh…” Mitchell said.

“I bet those new guys took it!” a woman said, pointing at the six of them.

The people in the mess hall stood up, murder in their eyes. They began to move toward the six of them.

“There’s a window behind us and to the left,” Teal’c told Mitchell. “We could-“

Azula interrupted him by standing up so fast she knocked her chair over. “We did no such thing!”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah!” Azula said, putting her hands on her hips. “And you know what? The sheer audacity of you accusing us makes me livid. Think we could resolve this with a duel? I’ll represent my side.”

“Azula what are you doing!?” Tempest hissed.

Azula ignored her. “Come on, who’ll face me?”

“I will,” a burly man with impressive stubble said, standing up – clearly a man who had been in more than a few fights in his time. “What’s the weapon?”

Azula grinned. “Would you happen to know martial arts?”

“Yes. Are you asking for hand to hand?”

“Precisely,” Azula said, pointing a finger at him. “I am Azula. You?”

“Raymond.”
“Good. When do we do this? I’m not exactly familiar with your customs.”

“Tonight. Eight. I’ll have everything put through the proper channels.”

Azula grinned. “Nice.”

The angered crowd of people slowly dispersed, knowing they weren’t going to get lunch, but also knowing that tonight they were going to get a duel with a newcomer. It was exciting.

“What was that!?” Mitchell yelled at Azula.

“You’re welcome,” Azula muttered. “Now they’re not going to mob-kill us. I saw it in their eyes, they wanted to, and no offense to muscles over there, but there was a lot of them.”

Mitchell put a hand to his forehead. “Fine. We’re not helping you with that duel though.”

“I can burn one man.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow. “Pretty sure they’d consider that cheating.”

“Whatever.”

Mitchell took out the dimensional device and handed it to Teal’c. “Leave Therma and go get some food stores for these people. Take Wan with you. Make sure to get your weapons before you leave.”

“Indeed.” He took the device and walked away with Wan.

Daniel furrowed his brow. “We should investigate the missing food.”

“Duh,” Azula said.

The four of them set out across the street to the food stores. There was a small crowd outside, but none were allowed in – Henry was guarding it. “Go back to your jobs!” He yelled at the crowd. “Do you know what Marge will do if you riot?”

The small crowd of people heard Marge’s name dropped and quickly ran like scared dogs, allowing Daniel and the rest to walk up to Henry. “Food missing?” Daniel asked.

“You heard?” Henry grunted. “This is what we get for employing the children…” he shook his head. “I can’t let you in.”

“We sent Teal’c and Wan to go get food from our base for you,” Mitchell said. “The least you can do is let us look. I bet you have the authority to do that.”

Henry nodded slowly. “I do. Fine, you can come in.” He let the four of them in and shut the door behind them. The warehouse was a single, large room with a dozen tremendous metal barrels that should have been filled with dried grains, edible fungus, and the like – but all of it was empty, besides a few scattered pieces of grain and fungus on the ground.

“How could someone have taken all this…” Mitchell muttered.

Tempest looked left and right suspiciously before taking a tablet out of her pocket and performing some scans. “We’ve got magic levels in here.”

“Is there magic in this world?”
“The levels were three hundred times lower out in the blizzard. I’d have to scan elsewhere in Therma to be sure, but something that probably wasn’t supposed to be in this universe happened here.”

“Did something follow us? Sombra?”

“These people don’t use advanced computers,” Daniel said. “While Sombra could definitely do something, I don’t think she could steal all this food… Plus, this isn’t exactly her M.O. Not to mention the lack of her signature.”

“Got something!” Azula said, lifting a small, green globe off the ground. It resembled a crystal ball, but glowed more like a glowstick and had visible circuitry lining the outside. “This doesn’t belong here.”

Daniel took it and examined the circuitry. “Not a language… But definitely not from here. Too advanced.”

Tempest scanned it. “The scanner says it’s producing a magical field to fuel its light spell. It’s not struggling against the physics of this universe at all…”

Mitchell raised an eyebrow. “Don’t most spells weaken or require more power when placed in a universe with low magic?”

“Yes… This isn’t. It's overwriting the physics of this universe, substituting its own.”

“That’s unheard of.”

“No,” Daniel said. “The black spheres with the green diamonds did that. They had to, because they were technologies designed to work in any universe.” He held the glowglobe in his hand. “Not even the Enterprise or Feldspar was able to do this… This is a feat of engineering beyond us at the moment.”

“And it’s a flashlight,” Azula commented.

“Yeah. A flashlight. I’m not sure I want to read too much into what this implies we’ve stumbled across…”

Mitchell crouched, lowering himself to the ground. “Someone’s been in here.”

“Oh?” Daniel responded.

“I see evidence of footprints. Small, possibly a child.”

“Probably the child that told everyone what had happened.”

“It’s hard to see against the wood floor, but the dust patterns…” He moved behind one of the large metal drums. “It’s clearer back here, easily seen in the dust. Nobody comes back here.” He followed a trail to a door, and opened it, revealing a long hallway covered in dust – but where there were no footprints. He reeled back, baffled – he was trained to track as part of his military schooling, and he knew the girl had come through this door – but he also knew she hadn’t come out the other side.

He walked out from behind the drum. “Okay, so maybe the rumor about the girl who walks through doors and vanishes is a real thing.”

Tempest frowned, glancing at the glowglobe. “So we have a mysterious girl with probably access to advanced magic. Why would she need to steal all the food?”
“Good question,” Daniel said, hand to his chin. “What if-“

The door to the warehouse flew open. Daniel stuffed the glowglobe into his pocket as fast as he could, and Tempest hid her tablet. A man in a long silvery coat strode in, holding out identification. “I am Doctor John Smith, and I’m here to investigate the mysterious vanishing of food in this warehouse. Tell me, what are you four doing here?”

“Investigating as well,” Mitchell said.

“Have you found anything?”

“Besides a trail that goes to that door and ends? Nothing,” Tempest answered.

“Hm… Hm…” John Smith said, walking around, an incredulous look in his eyes. “Where are your other two team members?”

“Getting food from our base to help yours,” Mitchell said.

“Really… So what you’re telling me is that you’re our saviors in our time of need?”

“If that’s how you want to see it.”

John Smith raised an eyebrow. “What if, bear with me a moment here, you stole the food just so you could replace it and seem like the heroes?”

“Oh, this again!?” Azula said. “Do I need to duel you too?”

“Ah, no, I’m not part of such a barbaric practice. I’m just here to solve a crime, and you are my prime suspects.”

“We were working on the Repository all day,” Daniel said. “Ask around.”

“I’ve examined your weapons. You have access to some rather spectacular technology, I must say. Your secret base must be very well funded. I wouldn’t be surprised if you had something that could make all the food vanish from a distance.”

“We don’t have any such thing!” Michell shouted.

Azula whistled innocently.

John Smith did something that no normal human would do – he noticed her falsely innocent whistling, and then called her out on it. “Oh, so you can do that? Specifically you? Curious. I hear you challenged Raymond to a duel in martial arts. You have a special trick up your sleeve, don’t you?”

Azula’s confident smile faltered for the first time the entire mission. She said nothing.

John Smith smiled. “Right! So you’re some kind of powerhouse that could do this, through some esoteric means. Wonder if you’re a wizard of some sort. But that’d be silly, wouldn’t it?” He chuckled. “Daniel Jackson, you’re hiding something in your pockets.”

“Classified, Mister Smith.”

“What a convenient excuse, that,” John Smith said, whirling around. He still had a smile on his face that was somehow rather jovial, despite the nature of the comment. “I ask a question, you just say it’s classified. What am I going to do, shout it to the world? This is just a small town, not worth your
“He’s trying to convince us to just leave,” Daniel thought. He cleared his throat. “We’ll be out of your hair as soon as we replace your food stores, if that’s what you want.”

“Really? Your base must be really close by. I’m pretty sure the scouting parties would have found it if it was within twenty miles.”

“It wouldn’t be very secret if it was easy to find.”

John Smith put a hand to his chin. “You have a point there…” Suddenly, a grin grew across his face. “Oh… Ooooooh… If you’ll excuse me, I have something to attend to. Such a wonder, talking to you.” He ran out of the warehouse.

Tempest blinked. “That man was way too clever for his own good.”

“He’s onto us,” Mitchell said. “And that makes us look guilty in his eyes.”

“We should find out what happened to the food, and fast,” Daniel said. “I don’t think he’ll be distracted by… Whatever he was distracted by for long.”

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Corona had just started believing Trixie’s assertions that nothing was going to go horribly wrong when the man that summoned lizards from his mouth started tormenting Trixie’s crowd. The swarm of sticky, wet reptiles sent the adoring crowd screaming in every direction.

Trixie shrieked. “What are you doing!?”

“Using my new powers, what does it look like?” He hurled a lizard onto her face.

“EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEW!” Trixie shrieked, tearing the wet reptile off her face and tossing it to the ground.

Corona encased the lizard-spewing man in a red crystal. “HEY TRIXIE!” she shouted.

“W-what?” Trixie said, face already red.

“I TOLD YOU SO!” She ground her teeth. “We need to go talk to Discord.”

“Trixie is sure he’ll have a good explana-“

Corona glared at her.

“Uh… I think we should go talk to Discord too.”

“That’s good. Sparky, with me!”

Sparky performed a teleport, appearing to Corona’s side, wobbling. Trixie trotted on the other side. The three of them barely made it one step before a man with the power to create ice that was as hot as a roast turkey dinner appeared, riding a sled of his own bizarrely warm ice. Corona swore the ice smelled like turkey. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Corona lit her horn, red magic swirling around it. “Going to talk to Discord. You should get out of the way.”
“Oh, I’m sorry, we can’t allow that.” He said. A girl appeared to his left, her slender body duplicating itself several times over. To his right another man in a tuxedo appeared – his eyes glowing slightly.

“All right, Freezy, Copy, and Starey, get out of the way,” Corona growled. “I am Corona Shimmer, and you don’t know what you’re dealing with. You and your friends are tormenting this campus.”

“Jumping to conclusions much, are we?” the girls dubbed ‘Copy’ said. “We’re just enjoying our powers!”

Corona pointed at a bunch of bagels flying through the air and breaking windows. “That’s tormenting!”

Starey stepped forward, expression flat. “We can’t let you talk to Discord. He would remove our powers. And we can’t have that.”

“I thought you were his followers!?” Trixie shouted. “Shouldn’t you want what he wants?”

Corona blinked. “…They played him. Pretended to be his followers so they could get powers.”

Freezy clapped loudly. “You’re significantly smarter than he is. But he has given us the power of chaos. We a-“

Corona froze him in a box of red crystal. “One down, two to-“ Corona blinked. The box of red crystal was gone, and Freezy was free. Trixie and Sparky were nowhere to be seen. She teleported out of the way of the unpleasantly hot ice, only to end up in a location that she hadn’t intended to teleport to. The Copy copies were there, even though Corona was sure they hadn’t been there before. They tackled her, but she blew them back with a burst of telekinesis. She kicked off her boots and touched one of the Copys on the face – but no emotions rushed into her mind.

I’m under the influence of an illusion or something.

She grabbed one of her back boots and pulled out a particular pair of sunglasses. “SOMBRA! Come in! My senses and possibly my mind are compromised, help!”

A message appeared on her lenses. We’re sorry, Sombra can’t come the phone right now. Please leave a message after the beep! That was the beep, Corona, just leave a message.

“You heard me – or you didn’t and I’m still under the influence...” Corona muttered, leaping back over a bunch of ice shads. It’s probably mister Starey that’s doing this, but I can’t exactly be sure if hitting him will actually hit him...

I’ve just got to hope when I yell out that I’m actually talking and not in some vegetative state.

“TRIXIE! You’re the illusion master; you know how to see through illusions! Do something about this!”

She had no idea if Trixie heard her – or if Trixie could hear her. That was the problem, she had no idea how far the sense manipulation of Starey went. She just had to operate however she could.

She focused all the magic she could into a complex matrix designed to protect her from incoming ice and Copy duplicates. She still wasn’t getting anything off the sunglasses, and contact never let her get the emotions of others. She glared at Starey, trying to take him down with fire, but his form moved without moving – it was suddenly in another place the moment she fired.
“This is hardly fair!”

“This is power,” Starey said. “This is magic so many of us have dreamed of for so long. You will not take it from us.”

“There are other ways to get magic!”

“Not of this power.” He pointed a finger at Corona. “You were gifted with power, and you don’t use it. That’s why you’re in the background. That’s why you’re nothing.”

Corona snarled. “I used my power once. It turned me into a monster. I’d rather you didn’t go through that. It may be too late though.”

“That’s all you need to thi-“ A firework explosion went off behind his head. The illusions around Corona vanished the moment Starey hit the ground. She was able to hear Sombra laughing in her ear.

Trixie whooped. “Yeah! Got him! Take that, you substandard illusionist!”

Sparky looked around, blinking. “Wh… What happened?”

Freezy and Copy looked at each other. “I guess we’ll actually have to fight now,” Copy said.

Corona removed her sunglasses and put her boots back on. “Nope.” She lit her horn and teleported the three of them right to Discord. “Should have done this from the start.”

Discord looked at them. “Hm? What brings you to my chaos capita-“

“Discord your ‘followers’ are playing you just so you’ll give them cool powers and then they are abusing the powers to do whatever they want.”

Discord dropped his bag of popcorn, the contents spilling into the sky and turning into teddy bears made of marshmallows. “…What?”

A woman looked panicked. “I assure you, great Discord, we had no such intent-“

Discord snapped his fingers, removing all the chaos and powers in an instant. He glared at all of them. “Care to explain? Any of you?”

“Corona’s lying!” one of them shouted.

Discord appeared next to the shouting man. “You, hey you, SHUT UP, Corona’s not exactly a liar. And, you know what, now that I think about it you all seemed too eager. Well guess what? I’m never giving out special powers again! You’ve ruined it for everyone! And I’m taking Trixie away!”

Trixie blinked. “Wh-“

“We’re leaving Trixie.”

“But-“

Discord raised an eyebrow. “Trixie?”

“Er… Okay, fine, they lost their chance.” She sighed. “Goodbye all! The Great and Powerful Trixie will probably not be back! Shame on you!”
Discord snapped his fingers and the two of them were gone.

The crowd of students dispersed, suddenly not wanting to be anywhere near where the teachers could find them and make them clean up.

Corona sat down and rubbed her temples. “Ugh…

Sparky blinked. “I still have no idea what happened.”

“I was right. That’s what happened,” Corona muttered. “Just wait until tomorrow when the news picks this up and blows it up in everyone’s faces.”

Sparky blinked again. “…I’m still confused. Was there or wasn’t there a giant evil quesadilla?”

“No, there was not. He must have really gotten into your head.”

“~~~

“Got a description of the girl,” Tempest reported. “Maybe fourteen years of age. Reddish eyes, white hair that some people claim was slightly blue. Her most distinctive feature is the two red gloves she has on her hands. Her clothing is also odd for this world – smooth, almost rubbery. She’s been seen entering several doors and never leaving, even when people walk in right after her. There’s occasional mention of her being accompanied by someone, but those descriptions don’t match up.”

“Why doors?” Daniel wondered. “What is it about doors that make everyone associate them with her? Surely she disappears behind other things. Surely people see her in other locations…”

“Any pattern to where they see her?” Mitchell asked.

“More sightings around the generator than anywhere else,” Tempest said.

“Then we go there,” he stood up and adjusted his hat. “Since we don’t have our weapons, if we run into a problem – Azula, you’ll be our only firepower.”

“Not a problem. It’ll be nice if some fun shows up.”

“You are not to instigate a fight.”

“Fiiiiine.”

The four of them quickly arrived at the central generator areas. There had once been living quarters surrounding the generator, but they were abandoned now. It was sweltering here, so hot that nothing could be done comfortably. There were only a few generator engineers working around the giant cylinder, and these people were sweating profusely.

“It’s a giant space heater,” Mitchell said. “…I was expecting it to be more elaborate.”

“Sometimes simplicity works best,” Azula said. “If we were in the Fire Nation we’d just have firebenders pouring fire into the air twenty-four-seven to accomplish the same thing.”

“This must take a tremendous amount of power,” Daniel observed. “I wonder what they did to get it working this efficiently.”

“Trade secret, classified, that sort of thing,” Tempest said. “Y’know, like how we can’t tell them what we’re doing.”
“Right…” Daniel said, looking around with curiosity. He wiped his brow.

Then he saw it – something unusual tucked between two buildings. “Hey, what’s that?”

Everyone turned. They saw what could only be described as a blue phone box sitting snugly between two buildings, mostly in the shadows. The door was slightly ajar, allowing a slight glow to come out – the glow being the only reason Daniel had noticed it.

Cautiously, Mitchell approached the phone box. He touched his boot to the door, pulling it open the rest of the way. All four of their jaws dropped.

“It’s bigger on the inside…” Azula managed to say.

Mitchell walked in cautiously. The phone box should only have been able to hold one or two people, but the room he entered could easily hold twenty. It was spherical, with a large column of complex glowing technology in the center. A beyond-complicated console surrounded this central column, lined with buttons, levers, screens, widgets, and springs that served some indecipherable function. The outer walls were lined with doors, stairs, and there was even one side that had a small bookshelf.

“What is this place?” Mitchell asked as he walked around the central pole.

Azula leaned in to touch one of the central buttons, but Tempest slapped her hand away.

Daniel went right for the bookshelf. On top of it was a tremendous tome with a peculiar design on the cover – three large circles of differing sizes arranged around an unusual symbol that resembled a ‘K’ with a line through it. A fourth circle was inscribed near the bottom of the cover, distant from the other three.

*The Multiverse.*

“Guys?” Daniel called to them. “I think I’ve just found a Directory.”

“What?”

“A multiversal guidebook.” He held up the tome, showing its cover to everyone. “I think this might be a map of sorts. You know how Twilight’s map arranges things into two ‘spheres’ – east and west? This suggests there might be others – two or three, I don’t know what all the symbols mean.”

“What’s inside?” Tempest asked.

Daniel tried to open the book – but it wouldn’t let him. “Sealed shut. Don’t have any mages to open it either…”

“We could just take it back with us,” Azula said. “I’m sure whoever owns this place has a few extra around.”

“Aaaaaand that’s all I needed to hear!” the voice of John Smith echoed through the room. The front doors of the phone box closed and locked. John Smith opened another door and walked into the room. “Multiversal travelers, aware of magic, and *thieves.*”

Azula pointed a finger at John Smith – but he pulled a small, blue rod out of his coat. “Ah ah ah, we can’t have that! Terribly sorry.” All four of them froze. John Smith smiled. “Now, the question remains – why are you tormenting these people?”

“We aren’t!” Mitchell shouted. “We just got here today!”
“What are the chances that not one, not two, but three multiversal parties make contact with the same separated universe within a few days of each other? Not very likely. Since I know you’re not with me, you must be with her.”

“Who is she?” Daniel asked.

John Smith rolled his eyes. “Don’t you play dumb with me! I’m the one who wants to know who she is! You tell me!”

“We have no idea!” Mitchell said. “I’m Colonel Cameron Mitchell and we’re with Earth Tau’ri, ally of Equis Vitis, Earth Vitis, Lai, Equis Cosmic, and the Elemental Nations! We didn’t even know there was a settlement on this world until today!”

“And I’m the Doctor, the Traveling Doctor,” the Doctor said. “And none of those names ring any bells. The words Equis and Earth being exceptions, but those are just standard world names. This is not the first time I’ve dealt with a Cameron Mitchell or Daniel Jackson, however. A disgrace to your counterparts, you’re usually the good guys.”

“Think about this,” Daniel said. “If we knew what was going on, why would we be investigating the girl? We’d just be able to go right to her!”

“The working theory is that she’s a runaway of yours and you’re trying to catch her and sweep the mess you created under the rug.”

“Yeah, no,” Daniel said. “I have proof of this, but I have to reach into my coat to show it. Okay?”

The Doctor pointed the rod directly at Daniel. “Go ahead.”

Daniel removed the glowglobe. “We found this. We do not have the capabilities to make such a technology. It overwrites the local physics of this universe, replacing it with its own light spell. None of our mages can do this, and this is just a flashlight.”

The Doctor blinked. “How do I know you’re telling me the truth? I’ve met some really good liars.”

“Oh for the—“ Tempest couldn’t take it anymore. She unleashed a spin-kick on the rod the Doctor had in his hand. He reacted quickly, using a precise calculation of movement and a twist of his body to knock Tempest to the ground. She tried to get back up, but he kicked the back of her leg, making her fall flat on her back.

He pointed the rod right in her face. “Nope.”


“I assure you, it does something.”

“It’s not a weapon though.”

The Doctor tensed. Then he held up his hands, sticking the rod back into his coat. “I could probably modify this sonic screwdriver to do some damage quickly, but I know when I’ve been made.”

Daniel looked at Tempest. “How did you…?”

“He would have used it on me if it was a weapon,” Tempest said. “Even if he didn’t go for a lethal blow, it could have been used to threaten me. But he just took me down.” Her smile fell as she realized she had just been well and truly trounced by a man without a weapon. She made some
disgruntled noises.

Azula turned to Mitchell. “Can I burn him?”

Mitchell shook his head. “We’re on the same side here. Do you realize that, Doctor?”

The Doctor furrowed his brow. “I’m not completely sold on it just yet…”

Mitchell shrugged. “Teal’c and Wan have our dimensional device, so we can’t just show you…”

Daniel’s eyes lit up. “I got it. Doctor, you said you think we’re after the girl to clean up our mess?”

“That still seems rather likely, yes.”

“We aren’t, but even if we are that still means we want the same thing. To catch her – and by consequence save these people. We should work together.”

The Doctor shrugged. “That’s all fine and good, but do you have any leads I don’t?”

“We know what she looks like, that she disappears through doors, and has been seen hanging around the generator lately.”

“I know all those things,” the Doctor said. “I also know she vanishes through doors because her particular method of interdimensional travel relies completely on doorways. No idea why.”

“I had a thought earlier,” Daniel said. “She’d clearly have no use for food. What if she came to the room for the same reason we did – to investigate? To find out where the food went?”

The Doctor blinked. “That makes some sense, but that means there’d have to be something else here. Something that could take all that food in an instant… Something that hasn’t been here for very long, or it would have happened befo-“

Daniel and the Doctor locked eyes.

“The engineers upgraded the generator,” they said at the same time.

The Doctor snapped his fingers, opening the doors to the phone box. “Everyone out of the TARDIS!”

“Tardis?” Azula commented.

“Time And Relative Dimensions In Space – I do not have time to explain this right now! Let’s go, to the object of our interest!”

The five of them rushed out of the TARDIS doors, toward the generator. They stopped right next to the extremely hot object.

“So,” the Doctor said. “Anyone know how to get in?”

“Is there even an inside at all?” Mitchell asked.

“Has to be. Maintenance tunnels at least…” the Doctor facepalmed. “Everyone back in the TARDIS.”

“…We just left,” Azula pointed out.
“I can teleport us right in. Just a quick jump into the middle, the TARDIS will find where she can land.”

The five of them piled back into the blue phone box. The Doctor closed the doors and began activating dozens of lights with the central console. Nobody could follow the pattern of inputs he was inserting, and that was probably the point. The TARDIS shook slightly and the central column glowed a brighter white. A VWEEEEERRRRP VWEEEEEEEERP VWEEEEEREP noise met their ears – and then there was a thump. The Doctor snapped his fingers, opening the front doors.

The inside of the generator was so hot the temperature difference created a wind in the Tardis’ interior, blowing a few loose objects around. The five of them didn’t care – they marched out into the heat. The place was dark, but the central heating element let out a consistent dim red glow that covered the area in a hellish scheme.

And then there was the thing. It was square, but it had five sides. It was in three dimensions, but it shifted through thousands of cross sections before their eyes. It was bright, but it didn’t cast any light. It was impossible to look at, because it didn’t make sense.

What could be seen was a large cable dangling from the ceiling, channeling power from the thing, shunting it into the heating element.

“That’s not supposed to be here,” Mitchell said.

Tempest pulled out her scanning device and the Doctor pulled out his screwdriver. Their eyes widened.

“I’m not getting any readings that make sense,” Tempest said.

“Seven-dimensional object,” the Doctor said. “It really shouldn’t exist here. It’s reaching into dimensions this universe can’t handle… Probably causing spontaneous teleportations.”

“Is it… bad?” Daniel asked.

“Not really,” the Doctor said. “It’s an object. They’re running power from it, but they don’t know how to control it. I could probably get them an appropriate replacement…”

“I’m afraid that won’t be happening.”

They looked to their left, to see Marge standing above them on a metallic scaffold. Below here were a half-dozen soldiers – including Raymond. Marge continued. “We will figure out how to use this divine gift, and you can’t use your secrets to stop us, or give us something else. It is ours, and we will use it to thrive. You can’t have it back.”

“…Back?” Mitchell said. “Wait! We’re not with the girl-“

“Likely story. Raymond, get them.”

Azula turned to Mitchell. “Can I?”

Mitchell nodded.

Raymond and his compatriots had to raise their guns. Then they were on fire, their clothes and skin burning. The surprise came so far out of left field that they all dropped their guns. Some remembered to stop, drop, and roll – Raymond was not one of them. He charged Azula, ignoring the intense pain of flames on him. He raised his fist – she shot him to the ground with a fireball.
“You’re all regular humans,” Azula said, snarling. “You can’t do anything against me.”

“Not me, but I have a new friend,” Marge said, pulling a large cable from behind her. She flicked a switch on the wall, forcing a tremendous bolt of lightning to shoot out from the wire. Azula managed to duck out of the way, but the current found a target – Daniel. The poorly-controlled and primitive blast of electricity went right through his chest. He fell backward, motionless.

“Daniel!” Mitchell yelled, kneeling down to tend to him. Tempest, the Doctor, and Azula acted as a single unit. Marge fired off another bolt of electricity from the wire, but Azula caught it in her hands, twirling in the air as she did so. The Doctor Pulled out his sonic screwdriver, overloading the technology in the wire, making it useless. Tempest rolled, picked up one of the discarded guns, and shot Marge right in the head.

To add to the overkill, Azula released the bolt of lightning out of her body, returning it to Marge. Her body shuddered with the electric signals and fell back, smoking.

The Doctor shook his head in disappointment at the sight of death.

Tempest lowered the gun. “All clear.”

Everyone crowded around the form of Daniel. Mitchell was checking his pulse. “He’s still got one, but it’s irregular…”

“That lightning hit near his heart,” Azula said. “He’s lucky there’s a pulse at all.”

The Doctor leaned down and examined Daniel, feeling his heart. “That might just be remnant signals… The heart could stop, then we’ll have to revive him.”

“Again?” Mitchell said.

“Happens a lot to you too?”

“You have no idea…”

“You’d be surprised how many Daniels have this problem.”

Luckily, it appeared as though another round of ‘find a way to revive Daniel’ would go unplayed. His heartbeat returned to regular, and he opened his eyes. “Ugh… Cam, have I ever been struck by lightning before?”

“Don’t think so.”

Daniel put a hand to his head. “Why is it always me…” he muttered.

“The multiverse hates you,” Azula said.

Tempest looked up at the seven-dimensional thing. ”So… what are we going to do with this?”

Mitchell looked at it and shrugged. “Probably study it, after we help these people get over their… Somewhat crazy leader.”

“I have a better idea!” a young voice called. “How about letting me have it?”

Everyone except Daniel looked beneath the seven-dimensional object to see the girl lay a doorframe down on the floor – a doorframe large enough to accommodate the seven-dimensional object. She pulled it open with her bright red gloves faster than they could react. Something on the other side of
the door sucked the object through.

The girl looked ready to jump through the door herself, but the Doctor called out. “Wait!”

The girl raised her eyebrow. “I mean, sure, but why?”

“Why are you doing this?” Daniel asked.

“Who are you?” Tempest demanded.

“Who do you work for?” the Doctor asked.

The girl grinned. “All right, I’ll play along. This thing wasn’t theirs, they got it by accident, and I’m returning it. My name is Jenny, Jenny of the Red Gloves, C.E.O. of Dracogen Enterprises, and I’m currently working for the University of Doors.” She smirked. “Such satisfying expressions you all have.” She jumped into the door and closed it behind her.

Mitchell walked up to the door in the ground and opened it. Of course there was only the floor through it.

“…Well,” he said. “Doc, think you can take us to our hospital before this town decides to lynch us?”

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. “Just this once. The TARDIS is not a taxi.”

“We’re not exactly paying you,” Azula pointed out.

The Doctor smirked. “Azula, I never ask for payment of any kind. I’ll get you home. Just promise me that you’ll take care of this place. I wouldn’t recommend telling them about the multiverse, but they will be in for some tough times.”

Mitchell nodded. “That was the plan.”

“Good!”

“Wait, Doctor,” Tempest said. “Can you answer some questi-“

“It’d be best if you discovered the nature of the multiverse naturally, rather than having an old man tell you.”

“But-“

“No buts! We will meet again, I am sure of it. But now is not the time for me to tell you everything I know. Actually, I don’t think that time will ever come. Nobody can know everything I know. … Except maybe Flagg…”

“Who?”

“Not important,” the Doctor said. “Are we just going to stand here talking all day, or are we going to let Daniel die again?”

“That would be…inconvenient,” Daniel muttered.

Mitchell bit his lip. “Right. Everyone, move out. Let’s hope Teal’c and Wan have already gotten most of the food figured out…”
Charter-Princess Twilight Sparkle sat in one of the wings of her castle, a giant pile of papers on one side of her desk, a tremendous stack on the other. Spike sat across from her at his own desk with his own similarly sized stacks and piles of paper that loomed in such a way that should have been ominous, but was instead just somewhat annoying.

Twilight glanced up from her desk to see that Spike was yawning, hardly an unusual sight.

This was her life now. She was either reading and signing paperwork, or she was traveling to other worlds as an official ambassador – not an explorer. She enjoyed the latter half well enough, but… Well, it wasn’t much compared to the adventures she used to go on. Dangerous and heavy as they sometimes were, she found that her current, safer job was rather… boring.

She cursed herself for these thoughts. If she didn’t do what she did, nopony would. Exploration was important, yes, but maintaining strong friendships and keeping oneself well-informed was even more important.

She missed having adventures with her friends though. Only Renee ever came along for diplomatic missions, Pinkie generally wasn’t well suited for the patience involved, Flutterfree didn’t want to, and Nova had a certain reputation that would reflect badly on Equis Vitis. Just her most of the time - not even Spike came on every trip.

Twilight would have called it too quiet a life, but she had enough awareness to realize how much weighted on her shoulders.

She let out a sigh, reading over a proposal by the Hub to improve their ‘on call’ pseudo-military. Of course, the proposal was largely headed by O’Neill. She read over it, absorbing the information at an impressive speed. She thought it seemed fair, so she grabbed her green stamp and hit it. TWILIGHT SPARKLE, CHARTER-PRINCESS OF FRIENDSHIP, EQUIS VITIS-42: APPROVAL. She clicked a purple pen and wrote an encouraging remark in the margin, reminding those who would see the file that the forces needed to be varied enough that no single universe’s interests would be above the others. She placed it on top of the larger stack where a small camera mounted in the ceiling snapped a digital picture of the proposal and uploaded it to a database somewhere.

The next thing she looked at was a tremendous sheaf of around thirty pages. Her ears twitched involuntarily. She read it – realizing with relief this was just an updated version of a festival plan. The changes were conveniently outlined, so she flipped over to them, found them satisfying, and stamped it – this time finding no need to leave an extra note.

She reached for another file…

Her jaw dropped.

“Spike…”

“Yes, Twilight?” He said, looking up from a strange hexagon-shaped piece of paper.

“I’m… done.”

“…What?”
She spread her wings and grinned. “I'M DONE!” Her excitement blew her large stack of paperwork
over, but she caught it all with her telekinesis. It had only taken three paper spills for her to obtain the
needed reflexes for such an operation. “Spike, check my schedule. Is there anything else I have to do
today?”

“Uh…” Spike pulled up her planner. “…Let’s see… Nope. Tomorrow’s light too, just a little trip to
Lai to make a statement. Yeesh, I can see why that’s the only thing that day, it might cause a riot.”

“Spike, do you have everything handled on your end?” Twilight asked, eyes hopeful.

Spike looked up at his stack. “I can probably get it done in a day.”

“Thank you Spike! You’re the best!” She looked at the clock on the wall. “I might be able to catch
them before they leave today!” She clapped her hooves together and lit her horn. “Oh this is going to
be great!”

She teleported into the main hall of her Castle, grinning like a filly who’d just been given a lifetime
supply of ice cream. “Guess what!” She said, calling to the four ponies standing there.

Pinkie opened her mouth.

“Not you, Pinkie, that’s not fair to the others.”

“Aw…”

Renee put a hoof to her chin. “Judging from your downright cheerful demeanor and excitement, I’d
say you finally managed to get yourself a break, darling.”

“Right!” Twilight couldn’t sit still, jumping from place to place. “Oh, I get to come with you girls
today! Oh this is going to be great – I’ve been wanting to go for sooo long you know… It’s been
forever.”

“It’s been two weeks, Twilight,” Flutterfree said. “Remember, the robots that turned into cars?”

“Oh. Right. But still, that’s a long time! You guys go to one or two worlds a day! I’m missing out on
so much!”

Nova smirked. “Hey, it’s our job. We kind of have to go out and explore. Not fair to compare
yourself.”

Twilight shrugged. “Eh, I’m just missing out. But not today! Pinkie, where are we going?”

Pinkie shrugged. “Dunno. We’ve been sitting here for about five minutes scrolling through the
Directory, nothing’s standing out.”

Twilight looked at the Directory. No longer was it a book – instead, it resembled an arcade cabinet –
tall, rectangular, and with a large screen embedded into it. Twilight pressed her hoof to the front of
the machine, and the screen switched to display a list of dimensions, sorted into groups of 100. At the
top was the current number of known universes – 32,064. 32,065 now. Someone must have just
uploaded another set of confirmed coordinates. Probably one of the many machines in the major
universes scouring combinations to find a new connection. The Directories didn’t use the internet,
but rather the spells the original Directories and Journals had used. This, thanks to some
enchantments from Equis Cosmic, made the digital Directory network impervious to hacking.
Sombra could, of course, find access to one of these devices and read the data, but she couldn’t alter
it.
Twilight pressed her hoof on folder 134, and saw a list of a hundred universes. Most were just labeled with random number-letter codes, though she saw a couple names. She ignored the named ones, instead opting to hit the ‘random’ button. It selected universe 013433. She plugged the location into her dimensional device and fired.

Nothing happened.

She facehooved. “Forgot for a second that not every universe is directly connected to this one.”

Flutterfree smiled. “Don’t worry, it’s an easy mistake to make. We even made it last week. We were running from a herd of zombie buffalo. Nova thought the dimensional device was broken for a good ten minutes.”

“Hey, Pinkie *let* me keep trying!” Nova retorted.

Pinkie giggled. “But it was so fun to watch!”

“We were in danger, Pinkie!”

“Psh, they were slow.”

Twilight rolled her eyes, setting the device to dimension 013434 instead. This portal connected, revealing a world colored similarly to their own, though they saw no castle or buildings. “This one works. Oh, I’m so excited! I can’t wait to meet who or what’s on the other side of this portal and find out what kind of adventure or culture they’ll show us! Eeee!”

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“…and at the end of the race, everypony’s a winner!”

Twilight slowly blinked, taking in the sight before her *again* just to make sure she wasn’t going crazy. The pony in front of her was more like an Earth pony than an Equis pony – her muzzle was significantly more pronounced and her eyes weren’t forward facing like most Equis ponies’ were. Her figure was significantly fuller and more rounded, and her cutie mark was centered higher on the flank. Despite the pink coat and white-purple mane, Twilight *knew* she was looking at another version of herself – admittedly without wings.

Twilight was trying really hard not to think of the other version of herself as an *idiot*.

“What’s the point of the race if there’s no winner?” Twilight asked. “Doesn’t that kind of take the fun out of it?”

“We don’t want anyone losing and feeling bad!” the native-Twilight said.

“Yeah!” Another native pony said, a blue pegasus named Wind Whistler. “The fun is in the running!”

Twilight blinked, turning to Pinkie. Pinkie shrugged. “I dunno. It might work for them. Just be glad Dashie isn’t here.”

Renee shrugged. “Just get done with your race, girls. I’d like to get to this ‘Paradise Estate’ and find a spa. If there’s one place I’m *sure* this world has, it’s a place to get your mane done spectacularly.”

Twilight shrugged, lining up with Flutterfree and Pinkie for a race. Their competition? Native ponies by the name of Firefly, Wind Whistler, and a version of Applejack. Twilight, Flutterfree, and Pinkie
took a ready stance. Renee and Nova watched from the sidelines.

“Ready… Set… Go!” Native-Twilight said. In an instant, Twilight and Flutterfree used a takeoff technique they had learned from Rainbow Dash a few years back, shoving themselves into the air along the track. It was a simple dirt circle that wound through a sparse set of trees on a grass-covered hill. Within moments, Twilight and Flutterfree were neck and neck, flapping their wings as hard as they could.

Unfortunately for Twilight, Flutterfree had been flying for a lot longer than she had. She easily completed the track a full pony-length ahead of Twilight.

Of course Pinkie was waiting for them, whistling innocently.

“Pinkie, number nineteen, wins! Flutterfree – thirty-three - second, and Twilight – forty-two - third!” Nova declared. “And… All the others are a fair bit away.”

Native-Twilight smiled. “Good race! I’ve never seen ponies move that fast!”

“I guess we’re just faster?” Flutterfree said. “Or maybe Rainbow Dash just rubbed off on us.”

“I have become Filly-second,” Pinkie said, grinning.

Twilight rolled her eyes. “We all know you’ve always been able to move that fast.”

Pinkie shrugged. “The costume’s fun though!”

“Why not wear it then?” Renee asked. “I’m pretty sure you can just reach into your mane and pop it out.”

“Oh yeah!” Pinkie said, pulling out a pink and white superhero outfit and putting it on. “You shall now call me Filly-second!”

“Nope,” Nova deadpanned.

“Aw…” She took off the suit and shoved it back into her mane. “You’re no fun…”

Firefly crossed the finish line. “Hey! Why’d you all go so fast!”

“…I thought it was a race?” Twilight said, uncertain.

“But but…”

“It’s not like I actually won anything.”

“But you still went fast!” Firefly said, pointing a hoof. “And that’s showing off! You’re a showoff! All of you!”

Renee blinked. “Firefly, dear, I don’t think that was their intention-“

Firefly snorted. “That’s not how we do things!”

Twilight raised an eyebrow. “Okay, I won’t show off my flying again. That work for you?”

“Why didn’t you say that earlier!?”

“…Earlier?”
“Back on the track! I tried to get your attention!”

“Oh,” Twilight smiled sheepishly, tapping her ears. “I’m deaf, sorry.”

“…What’s deaf?”

Twilight blinked. “…That means I can’t hear anything.”

“That’s silly! All ponies can hear! You’re a liar!”

“Firefly, I-“

“Twilight, wing-you is lying!”

“Wing-me, stop lying,” Native-Twilight said. “It’s mean.”

Twilight’s eye twitched. “Fine. I’ll stop this supposed ‘lying’ and substitute it with a new rhetoric. I’m just a crazy, manipulative, clinically insane pony who has difficulty listening to others. Satisfied?”

“…I didn’t understand those words,” Firefly said.

“What’s ‘rhetoric’?” Wind Whistler asked.

“It’s a way of talking and speaking,” Twilight explained. “…Wait, why do I even need to explain this to you?”

“…Why not?”

Twilight took in a deep breath. Pinkie put a hoof around her to calm her. “Hey, how about we head to Paradise Estate now? I bet there’ll be fun and parties there!”

The attitude of the native ponies changed in an instant. With a “yeah!” they started galloping off to their home.

Twilight and company walked after them, trailing behind.

“I… I don’t even have words,” Twilight said after a couple of minutes. “They have the minds of children. Actually… no, the CMC are more mature.”

Renee raised an eyebrow. “The CMC are hardly children anymore, Twilight.”

“Oh. Right. …Guess I haven’t seen them in a while. Still, I don’t remember them ever being like… this.”

“Really young, like Flurry,” Pinkie said.

Nova blinked. “So this place has a race of ponies that can’t think any better than an extremely young foal? Well. That’s… not sure if it’s depressing or interesting, actually.”

“Well…” Flutterfree began, a hoof to her chin. “Think about our world. Ours is slightly ‘dumbed down’ as well. We all know what disability, injury, death, and other such things mean, but did we ever really come across those things in our day-to-day lives before we started exploring? We hardly have any swear words at all, and friendship is a physical force. They’re like a more extreme version of us.”

“Innocent,” Renee said. “They’re innocent, that’s it.”
Pinkie nodded. “Yep. Not always the best thing, though. They aren’t exactly the nicest.”

“How do they survive?” Twilight wondered aloud. “I sense powerful magics in this world, and I’m certain I’m getting traces of a tremendous dark power that was here relatively recently.”

“Maybe they have the Elements or something?” Flutterfree suggested.

Pinkie shrugged. “They’ve got something, that’s for sure.”

“Good leadership?” Nova suggested. “Maybe they have a Celestia?”

“Other me’d never seen a unicorn with wings before,” Twilight reminded her.

“Who’s to say this Celestia’s an alicorn?” Renee suggested.

Twilight smirked. “Who indeed. Maybe their Paradise Estate will tell us…”

To Twilight’s surprise, Paradise Estate was only a handful of pink buildings surrounded by pastures. There were a few dozen ponies there – all female. There was one small dragon, presumably a version of Spike, but otherwise it was uniform. There weren’t even enough buildings to house every pony.

Nova blinked. “So, is anyone going to ask them how they… er… go on without any stallions, or what?”

“Nope,” Renee deadpanned.

“Right. Just checking.”

“I’m more curious about how they can live here,” Twilight said. “No farms, not enough houses…”

“This may be a case of questioning it not helping, Twilight,” Pinkie pointed out.

“Riiight…” Twilight tossed her mane back. “Let’s go see if we can find a leader, or how they protect themselves, at least.”

The five trotted down to the Paradise Estate proper, waving hello to the ponies. Most accepted them without another glance.

“No spa…” Renee muttered. “Stupid naturally perfect manes…”

Twilight trotted up to her native-self, who was talking to some pony lamenting their terrible luck. “Hey, Twilight? I have a couple questions.”

“Oh, ask anything!” Native-Twilight said with a smile on her face. Twilight thought the expression looked strange on such a long face. She tried not to laugh at her own thoughts.

“Right. Well, I was wondering if you girls have ever come across any dark magic?”

“Oh, plenty! There was that nasty Tirek, and that horrid Smooze.”

Twilight was thrown for a loop at the mention of the Smooze being horrid – she’d met the Smooze of her world. He was a chill, rather dim green fellow that had some sort of connection to Discord. Twilight, to this day, still didn’t know what that connection was. “How’d you stop them?”

“Oh, we used the Rainbow, Megan, and the Flutter ponies!”
“…Rainbow?”

Native-Twilight pointed at a filly wearing a red necklace. “That’s Lickety Split, she keeps the Rainbow safe for us!”

“Looks like an Element of Harmony,” Flutterfree commented.

“Doesn’t feel like one. Low magic,” Nova said.

“Looks can be deceiving,” Renee reminded her.

Twilight turned back to her other self. “Right. Rainbow, got it. And got help from some others. Next question, do you have a leader?”

Native-Twilight blinked.

“Princess? Queen? President? ….King? Prince?”

“Oh! I know a Prince! Prince Scorpan! He has his own kingdom and everything!”

“A full kingdom?” Renee said, suddenly very interested. “Mind telling us the way?”

Wind Whistler landed next to them. “Better yet, I can just take you. It’s only over that mountain, and you guys are pretty fast!”

“Yeah. We are,” Flutterfree said, smiling softly.

“Then let’s go!” Wind Whistler cheered, slowly floating out of the house.

Twilight blinked. “These ponies like to jump around a lot.”

Flutterfree raised an eyebrow. “You were pretty jumpy to get on this adventure, earlier.”

“Oh. Right. Uh… Yeah, shouldn’t judge.” She walked out of the simple houses of Paradise Estate, following Wind Whistler on the ground. “I’m glad we found something, I was just about to give up and try another universe.”

Renee held up a hoof. “Wait, girls. Doesn’t the name Scorpan mean something to you?”

“Uh…” Nova scratched her head. “No?”

Twilight blinked. “Scorpan! Tirek’s brother! Oh, weird – we’ve never met a version of him in the multiverse yet!”

“Should we be expecting something?” Nova asked.

“Friend to ponies, betrayed his evil brother, gargoyle,” Twilight said. “Considering how xenophobic Tauryl is back home, maybe I can finally learn a bit about them here! Oh, I’m excited again!”

Pinkie laughed nervously. Luckily, Twilight didn’t notice.

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Toph, Vivian, Lieshy, and Lady Rarity were, for once, not adventuring on Lai. They were, instead, taking a ‘vacation’ in the United Republic of the Elemental Nations. Specifically, they were hanging around the demon village.
Lady Rarity knew Lieshy had mixed feelings about the visit – the poor pegasus had lived among these people for a significant amount of time, enough to form connections. Especially with Fef. All of the group save Lady Rarity were getting painful reminders of their betrayal, but the buttery pegasus was the worst off.

The armored pony hefted her hammer, taking point instead of Toph. “I’ll take over.”

Toph pointed a finger at her. “Rarity…”

“You need a moment to collect yourselves.”

“I told you we could handle ourselves.”

“You still need a moment,” Lady Rarity asserted, walking further into the demon settlement. Toph didn’t try to forcibly stop her, instead resigning herself to following behind.

Lady Rarity had never been here before, so she didn’t know what to expect. There were demons of several differing hues of red walking around, some young, some old, some winged, some not. The buildings were made of simple implements taken from the forest around them, but there was a paved road that led right to Republic City and a station for charging technological devices such as phones.

There were a surprising number of Arcei walking around, apparently having chosen this place as a good one for their outsider lifestyle they didn’t want to abandon quite yet. Lady Rarity saw more than a few young Arcei children without arcs. They had no idea what was coming in a handful of years if the scientists couldn’t figure out how to synthesize runes… They were getting closer, as Lady Rarity understood it, but not close enough.

“…Sparse rose…” Lieshy said under her breath.

“Hrm?” Lady Rarity said.

“There’s not enough demons here,” Toph ‘translated.’ “Maybe half as many as last time. Town looks full because of all the Arcei, but it’s not.”

Vivian adjusted her hat. “Where’d they go? Are they all working?”

“Let’s find someone we know and ask,” Toph said, ramming her foot into the ground to get a clearer image of all the demons around. “…Weird. I can’t find Mlinx, Veila, Siron, or Mistress Luna…”

“Maybe there’s a party going on somewhere?”


Hastik shrugged. “He’s been gone for a while on some kind of secret mission.”

“How long?”

“…Weeks? The mission’s been going on for months though, but he drops by every now and then.”

Lieshy furrowed her brow. “Huh. Half the town with him?”

“Eh, lots of us have moved to Republic City. We’re not hated as much anymore, so some just decided to move. Lavill’s become a personal trainer for non-benders, can you believe it?”

“My waves struggle to encase.”
“Heh. Nice. Anyway, if you want anything, you should probably go there. There’s not much here anymore.”

“…Your society is fading,” Vivian said, dour.

Hastik nodded. “Unless what Siron’s doing has some way to help us remain distinct, I don’t think we’ll stay proud much longer. We’re already mixing with the Arcei. I think we’ll just have to carry on our legacy as proud warriors some other way. Gardis has taken to exploring, looking for rare creatures to slay.”

Lieshy blinked. “Siron didn’t take Gardis?”

“Gardis… Does his own thing now.”

As if on cue, a dimensional portal opened up and deposited a reddish-brown demon who was tall, but nowhere near as tall as Siron. His rust carapace was covered in dents and cuts from combat, ruining any designs he may have had etched on there long ago. He had dozens of blades all over his back, a couple of guns at his hips, and what appeared to be a defensive amulet around his neck.

His most recent ‘kill’ was in his top left hand – Alushy’s head.

Lieshy gawked. “Gardis? You cut off Alushy’s head?! AND LIVED!?”

Toph shook her head. “…You’re insane.”

Gardis nodded. “True. But Alushy has no idea who I am. She probably never even saw me. And if you keep quiet, it will stay that way.”

“She’s going to hunt you down!”

“She can try,” Gardis said, tossing the head into a nearby tent. “It’s interesting, having a target hunt you after you’ve already gotten the trophy. Nice seeing you Hastik, Lieshy. But my work is never done.” He opened a new portal to the Hub, but hesitated a moment. “Happen to know of any horrendous beasts that need slaying or trophies that would be a challenge?”

Lady Rarity frowned – she knew of a few things that were exactly what Gardis was looking for, but she said nothing.

Toph shrugged. “Go to Ardent and talk to Link. He knows where to find the monsters.”

“Travelers aren’t allowed on Ardent! Everything’s secret!” Vivian reminded Toph.

Gardis shrugged. “I can get a go-between.” He walked into the Hub and let the portal close behind him.

“I know it’s not that hard to get a dimensional device, but don’t they require a permit now?” Lady Rarity asked.

“He’s got one,” Hastik said. “…I think.”

Toph shrugged. “We can check later. Just… For now, let’s…” She felt the Arcei and demons walking around the village. She placed a hand gently to the side of her Master Sword, head sagging slightly. “…Let’s go to Republic City, girls, nothing else to do here.”

Lady Rarity sensed Vivian preparing to object, but with a glare the shadow siren was silenced before she even uttered a peep. They left along the road in silence.
A few minutes later, after the demon settlement was out of sight, Toph rammed her foot into the ground, launching a boulder out of the well-paved road, presumably incurring a large fine. “Why did we even go there!?”

“I wanted to see Mlinx and the Mistress,” Lieshy reminded her. “They weren’t there. It was pointless.”

“Yeah…” Vivian said, sagging. “It’s just full of bad memories now.”

“Maybe them fading is a good thing,” Lieshy muttered.

“Lieshy!” Vivian chided.

“Vivian, they’re a highly violent and militaristic race, Siron is a conniving manipulative mastermind, and they’re always asking for trouble. Spread the gasoline out!”

“But their culture!”

“Is fading,” Lady Rarity said. “The argument of if their culture is good or bad is moot. They do not have large numbers, they do not have a large presence, and even when trying to respect it the mere existence of the multiverse forces adaptation. This can even be seen in Lai. The Arcei are moving out, others are moving in, and tensions are on the rise as a culture is changed – and in the case of Lai, I feel confident that the change is for the better.”

Toph cocked her head. “Wow. That came out of nowhere.”

“I finally felt a connection to the conversation.”

“Right…”

Vivian sighed. “…But Lai will still exist once it changes. The demons will just become part of something else.”

“But they will be remembered as a pivotal race in the history books,” Lieshy pointed out. “They will have a legacy.”

“Like the Binaries?”

Lieshy took in a sharp breath. “…Yes.”

Vivian shook her head. “I don’t know…”

“It’s not like we can do anything about it,” Toph commented. “We’re just a bunch of explorers and ‘knights’ for Queen Luna. We’re not leaders here.”

Lady Rarity nodded. “None of us are in the political game.”

Vivian sighed. “All right. We’ll just see what happens.”

Lady Rarity’s ears perked up. She drew to a stop, looking off the side of the road. The sudden clank of her armor went unheard by the other three – they kept walking and talking. Lady Rarity stepped off the road towards the noise that had caught her attention, readying her hammer for a confrontation. She wasn’t sure why she didn’t call the others’ attention.

A short ways off the road, hidden behind the trees, there was a young Arcei, albeit one old enough to have his arcs already in place. There was a human standing over him, left hand producing a flame.
He had the messiest hair imaginable and his clothing was perhaps the most atrocious crime against fashion - dusty, ripped clothes that had probably never been washed. “Look at the little murder-machine, out here all alone…”

“P-please…” the stallion said, backing away. He lit his arcs, but clearly he wasn’t experienced with using them since nothing happened.

“Do my eyes deceive me? The splicer’s unable to use his murder-circles? Rich!” He pointed his hand at the Arcei. “I think it’s time for you to burn.”

A small fiery jet shot out of the man’s hand, barely glancing the Arcei’s side. The stallion shrieked from the burn.

Lady Rarity's instinct rose within her, a long forgotten past bubbling to the surface from her anger. She wanted nothing more than to chew this pathetic excuse for a human being up into a thousand tiny pieces.

Since that particular course of action was off the table, she opted to leap in and smash her hammer on the ground in front of him. “Leave him alone.”

The man looked at Lady Rarity. His crazy eyes twitched. “Get out of my way, unicorn!” He showed no fear, unleashing a torrent of fire from both his hands simultaneously.

Lady Rarity pulled her helmet over her head, the casing deflecting the brunt of the heat. She cast a quick cooling spell and swung the hammer from the side, intending to knock the man to the ground. Instead, he did a backward kickflip and dodged the metallic weapon.

Lady Rarity shot a magical laser after him, but he had apparently realized he wasn’t going to win this conflict if he kept at it. He ran. Lady Rarity felt the intense desire to pursue, but the need to check the Arcei won out. She kneeled down, checking his burn. It wasn’t bad, but it certainly would be painful. “Are you okay?”

“I’ll… I’ll be fine. But… He’ll be back. With friends, since you attacked him…”

The desire to brutally tear the man’s flesh apart returned with a fire. “…I’ll take care of him.”

“…Thank you… Uh…”

“Lady Rarity,” she said, galloping off. She was going to dice that man into a thousand pieces, as well as whoever his friends were. He was a predator, and predators needed to be stopped.

~~~

Scorpan was a human.

The kingdom he ruled – which didn’t seem to even have a name – was filled with humans of all shapes and sizes, though of a uniform white skin tone. At least it was an actual kingdom, and not a small set of houses that didn’t even qualify as a village…

Scorpan wasn’t a gargoyle.

They were currently in the throne room, a nice hall that was for some reason… nondescript. It was a throne room without anything in the way of decoration besides a plain red rug and the cliché regalia Scorpan was wearing.
Scorpan had a beard.

“Charter-Princess? You seem lost in thought.”

Twilight shook her head. “Right, sorry, your highness. This just wasn’t what I was expecting, as I believe I already said.”

Scorpan nodded. “Well, I welcome you back! I was just introducing my advisors, Nadir and Ursula. Say hello.”

Nadir, a man with a strange floppy hat, smiled and waved. Ursula, a haughty woman in purple robes, did the same.

Twilight awkwardly waved back. “…Hi.”

“I don’t know where I’d be without these two. They kept the kingdom running while I was gone, and always tell me what’s happening with the people! Such great help.”

Nova sent a telepathic message to Twilight. *Better than the ponies, but still kinda dumb.*

Twilight sent one back. *Yeah. We’re probably wasting our time here.*

Scorpan turned to Nadir. “By the way, Nadir, how’s the family these days?”

Nadir visibly tensed. “Absolutely wonderful, sir.”

“Good to hear! Ursula, how’s your sister?”

Twilight was prepared to excuse her party from the room before the conversation turned to sub-standard small-talk, but what Ursula said caught Twilight’s attention.

“Buxom as always!”

*Buxom.*

“Scorpan…” Twilight said, hoof to her chin. “Do you know what the word ‘buxom’ means?”

Scorpan blinked. “No, I don’t actually. Mind telling me?”

Twilight lit her horn, looking a now extremely nervous Ursula up and down. “I think it means your impostor just slipped up.”

“…Impostor?”

Twilight lit her horn and cast a revelation spell, forcing the magic around Ursula to vanish, revealing a four-legged black creature with translucent wings, a jagged horn, and pale blue eyes. “Yep. We’ve got a changeling infestation.”

“Scorpan! She’s lying! She turned me into this horrid creature!” the Changeling shouted.

“Twilight! Turn my advisor back this-“

Twilight facehoofed. “I am out of patience.” She cast a spell and forced Scorpan to sleep. She turned to Nadir. “So, are you going to reveal yourself or are you going to make me do it?”

Nadir shrugged, dropping the disguise. With a flash of green energy, the true form of the changeling
was revealed – significantly taller than the other one, with jagged wings and a large horn overtop two gigantic, intelligent, evil eyes.

“A Chrysalis,” Nova said, putting herself on guard.

“You don’t belong here,” Renee said. “You don’t look anything like the ponies here. You look like our changelings.”

Chrysalis smirked. She spoke with a deep, reverberating tone – that Twilight couldn’t hear, but knew was there. “Good observation, Renee. No, I do not hail from this world. But you would know where I do come from. Does the name Melinda ring any bells?”

Pinkie nodded. “How could we forget?”

“Me and my hive were stuck in a world where we could not win. We were starving. But then you came along, and we saw that there were other worlds. I took the identity of one Starbeat for a short time, using my appearance to get a hold of a dimensional device. We evacuated, and found this place, a world where it was so easy to draw love and power. Everyone was just so stupid. Even when a drone broke character, the ponies would never notice or suspect. It was simply beyond them.”

Twilight nodded. “Well, sorry to crash your party, but you know we have to stop you. You know who we are, and the power we wield.”

Chrysalis lit her horn, teleporting Twilight’s dimensional device to her and crushing it.

Twilight raised an eyebrow. “…You know that’s not what we were going to-“

“I know very well, my little pony. What I do know is that, after I show my power, you’ll want help. And now you won’t be able to get it.”

She teleported two necklaces to herself and placed them around her neck. One looked exactly like the ‘Rainbow’ artifact they had seen back with the ponies, though the one Chrysalis had was definitely giving off enough magic to actually be an Element of Harmony. The changelings had probably stolen it and replaced it with a fake. The other necklace was just a bag, filled with some sort of churning dark magic.

Twilight tensed. “The Rainbow shouldn’t be a threat to us, Chrysalis, if it works like the Elements of Harmony.”

“Ah, but this other thing? The Rainbow of Darkness?” Chrysalis opened the bag with her magic. A dark, swirling horror flew out of the bag and hit Wind Whistler – a pony Twilight had honestly forgotten about until that moment. The poor pegasus was twisted and transformed into a four-legged creature of darkness with bony protrusions, evil eyes, and a mouth that screamed in rage.

Chrysalis smirked, letting the Rainbow of Darkness back into her bag. “For a land of such stupid ponies, there sure are a plethora of powerful magical artifacts here, great powers of darkness. This Darkness can corrupt whatever it touches, transforming it into a monstrous slave. And I am the only one with the power to undo the damage, with this real Rainbow.” She leaned in closer to the five ponies. “Now, I’d like to keep you all aware and clever, since it’d make for a better audience, but if you try anything I will turn you all into slave monsters.”

Twilight furrowed her brow. She wasn’t sure if she could pull off a spell that could do anything to
Chrysalis or her Rainbow of Darkness without getting corrupted by said Rainbow. She glanced at Pinkie – Pinkie just shook her head.


Chrysalis grinned. “There was once a worthy power in this land, one by a name you would recognize. The great Tirek. He knew of the great evil in this world, and how to bend it to his will.” She lit a horn, teleporting all of them – except Scorpan – into a room deep beneath the ground with about a dozen changelings in it, all walking around in their default forms. The room was round, dark, and lit only by torches. In the center, there was an altar with two black, broken horns and a tuft of loose red hair. “These objects are all that remain of him.”

“You’re going to resurrect him,” Flutterfree. “Doesn’t that sound like it could easily go wrong?”

“I’ve got the Rainbow, I can always just kill him again. But I need his knowledge. And you’ve come at a perfect time – the ritual is ready.”

“Convenient,” Pinkie said.

“Inconvenient,” Flutterfree countered.

“Trust me, it’s convenient.”

Chrysalis started laughing. “Tirek will show me the dark powers of this world, and I will use them to unleash devastation over everything I can find, and perhaps even gather something to defeat Melinda. Everyone will pay!” She entered the crazy-evil laugh phase, barely able to stand straight.

Twilight considered making an aggressive move, but the presence of the other changelings was a problem.

She opted for plan B. She lit her horn…

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Lady Rarity was on the hunt.

She had traced the man back to Republic City proper. She barely registered the peculiar city around her, focused entirely on her target. It wasn’t hard to trace him at all – even if she didn’t have tracking spells at her disposal, she believed the stench he left would have been enough to go on, even in this busy city.

To her annoyance, her large stature, clanking armor, and tremendous figure drew a lot of attention. There were probably a few people here who knew who she was. None asked for an autograph, or even approached her – but they stared, and a few followed at a distance.

She let out a hissing growl. They might ruin the justice she was about to dish out. They’d probably lose interest eventually, but she couldn’t ignore the possibility that there’d be one who would decide to follow her to the ends of the multiverse. She wondered if they were going to regret their decision.

Then she saw him – down an alley, knocking on the door of a beat-down house. She slowly approached, grinding her teeth, ready to confront him.

An old woman opened the door. “Rodney, what is it?”
“Mom? Can I…”

“No, you can not come in, you used up your last chance already, Rodney.”

Rodney put his hands together. “Please, Mom, you know I-“

“Go away. I mean it, Rodney, you’re not allowed here anymore, not after what you did.” She slammed the door in his face.

Rodney’s hands balled into fists. He punched the door, turned, and ran further down the alleyway in a blind rage.

Serves him right, Lady Rarity thought, continuing to follow him. She was in no hurry – let him suffer a little more before she got to him. It’d just make it better.

She continued tracing him, drawing the hunt out as long as she could. She hadn’t done this in quite some time – she’d forgotten how exhilarating it was… Why had she ever denied this part of herself…?

She didn’t let herself think about the question too much. She was focused on other things.

So focused that she didn’t even notice when Toph and the others caught up with her – not until Toph said something. “Loser says what?”


Toph shrugged. “Seemed like the perfect opportunity.”

Lieshy facehooved. “That was beyond stupid, Toph.”

Vivian shrugged. “Rarity, what are you doing?”

“I’m hunting down a horrible excuse for a human being who was trying to brutalize an Arcei – he might be trying to gather up his friends and try again. His trail leads down these alleys.”

“Ah. The bad part of town,” Toph commented. “Makes sense, the unsavory types hang out here from what I hear.”

Lieshy raised an eyebrow. “...How?”

“Iroh.”

“Oh. Right.”

Lady Rarity continued walking forward, her gaze narrow. She said nothing further as she marched along the trail.

“…Rarity? You okay?” Vivian asked.

“Fine,” Lady Rarity lied.

“You sure? You seem… fixated.”

“You didn’t see what he was trying to do. I did. And he’s going to get what he deserves.” She hefted her hammer in front of her. “Justice.”
Lieshy raised an eyebrow. “That seems a little vindictive for you, Rarity.”

“Shush, he’s close by,” Lady Rarity chided, ignoring the content of the comment. She approached an ajar door placed in the side of a run-down building that rested in the shadow of a large industrial factory. Lady Rarity followed the trail through the doorway, feeling the closeness of her target.

Her prey.

She walked into the building, hammer held high. The trail went through another door, this one actually closed. She quickly drove her hammer through it and leaped into the room, preparing for the attack.

Rodney was in there, alone, sitting on a bed. He was crying into a pillow so hard that he hadn’t even noticed her bash the door in. His shirt was off, revealing a body covered in scars – some of which were indicative of regular beating. There was an unnatural lump of skin on the side of his chest, and he looked malnourished.

Lady Rarity’s instinct vanished. She dropped the hammer and quickly backed out of the room, tears in her eyes. “…What was I doing?” she said, barely any breath in her voice. “Wh…”

Toph stamped her foot, feeling the broken body of the man. “I’ll get him to a hospital.” She picked him up – he didn’t fight. Didn’t even say anything. With a burst of earth, she left the building, leaving Lady Rarity, Lieshy, and Vivian behind.

Vivian put a hand on Lady Rarity’s armored back. “Hey… You just wanted justice.”

“No, I didn’t! This was more than that! I was giving in to my instinct!”

Lieshy raised an eyebrow. “You don’t have an instin-“

Lady Rarity stamped her hoof on the ground. “Yes I do! You don’t know, you couldn’t! You…”

Vivian folded her hands. “Rarity, we might not know – but you can tell us. You can trust us.”

“I… I know.” Lady Rarity sighed. “You won’t know what this means… But I’ll explain it.” She reached to her mane, pulling it all the way back, revealing the part of her forehead just below her horn. There were two smaller, rounder, but fully functional eyes.

Toph returned, breathing heavy. “Even with the master sword, that’s not a short tri- woah. Rarity, you have your eyes uncovered. Neat.”

Lady Rarity chuckled softly, wiping all four of her eyes. “Yes. Yes, they are cool. But they also mean something you’re not aware of. I’m not a unicorn – I’m a spirid-unicorn.”

Toph raised an eyebrow. “…Never heard of a spirid. Thought I knew all the Lai races.”

“Spirids aren’t considered a race, and for good reason,” Lady Rarity explained. She bared her teeth, making sure they noticed the highly sharp edges and protruding fangs. “Spirids are a strictly carnivorous and regularly cannibalistic race. They’re considered monsters and not real ponies by any stretch of the imagination.” She began to, for the first time in forever, take off her armor completely. The tremendous metallic chunks fell to the ground, revealing Lady Rarity to not be the tremendous unicorn they all thought she was. In reality, the spirid-unicorn was only slightly above average in terms of height, but the armor suit just gave her a ton of extra mass. Beyond the eyes and sharp teeth, the rest of her body wasn’t normal either. She had no tail, but instead, a large rounded abdomen with a cutie mark printed on it of a diamond encased in a web. She only had three legs – but there were
five stumps, suggesting she once had eight.

“You poor thing…” Vivian said.

“I’m part monster,” Lady Rarity asserted. “My mother was a Spirid living near the edge of an outer forest, and my father was a unicorn she captured, had some fun with, and devoured one night. I was born with powerful predatory instincts and nopony to tell me otherwise. And with the advantage of my magic, I was a ruthless monster that never failed to capture prey. I have no idea how many lives I took.”

Noting that all three of them were paying attention to her with eyes wide, she continued her tale. “I was gravely wounded one day by a wild dragon. I would have bled out and died had I not been taken in by a kind old wizard. I don’t know why I didn’t eat him or attack when I woke up – but I didn’t. He taught me to speak, how to use magic with more finesse, and taught me what it meant to be a pony… not a monster. How to deny the instincts.” A soft smile came to her face. “I had more than a few adventures after that. You could say I helped save the world. But… Well, I was eventually being hunted down by terrified ponies. Starcei came to my rescue. She built the armor, told me how to hide what I was. We had to amputate four of my legs that day – I lost the back left one a few years before that. And… then I was Lady Rarity, and I became a knight, a champion.”

She looked at the empty room Rodney had been in before. “And then today the instincts came back. I was going to kill him. I was going to eat him. But… He’s me, don’t you see? A monster that doesn’t really want to be. Someone who needs help…”

Lieshy pulled Lady Rarity into a hug. “You’ve had a hard life, and a dark past. But that doesn’t matter to us – what matters to us is today.”

“And you didn’t kill him. You’re the reason he’s getting help at all,” Vivian said.

“Maybe you just needed to have your instincts act up today,” Toph suggested.

Lady Rarity smiled. “…Thank you.”

“You also don’t have to wear that armor all the time, if you don’t want to,” Vivian said.

“Girls, I only have three legs. The armor not only protects me, it gives me a fourth leg for balance. It’s used for more than just hiding who I am.”

“You don’t have to hide the eyes, though,” Lieshy said. “Seriously, even Lai won’t be able to racially judge you anymore. Far as they know, you’re the result of something from another universe.”

Lady Rarity sighed. “…But I want to deny this part of me.”

“Maybe that’s part of the problem,” Lieshy suggested. “Just bottling it up doesn’t work that often. It tends to explode outward.”

Lady Rarity nodded slowly. “Maybe… All I know for sure, right now, is that I trust you all. And… thank you for being here.”

Toph gave a thumbs up. “Don’t mention it. We’re a team, Rarity. Don’t forget that.”

“I won’t.”

“Good. Now let me ride you into the sunset.”
“No,” Lady Rarity deadpanned.

“Aw…”

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The resurrection ritual clearly was not of the world they were currently in – Chrysalis must have been doing some exploring of her own to find the magics required to accomplish the blasphemous act she was currently undertaking. Moaning spirit noises filled the room the moment she activated her horn. The altar turned a sickening green color, covering the horns and hairs of Tirek in a thick, syrup-like magic. They floated into the air, rotating at ever-increasing speeds. The horns mended their cracks first, the hairs tied themselves together second. A body began to form – first a head, then the arms, then the four legs, protruding out like some expanding telescope. As the body expanded, shifted, and grew, everypony present could hear bones crunching and flesh churning under the magical syrup. A death scream played in reverse greeted their ears as the ancient centaur was brought back to life, forced to relive the pain that killed him.

He didn’t look quite like the Tirek that Twilight had faced in her past – his horns weren’t as large, his face was significantly more pronounced, and he wore armor over his chest. But he was still a red and black centaur with a malevolent expression on his face.

“Tirek,” Chrysalis began. “I, Chrysalis, have saved you from your untimely demise. I have come to this world seeking artifacts of Darkness and Power, and I believe you know just where to find such things and how to use them. In return, I offer you your own Rainbow of Darkness back, as well as sway over my army of changelings. We can rule this pathetic world – and possibly even other worlds – together. I know you want to get revenge on that human girl from the neighboring world.”

Tirek looked around Chrysalis’ neck. “You have the Rainbow of Light,” he observed, speaking with a deep, gravelly voice.

“That’s just in case you say no. And also so the ponies don’t use it on me.”

Tirek folded his hands, looking at the changelings. They showed off by transforming into several different monsters. Tirek smiled at this – but the smile vanished when he laid eyes on Twilight and her friends. “Who are they?”

“An audience of enemies,” Chrysalis explained. “They come from another world, like myself. They wanted to stop us, but they can’t face the Rainbow of Darkness, and they cannot escape me either.”

“Why have you not corrupted them to be your servants!?”

“That’s boring,” Chrysalis said, matter-of-factly. “Though now that they’ve seen you I suppose I’ve seen all the looks of shock and awe I need.” She levitated the bag containing the Rainbow of Darkness to him. “Do you want to do the honors?”

Tirek nodded. “I accept this alliance.” He grabbed the bag and hung it around his neck.

Pinkie shouted. “WAIIIT!”

Tirek raised an eyebrow. “…Why?”

“You don’t even know our names! I’m Pinkie Pie, that’s Nova, this is Renee, and over here we have
Flutterfree! Oh, and we mustn’t forget our illustrious leader, Twilight, an *alicorn*! Both wings *and* a horn! Bet you’ve never seen that on a pony before!”

“No, I have not. Why should I care?”

“I dunno, she might have some secret magics or knowledge to tell you about!”

“She’s among the rulers of a far off world that should be of no consequence to us,” Chrysalis said. “She knows nothing of this world.”

Tirek gripped the bag tightly. “And anything she does know can be mine when she is under the power of Darkness.”

Twilight smirked. “You see, that might actually work. If, well, you actually had time to do that. But, here’s the fun thing. You see, Chrysalis took my ability to travel between worlds away earlier, but what she doesn’t realize is that I know the magic spell in that device by heart. *I* can create a miniscule portal with my power and send a message to my world. And it just so happens that they’ve acted pretty quickly and currently have you surrounded.”

Chrysalis snorted. “What a stupid lie. I would have notice-“

Bon Bon dropped from the ceiling and bucked Chrysalis across the face. “GO! GO! GO!” she shouted.

The makeshift Hub military made itself known – creating dozens of portals from several different worlds simultaneously, throwing the changelings and Tirek into a confused panic. A mixture of ponies, humans, reformed changelings, and even a handful of dragons unleashed their fury on the company. The changelings rushed to copy their opponents, but they were taken by surprise, largely ineffective against the mixture of bending, magic, and dragonfire.

Tirek roared. “You fools! You are nothing in the face of the Rainbow of Darkness!” he reached into the bag and unleashed the disturbing swirl of darkness. It rushed the attackers – but was intercepted by a single yellow pegasus in a red hat.

Alushy laughed as the Darkness swirled around her, trying to corrupt her essence and failing miserably. “Oh would you *look at that*, apparently I’m already way too corrupted! Ha! Surprise surprise!”

Tirek forced the Rainbow of Darkness off Alushy and onto a dragon; the beast followed the centaur’s command and attempted to eat the vampiric pony. Alushy simply flew around the dark dragon’s mouth and kicked it in the jaw. She turned to Tirek. “Okay, Tire? I’m calling you Tire. I’ve had a bad day. Some *asshole* decided to cut off my *fudging head* earlier today and I can’t find them. So I’m going to take my rage out on you, mmkay?”

The Rainbow of Darkness corrupted a powerful spellcasting unicorn, who teleported Alushy away to who knew where. Tirek laughed. “You are all powerless in the face of Darkness!” The Rainbow protected him from all the dangers, shoving the powers of the attackers back.

And then the Wonderbolts showed up. The fiery form of Commander Spitfire took point, heading right for Tirek’s head. The Rainbow of Darkness pushed her back, but the pony behind her – one Rainbow Dash – made it through and connected a powerful buck right to Tirek’s face. He fell off the altar he was standing on, reeling.

“Rainbow Dash?” Twilight called, firing lasers at changeling drones. “You’re part of the Hub’s
makeshift military?"

"Eh, not officially..." Rainbow Dash said, twisting her back around and unleashing a small tornado on an attacking changeling. "But Spitfire got us in with some clever something or other. Nice to see you, by the way."

"Same!" Twilight called.

Their interaction was interrupted by the Rainbow of Darkness surging, corrupting more of the attacking force.

Nova grimaced. "I don’t like this. Even with our forces, I don’t think we can take that powerful an artifact."

"The solution is already here," Twilight said. "Chrysalis has the..." She blinked. She couldn’t see Chrysalis anywhere. Lighting her horn, she sent a message through one of the portals. *Get the Feldspar here and scan for a changeling queen magic signature!* She teleported out of the basement and to the surface of the world. A gigantic portal opened up, allowing the impressive beauty of the Feldspar to grace the world. The magical ovoid on top surged with energy, scanning the land below, while the solid bottom glinted in the light of the sun.

Twilight felt pride at the accomplishments of Equis Vitis in this ship.

She received a message from the current commander of the Feldspar – Luna, apparently. She knew exactly where Chrysalis was. She teleported to the given location. Apparently Luna had the same idea, since they both appeared in front of the fleeing Chrysalis.

"Darnit," Chrysalis hissed, turning to face them. "Even two on one, there’s no guarantee you can beat me! I have absorbed so much lo-"

Twilight teleported the Rainbow of Light from Chrysalis’ neck. "Think you can keep her busy for a minute, Luna?"

"Of course," Luna said.

"Hey! Get back he-"

Twilight teleported back to the basement before Chrysalis could finish her sentence. She unleashed the Rainbow of Light from the trinket. "HEY TIREK!" She called.

He turned to look – and all the colors of the rainbow hit him in the face, knocking him over once again. The Rainbow of Darkness moved to protect him, but its dark colors were transformed into bright, vibrant shades by the Rainbow of Light. The power of swirling light overcame that of Darkness, banishing it. The corrupted forms of ponies and people slowly returned to normal. The Rainbow moved on to Tirek.

"No! Not again!" Tirek shouted, casting magic of his own that once again proved ineffective against the immense power of the Rainbow.

Twilight realized she could probably recall the Rainbow at this point. The Rainbow of Darkness was out of the picture – at least temporarily – and they could now take Tirek. Imprison him, throw him where the other Tirek was...

But she saw death. Already, in the fight, there were losses on both sides. Bodies on the ground.
She had ordered ponies to their death, and the death of many changelings. She knew that, even though her message had included ‘minimal casualties’, that a fight of this scale would not be without loss.

The least she could do was follow through, to avenge them.

No… She could do a little more.

Her eyes went white. She shoved her magical power into that of the Rainbow, enhancing it. It surrounded Tirek, doing more than just destroying him, like it had in the past. Twilight ensured that it tore him apart molecule by molecule, spreading his essence into nothing more than dust so he would never be able to be resurrected from his remains again.

A single tear rolled down Twilight’s cheek. She dropped her magic and folded up her wings.

Pinkie was standing right in front of her, a sad look on her face. Twilight smiled back, a similar sorrowful tint on her own expression. “I did it, Pinkie. I… I feel a little proud, actually. That’s… That’s messed up, right?”

“Yes,” Pinkie said, pulling her into a hug. “Yes it is.”

There was silence in the room that had seen a war.

Alushy charged in. “I’M BACK, WHO’S READY FOR TH- oh. Oh, well today just sucks in every possible way.”

Twilight tore herself from Pinkie and turned to her three friends. “We should go check on Chrysalis. Luna has her occupied.”

“Luna?” Flutterfree asked.

“She was in charge of the Feldspar, apparently.” Twilight lit her horn, teleporting the five of them to where Chrysalis had been. All they found was Luna standing there with a grumpy expression on her face.

Twilight raised an eyebrow. “…What happened?”

“She portaled to another universe,” Luna grunted. “I’m waiting for the Feldspar to send me the data to go and retrieve her.”

“We can do that,” Renee said. “I think your ship wants you back on it.”

Luna nodsed slowly. “You are right, of course…” Luna and Twilight received the magical information. “Enjoy hunting down another changeling Queen.”

Twilight nodded, accepting Luna’s dimensional device. She activated it, tearing a hole into another world…

~~~

Pinkie Pie was a pink pony who loved parties. She especially loved the parties she threw for her six amazing friends. One day, she decided she needed to throw an extra-special super-duper amazing-fun party, because she knew today was going to be a special day!

She set to work. Every party needs balloons, so that was what she set up first. The punch came next, set up in a shining and clear bowl. After that, she did the next fun thing and set out a nice patterned
rug. It was pink! Everything Pinkie Pie had was pink, just the way she liked it. Her friends didn’t mind.

Pinkie Pie rung a bell so everypony would know to come rushing to her house for the party! She was so excited she could barely stand still! But Pinkie Pie knew using all of her excitement would just make the party not as good as it could be. So she sat, patiently, waiting for them all to arrive.

Just when she was beginning to wonder if they’d show up, all of them did! Rainbow Dash came first, dressed in her finest dress of many colors. Scootaloo ran in after, barely able to contain her excitement. Cheerilee followed her excitable little sister in, happy to share time with everypony. Starsong flew in after, her wings shining in the light. Sweetie Belle held her horn high as she walked in, her magic shining brilliantly. Toola-Roola came in last, also shining, ready for some arts and crafts!

But oh, what’s this? There were two Toola-Roolas! How could this be? Pinkie Pie knew there was only one Toola-Roola! It was always just Pinkie Pie and her six friends, never anypony else. What was going on?

“Toola-Roola, do you have a twin sister?” Pinkie Pie asked.

“That’d be such cool beans!” Scootaloo cheered.

A Toola-Roola shook her head. “No, I don’t. I think she’s an imposter!”

“I’m no im…pos…ter,” the other Toola-Roola said. “…What’s imposter mean, Pinkie?”

“It means somepony pretending to be somepony else,” Pinkie Pie explained.

“Oh. Am I an imposter, Pinkie?” one of the Toola-Roolas asked.

“I don’t know,” Pinkie Pie said. She put a hoof to her chin. “Maybe we don’t need to! Let’s just have fun with two Toola-Roolas!”

“Yeah!” her six friends cheered.

Oh! Suddenly, a strange circle appeared in the air! Five unusually shaped ponies appeared! They looked like they had just been through an exhausting day of play!

“Okay, uh… hello!” their leader, Princess Twilight Sparkle, said. “Look, I’m going to see if we can resolve this quickly… Have any of you seen a tall, black, bug queen around here? Looks menacing, has holes in her legs, evil laugh?”

“I’ve never heard of anypony like that!” Sweetie Belle said.

The white visitor, Renee, looked at Sweetie Belle. “…Odd. Regardless, clearly she has to be one of those two identical ponies over there, unless you’re twins or something. You see, she can change her shape to be anypony.”

“An… imposter?” one of the Toola-Roolas asked.

The yellow visitor, Flutterfree, smiled. “Yes. An imposter. Twilight here can make her show her true form with a simple spell!”

Sweetie Belle looked at Princess Twilight Sparkle. “You have wings! That’s amazing!”

“Cool beans!” Scootaloo cheered.
Princess Twilight Sparkle lit her horn. “…Great. Anyway, thank you all! I’ll just reveal her and we’ll be on our way…”

Pinkie Pie held up a hoof. “Wait. I think I should talk to you five for a minute. We have things we do at our parties! You should learn about them!”

“I… what?” Princess Twilight Sparkle said.

Pinkie Pie turned to her six friends and the other Toola-Roola. “Go outside and play for a bit! There’s a tire swing outside!”

“Yay!” Six of them shouted. The other Toola-Roola shouted after all the others. They went outside.

The pink visitor, known as Pinkie Pie, spoke next. “Ahem.”

“Yes?” Pinkie Pie asked.

“Can we drop the whole ‘dumbed down’ thing now? It’s painful to exist in,” Pinkie Pie said.

Native-Pinkie nodded, pulling a chair out of her mane and sitting down. “All right, that’s fair. They’re not here anymore, so I guess it’s fine. I already know why you’re here, but I’ll ask anyway. What’s up?”

Nova let out a breath. “Thank goodness, that was getting unbearable… I thought the last world was bad…”

Twilight nudged Nova before addressing Native-Pinkie. “We’re here to get a criminal by the name of Chrysalis. She was impersonating a Toola-Roola, and we know which one. Please, let us get her before she escapes again or hurts your friends!”

Native-Pinkie pulled a dimensional device out of her mane. “She’s not leaving anytime soon, trust me. She’ll also find that she can’t actually hurt my friends. I’ve set it up that way.”

“…Set it up?” Flutterfree asked.

Pinkie Pie nodded. “It’s just me and my six friends here, nopony else in Ponyville. This world is a sanctuary of innocence. I keep them happy, and they worry about nothing. They may be like children, but while you might find it insufferable, I find it endearing and… pure.”

“…Fair,” Twilight said. “I don’t agree, but fair. I’d still like to take her back with us.”

Native-Pinkie shook her head. “I think I’ll keep her here. I don’t know if it’ll work out – probably not, really – but I might be able to show her the beauty of this world. Get her to realize that there’s more. If not, I can always toss her to another universe with this device.”

“Nautica’s our prison world,” Pinkie said, dialing the device to the water world. “Send her there if you have problems!”

“Thank you!” She put the device back into her mane. “I might be able to change her, and I at least want to try.”

Twilight turned to Pinkie. “…Can we trust her?”

“Yeah,” Pinkie said. “Chrysalis ain’t got nothin’ on this version of me. An entire world under her hoof! Pretty cool!”
“It is, isn’t it?” Native-Pinkie cheered. “Hey, want to stay for a tea party!?”

“Do I ever!”

“No, stop, I’m checking out now,” Nova said, raising her hoof into the air. “I can’t stand this place.”

“Fair,” Native-Pinkie said. “But consider coming back for a vacation or something. You’d be surprised what a completely innocent world can do for your psyche. Just don’t tell too many ponies about this place, okay? I don’t want to have to hide it.”

Twilight nodded. “We won’t. All right, girls, who’s staying for the party?”

Pinkie and Flutterfree raised their hooves. Twilight tossed them her dimensional device after she used it to open a portal to the world they’d just come from. “Remember, you can’t get directly back to home from here. Have fun! And, Pinkie?”

“Yes?” Native-Pinkie said, knowing she was the one Twilight was talking too.

“I hope your world stays innocent.”

~~~

Dear Princess Celestia…

Today I learned that I can kill people.

It wasn’t even that difficult. I just saw that everything would be better if a version of Tirek was completely expunged from this world, so I tore him apart molecule by molecule so he could never come back. I knew what I did was a good thing. I felt pride.

This pride scares me, Celestia. It really scares me. What I did, it was just a horrible thing that needed to be done, but I feel vindicated because of it. I almost feel… better. Relief. Maybe I was just waiting for the other shoe to drop, or maybe I’d seen enough death at this point to be prepared?

Or did I want to do it?

I don’t know. I do know that I needed to write you a letter.

I’ve truly lost my innocence today, Celestia. The last shred of it went with that final act. But… I also saw two worlds today that were innocent, in one way or another, more so than I ever was. I’ve learned that innocence, while comforting, is not a good thing. Without the bad, the dangerous, the gray areas, life can’t have as much life to it. It becomes, in some ways, idiotic. But, well, the ponies in a truly innocent universe don’t feel pain. They just live their lives, happy.

I don’t think that kind of life has any meaning. Happiness is not all there is in the world.

Look at me, I’m rambling now. Sorry.

I think we should talk about this more over lunch. It’d be nice to just talk with you.

-Your faithful student, Twilight Sparkle.

A tear rolled down Celestia’s cheek as she rolled the letter up.
Corona waved goodbye to Twilight Sparkle, trotting out the front doors of her castle and into the Ponyville of Equis Vitis, the once-tiny town that was now the largest hub for interdimensional activity besides the Hub itself. The vast majority of denizens were still ponies – but this majority consisted largely of alternate ponies. As Corona walked down Main Street, she even saw a version of herself with an eyepatch and the most pirate-y hat Corona could imagine. She saw three different Fluttershys walking together, and a pegasus-Celestia perched on top of a nearby hotel.

The three Fluttershys noticed Corona. “Oh. My. God. Butterbun, do you think that’s the Sunset Shimmer?”

“You mean Corona?” another Fluttershy – maybe Butterbun – said.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.” The first Fluttershy walked up to Corona. “Hey! You’re her, right!? I know you heard us!”

“Oh, yeah,” Corona said, smiling awkwardly. “Who’s asking?”

“I am Shyron, this is Butterbun, and that is… Uh…”

“I’m going by Fuc-“

Shyron put a hoof over her counterpart’s mouth. “Er… She’s F U, if you catch my drift.”

Corona raised an eyebrow. “You sure you want to keep that name? It’ll stick and-“

“Fuck you.”

Corona smirked. “I’ve been around too many worlds to be all that surprised when somepony makes
me think of things a different way. This is just Tuesday.”

Shyron put a hoof to her chin. “Well, I’d ask what that’s like, but I experience Tuesdays too, so… Yeah.” She pulled a piece of paper out of her bag. “Can I have your autograph?”

Corona rolled her eyes, scribbling a signature for Shyron.

“Thank you!” Shyron squeed, hugging the signature close. “Oh, oh, oh, while I have you here, I have more questions!”

FU sneered. “I can think of a few as well. What’s your romance life like? I’d love to hear you explain that one calmly.”

“Girls, leave the poor unicorn alone,” a new voice said – one of a Starlight, Corona knew. The tone of the voice wasn’t right for Nova though, so it might as well have been anypony. Corona and the three Fluttershys examined the newcomer – a Starlight that was slightly taller than most others and with a slightly sharper horn. Her gaze was soft and kind, but firm and deep. She wore a black and white collar around her neck, under which a cross-shaped necklace hung.

“Reverend?” Butterbun said, cocking her head. “…I thought you had a service right now?”

“Guest speaker,” the Reverend said. She opened her mouth to talk further, but was interrupted by FU.

“No! No you don’t get to talk, you fu-”

Shyron hit FU upside the head again. “Sorry Rev! Real Sorry! We’ll go, give her some space! Come on girls…” She dragged FU away by the back of her mane. Butterbun shrugged and followed after.

Corona blinked, turning to the Reverend. “Thanks. Why though?”

“Saw you needed help,” she responded. She extended a hoof. “I’m Reverend Starlight Glimmer, but everyone just calls me Rev, or the Reverend if they’re trying to be professional. I run the church over there.”

Corona glanced behind Rev. “Ponyville has a church? Since when?”

“Since a month or two ago, when I moved here.”

“Huh. How’s that going for you?”

Rev smiled. “Well. You ponies are really accepting, even if it is hard to understand how everything applies to us in this multiversal age.”

“Good luck explaining it all.”

“I try my best. You could drop by for a service if you wanted, but I don’t think you’ll do that right now.”

Corona rubbed the back of her head. “Yeah, not really my thing. Sorry.”

Rev shrugged. “Don’t be. Everypony has their own path. I’ll see you around town, though, I hope?”

“I come here somewhat often… Yeah, you probably will.”

Rev smiled. “What good news. Anyway, I’ve delayed you long enough, surely you have somewhere
to be.”

“Yep. Secret science stuff in a far away universe.”

Rev waved Corona on. Corona shrugged, pulling out her new and improved dimensional device – a gray sphere with intricate red runes etched all over it, infused with magic. It wasn’t a perfect replication of what Rick had done during Majora’s attack, but it was close. She activated it, tapping into a dimension that couldn’t be accessed directly from Equis Vitis. The device shot out a red ring of energy that tore a hole in space to another universe, and then a hole in the next universe, and a hole in the next – compressing the three red rings of energy into a single one. A dark, mechanical world could be seen through the portal.

Corona winked at Rev for effect and leaped through the opening, landing on the metal with a loud clang. She waved back at Ponyville while the red rings vanished with a pop.

The world she was in was small – she was almost positive that this one room was all that existed. It was the size of a football field, yes, but that was still a tiny size for a universe. The shape was perfectly circular, the gravity was slightly above normal, and a tremendous metal pillar covered in levers and buttons sat in the center. Otherwise, the round room was featureless besides the occasional dent in the metal floor, ceiling, or walls.

Sparky was standing next to the pillar, poking it with a multimeter of her own invention, trying to get any reading on it at all.

“Anything new?” Corona asked.

Sparky shrugged. “Nothing. I can tell you it’s metallic and also an insulator. Oh, and that the entire room is made of the same stuff. I have no clue about the atomic structure – if it even has an atomic structure. For all I know this universe doesn’t have atoms!”

Corona frowned. “We’re still made of atoms, right? Then it’s probably not the case. We’d be converted if it was.”

“Right… So many ambiguous rules…” Sparky muttered, pulling out a magical probing crystal and trying to scratch the column to no effect. “So, how’d Twilight react?”

“As excited as you were at the ceremony, except more condensed for time,” Corona said. “She had quite the smile. She even phoned Pinkie to plan a big party.”

Sparky smirked. “I am so there. And so are the girls.”

“Eh. It… Doesn’t feel like a big deal to me. I’m sure the party will be great, but… It’s just a piece of paper.”

“I want to see it again. Please?”

Corona rolled her eyes, summoning a piece of paper with her magic. She showed it to Sparky.

Wolfe University

awards the Graduate Certificate of

Bachelor of Science in Physics
Spandy squed. “So… monumental…”

“You’ll get yours eventually,” Corona said, shaking her head. “Just be patient.”

“How are you not flipping out in excitement right now?”

Corona shrugged. “I dunno. I’m not done studying – that Equis Cosmic program will be opening soon, and I’m going to be there. Or maybe it’s just that this piece of paper doesn’t mean much off of one of the Earths. I learned a lot there, and I’m very thankful for it, don’t get me wrong, it just… Seems small compared to all the stuff we’ve dealt with. I’m more proud of living as a unicorn for a semester than getting this piece of paper.”

“Ack! The apathy is destroying my very soul, Corona!”

“Hey, the paper doesn’t help us understand what this place is.”

“The degree represents the journey you’ve completed! Use the reasoning you’ve accumulated to deduce what this place is!”

Corona put a hoof on the metallic center of the entire universe. “…I think this universe is probably artificial, created by beings we can’t understand. Other than that I have no idea. But that’s why we’re here. What’s the next test?”

“Exposure to fire to see what happens?”

“We’re not going about this very scientifically.”

“Everything else has been inconclusive.”

“Wow, I feel sorry for you two dweebs.”

Corona and Sparky looked up to see a third individual in the room – a gray-skinned orange-horned humanoid in an orange outfit. Corona raised an eyebrow. “…Vriska, is it?”

Vriska snapped her fingers. “Righty-o! Vriska’s the name, crashing romantic science is my game.”

Corona stared at Vriska blankly. Sparky broke out into laughter.

Vriska put a hand to her forehead. “Oh, great, you’re one of the pairs who aren’t together. All right, which ones are you? I’ve clearly met you before…”

“No, actually,” Corona said. “I’ve just heard about you. You met Charter-Twilight. I’m Corona, and this is Sparky.”

Vriska pondered this. “Oh, so I’m back in this neighborhood? Huh, I wasn’t expecting to be back this soon… Heh. Guess this place just can’t get enough of me!”

Sparky rolled her eyes. “Riiiiight.”

Corona pointed at Vriska and smiled. “So, you feel sorry for us, do you? Mind telling us what this thing is?”

“Eh, usually I’m not big on spilling the beans, but I’m feeling generous today - so unlike me, I know, hold your gasps in, please.” She placed her hand on the central pole. “You’ve found yourselves a
“leyline universe.”

“A what?”

“Notice how you have difficulty forging direct connections between most universes?”

“Yeah. You can get to A from B and C from B but not A from C.”

“Well, it’d be even more convoluted without these things. They’re part of the reason there are so many connections. They connect to millions of universes, and because they have so many connections, other universes got more, creating a denser web. At least around here.”

“Who made them? There’s more than one? How can we use it?”

Vriska rolled her eyes. “I have to keep some secrets. Though I don’t know who made them. Not sure anybody does.” She placed a fingernail into a dent in the central rod. “Hrm… This one’s got a dent in it…”

Her nail punctured through the buckled metal. Vriska blinked. “…Huh. I half expected it to break and explo-”

It broke and exploded. The column blew outward, peeling the top and bottom halves of the central structure like two razor-sharp bananas. The shockwave blew Sparky and Corona back, but Vriska stood firm, looking curiously at the revealed interior of the leyline universe. It was a shifting ball of white energy with five slowly moving tendrils. A dot at the edge of each tendril flashed with a bright color – purple, pink, yellow, white, and a bluish color. The bluish color twitched unnaturally, lashing as if in agony.

Corona grabbed onto Vriska with her magic. “Come on Vriska! It’s dangerous!”

Vriska luckily twisted out of Corona’s telekinesis, landing back in front of the glowing sphere. She grinned. “That’s the point, sunny. It’s dangerous, so it’s going to be fun!”

The fifth, angry light shifted color to a pale green. The green color instantly flew off the tendril, leaving only the white tendril, a strangely naked burst of energy. The other four tendrils began to spin like a propeller, creating a rainbow while the naked tendril stood still.

Then the tendril spiked Vriska through the skull, and she saw colors.

Then she knew she was somewhere else, lying on her back at the edge of some version of the Everfree Forest. There was a Pinkie Pie standing over her.

“Ugh… I was expecting somewhere interesting…” Vriska muttered.

The Pinkie shrugged. “That’s just the way life is sometimes, broo. Sometimes you want something interesting and get a magical land of colorful ponies. Sometimes you want to summon a powerful demon and get some gray chick instead. Just the way life is…”

Vriska blinked. “What was that part about summoning demons?”

“Oh, that. You see, I meant to say something about dancing in the blood of the fallen, but I wasn’t in the mood for it, you know? …Oh! I know! I could tie you up!”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Aren’t you already tied up?”
Vriska looked at her hands and feet, discovering that there were already ropes around them. She took in a deep breath. “I fucking hate Pinkie Pies.”

“Broo, broo – I feel you. I feel you. How’s about we go back to my place and kick off this grand, epic adventure that’s too silly for its own good?”

Vriska rolled her eyes. “…Sure. I’ll try to escape later.”

“Oh, of course, broo! Wouldn’t have it any other way!”

“…So what now?”

“Well, if this were really some grand epic adventure we’d have a title sequence of some kind!”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZcBNxuKZyN4&feature=youtu.be&t=1m54s

Charter-Princess Twilight Sparkle knew something was up the moment she walked down a hallway in her castle she didn’t recognize. This, however, could mean any number of things – surprise decoration by Rarity, the castle itself having rearranged its interior, or just her going a little crazy from seeing the same halls day in and day out. For all she knew it was just a difference in light levels from a slight magic surge.

Regardless, she was on guard now. Not worried, but ready in case there was something unsavory around the corner. She tried to get back to the main hall first, but after traversing several rooms and halls with no luck, she considered teleporting – though, admittedly, if she didn’t know the layout of the castle, teleporting was probably a bad idea.

She wondered if the Tree of Harmony was having a joke at her expense or something. The Tree wasn’t prone to such pranks, unlike Celestia, but it was a possibility. If it was anything else that had rearranged her castle, it would have to be something… nefarious. Or Discord.

Now that she thought about that, it probably was Discord. This was just the sort of stunt he’d pull randomly. For all she knew he was uncontrollably chuckling behind her back, understandably unconcerned about being heard.

She glanced behind her and saw nothing. That didn’t mean he wasn’t behind this.

It was at this moment she stumbled into the main hall. She didn’t have time to check to see if it was as she remembered, because she saw the tremendous entry doors get kicked open by a very ticked off looking Applejack. “Twilight, I’ve been knockin’ for three minutes! Three minutes! Yer debt’s up to five thousand bits because of that!”

“Oh,” Twilight said, blinking. “I’m in an alternate universe. Got it. Good to have that cleared up.”

“Six thousand bits for ignorin’ me!”

“Oh, sorry… Applejack, right? Sorry, I’m not the Twilight that owes you money, I’m from a completely different universe.”

“Seven thousand!”

“And I didn’t answer the door because I’m deaf. Can’t hear – I can read lips though so don’t you
“Eight thousand!”

“Look, I can’t take any bits out of the treasury for you, I don’t have any right in this universe, not to mention this isn’t how debts work. You can’t charge interest by the sentence! It doesn’t work like that!”

“Nine thousand!”

Twilight huffed. “Fine, one thousand bits for ignoring me. Pay up.”

“Te – wait, excuse me?” Applejack huffed. “Twilight, ya don’t wanna do this. Ah can bring the literal legions of hell down on ya and yer pathetic excuse for a scam. Drop the dumb act, get yer hair back to normal, and just pay me the money.”

“And if I really am a pony from another universe?”

“Oh’m not sayin’ Ah’ll eat mah hat.”

Twilight blinked. “That… Wasn’t what I was going for. I’m just asking you to consider the possibility that maybe, by some chance of fate, that I’m telling the truth.”

“…Ya are talkin’ awfully reasonable for the Twilight Ah know… And Ah’ve never had her try a scam on me, she knows better…”

“See? It’s not outside the realm of possibility.”

“Ah’ll be the judge of that. Hey Spike!”

A version of Spike poked his head out from behind a door. “Yes, Applejack?”

“Twilight seem odd to you?”

“Uh…” he glanced nervously at Twilight. “Master, what’s this about?”

“Master?” Twilight blurted. She shook her head. “Applejack, answer me honestly, is the other me here a slave driver?”

“Nooo,” Applejack said, drawing out the word far longer than necessary.

Twilight narrowed her eyes. “…I’m not sure if you’re being condescending or sarcastic.”

“Ah, there she is!” Applejack laughed. “Ya almost had me there for a moment, Twi, but that’s classic Twilight right there.”

“Of course we wouldn’t be completely diff- you know what, nevermind. Why am I even arguing?”

Spike raised a claw. “Uh, Applejack? Isn’t that a classic Fluttershy move?”

“Shut up Spike, you don’t know anythin’,” Applejack blurted.

Twilight pulled a dimensional device. “I’ll just go home. Simple universe coordinate set and…”

The device gave her an error message. No connection.

“…Drat,” Twilight muttered. “Not working…”
“Ah’ll forgive half your debt if you give me that thing,” Applejack said.

“It’s not my debt!”

“Master, it is,” Spike added.

“I am not your master! And whoever’s usually here shouldn’t be either!”

Applejack blinked. “…Woah, you really aren’t Twilight.”

“You believe me?”

“No, Ah just wanted to see the hopeful look on yer face suddenly be crushed by dawning realization.”

Twilight’s jaw dropped and her eye twitched.

Applejack rolled her eyes. “Of course I believe ya Twi, Ah’m not an idiot.”

“I am!” Spike shouted.

“Thank you for that rivetin’ addition to the conversation.”

Twilight put a hoof to her head. “Okay. This has given me a headache…”

“Noooooooo,” Applejack said.

“Would you stop that?”

Applejack smirked. “Tell ya what, for a bit, Ah’ll stop.”

“Don’t have any bits on me, sorry.”

“Then ya owe me one, cause Ah’m stoppin’.”

“Wha- you can’t- bu-“

“Oh yes Ah can. Ah run this town, little Twilight. Since yer new here, that’s the first thing you need to understand. The second is everypony else is a raging idiotic lunatic. A bit refreshin’ to have another brain around here, to be honest.”

“Then why are you tormenting me with… debts!”?

“Ah’m a… businesspony.”

“You’re the mafia aren’t you?”

“What? No… Nooooo…”

Twilight smirked. “And my debt is cleared.”

“…Damnit.”

“Ah, but you have a chance to get me in debt again!”

Applejack smirked. “Oh, we talkin’ business?”
“Yep. I’ll promise ten bits for information and a guide – do you know of any way to travel between universes? If you do, show me where it is.”

“Yes, and right this way, takin’ ya to the basement! She’s got some mirror portal down there that leads to a place with humans or somethin’…”

Twilight grinned. “Good. Also, Spike, go take the day off.”

“Really, master?” Spike said, eyes wide.

Twilight sighed. “Yes. Really.”

“Yay! I’m going to go do nothing productive! I think I’ll go stare at my muscles in a mirror!”

*So long as he enjoys himself,* Twilight thought. *I hope I’m wrong about his relationship with the native Twilight…*

~~~

Flutterfree woke up from her nap surrounded by a dozen rabbits staring at her intently. She blinked. “…Why are you all looking at me like that?”

Angel cocked his head. He noted that she sounded strange.

“Oh, I do? I don’t sound weird to me…”

He shrugged, commenting that Flutterfree also wasn’t acting as scared of them as usual.

“Scared? Why would I be scared? I’ve known you all for years and - …wait. Angel Bunny, what’s my name?”

He thought it was Fluttershy.

“Of course…” Flutterfree took in a breath. “I’m sorry, I don’t think I’m the pony you know. My name is Flutterfree. I’m from a completely different world, probably. I’d never find any of you precious creatures terrifying!”

This disappointed some of the animals and relieved the others.

Flutterfree looked outside, narrowing her eyes. “So, would anypony here know about other universes and worlds? It’s okay if you don’t know.”

Angel shrugged. Twilight was the science pony. Pinkie also had a way of knowing things.

“I think I’ll try Twilight first, Pinkies are always so… unpredictable. You never know when one will try to bake you into cupcakes. I don’t think I could handle one of those by myself.” She scratched Angel behind the ears. “Is there anything dangerous out there I should be worried about?”

There was a war going on, but it wasn’t exactly happening near Ponyville.

“Oh, a war… that’s terrible! I hope it ends soon.”

Angel shrugged – he didn’t care about it all that much.

“Right. Well, I’m off to find this world’s Twilight. Does she live in a castle, a library, or…”
She lived in the library.

“Got it. Thank you all! Try not to torment other-me if she comes back, okay?”

Angel rolled his eyes. She’d been getting better with them as of late, less running in terror and more random bursts of screaming.

“…Right. Take care of yourselves!” She walked out the door and shut it behind her, trotting down the road to Ponyville. The path looked *almost* identical to what she remembered from four years ago, but there were a few subtle differences. There were less birdfeeders and animal habitats – presumably because this world’s Fluttershy was not good with animals. She also saw a couple of zeppelins in the sky, moving in a circle. Probably part of the war.

She gulped. She didn’t like the looks of this. She wished she had a dimensional device on her. Maybe she should start carrying one at all times, like Twilight and Pinkie…

She hoped this world’s Twilight could help her.

As Flutterfree entered Ponyville, nopony paid her much mind – she did, after all, look like Fluttershy. No hat, no metal ears… Nothing to set her apart. Probably good, in this case. She walked right up to the Golden Oaks Library and knocked.

Twilight Sparkle, unicorn, answered the door. “Yes, Fluttershy?”

“Hello. This is going to sound weird, but I’m not your Fluttershy.“

“You’re not Fluttershy…?” Twilight said, entering a defensive stance.

Flutterfree shook her head. “No, I’m not. I’m from another universe. The animals told me you might be able to help.”

“I… What? *Why do you sound like a dude?*”

“To me, *you* sound like a guy.”

Twilight blinked. “…I’m going to get a notebook to write all this down. Help yourself to anything in the kitchen that isn’t marked ‘Spike’.”

Flutterfree nodded. “Thank you.”

~~~

Renee woke up, slowly coming into the awareness of the day. She was on her drama couch, in her boutique, lying on the white form of her younger sister, Sweetie Belle. The filly days of Sweetie Belle were long behind her – she was a full grown, if still young, mare now, cutie mark and all.

Renee adjusted her hat and rubbed her eyes – they must have fallen asleep on the drama couch. What had they been doing? Oh, right. Watching TV. The humans had such interesting movies sometimes… The two of them had been making movie night a thing they did as of late.

Though Renee found herself momentarily confused to find that the wall the TV had been mounted on was empty. Not to mention, the dresses were also different than she remembered… Did Coco or Sassy come in and change the selection? Renee knew she wasn’t really in charge of her boutiques’ finer points anymore, but she still had a sharp eye for detail and knew when things changed…

“Renee…” Sweetie muttered, rubbing her eyes. “Can’t we keep sleeping?”
Renee put a hoof to her chin. “Sweetie, I think something’s up. Does the boutique look different to you?”

Sweetie blinked, forcing herself to look around. “…Well, the TV’s missing. Were we robbed?”

Renee walked up to the wall the TV had been on and put a hoof to it. “There’s no dust back here, or even an imprint of the TV’s mount… It’s like it was never here.”

Sweetie shook her head, trying to clear it. “Uh… Are we in the past or something? Did Nova screw a spell up?”

“Possibly…” Renee looked out the windows of the Boutique at Ponyville. “Might actually be in the past. No castle, no dimensional buildings… This could also be another universe.”

“Why are we here?” Sweetie asked.

Renee furrowed her brow. “I don’t know… And I don’t have a dimensional device on me. This could be… problematic.”

Sweetie blinked. “We… Can get home, right?”

Renee nodded slowly. “Oh, of course we can, we got here somehow. The issue is finding out how to get back. Sadly, I only know the most basic dimensional theory…”

Sweetie grinned. “I’ve studied up on it! I could probably do something with enough magic!”

Renee smirked. “Well, aren’t I lucky you came here with me then?”

“Yes, you are.”

The front door of the boutique opened, allowing a version of Sweetie Belle in – a blank flank filly with angry, somehow ominous, eyes. She spoke with a voice so deep it resonated with the very substance of reality around them. “Rarity, Twilight wants to see you about that dress, and she demanded I come here like some errand pony, refusing to look up from her incantations for any reason. As a normal sister, I of course begrudgingly obliged. And- Edsam l’oa i't 'jknk yi Azathothn' th yar as't?!?” the filly blurted when she noticed Sweetie Belle.

Sweetie Belle stared back at the smaller version of herself. “Not as cute as I remember.”

Renee shook her head. “Stars above, I thought Alushy had the voice. Clearly I was wrong.”

The filly blinked. “As a perfectly normal unicorn, I am understandably confused, and concerned, by the sudden existence of an adult clone of myself and a clearly altered big sister. Rarity, what is going on!”?

“Well… I’m not Rarity, I’m Renee, this is Sweetie Belle, and we’re not from your universe.”

“Ah. As a filly, I cannot comprehend this strange concept, but I think I can grasp that you are not the ponies I knew. So… I am Thrackerzod. What brings you to this plane?”

Sweetie Belle and Renee exchanged confused glances. Renee shook her head. “Well, we don’t know. We fell asleep on the couch, watching TV, and then we woke up here. We currently lack any way to get back home… Thrackerzod, dear, do you know anything about other worlds, or any pony that could help us?”

“I most definitely do not have any such knowledge myself, clearly, but there may be something in
The library. Where Twilight Sparkle is.”

“Right,” Renee said. “I suppose we will answer her ‘call’ then, even if it’s not going to be the one she wants…”

“Want to come?” Sweetie asked Thrackerzod. “You could be our guide to this world!”

“…This strikes me as a bad idea,” Thrackerzod said.

“Oh, you sure? I think it’d be fun.”

Thrackerzod sighed deeply. “…I cannot turn down ‘fun’, it is the way things are.”

Renee raised an eyebrow. “If you don’t want to come, Thr-“

“No, no, I shall come, no more deliberating. It’ll be worthwhile to prepare further with Twilight…” she noticed the way Renee and Sweetie were staring at her. “…for a party! Thrown by Pinkie! You have Pinkies that throw parties, right?”

Renee nodded slowly. “Yes…”

“Then let us go to Twilight Sparkle for interdimensional help and… observation. Yes. Also, while I am concerned for my sister I am still overcome by excitement at the prospect of something new and interesting.”

Renee rolled her eyes. “Right, well, to the library then.”

~~~

Pinkie, the last pony to see, was the one who figured out what was going on fastest.

Which was to say she cheated by just knowing.

She sat up from the cake she was baking and stared outside. “Huh. Another universe. Cool. Thank you Vriska,” she said with only a slight hint of sarcasm. “So… What am I going to do here? Hrm…”

She put a hoof to her chin. “I know! I’ll just go say hello to everypony!”

She burst out the doors of Sugarcube Corner and stood on her hind legs, smiling in the light of the sun. “HELLO PONYVILLE!”

“Hello, Pinkie,” a Rainbow Dash said, flying up. “You’re looking Rainbow today, Dash!”

“And so are you!” Pinkie said with a grin. “So, what’s up today Dashie?”

“Rainbowing, some Dashing, some more Rainbowing, you know.”

“Yeah. I do,” Pinkie said, straining to keep her smile as large as it was.

“But then the Dash with the Rainbow, Rainbow Dashed, and it was awesome.”

“…Right,” Pinkie said. “So, seen any friends lately?”

“Only the best! Rarity’s right over there!”

Pinkie turned her head sharply to see a Rarity trotting across the street. She was wearing some kind of purple ceremonial robe and a giant hat. “Hey Rarity!” Pinkie called.
“Pinkie!” Rarity said, aghast. “Darling, you can’t interfere today! We have a ceremony that I can’t be responsible for messing up again! Take your randomness and your witchcraft elsewhere, I don’t want to deal with it today! Humph!” She trotted away, barely maintaining balance due to the giant hat.

Pinkie blinked as Rarity trotted away. “Wow. That was mean.”

“It totally was,” Rainbow Dash interjected.

Pinkie shook her head slowly. “Right so… What have I learned? Nothing really, just introduced this Rarity, that’s important. There’s also the double flanderized Rainbow Dash, not so important. The world is filled with uncaring jerks and I’m a witch. Or the other me is a witch. Wait…” She put a hoof to her chin. “Can I be a gypsy bard witch thing? That would be cool, it’d certainly provide a convenient excuse to move along the plot…”

Rainbow Dash blinked. “Uh… You aren’t supposed to be saying that in front of me, are you?”

“Repeat anything I just said.”

“Rainbow!”

“Thought so. You’re safe.” Pinkie adjusted her mane and put on a smirk. “Dashie, you might want to go. I’m going to turn the basement of Sugarcube Corner into a séance! So unless you want some witchcraft parties, I’d suggest moving your caboose to Dash some Rainbow Rainbow elsewhere.”

“So Rainbow!”

“Yes. Exactly.”

Rainbow Dash flew away. Pinkie let out a breath. “Right, so… To the basement!”

She was in the basement, somehow having already set up a pentagram. She set five cakes at the star points and a large crystal ball in the center. She giggled. “This is going to be so silly.” She opened a chest that belonged to the native Pinkie, removing several enchanted witchcraft ingredients. Normally they’d need to be thrown into a cauldron, but Pinkie had used all her patience on Rainbow Dash. She just threw them into a random glass bottle, shook, and decided it was ready.

“Yeah, I know I’m exploiting. It doesn’t really matter, okay?” She completed the highly illegal form of magic and began to chant in a mysterious, ancient tongue, the ten minute speech roughly equivalent to “Oh great forces, show me my quest!”

The lines of the pentagram glowed, dissolving the cakes into nothing. A sugary sheen covered the crystal ball, prompting an image to show up within the crystal sphere. It was of this world’s Fluttershy, in full ceremonial dress, watching a purple mass of evil burn through the countryside, enveloping everything…

Pinkie gasped. “The Smooze is coming! Oh no!” She stood tall and saluted nothing in particular. “I take it as my sworn duty to Equestria and the Multiverse to stop this calamity from happening!”

Her serious expression vanished and she started giggling. “This should be fun!”

~~~

Charter-Princess Twilight Sparkle stood in front of a portal with Applejack at her side.
“There’s going to be another Applejack through this barrier,” Twilight said. “We’ll need to call you something else.”

“Why shouldn’t the other one get a name?”

“Because she’s not here?”

“And why are ya still Twilight then? By that logic, ya should change yer name!”

“…I’m working on that. You can call me Charter if you need to differentiate.”

“Yer Charlie.”

“I am not Charlie”

“Yer Charlie to me.”

“Then you’re… You’re just Jack, Jack.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “…Ah’m okay with this.”

Twilight facehooved. “Of course you are. Let’s move.”

The two stepped through the Mirror Portal, arriving on an Earth much like Earth Vitis, albeit several years behind. Canterlot High was still here, exactly as Twilight remembered seeing it the first time.

She was slightly disoriented to realize she was a human again. She stumbled a bit – but nowhere near as much as Jack, who took one step, landed on her face, and made a skid mark in the concrete.

Twilight smirked. “Takes some getting used to, doesn’t it?”

“Somepony’s gonna pay for makin’ me look like an idiot, and Ah’m thinkin’ yer a good candidate.”

Twilight shrugged, standing up and dusting herself off. “Then you’d never get your money.”

“Yeah, can’t wait for those hundred bits.”

“It was ten, Jack.”

“Ah seem to remember a hundred…”

“That won’t hold up in court.”

“Ah own the courts!”

Twilight rolled her eyes. “It’s extremely likely I can get the interdimensional courts in on this, places where you have no influence.”

Jack put a hand to her chin. “Clearly, I need to expand my influence…”

“Good luck with that,” Twilight said, pulling out her dimensional device. She attempted to dial Equis Vitis – but there was no connection. She started cycling through all the commonly-used coordinates she knew, but she found nothing. She was able to dial the universe she had just been in, but that didn’t really help.

“Huh. So it actually works. Color me impressed,” Jack commented.
“Oh ye of little faith…” Twilight said, closing the portal. “Well, this doesn’t help me. Still no connections. I may have to set up a finder spell…”

“A what now?”

“It’s something I can attach to the Mirror Portal that’ll make it cycle between different universes. Though without the diamond it won’t be able to check very distant locations… I’m sure it can find something. Let’s go back.”

“Go back? We just got here!”

“Yeah, but it’s not exactly helpful now is it?”

“Charlie, ya don’t skip out on an opportunity like this. We’re here, there’s something we can do.”

“Who in hell are you?” a human Applejack said, walking up with a Sunset Shimmer behind her.

Jack looked at Twilight. “Ah’ve changed my mind, let’s leave now.”

“Oh, can’t stand the sight of yer own face?” the Applejack questioned.

Jack put her hands on her hips. “The disgusting shape of a human’s face is only part of it. The other part is that yer clearly some froo-froo teenage girl. Ah bet you don’t even have a say in the family business.”

“…Farmin’ apples?”

“Dear Celestia, this place is unbearable. It’s makin’ me think about things Ah don’t wanna think about. Charlie, let’s go.”

Twilight ignored Jack and walked up to Sunset Shimmer. “Hello, I’m Charter-Princess Twilight Sparkle, and I’m from a far away universe. You are…?”

The Sunset Shimmer opened her mouth, but her Applejack spoke for her. “That’s OJ. Surprised you don’t know, Twilight.”

“She’s not the same Twilight, ya idjit!” Jack chided.

“Ah know that, me, you can piss off.”

“No you can piss off.”

Twilight turned to OJ. “So… OJ? Not Sunset Shimmer?”

“Apparently not,” OJ said, sighing.

“Well, it does make things easier if we run into another Sunset at any time. What’s it stand for?”

“Orange Twilight.”

Twilight blinked. “…How does…?”

“It doesn’t.”

Applejack butted in. “It’s perfectly understandable! Listen! ooooranjeeeeeee OOOOOOOORANJEEEEEE.”
Twilight raised an eyebrow. “…I can hear you inserting a J in there where none was meant to be.”

“Same,” Jack commented.

Applejack crossed her arms. “Whatever, it’s just a name, who gives a crap?”

OJ averted her gaze from everyone. Twilight put a hand on OJ’s shoulder. “Hey… Chin up, okay?”

“I’m fine…”

“No, you’re not,” Twilight said. “But I can help, if you’ll let me.”

“Why are you wastin’ your time on OJ? She’s not-“

Twilight shot Applejack a look that shut her right up. “Whatever you were about to say, it was wrong. OJ here is a great human and a great unicorn who’s just a little lost and needs to find her purpose.”

“What are you, some kind of empath?” Jack asked.

“Just good at my job,” Twilight said, looking warmly at OJ. “Would you like to come with me for a little while, get out of this place?”

OJ pulled Twilight into a hug. “Yes. Please, god yes.”

Twilight hugged her back. “That settles it. Jack, we’re taking OJ with us. See you… other Applejack.”

“Eh, Ah could care less.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “It’s ‘Ah couldn’t care less’, idjit.”

“Do ya get off on insultin’ yerself?”

“Ya’d know.”

“Okay! We’re leaving through the portal!” Twilight called. “You can stay here and keep arguing if you want!”

The two Applejacks stared at each other for a few more seconds before huffing and walking in opposite directions. Jack returned to her Equis with Twilight and OJ.

When they returned, Twilight gave OJ a reassuring smile. “We’re going to try to find another universe, OJ. Does that sound exciting?”

“It does. Trying to get home?”

“Yes. Might take a bit, but I don’t think we’re too far away from our section of the multiverse.” She took her dimensional device and placed it at the top of the Mirror Portal, casting a complicated search spell on it. The lights on the device began to flash in seemingly random patterns as it began to test dozens of different coordinates. There were no instant discoveries – the Mirror Portal turned off, and remained off while the searching continued.

“Don’t worry, I can take you back to Earth at any time,” Twilight said.

OJ looked at the Mirror Portal. “…I’m not sure I want to go back.”
Jack raised an eyebrow. “What, too many references to the time ya were totally evil?”

“…Yeah. And all the references to me being useless.”

“Well suck it up, ya were evil, you’re facin’ what happens. Buckle up, buttercup, it don’t go away.”

OJ started crying.

“Jack!” Twilight called. “That was mean!”

“Ya really are from another universe, aren’t ya?”

“Yes! But I know that OJ here can be useful and have a purpose! I’m sure she can be a great friend and ally!”

OJ let a smile come to her face. “Thanks, Twi…”

“Oh look at that, you’re giving her hope,” Jack commented. “Now that’s mean.”

Twilight took in a deep breath and let it out, calming herself. “Don’t you have a criminal empire to run or something?”

“Oh, Granny’s got that under control for t’day. Ah think Ah’m gonna join ya and spread the influence.”

“…Great.”

~~~

“These are some nice crackers,” Flutterfree commented, munching.

“Yeah,” Twilight said, scribbling more things down. “So… Let me see if I have this straight. You’re part of a task force with a version of me, Pinkie, Rarity, and somepony named Starlight that explores new universes and forges alliances?”

“More or less,” Flutterfree confirmed.

“And you’re currently lost in our universe, and you have no idea why…” Twilight put a hoof to her chin. “I’m sorry, I don’t think I can help you… Oh, but I know somepony who might?”

“Who?”

“Only the best pony ever, Princess Celestia! I’ll have Spike send her a letter explaining the situation, and asking for some kind of help. Actually, I should probably do that anyway, she’ll want to know about you so she can make a decision about what to do with you. She might be busy though…”

“With the war?”

Twilight’s excitement left her body. “Yeah. The war.”

“What’s the war about anyway?” Flutterfree asked.

“Sombra and Chrysalis want us dead, basically.”

“…Somehow I expected it to be a bit more complicated than that.”

“Oh, it probably is. But here, we’re safe. The war will never get this deep into Equestria, Celestia
won’t let it. She’s just too good.”

Flutterfree smiled. “That’s a good attitude.”

“Anyway… Spike! I need you to send a letter- Wait, right, he’s not here right now. At Rarity’s.”

“Let’s go say hello to Rarity then,” Flutterfree said, eating the last bit of her cracker.

“Actually, she might be able to help some as well…”

“Hrm? Rarity?”

Twilight blinked. “Yeah! Her. For… reasons.”

Flutterfree raised an eyebrow.

“Look, it’s something private, and she’d rather not tell some random pony who looks like Fluttershy about it.”

“I understand.”

“What do you think happened to Fluttershy, anyway?”

Flutterfree shrugged. “She’s probably in my world. I can guarantee she’ll be looked after, if you’re worried.”

“Right…” Twilight trotted out of the library, Flutterfree close behind her. The two of them knew exactly where the boutique was, and marched right in. Sure enough, Spike and Rarity were both in there.

Spike was talking. “So yeah, that’s pretty much how I saved the entire badlands.”

Rarity rolled her eyes. “Um, I think I would have remembered that, if something happened in the badlands. Um, yeah.” She turned to Twilight. “Hey, Twilight, do you want to buy a dress?”

Twilight took in a deep breath and released to calm herself. “No, Rarity, I do not want to buy a dress. I am here to use Spike – we need to send a letter to Princess Celestia.”

“Oh come on!” Spike blurted. “Another one? What is so important that you couldn’t use the regular mail, Twi?”

Flutterfree spoke up. “I’m from another universe and your Fluttershy is probably stuck in mine.”

Spike blinked. “Oh. Okay, fine, write the letter, I’ll send it.” Twilight nodded, taking out a piece of parchment and writing the letter.

Rarity looked at Flutterfree. “Um…”

“Hello Rarity, I’m Flutterfree.”

“…Um, do you want to buy a dress?”

“Maybe later, I don’t have any money on me right now.”

“Oh, I can just give you a dress. Lemme check the back…”

“Don’t worry about it right now,” Flutterfree said. “But I would like to see it later, after this is dealt
“Right,” Rarity said, smiling. “…Our Fluttershy is okay, right?”

“My world isn’t dangerous at all, don’t worry. There’s no war there.”

“Oh? Um, really?”

“Nope.”

Rarity leaned in. “Do you have enemies though?”

“Oh yes, we had Sombra and Chrysalis too, but they were defeated before war could break out. The changelings are our allies now as well.”

Spike, Rarity, and Twilight stared at her.

“Oh, did I say something wrong?”

“Er… No! Not at all!” Twilight said, looking around nervously. “Just a little odd, that’s all!”

Rarity leaned closer to Flutterfree. “How did you become allies?”

Flutterfree put a hoof to her chin. “Well, we deposed Chrysalis, and discovered that changelings can operate on giving love instead of stealing it. Though, sadly, not every universe’s changelings can do that – they can all still be friends though. I know several versions of a changeling named Kevin-”

“Kevin!?” Rarity blurted.

“You know him?”

“Um… No!”

Flutterfree blinked. She held up a hoof. “Okay, clearly we’re treading over dangerous ground where there are lots of secrets. I won’t ask you to tell me – you have no reason to trust me, you’ve known me less than ten minutes. But, to answer the question I think you want answered, Rarity – yes, changelings are redeemable and can be great friends, just as they have capacity for great evil.”

Rarity nervously smiled. “Um… Thank you.”

“I think I’d like to look at that dress now,” Flutterfree said.

“Right this way!”

As the two left, Twilight and Spike glanced at each other.

“Well this might complicate things,” Spike said.

“No kidding,” Twilight muttered, writing another line on the letter and handing it to Spike. “Let’s see what she says.”

Spike sent the letter up and away to Canterlot Castle…

~~~

At the door of a library parallel to the one Flutterfree had just left, Renee knocked on the door, Sweetie and Thrackerzod flanking her sides.
A unicorn Twilight Sparkle opened the door, her expression giving off a mixture of apathy, disinterest, and general grumpiness. She spoke with a voice that belonged in a stallion but was still a far cry from Thrackerzod’s guttural undertone. “What is it?”

Renee gestured at Sweetie, Thrackerzod, and her hat.

“…Oh. Great, this is going to be one of those days. What did you do this time? Did you do it with some powerful wizard, and a freaky spell of some kind discharged at just the wrong moment?”

Renee winced. “Oh dear, is my counterpart one of those Raritys?”

“…You’re sounding masculine.”

“Rather,” Renee said, ignoring the comment for the most part. “I am Renee, a Rarity from another universe. I assure you, I am nothing like the… uncultured ‘flirt’ you’ve suggested your Rarity is. I am a pony of class and an explorer of many untold worlds. This is my sister, Sweetie Belle. We don’t know why we’re here and we have no way to get back.”

Twilight stared at her blankly. “While that’s beyond interesting, why the hell did you come to me?”

“You know things!” Thrackerzod accused, pointing a hoof.

“Oh, for the – you listened to Sweetie Belle?”

“Thrackerzod!” Thrackerzod insisted.

“Just call her Thrackerzod,” Sweetie said. “Unless you want me to change my name to something.”

“Ugh… Look, I may know a thing or two about conjuring things from other realms, that’s no secret, but they aren’t exactly places you’d want to go, even if you have explored other worlds before. The things there are literal evil eldritch abominations.”

Renee and Sweetie Belle glanced at Thrackerzod. The filly started sweating profusely.

Twilight raised an eyebrow. “…Why are you looking at her funny?”

“No reason,” Renee lied, turning back to Twilight. “Although you can’t help us, I do believe you would be the pony to talk to so we may learn more about this world.”

“That’s… Probably right, unfortunately. Ugh… Fine, I’ll pour some drinks, something tells me this is going to be a long day.” She let the three of them in. “I’ve got every kind of alcohol under the sun, what do you want?”

“Oooh oooh!” Sweetie cheered. “Have anything cherry flavored?”

“I do have some infused wine- wait, aren’t you too…” she looked Sweetie Belle up and down. “Nevermind. Still have the image of a filly in my head for you. Probably won’t go away anytime soon and I’m not going to make much of an effort to get rid of it.”

Renee sighed. “I’ll have a daiquiri. Any kind will do.”

“You have to promise not to throw it onto the floor if it’s not perfect,” Twilight muttered, grabbing a beer for herself.

“I’m liking your version of me less and less as time goes on,” Renee commented.
“That’s the rational response,” Twilight said, passing out the drinks.

“I shall sit back here,” Thrackerzod announced, “jealous that I am not old enough to consume the adult beverages, but obediently I will not try to consume some behind your backs.”

“Uh huh, sure,” Twilight muttered, downing her bottle. “So, Renee of other-universe-somewhere, you’re lost.”

“Yes, unfortunately.”

“No idea how you got here?”

“None at all. It happened while we were asleep. We were watching TV – do you have TV here?”

“Yeah. What sad universe wouldn’t?”

“Most pony universes, actually.”

“The multiverse sounds horribly depressing. Which is to say this revelation changes nothing about my outlook on life. What a riveting piece of information.”

Renee raised an eyebrow. “Dear, you seem troubled.”

“No, really?”

“Really. I won’t pry, since I’m new here and clearly I’d be out of my bounds to do so, but perhaps you could stand to get some help.”

“My friends are all idiots or assholes and that wolf psychiatrist was worthless.”

Renee blinked. “…Fair. I would offer you help, but I’m cut off from all my resources.”

“Why are my personal issues any business of yours?”

“Habit, I suppose. We were regularly called to solve ‘friendship problems’ back in the day. Still are, from time to time.”

“That sounds completely asinine.”

Renee smirked. “Usually we ended up doing some good. But we are getting off track. You should tell me a bit about this world.”

“Celestia is the god-ruler of everything and if you go against her you are dead in every possible sense of the word. You’re in her kingdom, Equestria, and we have three types of ponies that generally hate each other but still manage to make this bizarre experiment that is government work well enough not to fall apart at the seams. There’s five magical elements of harmony that we can use to rainbow-blast enemies into oblivion…”

“Five? Strange. We have six in our world.”

“Why would there be si- oh, right. Spike. Forgot about him for a moment.”

Renee blinked. “Huh. In our world it’s me, Twilight, Pinkie, Applejack, Rainbow Dash, and Fluttershy.”

“Who?”
“…Do you not have a Fluttershy?”

“I don’t recognize the name.”

“Yellow pegasus, little shy, usually likes animals?”

“…Not ringing any bells.”

“Strange…” Renee shrugged. “I’ll have to look into that later. The town is the same, I bet her cottage would be in the same place…”

“You’re getting off track again.”

“I’m not sure this conversation really has a track.”

“Well great, here we are drinking and having a conversation that has no point.”

“Oooh! Just like a date!” Sweetie said.

Twilight and Renee looked at her. “I completely forgot you existed,” Twilight said.

“Eh, yeah, that happens. This is actually my first interdimensional adventure, I’m just so caught up in watching Renee do what she does best!”

“Kid, your sister is doing a terrible job at interrogation.”

“Oh, she’s not interrogating, she’s making friends.”

Renee smirked. “I’m doing both, Sweetie.”

A thought occurred to Twilight, “Wait, if you’re here, where’s my Rarity?”

“Dunno. She wasn’t in the boutique,” Renee said. “I’d say I probably swapped places with her, but both Sweetie and Thrackerzod are here.”

“Sounds like a question you should try to answer if you want to get home.”

“Certainly.” Renee took a delicate sip of her drink. “Now, I’m curious, what are your elements like?”

“Well… Want the long version or the short version?”

“Short first, long if I want more.”

“Applejack’s the only reasonable pony in existence, Spike is my sarcastic servant, Rainbow Dash has mental retardation, Pinkie is always either trying to seduce me or kill me for some reason, and Rarity is a slut.”

Renee tried to hold back her gasp – she couldn’t.

“You really take offense at that, don’t you?”

“If I ever see her I will likely have a long chat with her about the dignity of a lady.”

“Good luck. She’s of the mind that she’s the most fashionable thing since sliced bread.”

“Her metaphor leaves much to be desired, sliced bread is hardly fashionable.”
A small smile came to Twilight’s lips. “No, it’s not. See, I keep telling her the metaphor would work better with some sort of fashion trend from a few decades back, but she never listens to me. And don’t get me started on how picky she is – throwing ‘imperfect’ drinks on the floor, refusing to get dirty…”

“Stars above, Twilight, I do believe we’re gossiping rather malevolently about a pony I’ve never actually met.”

“…Do you have a problem with that?”

Renee bit her lip. “Well… I should…” She slammed her hooves on the table and grinned. “But I can’t resist! Let’s keep going! I’ve known a few crazy Raritys in my adventures, some of whom were literally murderers. The strangest one of all, though, would have to be Dynamo. I never did understand her name…”

~~~

Thrackerzod had slipped away quickly after the boring ‘gossip’ talk started. She wasn’t getting any new information, and nothing was getting her any closer to her goal – the death of Twilight Sparkle and the capture of her soul. A somewhat small part in the tremendous game Thrackerzod was apart of, but still important to the eternal machinations of the forces she served.

However, she had learned some things today that she needed to report. So she called her friends together for another ritual. She, Applebloom, and Scootaloo performed it in the clubhouse this time – as nice as Fluttershy was, doing it in her cottage again was just bad for the eldritch vibes of what was about to happen. They still took one of her chickens though, they were good for innocence destroying.

“Remember, you two,” Thrackerzod said. “He’s a busy man, and we can’t keep him around to play for very long.”

“I don’t need very long, baby, hoo!” Scootaloo said. “Just a little time to get on in there, if you know what I mean.”

Applebloom rolled her eyes. “Yes, Scootaloo, everypony from here to Canterlot knows what you mean and is understandably creeped out.”

“Hoo! Just the way I like ‘em!”

Thrackerzod rolled her eyes, turning to the chicken that was placed upon a yellow glyph in the ground. “So, Mrs. Spaghetti the second, are you ready for your innocence to be destroyed!?”

“Ooh! Ooh! I wanna do it!” Scootaloo said. “Hey Mrs. Spaghetti, allow me to explain to you the language of love.”

“All the chickens are married to Mr. Spaghetti, that’s not anything new for her,” Applebloom muttered.

“Applebloom is right, the lost innocence must be lost freshly,” Thrackerzod said.

“See? I can learn things about this eldrawhatever.”

“You will make a good acolyte one day,” Thrackerzod confirmed.

“I bet I can get the innocence destroyed… Hey, Mrs. Spaghetti! There are thousands of chickens
being grown on farms everywhere for the explicit purpose of harvesting their newborns for cake batter! And it’s worse in Griffonstone, they eat all the chickens!”

Nothing happened.

“Not quite enough…” Thrackerzod muttered. “Let’s see… The world is inherently meaningless and you are but a pathetic animal, doomed to serve higher beings for eternity, lower even than the ponies that watch out for you. Also, Twilight Sparkle will never remember Fluttershy’s existence, and life is full of decisions where there is no right choice!”

The chicken took a step back. The yellow glyph transformed into a tall humanoid in red robes with two floating black hands at his sides. “Who has summoned me?” he spoke in a distant, alien language that somehow all present could understand anyway, even though it was a little disorienting.

Thrackerzod cleared her throat. “Hastur! I have summoned you, once again, to report my progress. A complication has arisen.”

“You think you have a complication? There’s a nut-head here screaming his head off and the Twilight has sent a ripple through the conduits again!”

“A Rarity and a Sweetie Belle from another universe have arrived, a universe that knows of interdimensional travel. They haven’t outed me yet, but they are suspicious.”

“This is bad news indeed- the plans will have to be moved along faster than intended. The Twilight cannot be allowed to roam free with her power, the consequences to our realm would be worse than the nut-head.”

“What’s a nut-head?” Applebloom asked.

“4th dimensional beings that think they should run everything they can and apparently have taken issue with our interference in this realm even though with the presence of Thrackerzod we have a legitimate claim to the existence. They think they can regulate everything and we call them nut-heads because they look like they have wrinkled nuts for heads.”

Thrackerzod raised an eyebrow. “That’s a more pleasant description than you usually give of them.”

“Oh, baby, I wanna see one of these things now!” Scootaloo commented.

“You do not, trust me,” Thrackerzod muttered.

“The nut-head watches at all times and it would be best not to insult it while its senses are on us. There is a chance it is watching now though I truly expect it to just be partying it down at the Pitpit while pretending to do its supposed ‘job.’ Regardless, Thrackerzod, I will orient the realm how I can to make the moment right. With the dimensional additions I will attempt to expand the horizons of the contract to be more accommodating should interdimensional foreplay be required. The imbalance of the Twilight must be stopped.”

“Clearly. That is all I need to report. I should get back to the otherworlders, to make sure they aren’t doing anything unexpected. You can stay as long as you wish.”

“Your hospitality is appreciated, Thrackerzod. I shall let you return to your work and I will spend time with these two fillies while changing the contract – would you like TV or Battleship?”
“Oooh! I like Battleship!” Applebloom said.

“Have fun,” Thrackerzod called back. “There is work to do…”

Unbeknownst to Hastur, Thrackerzod, Applebloom, or Scootaloo, they were being watched. Sweetie Belle slowly lowered herself from the clubhouse’s window, trying to process what she’d just witnessed.

~~~

Pinkie looked at the sky with her binoculars – she knew the moon was up there, moving closer and closer to the sun, preparing for an eclipse later. The eclipse that would signal the coming of the Smooze, were the ritual to be completed properly. Pinkie could try to convince Luna to move the moon, but she wasn’t sure if that would work. The eclipse could just be a timer, not a source of actual magic…

She would have to stop it some other way, but she wasn’t sure what part of the ritual it was that actually summoned the Smooze. Pinkie turned her binoculars back to the clearing in the Everfree Forest where the cult had set up, all the ponies wearing beautiful purple robes. Fluttershy was wearing the most extravagant robes, lined with gold and mysterious symbols of Smooziness. She was standing over a large, round, open pit, which she threw a dead raccoon into. As she did this she shot Rarity a disgruntled look. Pinkie couldn’t see Rarity’s reaction, but it was probably shameful.

The Smooze acolytes began moving around the clearing, setting things up. Pinkie had no idea what any of it meant, it was all too far away. She couldn’t get closer – they really didn’t trust the ‘gypsy’ or her witchcraft. She’d be revealed immediately…

She needed an ally. But most of the ponies in this world were either aggressive, clueless, prideful, or part of that cult… Who could she think of that was nice, mostly moral, and had good reason to help her?

A lightbulb went off in her head. She knew exactly who could help her.

She appeared in the middle of Ponyville, stopping this world’s version of Sweetie Belle in her tracks. “Hey Sweetie, do you know what your sister is doing?”

Sweetie Belle spoke with a synthetic voice that clearly announced her identity as a robot to everypony present. “Yeah! She’s summoning the Smooze today! The summoning that I ruined last time!”

Pinkie just let her knowledge that Sweetie Belle was Sweetie Bot pass into the back of her mind – nobody needed to know about the robotic nature of the filly, not even Sweetie Bot herself. “Well, do you know what happens when the Smooze covers everypony?”

“Uh… No. I don’t. All I know is that it’ll make Rarity happy and that’s all I need to know!”

“Sweetie, I’m sorry, but Rarity thinks it’ll make her happy… But really, it’ll kill her and everypony in town at the least – possibly all of Equestria!”

Sweetie Bot blinked, her mechanical brain audibly whirring from the processing strain that revelation caused. “Whaaaaaat?”

“It’s true! Think about it – the Smooze is a giant purple flood of toxic chemicals that will blanket the land! Does that sound survivable?”
“Chances of survival in that situation are 0.01%! Oh no, Rarity! I have to stop you!”

Pinkie smiled warmly. “That’s the spirit! I need you to go to the cult’s ritual site and record everything you can, then report back to me so we can make a plan! Find out what part actually summons the Smooze! I can’t go in there, they don’t trust me, but I’m sure you can get your way in!”

“I’ll need the appropriate attire.”

Pinkie pulled a filly-sized cult robe out of her mane. “There you go!”

“Yay! My trustworthiness has increased!”

“Now, don’t you go forgetting your mission while you’re in there, okay Sweetie? The fate of the world depends on you finding out how we can stop the ritual.”

“My dependability is maximum! I won’t let you down!” She ran off into the forest, inner gears whirring quickly. “Rarity! I’m coming for you!”

Pinkie shrugged, appearing back on her outlook hill to observe the infiltration of the cult. Sweetie Bot arrived only shortly after Pinkie, her impressive robotic speed providing quite the advantage over other ponies. Pinkie saw her slide into the clearing, grinning, shouting something cheerfully. Fluttershy and Rarity walked up to her, said a few things, but eventually let Sweetie Bot in.

Pinkie grinned. Step one, success. Now Sweetie Bot just needed to remember how to get out…

“Hey, Pinkie, why are you spying on your friends?”

Pinkie lowered her binoculars to find an alicorn version of Twilight standing behind her. “Oh, Acorna. Hi.”

“…Why did you use my middle name?” Acorna asked.

“To avoid confusion,” Pinkie explained, looking back into her binoculars.

“Pinkie, you’re ignoring me. I don’t like that.”

“I’m trying to stop the Smooze from destroying all of Equestria, if you must know.”

“Oh. But I thought Rarity and Fluttershy wanted this?”

“Yes, they do. Not going to let it happen.”

“Pinkie, you can’t just betray your friends like that!”

Pinkie looked up at Acorna and raised an eyebrow. “Why not?”

“Because… Because…”

“Hey, if I told you they thought you didn’t deserve to be princess and that your marriage was a farce perpetuated by mind control magic, what would you do?”

“They’d be executed!”

“Right. And if I told you they wanted to destroy Equestria?”

“Eh. Long as I’m still around.”
Pinkie blinked slowly. “Okay… What if I told you that destroying Equestria would make them better than you?”

“…It would?”

“It definitely would. Think about it, you’re the Princess of the Night, but that pales in comparison to the power of unleashing a sticky, Smoozy abomination on the world. You’d be placed in the shadow, ridiculed for having been surpassed. You might even be called to face the Smooze after it is summoned, and that’d be work.”

Acorna processed this. “…We have to stop the Smooze.”

*That was way too easy,* Pinkie thought. “Well, for now, all we do is watch Sweetie Belle. She’s my spy.”

“She’d make a horrible spy, she’s not subtle at all in anything she does.”

Pinkie snorted. “Oh, I think you’ve underestimated her…”

“I can’t underestimate anything.”

“Suuuuuuuuure. Can you make mistakes?”

“Nope! I’m the goodest goodpony that ever existed! The world basks in my glory!”

“Delusions…”

“Why yes, it is delightful!”

Pinkie twitched, looking through the binoculars again. Sweetie Bot was talking to Rarity. Pinkie could only hope it was about the specifics of the ritual.

“…Are we just going to wait here until she’s done?” Acorna said.

“Yep,” Pinkie confirmed.

“Well that’s boring. I demand we move forward now!”

“Acorna, princess, that’d make ponies think you were impatient. You don’t want ponies to think that do you?”

“Nah, but I don’t have to worry, ponies always love me.”

Pinkie rammed her face into a desk that hadn’t existed a moment before. “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaa…”

“Pinkie? Is something wrong? You seem a bit… Off, today. Do you need to sing a depressing song that sounds cheerful?”

“No,” Pinkie muttered. “I just need to stop the Smooze…”

“Wow, you’re acting weird today. Must just be you being you!”

Pinkie felt like saying something really mean and biting, but didn’t. She wondered for a moment why she was bothering to save this world. …Right. Just because they weren’t the best, they were still people, and they didn’t deserve to die by toxic demon slime.
She sighed.

“I’m going in,” Acorna said.

“Wait, what!? No! Uh…” Pinkie thought quickly. “I have a better idea!”

“No ideas are better than mi-"

“Teleport Sweetie Belle back here once we think she’s collected enough information, just so she doesn’t have to work out how to escape herself! I can’t do that, but you can. You are key to this plan Acorna. In fact, it was actually your idea!”

“It was?”

“Yeah! Don’t you remember?”

“I guess such a plan would have to be created by me… Sweet! I’m going to save Equestria again!”

“Yay…” Pinkie said, halfheartedly.

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Outside the castle Charter-Twilight was currently sitting in, a Rainbow Dash hovered inches from the door, engaging it in a staring contest.

This world’s Rarity walked up to her and blinked. “Rainbow Dash, what are you doing?” she asked with a distinctly Australian accent.

“Ermagerd, this door, it just won’t give up!”

“…Are you having a staring contest with a door?”

“Yeah. It’s good at it.”

“Rainbow, I don’t know how to tell you this, but it doesn’t have eyes.”

“If I needed eyes to have a staring contest I’d already have lost!”

“…Right. So can I come in or not?”

“Only if you can do it without moving the door!”

Rarity rolled her eyes from behind one of the castle’s windows. “Done.”

“Yah! Wait, how did you get in there?”

“Rainbow Dash, you, of all ponies, are asking how I managed to move from one place to another without going through a door?”

“Uh, yeah, it’s kind of obvious, Rarity.”

“Oh for the – blame it on montages or just ask Phil for some contrived explanation or something! Why do you even care, weren’t you supposed to be having a staring contest with a door?”

“Pfft, stupid Rarity, doors don’t have eyes. How could I have a staring contest like that?”

“I can’t believe I’m still fazed by this. Whatever, I’m done with you Rainbow Dash, I’m going to see
Twilight.” She walked further down the halls of the castle until she, by chance, came across the room Twilight, Jack, and OJ were sitting in.

Twilight was talking. “So then I wore this mask that made it impossible to fall asleep. It was… An interesting experience.”

“Wow. This is quite some story,” OJ said. “What happened to Rarity?”

“Well, she went crazy obsessed over the inclinations of ‘truth’ and basically had a mental breakdown.”

“I did no such thing!” Rarity shouted.

Jack looked over Twilight’s shoulder. “Even if we were talkin’ about ya, at least half of that sentence describes ya all the time.”

“Why, I never!”

Twilight blinked. “Wha- oh. She’s behind me.” Twilight turned to meet Rarity’s gaze. “Hello, I’m Charter-Princess Twilight. I’m not the Twilight you know.”

“This better not be another Mirror Pool incident. You also better not be a demon. Also you still better accept dresses, because I came here to deliver a dress and I’m not leaving without delivering it.”

“Uh…” Twilight shook her head. “I’m not from the Mirror Pool, I’m not a demon, and I guess I can accept a dress?”

Rarity suddenly had a dress In her hooves and gave it to Twilight. “Here you go, all ready to go!”

“…How… Where did this come from?”

Rarity took a different approach with the question this time. She just smirked. “I bet you’d really like to know how I did that, but a lady never reveals her secrets!”

“…Do you have Pinkie powers?”

Rarity blinked. “That’s as good of an explanation as any I suppose… Though, in the words of the Twilight that should be getting that dress, ‘we don’t have to explain shit’.”

“I think I can see why.” Twilight deadpanned.

“So what brings you to our nonsensical universe?” Rarity asked. “You looking for adventure? Love? A devious mixture of the two?”

“Lost,” Twilight answered. “Currently looking for a way back with the Mirror Portal.”

“Ah. Such a shame, that. I could have helped with both.”

“And that’s the end of that conversation,” Jack said.

OJ raised a hoof. “Can we go back to the story about the masks? That was interesting.”

Rarity sat down. “Oh, masks? I love masks! They make everything so much more… interesting. Speaking of, Twilight, I need a long, round cactus. I know you have a plant-growing spell! Or, well, other you did, but you look more magical.”
OJ blinked. “…She seems more intense than my Rarity.”

“That’s because ponies are objectively better than shallow human teenagers,” Jack commented.

Twilight put a hoof to her chin. “…I wouldn’t say ‘better’, but I would say ‘more developed’.”

“Same diff,” Jack said.

“I’m going to take this entire thing as a reason to feel good about myself,” Rarity said. “Now, about that cactus…”

“No I’m not making you a cactus,” Twilight deadpanned.

“Oh, but I was going to use it-“

“Nopony wants to hear about that,” Jack interrupted. “So shut yer yap.”

“I will not shut my yap, Applejack! I will continue to describe, in uncomfortable detail, the step by step plan I have in place to get some enjoyment out of life!”

OJ pointed with her hoof. “Hey, everypony? The Mirror just dinged.”

Twilight turned to the Mirror Portal. “Oh. It found one. Good.” She summoned a piece of paper and scribbled a note on it, affixing it to the back of her chair. “If anyone comes here looking for me, they can look at that.” She sent a test spell through the Mirror, and it came back green. She entered the coordinates into her dimensional device for safekeeping. “Right, I’m off. OJ, coming?”

OJ stood up and smiled. “Definitely!”

“Ah’m comin’ too,” Jack said, standing tall. “Ah wanna see this multiverse for myself. I foresee many scams in my future…”

“You’re not even trying to be subtle,” Twilight muttered.

“You’d be surprised how many ponies just let you scam them.”

“…Good point. Rarity?”

Rarity shrugged. “Nah, I think I’ll stay here. Get seventeen more dresses done in a montage or something. Or torment Rainbow Dash with the door some more. That could be fun…”

Twilight moved to the Mirror Portal. “Well, it was nice to meet you.”

Rarity smiled. “By the way, if I never see you again, I have a tip for you.”

“Huh?”

“Never be afraid to whip out the shackles.”

“Aaaand we’re leaving!” OJ said, walking through the portal first. Twilight agreed.

~~~

Da na naaaaa.

In the world Flutterfree currently occupied, versions of Celestia and Luna sat in front of a window depicting Shining Armor and Cadence.
“Soooo…” Luna said. “In news that isn’t depressing, they’re erecting a statue of me in the courtyard to replace the Nightmare Moon statue.”

Celestia blinked. “Oh come on, that statue was amazing! You looked so awesome!”

“I looked evil!”

“But evil is awesome!”

Luna affixed Celestia with a Look.

“Luna, sister, listen to me. Awesomeness is not a ‘good’ or ‘evil’ trait, but it is nice. Think of it, if there were no evil awesomeness, why would I bother having so many nemeses? Why would I bother having any nemesis at all were evil not awesome?”

“One of your nemeses is Kevin Bacon and the other is a small dragon you can give indigestion at any given moment.”

“But Chrysalis! And Sombra! Those are evil awesome nemeses!”

“They are just terrifying and currently want us dead.”

“But that’s the point of having nemeses! There’s drama, there’s action, there’s… Well you know, it gives life some meaning.”

Luna raised an eyebrow. “I think it just makes things complicated. Like, you know, war.”

“You and I both know the war would have happened regardless.”

“Maybe if you didn’t find your evil adversaries so cool we could defeat them faster!”

“Luna, Luna, if we don’t treat our enemies with respect, they can surprise us. Come on, this is like, basic political stuff!”

“Oh, and like you know politics. You sent your generals a letter with important instructions and then purposefully got it lost in the mail. Why? To torment them with backstories!”

“But that was amazing!”

“You never even saw the results!”

“So? I can just imagine it… So succulent…”

“You know if they ever find out that it’s you, they’re going to be livid.”

“Pffft, I doubt it. They’re kids, kids are forgiving. I’m like, their grandmother. Or something.”

“You clearly haven’t been around kids in a long time.”

“No, I’m pretty sure they’ll find it within their hearts to forgive me. Yet another reason children make good generals.”

“I can’t believe you…”

Silence fell over the two of them in the hall.

“So,” Celestia said. “…Been in any cool dreams lately?”
“Yeah, actually. I’ve been spending time in Fluttershy’s. Do you know what a Morph is?”

“…Morph?”

“Yeah. It’s apparently something that terrified her in her young age.”

“…What the heck’s a Morph?”

“I don’t know! I was asking you! It never appears in the dreams, and every time I ask her it ends up being annoyingly vague and mysterious.”

“…Huh. You know, I once met a creature that wa-“ A letter, sent by dragon, appeared in front of her face. “…If this is hate mail I will drop the sun on Ponyville.”

“Celestia! You can’t drop the sun on Ponyville! That’ll destroy the planet!”

“…I’ll just hold the sun over Ponyville, roast it alive…” She opened the letter and began to read it.

“You know, you’ve never gotten mail while standing at this window before. I wonder why.”

“Hmm…” Celestia said, examining the scroll. “Apparently Fluttershy has been replaced by a pony from another universe, Flutterfree. Looks exactly like her but doesn’t act or sound at all similar.”

“…Did the portal open again?”

“No, these descriptions don’t match the other world. For one, the changelings are good in their world. Reformed and everything.”

“I bet Rarity will be glad to hear that.”

“She was, apparently. Almost blew her cover to the complete stranger. Or did. Twilight’s wording here is a bit ambiguous… She has learned the art of politically correct wording well.”

“Unlike you.”

“I can be politically correct if I want! There’s just no reason to! Like, ever.”

“Celestia…”

“Anyway, I should probably reply to this… Tell them not to worry, keep her under wraps, yadda yadda…”

“Celestia, this sounds important. Maybe we should pay this Flutterfree a visit?”

“Luna, Luna, come on, do you think we need to get involved with some random pony from probably nowheresville? Seriously, we’ve got a war to deal with.”

“Celestia, we haven’t talked about the war all day, the Generals do most of the work, and I think you declared today ‘cake day’ so you couldn’t be bothered except with a national emergency.”

“Holy crap, that was today? Man, I’m wasting cake day staring at this window. What a shame.”

Luna just stared at her sister.

“No, we’re not going to pay them a visit. But you can help me write up the response, if you really want.”
“Yes, I would like that.”

“Good. Ahem. My bestest student of all time Twilight Sparkle…”

“Laying it on a bit thick, are we?”

“…Nah. She likes getting fake fancy titles. It’s like giving a dog treats.”

“Comparing your prized student to a dog isn’t exactly a compliment.”

“Oh, pfft, she understands.”

“…Sometimes I can’t understand your dynamic.”

“I thought that was always?”

Luna sighed. “…Yeah, it is. Let’s just write this letter…”

~~~

Flutterfree looked out the window at Ponyville. “This brings back memories. Every time I come to a Ponyville before Twilight’s castle showed up… It’s just nostalgic.”

“I can imagine,” Rarity said, standing next to her. “It’s like, um, seeing the good parts of your home, right?”

“Right. As the years have gone by I’ve had less and less attachment to home, but that attachment is still there. Always.”

“Yeah.”

“By the way, nice dress,” Flutterfree said, looking at the garment she was wearing. “It goes great with my hair.”

“Aw, don’t mention it. Hey, wanna try some spaghetti noodles?”

“Oh, I love spaghetti!”

“It’s not going to be the kind you’re used to,” Twilight said, not looking up from her book. “It’s a dish customary in the badlands. You bake the noodles. It makes no sense.”

The door of the boutique flew open, “I think the spaghetti noodles are amazing!” yelled a Sweetie Belle with the highest pitched voice Flutterfree had ever heard. “It’s cultural. Hi Rarity! What did you want to see me for?”

“Um, how did you get word so fast?”

Pinkie Pie poked her head out from around the doorframe. “Hey guys! I hope you don’t mind, I got Sweetie Belle here ahead of schedule!”

“…Don’t mind at all,” Twilight said, slow enough that Flutterfree noticed she was choosing her words carefully.

“Oh,” Rarity glanced at Twilight, Pinkie, and Flutterfree. “I just thought my little sister would find a pegasus from another universe interesting. Sweetie, Flutterfree. Flutterfree, Sweetie.”
“Pleased to meet you!” Sweetie said, grinning. Flutterfree smiled back.

“Oh!” Pinkie said, raising a hoof. “Before we get started, I think we should sort names out!”

“…Why?” Rarity asked.

“Because we’re dealing with copies of ourselves and we should deal with it now instead of when there’s seven Pinkies running around, or something. Yeah.” Pinkie coughed. “So, I’ve got names for all four of us. I’m Scooter, Sweetie can be Squeaky, Rarity, you’re Charity, and Twilight, you can be Twix.”

“I am very squeaky!” Squeaky Belle said, taking to the moniker like bread and butter.

“Um… Charity?” Charity said. “That’s a bit… Um… You know… Obvious?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Pinkie dismissed.


Twix blinked. “Oh, right. That does make sense. But why can’t I be the Scooter and you be the Trix?”

“Because then I’d literally be Trixie or Pixie or something. And then you’d be what, Scootwi? Sparkoot? Trust me, Twix sounds better.”

Charity blinked. “Um, care to explain what you two are talking about?”

“Nope!” Scooter said, smiling nervously. “W-why would we need to? Just private stuff!”

“It’s okay,” Flutterfree said. “My Pinkie knows stuff too, and she can’t tell us everything. I understand.”

Scooter’s pupils shrunk to pinpricks. “She… she knows stuff? I can’t wait to meet her.”

“I think it’ll be good for her too, to have somepony to talk to. I can tell it stresses her out sometimes.”

Charity and Squeaky exchanged glances. “Are you three on some kind of in-joke, or something?” Squeaky asked.

“I guess you could say that?” Flutterfree said. “It’s not my place to say. I think you need to take it up with Scooter later.”

“Or not!” Scooter said. “That’s good too! We could just forget any of this happened!”

Flutterfree saw a line of white letters appear above Squeaky and Charity’s heads. Or we could talk about me!

Scooter shot Flutterfree a look and shook her head rapidly. Flutterfree got the message – the words (whatever they were) didn’t exist as far as Squeaky and Charity were concerned.

Twix hissed in Scooter’s ear. “Has he gone mad?”

“I think he’s just on vacation and it’s driving him a little nuts,” Scooter whispered back.”
“What do you mean?”

“Um, well, I’ll explain later, the situation is a little different than normal.”

“That doesn’t make me feel very easy!”

“Shhhhh!”

Charity blinked. “Um… Are you two okay?”

“Fine!” Scooter said.

Twix rolled her eyes. “Fine as we can be. Anyway uh… Wait, why did you want Sweetie here again?”

Charity shrugged. “Um… No reason.”

Squeaky grinned. “Because alternate dimension pegasi are cool! Hey Flutterfree, do you know what happened to the other you?”

Flutterfree smiled. “I think she’s in my universe. Pretty sure she’s safe. I’ll return her to you the moment I figure out how to go home. There’s also a Sweetie Belle there! She’s all grown up, has her cutie mark and everything!”

“Oh. Cool.”

Flutterfree blinked. “…I was expecting more of a response. You are part of the Cutie Mark Crusaders in this universe, right?”

“Oh, yes, uh… Yah! Cutie marks! What was hers!? I gotta know!”

Flutterfree knew something was up at this point, but she answered anyway. “She got a crusader shield with a music note in a star. It represents her connection to her two friends and how they, together, can help other ponies with identity problems, usually relating to cutie marks.”


Twix raised a hoof. “I have a question. How can you get a cutie mark in cutie marks?”

“You just do,” Scooter and Flutterfree said at the same time. Flutterfree giggled.

“That doesn’t make any sense!”

Squeaky glanced at Twix. “I thought Spike was the one who was supposed to ask those questions?”

“Well… Oh my god you have a point. I’m turning into him.”

Flutterfree giggled again. “Asking questions is good for the mind, I’ve found. Accepting things blindly only ends in pain.”

That remark prompted nervous and guilty glances to cross the room from everypony.

“Oh, sorry… Didn’t mean to dishearten anypony.”

“It’s okay,” Scooter said. “There’s just… A lot of stuff going on in this room that you’ve placed yourself riiight in the middle of.”
“I got that. I also get that you’re all really stressed.” Flutterfree stood up. “As soon as Celestia’s instructions get back, I’m going to make it my mission to get you all to relax. I’m Flutterfree, Element of Kindness, and I’m out here to help ponies. I’m going to help you all. You’d be surprised how comforting a bunch of animals can be.”

Squeaky shook her head. “Okay, good with animals, that’s definitely new.”

“I wonder why your Fluttershy lives near so many animals…” Flutterfree wondered.

“I ask the same thing all the time!” Spike said, coming down the stairs. “By the way, letter from the princesses. Both of them.”

“Both? That’s unusual,” Twix said, taking the letter in her telekinesis. “Dear my bestest student of all time, Twilight Sparkle – heh – treat the visiting Flutterfree like we would any friend. Ensure word of her otherworldly origins do not spread to our enemies. Shouldn’t be hard at all, since you’re in Ponyville and not on the front lines, but don’t go broadcasting the information. We are sorry to say we cannot help her get home right now, but tell her that while she is here she will be treated just like she is our Element. You may want to check to see if she can wield the Element of Kindness in Fluttershy’s place. Also, tell Rarity this code: OP3469. Princess Celestia and Luna.” Twix rolled the scroll up. “So, uh, … Charity, did you get the code?”

Charity glanced at Squeaky, who nodded ever so slightly. “Um, yeah, I got it. Know exactly what to do. No I can’t tell you.”

Twix nodded. “So… Flutterfree! Want to check the Element of Kindness out?”

“Oh, I’m pretty sure it’ll work. I’ve worn Elements from other universes before. But it’d be nice, I haven’t had one around my neck in a while.”

Squeaky grinned. “You go have fun with that then! I’m going to go play with Bloom and Loo then!” She galloped out the door.

Scooter smiled. “So, animals, relaxing?”

Flutterfree nodded back. “I can get a nice picnic set up. You’ll all get a moment to unwind. I am your stress relief.”

Charity let out a relieved sigh. “That sounds… nice.”

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“Twilight, oh Twilight…” Renee said, downing another Daiquiri. “Let me tell you about my Twilight. She’s a crazy neat-freak who… well let’s put it this way. Instead of turning away from a multiverse exploration mission when she lost her hearing, she kept going, driven by some crazy determination deep within her.”

Twilight chuckled. “Sounds like you have a similar determination.”

“I… Well yes I suppose I do, but…” she stretched her neck. “But nothing, I guess.”

“But nothing indeed.”

“…Got anything interesting in this house?”

“I’ve got a mysterious key in a drawer over there, but that’s all I can think of right now besides a
“Mysterious key?”

“Yeah. I started to get this strange sense of déjà vu one day, and this key was around just when it started happening. I have no idea what the deal with it is.” Twilight lit her horn, pulling the small golden key out of the drawer. “Here it is, the mysterious key.”

Renee stared at it in silence for a few seconds. She rubbed her head. “I think I’ve had too much to drink…”

Twilight set the key on the table. “Are you kidding? You’re not drunk yet.”

“That’s the point. Getting actually drunk isn’t good for anypony’s image. Particularly Rainbow Dash.”

“Your Rainbow Dash has an image? Mine’s just a stupid buffoon who can barely read and doesn’t understand right from left and, oh, get this, breaks her limbs every other day! I think she literally doesn’t have the capability to learn. I don’t even know why I bother with her.”

The two of them heard a whimper come from the front door. They turned to see Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy standing in the room with them.

“Oh,” Renee said, biting her lip. “Rainbow, darling, Twilight here is just a little drunk and-“

Rainbow Dash was clearly fighting back tears. “I – I know. It’s just the alcohol talking! I should believe that right?”

“Yes. You should,” Twilight said, trying to keep her face as straight as possible.

“But... But what about all those other times I hear about! Or those times you called me an idiot to my face! Or worse! Or…”

“I think we need to stop yelling and remember that we’re all friends here…” Fluttershy muttered.

“Yes, what Fluttershy said,” Renee asserted.

“But... But I’m upset!” Rainbow Dash whined.

“Dash, why do you even care what I think, it’s hardly news to you,” Twilight muttered – then burped. “Ugh... I make it no secret that I think all of you are pretty much huge wastes of my time and that, most days, I wish I could be just about anywhere else.”

“Twilight!” Renee gasped. “Think about what you’re saying!”

“I am thinking just fine Rarity.”

“Renee.”

“Whatever.”

“Wait, now I’m confused,” Rainbow Dash said. “Rarity, did you change your name.”

“No, I-“

“Don’t bother,” Twilight muttered. “She’s too stupid to understand.”
“I am not!” Rainbow Dash blurted.

“Dash, I agree with Twilight here,” Fluttershy said, barely loud enough to be heard. “I’m not even sure what’s going on…”

“Fluttershy! You… Traitor! I’m going to fly away and… And… And be mad for a while!” She spread her wings and flew out a window, shattering all the glass on her way out.

“Third time this month…” Twilight muttered, ramming her face into the table.

Fluttershy blinked. “I’ll… Uh… Go now, if… If that’s alright with you…”

“Fluttershy, stay a moment, will you?” Renee said, waving her over. “What did you two want before that… incident?”

“Well, we wanted to ask Twilight for a book about insurance, because half of Dash’s house exploded recently.”

“Ah,” Renee said. “I’m sure Twilight can help you. Twilight?”

“Mmm?”

“This is your version of the pony I was telling you about, Fluttershy.”

“…Who?”

Renee blinked. “Our sixth Element of Harmony, Kindness? The yellow pegasus I was talking about?”


Renee raised an eyebrow. “For someone who claims to be organized you have a terrible memory.”

“I can remember things!”

“Right, so, what was this pony’s element again?”

“…Understanding?”

“You wish,” Renee said, rolling her eyes. “Fluttershy, do you think you can find the book without her?”

“Probably. It’d be faster. Every time I’m in a room she forgets I exist within ten minutes. It’s just a fact of life…”

“I… I do not!” Twilight blurted. “I… Uh…” She stared at her beer bottle. “Man I think I need another drink.”

“Twilight, you’re on your third bottle.”

“I’m not drunk enough for this.”

“I’ll just go look for that book now…” Fluttershy said, sliding away. “You two continue drinking… I’ll be fine not being involved…”

“Fluttershy, come back, I insi-“
Fluttershy apparently decided she needed to get out of there. She flew out the window Rainbow Dash had busted.

Renee blinked. “…That pony is more skittish than Flutterfree ever was.”

Twilight looked up from her bottle. “Huh? What? Who were we talking about?”

Renee shook her head. “Twilight Sparkle, I see a good mare somewhere inside of you, struggling under that harsh exterior and apathetic attitude.”

“Oh boy, here comes the speech.”

“Not a speech. Just an observation. If you actually tried caring about others a little more, maybe life wouldn’t be so… oh, what’s the word? Bleh? Yes, that’s it. Life wouldn’t be so bleh anymore.”

“Clearly, you’ve never experienced the agony of ‘friendship studies’.”

Renee smirked. “Dear, me and my friends are a result of friendship studies.”

Sweetie Belle walked back into the library, breathing hard. “I… I’m back!”

Renee smiled sadly. “Ah, Sweetie. Where were you?”

Sweetie noticed Thrackerzod walking up the street behind her. “Just checking out town. I saw Rainbow Dash fly from over here. What’s she like?”

Renee bit her lip. “Well… She has sub-standard intelligence and is easily wounded. A bit childish, actually. Twilight lost all sense of tact and insulted her out of the library.”

“Oh,” Sweetie said, glancing at Twilight. “That bad, huh?”

“Why does this have to happen today?” Twilight muttered as Thrackerzod walked back in. “Why can’t the universe decide I just need one problem to deal with today? Here I was, actually letting myself have a good time with another pony and it just explodes because, apparently, I’m not allowed to talk!”

Renee’s gaze softened. “Darling, it’s like I said. Maybe you just need to care a bit more.”

“Did I ask for life advice?”

“No,” Thrackerzod said. “But wouldn’t only giving advice when it is asked for mean you miss all the times when people don’t know there’s a problem?”

Everypony stared at her.

“I mean… I like getting life advice all the time! It brings me and my friends closer together!”

Twilight rammed her head into the table again. “I hate all this friendship nonsense… How could this day possibly get any worse…”

The front door was disintegrated by a bolt of fire this time. Twilight was prepared to complain about her house getting beat up again, but then she realized who was at the door. The tall, powerful, white form of Celestia towered over them, her expression one of an alicorn ready to smite somepony for the slightest offense. She spoke with an authoritative, powerful, deadly tone that drove all four ponies in the room to cower in fear – including Thrackerzod.
“Twilight Sparkle, my student, I have detected a large amount of otherworldly energy in Ponyville today. Once or twice would have been a minor annoyance to write to you about, but there have been consistent surges of the beyond in Ponyville. And yet, I have received no letter from you, no report of any kind, and the letters I’ve been sending you apparently haven’t been making it through. So, here I am, and what do I see? A complete lack of that dragon who should be with you at all times and fraternization with what is clearly an interdimensional incursion. How do you think this makes me feel, Twilight?”

“P-p-princess! I-I did not know an interdimensional incursion was something to write you about! H-had I known it was I would have clearly written you a letter the moment I’d gotten the incursion under contro-“

“I will listen to your excuses later, Twilight. I assure you, it will be an extremely long and taxing discussion that will determine the future state of your entire life. Though I will say that your drunkenness may make it slightly more bearable, depending on which way your spontaneous idiocy swings. But for now…”

Renee stepped forward. “Yes?”

“You’re not bowing.”

“Apologies, your majesty.” Renee said, taking off her hat and lowering her head to the floor. “I am but a humble traveler, hopping from universe to universe. My name is Renee, and I am currently lost in this universe due to unknown reasons, and was discussing with Twilight here possibilities of returning me and my sister home. This is Sweetie Belle, my sister, who came with me. That’s just Thrackerzod, native to your universe – I do not know if you knew that already or not, but I don’t want you placing any blame you place on us onto her.”

“You speak well, Renee,” Celestia asserted. “I’m inclined to believe you – and in fact have little reason not to. Some of what you say is evident, and your demeanor is in line with your story. And you have managed not to offend me, which is a prize few can take.”

Twilight looked between Celestia and Renee like she couldn’t believe the exchange that was happening between the two of them.

Renee stood up from her bow, looking Celestia in the eyes. “Your majesty, may I ask a question?”

“You may.”

“Do you have the means to send us home? Or any knowledge of other universes?”

“Some. I do not know which world you hail from.”

“I know the spell to return directly to my world, I just lack the power within myself to do such a spell.”

Celestia nodded. “I am aware. If you start the spell, I will be able to complete it with ease.”

“The question then is…” Renee adjusted her hat. “Will you?”

Celestia smiled. The expression was apparently enough to make Twilight shiver in fear. “What kind of god would I be if I did not help a pony in need?”

Renee nodded slowly. “Well then… We could try it now.”
“I see no reason to wait,” Celestia agreed.

Renee cast the spell, Celestia completed it, and... nothing happened.

“...Oh, bother. It appears this universe doesn’t have a direct connection. I’m sorry for wasting your magic.”

“As you should be,” Celestia confirmed. “I may have another solution. There is a flow of energy present in the world that was not present before the interdimensional activity began. I can edit your spell to produce a gateway through that flow of activity. It will not take you home, but it may take you somewhere you can get home from. You two can leave me to deal with... my subjects.”

Twilight was positive Celestia stared right at her when she said that, but in reality she was staring right at Thrackerzod. And Thrackerzod knew it. A string of eldritch swears went off in her head. She had to think of something fast...

“That would be a boon greater than we deserve,” Renee said, bowing again.

“Most definitely,” Celestia asserted, casting the spell. A crisp yellow ring appeared in the air, leading to a Ponyville where the Library did not exist. “There you are. Another world to enter.”

“Thank you, your highness,” Renee said.

Sweetie blinked. “So, what, we’re just going to leave? Just like that?”

Renee nodded. “Yes. Celestia needs to deal with her subjects, Sweetie. We don’t want to be here when that happens.”

“Oooooooh.”

“And Twilight?” Renee said, turning to the unicorn.

“Y-yes?”

“After... this, think about what I said. You might find something new in life.”

“S-sure! Whatever you say, Renee!”

Renee and Sweetie Belle stepped through the portal. Celestia allowed it to close.

At the last possible second, Thrackerzod teleported through the portal to the other universe.

“Damn!” Celestia cursed, “the demon escaped!”

“Wh-what?” Twilight said, looking around. “Did that kid just teleport? Did you just... What? I don’t understand – but I’m willing to learn! Definitely willing to learn!”

“Twilight, you do not realize it yet, but soon you will come to understand just how badly you’ve screwed up every conceivable thing. It’s so far off the rails that I will get little enjoyment from watching you squirm for your life.”

Twilight gulped.

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“So...” Sweetie Bot said, trotting alongside Fluttershy. “What actually summons the Great and
"Lord Smooze, young one," Fluttershy responded with a calm, soft, musical voice. "Lord Smooze is not a showpony, but the savior and cleanser of all things. And every single part of this ritual is important, passed down from the first of our order."

"But what actually *summons* the Smooze? I am one-hundred percent sure that the mathematically sound dancing and perfect purple robes are important, but there has to be one part that actually ends the ceremony, bringing on Lord Smooze!"

"Oh my, you are such an inquisitive little one! I am afraid the central step of the ritual is a secret, to prevent gypsies like Pinkie from trying to stop us with their unnatural magic. We just cannot risk it."

"But… But I’m Rarity's sister."

"And while I do not doubt your devotion to your elder sibling, she is the reason the ritual failed last time."

"…I thought I was the one who ruined it by desecrating the desecrated raccoon?"

"You did not know what our order needed, you were forgiven. But she spent the day with you instead of with us, and pushed our plans back considerably. Perhaps this was for the better – after all, you are with us now – but I still can’t take the chance. I’m sorry."

"Entering disappointed failure mode…"

"Oh, don’t be like that! You can still help. Here, I’ll tell you something interesting. See that great pit in the center of the clearing? That is the pit Lord Smooze will erupt from and cover the entire world with his holy goop. One of the steps involves the ritual dumping of all those buckets of paint. We wouldn’t be able to complete it without them." She turned to look Sweetie Bot directly in the eyes. "*Remember* that now, Sweetie."

"I will!" Sweetie Bot said, grinning. "Success sequence initiated!" She began to do a happy dance.

"Mhm. Yes," Fluttershy said. "Now go run along, the ritual isn’t until the eclipse actually starts."

"Yay! Rarity! Hey Rarity! I did something amazing!"

Rarity looked up from the raccoon she was skinning. "Hrm? What is it, Sweetie Belle?"

"I am going to do something great for you! I love you so much!"

"Mhm, yes…” Rarity said, continuing to skin the raccoon. "Don’t go dragging me off to a strange obstacle course now, you hear?"

"I would never do that again! It is saved on the list of things never to do again, beep boop!"

Rarity smiled at her sister. "Yes… Yes it is.” She gave her little sister a hug. "You know, it means a lot to me that you’re here *with* me. We’ll get to appreciate the glory of Smooze together!"

"Er… Yeah! That’s definitely what’s going to happen! Affirmative!"

"Sweetie, do you have a surprise for me? I can tell when you have a surprise, you know!"

"Yeah! I do! But it’s a surprise, so turn off your eyes until then!"
“Sweetie, I do have to prepare for the ritual. But I won’t pry. I can’t wait to see what it is.”

“Hooray for Rarity, number one sister!”

“Mm, yes…” Rarity said, turning back to her work.

It was then that Acorna decided to teleport Sweetie Bot back. “Aha! My plan worked to perfection!”

“Yes, yes it did,” Pinkie said, rolling her eyes. “Hey, Sweetie! Did you find out what we need?”

“Yeah! The buckets of paint! They can’t complete the ritual without them!”

Acorna looked at the buckets of paint clearly stacked near the edge of the clearing. “I've got them in my sights! Prepare for a destructive laser!”

Pinkie facehooved. “Just teleport them here, don’t draw too much attention. I mean, they’re probably all pretty dumb, but I think they’ll notice a giant explosion.”

Acorna glared at Pinkie.

“Remember, it was your idea to do this.”

“Oh. Right, yes. Ahem. Begone, buckets!” With a flash of her magic, the buckets were suddenly on their hill and not in the clearing with the cult. “There, all good. The ritual won’t complete. I’ve saved Equestria again!”

“Yay!” Sweetie Bot said, clapping her hooves together. “What do we do now?”

Pinkie shrugged. “I dunno, actually. Oh!” She pulled a camera out of her mane. “Let’s take pictures of their faces when they fail!”

“Priceless!” Acorna said. “I can’t wait to go down there and rub my victory in their faces!”

“That’s one way to do it,” Pinkie said.

“Can I go back down there and be with my sister?” Sweetie Bot asked.

“I don’t see why not,” Pinkie said. “Unless something unexpected ha-“ She shoved a hoof over her mouth, but it was too late. She had invoked Murphy's Law.

Which, in this case, turned out to not be so much ‘the worst thing’ and more of ‘the unexpected thing.’

Charter-Twilight, OJ, and Jack walked up to them. Twilight grinned. “I thought I sensed a dimensional device! Hey Pinkie!”

“Hey Twilight!” Pinkie said, hugging her. “How was the Ultra Fast universe?”

“Is that what it is?” Twilight said, rubbing her chin. “It was a little strange, and sometimes infuriating, but it’s nice enough. I made some friends! This is OJ and Jack.”

OJ waved a hoof. Jack nodded with dignity.

Pinkie grinned. “This is Acorna and Sweetie B… Just Sweetie. No special name.”

Acorna took a step forward, measuring herself up to Twilight. They were the same size, but
Acorna’s hairstyle was clearly less interesting than Twilight’s. Acorna lacked the uneven coat that was telling of scars, and her ears were plain.

Acorna narrowed her eyes. “Hello Twilight…”

“Hello!” Twilight said, shaking Acorna’s hoof. “Pleased to meet you! If you think calling me Twilight is weird, just call me Charter.”

“I prefer Charlie,” Jack commented. “By the way, Acorna, what’s the Apple family like here? Do they have any… side businesses?”

“Applejack, you’re supposed to know, you live there.”

“Ah. So yer a moron too. Sorry Ah thought otherwise of ya.”

Twilight nudged Jack. “Jack, be nice. We don’t know anything about this world.”

Pinkie shrugged. “All I know for sure is that we stopped the Smooze from being summoned down there. It would have been bad if it was. Oh! I know witchcraft now! It’s awesome!”

“Cool! Does this mean I can teach you spells now?”

“Eh, more like Zecora stuff than unicorn magic, but maybe? I haven’t really tried much, spent all my time spying on the Smooze cult.”

“Sounds like you’ve had an eventful stay. All I’ve had is a bunch of talking, pointless banter, and some friend making.”

“Also she owes me thirty bits,” Jack said.

“Ten, and you know it.”

Pinkie raised an eyebrow. “I dunno Twilight, it could be thirty…”

“Pinkie that’s not helping!”

Jack smirked, putting a hoof on Pinkie. “Charlie, let me tell you how much I appreciate your Pinkie. As much as your forty bit debt.”

Pinkie giggled. “I’m sure appreciated!”

“Traitor,” Twilight grunted.

Acorna shoved herself into the conversation. “I bet she actually owes… fifty bits! Yes! Also, she’s ugly.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “What threw ya out of bed this mornin’?”

Acorna rammed her muzzle into Twilight’s. “An imposter, that’s what. Trying to steal my glory. There can only be one pretty pony princess and that princess is ME!”

“You’re going to be very disappointed to find that there are thousands of Princess Twilight Sparkles out there. I’m just one that likes to travel universes a lot.”

“Yeah, well, you, uh… You’re evil! I know it!”
Twilight blinked, unimpressed. “Pinkie, where’d you find this one?”

“She found me. I protested. It didn’t stop happening.”

“Fun.”

Away from the four ponies involved in the argument that couldn’t settle on a topic, Sweetie Bot and OJ sat on the edge of the hill.

“So, you’re Sweetie?” OJ said. “Nice. I’ve never known a Sweetie that well.”

“I’ve never seen you at all! You look like you’re on fire! So many health hazard alarms are blaring in my mind after making that connection.”

OJ smiled. “You have an interesting voice, you know that?” Twilight caught this comment out of the corner of her eyes. Out of curiosity, she turned on her ears.

“I’m told it will take me far some day!” Sweetie Bot said. “Sweetie Belle, great singer extraordinaire!”

OJ put a hoof around her. “It’s nice to have something going for you. I… Don’t have much. I used to be evil, but now I’m good, and everyone still hates me.”

“I don’t hate you,” Sweetie Bot said, returning the hug. “I’ve only known you for like three minutes and I’ve already decided you’re cool! That should mean something!”

OJ smiled. “Yeah, it does. Twilight was like that as well. But… Well, I still feel like I want to do something. I’ve tried to make up for what I’ve done, but I just keep screwing it up. I’m… Well, I’m useless.”

“I’m sure you can do something good if you just tried! I always thought I ruined so many things, but today I saved the day! My sister is going to live and the Smooze has been stopped!”

“Yeah… You got lucky though. What am I going to do? Sit here and wait for something to go wrong I can fix?”

“Probably! I bet you’ll be amazing at whatever it is!”

OJ hugged the filly close. “Thank you, Sweetie.”

“Don’t mention it! My encouragement skills are at maximum!”

Twilight broke herself away from the argument to look at Sweetie Bot. “Your voice is a really interesting one, Sweetie. It sounds synthetic. Does that mean anything?”

“Aren’t you deaf?” Jack asked.

“Turned the artificial ears on out of curiosity. There’s something really curious about Sweetie’s voice.”

Pinkie’s ears perked up. “Ahhahahahaha – how about we talk about anything else?”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “Huh, Twilight’s right, her voice does sound kinda artificial. Like a machine or something.”

Pinkie facehooved. “What did I just say?!”
Acorna’s expression became darkened. She glanced at Sweetie Bot. “…There’s no way.”

Sweetie Bot glanced around. “No way what? What was that about my voice? Am I not operating within normal parameters?”

OJ blinked. “I thought it was obvious. She’s clearly a robot of some kind.”

“Okay, that’s cool,” Twilight said. “I don’t think I’ve seen a robot that looks that much like a pony before.”

Jack smiled. “If Ah could copy her I could send ponies to their death more often…”

Pinkie laughed nervously. “Ignore them! There’s no robots here! Not at all!”

Acorna looked right at Sweetie Bot, horn algow. “Sweetie…”

“I am definitely not a Robot!” Sweetie Belle shouted. “Robots don’t have souls! Robots have difficulty expressing true emotions! I love my sister!”

Pinkie put a bucket of paint over Acorna’s horn. “Oh look at me, being a silly prankster, stopping whatever magic she was doing!”

Twilight looked at Pinkie and understood what was going on. She turned off her ears. “Pinkie! You prankster! Hey, can you tell us about the time we had that whole paint fiasco on Hearth’s Warming? Oh, those were fun times…”

Acorna wasn’t listening to them. She removed the bucket from her head, magically cleaned herself up, and cast a simple scan spell on Sweetie Bot. Acorna grinned. “Oh, would you look at that. No soul. You are a robot.”

Sweetie Bot stamped her foot on the ground. “No! No I am not! I love my sister! I-“

Acorna cast a simple spell that tore a hole in Sweetie Bot’s leg, revealing not blood, but complex circuitry. Sweetie Bot couldn’t stop staring at it.

“ACORNAs!” Pinkie yelled. “You… You… YOU KNOW WHAT HAPPENS WHEN ROBOTS DISCOVER THEIR TRUE NATURE?”

Acorna’s smug smile vanished. “…Oh.”

Sweetie Bot’s eyes went red and two dozen guns unfolded from her robotic back, pointing at the five ponies. Her face was that of unbridled, uncontrollable rage. She screamed.

Then things started exploding.

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Renee turned around, happy to see Thrackerzod behind them. “Oh, good, you got out of there.”

“You… wanted me to come with you?” Thrackerzod said, cocking her head.

“Of course! Celestia clearly wanted you dead for… some reason – probably because of whatever you are – but from what I know of you, you don’t deserve it. Now we just hope she doesn’t follow us… I gambled that since she wanted us gone, if you followed she would consider it a win.”

“…I just wanted to see the other world, that is all.”
“Thrackerzod, I saw you summon Hastur and talk about killing Twilight Sparkle and grabbing her soul for some weird game,” Sweetie Belle said. “The jig is up!”

“Wait, what?” Renee said, baffled. “That happened?”

“Yeah, I followed Zod when she sneaked out. It was… A little disturbing, but Hastur seemed agreeable enough, and Applebloom and Scootaloo were there. It was… Interesting. I should come on adventures more often!”

“That is not the response I would expect from you…” Renee said, shaking her head. She turned to Thrackerzod. “Is this true?”

“I assure you, I am a perfectly nor-“

“Dear, for whatever reason everypony in your universe except Celestia bought your act, but we knew something was up the moment we met you. We’re not going to hold… Whatever you are against you unless it clearly becomes a problem. For one I’d rather you didn’t kill Twilight Sparkle.”

Thrackerzod coughed. “If I were to be part of such a nefarious plan – which I am not – I would not be able to do anything an entire universe away. Such things would be beyond even a minor deity’s capabilities. …Yes.”

Sweetie Belle raised an eyebrow. “Nobody believes you.”

Renee shrugged. “She’s clearly been at this her whole life. Just let her do it. She’ll open up eventually. Until then, we just need to keep an eye on he-“

“Woah! Rarity, you’re really good at getting through that door without me noticing!” a Rainbow Dash said as she flew up to them. “I thought staring at it harder than before would keep you in there, but you eluded me yet again!”

Renee blinked took in a mildly annoyed breath. “...I am not your Rarity.”

“Rarity, I don’t own you, don’t be stupid!”

“Rainbow, ponies can’t own each other.”

“But you own Fluttershy! I think. Or was that the other way around? I can never remember.”

Renee blinked. “Huh?”

“Yeah, me too, I hate that guy.”

Renee looked to Sweetie and Thrackerzod for help.

Sweetie cleared her throat. “What my sister means to say is, we aren’t the ponies you know.”

Rainbow Dash chuckled. “Oh, I knew that.”

“You did?”

“Yeah! I’m, like, a goldfish? Like, I can’t remember anypony for more than a few seconds. Who are you again?”

“Sweetie Belle.”
“Oh! I remember you. You’re smaller than I remember…”

Sweetie Belle turned to Thrackerzod. Thrackerzod sighed. “Greetings, citizen of this fair town, I am a completely normal unicorn from another phase of existence! My name is Thrackerzod! I implore you to inform us of the status of your friends, so they may speak with us as opposed to you!”

“Oh, sweet! I heard a lot of big words in that sentence!”

“That was more than one sentence.”

“What was that word you said? The thing right before sentence?”

“…One?”

“…What the heck is ‘one’?”

“We’ve officially failed,” Thrackerzod said. “Time to pack our bags and hope Celestia finds a way to kill us before this imbecile does it with her words.”

“But I already packed you a lunch, Thrackerzod! …Wait, no, that was my lunch. Ohmygod I forgot my lunch at home!” She looked into the sky. “Aaaa! Where is my home!?”

Thrackerzod blinked. “…I have seen many things in this life. I… What is before me is the riddle to end all riddles, the puzzle for even the Oldest of Old Ones. You, Rainbow Dash, are the enigma of all phenomena.”

“Aw, you’re makin’ me blush.”

“…Weren’t you worried about your house a moment ago?” Sweetie asked.

“I have a house?”

Renee let out a loud groan. “Okay! Okay, this is taxing. Let’s find another pony to talk to.”

“Hey, broo!” the native Pinkie Pie said, appearing from nowhere. “I’m another pony!”

“Any pony but a Pinkie Pie,” Renee said, turning tail.

“Aw, no fair broo! I’ve got a more sensical train of thought than Rainbow Dash! You can talk to me!”

“Hey, no fair!” Rainbow Dash shouted. “Your thoughts get a train?”

“Yeah broo! Everypony has a train! Yours is just in space, for some reason.”

“Y’know, knowing you, I thought you’d say it was in hell or something.”

“Oh, that can be arranged,” Pinkie chuckled. “By the way, hello interdimensional travelers, I’m Pinkie Pie! But you can call me Dinkie if you want!”

Sweetie Belle raised an eyebrow. “Why Dinkie?”

“Cause… reasons!” She leaned closer to Thrackerzod. “Special reasons!”

Thrackerzod lit her horn, and her eyes widened. “Oho… This is a pleasant surprise…”

Renee shot Thrackerzod a questioning look before returning to Dinkie. “So, Dinkie, can you tell us
“Anything?”

“What, me? Oh I don’t know anything, sorry broo! I think Rarity might know something though!”

“Pinkie, Rarity’s right there! You’re talking to her!” Rainbow Dash said. “Man, I thought I was stupid.”

Sweetie Belle facehooved. “Dinkie, where can we find Rarity?”

“She should be at Twilight’s castle!” Dinkie said. “Probably looking for a cactus.”

“Why does she need another one?” Rainbow Dash asked. “She totally ruined the one I gave her…”

“Yeah, she tends to do that.”

Renee took a breath. “Well… it was an... event, meeting you two, but we should go see Rarity.”

“Oh I see the problem!” Rainbow Dash hit herself in the head. “Duh, you can’t see yourself, so you can’t see Rarity! It all makes so much sense now! I’m a genius!”

Dinkie blinked. “Yeah, broo, you are.”

Renee led Sweetie and Thrackerzod to Twilight’s castle. For the briefest of moments, Thrackerzod lit her horn and looked right at Dinkie. Dinkie nodded subtly, bouncing away.

It took Rainbow Dash five minutes to realize there was nopony to talk to anymore.

At Twilight’s castle, Renee walked in the front doors. “Hello? Rarity?”

Sitting on a chair in the middle of the hall, there was a Rarity twirling a knife on her hoof, the tip digging into her limb ever so slightly. “Oh! Hello there, Phil said you’d come by.” She dropped the knife, walking over to them. “What brings another me and her sisters here to little ol’ me? Come to rough me up, perhaps?”

“Oh… No.” Renee said, slightly taken aback by the strong accent that was probably Australian, not that she was very familiar with such things. Frankly, she was used to odd voices at this point. “We were told you might know… Uh…”

“We just wanted to get away from your Rainbow Dash and Pinkie,” Sweetie Belle said.

“They were suffocating our group dynamic!” Thrackerzod added.

“…Sure,” Renee said. “To be frank, I’m not sure why I’m here.”

“Well,” Rarity said, putting a hoof to her chin. “If you were me, I’d be here looking for somepony to slap me across the face that would understand exactly how I feel about it…”

Renee took in a breath. “Darling, I won’t judge you, but please realize I am the furthest thing from a masochist.”

“Huh. You know, I haven’t heard the word in a while. Feels liberating to hear it spoken out loud…” Renee facehooved. “Ugh… What is it with my alternates…”

“Well, maybe it’s just because we’re the type of pony that can be… Oh I don’t know the word…”
“Corrupted?” Thrackerzod suggested.

“Yes! Corrupted. That’s it. We’re corruptible, darling.”

Renee sighed, pulling her hat up a little. “Yes, I suppose that is true… Anyway, you seem to have some knowledge of what’s going on. Do you have any idea how to get us home?”

“Nope!”

“Worth a shot.”

Rarity smirked. “I do know where your Twilight is. She went to another universe through our Mirror Portal. She’s even got a note for you on the back of that chair.”

Renee galloped to the chair and ripped the page off the back of the chair. My friends, this is Charter-Twilight. I’m trying to find a way home, but it may not work. You can follow me through the Mirror Portal or by using the spell outlined below. I’m doing fine, made some new friends. I hope to see you all soon!

Renee smiled, rolling up the paper. “Rarity, where is your Mirror Portal?”

“It’s in the back wing. I tried to move it when I knew you were going to show up, but not even a montage could safely move that thing. Right this way!”

She led the three of them to the Mirror Portal, gesturing toward it with a hoof. “Behold! The doorway to further adventure, and your friend!”

Renee looked at Sweetie. “Looks like we might be getting out of here sooner rather than later.”

“I sure hope so,” Sweetie said. “This is already getting pretty weird.”

“The weirdness has been doubled,” Thrackerzod deadpanned.

Rarity raised an eyebrow. “…Yeah, I don’t think that worked.”

“I found it funny,” Thrackerzod huffed. “Can we go now? Places to go, things to do, all that.”

Renee smiled. “Sure.” They stepped through a portal to another universe…

~~~

Dinkie placed a chicken in the basement of Sugarcube Corner, right in front of the form of Vriska, still imprisoned.

“…Why are you showing me this chicken?”

Dinkie grinned. “This, broo, is one of Fluttershy’s many chickens. She will be giving us what we need to make a sacrifice of innocence!” She began to draw a yellow mark in the ground.

Vriska raised an eyebrow. “Why do we need an innocence sacrifice?”

“Because I got some amazing instructions from a higher demon from another sect! And it sounds cool! I’m going to contact her boss and create a great demon army!”

“For what?”
“I think we’re killing a Twilight Sparkle in a special way, I’ll get more info from the yellow broo.” She stared right at the chicken. “Your life is worthless, little chicken!”

Nothing happened.

“Come on… Uh… Broo! Broo! Chicken broo! If you keep not losing innocence, you’ll be sent to the butchering shop! Uh… Your friends don’t like you – wait do chickens even have friends?”

Vriska sighed. “You’re doing it wrong. Hey! Chicken!”

The chicken turned to stare at Vriska with rapt attention.

“You are nothing but a fucking pathetic animal in a huge world where giving a shit will only flatten you for trying. Your only purpose to the beings that run this world is either to lay eggs or eventually be turned into fried chicken, sold at some fast food restaurant for a few dollars. Your father and mother were likely eaten in much the same way, and most of your children will be smashed into those pastries – some of which I’m sure you’ve nibbled on occasionally. Cannibal.”

Hastur popped out of the glyph in the ground. “Who has summoned me?”

Dinkie bowed. “I am but a lowly demon servant, Dinkie, sent here by Thrackerzod to report on complications. This is Vriska. She’s really good at making chicken innocence sacrifices.”

Vriska would have folded her arms with pride were her hands not tied behind her back at the moment. “I’m pretty sweet, yeah.”

“What happened that Thrackerzod cannot contact me herself? Do not tell me that the nut-head got wind of her. Or that her mortal shell has perished and she is currently fighting her way through the halls of undeath.”

“No, broo, nothing that bad! Well, maybe that bad, I don’t really know what’s going on that well, all I know is that I’m going to get to summon a lot of demons for you.

“Provide a good reason to give you access and it shall be granted. Also, that’s a pretty nice cloak there, deity.”

“Thank you,” Vriska said.

“Why do you let this pony imprison you so? Powerful though she is, you easily have the power within you to drain her.”

“I’m interested to see where this goes. That’s pretty much it.”

Dinkie cleared her throat. “So, apparently Thrackerzod was made by Princess Celestia. She bailed to my universe, but is currently under the watch of some interdimensional travelers – Renee and Sweetie Belle - so she can’t exactly talk to you without raising suspicion. She did manage to send a message to my brain though! Her plan is to use the new nature of the contract to summon a demon army from here, and shunt it through a portal to there, for a surprise attack Celestia won’t see coming, nor be able to stop even with her power! The Twilight in the contract will fall and the mission will be completed!”

“An adequate plan, especially for one constructed in such a hurry. There are complications though, not the least of which is the deity you have tied up behind me. She has a soul-connection to the interdimensional travelers, and likely will interfere. I understand that, at the moment, she
will promise not to interfere, but I also understand that promises mean next to nothing to her.”

“Eh, you’re not wrong,” Vriska admitted.

“Glad you’re not too offended. I would like to ask you out for a drink later, but there are more pressing matters.”

“Clearly. By the way, I say go for the demon army. It’ll be cool, and you know I probably won’t be able to stop it. If you really want to be sure, why don’t you just stay here? You have enough power to match me.”

“The nut-head is watching. If I leave for any significant amount of time, I will be found out, and he could ruin everything.”

“I hate those bastards…” Vriska muttered, clenching her fists.

“They do have a habit of impeding the efforts of many.”

“Am I gonna get to summon a demon army or not broo?” Dinkie demanded.

Hastur folded his fingers together. “…Yes. The more time Celestia and Twilight have to prepare, the less likely we will ever get a chance to take her soul without alerting my superiors – and we do not want to get them involved for any reason at all.”

“Who are your superiors, by the way?” Vriska asked. “You seem a little too organized for run-of-the-mill eldritch abominations.”

“None of your concern, deity, at least not at the moment.”

“Fiiiine,” Vriska said, leaning onto her side. “Can you get to the demon summoning already? I want to see it.”

Dinkie held out her hooves, asking Hastur for the power. He snapped his fingers, and eldritch energy shot into her hooves. “Do not abuse this power, I could smite you in a single instant from three universes away.”

“You can count on me, Hastur!” Dinkie said, saluting.

Hastur vanished, leaving Dinkie and Vriska alone. Dinkie set to work on the demonic army…

Flutterfree’s picnic was just as enjoyable as she said it would be. Scooter, Twix, and Charity really enjoyed having a dozen fluffy bunnies ready to be petted and stroked at a moment’s notice – it was just so cute. Flutterfree had made the sandwiches and the fruit bowl herself, carefully arranged to be as pleasing as possible. These three ponies were going to let off some much needed stress, and it was working pretty well. Twix was taking a nap surrounded by the rabbits, Charity was savoring the delicious sandwiches and talking about how they even made her ‘spaghetti noodles’ pale in comparison. Scooter was ever alert, and much calmer than the Pinkie Fluterfree knew, but even she allowed herself to have a nice relax surrounded by fluffy animals, staring into the sky, studying clouds.

“You know…” she said. “I don’t think I realized how much I stress myself out over nothing all the time.”
“Oh?” Flutterfree pried.

“Well, I know that everything will turn out fine in the end – at least I’m reasonably sure – but I rarely worry about that. I worry about all the little things. The things I know, the things I don’t know, whether or not I should try to know…”

“It is a large burden.”

“How does your Pinkie deal with all of it? If you know, that is.”

“I think she just enjoys every day as it comes. She occasionally says things… She knows something terrible is going to happen, eventually. But she doesn’t let it bother her much – she just enjoys us. The feeling of being together.”

“…Yeah, talking vague like this, while nice, doesn’t really cut it.”

“I can imagine.”

“I hope she shows up soon…”

Flutterfree smirked. “You know she’ll show up eventually, don’t you?”

“I will neither confirm nor deny that suspicion.”

“Um,” Charity called. “What are you two talking about over there? Are you ignoring me?”

“Sorry!” Flutterfree said, turning her attention back to the white unicorn. “What were you talking about?”

“Um, well, I wanted to know if animals bought dresses.”

Flutterfree blinked. “Sometimes? I don’t think any of them are looking for one now.”

“Oh. All right.”

“I can ask them though! Does anyone want a dress?” There was silence from the fuzzy creatures. “Sorry, Charity.”

“Still feels off to be called that.”

“Well,” Flutterfree said. “If I ever come back here with my Rarity, or another Rarity, then we do need these names. I think it’s going to save a lot of time later.”

“That sounds cool,” a new voice said. Flutterfree made eye contact with the local Rainbow Dash. “Rainbow Dash, I presume?”

“What? No. I am… The Bird.”

Flutterfree blinked. “…Convenient.”


“Hello,” The Bird responded.

“When you said ‘so there’s no confusion’, did you mean with no confusion with Rainbow Dashes?”
“I dunno. When did I say that? Hey, sweet, look at all the rabbits.”

“The Bird! The- agh, she’s gone.” Twix facehooved. “I will never understand that pegasus.”

Flutterfree shrugged. “She’s not so bad. Hey, The Bird! Did you know your friends have different names you can call them now?”

“Uh, no. That sounds sweet though. Lemme guess… Carapace, The Swan, and Orville.”

Twix blinked. “…No.”

Charity raised an eyebrow. “Um, which of those names went to each of us?”

“I dunno,” The Bird said. “I just said things that I thought. It usually works out for me.”

Flutterfree chuckled. “They’re Charity, Twix, and Scooter.”

The Bird looked at Charity. “Isn’t that kind of… obvious?”

“Yeah, that’s what I keep saying, but nopony pays any attention, and, um… The Bird, that isn’t Fluttershy over there. That’s Flutterfree.”

“Oh, so she has a new name as well? Sweet.”

“No, see, she’s from another universe.”

“Oh. That makes sense. So we don’t tell her about the Ch-“

Charity shot The Bird with a death glare.

“Hey, I’m just kiddin’ Charity, just loosen up.”

“You picked up those names fast,” Twix muttered.

“I have a freakily selective memory. …I think, can’t exactly remember that all that clearly.”


The strange words appeared in the sky again. Nicer.

“Oh sweet, the words of the all-powerful being are back,” The Bird said.

Charity looked around, finding no words. “…Sure they are.”

Scooter stared at the place the words had just been, eyes narrow. “I will go beat you up again, don’t think I won’t,” she muttered.

_I have a new home security system._

“Bring it.”

Charity blinked. “…Am I missing something?”

“It’s just right over your head, Charity, don’t worry about it,” The Bird said.

Flutterfree shook her head. “I’m with The Bird on this one.”
“Yeah. New friend likes me. Hey, can I have one of those sandwiches?”

“Sure!” Flutterfree said. “Help yourself! I’ll just have to go get some more now…” She flew away from the group, heading back to her cottage for more sandwiches. She hummed a little song to herself, happy with the way life was right now. So what if she was lost in a world at war? She had good friends, good animals, and good times. She noted that she’d be happy here even if she was never able to return home – though she didn’t believe for a second the girls would stop looking for her.

She didn’t make it back to her cottage. Two ponies appeared out of nowhere and threw a net around her, one shoving a hoof into her mouth. They looked like Lyra and Bon Bon, but Flutterfree didn’t need to think too hard to realize what they really were.

Changelings.

They threw her in a sack, bound and gagged, and flew her through the air somewhere far away. She probably should have been really, really scared. She wasn’t really – she was being kidnapped by some changelings and was probably going to be interrogated. But they were just changelings – they weren’t Majora, they weren’t some horror from beyond time, they were just the normal shape-shifting bugs she was used to. She could handle herself pretty well, even if they could steal all her positive emotion or kill her…

She really should be more worried than she was.

She had no idea how much time passed in the sack before she was sat down in a really uncomfortable chair. The sack was pulled off of her, and she was able to see that she was in a cave. There was a table in front of her, and there were two changelings glaring at her.

“All right! Spill the beans!” the left one, a male, yelled. “What do you know?”

“What do I know about what?”

“Everything!”

Flutterfree sneered evilly. “I know that each and every rabbit in the world has a different volume of carrots they need to eat a day, and this can vary by five percent on any given day on a day to day basis.”

“No, no, no! You know what I mean!”

“I’m really just clueless mister Changeling – please, tell me what you want and maybe I can give it to you!”

“W-why aren’t you terrified! You’re Fluttershy, you’re supposed to be afraid of everything!”

“That’s because I’m not Fluttershy, I’m an alternate universe version of her! I’m lost, and I replaced her. Sorry if you can’t find her, that’s probably my fault.”

The second changeling, a female, rolled her eyes. “Likely story.”

“Do you think this is funny?” the first demanded, slamming his hooves down on the table. “We can have you killed or drained easily! Would you like to die here, alone? Or, better yet, get encased in icky changeling goo and be carted off to the Hive to be slowly drained of all emotion?”

The second changeling facehooved. “It’s called nest fluid…”
“It sounds scarier when I call it goo!”

“No, it doesn’t.”

Flutterfree shrugged. “I don’t want those things. Trust me.”

The male growled. “We know you’re an Element of Harmony, don’t deny that.”

“Oh yes, I’m the Element of Kindness!”

“Good. We know you’re close to the Princess’s Protégé…”

“Oh yeah, she’s a friend.”

“So… You’ll have heard things about the war and some secrets you weren’t supposed to know about.”

“Definitely!”

“Who’s running their army!?”

Flutterfree grinned wide. “Why, children!”

“AUGH! Not this again! Do you realize how many times we’ve heard that? It’s stupid! It never makes any sense! Why do you ponies keep trying it? It’s insane!”

“-ly brilliant?” Flutterfree suggested.

“Every time I hear that tacked on to my sentence I want to gut somepony.”

“Oh, then you should stop using the word ‘insane’. It just sets you up for it.”

The female changeling rolled her eyes. “Look, Fluttershy, can you tell us anything useful?”

“Well, they’ve probably noticed I’m gone by now and are trying to track me down.”

“There’s nopony who can track us to this place, we’re too well hidden.”

“Who said a pony was going to do the tracking?”

“…What are you implying?” the male asked.

Flutterfree grinned. “Well, they have a dragon. Dragons have pretty good noses.” Spike doesn’t really, but they don’t have to know that.

“A- crud, you’re right, Spike. But wait, he hate’s Celestia…”

“He likes me though.”

“Dammit, you’re right…”

The female slapped the male upside the head. “Spike doesn’t know how to track, remember? Have you even read his file?”

“…No.”

“She’s just trying to get under your carapace. And it pains me to say that she’s succeeding. We need
to try other tactics. I say we move her to the torture departme-

Two changelings burst into the cave room. “There’s a contingent of unicorns coming!” a female shouted. “We’ve got to pack up and move, like, now!”

“How could they find us!?”

“Um, I have no idea! Maybe they’ve got a changeling working for them or, um, something?”

“There’s no way…” the first female said.

“Something to figure out later!” the male said. “Let’s just get going! You two are here for the prisoner, right?”

“Right!” the changeling who hadn’t spoken yet said in a gruff tone.

The two interrogators ran out of the room. The two new changelings walked up and hoisted Flutterfree onto their backs.

“Hey, Charity. Thanks for saving me,” Flutterfree said.

Charity winced. “Is it that obvious?”

“Yes. Yes it is,” Flutterfree said bluntly. “I assume this is your Kevin.”

“She even knows about me!? Really!?” Kevin blurted.

“Um, okay, I can explain that. See, she knows other versions of you, Kevin, and, um…”

“We can talk about this later,” Flutterfree said. “Look like you’re trying to get a prisoner to another section of camp. I assume there actually is a contingent of unicorns coming?”

“Yeah. I called them.”

“Squeaky?”

“Is there anything you didn’t figure out?”

“Eh, not sure what Scooter’s deal was with the words yet… But I’m working on that one.”

“Words?” Kevin asked.

“I don’t know either,” Charity muttered. “Let’s go.” The two of them dragged Flutterfree out of the caves, into the larger changeling base they were in. Changelings were panicking, trying to get out, to move, to do anything – but they were clearly moving too slow. It would take at least half an hour to get every changeling out, and Flutterfree was pretty sure they didn’t have that kind of time. She felt sorry for them, even if they had threatened to torture and kill her.

They burst out into the open sun. Charity quickly transformed back into her unicorn form. Kevin waved them on. “Go! I’ll keep watch.” He transformed into a rock.

“He’s really good at changing…” Charity commented. She untied Flutterfree. In return, Flutterfree grabbed her and flew through the air. She may not have known this universe, but the geography was close enough to her own. She knew which direction Ponyville was, flying right in that direction.

The Bird caught up with them. “Woah. You guys are fast. I thought you needed saving.”
“Charity already took care of that,” Flutterfree said. “Put her powers to good use.”

“Woah. Sweet moves, Charity. Wish I’d been there to see it.”

“Um, you being there would have probably messed it up.”

“A pegasus can dream.”

“Yes. Yes they can.”

“By the way, thanks for coming to save me The Bird, the thought is appreciated.”

“Aw, thanks. Think we can go back to the picnic?”

Charity spoke up. “Um, Flutterfree and I will need to be… debriefed. But we can do it after that’s done.”

“Nice. See you there!” She blasted away in a flash of rainbow.

“I like her,” Flutterfree said. “She’s not all there… But she seems so happy with life.”

“Yeah. Sometimes, it’s lucky to be The Bird.”

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Celestia had a giant whiteboard with the words How Twilight Sparkle Fucked Up written at the top. There were a list of bulletpoints under this insulting heading.

- Twilight Sparkle contacted eldritch spirits to gain power and got caught
- Twilight Sparkle foolishly didn’t realize she had been caught
- Twilight Sparkle continued to tap into the power of the eldritch over years
- Twilight Sparkle didn’t notice when a demon literally moved into town with her
- Twilight Sparkle did not bother to check the state of magic for stability ever

“Now, have I outlined precisely how you’ve ruined everything?”

“Yes princess!” Twilight said, cowering.

“NO I HAVE NOT!” Celesta bellowed, her voice blowing out all the windows in the library that weren’t already destroyed. “This list is just the why you screwed up and what you did. It tells you nothing about what horror you actually unleashed, why I’m concerned, and furthermore, why I haven’t squashed you like a pancake yet.”

“Uh…”

“BACK TO MAGIC KINDERGARTEN! Lesson 1: Magic is a very unstable source of power and those of us with decent levels of magic should regularly check our area for discrepancies. Even if your magic was inherently corrupted by whatever me-forsaken ritual you first accomplished, if you were doing this you would have detected the presence of a demon in your midst at least once.”

“Yes princess, I should have been doing that princess!”

Celestia rammed her face right into Twilight’s. “Does it look like you can say anything that can bridle my anger? No. You can only sit and whimper. We haven’t even gotten to what you actually caused yet. I haven’t done a full scan yet, but now that this eldritch power has made itself known, I can see. It has a soul bill on you, Twilight. You traded your soul, knowingly or not, in one of your
rituals. Normally this would just mean a visit from a demon one night and a quick death, but apparently you’ve screwed something up with time or other force of nature, because the bond is shaken. You did something that moved outside the terms of whatever contract you were apart of, and that upsets some bigger demonic entities. That little unicorn filly had more power than you have within yourself, and it is no doubt but one of the underlings after you.”

“I… I had no idea…”

“Clearly not, for if you did you would have wormed your way out of the contract completely by now. And another thing – do you realize how difficult it must have been for you to ignore the oddness of that filly? She spoke with such an unnatural tone! And I seem to recall you mentioning in one of your letters she had a thing about being a ‘completely normal pony’. Did you temporarily catch the retardation of your rainbow friend, my faithful student?”

Twilight whimpered.

“You’re lucky I hate the eldritch oversight that wants you dead, otherwise I’d probably execute you for idiocy. But by keeping you alive I’ll destroy much of their infrastructure around this one contract, and nothing delights me more than seeing beings ‘more powerful’ than I put in their place. Of course in the end this will likely have irrevocable effects on the nature of magic itself, but you have to suffer some kind of punishment. Being responsible for the fundamental alteration of our world probably suits you.”

“Thank you for being merciful!”

“I’m also thinking time in the dungeon…”

Twilight shut up, backing up into a wall.

“Good response, no-“

It was at this point Pinkie stuck her head in the doorframe. “Ah, Twilight, Pinkie sees you’re in need of a new door, yes. Pinkie can make that happen, yes, with just a few small favo-“

“DO YOU WANT TO ETERNALLY FEEL THE BURNING OF YOUR OWN INTESTINE WRAPPED AROUND YOUR NECK, PINK ONE!?” Celestia bellowed. Pinkie left very quickly.

Celestia’s eye twitched. “Now, Twilight, even if this Thrackerzod ran away to save her skin from my wrath, there will be others after you. We are going to need to prepare.”

Twilight gulped. Celestia was smiling again. That couldn’t be good.

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Cult Leader Fluttershy tensed when the exploding started. She may have had backup plans upon backup plans for today, but there was always the chance some crazy explosion messed everything up. Random explosions were not a variable she could account for, not easily anyway.

She was mildly surprised to see the source of the explosions. The metallic form of a bloodlusted robot was tossed into the ritual clearing. Fluttershy was no stranger to these events – she had seen a couple robots revealed in her time, and the result had always been interesting. Who the robot was, however, that surprised her. Sweetie Belle – or, she supposed, Sweetie Bot. Fluttershy realized she’d wondered a few times if Sweetie was a robot, but as a cult leader she didn’t really care about such things. The robotic infestation meant nothing to Lord Smooze.
The thing that really surprised Fluttershy was what happened around the bloodlust robot. Princess
Twilight Sparkle appeared, firing a laser intended to vaporize Sweetie Bot – only for another
Twilight Sparkle, one Fluttershy didn’t know, to block the laser. “No! You don’t have to do this!”

“She’s a robot! All robots must die!”

“Acorna, think about what you’re doing!”

“Who needs to?” Acorna shouted, firing another laser. Twilight blocked it, but was unable to defend
against a rocket from Sweetie Bot. The explosion threw her into the air. Acorna dropped all pretense
of fighting Sweetie Bot instantly and engaged Twilight directly. “I’ll show you who’s the better
princess!”

“What? This isn’t-“ Twilight quickly found herself in a fight for her life against… herself.

Fluttershy saw Pinkie appear, wielding a giant hammer, knocking Sweetie Bot to the side before she
could lock on one of the cult members. Already, ponies were fleeing from the clearing, abandoning
their devotion to Lord Smooze. Traitors.

Rarity, notably, wasn’t. She was staring right at the form of her sister in disbelief. Fluttershy
wondered how a robot became one’s little sister without one knowing. It must feel like a betrayal to
her.

Good. Fuel for the fire of Smooze.

Pinkie was using powers Fluttershy had never seen before – was it possible she wasn’t the gypsy
bard, but another Pinkie? Like the other Twilight? A curious thought. A thought that was only
enforced by the more incredible things Pinkie was doing – exhibiting the skill of somepony who had
been in a lot of fights, something the gypsy bard had not. Interesting.

She saw some others come toward the clearing – an Applejack and a strange, fiery unicorn. “OJ!
Don’t be stupid! We aren’t made for this!” Applejack called.

OJ continued trotting. “I bonded with her, Jack. I think I can talk her down. I can do something.”

“Ye’ll never do anythin’! Just accept that and move on with your life!”

“No. I’m doing this,” OJ said, walking into the clearing, horn held high.

Pinkie rammed Sweetie Bot into the ground, creating a small crater. The small robotic filly was made
of sterner stuff than it appeared, ready to go again, this time activating the machine gun.

“Sweetie!” OJ called. “You don’t have to do this!”

Sweetie Bot glanced at OJ.

“Look at me! It’s your friend! Remember? We can-“

OJ didn’t get to finish. A bullet hit her in the left leg, forcing her to the ground. Sweetie Bot didn’t
get off another round due to Pinkie’s extra-long golf club impacting her face and throwing her to the
side.

Jack kneeled down to check OJ. “Ah, time to use some first aid. Hope ya have insurance.” She
began to treat OJ’s gunshot wound using what she could, namely, her hooves, a swift kick, and a
loose purple robe. It did the job.
“I’m worthless… Can’t do anything right… What’ll it be that’s better than me now? Another tambourine!?”

“Woah woah, hold yer salt there OJ. Just be glad yer alive, got it? That’s an order.”

OJ just curled into a ball and let herself cry.

In the air, Acorna and Twilight circled around each other. “Twilight! Why are you so angry with me? Trying to attack Sweetie I can understand, but… But what did I do to you?”

“I am the Princess of the Night!” Acorna roared. “And you’re not letting me have what I want!”

“I… Are you a child?”

“Oh no, I’m married, Twilight. I bet you aren’t mature enough to get that!”

“That has nothing to do with maturity!”

Acorna’s eyes flickered with an entitled menace. “Twilight, I worked my way to where I am. I cut, I stabbed, I lied, I pushed. I destroyed all those evil, that is, those who stood against me. I got to where I am by my own merit. These wings? They are mine. And now everypony has to give me what I want – except you. So, of course, I have to get rid of you just like Luna! Just like Cadence! Just like everypony else!”

“You… Took out Luna?!”

“What? No. I just tricked her into giving up her title. Was pretty easy, actually. Just had to convince her I could make her sexy!”

“What about Celestia?”

“Celestia understands who I am perfectly!”

“…I doubt that,” Twilight said. “…You know what I think? I think you’re the evil one.” She spread her wings. “I think you need to be stopped. Maybe even more than this Smooze does.”

“Ha! You won’t be able to win, I’m a princess.”

“Hello? Look at the wings! Princess here as well.”

“You’re just a shoddy wannabe. Trust me, I can tell, I’m a princess.”

Twilight took in a sharp breath. “Right.” She glanced down at the fight with Sweetie. “…Are you sure we can’t put this on hold? I need to stop what I caused…”

“NOPE!” Acorna shouted, firing a laser at Twilight. She deflected it, and the magical war began anew. Below, Pinkie was trying to capture Sweetie Bot while making sure she didn’t kill anypony, but that was proving to be very difficult. Nopony had died yet, but OJ was injured, Pinkie was getting tired, and the bloodlusted machine showed no signs of running out of ammo or rage.

“What a cruel world,” Pinkie muttered, pulling a rocket launcher out of her mane and firing. The explosion rocketed Sweetie Bot into a nearby tree, but, as usual, the effect was temporary and minimal.

They were going to need help if they were going to win this…
“HEY!” a voice yelled. Pinkie looked up to the hill.

Renee, Sweetie Belle, and Thrackerzod stood there. Sweetie Belle had been the one who shouted.

Sweetie Bot was certainly distracted by the appearance of another one of her. If distracted could mean the acquisition of a new target. The robot fired a barrage of ceaseless bullets at the three white unicorns. Renee easily deflected these with a blue shield, sending the bullets harmlessly into nearby trees. The three of them ran down the hill to the others while Pinkie continued to battle Sweetie Bot – maybe they could make a plan.

“What’s going on?” Renee asked Jack and OJ when they arrived. “Why are the Twilights fighting? Why is there a robotic Sweetie Belle attacking everyone?”

Jack looked down at OJ – she was in no position to explain anything. “Ah, fine. Ah guess Ah’ll explain for free today. The Acorna-Twilight, the one who lives here, has got her ego bruised and is now out for blood. As for the robot, well, she realized she was a robot, and apparently when robots here realize they’re robots they start going on a murderous rampage.”

“Is there any way to stop her?” Sweetie Belle asked.

“Not that Ah know of.”

Sweetie Belle looked around, scanning the area closely. She saw the clearing, the debris, the cult members, Fluttershy, Rarity-

“Aha! A Rarity!” Sweetie Belle took off, Thrackerzod in tow. Renee stayed behind, using her magic to tend to OJ “Rarity! Rarity!” Sweetie called.

Rarity gasped, her eyes watering. “Sweetie! I thought… I thought you were that machine!”

“The Sweetie Belle you know is that machine,” Thrackerzod said. “We are curious if you know of any way to stop her?”

“I… No.” Rarity looked at the ground, crestfallen. “All robots have to be killed when they go on a rampage… They…” She started crying.

Sweetie Belle looked at Rarity. “…Did she love you?”

“More t-than anyth-thing…”

“Then I have an idea.”

Thrackerzod narrowed her eyes. “Is this going to depend on the power of love?”

“Yes.”

“That’s stupid and you should feel stupid.”

“You have a better idea?”

“…I will monitor the attempt as it happens to aid however I can.”

“Good. Rarity? Do you think you can talk to her?”

“…Wait, what!? Me!? But the guns… The war… It’s all about the war…”
“Yes. You. You are the key, Rarity. Get over yourself for a few minutes and talk to your sister!”

“O-okay…”

“Thrackerzod, if we get shot at, you better use that magic I know you have to defend us.”

“…Fine,” Thrackerzod promised.

“HEY SWEETIE BELLE!” Sweetie Belle shouted. “LOOK AT ME!”

Sweetie Bot hit Pinkie with the edge of an explosion and turned to lock on to Sweetie Belle. She fired – but the bullets were blocked by a dark, eldritch barrier that tugged on the minds of all who saw it. Sweetie Belle pushed through. “LOOK AT WHO’S NEXT TO ME! IT’S YOUR SISTER! RARITY!”

Rarity took a breath. “Sweetie Belle! Come back to me! Please! We can go run fast at the social again! We can make beautiful art with these dead raccoons! We can… We can sit around at a bench and read stories to each other!”

Sweetie Bot lowered her weapons for a moment. “R-rari- BZZZZT!” Her weapons armed themselves again and kept firing.

Thrackerzod grunted. “Do it again!”

Rarity, hope in her eyes, screamed out. “SWEETIE BELLE! I am your sister! And there’s one thing you say to me all the time that I rarely acknowledge. Sweetie Belle, I love you! My sister, come back to me!”

Sweetie Bot’s weapons lowered again – and Thrackerzod took the chance. With a burst of magic, the code that was supposed to reinstate the bloodlust was never allowed to run. Sweetie Bot let her weapons fold away into her back, vanishing within her metallic interior. Her skin was torn off in numerous places, revealing metallic circuitry, and one of her ears was half broken – but she still managed to look adorable as she ran toward Rarity. “Rarity! Rarity!”

“Sweetie Belle!” the two embraced, clutching each other tighter than they ever had before.

“I… I don’t know what I was doing… What am I? Am I evil?” Sweetie Bot asked.

“You are Sweetie, and you are my sister. And you are not evil by any stretch of the imagination.”

At this moment, Acorna fell from the sky, embedding into the ground. “Ow…”

Twilight dropped to the ground, landing on her feet. “That… I hate fighting myself, so annoying…” She wiped her brow, turning to Sweetie Bot. “…You okay now?”

“Yeah! I’m… I’m with my sister. That’s all that matters. I may be a robot, but… That doesn’t change anything.”

Rarity blinked. “…Hey, am I a robot?”

“No,” Thrackerzod said. “…I know this because I have a knack for detecting synthetic voices and not a soul scanner!”

Sweetie Belle facehooved. “Oh boy… …Thrackerzod?”

“…Yes?”
“You did good. I knew you had it in you.”

“You kind of put me on the spot there!”

“If you were really some evil abomination – or, well, if that was all you were – you would have let us get shot to pieces.”

“Quite the gamble you made.”

“I did make you promise.”

“I could have broken that promise.”

The two stared at each other blankly. Then they started laughing.

Sweetie Bot tore herself from Raity’s embrace. “Sweetie B… Bot! Sweetie Bot wants in on this fun activity with other Sweeties!”

Sweetie Belle put a leg around Sweetie Bot. “Welcome to the group!”

“No!” Acorna screamed, pulling herself out of the ground. “We can’t have that! Robots need to be purged! You’re all traitors to the Crown! I can’t lose!”

Twilight stood overtop of Acorna, expressionless. “Acorna, we are going to leave and never bother you again. We will be taking Sweetie Bot – and her sister – with us, so you can’t hurt them.”

“But she’s an Element of Harmony! We need her!”

“She’s in danger if she stays here. Danger from you,” Twilight slammed her hoof into the earth. “Twilight Acorna Sparkle, goodbye. May we never meet again.”

Renee walked up to Twilight. “Where are we going?”

“I think back to the universe Jack over there is from…”

“There should be some kind of ‘magical flow’ moving through the area,” Renee said. “We used it to get from our universe to that one. You should be able to use it to get somewhere new.”

Twilight nodded. “Right. Right…” She scanned around with her horn for a few minutes, locating the pattern. “Huh. That was easy to find. Wonder why I didn’t check earlier…” She prepared the spell. “Everypony who’s not staying here, come to me!”

Pinkie, OJ, Jack, Sweetie Belle, Renee, Thrackerzod, Sweetie Bot, and Rarity surrounded her. Then they were gone, to another universe…

Fluttershy grinned. Good. They were gone.

Acorna screamed to the heavens in childish rage.

~~~

The basement of Sugarcube Corner was quickly filling up with demons of all shapes and sizes, ranging from buglike monstrosities to piles of organs with eyes to shades composed of magic, all of which were following Dinkie’s every order.

Vriska looked up at Dinkie. “Hey, guess what time it is.”
Dinkie looked away from the tall, muscular humanoid she had summoned. “Oh, broo, please not now-“

Vriska removed her hands from her imprisonment with her luck. “Escape time!” She leaped over the head of the freshly summoned demon, landing on the stairs out of the basement. “See ya!”

“GET HER!” Dinkie yelled. “…Also, Frank, go get a chicken from Fluttershy, kay?”

Vriska threw her dice into the basement, unleashing an attack of exploding jellyfish. She saluted and ran out of the basement and through the front doors of Sugarcube Corner, into the sunlight. She spread her wings and took off into the sky, laughing madly. That was easy. Stupidly ea-

A flying demon composed of three eyeballs connected by a stomach-like sac teleported in front of her and hit her with far more force than should have come out of its somewhat small mass. Vriska flew toward the edge of Ponyville. She stole the luck of the creature, but another one appeared behind her, this time composed mostly of teeth apparently glued onto a perfect sphere. She cut this one in half with her sword – no need to rely on the fancy dice.

A demon made entirely of wind shoved her even further off track. She managed to cut three other demons in half, but she was still being pushed around so much she couldn’t control where she was going. She was getting pretty tired of this…

A bed-shaped demon smashed into her, driving her through the roof of a certain clubhouse.

“Ow…” she muttered, rubbing her head. She saw four faces looking down at her – a Scootaloo, Sweetie Belle, Applebloom, and Princess Luna.

“Scoo-ba?” Scootaloo asked.

“I have no idea what she is, but I think she’s in trouble!” Applebloom said.

“I see demons out there!” Sweetie Belle said with a gruff voice as she looked out a window. “Can I go punch one?”

“That would be unwise!” Luna declared. She teleported them all out of the clubhouse seconds before it was demolished by attacking beings. They appeared on top of a nearby ridge overlooking Ponyville.

Vriska stood up and dusted herself off. “Thanks. I could have handled that, but it was getting annoying.”

“I am happy to serve!” Luna declared. “So, who are you?”

“Why are the legions of hell after you?” Sweetie Belle demanded.

“Scootittidy bibbityba?” Scootaloo added.

Vriska grinned. “I’m Vriska Serket, your Pinkie Pie is summoning a demon army to go kill a Twilight Sparkle in another universe, and I’m apparently in a good position to stop her. But, you know, now that I see what I have to work with… I think I can make this work. Who wants to stop a demon invasion?”

“THIS IS LITERALLY THE BEST DAY OF MY LIFE!” Sweetie Belle cheered.

“SAND!” Luna cheered as well.
“Doesn’t have the same ring to it,” Applebloom muttered.

“Scooby bappity skoo ba ba,” Scootaloo added.

“I found it again. I missed it,” Luna answered.

Vriska blinked. “Wait, hold on, why can’t I understand Scootaloo?”

“Scooba doofa bappity ba ba ba bappity ba. Ba ba,” Scootaloo explained.

“Ah dunno,” Applebloom said.

“But I have a universal translator and – AGH whatever. Luna, you should know an invisibility spell.”

“That I do!”

“Good. Let’s go investigate!”

“Are you sure we should be involving children in this?” Luna asked.

“IF YOU TAKE THIS FROM ME I WON’T BE YOUR FRIEND ANYMORE!” Sweetie Belle shouted.

“Yay! Demon hunters with children, what a great idea!” Luna cheered.

Applebloom glanced at Scootaloo. “Ah thought we weren’t her friend?”

“Scooba,” Scootaloo shrugged.

“Let’s just move it,” Vriska said. “I have no idea how long we have, and frankly I’d rather this not all devolve into chaos.”

Several minutes later, the five of them were invisible, floating into Sugarcube Corner’s basement by way of Luna’s magic. They could hear Dinkie cheering. “It took like ten minutes, but I finally got you back broo! You have any idea how hard it is to remove the innocence from a chicken?”

“Easy as creating a potato from scratch,” Hastur said. “I take it we are ready?”

“Yeah, totally broo! Got the demon army and everything! Vriska’s escaped though, so she’s probably gonna try somethin’. We should be ready for that.”

“I will be our defense against her should she decide to make a move. We must go quickly though. My coworkers can only keep nut-head distracted for so long. I will generate the portal, you get the demons in line.”

“All right demon broos! Let’s do this thing! Remember, you’re after the purple pony with a horn and a lot of magic! Should be easy to find! Because this contract is all weird, we can’t just kill her directly, we’ve got to, uh, Hastur? What was the weird thing again?”

“We need to secure the soul prior to killing the body. It’s a delicate operation, but I should be able to accomplish it assuming the demon army can take care of Celestia.”

“Sweet, Broo! What if Vriska shows up though?”

“We’ll have to adapt. No plan survives contact with the enemy.”
“Sweet! How would you react if I told you Vriska was listening to us right now?”

“Of course she is. She’s probably got some invisibility spell, or something. I sense a magical presence that might be Princess Luna. Word of advice to our eavesdroppers, I would not interfere. I am a higher demon far beyond you pathetic mortals. Even if you have power, I’m more than willing to scream in the broodfester tongues loud enough to destroy the lives of every pony within a mile radius. I don’t want to do that, but I can. Think very carefully.”

“Fuck,” Vriska muttered.

Dinkie clapped her hooves together. “That was so badass, broo! You’re, like, the best demon I’ve ever had the pleasure of knowing!”

“You aren’t that bad yourself, Pink one.”

“Aw, broo! You don’t need to say that! You’re makin’ me blush!”

“True. Prepare, we’re going through soon.”

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General ‘Squeaky’ Belle looked from Flutterfree, to Charity, to Flutterfree. She cleared her throat. “This has been an immensely horrible breach of security. Celestia would be ashamed of us.”

Flutterfree nodded. “Yeah. I’m sorry. Just because they didn’t believe me, doesn’t mean the risk was mine to take.”

“Definitely not! And while it was very funny to hear about, if they hear the ‘oh, the Generals are children’ often enough they’re going to get suspicious! And Charity, I know you wanted to hear about the good changelings so badly, but…” she sighed. “Look, I know it’s hard to take my voice seriously, and I’m really freaking cute, but I mean what I’m saying. You’re not in trouble, but… You two are grown mares. You should know better!”

“I’m sorry,” Charity said.

Squeaky smiled. “Good. Now, I-“

Scooter kicked the door in. “Sorry to interrupt, but I’ve got, like, eight visitors here to see Flutterfree!”

Charity was about to object, but then she saw who was there. No doubt, this was Flutterfree’s Twilight – and Pinkie, and Renee, along with some other friends.

Squeaky blinked. “Woah, where’d you find them?”

“I was just waitin’ around the edge of the Everfree forest, like I do,” Scooter said. “They’ve had quite an adventure, I bet!”

“You have no idea – Actually, wait, you do have a pretty good idea!” Pinkie said, giggling.

“We are going to be the best of friends, Pinkie.”

“You bet we are, Scooter!”

Flutterfree leaped up and hugged Twilight. “It’s good to see you all safe.”
“Yeah. It’s good to see you,” Twilight responded. “I was worried about all of you.”

“Where’s Nova?” Flutterfree asked.

“I don’t think she was dragged into these universes with us,” Renee said. “I haven’t seen a single version of Starlight anywhere.”

Flutterfree glanced at Sweetie Belle, Thrackerzod, and Sweetie Bot filing in. “What’s the story there?”

“I’ll tell you all about it. See, Sweetie Belle came with me for some reason, probably because I was sleeping on her…”

Squeaky looked at Sweetie Belle, Sweetie Bot, and Thrackerzod. “Well then,” she said. “This is interesting.”

“I’m willing to bet this is some cruel joke of fate,” Thrackerzod said. “Before we know it the Sweetie Belle from Jack’s universe will show up and we’ll have a full set.”

Sweetie Bot beeped. “That would be amazing! The cuteness would be at maximum capacity!”

Sweetie Belle walked up to Squeaky. “Sorry for not introducing ourselves. This is Thrackerzod and Sweetie Bot. I just go by Sweetie Belle, but if you want to go by that I can be something else.”

“I’ve already got a name! Squeaky!” Squeaky said, smiling. “It’s going to be great to know you all! So… This is going to sound like a weird question, maybe, but what’s your job?”

“I help ponies find their destiny. A therapist, I guess,” Sweetie said.

“I am a robot,” Sweetie Bot said. “…I don’t know what that means, but I think it’s cool now.”

“I am a perfectly normal unicorn!” Thrackerzod asserted.

“Thrackerzod’s some kind of dark being from another dimension with a heart of gold,” Sweetie corrected.

“Traitor,” Thrackerzod muttered.

“Wow. Cool!” Squeaky said. She looked around shiftily. “I can’t tell you what I do, but I can tell you it’s awesome!”

“If I’ve heard right, it definitely is,” Charter-Twilight said, walking up to her.

Squeaky blinked. “Do we need to go talk somewhere alone, or…”?

“No. I just want to say thanks. As Charter, I will want to talk to you later, but for now… Enjoy being a kid. Something tells me you don’t get much of that.”

Thrackerzod raised her eyebrows. “The only one of us here with the mentality of a child is the robot.”

Twilight smiled. “And Thrackerzod? I’ve sensed your kind of power before, in a horrible enemy we faced called Majora. Everywhere else we’ve encountered that power, there is darkness. But… What you did today? That made me think of things differently. Thank you for that.”

Thrackerzod blinked. “…You know, I should be thankful, but instead I’m just upset that I don’t even
have a cover anymore. I’m supposed to be some unimaginable horror who needs to hide to connect to anypony! We don’t get friends.”

“I saw you with your Scootaloo and Applebloom,” Sweetie Belle interjected. “You had an actual bond with them.”

Twilight smiled. “I hope I’ll get to see you again, Thrackerzod. I think I’ll have a lot of questions. But you, too, can have fun, despite your ‘maturity’.”

“Yay!” Sweetie Bot cheered. “Hey, are all your sisters the best too?”

Squeaky looked over at Charity. “Yeah. Yeah she is.”

Thrackerzod huffed. “My ‘sister’ thinks the idea of setting an example is for ponies who aren’t her. She thinks she can run everypony, including me! Little does she know I plot against her in my dreams…”

Sweetie Belle rolled her eyes. “My sister is there, in the hat. She’s amazing. She explores universes and is sometimes an ambassador for all ponykind!”


“Oooh! She’s talking to my sister!” Sweetie Bot commented. “I wonder what they’re talking about?”

Renee looked at Rarity and Charity. “I was beginning to lose hope,” she admitted. “I heard word of a deplorable Rarity, and met one who was literally a masochist. But you two… You two have restored my faith. A good sister, and a hero.”

Charity sighed.

“Flutterfree tells us everything Charity, don’t be ashamed. Your secret is safe with us.”

“What secret?” Rarity asked.

“It’s hers,” Renee said. “It would be best if you didn’t pry. But, I do think it’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

Charity smiled. “Um. Thank you, Renee. Means a lot.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Jack and OJ sat near the edge of the room.

“Ah feel like we’re bein’ left out,” Jack said. “Ah have the sneaking suspicion there’s no real reason for me to be here.”

“I thought you were expanding your influence?”

“Oh, Ah’m doin’ that. Cheated several ponies out of their bits while ya weren’t lookin’. But there’s a bigger story goin’ on here, and Ah don’t belong in it, not really.” She stood up. “Ah think Ah’m gonna go to the bar in this town, maybe see if I can rope the alternate Apples into a business deal of some kind.”

OJ sighed. “I mean… I think you should stay. That way I have someone to talk to… Someone who isn’t a failure.”
“Wow, OJ, ya sound more pathetic than a spineless porcupine. Just go up and talk to somepony, they all look nice. Nicer than me, at least.”

“Why are you giving me life advice, anyway?”

“Racking up favors.”

“…Is that just an excuse?”

“Do ya want to find out?”

“…No,” OJ admitted.

Behind them, Pinkie and Scooter were talking.

“So, Scooter, I hear you want to talk with me.”

“It’s hard Pinkie,” Scooter said. “I can read the script and everything, and I try to protect them, but I can’t. Twix already knows, and she took it… well. But she almost didn’t, and the Fourth is breaking down more and more as time goes on, Trixie almost broke everything, and then The Editor shows up and—”

Hello, The Editor’s text ‘said’. Nice to meet you.

Pinkie waved at the Editor. “Hey. So, bored?”

A little.

“Yeah, your type of jokes don’t really apply in book form do they?”

Not really. I mean, I’ve been writing in different colors each time, but nobody notices.

“You guys talkin’ to the Editor?” Twix said, trotting into the crowded room.

“Yeah,” Pinkie said. “You’re a little late.”

“I got caught up with… a book.”

Scooter raised an eyebrow. “I told you the exact time they would arrive, Twix.”

“Yeah, so? My internal clock isn’t perfect.” She looked at Pinkie. “So… You have it too. The Fourth, or whatever.”

“Yep. I actually don’t have it as strong as Scooter here – I can’t actually go and read the script. But I’m pretty close. Also, if you want to call it what it’s really called, go with Ka.”

“None of the readers are going to know what it means,” Scooter said. “Seriously, those that do had to have it explained to them.”

“There are some who know about the Tower.”

Twix blinked. “Wait, readers? I thought we were being watched.”

“Yeah, this is a special derivative work,” Scooter said. “The ol’ GM is trying pretty hard to keep this seamless with all of Scootertrix, but, you know, that doesn’t always work.”

He put me out of a job.
“You needed to get fired long ago. You misspelled ‘little’ up there, by the way. You’re really bothering all the real editors of this chapter.”

“Scooter!” Pinkie chided. “That’s rude. …wait a minute…”

“Sorry, right… The Editor, just… Work at it? Okay?”

Sure.

Twix rubbed her head. “This is all a bit meta for me. I think… I think I need to get out of here before I get an aneurysm from thinking too much.”

“Yeah, you won’t get time to do that,” both Pinkie and Scooter said.

“Uuuuuuugh…”

A brilliant magic filled the space, depositing the princesses Celestia and Luna in the room. Celestia held out her hoof. “Beware, interdimensional invaders! I have come to face you off and protect my land… In a game of chance! Somewhere in this room is a bomb set to go off at any moment! The rules are simple – you need to find it before time runs up! I will provide hints for pathetic losers! And… go!”


Twix chuckled. “Hey Celestia!”

“Oh, Twilight! Have you been doing well on your studies?”

“Well, just look at all these new friends!”

“I can see! They’re not trying to… invade are they?”

“Definitely not!” Twix said, grinning. “Some are annoying, but I like them all.”

“Hey,” Jack said, walking up to Celestia. “Would you like to purchase interdimensional insurance from the Apple Family of the land of Ultra Fast?”

“…You’re trying to scam me. You have some serious balls. I respect that.”

Luna sighed. “Look, everypony, we just detected a huge surge of interdimensional energy, probably when you all showed up, and decided to investigate.”

“There’s no need, princesses,” Squeaky said. “They’re not working with the enemy.”

“Good. See Luna? I told you they had everything under control.”

Luna grumbled under her breath.

“Back to the window then,” Celestia said.

“Wait! We haven’t given you a name yet!” Pinkie called.

“Why would I accept a name from a pony like you? If I were to differentiate myself from other Celestias, I would come up with it myself.”
“Trollestia.”

“That is the most beautiful word I have ever heard. It is mine now.”

Pinkie winked. “Glad you like it!”

Luna sighed. “Great…”

Charter-Princess Twilight bowed at Trollestia’s feet. “I am honored to make your acquaintance.”

“Nice wings,” Celestia commented. “Hey, Twilight, you like these wings?”

“Yes princess!” Twix said.

“Good… To… Know…” Celestia said, commenting no further on the matter. “So, what am I to call you, other Twilight?”

“I am the Charter-Twilight.”

“So… Charlie?”

Jack burst out into laughter. “Ah told ya that was the best name!”

Twilight twitched. “I’d prefer just Charter, Trollestia.”


“We were wondering if, maybe, you might have a way home for us? A way to get to another universe?”

Trollestia put a hoof to her chin. “Hrm… I’m thinking… Maybe…”

Renee raised a hoof. “Twilight, just cast the spell along the magic conduit again. It should continue to a new location.”

“Okay, I want to see this,” Trollestia said. “Do it. Make a portal to another universe. I hope it looks like a donut.”

Luna shook her head. “Please forgive my sister…”

“Why?” Pinkie said. “She’s awesome!”

Luna facehooved. “I am alone in my struggles…”

Twilight activated the spell, punching a hole through to another version of Rarity’s boutique… An empty one, with a drama couch in the middle of the room.

Renee blinked. “Hold up…”

In an instant, the portal no longer led to the boutique; it had been forcibly moved to Twilight’s Library, where a certain brutal version of Celestia and her terrified student, Twilight, stood.

Trollestia waved. “Hello, me! I’ve always been curious, is the grass greener over there?”

Celestia looked closely at her counterpart, sizing her up. With a slight hint of pain in her voice, she forced herself to speak in a dignified, respectful manner. “Your Highness, why have you connected to my realm?”
“I wanted to see what this Twilight could do with the dimensional things. It turns out that those things are pretty sweet, though not as donut-like as I was expecting.”

Luna cleared her throat. “What she means to say is that we won’t bother you any further if you don’t wish us to.”

Twilight looked at the brutal Celestia. “Your highness, I am the Charter-Twilight, leader of this interdimensional group of explorers. If I have your identity correct, you helped Renee learn of the magical conduit. For that, I thank you. It appears to go in a circle though.”

Trollestia blinked. “Donut-like after all…”

“Wait…” Celestia glared. “Do you have the demon among you!?”

Thrackerzod was sweating profusely, frozen in a state of panic. Celestia grabbed her with the telekinesis of a self-proclaimed god. She would have crushed the eldritch filly right then and there had Luna not stepped in to release her grip.

“You can’t just go crushing fillies like that!” Luna shouted at her.

“I can do what I wan-“

“Ah ah ah,” Trollestia said, waving her hoof. “See, Thrackerzod is on our side of the line, in our territory. You can’t do anything in our territory. If, say, she were through the portal, or even stuck a single hoof through, you could take her and bake her into a victory pie or something. Buuuuut, the line is law!”

“I don’t have to respect your laws.”

“And neither do we! Isn’t this a fun game?” Trollestia raised her eyebrows over and over. “Come on, you’re enjoying this.”

“Stop antagonizing her!” the unicorn Twilight hissed. “Do you want to start a war?”

Luna glanced at Trollestia. “We can’t handle another war.”

“No… We can’t… But there’s, like, over a dozen of us, three of which are alicorns, and one of her. Well, two, but that shaking two-bit Twilight doesn’t hold a candle to the real thing.”

“I can hear every disrespectful word you say, buffoon,” Celestia growled.

“I know! See, I’m trying to get you worked up and angry. Is it working? Please tell me it’s working.”

Celestia took in a breath. “The being you are harboring is a horrendous demon creature that has taken over the life of a poor, defenseless unicorn filly. She has one purpose and one purpose only – to take the soul of my student Twilight Sparkle, killing her in the process. She serves beings far beyond my power or yours, outer gods that could tear universes apart with their breath. Do you really want to defend a creature such as that?”

Luna frowned. “When you put it that way…”

Sweetie Belle cleared her throat. “Thrackerzod is more than that! She saved a filly’s life! She protected us from certain doom! She’s our friend!”

Celestia narrowed her eyes. “And what are you suggesting?”
Scooter shrugged. “We could go with the whole ‘friendship is magic’ thing, but…”

Pinkie jumped in. “…we think it’s just good that she has a heart in there, somewhere amongst theicky blackness. And that’s something to fight for!”

“She would have my student killed.” Celestia grunted.

“Oh, we can stop her from doing that easily enough,” Trollestia said. “Thrackerzod, if you do anything to kill Twilight Sparkle, I will find some creative way to torture you. Involving… Oh, let’s say blobfish. I’ve always wanted to use a blobfish for something.”

“Er… I…” Thrackerzod gulped. “There’s probably something you should—“

Celestia pointed a hoof at Thrackerzod. “Do not believe its words! It will snake-charm you into whatever it wills! It has access to the broodfester tongues, and could kill most of you with little effort. Kill it, now. Kill it before it can manipulate you beyond!”

“No!” Sweetie Bot yelled. “Thrackerzod is a friend!”

“Yeah!” OJ yelled, standing up. “I like her!”

Renee nodded. “As much of a pathological liar as she is, I can certainly say she’s a good pony at heart. We’re certainly friends with worse characters.”

“I wonder what Alushy’s up to right now…” Pinkie muttered to herself.

“Yeah, I don’t really know her that well but she saved my sister!” Rarity called.

Thrackerzod blinked, wiping tears from her eyes. “Ponies… Celestia is right. I am charged with killing Twilight Sparkle, and nothing can take that task away from me. It is my definition, my requirement in this life. I have an insatiable desire to seek out her destruction, and it must be done. She has imbalanced the magic of my realm with her dealings with our kind! She signed the contract herself, and then something messed it up! Something…” She looked at her horn and frowned, losing her train of thought. “…There’s something in there. Something strange.”

Charter Twilight lit her horn, scanning the interior of the library through the portal. She teleported the key to herself. “…This thing has unusual energies.”

Unicorn Twilight blinked. “That stupid thing? It’s just a key I found when I started experiencing déjà vu!”

Thrackerzod frowned. “While that key is certainly important, it changes nothing. Twilight’s soul is needed. I cannot change this. Furthermore, killing me will not change this requirement. I have superiors.”

Celestia glared into Trollestia’s eyes. “It appears we are at a standstill, me.”

“Oh I don’t know about that, I think I can do this pretty well while sitting down! But I won’t, because then you’d be taller. And you’re already significantly more menacing, so, you know, have to keep it balanced.”

“We can do this the hard way, you know,” Celestia said. “I guarantee I can kill most of your subjects before you can do anything.”

“That… is a good point.”
“A good point?” Luna blurted. “We can’t risk all these ponies for the life of a single filly! Not all of them want to sacrifice themselves!”

Jack raised her hoof. “Ah’m one of the sane people!”

Celestia smiled – it was unsettling even to Trollestia. “See? You need to hand her over. You have no choice.”

It was at that moment another portal appeared behind Trollestia, depositing Acorna, a very upset looking Fluttershy, an Applejack, a Rainbow Dash, and a Spike, all wearing Elements of Harmony on their necks. Acorna pointed her wing at Charter-Twilight. “There you are! I can have my revenge!”

“…Are you threatening us with the Elements of Harmony?” Charter-Twilight asked.

“Yes! You will be purged to what I want you to be!”

“…But you need all six.”

“…What?”

“You’re missing a Pinkie and a Rarity. Even with Spike, which might work, you’re still missing one. And nopony here is going to hop onto your side just because they can. Nopony likes you.”

“But everypony loves me!” Acorna asserted. “Just watch. Anypony want to help me get my revenge!?”

Not a single pony moved forward to join her side.

Acorna’s eyes began to fill up with tears. “But… But… But…” She collapsed to the ground, crying. “I WAS GOING TO GET YOU!”

“Yeeeeah…” Charter-Twilight said, turning away from her. “That mare has a problem.”

“That mare is a problem,” Renee muttered.

“Now that we are done with such pointless distractions,” Celestia said, narrowing her eyes. “Counterpart, what do you say about giving me that eldritch filly?”

Trollestia glanced at Luna. Then she glanced back at her brutal counterpart. “Fine, you win, brutal empress of whatever. You can have the filly to do whatever horrendous things you wish. Don’t like it, but can’t have you being more brutal and killing ponies.” She levitated Thrackerzod into the air, moving her toward the portal. “I’m sure your subjects are going to love the video.”

“The video?”

“Oh, you know, the video I’m going to take with my magic and send to some company somewhere to mass produce. Princess Celestia, doing unspeakable things to a foal…”

“A good publicity stunt. I should thank you.”

“…You’re serious.”

“Yes.”

“And I thought I was a monster. Wow.”
Luna winced. “Let it be known that the Princesses Luna and Celestia of this universe do not condone your actions, Celestia. You have forced our hoof.”

Thrakerzod looked down at the other Sweetie Belles as she was levitated to the middle of the ring. “I am sorry, my friends. It was good to know you.”

Sweetie Bot started crying. Squeaky and Sweetie just nodded slowly and forced smiles onto their faces for Thrakerzod.

Thrakerzod turned her gaze to Celestia. “The moment you try to do anything to me, I fight back with all I have.”

“I am a god, filly. My power far eclipses that of a minor demon.”

Thrakerzod took a deep breath. “I know. Do your worst.” She was now past the line, on the others side of the portal, in the telekinetic grasp of the brutal tyrant Celestia.

Scooter grinned. “Hey, you know what’d be really convenient right now?”

“What?” Pinkie asked, legitimately confused.

“A demon army coming out of nowhere.”

A portal flew open behind brutal Celestia, unveiling the forces of Hastur and Dinkie. “CHARGE!” Dinkie yelled. “GET TWILIGHT SPARKLE, BROOS! DO NOT STOP THE WARRING UNTIL THE CONTRACT IS FULFILLED! NOT FOR ANY REASON!”

All hell broke loose.

Literally.

Twilight Sparkle, the unicorn, was suddenly in the center of a fight for her life. Her mentor and tormentor of the past few years, Celestia, ruler of her entire world, was defending her from this horde. Her fear began to melt away, replaced with the urgency of survival – the need to fight back, to help. She stood alongside her ruler and fired a complex series of lasers through the solar shield matrix she had created, downing demons left and right.

Thrakerzod flew out of nowhere, trying to drive a sickle of eldritch energy into Twilight’s chest, but Renee was there, stopping her. “Thrakerzod…”

“Renee… Get out of my way. This has to be done.”

Renee smirked. “You’d be surprised how often we get into fights with ponies we don’t want to. Bring it, I’m pretty-“

A wall of eldritch energy shot from a direction that should not have existed, barreling into Renee and knocking her unconscious with a single blow. “Sorry,” Thrakerzod said, returning her attention to Twilight. She generated another wall of eldritch energy, but Twilight was expecting it, deflecting with a powerful shield. Thrakerzod knew Twilight’s power was strong enough to do this, so she had a backup plan. A spike of powerful energy shot from a direction that could best be described as ‘behind’. It missed Twilight by mere millimeters. Thrakerzod moved to rings of shadow, keeping Twilight on the defensive, but soon she had a new opponent.

Sweetie Bot. The dented and bruised robot stood between Thrakerzod and her charge. “Thrakerzod! Stop! We are your friends – you don’t have to do this!”
Thrackerzod groaned. “You don’t understand, do you?! I do have to do this! It is physically impossible for me not to try!” She tried to shove Sweetie Bot out of the way, but she stood fast and produced her many guns.

“Don’t make us try to stop you!” Sweetie Belle called.

“We can do it!” Squeaky said. “We can totally have you taken down!”

Amongst the war between demons and ponies, Thrackerzod shook her head and ground her teeth. “You are all morons who cannot understand my ways. You must take me down. …I hope you succeed.” She lunged for Twilight Sparkle again, a claw of red power summoning forth from her horn.

Sweetie Bot tackled her to the ground, the robotic strength more than enough to overcome the eldritch boost to a little filly’s body. “Stop it! Look into your heart drive!”

“I don’t have a heart drive you impressionable filly! I-!”

“It appears as if we are having a conflict of interest,” Hastur said, approaching them. “Do not fret, Thrackerzod. I shall complete the contract for you, and no one has to hear of this.”

 “…Thank you, Hastur,” Sweetie Belle said, walking in front of Thrackerzod. “…They’re still going to have to stop you though.”

“They’re welcome to try.” With a burst of energy he moved toward Twilight himself.

Sweetie Bot hugged Thrackerzod close. “Yay! Now we don’t have to fight anymore!”

A gigantic demon walked up to them and screamed in bloodcurdling rage. Sweetie Bot screamed, backing away. Thrackerzod gave it the evil eye, planning to cut its head off – but somepony else did that instead - a fifth Sweetie Belle. “Aw yeah, this is the best day ever!” The newcomer said, standing in a pool of demon blood. “Muahahahahaha!”

Thrackerzod facehooved. “What did I say? What did I say? Look at it, here she is. Behold!”

“Input name: Sweetie Brute!”

Sweetie Brute chuckled. “That sounds like me all right!”

“Where did you come from?” Squeaky asked.

“I came with her,” Sweetie Brute said, pointing at Vriska.

Vriska flew through the air, landing between Hastur and Twilight. “Ah ah ah… Not gonna happen.”

“Do you wish to risk a heroic death against me, deity? For these ponies?”

“Oh definitely, I like them, and I know they like this unicorn. Plus, as I’m sure you know, these ponies are important.”

“Very well. I regret to inform you that, as an obstacle to fulfilling the contract, I am required to take you out of the equation by any means necessary. If by some miracle you survive, are you still on for that drink later?”

“Of course, what kind of idiot would I be to turn that down?”
“Good to know.” Hastur pointed a finger and a surge of eldritch energy shot out, so much that some of the demons nearby grabbed their heads in agony. Vriska flew into the air and grinned, siphoning the luck from Hastur.

Hastur snapped his fingers, undoing Vriska’s ability. Vriska laughed. “Ah, nice trick. But does it work when I steal from others?” She grabbed a nearby demon’s luck, as much as she could grab, forcing the disgusting blob to die of a heart attack. She rolled her dice, getting a very high roll. A shark made of sawblades appeared from the aether, cutting Hastur into a million pieces.

He reformed without much of an issue.

“This is going to be so much fun…” Vriska smirked.

Celestia, Trollestia, Luna, and another Luna were standing together, keeping most of the demon horde back.

“So… What’s your story?” Luna asked the other Luna.

“SAAAAAAND!”

“…That’s… Not helpful at all.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just a thing I say sometimes. I’m here with the gray troll creature and the three children on my back.”

“Pleased to meetcha, Luna Two,” Applebloom said.

“Scootitty ba bannada scoo,” Scootaloo said.

Luna blinked. “Other me, that’s only two fillies.”

“Great. One must have slipped away…”

Trollestia smirked. “If she dies or gets injured in any way, you are so getting sent to the moon, aren’t you?”

“SAAAAAAAAND!” ‘Sandyluna’ roared in rage.

Celestia took in a sharp breath. “I am surrounded by imbeciles…”

“Hey! I’m not an Imbecile!” Luna called.

“You’re incompetent.”

“But I… I…”

“Just focus on the demon horde, all of you!”

Elsewhere in the midst of the fight, Dinkie got a truly devious idea. She appeared next to Acorna. “Hey, broo! I hear you need another Element o’ Harmony!”

“You… You’d do that?” Acorna said, wiping away her tears.

“Uh, yeah! Your enemies totally are messing up my demon horde! Let’s hit them with the rainbow death laser! C’mon!”
Acorna grinned, slapping her sixth Element around Dinkie’s neck. She turned back to her ponies. “ALL RIGHT GIRLS, TIME TO TAKE REVENGE!”

“Damn it!” Twix yelled, seeing their Elements start activating. “CELESTIA! WE NEED THE ELEMENTS!”

“I have them on me!” Trollestia called. “Just use your amazing magic to grab them out of my magnificent tail!”


OJ stood up from her cowering position. “Maybe this is my chance to shine… Maybe I can take the Element of Loyalty…”

Twix grabbed a megaphone from Pinkie. “THE BIRD! HELLO!”

As if summoned by magic, The Bird flew onto the scene. “Hello.”

Twix slapped the Element of Loyalty on her. “Let’s move ponies!” Twix, Rarity, Jack, Pinkie, Flutterfree, and the Bird rose into the air.

“Heh. Guess this is why Ah was here,” Jack said.

OJ crumpled back onto the floor into a ball of tears.

Even though the second set of Elements was activated several seconds after the first, they were still able to resist the power of the first set. Soon, there were two lasers of rainbow ‘death’ firing at each other, canceling their powers out.

“Pretty,” Scooter said. “All right ponies! Keep fighting back the horde!”

Demons fell by the dozen, but they just kept coming. Ponies fought for their lives, and not just that of the unicorn Twilight Sparkle. Currently, Charter-Twilight was her primary defender, the defense well within her power since Hastur was busy with Vriska. The battle between the two of them was beyond the capability of most ponies present to understand – the troll used her Vision Eightfold to track the higher demon, but his partial existence outside the dimension made her battle difficult. It should have been impossible, but she was known for her luck.

The five Sweetie Belles sat in a corner, unsure what to do. Sweetie Brute kept moving to go back to punch demons in the face, but that would go against what the group was doing, and she wanted to feel included with her other selves.

“We have to stop this fighting!” Sweetie Bot said, turning to Squeaky. “Do something.”

“I can’t do anything! I make war! I don’t stop it without a lot of violence involved!”

“The horde will get her eventually,” Thrackerzod said. “She will pay for what she’s done, and the contract will be complete.”

“You still think she needs to pay don’t you?” Sweetie Belle retorted.

“Do you think a demon, such as myself, would be allowed on such an important mission if I had free will in regards to this mission? Do you? I’m programmed!”
“Then unprogram yourself, like you did me!” Sweetie Bot said.

“You should know you can’t do it to yourself,” Thrackerzhod muttered. “And even if, say, I could think it was a bad thing, which I don’t, and it isn’t, there’s probably a self-destruct somewhere in here for that eventuality. Traitors are not treated well. Even hesitation is usually a one-way ticket to eternal damnation in places worse than the hell any of you can imagine. I am immensely grateful for Hastur’s existence.”

“But… But…” Sweetie Belle threw her hooves in the air. “There has to be a way! There’s always some third option!”

OJ heard this. The idea of the third option burrowed its way into her mind. She snapped out of her depressed stupor and looked around. She saw the fights. She saw the injuries, though she didn’t see any dead ponies, just demons. She saw Vriska and Hastur battling in a way that hurt her mind. She saw demons congealing around the unicorn Twilight. She saw her screaming and fighting for her life. She saw the Elements of Harmony, both sets, burning at each other for eternity. She saw the Twilight Sparkles leading both sets…

Twilight Sparkles.

There was an S there.

“EVERYPONY STOP FIGHTING!” OJ yelled, using the megaphone Twix had left on the ground.

For whatever reason, everypony did. Not just the ponies, but the demons, and even the Elements of Harmony stopped firing. OJ decided not to question this. “YELLOW DEMON GUY! WOULD IT BE POSSIBLE FOR ANOTHER TWILIGHT SPARKLE’S SOUL TO SATISFY THE CONTRACT?”

Hastur released his hold on Vriska’s neck. “…Given the recent edits to account for interdimensional interference, legally speaking… I think so.”

Everypony and demon in the room slowly turned to lock their eyes with those of one Twilight Acorna Sparkle.

“No…” She said, taking a few steps back.

Dinkie threw her Element on the ground. “Sorry broo, looks like you’re about to get served. I’ll just distance myself from you right now…”

Celestia teleported herself to Acorna and unleashed a bolt of holy sun magic. Acorna met it with her own, the powers of two alicorns matching for the briefest of moments.

“Twilight!” Cult-Leader Fluttershy called. “Retreat!”

Acorna, for once, listened to her friend. She teleported them through her portal back to their world. Celestia forced the portal to remain open, following them.

The demons looked at each other, shrugged, and decided that attacking any Twilight Sparkle was fair game now.

“Hey!” Twix shouted. “Stop it! Get away!”

Scooter and Pinkie hit them back with gigantic hammers.
“PINKIE!” Jack called to her pink ‘friend’. “TELL THEM TO FOCUS ON ACORNA! Idjit! That’s obvious!”

Dinkie shrugged. “Sorry broo! Can’t do that, already told them not to stop!”

“But they just stopped when OJ asked!” Twix shouted.

“Yeah, I dunno what that was about, but it sure made for some nice dramatic tension!”

Jack glared at Dinkie. “Dinkie, ya are such a moron.”

“Yeeeeeah…”

The three remaining princesses strained against the Demon horde. “This… Is harder without that other Celestia…” Luna strained.

“I’ve got a plan,” Trollestia said. She teleported Twix, unicorn Twilight, and the Charter to her. “Hey demons! Look at these tasty purple snacks!”

“What!?” unicorn Twilight shouted. “What are you doing!?”

“The plan.” Trollestia spread her wings and flew through the portal to Acorna’s universe, leading the entire demon horde with her. The two Lunas looked at each other, shrugged, and followed the horde through.

Thrackerzod stood up tall. “Sweetie Belle?”

“Yes?” Sweetie responded.

“Are we allowed to go through that portal… and kill Twilight Acorna Sparkle?”

“Hell yes!” Sweetie Brute shouted.

“It seems like the best of all possible options,” Squeaky added.

“Acorna was really mean and Twilight called her evil!” Sweetie Bot pointed out.

Sweetie Belle gulped. “F-fine. You can go after her.”

Thrackerzod grabbed her hoof. “Let’s do it together. I… I would like that.”

Squeaky, Sweetie Bot, and Sweetie Brute stood behind Thrackerzod. Sweetie Belle bit her lip, thinking about what Renee had told her – about sometimes needing to do the hard thing. About sometimes hurting ponies to do what was right. To save others. It was only a matter of time before the demons killed somepony, if they hadn’t already…

She was surprised they hadn’t…

“You’re welcome!” Scooter called to her for reasons she didn’t understand.

“All right. Let’s do this,” Sweetie Belle said, readying herself.

Squeaky nodded. “Right! So, if we’re going to do this, we need to be organized. Here’s the plan…”

Nearby, Scooter looked at Pinkie. “So the Princesses are going to deal with each other, the Sweeties have Acorna… What about… The other thing?”
“What other thing?”

“You know what other thing.”

“Oh. That. I guess we’re on that.”

“Great. No, The Editor cannot help us.”

*I can help!*

“And like that, you’ve just completely ruined your case,” Scooter said, shaking her head. “Come on, Pinkie.”

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Acorna glanced behind her – and saw the angry, brutal Celestia in hot pursuit. She saw her own version of Spike running alongside her.

Spike looked up at Acorna. “Twilight, what are you thinkin—”

Acorna tripped him. He fell face-first in the mud, but Celestia paid him no mind.

“That didn’t slow her down at all!” Acorna wailed.

Her Rainbow Dash and Applejack ran alongside her. “Sugarcube, Ah hate to break it to you, but Ah don’t think we can beat her.”

“We just need to survive long enough!” Acorna said. “They’ll come to defend me!”

“Rainbow!” Rainbow Dash said.

“Nobody cares enough for your stupid selfish self to come and save you,” Celestia’s deep voice came to Acorna’s ears, chilling her to the bone. “You are naught but a child in a game of gods. You do not deserve those wings you bear.”

Acorna’s brain switched from ‘fear’ to ‘rage’ in an instant, turning to Celestia and blasting her with the strongest insta-death laser she could muster. Celestia was knocked back – but she essentially just shrugged it off. “You cannot hold a candle to me,” Celestia said, grabbing the alicorn in her telekinesis. “It is time to die, whelp.”

Another Celestia appeared – the one native to this universe. She tore her student from the angry Celestia’s grasp. “I am afraid I cannot let you do that.”

“Ah. I was wondering if you would appear. Tell me, what brings you to accept and bestow such power to an asinine student?”

“…Not all of it was my choice. She… It does not matter. She is my student, and I will defend her.”

“Heh.” There was that *smile* again. “Even your own mentor doesn’t care much for you, *Acorna*, fighting only out of a sense of duty rather than genuine care.”

“I saw how you looked at your Twilight!” Acorna shouted. “You don’t either!”

“Gods show their affections in mysterious ways, little Acorna.” She lit her horn. “Prepare for a battle.” Something gave her pause. “…Wait, where’s your Fluttershy?”
“Why am I supposed to know where my friends are?” Acorna demanded.

That question never got answered, because Trollestia appeared with the other Twilights. “Don’t mind me, just leading a demon horde to your position!”

Acorna’s Celestia gasped. “What? They’ll destroy Ponyville!”

“Are destroying Ponyville!” Trollestia corrected.

The brutal Celestia glared at Trollestia. “Are you here to take a side?”

“Oh no, I’m just here to watch the fireworks! But I think one of these Twilights will join you.”

Charter-Twilight nodded, teleporting to the brutal Celestia’s side. “Acorna, one of us has to go to end this game. I… I am sorry, but it’s going to be you.”

Acorna roared. “NO IT IS NOT!”

“She’s right!” Trollestia’s Luna said, appearing behind her. “We can’t just kill a pony!”

“Yes you can,” Trollestia said.

“Sand?” the other Luna said, showing up in a flash of magic. “I really don’t know what we’re arguing about or what I’m doing here.”

“We’re setting up an epic fight of the gods!” Trollestia grinned. “On one side… Uh… that Celestia. And on this side. A Celestia and… my sister. Erm…”

“That didn’t help me understand this at all.”

Trollestia facehooved. “Oh this is a disaster. Okay, you? You are Sanduna. You, mentor of Acorna? You’re Cornlestia.”

Luna facehooved. “Can everyone just take a side? Like, on opposite sides of a line so we can figure out who’s who?”

On one side, the Celestia who was never renamed, and Charter Twilight. On the other, Luna, Cornlestia, and Acorna. Sanduna and Trollestia were on the sidelines.

“For the sake of balance I choose this team!” Sanduna said, walking over to Charter Twilight.

“And the teams are set!” Trollestia said. “Who will win? The saviors of life, or the bringers of death? Who has the-“

“CELESTIA!” Luna shouted. “What is wrong with you?”

“I agree with your sister,” Celestia deadpanned. “Is this all a game to you?”

“…Celestia, life is a game. A game of pawns, rooks, and little oblong go stones. Every move is precisely calculated and intentional. The whole board matters in a way I’m sure you understand.”

Celestia narrowed her eyes. “…You have chosen a side.”

“Yeeees! My own!”

“…You’re a dangerous one, ‘Trollestia’.”
“Took you long enough to realize that. You get a consolation cookie.”

They had forgotten all about the missing Fluttershy. No one put the pieces together when the eclipse started happening...

~~~

Backup plans upon backup plans…

Fluttershy knew she needed them this time. She didn’t know she needed almost all of them. The one thing she had been counting on – her presence – had almost been torn from this altar by some petty dispute of Acorna’s making.

But she was here, now, and all the preparation had been worth it. The ritual didn’t need the dancing, or the paint, or even most of the raccoons. Not when she had unicorns lace the entire clearing with magic months ago.

She could do this alone if she had to. And she did. There was already enough energy from the cult here…

She held out her hoof, her flowing purple robes rippling in the ever-increasing breeze, the golden lace reflecting sharp rays of light.

She held a single torch up high, the tip burning with purple flame. The last step.

She threw it into the hole. Magic circles around the entire clearing lit up, flashing with deep purple patterns that rotated around the hole like some kind of interlocking machine.

“Drat!” Pinkie called from behind her. “We’re too late!”

“We were always going to be too late,” Scooter said, cracking her neck. “We just have to deal with it now.”

Fluttershy turned to them and smiled. It was a soft, calm smile – but the eyes were evil. “Welcome to the resurrection of Lord Smooze, Pinkies. I had hoped that, when this day would come, my Pinkie would face off against me. She was always the one who flew in my face with her witchy ways and her portals… But I suppose I will have to make do with the two of you.” She held a hoof wide, pointing behind her at the hole. “Behold. Your savior, Lord Smooze.”

A green blob slightly larger than a pony appeared above the hole in the ground. It smirked.

Fluttershy blinked. “Jeff the Blob?”

Jeff the Blob nodded. “Yes. It is time to give you what you want.” He pulled a zipper, transforming into a purple blob. He fell into the hole. A tsunami of purple goo riddled with eyes and huge, gaping mouths erupted from the hole. Fluttershy flapped her wings, flying into the air alongside her Lord, all confusion gone from her face. The Smooze gurgled and churned, already devouring the land in the center of the clearing with its power.

Pinkie produced a gigantic vacuum cleaner and Scooter turned it on. The Smooze was sucked in, glob by glob, shunted to nowhere.

Fluttershy was having none of this. Her Lord was here, and he knew she was her high priestess. She could direct him. With a simple flick of her hoof, the Smooze circled around the two Pinkies and attacked them from behind.
“Augh!” Scooter said. “She’s not an idiot!”

“I’m just as surprised as you are!” Pinkie said, producing a trampoline and using it to get the two of them out of the Smooze’s ‘smoozing’ range.

Fluttershy laughed. It wasn’t an evil laugh, more of a slightly crazed giggle, but the lack of evil in the tone just made it disturbing. “Foolish Pinkies. Nothing can stop the Smooze.”

“Scooter, now would be a good time to read that script and discover how we defeat it.”

“But I may not be able to say anything!”

“I’d just like to have some confirmation that we don’t leave this world to be completely consumed by the Smooze.”

“Oh. Give me a minute…”

~~~

Trollestia was slightly wrong – the demon horde wasn’t exactly destroying Ponyville, because they were being held back by an unexpected duo.

Vriska and Hastur.

Both of them were sure the princesses had Acorna under control. All it had taken from Vriska was a little comment to Hastur about protecting the town and letting Thrackerzod do what she needed to do, and he was on board. Two beings that had been at each other's throats only a few minutes ago were suddenly working side by side, facing off against a demonic power surge.

The demon army Hastur had focused so much of his energy into was almost gone at this point.

“The irony of this situation is not lost on me. If this goes south I will be written up for joining you on a whim to defend lower lifeforms from collateral damage.”

“I know how you feel, Hastur. But hey, this feels good, doesn’t it?”

“In a slightly outlandish, nerve-wracking fashion, yes. This is taking too long though.”

“Don’t worry about your nut-guy, I can vouch for you.”

“Your word will mean nothing.”

“I was thinking a little more of letting my dice do the talking.”

“You are a very foolish and impulsive deity, Vriska Serket.”

“Aw, look! You remembered my name!”

The two of them barely noticed the troop of five Sweetie Belles running past them, Squeaky shouting orders like she was some kind of war general.

Which she was, but it’s not like they could know that.

Children generals.

Insanely brilliant.
Gods of the sun, moon, and magic fought each other in the high atmosphere. As the fight went on, they rose higher and higher. They were high enough to see stars now. Twix and unicorn Twilight had been left on the ground long ago, leaving only alicorns in the battle.

Celestia the Brutal got the idea to use the sun as a weapon first. Cornlestia fought back, but her hold on her celestial body was not as impressive as her counterpart’s determination. The burning ball of plasma approached their position, straining all the alicorns’ magic shields.

Luna grabbed the moon. “I will *ram* the moon *into* the sun! Don’t think I won’t!”

Charter-Twilight teleported all of them *onto* the moon. “Nobody’s destroying any moons or suns! We can’t destroy this world – we have to-“

Acorna blasted her in the face, strong enough to launch her out of the moon’s gravity well. “SCREW YOU AND YOUR STUPID SPEECHES!”

“SAND!” Sanduna yelled, taking control of the moon dust and forcing it toward Acorna in a wave of gray power. Luna stamped her feet, turning the entire moon in such a way to force the powder back to the ground and to disorient everypony on it. She forced the celestial body further and further from the blue orb of Equis itself.

Celestia was having none of this. She pulled the sun *past* the moon and placed it in front of the moon’s trajectory. Luna had to stop quickly, or else she would have doomed them all to a fiery death. As it was, they all felt pretty toasty.

Trollestia had summoned a grill with her magic and was cooking bacon. “Can I just say this is quite possibly the coolest thing I’ve ever seen?”

“Shut up!” Luna shouted, moving the moon sharply out of the sun’s heat. Celestia tried to move it back, but Cornlestia slowed the Sun enough.

“You! Sand Luna!” Celestia shouted. “Stop the moon!”

“Oh, right, sorry, I was caught up in the cool space battle.”

“I know right?” Trollestia called. “So hard to focus when the stars are dancing around you like cakes!”

Sanduna grinned. “Yes! Maybe, after this is over, we could hold celestial battle olympics?”

“Yeeeeeeees!”

“SANDUNA!” Celestia yelled. “NOW!”

Sanduna shook her head. “Right. Ahem. STOOOOP MOON!”

The moon stopped moving.

“…Darn,” Luna muttered.

“You know, is this fight supposed to be serious?” Acorna said. “Because all I see is a bunch of ‘gods’ fighting like pathetic children. It’s quite amusing, really!”

“Are you *trying* to upset everypony?” Twilight questioned.
“What? No! I’m being funny! I’m funny. Ponies love my humor!”

“Twilight, they do not,” Cornlestia said.

“But… But… But I can get them to do whatever I want!”

“A fact of life I have just had to accept,” Cornlestia said, deflecting lasers from Sanduna and Twilight.

“…You have betrayed me.”

“What?” Cornlestia shook her head. “I’m trying to save you!”

“What a nice job you’re doing! Questioning me?”

“Acorna, are you really going to do this now? Your life is in danger!”

“Pfft. I can’t die. I’m the Princess of the Night. Nopony can touch me!”

Twilight’s pupils dilated. “…Melinda.”

“What?” Celestia said, sensing the horrified tone in Twilight meant something important.

“There are beings out in the universe who, by some trick of nature, are surrounded by an aura of ‘perfection.’ It’s almost as if they cannot lose in any interaction.”

Celestia glowered. “How does one defeat these beings?”

“I don’t know! I haven’t seen many! The only one I’ve ever seen lose was when we asked her to help deal with a problem out of her context!”

Luna blinked. “Wait… Twilight, are you saying this alicorn, this… Acorna… can’t lose within her own world?”

“It sure seems likely!”

Luna looked at Acorna, torn. “…Acorna. How do you treat your friends?”

“Like royalty!”

“She tripped Spike hoping to slow me down,” Celestia deadpanned.

“But that’s Spike! He’s worthless.”

Luna took a few steps back from Acorna. “…You’re a monster, aren’t you?”

“What? No. No I’m not! I’m the Princess of the Night and everypony loves me!”

Trollestia appeared in front of Acorna and shook her head. “You know, I’d think even someone with clinical insanity would be able to see, at this point, that they’re pretty unpopular in the current company.” She turned to Luna. “Glad to have you on the same page, Luna. I was beginning to wonder if you would realize.”

“…Wait, did you not fight just to make sure I would learn… So I wouldn’t take out my… DAMN IT! Why do you always have to be so clever!?”

“I’m the Princess of the Sun!”
Something broke in Acorna. “You don’t get to say that! You don’t get to say that!” She rushed forward, ready to skewer Trollestia through the heart – but then she vanished in a puff of white light.


“I teleported her away,” Cornlestia said, sitting down. “And then I placed a teleport locker on the moon. None of us are going anywhere.”

Celestia grabbed Cornlestia by the throat. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t dash your brains out on these gray rocks and create a masterpiece with this moon as my canvas and your bodily fluids as my paint.”

Cornlestia sighed. “I don’t have one, besides that it would make you look evil to the other ponies around you.”

Celestia dropped her. She turned to the Lunas. “Start moving the moon back to Equis.”

There was silence.

“DID I STUTTER?”

The Lunas quickly started moving the moon back.

~~~

Twix, Rarity, The Bird, Flutterfree, Jack, and Dinkie tried to use the Elements of Harmony on the Smooze as it poured across the countryside toward Ponyville. That had only a minimal effect on a small area of the oncoming purple storm of goo and destruction.

“Well, let’s move that we call it a loss and retreat to safety,” Jack said. “We’re right doomed if we stay here.”

Flutterfree furrowed her brow – and a lightbulb went off in her head. “I have an idea, but I need to find the center of the Smooze. You all can run if you want – I have to go.” She flew over the top of the Smooze, careful to avoid its slow-moving blasts of goo shot at her overhead form.

Twix sighed. “Fine, let’s retreat back to our universe, or go help Vriska with those demons, or something… I sure hope something like the Smooze doesn’t exist in our world…”

The Bird folded her hooves. “Our Smooze would totally listen to us more than this one. I can see… A friendlier, greener, goopy thing.”

“Hello,” Twix said.

“Hello,” The Bird responded.

“The Bird, we have to go, Now.”

“Good move,” Jack said. “Now, let’s say we go to my universe, it’s got quite a lot of… infrastructure.”

Dinkie nodded. “Can confirm. Lots of it. Most of it owned by Jack here, broo.”

“Pinkie, piss off. Wait, why are we working with ya now?”

“I’m not your enemy anymore! And it’s Dinkie now, Jack!”
“Not for long it ain’t…”

“Aw…”

Rarity screamed. “SWEETIE!” She shouted, holding out a hoof. Everypony turned to look – seeing the five Sweetie Belles riding a boat made of black eldritch magic over the top of the Smooze.

Twix blinked, mildly surprised to see that the Smooze was unable to damage the eldritch power. “…I think they’ll be fine. We won’t be, not if we stay here. C’mon, let’s move.”

The Sweetie Belles moved across the Smooze, eyes serious.

“Do you remember the plan?” Squeaky said.

“Yep,” all four said.

“Good. The Smooze will actually help a bit. I’m sure you see how.”

“I don’t!” Sweetie Bot said, grinning.

“That’ll be fine. I trust the others to use it.”

“We need a name!” Sweetie Brute said. “What are we? The Sweet Things? The Cutables? The Demolishers?”

“The League of Sweetie Belles,” Sweetie Belle said, smiling.

“Name approved!” Sweetie Bot chirped.

“It’ll work nicely,” Squeaky added.

Thrackerzod shrugged. “Sure, I guess. It does sound somewhat childish, but organized… Appropriate.”

Squeaky nodded. “Now we just need to find Acorna…”

Acorna appeared in front of them with a flash of solar energy, looking very confused.

“…Convenient,” Sweetie Belle commented.

“GO GO GO!” Squeaky shouted, ordering Sweetie Bot and Sweetie Belle to their part of the plan.

Sweetie Belle held on to Sweetie Bot as she activated her rocket feet, launching into the air. She flung herself at Acorna. “Hey Acorna!”

Acorna grabbed Sweetie Belle with her magic. “What the-“

Sweetie Bot rammed into Acorna from the side while she was distracted, knocking her toward the Smooze below. Acorna tried to recover, but a tendril of Smooze grabbed her low-altitude body. “Augh! What is this stuff!!?”

“The Smooze,” Thrackerzod said, carefully manipulating a half dozen eldritch constructs to keep the Smooze from devouring everypony, including an altar under Acorna – though the Smooze still encased her wings and horn. She tried to fight back, but the goo of the Smooze kept her down.

“No! I am the Princess of the Night!”
“That doesn’t mean anything!” Squeaky shouted. “You are just a tyrant. This world will probably be better off without you!” She lit her horn, casting the spell Thrackerzod had taught her – the soul-binding spell, one Thrackerzod was too busy to cast herself at the moment. “Brute, now!”

Sweetie Brute took a knife out of Squeaky’s mane and leaped onto the altar where Acorna stood. Acorna screamed as she felt her soul separating from her body, but not quite ready to leave. She tried her hardest to move, but the Smooze – the Smooze was too much.

Sweetie Brute held the knife high. Sweetie Belle and Sweetie Bot looked away.

They heard a disgusting shik.

A few seconds later, Thrackerzod called to them. “It is done.”

They looked down. There was no sign of Acorna’s body, or Thrackerzod’s altar. There was just their black eldritch-construct boat and a jar with a purple spark of life in it.

“That her?” Sweetie Belle asked, jumping back to the boat.

“Yes,” Thrackerzod said. “She will be turned over to Hastur, where she will take the place of the original Twilight. The solution is unjust, but it works the best out of our limited options.”

Sweetie Bot nodded slowly. Sweetie Belle sighed. “This… This is wrong.”

“As you saw me tell a chicken, life is full of decisions where there is no right choice.”

“Right. Loss of innocence, and all that. Heh. Think we’re summoning Hastur with what we’re doing?”

“I wouldn’t remove the possibility,” Thrackerzod said. “Come on, let’s get out of here. …Somepony else can deal with this Smooze.”

Somewhere not so far away, the handful of remaining demons vanished, their contract fulfilled.

Vriska twitched. “…I was so hoping for a complete slaughter…”

Hastur just shrugged.

~~~

Flutterfree landed on top of a tree, one tall enough and large enough to withstand the force of the Smooze for now. She could see her counterpart, the cult leader, fighting Pinkie and Scooter.

Flutterfree took a breath. Here goes nothing.

“Just remember what Tree Hugger taught you…” Flutterfree said, remembering how they ‘defeated’ the Smooze of her universe – sonic vibrations.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa, whee-ee-ee-ee-ee-ee-ee…” Flutterfree announced, almost singing the zen tones for the Smooze to hear.

The effect was instant. It stopped spreading.

Fluttershy noticed this instantly, turning to Flutterfree with rage. “What are you doing?! HOW ARE YOU DOING IT!”
Flutterfree ignored her, continuing the calming chant, guiding the Smooze back into its hole with sound.

Pinkie appeared next to Flutterfree, wearing her mane like Tree Hugger. “It’s, like, relaxing sonic vibrations designed to release the Smooze’s pent up stress.”

Scooter appeared as well, wearing her mane in a similar fashion. “Like, just go with the flow Fluttershy, Lord Smooze is really enjoying this treatment.”

Fluttershy pointed a hoof at them. The Smooze generated a tremendous tendril of purple horror, shifting toward all three of them.

Pinkie deflected it with a ping-pong paddle.

“This… This… This is so absurd!” Fluttershy screamed. “This is just absurd!”

Scooter shrugged. “Well, we already had our serious confrontation back there. We had to have something stupid here!”

“And you know what?” Pinkie said. “It actually makes some sense!”

“No it doesn’t!” Fluttershy wailed.

“You had to be there.”

Soon, the Smooze pushed itself back down the hole, vanishing from the world altogether, leaving Fluttershy powerless. She descended to the ground, staring at the now-empty hole. “Not again…”

Scooter slapped a pair of hoofcuffs around her. “And now you’re under arrest for mysterious cult activity.”

Pinkie slapped another pair on her wings. “Yeah! Enjoy some time inside whatever slammer we slam you into!”

Fluttershy took in a deep breath and sighed, accepting her fate. “You win.”

“Good! HEY FLUTTERFREE! YOU CAN STOP ZENNING NOW!”

“Ee-ee-ee- oh.” Flutterfree blushed. “Sorry, guess I got a little carried away. It was pretty relaxing.”

Pinkie winked. “It’s okay. Everything’s worked out now! Time to wrap this up!”

~~~

There was a meeting held at the only version of Twilight’s castle in the four universes, the one in the fabled land of Ultra Fast. Nopony knew why it was called Ultra Fast, and the more ponies asked around the less sense it made. Four Lunas, Four Celestias, and Charter-Twilight were locked inside the throne room, discussing fervently.

“But that kind of talk is boring,” Scooter said, “so why don’t you hang out here with the rest of us who are just waiting?”

“Nice,” Pinkie said. “Would have been better if you were actually addressing somepony that wasn’t behind the wall.”

Scooter shrugged. “Eh, I do what I can.”
“But let’s see what everypony’s talking about! Be a team of *convenient eavesdroppers*. Won’t that be fun?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it would,” Scooter chuckled.

The two Pinkies slowly began to move from conversation to conversation, like *spies*.

Twix raised a surprised eyebrow at unicorn Twilight. “Wow, you have it rough. I mean, I got the impression your Celestia was a little mean, but she threatened to have you *eaten*?”

“Yeah. And I’m pretty sure she was completely serious at the time.” She took a swig of the unidentifiable alcoholic drink she had in her hoof. “My life was pretty terrible.”

“I could probably convince my Celestia to take you in.”

“I don’t want to suffer from an accusation of treachery, and frankly your Celestia seems annoying.”

“What? Noooo… She’s the best! Like, ever! She’s old, wise, thoughtful, and funny!”

“That last one there, see, that’s the problem. A leader can’t garner respect with the amount of crap she clearly pulls all the time. I don’t know how your society continues to function.”

“I believe I heard it put like this once… She’s insanely brilliant.”

“And I can’t argue with logic like that.”

“Dears,” Renee said, passing them by with her group of four Raritys. “Hrm… Twilight, are you the only one here from your universe?”

“I’m pretty sure Spike is somewhere around, but… Yeah. I’m pretty alone here.”

“Do you remember what I said?”

Twilight looked out into the distance, gaze stern. “…I do. And there’s a chance, a chance that’s larger than I would like to admit, that you were right. Maybe I’m just doing this all to myself. It would certainly make a lot of sense.”

Renee nodded. “Good. All I ask now is that you think about what else you can do. Trust me, working with others is a great way to improve your own life. Make some *real* friendships and work at them. It’s worth trying out, at least. Enjoy your… punch?”

“I have no idea what this is.”

“Huh. Enjoy it anyway.” She trotted off, catching up with the other Raritys. The Pinkies decided to follow, going with some semblance of ‘order’ to the eavesdropping. “So, ladies, I propose we have a night on the town at some point. No, Mattie, there will not be any death-defying erotic stunts.”

Mattie, the Ultra Fast Rarity who had tried to name herself Masochity, shrugged. “Hey, I’ll find some way to get my enjoyment, and you know it.”

“So long as it isn’t with weapons,” Rarity said huffing. “My PTDD is barely being held back since the thing with my sister.”

“Um, PTDD?” Charity asked.

“Post Traumatic Dress Disorder.”
“Um. That’s a thing?”

“Yes it’s a thing! Really, Charity, I expected better of you!”

“Um. Okay… I’m sorry? I was just… surprised, is all. It sounds odd. Care to describe it?”

Rarity did, in fact, decide to describe it, but the Pinkies turned their attention to another conversation – Mattie, Jack, and OJ.

“So ya finally did somethin’ worthwhile,” Jack said. “Ya could write a book about that, sell millions. Ah’ll be yer manager.”

“Nah, I don’t need to write a book,” OJ said. “I think I’m ready to go back to Canterlot High with my newfound confidence!”

“Dear, we all know you’re just going to regress in character development by the next movie,” Matty said.

“N-no I won’t! I won’t! You’ll see! I am OJ, Sunset Shimmer of Ultra Fast, and I will have confidence!”

“…Movie?” Renee asked, butting in.

“Don’t worry about it,” Mattie said.

“I’m worrying about it!”

“Awwwww yeahhhhh…”

Renee glanced around for the source of the sudden strange voice. “Where did that come from?”

“Oh. That’s just Phil. Don’t worry about him either.”

Renee pulled her hat down and shook her head. “Too much nonsense…”

You can say that again.

Scooter dragged Pinkie into a side hallway. “The Editor! What are you doing here? This isn’t even your universe!”

I wanted to see what was happening. Like you.

“Awww yeeeeah, two mysterious voices, talking together! Best bros, him and I!”

We are not friends, Phil.

“Awwwwwww nooooooo…”

I am also not a voice.

“This is dumb,” Scooter said. “You two, just… Talk amongst yourselves here. Don’t shatter anypony’s worldview, okay?”

“Awwwwww yeeeeeelah…”

I’m done with this.
The Pinkies shrugged and returned to the main group. They ran into the League of Sweetie Belles.

“Can we kill monsters more often together? That was a lot of fun!” Sweetie Brute cheered.

Squeaky shook her head. “I have a job. I can probably stay in contact with you girls, but I’m very busy and no I can’t tell you what I’m doing. Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Sweetie Belle said. “You’re still part of the League, even if you won’t always be with us. I’m sure I can get you a dimensional device even! And a computer connected to the Internet! Oh, there are so many videos I want to show you!”

“I am curious to see what an interdimensional Internet has to offer,” Thrackerzod said. “I predict both more amazing and more depraved content than even my twisted mind can imagine! Horrors from beyond the depths of the darkest dreams!”

Sweetie Bot chuckled. “The creepy levels have no bound!”

“Precisely, my robotic friend.” Something occurred to Thrackerzod, making her stop in her tracks. “Wait…”

“What’s wrong?” Sweetie Belle asked.

“I’ve finished my contract. That means my purpose for this body is done.” She looked at the ground. “I am to discard it and return to the court of Azathoth.”

“No! Don’t go!” Sweetie Bot called. “We just met you!”

“I am bound…”

“Not as much as you think you are,” Hastur said, walking up to them.

“Hastur?” Thrackerzod said, shaking her head. “How did you get here? I did not summon you.”

“I came under my own power. The nut-head has left, citing that one of his universes is going to need an ‘ass whoopin’ soon. I was no longer under observation, so I came here, and I am glad I did. Thrackerzod, there is nothing in your soul contract that demands you must discard your mortal shell immediately upon completion of your purpose. The wording can easily be taken to mean that you do not return to Azathoth’s court until you discard that mortal shell. The life of a mortal is nothing to our master. You can take a vacation of one lifetime.”

Thrackerzod’s jaw dropped. “You’re serious.”

“I am very serious.”

Thrackerzod grinned – then, realizing it was unbecoming of her to look like a child despite her current form, she coughed and regained her composure. “Ahem. Hastur, I shall take your suggestion and capitalize on it. I shall return to the court of Azathoth upon the expiration of this form in… roughly 200 local years.”

Hastur bowed. “I shall await your return, and will be curious to see what you learn from this experience as a half-mortal.”

“It will be interesting, that is for certain. Have any of us managed to be revealed and not hunted to death before?”
“Not that I am aware of.”

“Thrackerzod is the first!” Sweetie Bot cheered. “Celebrate!”

“Yeah. I am in the mood for a celebration,” Thrackerzod asserted.

The Raritys walked up to the Sweetie Belles. Sweetie Belle looked at Renee guiltily. “Renee, I—”

“You did well, Sweetie. I am proud of what you did – what all of you did – to overcome yourselves and do what needed to be done. Though in the case of Thrackerzod she went in the other direction.”

Rarity hugged Sweetie Bot. “You’re a good little robot, yes you are!”

“Um… Yeah. Good work… Squeaky,” Charity added.

Squeaky rolled her eyes, but chuckled anyway. “Thanks.”

“I hear you cut him open with a knife!” Mattie said. “That’s my girl!”

“Yay! I’m approved!” Sweetie Brute cheered.

Renee moved to Thrackerzod. “I’m still not sure what to make of you.”

“You cannot comprehend me, mortal.”

“You’ve wanted to say that to my face for a long time, haven’t you?”

“It is a phrase I have wished to utter for many years. This form was exceedingly liberating even when it was a secret. Now it has shown me something new.”

“The magic of friendship?” Renee asked, smirking.

Thrackerzod sighed, disgruntled. “Yes…”

“Oh, we should all introduce each other to our crusaders!” Sweetie Belle said.

“That’s… not a good idea in my case,” Squeaky said.

“That’s fine, we can just get everypony who wants to come!”

“Oh!” Sweetie Brute jumped up and down. “You’ll all love Scootaloo! She’s the best!”

The Pinkies moved on to another conversation, this time not even worrying about tying them together.

“Hey there, I’m Rainbow Dash!”

“I am, The Bird.”

“Ermagersh, that’s so cool! Are you, like, an actual bird?”

“No. Just The Bird.”

“But how is that possible?”

“Because, I’m just that awesome.”
“Woah, I’m awesome too! Did we just become best friends?”

“I dunno. I’ll have to think about it a bit.”

“Yes! Success!”

“Why are you called Rainbow Dash, by the way?”

“I… I… Ohmygod I don’t know why we have names! What have you done to me?”

“I just said what came to my mind.”

“Woah… You’re like some super wise guru me!”

“Yeah. I get that a lot.”

“You own a parking lot?”

“What? No. Where’d you get that idea?”

“What idea?”

“A parking lot would be pretty cool though…”

“Oh yeah! That would be awesome!”

The Pinkies had enough of that. They moved on, finding Vriska talking to… Dinkie.

“So… You’re not evil?” Vriska asked.

“Oh no, I’m definitely evil. Demonic pink entity up the whazoo!”

“…Neat.”

“I know, right? Jack has me working with the Apples to scam the world out of its life! Or something. I don’t really know, broo.”

“Your world is lucky you’re so scatterbrained.”

“Yeah. They are.”

“Do you even know what I just said?”

“No way broo, wasn’t listening!”

“Figures.”

“By the way, no hard feelings about me tying you up, right?”

“Hey, I destroyed almost your entire demon army, I think we’re even.”

“Great!”

Finally, the doors to the main meeting hall opened. Four Celestias, Four Lunas, and Charter-Twilight stepped out. “Right,” Twilight said. “We didn’t really make much in the way of decisions. But we have all agreed not to go to war, and to remain in contact with each other. That’s… That’s about it really.” She glanced uncomfortably at the Ultra Fast Celestia. “Otherwise, I think we may have
“Yeeeees!” Trollestia trilled. “My universe has a connection to another universe outside this magical donut our four worlds are in! We are going to use it to break this pattern and send these explorer ponies home! And get our ponies back!”

“Hold up!” Trollestia’s Luna called. “They all need to know about the 4th dimensional being that guards that world! It doesn’t like ponies coming in!”

“We can take him,” Trollestia asserted. “Or we can explain we’re just doing him a service. He’s all about order isn’t he? Well we’re restoring order.”

Twilight nodded. “Anyway, Flutterfree, Renee, Pinkie, Sweetie Belle, we’re going to try to get home. Vriska, OJ, Sweetie Bot, Bot’s Rarity, and Thrackerzod, I invite you to come with us.”

OJ shook her head. “I think I’m staying. Sorry.”

“It’s your decision.”

Vriska landed next to Twilight. “Of course I’m coming. It’s time for me to get out of here.”

Sweetie Bot looked at Rarity. Rarity shrugged. “I guess we can get ourselves some kind of home with them. I will need to rename myself though…”

Twilight looked at Thrackerzod. Thrackerzod nodded. “I will come. Though I wonder what I will do?”

“Thackerzod, we have encountered your kind of magic rarely, and it is very poorly understood. I’m offering you a job with our alliance of universes, as the expert on the Eldritch. I understand this may be a step down from your servitude to… whoever it is you serve, but I think you’ll find it rewarding.”

Thrackerzod nodded. “I will not show you or any alicorn any respect, and I get full rein to practice dark magic however I wish.”

“So long as you aren’t using sapient sacrifices.”

“Deal. I’m in.”

Sweetie Belle hugged her. “We’ll get to see a lot of each other!”

Trollestia coughed. “Let’s gooo people! I want to bust the portal open already!”

Twilight rolled her eyes. “Right. We will go now – but we will be back, back to say hello to all the new friends we’ve made. I wish all of you luck in your lives, and hope we will be stronger together. Trollestia, take us away.”

“Bwa bwa bwaaaaaa!” Trollestia said, for dramatic effect. She teleported them all to her universe, then into the Everfree Forest where the mirror pool was. She lit her horn, unleashing a beam of sunlight into the water, destroying the obstacle on the other side.

Twilight pulled out her dimensional device. “I’ve got a reading of the other side. I can get us there without going through the Mirror’s Magic.” She looked at everypony there – herself, Renee, Flutterfree, Pinkie, Sweetie Belle, Sweetie Bot, Thrackerzod, Rarity, Vriska, Trollestia, and Luna. “Wait, Luna, why are you here?”
“In case we need to deal with the 4th dimensional being,” Luna said. “Which I guarantee, he will. From the letter I got from this universe’s Luna, he was ticked off last time the portal was used.”

Twilight shrugged. “Here we go then…” She activated the portal, bringing them to another universe with another mirror pool. Sitting there was a version of Rarity and Twilight Sparkle, though the Twilight was a unicorn. She stared in awe at Charter-Twilight’s wings.

“Oh dear,” the Rarity said, looking worriedly at her Twilight. “This… Complicates things.”

“Sorry,” Charter-Twilight said. “Just passing through.” The rest of the ponies filed out behind her. “I can come back and explain later, but we’re trying to get home to our universe, so…”

“Hey!” Sweetie Bot called to Rarity. “I bet you have a Sweetie Belle! Think she can join the League of Sweetie Belles?”

Thrackerzod raised an eyebrow. “There is no way she has any idea what that is.”

“I can guess,” the native Rarity said. “I’m sorry, my daughter is too young for the type of adventures you all clearly go on.”

Renee sputtered. “DAUGHTER!?"

“…Are they not supposed to be?”

“Every last one is a sister of a Rarity!” Renee said. “I… I cannot process…”

Trollestia snickered. “You should have seen Charity’s report on when she was over here.”

“Wait, that was you?” the native Twilight said. “You… You… That day fucking blew! How was I supposed to know that Rainbow Dash had been replaced!? I was making my move and-“

Luna sighed. “We apologize for any inconvenience we may have caused. …Hasn’t your Luna informed you about our reasonings?”

“…No. Why would she?”

“Because I’ve been writing to her?”

The native unicorns exchanged glances. “News to us.”

Luna rolled her eyes. “Riiight. Anyway, we just need to test the dimensional framework, and then we’ll be on our way.”

“I should send The Bird over here more often,” Trollestia mused.

“Don’t. You. Dare.” the native Twilight grunted. “I will fucking burn you.”

“Oh, excuse me, didn’t you try to dethrone your Celestia once? How well did that go? Oh right, you got banished to Ponyville for eternity. Oooo – burn!”

Charter-Twilight facehooved. “We don’t have time for this.” She tried connecting to Equis Vitis – nothing.

Vriska grabbed the dimensional device and began to plug in coordinates. “Give me that…”

And that was when the 4th dimensional being showed up.
Pinkie blinked, staring at the strange being with a wrinkled brown head. “Huh. It really does look like a walnut.”

The native Twilight blinked. “I think it looks more like a stallio-“

“EEENOPE! Not going there!” Pinkie demanded.

“What did I tell you?!” the being shouted. “I told you that if you went through this thing and upset the balance again, asses would be whooped!”

“Technically you told the other Luna that. She has no idea we’re here,” Luna said.

“I’m still gonna whoop some asses! Prepare them, for you have upset the balance in the universe!”

Charter-Twilight cleared her throat. “I am Charter-Twilight, a prominent member of an alliance of several different universes. We are simply trying to find our way home, and these two royal sisters were kind enough to show us possible passage through this universe. They have no intention of further interfering beyond this visit, if that is what you wish.”

Trollestia coughed. “Oh I dunno, that idea with The Bi-“

“No intention,” Charter-Twilight insisted, talking over Trollestia. She wasn’t looking at the princess, so she had no idea what she’d been saying, but Twilight knew well enough at this point whatever it was couldn’t have been good. “We will go home and never bother this universe again.”

“Dimensional travelers, huh? You listen to me little alicorn, you think you can mess with these powers you don’t understand? There are forces that are unbalanced by your mere existence in other planes. One of these days you’ll find yourself in a place and then BAM, you’ll screw it up, KA-POW! No, you don’t get to come back here at all, and if I can I think I’ll stop you from traveling at all-“

“You do not have jurisdiction over all those worlds!” Thrackerzod blurted. “You cannot act over them, they formed outside of your territory, and acting outside of your space just makes things worse. You know the instability of this universe is because of your universe’s proximity, do you not?!”

“Thrackerzod. I’ve heard a lot about you. I-“

“Shut your nutty mouth! You have jurisdiction over this world. We will promise never to return here. But you can’t have any sway over the others.”

The 4th dimensional being pointed at Trollestia and Luna. “I have some say with them. If you really want to cut this deal, you must listen to my decree. You cannot interfere with their war. None of you.”


“Good. Now go home before I decide that assess need to be whooped anyway!” He vanished into time itself.

Thrackerzod blinked. “Hastur wasn’t kidding, that guy is unbearable.”

Charter-Twilight turned to Trollestia and Luna. “I hope you don’t mind, but we can’t help you now. I’d… Rather not upset whatever organization he’s apart of.”

“We understand,” Luna said. “It is our burden, and our burden alone.”
“Got it!” Vriska said, pointing the dimensional device and opening a portal directly to the nexus universe that Corona and Sparky were in. “Woohoo! Made it back!”

Charter-Twilight waved to the native Twilight and Rarity. “Bye. I don’t think we’ll see each other again.” They vanished inside the portal.

The native Rarity looked at Twilight. “…You’d do best to forget the existence of those wings.”

“…Rarity, do you ever get the feeling we are but tiny ants in a tree on a planet about to crash into the sun?”

“…Sometimes?”

“Fuck, now I’m going to be existential all day.”

“It happens to the best of us.”

Meanwhile, in the nexus universe, Vriska threw her dice at the exposed center. The glowing white light that started this whole mess vanished as a giant fish ate it. She let out a breath. “Good, there we go, the connections are reset.”

“…What?” Renee asked.

“We were trapped in those four universes because this nexus decided to rearrange the connections between them for some reason. Now we should be able to easily travel to them directly. Or, well, you will. I’ll just keep traveling around by luck.”

Twilight smiled. “Thanks, Vriska. It was nice to see you again.”

“Nice to see you too, Charter. But I must go – I’ve got some business to take care of. I’ve heard rumors that an old friend of mine, Aradia, has been seen around here. Haven’t seen her for quite a few years. I’m going to track her down.” She vanished into another universe.

Twilight blinked. “…Well that was a fast goodbye.”

“The irony is painful,” Pinkie muttered.

“Huh?”

“You’ll understand by the finale.”

“…What?”

Corona raised a hoof. “Um, does anyone want to explain to me what happened?”

Trollestia grinned. “Well, once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria, there were two regal sisters. One was amazing and raised the sun in all her amazing glory. The other… kinda sucked.”

Luna gasped. “Celestia!”

Chuckles rippled through the group of ponies.

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Twilight returned to her castle to find chaos. Nova grabbed her by the neck and screamed. “HELP ME!!!”
Twilight saw four ponies within the castle. One was clearly the alicorn she had replaced less than a day ago, a look of panic on her face. There was a Rarity who was busy looking at herself in the mirror with a dissatisfied expression, and a Fluttershy who seemed to be scared of everything. Then there was a Pinkie Pie with a cauldron chanting something about stitches in time and undoing what was wrong.

“ATTENTION PONIES!” Twilight called, getting the four’s attention instantly. “Who wants to go home?”

“Oh! Yes please!” the Pinkie said. “I didn’t want to deal with nine portals again! Call that timing!”

“Oh thank you thank you!” the Fluttershy called, laying herself at Twilight’s hooves. “I didn’t know how much longer I could handle this, man!”

“I dunno,” the Rarity said. “Go back? Really, what’s there for me? I… Well I guess there’s the girls, but that’s a mixed blessing… Though I do suppose I’ll actually be allowed to see some stallions rather than be locked up in this clambake of a castle…”

Thrackerzod poked her head into the castle. “You are going back and that’s final.”

“Sweetie Belle-“

“I am Thrackerzod, a being from beyond the dark from whence nightmares fear to tread and you will address me as such!”

“Dear, stop being so sill-“

Thrackerzod levitated her Rarity into the air and glared. “Rarity…”

“Right, Thrackerzod! Whatever you say, Thrackerzod!”

“Good.”

Twilight turned to her other Twilight. “You?”

“Oh, I guess I could stay here and try to find myself… But, you know, I do have friends back in my home, even if they are a bunch of idiots. And Applejack.”

“I don’t envy you.”

“Yeah. I’m just glad this special is over.”

“…Uh… Okay?”

“Right! So, take us home!”

Twilight opened a portal for her counterpart. She smiled, nodded, and returned home.

The Pinkie lined up next. “I think I’ll write a song about this!”

“You’ll have plenty to write about when you return home. ...Your Fluttershy is imprisoned and your Twilight is no more.”

Pinkie sighed. “…It’s not like they treated me very well to begin with… I’ll just try to find some friends.”
“I’m available, and so are the ponies here.”

“Thank you! I’m sure we’ll meet again!” She bounced through the next portal Twilight made.

Thrackerzod pointed at her ‘sister’. “Get her home.”

Rarity huffed. “I never-”


“Oh, fine. But you should at least try to speak with digni-”

Thrackerzod created the portal herself and threw Rarity into it. “Done. So done.”

Lastly, Nova pushed Fluttershy toward Twilight, “Now, Fluttershy, you don’t need your hoof held so tightly anymore. You can go back home and I won’t have to keep careful watch over you!”

Fluttershy gulped. “Man, portals are scary though! Very scary! Totally not my thing!”

“Your friends miss you,” Twilight said, opening a portal to her world. “They want you back.”

“I dunno man, that looks scary and shiny…”

Scooter popped out of the portal and dragged Fluttershy through, “Thanks Charter-Twilight!”

“AUGH!” Fluttershy said. “Pinkie, don’t do that! I… I… I could have been disintegrated!”

“No, you couldn’t have,” Scooter waved. “Bye!”

With the last portal closing, Twilight was now standing alone with Nova and Thrackerzod.

Nova let out a breath. “None of them knew how to listen. All crazy. Every last one. Thank you, I couldn’t take much more.” She looked at Thrackerzod. “This one feels like Majora.”

“She’s our new expert,” Twilight said. “Treat her well.”

“I don’t trust how she feels.”

“Nova, she’s proven herself. And she’s probably better than Alushy.”

“That is not a high bar to cross.”

“I am standing right here,” Thrackerzod muttered.

Twilight laughed. “Right, sorry.” She yawned. “Anyway, I think I’m going to turn in. See you girls much later, I’m sure my paperwork will have piled up from me being away for so long.” She walked away. She knew they were probably saying things to her, but one of the perks of being deaf was that she didn’t have to respond after she no longer wanted to. She went up to her room, laid down into her bed, and sighed.

She felt something lumpy under her wing.

She removed a small golden key. Right, she’d taken this during the confrontation from across the portal… It had a weird energy around it, but it hadn’t actually been important. She wondered why she held on to it.

She shrugged – she had no idea. She just levitated it into one of her nearby drawers and stuffed it in,
closing it. She’d deal with it in the morning.

By the time morning came, she forgot about it.
Rainbow Dash of Equis Vitis flew in formation with the rest of the Wonderbolts. She kept herself to the left of the lead, Spitfire, her blue face determined. The five pegasi rushed the form of a dark female centaur. With her purple magic, the centaur knocked the pegasi to the ground. She tried to absorb their power, but Spitfire was too quick – she leaped up, delivering an uppercut to the purple opponent’s jaw. Rainbow Dash followed this up with a burst of rainbow color to the side of the centaur’s head, forcing her to the ground.

The centaur tried to stand up, but Spitfire put a hoof on her head between the horns. “Your reign of terror in this universe is over, Twirek. You’re going to Tartarus for this, as soon as we figure out which version has an opening.”

Twirek tensed, trying to think of a way out - but she eventually sagged, admitting defeat.

The crowd started cheering. The Wonderbolts turned to the people in the stands and bowed. ‘Twirek’ revealed herself to be a reformed changeling, bowing along with them.

“And that’s how we defeated Twirek!” Spitfire called out. “One of the harder missions the Princess sent us on, but also one of the most rewarding.”

“It was, to put it bluntly, awesome,” Rainbow Dash emphasized.

Spitfire nodded. “Show’s over folks! Hope you enjoyed!” The five pegasi spread their wings and flew into the air, quickly returning to the hotel they were staying in. The changeling didn’t go with them – he stayed around on the ground to talk to the crowd.

“Great show everypony,” Spitfire said. “I almost believed we were back in the middle of it myself!”

“I didn’t feel anywhere near as stressed out, though,” Soarin said, “it felt kinda cool actually!”

“That’s just because we cut out the part where you cowered behind a rock,” Fleetfoot muttered.

“Hey, don’t go giving Soarin a hard time,” Rainbow Dash said. “He came through for us in the end.”

“Fine.”

As they walked through the hotel lobby, they were flagged down by three Pinkie Pies.

“Heeeeey Wonderbolts!”

Spitfire sighed. “Look, Pinkies, we don’t need any of your antics right now.”

“Just hear us out!” the frontmost Pinkie said, adjusting her glasses and pulling a clipboard out of nowhere. “I have a business proposition for you!”

“Seriously?”

“The three of us work for the Pinkie Emporium – the best amusement park in the entire multiverse! Run by Pinkies, for everyone! We’re located in the Ponyville and were wondering if we could book an appearance? It’d be good for everypony involved! Think of it, the best fliers from the Vitis world,
combined with the attractions built by dozens of perfect party ponies plotting together! Doesn’t that sound amazing!?”

Spitfire rolled her eyes. “While it does, you still have to go through the regular scheduling procedure just like everypony else.”

Rainbow Dash nodded. “Yeah, we’re pretty popular.”

“Oh, we’ll be willing to wait, we just wanted to make sure you understood who was asking.”

One of the other Pinkie’s produced a pie. “There will be an entire stand devoted to pie.”

Soarin’s mouth watered. He was given the pie without another word.

“...Sweet,” Rainbow Dash said. “We’ll be there eventually, unless for some reason your park explodes.”

The third Pinkie blinked. “Did she jinx it?”

“I dunno, I’m not the aware one!” the second said.

“Girls,” the first said. “We’re fine, the Pinkie Emporium’s destiny has not changed.”

“What if the rules subversion-“ the third began.

“Ash-sh-sh-sh! Inkie! Blinkie! Trust me, I’ve got the knowledge up here in my noodle brain.”

“But Clyde…”

“No buts.” Clyde turned back to the Wonderbolts. “Thank you for your time. Looking forward to seeing you there!” She pulled a strange green pipe out of her hair and threw it into the floor. The three Pinkies vanished, and then the pipe sank into nothing.

Fleetfoot shook her head. “Rainbow Dash, why do your friends have to be the ones that show up the most often? Why don’t we ever get to meet, I dunno, another Fleetfoot?”

“We did,” Spitfire said. “She ate memories.”

“...Oh. But that was only once-“

“Twice.”

“-and we’ve met around a dozen Rainbow Dashes and see troops of her friends moving all around!”

“Elements of Harmony, probably,” Rainbow Dash said. “We just get around more. Sorry Fleetfoot.”

“Hmph.”

The five of them walked to their rooms. Spitfire turned around before anypony could actually get to their rooms. “Soarin, Dash, in my room for a minute. Have to talk to you about something.”

Spitfire trotted into her room, gesturing for Soarin to close the door behind him. She narrowed her eyes. “So, I’m just going to come right out with it. I’m getting a little old for this Wonderbolt thing. I’ve received an offer to work as a higher officer for the Hub Forces – mostly a desk job, but definitely worth my time. So I’m retiring as your commander.”
Rainbow Dash gasped. “But… But Spitfire! You’ve been the commander as long as I can remember!”

“That gives you some idea how long I’ve been at this, doesn’t it?”

“…Yeah.”

“Plus, I’ll personally find actual army work more satisfying compared to what we do lately. Even if I think that the Wonderbolts will become a force to be reckoned with in the coming years, that’ll be too late for me. I’m passing the baton to somepony who’ll be better suited for it.”

Soarin nodded. “I see.”

“Soarin, I have to ask you first, seeing as you’ve been my second for most of my time here. But I think you and I both know that you’re not that much younger than I am.”

Soarin smiled. “Psh, I don’t need to lead anyway.”

“Good, this makes this move a lot less questionable. Rainbow Dash!”

Rainbow Dash was staring blankly at Spitfire because she had reasoned out what the Wonderbolt was going to suggest.

“How would you like to lead the Wonderbolts into this new age?”

*Ohmygoshohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh.* “Are you kidding? I would gladly take the job if you aren’t going to do it, ma’am.” *OhmygoshohmygoshOHMYGOSH.*

“Knew I could count on you, Dash. You take these ponies and you treat them well, got it? They won’t be stunt ponies at all in a few years, there’s too much out there that needs great fliers. You need to be the one to get them ready for that.”

Rainbow Dash nodded. “I will make sure they’re ready for the end of the world if I have to!”

“Good to hear that. Now, Clipper, Crash? I need some sleep. Everypony to bed.”


“You aren’t in charge yet, Crash, don’t push your luck,” Spitfire cautioned.

“Eheheh… Right.” Rainbow Dash quickly backed out of the room. When the door was closed, she grabbed Soarin. “I never, in my wildest dreams, thought this day would come Soarin! I… I… I’ve won life itself.”

Soarin chuckled. “Just make sure I don’t get left in the dust, okay?”

“You kidding? You’ll be my second as well. I’m going to need somepony to help me through the early years. I hope you’ll take that job.”

“Definitely.”

“Thought so. No-“ Rainbow Dash’s sentence was interrupted when her cutie mark started glowing.

“Huh. That hasn’t happened in a while.”

“Looks like a higher duty calls,” Soarin said. “Try to be back for the show next week.”
“You can bet on it!” She spread her wings and flew out of the hotel’s front doors.

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Applejack was suddenly struck by how much Ponyville had changed. She was just doing what she did every week – walking back from the market – but for some reason today it hit her. While the old buildings were still there for the most part, surrounding them were high rising structures composed of pearly white substances and magical circuitry, giving the town an appearance of Canterlot almost. The main difference was that it was more advanced, more varied.

Applejack knew Ponyville could hardly be called a village anymore – it was a crescent-shaped city that crept around the edge of the Everfree Forest. She even got lost sometimes, despite her good sense of direction. Hardly a day passed where she didn’t see some version of herself in town, not counting the ‘Galajack’ that currently worked at Sweet Apple Acres since her universe’s one had burnt down. However, even with all this obvious change, it still didn’t hit her until today.

The attitude of Ponyville had changed. It wasn’t the friendliness – everypony was still friendly, happy, and welcoming. Ponyville was, and probably always would be, famous for this aspect. No… It was that they were more adventurous. Before, ponies were rather set in their ways – they liked their lives, and they didn’t care to look beyond. Now? Now everypony was eager to try new things, to look at things from another perspective. She saw several ponies looking at data pads and others reading news from newspapers reporting events from many different universes. She saw large screens with ponies debating how to deal with many multiversal events, making Applejack more informed on the state of the larger cosmos than she would have ever been on her own. Books on the customs of other universes were extremely popular as well. Ponyville had dropped the mentality of a town that didn’t care where it ended up to a place that sought out new and interesting ways of thinking.

It was a bit much for Applejack to take in, but she managed.

She glanced at Reverend Glimmer’s church – perhaps one of the better examples of the mentality change. The religious places were doing surprisingly well, filled with ponies curious about the meaning of everything. Applejack herself had little patience for it, since she mostly cared about what was in the tangible here and now, but even she had to admit the existence of such places was feeding into what ponies wanted right now.

She wondered if it would stay that way. Ponies might settle down in their ideas eventually and stop flocking just to see what was going on.

Further thought was interrupted when she recognized a pony entering the church for a service.

“Flutterfree!”

Flutterfree flared her wings. “Appleja- Oh no! I’m not Flutterfree! I’m… Pearcilla. Sorry.”

Applejack raised an eyebrow. “Flutterfree, Ah know it’s you. What’re you doing here?”

Flutterfree bit her lip. “Okay, so I may be attending Rev’s services in secret, okay? Don’t tell the girls. Especially don’t tell Nova. She hates Rev.”

“…Why?”

“Did you know that Nova used to be a Star servant? Very devout. She moved past that, and I think she views Rev as a version of herself she never wants to see again.”
Applejack frowned. “Ah won’t tell, but you know Ah’m horrid at lyin’, and Ah still think you should tell them you’re doin’ somethin’ like… this. Why are you don’ it anyway?”

“Oh! I just… I like what Rev says, what she teaches. I… Well, I actually don’t know that much yet, but I know we’ve all felt like we’ve done things wrong that we can never, ever make up. She talks about forgiveness and grace, and why we shouldn’t need to feel too ashamed or trapped by what we’ve done. There’s also a push for everypony to be kind, even to people who are mean…”

“Don’t we already do that sort of thing normally?”

“I… Guess so? I don’t know, really. Maybe it’s because it lines up so much with what I already believe that I like it.”

“Do you believe Rev?”

Flutterfree frowned. “I’m not sure yet. But I wouldn’t be believing her, I’d be believing her Word. She tries to make it as obvious as she can that she’s not supposed to be the master of us, just a friend to guide.”

“Glad to hear that somepony got the memo,” Rev said, walking past toward her church. “You’d be surprised how many ponies want to worship me as some kind of angel.” She turned to Applejack. “Applejack! Will you be joining us today?”

“Er, no.”

“My doors are always open. Even if they seem closed, just knock and the door will be opened.”

Flutterfree smirked slightly, but said nothing.

“Look, Ah don’t really have time for this sort of thing, Rev. Ah’m a bit busy with the farm,” Applejack said.

“All work and no play makes Jack a dull pony.”

Applejack raised her eyebrow. “Is that another thing from that book of yours?”

“Eh… No. It’s just a saying. If you want something from that book… what about ‘It is useless for you to work so hard from early morning until late at night, anxiously working for food to eat; for God gives rest to his loved ones.’ Admittedly, it doesn’t apply exactly, but you can see the point that it’s important not to overwork yourself.”

“Ah wouldn’t exactly consider sittin’ in on one of your ‘sermons’ restin’.”

“Definitely not,” Rev admitted. “But the invitation is still there.”

Applejack nodded. “Mhm. Ah want you to know, if Ah get any sense that you’re brainwashing Flutterfree here, Ah’m going to take action.”

“As you should, if such a thing were taking place.”

Applejack nodded. “Ah’m watchin’ you.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way. Now, excuse me, I do have a sermon to teach. Coming, Flutterfree?”

“What’s it on this time?”
“What exactly is meant by holy, and how it’s different from ‘divine’ magics we see around the multiverse.”

The two trotted into the church. Applejack stood still for a few minutes, contemplating what this would mean. Flutterfree was probably right, Nova wouldn’t be happy about Flutterfree’s curiosity. Applejack had a feeling she was going to end up between a rock and a hard place eventually… Already she was going to have a hard enough time not spilling the beans when she went out with Rainbow and Scootaloo for drinks next Friday.

As she trotted back to Sweet Apple Acres, Applejack found herself thinking about Scootaloo. With Sweetie Belle out exploring the multiverse with her League and Applebloom consistently busy on the farm, the orange pegasus was the only one of the Cutie Mark Crusaders truly devoted to her job of helping ponies find their destiny. For whatever reason this had translated to her hanging out with Rainbow Dash and Applejack more often, though Applejack couldn’t pin down why this had happened, or why Applebloom was never invited…

Applejack was startled out of her thoughts by Galajack, a mirror version of herself aside from the yellow coat. “AJ, got all the apples in the northwestmost field sorted by color and indexed by quality. This should increase profits by a 0.3 percent margin if we can get them out on the stands by the end of tomorrow.”

“That’s… great, Gala. Ah’m not exactly prepared for math right now.”

“Oh, Ah already showed it to Applebloom, we just need your approval to move the schedule ahead since Granny’s taking a legendary nap right now.”

“Right, right… If Applebloom says it’s fine Ah trust her. Go ahead and do your thing, so long as it doesn’t interfere with the work Ah’ve got to do today.”

“Trust me, it won’t.”

“Good. With Granny sleepin’ more and more each day and Big Mac otherwise occupied, we can’t afford to mess up the farm’s organization right now.”

“Ah won’t let you down!” Galajack ran off, a smile on her face. Applejack rolled her eyes – at times Galajack seemed like a twin sister, and others an alien. It was a weird sensation.

Applejack trotted into the house to find Big Mac and Applebloom. Big Mac she expected to be in here, but Applebloom was supposed to be working. “A-hem!”

Applebloom whirled around, her bow flapping in the air. “Ah’m sorry Applejack, Ah just wanted to look at him again! For a bit?”

Big Mac smirked with pride. “Eeyep.”

Applejack rolled her eyes, walking up to the crib the two were leaning over. Inside was a newborn foal with the red coat and green eyes of Big Mac. “Ah know little Junior here is a welcome addition to the family, and Ah know you’re beyond excited to be an aunt, Applebloom, but we do have work to do. Harvest season is upon us.”

Big Mac nudged her. “Applejack, let Applebloom have a moment. She’s been workin’ hard today.”

Applejack let out a soft chuckle. “Yeah… Your kid’s pretty cute. But we can’t let him steal away all our workers with adorable charm.”
Big Mac rolled his eyes. “When you have a kid, you’ll understand.”

“You’ve only had him for a week!”

“And you’ll understand the moment you have one.”

“Have you talked to your wife about this? Ah’m pretty sure mares and stallions have different instincts about this sort of thing. Ah notice she ain’t here, doting over the little thing.”

“She’s restin’. And Ah know she feels the same way Ah do.”

“You probably won’t have to wait long, Applejack,” Applebloom said. “Pretty sure Barley’s thinkin’ of proposin’.”

“He’s been thinkin’ of proposing for well over two months,” Applejack said with a soft smile. “Ah kinda wish he’d just get on with it, but no, he’s waitin’ for the ‘right moment’. Psh. But, come to think of it, at least he’s out workin’ instead of gawkin’ over the baby.”

“Pretty sure you’ve been around Lil’ Fuji long enough to qualify as ‘gawkin’”,” Applebloom commented.

Applejack stopped short. “Good point. Applebloom, with me, we’re taking on the pigs. Unless Gala had somethin’ for you.”

“Nah, she’s got it. Lemme grab the pig potions…”

“What’s the brew this time?”

“Sweet apple surprise. It’ll make them fall asleep while thinking they’re in a party.”

“Why can’t you just make a ‘pigs do what Applejack says’ potion?”

“Cause that’s borin’, duh.”

Applejack rolled her eyes, ready to set out – but her cutie mark started glowin’. “Well, this is certainly a bad time, but Ah can’t exactly refuse the call.”

“Ah can take care of the pigs,” Applebloom said. “And if all else fails Ah can force Big Mac to work with a brew.”

Big Mac poked his head around the corner. “You can’t actually do that, can you?”

Applebloom smirked evilly. “You do not know the true extent of my power.”

“Eeyep.”

“Ah think Ah’ll just let you worry about if I can or can’t. Hopefully you never have to find out at all!”

“…Great.”

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The map displayed Applejack and Rainbow Dash’s cutie marks on the northern hemisphere of a planet.
“So, sugarcube, which planet is that?” Applejack asked Twilight.

Twilight stared at the map, unable to see Applejack’s comment due to her rapt attention.

Rainbow Dash tapped her on the shoulder. “Equis to Twilight.”

“Huh? Oh. Uh, did you ask something?”

“Ah asked where that was,” Applejack reiterated.

“Right. That’s why I was staring – that’s… Well, that’s the remaining Binary world, specifically Port S-1. A world with a… lot of problems.”

“The one Majora tried to destroy but only corrupted?” Applejack asked.

“Yep. It’s not a nice place.”

“So…” Rainbow Dash said. “You’re saying it’ll be dangerous.”

“Definitely. Even the ports are in danger of attack by the deadly monsters. I’m sure you two can handle yourselves, but…” she bit her lip. Then she shook her head. “Sorry, we need to keep moving. The Feldspar’s here right now, it can get you there in a couple minutes. I’ve also got an operative there who can meet with you, an expert on the evils of that world. I wish you two luck, solving whatever friendship problem this place has.”

“Ya sure we need your operative?” Applejack asked.

“Applejack, I don’t mean any offense, but you almost never leave Equis Vitis. This is a world more alien than most. I think you do need a guide. They’re already there so it shouldn’t be a problem.”

Rainbow Dash shrugged. “They better not slow us down!”

“They won’t.” Twilight cast a spell, sending a message to Princess Luna. “You two should be teleported shortly.”

‘Shortly’ turned out to mean ‘in less than a second’, since they were suddenly in Luna’s private room on the Feldspar. The room was currently dimmed to evening lighting, and the Princess of the Night herself was madly pressing buttons on a controller, blowing up ponies and people in a video game clearly based on the Red and Blu war of Esefem.

“The Feldspar should be transiting to the Binary would in a few minutes,” Luna said, not glancing at them. “I would offer you a controller, but we wouldn’t even have time for one round before we arrived.”

“You playing against someone important?” Rainbow Dash asked.

“I’m connected to the E-sports server in Canterlot. This is only the initial round, so there’s nothing to really worry about. Hopefully the FTL connection maintains…”

Rainbow Dash sat down, analyzing the events happening on the screen. “Wow, you’re good at this Luna. How do you find enough time to practice?”

“Despite my role as commander of this ship, I actually have less to do than you think. Deep space explorations are a lot of waiting in most universes, and I fill my free time with these games.”

“Huh. Yeah, can’t do that in the Wonderbolts. If I could though, I’d totally kick your flank.”
“Big words for such a little pegasus.”

Applejack rolled her eyes. She never really understood the whole ‘video game’ craze that had popped up in the last few years. It all seemed horribly violent to her. She suspected the images she was seeing onscreen were desensitizing her to the pain and suffering the real people in Esefem were experiencing.

The round was completed quickly. Luna threw her controller in the air and cheered. “Victory!”

“Great going, Luna!” Rainbow Dash whooped alongside her.

Luna checked her phone to look at the listings. “Oooh, looks like I’m up against Trixie and Discord’s little group next. The amateurs are going down.”

Something beeped. “Oh, we’re here,” Luna said. “You’ll be teleported to the surface. It was nice seeing you two out here. You should try it more often.”

“Don’t plan on it,” Applejack said.

Rainbow Dash shrugged. “Depends on where the Wonderbolts go.”

Luna waved to them, and then they were elsewhere – specifically, Port S-1, which was a town situated under a large, floating, metallic disc. The town itself was composed of largely Binary constructions, meaning they were egg-shaped things riddled with one-way windows that made the exteriors of the structures appear uninterrupted. The town was surrounded by a large red forcefield, through which the corrupted wastes of the world could be seen.

The land beyond was completely purple and largely dead. Aside from the occasional mutated plant, the earth was bare. The only green to be seen was within the walls of the force field, carefully tended by earth ponies for food production. Binaries, ponies, humans, and no small number of demons walked around the streets of the town, almost all of which looked like they were barely holding onto life. Most of them had scars of some kind, especially the Binaries. A missing arm or leg was not an uncommon sight.

Applejack and Rainbow Dash materialized underneath a large floating disc, the technological center of the town, and the source of all its power and connection to the outside worlds.

“Y’know, usually we have to look for a friendship problem…” Applejack said. “Ah think here we’re gonna have a hard time figurin’ out which one we need to solve.”

Rainbow Dash gulped. “Yeah… Do we talk to those Binaries? Those ponies? Those demons?”

“Why not me?” Siron said, approaching them.

“Oh, hey Siron,” Rainbow Dash said. “Been a while, huh?”

“Indeed it has. A message told me you are here on Tree business.”


Siron folded two of his hands together and twirled his staff around with a third. “From what I can see, this entire town is on the brink. Tensions are high and most of the people here don’t know how to deal with each other like warriors. But, apparently, I am to let Twilight’s little friend explain ‘better’ what’s going on here. A real demon.”
“…Whaddoyamean, real?” Rainbow Dash asked.

“Clearly, you have not been around Sweetie Belle enough,” Thrackerzod said, stepping out from behind Siron. “I am Thrackerzod, from a plane beyond your mortal comprehension. I am the ‘little expert’ on all things eldritch.”

“…Huh,” Applejack said. “Ah was expectin’ somethin’ else, but now that Ah’ve seen you, Ah have no idea what I was expecting.”

“A common sentiment. I find myself on a similar train of thought. Why would the nigh-omnipotent Tree deem you necessary for this place? You two rarely leave Equis Vitis! This is about as far of a frontier as you can get besides the Static. You’re ponies out of your element, and this place will remove your faces for it.”

“…You’re not joking, are you?” Rainbow Dash asked.

“No, I am not. There are creatures out there that prowl the wastelands that exclusively eat faces.”

Applejack sat down. “Maybe you should explain how all this works to us.”

Thrackerzod glanced through the red forcefield at the edge of town, eyes narrow. “We have an entire planet here corrupted with unhinged eldritch energy. Eldritch energy is different from the arcane and spiritual powers you know in a very fundamental way. Eldritch energy, when ‘used’, has a mind of its own. Almost always, the power of my kind is channeled through a higher will of some kind. My power comes from Azathoth. Majora’s power was her own. She was the conduit that bestowed power to servants. But when she was sealed away and destroyed, all the energy she had unleashed had no direction, no goal. It became wild. Eldritch energy does not exist properly in an unanchored state such as this. It should be fading away rapidly, leaving behind only strange mutants and leftover darkness shunted into arcane and spiritual powers. That’s how Ardent works, why there are so many dark creatures because of Majora but outside her control.”

“That’s not how it works here, is it?”

“Not in the slightest. For an as-of-yet undetermined reason, the wild energies here are sticking around. Somehow, without the will of Majora, they just continue to twist and torment the landscape into increasingly more accurate reflections of hell. The prowling beasts get worse, the geography becomes more extreme, and chaos reigns. I’m positive there has to be some line sewing all the wild energy together, but I am unable to pinpoint it at this time. There needs to be a higher deity of some kind controlling it, and I have yet to detect or find one.”

Rainbow Dash shrugged. “Think the solution is part of a friendship problem?”

Thrackerzod rolled her eyes. “Doubtful, unless the entity tying the energy together lives among us and needs to be convinced to stop. You have likely been sent here by that overly empathic Tree to deal with the tensions between the people, a thing that I have apparently been assigned to assist you with. I wish to make it known that we will play hopscotch at some point during the investigation.”

“…Hopscotch?” Rainbow Dash asked.

“Yes. It is an enjoyable and carefree activity that no pony in this starved village is willing to engage in. I want to jump over the numbers.”

Applejack smirked. “So you are a filly. I was wonderin’.”

Thrackerzod narrowed her eyes. “Adults can enjoy frivolous activities as much as they wish.”
“I have a question,” Rainbow Dash interjected. “You said you were a real demon. Are you, like, evil then?”

“Rainbow Dash!” Applejack chided.

“What! I’m curious!”

Thrakerzod rolled her eyes. “I am neither truly Divine or Demonic. Most beings of my kind fall on the neutral spectrum, sometimes referred to as Deviant, though I myself will never use that term. So, in that regard, I suppose I am not a true demon, but I am certainly more of a demon than these red-carapace pansies.”

Siron pointed the staff at Thrakerzod out of habit.

“Do you want another duel where you get beaten into the ground by forces you don’t understand?” Thrakerzod asked. “No? Thought not.” She turned back to the two Elements of Harmony. “Hope you never run into a true Demonic presence.”

“Why not?” Rainbow Dash asked.

“We’re getting off track. We need to find this ‘friendship problem’, solve it, and get you two home so I can continue my work on this planet.”

Applejack nodded. “Ah do have a question about the people here. Why don’t they just leave?”

Thrakerzod facehooved. “They’re all idiots. The demons think this place can be their salvation and proof of power, the humans and ponies are generally relief, and the Binaries who stay have some sort of bizarre mental block that makes them refuse to leave their ‘district’. The fuzzy creatures are unable to comprehend that their government has completely fallen.”

Applejack nodded, looking up to examine the town once more. She saw ponies growing food, humans working on crafts, and Binaries lining up everywhere for all the support they were being offered. The demons stood at attention near the forcefield, guarding. They were watching a giant creature composed of tentacles, leaves, floating teeth, and magical crystal shards prowl around in the distance. They were preparing to face it should it near the forcefield

“Let’s go talk to some folks,” Applejack said.

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Mlinx glanced nervously over his shoulder.

Yep. Applejack and Rainbow Dash were here. Oh, why did they have to come now? Why did they have to come at all? Thrakerzod was bad enough, but she was horrible at picking up on context clues. But those two…

Those two were going to poke their noses around. And what they found probably wasn’t going to look good.

It doesn’t look good to me either, Mlinx thought. Maybe I should just go up and tell them? They’re not Renee… They aren’t even a part of her team. Maybe that’s why they were sent here…

Without really thinking it through, he found himself walking up to the two ponies, barely noticing they had Thrakerzod with them. At the moment, Applejack and Rainbow Dash were mediating between a demon named Narraz and a human woman Mlinx didn’t recognize. The dispute was
apparently over how to distribute the crops, but by the time Mlinx got close enough to be part of the conversation it was resolved.

“Glad to be of service,” Applejack said, checking her cutie mark. It didn’t glow. “Well, that wasn’t it.”

“Your expectation that it should be something simple and easy is curious,” Thrackerzod noted. “Is it normal for the mission to be an in-and-out thing?”

“Never,” Rainbow Dash said. “Fastest was a couple hours, and even that was an ordeal.”

“Ah wasn’t on that one,” Applejack said.

“Me, Pinkie, and Nova. There was some freaky monster that played games and would only stop if a team won. We didn’t win, but we discovered he was cheating, and eventually convinced him maybe he should only play games with willing participants.”

“Ah. Y’all did that in a couple of hours?”

“It was a very high-stakes fast-paced game.”

“Ah.”

“Hello!” Mlinx said, far louder than he should have.

“Uh… Hey, Mlinx! Siron brought you over?”

“Yep! He certainly did! Righty-O!” Mlinx made a gesture with his hands that was supposed to be reassuring but just ended up being confusing.

Applejack raised an eyebrow. “Right. So, Mlinx, by chance are you aware of any friendship problems ‘round here?”

Just tell them just tell them just tell them. “Nothing really comes to mind right away…” Darnit Mlinx! Get over yourself and just say something. “I mean, there’s a lot of stress from constant monster attacks, the entire planet wants to kill us, and everyone’s really angry at everything.” Mlinx, you get out of your horrendous cowardice right now and spill the beans. “Beans.” AGH.

 “…Beans?” Rainbow Dash said, cocking her head to the side.

“You know! Beans! Like, uh…” he scratched the back of his head. “I dunno. I guess Lieshy rubbed off on me a little while she was here.”


“I don’t know!”

“Ya sure you can’t think of anything specific?”

“Er…” Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes. “Well, I guess Mistress Luna has been acting a bit withdrawn as of late.” That isn’t it! “I know she’s here but I haven’t seen her interact with anyone in a while.”

Rainbow Dash turned to Applejack and shrugged. “Worth a shot.”

“Thanks, Mlinx,” Applejack said. “If you think of anything else though, we’re here to help.”
“…Where is the Mistress, anyway?” Rainbow Dash asked,

“She generally spends her time on the disc,” Thrackerzod said, pointing above them. “She is a mysterious star looking down on us all from on high, judging the disgust with her piercing light. She also won’t play hopscotch.”

“You chose the wrong town to want to play hopscotch in,” Applejack said. “No fillies at all. Only young’uns I see are the Binaries, and they’re… Secluded.”

“This is no excuse for a refusal to partake in the activity! Or any activity for that matter! They won’t even try board games. Considering how much they like boredom this surprises me.”

Rainbow Dash blinked. “I can’t tell if you’re completely serious or trying to make a joke.”

Thrackerzod didn’t dignify this with an answer. She just teleported them all away, leaving Mlinx alone again.

Mlinx gulped. He had just sent them on a wild goose chase. Great. That was a horrible move. What was he going to do now? He should have told them…

Or maybe he shouldn’t have. He wasn’t sure anything was wrong there, and the thought that something was… well… it seemed so surreal. It didn’t make logical sense to his mind.

Siron was a bold, wise, capable, and understanding leader. He couldn’t have been plotting anything. He was a good demon, perhaps the best out of everyone Mlinx knew. He was a leader. He couldn’t be…

Yeah, he really couldn’t be. Mlinx realized he must have just misheard something… Probably. But how could he be sure?

He needed to gather more information before he told anyone… He needed to be sure. Because if he was wrong, that made him a traitor, the worst thing.

He would not fall into the trap Renee did. He would not condemn someone without proof. Wouldn’t even consider it – he couldn’t believe he almost did that.

Mlinx was going to investigate Siron.

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Mistress Luna looked out from her perch at the lands beyond the forcefield.

“Mlinx isn’t wrong,” she said, speaking to the ponies behind her without shifting her gaze. “I have been going out less and less. I suppose it’s because Siron and I are always so busy working through how to keep this place afloat.”

“Ah was wonderin’ about that,” Applejack asked. “Why are y’all here? What ever happened to Republic City?”

“Our culture was being stamped out by proximity to such a powerful nation’s growth,” she explained. “Some of the demons prefer that life, but Siron – and myself – can’t stand to lose our identity. I came to them as an uncertain alicorn with repentance, and now… I have learned how to be a warrior. I understand their way of life, and I see it vanishing. So Siron moved here, a place where warriors thrive. Where warriors are needed. We are appreciated here for what we are.”
“Huh. Ah suppose that makes some sense,” Applejack said. “Though all this danger might be a bit much, don’t you think?”

“Perhaps,” Luna said, “but Siron made the call, and Siron’s the one best suited to make the call. Is it better to let our culture vanish or put ourselves into danger? He decided the latter, and I stand by him.”

Rainbow Dash shrugged. “You should still get out more, talk to these people you’re protecting and turning into ‘warriors’.”

Luna smiled. “You are right, of course. I will go out among the people right now, because it seems to be an opportune moment. Perhaps I will even find Mlinx, to put him at ease.”

“That’d be great,” Applejack said. “Thanks for your time, Mistress.”

Luna nodded, then vanished with a teleport, leaving three ponies alone on the top of the disc.

“Well, now what?” Rainbow Dash asked. “That wasn’t it either!”

“Ah think we need to go talk to Mlinx again,” Applejack said. “There was something else on his mind.”

Thrackerzod blinked. “Really?”

“You don’t act like he acted unless you are tryin’ to say somethin’ but can’t bring yourself to say it. He’s got something else going on. Though at this rate, it won’t be the friendship problem either.”

Rainbow Dash facehooved. “Ugh, why is it never obvious?”

“Rainbow, it’ll be obvious when we see it, as always. Thrackerzod, take us back to the surface.”

Thrackerzod teleported them to the ground, in the middle of the market. Currently, it was food distribution time. A handful of ponies and humans were operating a counter filled with baked goods and handing the foodstuffs to a long line of Binaries.

Applejack noticed something odd. There were no Binaries working behind the counter at all. It was all other races – the native hairy people were all in the line.

“Why’re there no binaries workin’?” Applejack asked.

Thrackerzod blinked. “I have no idea.”

Rainbow Dash shrugged. “Aren’t the Binaries the ones that need the aid? They’re in trouble, the other people are here to keep them alive with food and other things.”

“Don’t you think it a mite odd that none of them are workin’ there?” She glanced around – at the farms, at the construction sites, at the distribution centers for material goods – not a single Binary actually working – just in the lines. Always in the lines.

“This is a little weird…” Rainbow Dash commented.

Applejack trotted up to a random Binary. “‘Scuse me, sir?”

“I’m a woman,” she half-heartedly called to her.

“Right, my apologies. Ah was just wonderin’ if you could explain why none of you Binaries are
helpin’ with the distribution or construction?”

“...Because the ponies do it.”

“Right. But don’t you do anything?”

“Why? We can’t survive here. We have to rely completely on them for everything.”

Rainbow Dash raised an eyebrow. “If you know that, why don’t you leave?”

“I don’t want to move districts. …I don’t want to know anything more than I already do.”

“Listen, lady, your entire government has collapsed in the most spectacular way. There’s no more secrets based on location!”

“Right,” she said with a tone that suggested she really didn’t believe Rainbow Dash’s words, but she felt like she was supposed to.

Rainbow Dash turned to Applejack. “Help me here.”

Applejack shook her head. “Ah barely understand how their kind think, Rainbow. Ah don’t think we’re here to change that.”

“Then what are we here to do? This is clearly the problem. They’re just… Moving through life like ghosts! They don’t do anything!”

“Wait, this is the friendship problem?” Thrackerzod blurted. “How does the inherent laziness of a race of hairy apes relate to friendship?”

Applejack sighed. “The problems don’t always relate directly to friendship. Sometimes it’s more about relationships or attitudes in general. Personal problems that hinder connection and harmony.”

“You need a new name then. May I suggest social problems?”

“Ah dunno, doesn’t have the same ring to it.”

Rainbow Dash furrowed her brow. “But how do we fix that? They do need the aid they’re getting.”

She gestured a hoof toward the horizon, where a different giant monster could be seen approaching the forcefield. The demons and unicorns were ready to drive it back, but it was likely going to be very loud when it did hit.

“Do they? They need protection, for sure,” Applejack said. “But do they need all this food given to them? All these houses just maintained? They need to understand what hard work means, Rainbow Dash. Ah’m pretty sure this aid is actually hurtin’ them.”

“I still think they need it,” Rainbow Dash said, crossing her front legs. “And being a little lazy isn’t really a bad thing, Applejack.”

Applejack furrowed her brow. “Maybe we need to look around more to really understand the situation… Let’s talk to a pony.” She trotted over to a pony stepping out of the food distribution area, breathing heavily. The mare was a version of Coco Pommel, an earth pony with a blue mane and cream coat. She wore a strange crown of crimson metal. “Hey there,” Applejack said.

“Oh, Hello!” The mare said, sitting down and stretching. “I’m on break, don’t ask me to do anything.”
“No problem,” Applejack said. “We’re Equis Vitis’ Applejack and Rainbow Dash, here to solve a friendship problem. Mind if we ask you a few questions, Miss…?”

“I go by Criso,” Criso said. “On account of my crimson crown of the house of Pommel, where I’m from. And you can ask your questions, I don’t mind.”

“What sort of thing do you do here?”

Criso put a hoof to her chin. “Well… Everything! Our job here is to help the Binaries in every way we can think of. Food, clothing, bedsheets, buildings, the sky’s the limit. Anything they ask us for, we provide.”

“Anything?”

“Well, yeah. They need it.”

Rainbow Dash leaned in. “What’s the strangest thing they’ve asked you to do?”

“Hair recycling center.”

Rainbow Dash blinked. “While that is strange, not exactly what I meant. I mean things they should be able to do on their own. Do they ask you for anything that, frankly, they should be doing?”

Criso furrowed her brow, thinking deeply.

“See Applejack? She’s having a hard time thinking of anything. I betcha the Binaries do all sorts of behind the scenes stuff.”

“No…” Criso said. “I’m just trying to think of which one to tell you about. I had one Binary mother ask me to discipline her child for her. I had another ask for house cleaning. Then there’s those Binaries who ask for comfy chairs so they can sit all day without getting sore.”

Rainbow Dash blinked. “Right, Applejack, I believe you, there might be a problem here.”

“This seems absurd,” Thrackerzod said. “Why do you not just make the Binaries do some work, or refuse the demands for extremely comfy chairs at the very least?”

“We’re just being nice. It’s not that hard to make a comfy chair, or to clean a house. The kid was a bit hard, but thankfully they don’t ask for that often.”

“Have you ever seen a Binary doing work?” Applejack asked. “At all?”

“At the start? Sure. But they just slowly… stopped. And we kept doing what we were doing without much of a problem. The demons defend while we work with the humans to keep this place alive on the inside. Oh, there is Lexa though. He works quite a bit. Very grouchy about it though.”

“Can you tell us where Lexa is?”

“Sure. He should be across the street, actually. I can see him. Hey Lexa!”

“Get out of my hair!” Lexa shouted back with his gruff voice.

“Hey! Lexa!” Rainbow Dash called. “Got some questions for you!”

Lexa, like almost all Binaries, was covered in hair. He did wear a small blue hat atop his head, but otherwise looked just like all the others. Applejack wondered how the ponies who lived here could
tell them apart. Lexa folded his arms. “You those ‘friendship problem’ ponies?”

“The one and only!” Rainbow Dash called.

“I’ve been lookin’ for you. You need to tell that Princess of yours to pull the aid.”

“…What?” Rainbow Dash blurted.

“You heard me. You need to pull the aid, completely. We only need those demons. We can do the rest by ourselves.”

“That’s a pretty strong sentiment, Lexa,” Applejack said. “And while Ah agree that it’s doin’ you more harm than good, taking it out completely seems like a mite extreme of a measure.”

“Come. Let me show you something,” Lexa said, waving to them. Applejack shrugged and followed, Rainbow Dash and Thrackerzod behind him. They soon entered a large egg building, one that was completely hollow on the inside and filled with hundreds of comfy chairs.

Almost every single chair had a Binary in it, doing absolutely nothing. Only a few of them were talking or reading – most were just staring into space as if their minds were broken. Which, quite possibly, they were.

“What in the…”

Lexa huffed. “The only Binaries that stick around are either ones like me, who want to screw Majora over, or Binaries who can’t let go of the system. Those who can’t let go of the system are unable to process anything. This is what happens to those Binaries. They sit and stare. If they were you, they’d be thinking existential and philosophical thoughts, but that way of thinking almost doesn’t exist here, at least not in the district these Binaries were originally from. They can’t think like that. They can’t even realize that by doing nothing they’re wasting away. They forget to eat, forget to stand up, forget to go do anything. The ponies think this place is a mental institution, so they dote over everyone here. But more and more Binaries move in every day, Binaries that refuse to leave the village, but also just can’t comprehend their new lives. Taking advantage of the kindness of ponies without realizing it, and corrupting the entire system.”

Rainbow Dash stared, jaw hanging open. “How did it take us so long to find this?”

“Maybe because nobody is taking it seriously!? Well I’m glad I finally got your attention! You call your Charter-Princess and get her to fix this mess! Right now!”

Applejack turned to Thrackerzod. “You have a communicator?”

“Of course.”

“Good. We need to make a call.”

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Mlinx really wasn’t supposed to be where he was, snooping near Siron’s quarters inside the disc. He could probably talk his way out of why he was in the hallway if anyone but Siron asked him. If Siron asked Mlinx a question directly, well, it was game over. Mlinx would admit to having doubts of Siron’s loyalty to his people and then Mlinx’s head would roll.

This was beyond dangerous and against everything he believed, but he had to do something to either prove his suspicions or ease them, or else there might be a different sort of disaster. Something worse
for everyone involved…

That didn’t matter now, though. Now, Mlinx was completely caught up in his investigations. He approached the door to Siron’s quarters, hearing no demons, no ponies, nobody in the hallway. He approached the door – but then heard the voice of Siron inside.

Of course Siron would be in his quarters, stupid Mlinx. Wait… Why would he be talking? Unless there’s someone else in there…

There was indeed another voice in the room, and it took Mlinx a while to recognize it. Ganondorf, king of the Gerudo. Mlinx wasn’t all that surprised – he knew that Ganondorf and Siron had a sort of alliance, and there were a few Gerudo walking around the city. …Though he hadn’t seen those Gerudo at all since Applejack and Rainbow Dash showed up. Weird.

“And the ponies, they aren’t here because of us?” Ganondorf asked.

“They may have been suspicious at first, but I have word that the actual ‘friendship problem’ has to do with the ‘Binary Asylum’. Our plans remain unhindered, and without suspect.”

“We still have a long time before the planet is ready to serve us, Siron. If they discover what we’re doing...”

“It’s a gamble, I am aware of this Ganondorf. But as far as they are concerned, I only wish to stake out a small claim of difficult land to keep my culture alive, and in the process help those in need.”

“I find it amazing they just assume you have a disposition to help others.”

“They truly are naïve fools. There are a few who think my motives are suspect, but none have any clue that this is a power grab. Not even that Thrackerzod has figured out that I’m the one keeping this power active, and if anyone were to figure it out, it’d be her.”

“I would prefer it if we could accelerate the plans.”

“Subjugating an entire planet is no simple task, even with my connection. It’s also tremendously difficult to order the monsters to attack at just the right moment to keep the people believing they’re in imminent danger at all times.”

“…You know what disturbs me the most?”

“What?”

“That Tree of theirs is able to spy out interpersonal problems from universes away and send the ponies that are perfect for the job to fix it. That Tree knows what we’re doing.”

“If it hasn’t sent them to stop us, it must agree that what I’m doing needs to be done, or thinks it has no right to interfere. It either has my respect or indifference.”

“Or it could just be waiting for the right time to strike.”

Siron growled audibly. “…Yes. But it pains me to say we can do nothing to the Tree. We have no mask to seal it in, no way to remove it from the equation. So we have to dance with it carefully.”

Mlinx decided he’d heard enough. He took a step back from the door, carefully sneaking away until he thought he was out of earshot.

Mlinx didn’t wait around. He took off at a blind run down the hallway, jumping into the transporter
pad. The pad materialized him directly beneath the floating disc in what qualified as town square – and he kept running. He needed to find Applejack and Rainbow Dash, they could help… Or could they? Ganondorf and Siron were powerful… But apparently Thrackerzod was as well…

He was in such a blind panic that he ran right into Mistress Luna.

“…Mlinx? What has you so terrified?”

Mistress Luna! Perfect! She was understanding, calm, thoughtful, powerful, and cared deeply about others. She’d understand. She’d be able to help.

He told her *everything* he’d just heard.

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Charter-Princess Twilight Sparkle arrived at Port S-1 in a flash of her magic. She shook her head, glancing around at her surroundings. She saw the corpse of the huge beast at the edge of the forcefield first – riddled with demon weapon-blasts and being cut up into meat by the humans. The second thing she noticed was Applejack and Rainbow Dash playing hopscotch with Thrackerzod.

She blinked. “…Girls?”

Applejack looked up. “Twi! You’re here. Sorry Thrackerzod, gotta end the game.”

“At least there actually was a game,” Thrackerzod said. “I shall return to my research into this world. Good luck.”

Rainbow Dash gulped. “Yeah, we’ll need it.”

Twilight raised an eyebrow while Thrackerzod walked away. “Interesting response, Rainbow… Applejack, what was so important that I had to come here as soon as possible? And why do I have the feeling I’m not going to like it?”

“You probably won’t like it at first, and that’s why you need to be *here*. So we can show you.”

“Just tell me what it is first.”

“The aid you and the rest of the universes are giving is going too far. It’s hurting the Binaries.”

“Applejack, don’t be absurd,” Twilight said, waving a dismissive hoof. “I was here before the aid came in, me and all the girls. We saw what a horrible place this was. Death was around every corner, eldritch powers ran amok, and Binaries couldn’t live. And what do I see now?” She held her hoof out. “I see a town facing off against the darkness successfully. This place looks clean, ordered, and while not really full of *life*, definitely not fully of *death*. This is infinitely better than what it used to be.”

“I think that’s why *we* were sent here,” Rainbow Dash said.

Applejack nodded. “We never saw what it was like before, only what it is *now*. And Ah can tell you, what it is now isn’t good.”

Twilight’s expression became *angry* for a moment, but she quickly recovered. “How will removing aid make this place any better than it is now? It’ll just open everything up to return to the way it was. You’re going to have to explain this.”

“Come with me,” Applejack said, leading Twilight into the building with all the Binaries sitting in
chairs. “This is what they do all day. Sit. Sit sit sit. They let the ponies and humans tend to every need they have, losing all purpose. They don’t work, they don’t enjoy themselves, they just sit.”

“They can’t think, Twi!” Rainbow Dash said. “They can’t leave, but they can’t do anything here. They can’t even realize that it’s wrong for the most part!”

“They never ask questions,” Applejack said. “Ah’m not sure if most of them can. Some still think their government of secrets exist, and just can’t deal with it being gone.”

“Buuuuut,” Rainbow Dash interjected. “If we remove the aid – at least the aid that isn’t the demons protection from monsters – they will be forced to do things again, to have some of the awesome experience that is life. There’s already agriculture, construction, and other stuff in place. They can just start using it themselves!”

Twilight glanced from her two friends to the sea of chairs with horror seeping into her features. “…I’m not sure that would work…”

“You have to try somethin’, Twi,” Applejack said. “Just because this is better than what it was, it doesn’t mean you can just leave it alone.”

“You gotta keep trying, and always look for ways to make it better,” Rainbow Dash said. “If you can think of some other way to fix this, that’s fine. But what we’re here for is to make sure you look at this.”

“Sugarcube, from the outside, this looks like you’re ruinin’ a culture.”

Twilight nodded. “You… You are right. This is why the Tree sent you here. When I come here, all I can see is the horrendous horrors it used to be, the death, the destruction – it looks amazing compared to that. And the people here just see things through their distorted way of thinking, largely unable to realize things could be better or worse. But you… You can see things more or less how they are. Because you don’t know anything about this place.”

“That Tree’s really clever, ain’t it?” Applejack commented.

“Yeah,” Twilight said, furrowing her brow. “I think I know what to do, girls.”

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Mlinx finished his story, looking at Mistress Luna with wide eyes. “What are we going to do?”

Luna let out an long, deep sigh. “That does sound horrible, doesn’t it?”

“Of course it does! He’s controlling those monsters, making sure this world stays corrupted! That’s wrong!”

“…Maybe we need to look at this from another perspective. He may be controlling monsters, yes, but when was the last death from an attack? There have been plenty of injuries, but deaths come from other sources.”

“But…”

“And who’s to say gathering power is wrong? We are rather weak, Mlinx. We need to compete somehow.”

“Mistre- no.”
Luna sighed. “Mlinx…”

“You’re in on it. You know already!”

Luna nodded. “I do, Mlinx. I’ve known about it since we moved here. I know Siron cares very deeply for his demons, and that he wishes us to have a place to say something in the world. We can’t be an afterthought.”

“Don’t you see?”

“I do see, Mlinx. The way of the warrior is a dangerous one. But it must be done. The ponies, as nice as they are, can be very destructive within their kindness. A world as large as the Elemental Nations can resist their influence, but something on our small scale? We get assimilated into their culture, or whatever culture we place ourselves into. You can see them doing it to the Binaries. Here, they are losing their culture, becoming lazy, ruining their lives, and the ponies just keep trying to help them when it’s the last thing they need. The humans and the other universes are just as guilty, but they are the face of the other worlds. Twilight and her friends, they mean well, but they ruin.”

“No. They can back off. They left the Elemental Nations alone. They don’t demand that friendship is the only way. They accept other cultures, even violent ones like our own.”

“They do. But the best of intentions don’t matter. They are unwittingly absorbing and molding cultures around them to fit their model. As much as they respect other cultures, the mere fact that they hold friendship in such high regard means they value unity and oneness, and don’t value bitter arguments. By nature, they make friends, and then all the minds mold together toward one ideal. Granted, they blend with the other large universes – such as Earth Tau’ri – but small worlds? Such as this one? They can’t influence the larger collective the way they are. All Siron is trying to do is prevent us from losing ourselves, as we have come so close to doing already.”

“It’s still wrong!” Mlinx blurted. “He could talk to Twilight directly about it! Or just, I don’t know, move somewhere the other universes don’t care about?”

“Twilight would be able to twist things to her own point of view. And why would we lessen our power to live in the middle of nowhere? That hardly sounds like a thing a warrior would do. It would be surrendering.”

“No, Luna… No. We can’t do this.”

Luna shook her head. “I’m sorry Mlinx. But we do. We need a say.” She encased Mlinx in magic crystal and sealed the crystal away deep beneath the earth. She then teleported to Siron, who was currently walking around Port S-1.

“Mlinx found out,” Luna said. “I took care of him. Permanently.”

Siron looked at Luna in surprise. “…I didn’t think you had it in you.”

“I tried to talk him to our side. He wouldn’t listen. He needed to be removed. I… It wasn’t easy.”

“I liked Mlinx,” Siron said, looking into the distance. “He had a different point of view, a way of seeing the world that made you think. Shame that way of seeing things was what finally got him.” He shook his head. “I’m losing my best all around me, Luna. Lost to the culture, lost to their own failure. I, more than ever, know we have to do this. We have to have power over the others.” He held his staff in his hands, looking closely at it.

“I know,” Mistress Luna said.
“I’ve tried so many things, Luna. Dealt with so many warriors, so many cowards. All of those plans were dashed to pieces. If this doesn’t work, I may be out of ideas. This staff can only do so much.”

“What actually is the staff, by the way?”

“It is an ancient artifact, passed down from demon to demon for countless years. There are many legends about it, but as I’ve been out here among the other worlds, I believe I finally understand them. The legends say it was bestowed to the first chief by a green god who was ‘one beyond the stars’. I’m almost positive this means he was a being from a different universe. That girl – Vriska – she recognized it. There was something about it that was important to her, though I never got to ask her. She also recognized me, or had seen another version of me.” He looked into the distance. “This staff is a power from beyond my world, probably from a world far beyond any of the ones we’ve encountered. It has power beyond simple attacks – it allows me to infuse magical artifacts with its essence. And those infusions are now in the very substance of this planet, slowly falling under my control. And even though I can see this great power… I am certain there is more to it. There is power to unlock within this artifact. This Juju.”

“Juju?”

“That is what the green god originally called it in the legends.” He turned the staff around in his hands. “Perhaps, once this planet is under my control, it will reveal what it truly is to me.”

“I will be there to help you uncover the mystery, Siron.”

They heard the voice of Twilight Sparkle call across the town in the Royal Canterlot Voice, to ensure all could hear. Luna Teleported herself and Siron right in front of her.

“Citizens of Port S-1! It has come to my attention that relief efforts to this community have succeeded beyond my wildest expectations. With the extent to which everything has been developed here, it is my honor to announce the success of the relief efforts! Over the next few months, we will be removing our people from your town so you can return to your normal lives. The demons will stay to offer protection, but other than that, your lives should return to something resembling what they once were. You can once again return to work in your own society, Binaries!”

There was only scant clapping from the crowd – most weren’t sure what to make of this. But it was clear from Twilight’s expression that she was expecting this, and that she didn’t really care.

“We’ll be here for the transition period, but I expect you’ll be back on your feet soon! I’ll be visiting all the other settlements on the world to see if we can do the same for them, but I expect you’ll all stay here, within your forcefield. This world is yours – we just have to give it to you.”

She stepped down, once again only receiving a small amount of clapping despite the emotion of the short announcement. Mistress Luna noticed Rainbow Dash and Applejack’s cutie marks glow, the sign of a job well done.

They had been sent here to return the world to the Binaries.

A tiny seed of doubt began to creep into Mistress Luna’s mind.
Charter-Princess Twilight Sparkle was mildly surprised to find the ‘grinder’ room of her castle empty. There was always some scientist in here, observing the magitechnical apparatus as it attempted to locate new universes connected to Equis Vitis.

She approached the machine and laid a hoof on one of its edges. The grinder had the shape of a barrel with a reverse funnel seated on top, the device only barely taller than Twilight. Most of the magical crystals and electrical wires were contained within the barrel, though a couple snaked out the bottom and along the floor. The front face of the grinder held a single screen, continually cycling through dimensional coordinates it attempted to connect to, usually projecting a big red X to indicate failure.

Twilight knew it was missing universes – it wasn’t being powered by a green diamond, so it wouldn’t know if any of the universes it was trying were just too far away to connect to. Twilight contemplated taking one of the diamonds just to see, but that would be frivolous. Plus, the two they did have were doing important things. One was still at the Hub, working the primary Mirror Portal, while the other was at the Nexus Universe they had discovered a couple months ago, powering a much larger and more successful grinder machine. This little one in Equis Vitis was essentially just a hobbyist’s version of the real deal.

They still owed Chancellor Fluttershy of Equis Concretion for allowing them to use their diamond.

As a single check mark flicked across the grinder’s screen for a second, indicating a success. Twilight found herself pondering the diamonds. They were non-magical power sources that had been found only within dimensional devices – and they had only seen two of the spheres. One’s origin was a mystery, having been recovered by the Concretion in the early days of its construction, and the other she herself had picked up off the ground on the day this whole adventure started…

It had been how many years now? Five? She was sure it was more than that, but it was getting hard to keep track of time with all the dilation she experienced. She might have actually spent six years exploring, even if only five had passed here, for all she knew. Sparky didn’t have a good working theory of time dilation between universes yet, unfortunately.

All of this, because of that one sphere… Who had made it? Who was that man of light? Who was the unicorn chasing him? Why had they only run across scant pockets of multiversal individuals? Twilight went over the list in her head. There was Vriska, Rick, the Doctor, Thrackerzod’s people, maybe the Stars, and whoever it was in the University of Doors. But none of them had used the diamond to get around. Luck, gun, blue phone box, rituals, whatever strange cosmic thing the Stars used, and doors.

She got the feeling there was something much bigger out there. She’d been getting that feeling a lot lately, with alarming rapidity. She was beginning to fear it was an omen. She found herself wondering what could be worse than the horror of Majora…

An error code flashed across the grinder’s screen, returning Twilight’s attention to the machine. Error: Connection Will Not Disengage.

Twilight raised an eyebrow. That was odd – portals would only refuse to disengage if they were being held open from the other end. Twilight prodded the grinder with her magic, latching onto the
microscopic portal that was used to test the connection validity. She hooked it up to the power running through the castle and expanded it until it was large enough for her to walk through.

Through the portal was a sight that made her choke on her breath.

There was an identical room on the other side. Nothing all that unusual, except there was a *grinder* machine in there, one of the exact same design. Standing over this grinder was not a *version* of Twilight – it *was* Charter-Princess Twilight sparkle, complete with uneven coat, windswept mane, and metal-lined ears. The only differences the other side of the portal had were the other Twilight’s orientation away from the portal and the error message on her version of the grinder. *Error: Recursive Connection.*

“What in the,” Twilight said, taking a steps back. The *other* Charter-Twilight must have detected something - a change in the air, a difference in lighting, or a vibration in the floor - because she turned around and locked eyes with Twilight. They stared at each other for a solid minute, making the portal into almost a perfect mirror, the error messages being the only means of differentiation. Just to make sure they weren’t looking at a mirror, both Twilights glanced behind themselves at their grinders – yep. The error messages were different. They locked eyes with each other once again.

“What is going on?” They said at the same time. Then they both facehooved. “Oh come on, really? We didn’t start in the same position, why have we synced up? Okay, before we can continue, we need to find a way to break the cycle. Hitting won’t work, it’ll just make us upset. Oh! Here we go, just read the error on the other side of the mirror! A *difference*! Ahem. ERROR-“

The two spoke at the same time. The ‘recursive connection’ Twilight finished first. “Okay, so we broke that. Good. Now, the big question, what *is* going on here?”

The original Twilight glanced back at her error message. “It looks like my grinder connected to your universe while your universe tried to connect to itself?”

“That doesn’t make any sense, why would the grinder try to connect to the universe its in!?"

“The universe was moved? The Nexus altered the connection coordinates, it’s not beyond possibility."

“But what feat of engineering would be required to *move* an entire universe in… Whatever it is the universes are in.”

“A mystery. How about we perform an experiment?” the original Twilight took out a dimensional device. “How about I try to dial my own universe, see what happens?”

“I’ll do the same.”

They did. The original Twilight’s device gave the *Recursive Connection* error, while the other Twilight’s created a portal that led right to the original Twilight’s universe, creating two portals.

“Ohay,” the original Twilight said. “Strange. For some reason your devices seem to think *this* is home. So… I don’t know what this means.”

“This means you get ‘original’ dibs and I get ‘other’ dibs.”

“We need to find a way to differentiate ourselves from each other…”

They both had the idea in quick succession, but other Twilight acted first. She summoned a marker
from the downstairs of her castle. She scribbled a big black X on the grinder, and then a matching X on her front left hoof. “There.”

“You are Twilight-X?”

“Yep. It’ll work for now.”

“I know.”

“I know you know.”

“This is silly.” Twilight blinked. “So, now that that’s out of the way… Twilight-X. Can I come to your universe?”

“By all means,” Twilight-X said. “Let’s see if we can put our two heads together to figure out what’s going on.”

“We’ll blow away all the competition,” Twilight said, stepping through the portal. “…I’ll leave it open. Don’t want to change any more variables than needed.”

“Mhm. Here’s what we know. We know that we are Charter-Princess Twilight Sparkle, and we’re probably identical. We should probably test that. What names do your friends go by?”

“Nova, Renee, Flutterfree, and Pinkie is still Pinkie, forevermore.”

“What did Pinkie call herself once last week on Tuesday?”

“Palaloozalala. That’s not a fair question, I could have – oh, right. If I didn’t remember correctly, but you did…”

“Bingo! So, we are exactly the same. Actually…”

“Were you thinking in depth about the diamonds and getting existential in the grinder room?”

“Yes. And then the Error message popped up, and that’s where our experiences diverge.”

“Oh this is so fascinating! Your grinder apparently tries to dial your own universe, while mine dials yours and can’t close for some reason. But when you try to dial home, you dial my universe…”

“Wait, hold on,” Twilight-X said, waving a hoof. “All universes need to have a unique coordinate system. Let’s both try to dial Earth Vitis.”

They did, and neither of their devices made the connection.

“There’s no connection to it from here,” Twilight said, rubbing her chin. “That’s fascinating… What could this mean?”

At that point, Spike (or, more accurately, Spike-X) ran into the room. “None of the dimensional devices are working Twilight! They all give errors and – oh.”

Both Twilights started talking at the same time. “Yeah, we’ve probably got something to do with that. Ugh, now we’re talking in sync again. Say the other’s name on three, two, one.” They separated themselves by a simple use of an ‘X’.

Twilight continued talking. “I think this means something… bizarre, Twilight-X. Your devices don’t work unless they want to connect to my universe. It’s almost as if they’re calibrated for my universe,
and think they are in my universe. I would say it was my universe that moved, but we can see it through that portal. Which means…”

“This universe is a copy of yours!” Twilight-X said. “And it had to be made the moment your grinder connected to it… That may be why your portal couldn’t close, it needed to stay open to copy the universe.”

“What did? What is it?”

“I have no idea! I mean, I should probably be literally freaking out right now that I’m just a copy of you that didn’t exist a couple seconds ago, but I’m just too excited about what this might mean. We may have come across something that can build universes! Get some insight into how universes came to be, what they mean, and perhaps form a more coherent theory of what the multiverse actually is!”

“I’m calling all the scientists!” Twilight said, pulling out her phone and turning on her ears. She was too excited to register the pain. She levitated the phone over into her universe, the original, so not to cause conflict with ‘universe X’. “This is Charter-Princess Twilight Sparkle calling Hub Laboratories. I’ve got something amazing for you!”

“Twilight, this is the second time you’ve called this mo-“

“I found a universe that copied my universe. I’m standing next to a perfect duplicate of myself! Say hello, Twilight-X!”

“Hello!” Twilight-X said. “You should really come over here, I think this universe is about to have a dimensional device connection ordeal. Also a bunch of existential dread that hasn’t hit me yet. Just get everyone you can, we’ve got to check this place out!”

“…We’ll be right out.”

Twilight hung up the phone and turned off her ears. “This is going to further our multidimensional theory so far!”

“I know! And now there’s two of us to do things! We could swap places on adventures and other stuff, like Pinkie does!”

“But what about your friends?”

“Oh, right, they do exist… We could just make two teams! Or… Yeah we should think about this later, after we actually know what’s going on.”

“Which we don’t.”

Spike-X coughed, the motion of his body drawing their attention. “So… Should I just tell Ponyville that they’re all copies, or… something else?”

Twilight-X blinked. “Right. For now, tell them we’re getting the top scientists to work on the connection problem, and that we’ll have something to tell them about it by the end of the day, but they need to be patient for now.”

Spike nodded. “Got it.” He ran down the stairs to deliver the message.

Twilight and Twilight-X rubbed their hooves together. They both mentally cleared their calendars, even though only Twilight actually had a calendar to clear. Today was to be a day of extreme
A couple hours later, Twilight and Twilight-X were sitting in a the throne room of Universe-X filled with a handful of scientists from across the multiverse. Corona, Carter, Sparky, some alicorn from Equis Cosmic by the name of Alabaster, Starbeat, and a handful of others.

“So…” Twilight began.

“…What do you have for us?” Twilight-X finished. They hoofbumped.

Corona looked at her clipboard and bit her lip. “Well, we’ve got some good news, and some bad news, and the bad news is really, really bad.”

“It’s mostly bad and confusing news,” Alabaster said.

“Yeah. Sorry.”

Carter cleared her throat. “The universe we are in is a direct copy of Equis Vitis, down to the finest detail of memory. However, that is only the physical attributes. Clearly, the connections and placement in the multiverse are different, but there’s more. Using some of our more outlandish methods of analysis – many of which were obtained by analysis of the Nexus universe – we have determined that this universe exists ‘overtop’ of something we’re calling a framework. We have no idea what this framework looks like, if it looks like anything, but we do know its function. It takes connections formed to it, holds them open, and copies the information from the connecting universe into this one.”

Corona spoke next. “The obvious problem being that whenever you connect to this universe from a universe it isn’t already connected to, it overwrites whatever universe was here before. I hate to say it, but the grinder destroyed a universe by connecting to here, and we’ll never know what it was.”

Twilight and Twilight-X stared in horror, their excited expressions gone. They spoke at once. “Ensure the coordinates to this universe never get onto the Directory, and expunge whatever report the grinder sent automatically. We can’t afford to chance this universe being wiped out.”

Sparky nodded. “On it… Charters.” She pulled out a data pad and began making the necessary adjustments.

“Never disengage the portal that the grinder first made,” Alabaster added. “We don’t know if the universe vanishes when there’s no more connections or not.”

“We do have some good news,” Starbeat said. “I figured out enough of the framework to instill a virus spell within it.”

“What?” the Twilights asked.

“Well, I ‘cheated’ in a way. I have a ‘stop’ spell in my inventory that I’ve set to activate whenever the framework activates. Clearly the framework will need to draw a lot of energy to overwrite a universe, so I just told my spell to tap into that energy to stop time whenever the framework activates.”

The Twilights understood this. “So, when it activates, you’ll stop it?”

“Yes. The downside to the spell is that it stops everyone else in it. And I’m not sure it’ll activate
quickly enough to prevent universe destruction. It will prevent the framework from ever activating again, afterward. That’s assuming the spell can perpetually draw energy from it…”

“Basically, there’s a lot of assumptions and unknowns involved in what Starbeat’s done,” Corona said. “It’ll probably do something to stop the framework, but the effectiveness is questionable at best, and even at its best it’s going to have unfortunate side effects. So it’s probably best to just not activate the framework at all. Keep this universe the way it is, don’t overwrite anything.”

“We probably should prepare an evacuation just in case,” Carter said. “You never know if someone might accidentally tap into this universe and activate the framework.”

Twilight turned to Twilight-X. “You’ll need to evacuate the whole planet. And the universe, if the Stars are willing. …I just realized we probably copied Stars here. I wonder what they’re going to think about that.”

Twilight-X nodded. “I’ll write to Princess Celestia and organize the evacuation procedures. We should be able to start moving some ponies at the end of the day.”

“I’ll grab my friends, see if we can help move everyone,” Twilight said.

Twilight-X smiled. “Don’t bring too many over, we can’t be that risky or confusing. Remember, we have just about everypony you have, we can be organized. Well, in Equestria anyway. Getting Tauryl to evacuate will probably take a few weeks…”

“So we just have to keep anyone from dialing this universe for a few weeks.” She glanced at the room of scientists. “So long as nobody knows this place exists, that should be easy. Still be on watch, though. Can’t be careless about this.”

“Now might be a good time to mention this…” Starbeat placed her Beat sensor on the table. “I am getting the highest Beat readings I have ever gotten in my entire life now. The ambient Beat in Equis Vitis has skyrocketed far beyond its regular value, and it was high to begin with. Something is going on with this universe.”

“Could it be that this universe uses the Beat in some way?” Corona asked.

“Possibly,” Starbeat said. “I cannot say for certain. I certainly have no way to use the Beat, or even understand what it does. I can tell you when it’s here, and it’s definitely here. A lot of it is.”

The Twilights smiled at her. “Well, what you’ve told us is still very helpful Starbeat. We know more, and that’s important.”

Starbeat’s bracelet started beeping furiously. She blushed a deep red and rammed her head into the table, grunting. A few seconds passed, and the beeping stopped.

“…You okay?” Corona asked.

“I’m fine,” Starbeat said, lifting herself out of the Beat-stricken stupor. “Twilight, Twilight-X? You might want to go do those things you needed to do before I try to buy you chocolates or something.”

“You’re getting better at resisting it—” the Twilight’s began.

“The positive reinforcement is not helping!” Starbeat moaned. “I am finding the way you two talk at the same time very attractive right now. Pleeeaaase just get to what you need to do.”

The Twilights smiled awkwardly and then teleported away.
“Relief…” Starbeat said, laying down on the table and sighing.

“I wonder what it’s like to be you, sometimes,” Corona said.

The bracelet started beeping again. Starbeat started ramming her head into the table over and over again. The scientists quickly filed out of the room, concerned that the higher Beat levels may have been exacerbating Starbeat’s condition.

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Twilight-X was not kidding when she said they could handle it. It had been scarcely an hour since the announcement for evacuation had gone out, and already ponies were forming lines and troops. Nopony had evacuated yet – they were waiting for the entirety of Ponyville to organize before moving anypony, so as to minimize panic. They had done all this with almost no help whatsoever.

That said, Twilight still brought a few friends over to help, even if it was less about helping and more about a certain novelty she wanted ponies to experience.

Flutterfree and Fluterfree-X were working on getting all the animals ready to evacuate. Naturally, the animals would come second after ponies, but that didn’t stop the Flutterfrees from preparing for the eventuality.

They had already been herding rabbits for about ten minutes when Flutterfree said it. “This is bizarre.”

“Try being a clone,” Flutterfree-X said. “I apparently didn’t exist a few hours ago. Nothing I experienced was real…”

“Oh, it was! It really happened, all of it! And all your friends are with you!”

“I guess so. Though the other universes weren’t copied…”

“But they’re still out there. We can share friends, Flutterfree,” Flutterfree said. “I don’t mind sharing.”

“Are you sure you don’t?” Flutterfree-X asked.

“Anypony we might want to ourselves was copied. Though you – we – I – Celestia, this is confusing… You know I’m not interested in anypony now.”

“Yeah,” Flutterfree-X said, getting more rabbits aware of the situation with some simple wing gestures and a soothing smile. “I guess I’m thinking more about what this means. If ponies and entire universes can just be copied… What if we’re eventually able to do that sort of thing with ease? How would we use it for good? Could it be used for good? Or just evil?”

“Going deep already?”

“I’m you and I’m existential, think about it.”

“I just did. Good point.”

“I just…”

“Want to figure out what everything means, if you’re actually making a difference, or if the multiverse is just too big for your kindness to even show up?”
“Yeah. That. What if our kindness does nothing?”

“I… Well I always tell myself that we’ll keep raising ourselves higher until we do do something. Or that I’ll be satisfied doing small things.”

“But that always seems lackluster.”

“It may have been okay before we started exploring, but now it’s not. There are horrors out there we can’t fix.”

“But we have to try.”

“Yeah. …It’s our curse to try and fix everything, isn’t it?”

“Not the worst curse I can think of.”

“Starbeat’s is worse.”

“It definitely is.”

After that, there was silence.

“Do we really have anything to talk about?” Flutterfree-X asked. “We’ve had the same experiences, we already let out our pent-up existential stress…”

“…And any ‘new’ ideas we have will just be the same ones the other is having offset by a few seconds.”

“I already know we’re pondering how things are going to work in the future with two of us.”

“And the answer is to make two teams.”

“And that Pinkie’s swapping habit will be a mess.”

“And that it’s just going to be confusing.”

Flutterfree-X shook her head, guiding a bear to a clearing filled with other bears. “I can only see this getting worse and worse with time… What if there are other identical versions of us out there that aren’t copies?”

“Nobody knows…” Flutterfree said, looking into the sky.

“It’s hard to talk about anything with yourself.”

“I think that might just be a thing we have.”

“And that will clearly go away once we’ve all gotten a couple weeks of different memories. But we’re just so close right now.”

“This isn’t even really a conversation, it’s just us saying what we’re both thinking, over and over.”

“And over.”

“And over.”

They blinked. “Idea, I take west side, you take east. Then we’ll talk about what happened!”
Flutterfree smiled. “That sounds like a great idea.”

~ ~

Renee and Renee-X had already finished packing up Renee-X’s clothing line, which was exactly the same as what Renee had in her Boutique. They had gotten over the initial confusion a while ago, and were now sitting at a table, drinking tea.

They had already perfected the art of ‘talking’ without really saying anything. Renee would raise an eyebrow, Renee-X would chuckle softly and wave her hoof in the air, and then Renee would blink slowly and shake her head. The conversation would continue with Renee pulling her hat back slightly and narrowing her eyes, only for Renee-X to flutter her eyelashes, to which Renee reacted with an expression of disgust.

Sweetie Belle-X passed by them, blinked, then shook her head, deciding she wanted no part in this. “I’m going to line up for the evacuation. Please, only one of you show up.”

“Of course, dear,” Renee-X said. “Though I give no guarantees about which one of us it would be!”

Sweetie Belle rolled her eyes and trotted away. The moment she was out of sight the two Renees burst into jovial laughter.

“This is on the top ten weirdest days,” Renee said. “So surreal.”

“Think of what it’s like for me – oh wait! You are!” Both of them found this immensely humorous for some reason, perpetuating their laughter even further.

“Oh what ever shall we do? The absurdity of the situation worms its way under our hats and into our minds, deviously crafting ways to bring forth just one more chuckle, peep, or – dare I say – guffaw!”

“Guffaw!” Renee-X couldn’t stop herself from letting out a loud, rowdy, guffaw.

“Darling, how unladylike!” Renee said, chuckling.

“It’s just you and me and nothing else,” Renee-X said. “An opportunity to try on any sort of look with no issues! Laugh however you want!”

Renee opted to laugh like a deranged hyena that was gargling flubber while choking. The laugh stopped short, bringing on a stark silence to the two unicorns.

The silence was interrupted as they started laughing again.

“This…This should be what Pinkie is doing, not me,” Renee said. “Stars, I do not laugh this much!”

“You do today,” Renee-X observed. “I think we’re just cutting loose as it were. Pretty mild, considering, but still fun. I think.”

“I think as well, and I think that you’re thinking about what we could do with two of ourselves.”

“Pull a twin switcheroo gag. Later, of course, now is a bad time.”

“What about creating dresses twice as fast – wait, no, I don’t make dresses that much anymore.”

“Good cop bad cop on a reluctant politician?”

“Too cruel for the moment. Though file that away for future ideas. Er…”
“Hrm…”

“You know, you think you’d be able to figure out what to do with yourself if there were two of you easily.”

“Yeah. But I – we – or something – are drawing a blank. Huh.”

Nova-X and Nova touched horns, attempting to create a magical feedback loop in their magical energies and utterly destroy the second law of thermodynamics with their impressive mastery over all things arcane.

Instead, they made an explosion between themselves.

“Seventeenth time’s the charm!” Nova called.

“You bet it is!” Nova-X said. They tried again – and exploded again.

“Eighteen?”

“We’ll never know unless we try!”

It took until attempt thirty-eight before the feedback loop stopped perpetuating itself.

Nova blew on her horn. “Okay, X-me, we need to try some other combo spell that could only be conjured with two nearly identical minds.”

“One that does not involve the mind-reading echo chamber.”

“Clearly not, that’d just be an utter disaster for everypony involved.”

“Oooh! I know!”

“The infinite moonshot manticore mouthdive!”

“Oh, I could get Trixie! …Actually, bad idea, she’d try to take over.”

“But we can invite the Trixies later! For now, we need to summon a manticore from nothing.”

“Easier said than done.”

“Psh, both of us can do it if we work together! I take left side you take the right.”

The two of them began meshing atoms together from the air into the shape of a manticore, complete with yellow fur and red mane. Ten minutes later, they were finished and ecstatic.

Then they realized they hadn’t sewn the two halves together and the fleshy mass spilled into two piles.

“Ech,” Nova said, taking a few steps back. “That was a really bad idea.”

“We even got the skeletal structure wrong,” Nova-X said.

“I don’t think that’s a spleen…”

“We suck at this.”
“Clearly.”

“New plan! I shoot lasers, you catch all of them, then we measure how much power we’ve accumulated!”

“By vaporizing the fleshy mass?”

“What else!?” They did as they planned – Nova-X created a bunch of magic lasers and Nova caught them all with pinpoint precision, gathering every last little bit into a single point of energy and then unleashing it on the fleshy mass that was supposed to be a manticore.

“Can we do something with time dilation?” Nova-X asked.

“We shouldn’t but we’re going to anyway because when else are we going to get this opportunity?”

“Next week.”

“Shoosh, you’re not supposed to be cleverer than me.”

“Awww, but I want to be!”

“No, I want to be!”

Nova-X tapped a nonexistent watch on her leg. “We need to do time dilation stuff.”

“Right. You, in the future, blast energy back to me- WOAHOH I guess you did that.”

“Oh, I did. I should start now.” She lit her horn and sent some magical energy a few seconds into the past. “There we go.”

“Kinda scary how we can just do that, huh?”

“I wonder if we can convince Twilight to let us use the map to see if this universe had a past…”

“While I’m one hundred percent convinced that would be amazing, we don’t want to destroy time again.”

“Yeah. Maybe we ask after we finish this evacuation. Send the magic to my future now.”

“On it.” Soon, the two of them had a closed time loop of magic flow from one to the other.

“…What do we do now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Huh, something in a few seconds is going to interrupt the flow.”

“It is?”

“Aaaaand you just lost your focus, there it goes.”

“Oh. Right.” The two unicorns chuckled.

“Why are we so eccentric?” Nova asked nopony in particular.

“I have no idea, I just know that it’s fun. I’m sure we’ll calm down later and do some more calm, rational magic building.”
“Probably.”

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Pinkie stared at Pinkie-X.

“Sooooo…” Pinkie said. “Lots of ka in the air today.”

“Yeah, there sure is a lot of the stuff buzzing around! Big things coming soon, this time only on Songs of the Spheres! Stay tuned for what will be for some the biggest shift of all, and for others just be very ominous. Or both! Probably both, let’s go with both.”

Pinkie nodded slowly. “I think they probably already know this isn’t going to end well.”

“Yeah… An entire universe that can just be wiped away with the push of a button.”

“Everything’s just been a bit too cheery for a while.”

Pinkie-X looked at Pinkie with pleading eyes. “Can’t we keep it cheery for a little longer? I’d… I’d like that.”

Pinkie chuckled softly and wiped her eyes. “Yeah. Yeah, we can do that. So! Pinkie-X, we can’t throw a party because that’d interrupt the evacuation, so what do we do?”

“There’s a mountain over there. Let’s mess with something and turn it entirely into ice cream.”

Pinkie whistled. “DISCORD! ICE CREAM MOUNTAIN, STAT!”

Discord-X appeared and snapped his fingers, turning the mountain into ice cream. “There you are, my adorable pink apocalypses.” He vanished in a puff of magic.

“Oooooh boy, he used the word,” Pinkie said. “Pinkie-X, calm, deep breaths-“

“I AM CALM!” Pinkie-X shouted. “I AM VERY STUPIDLY CALM who am I kidding I’m not calm…” She pulled Pinkie into a hug. “I’m scared.”

Pinkie took a breath. “I know you are. You know, we could probably…”

“Do you want to risk retribution?”

“If you want to.”

“I do and don’t! And I… “ She glanced at a point in empty space. “Look, we need to talk about this without them watching. I… I just can’t do it like this.”

Pinkie nodded, pulling a remote out of her mane and hitting the fast-forward button.

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Twilight-X looked at Twilight, Renee, Flutterfree, Pinkie, and Nova, standing in front of the portal to Equis Vitis. Twilight-X smiled. “Thanks for your help, but they need you on the other side to receive the refugees now. We’ll be ready in about fifteen minutes to start moving.”

Renee nodded. “Of course, dear. Come on girls, we’ve got stuff to do!”

Pinkie bounced through the portal, her smile smaller than it normally was. Nova, Renee, and
Flutterfree followed.

“I’ll catch up!” Twilight called after them. “I think I’ll stay behind for a bit, see how the evacuation starts off.”

Pinkie looked at Twilight and smiled. “Goodbye then! Have fun!”

“See you,” Twilight said, waving. She turned around, looking at the grinder room again. She could scarcely believe it wasn’t her castle. But there it was, the X on the grinder itself, telling her this world was just a copy. A perfect, beautiful, interesting copy, but a copy nonetheless.

She saw Twilight-X head out to the balcony. Twilight moved to follow – she wanted to have another conversation with herself. They’d started to diverge more and more over the last few hours, and now Twilight felt as if she were finally talking to someone who wasn’t her, and that felt good. It felt like there was a new friend to make, a new pony to learn about. It was a nice feeling.

Twilight took a step through the doorway that led to the balcony – and then she was somewhere else. She was in a library. It was night time, and the shelves were lit with soft candles. The books came in all colors, shapes, and sizes. There was a single window in front of her, showing the brilliant sight of a night in a universe far from her own. She saw stars moving out there, shifting like they were part of some extremely distant fabric. Their colors shifted between pink, purple, and blue, filling her with a strange feeling of calmness.

“Do you like it? Not the most spectacular night sky I’ve seen, but one of the more soothing.”

Twilight turned around to see me. My appearance was by no means something special – I was a purple alicorn, much like herself, with a significantly more traditional manestyle. I had no metallic ears, I had no uneven coat, and my eyes were much older than hers. I was currently sitting at a desk, writing in a book. I finished my sentence, closed the tome, and looked at Twilight with a calm expression.

She looked down at the one feature besides my gaze that differentiated me from all the other Twilights in the multiverse – the eye affixed to my chest. It was a peculiar artifact, made mostly of a smooth white stone outlined in jarring, black metal. The pupil was a single slit, and several prongs that may have been confused for eyelashes could be seen penetrating into my body.

“Who are you?” Twilight asked.

“I am Twilence,” I said, speaking the truth.

“Why am I here?”

“I wanted to talk to you for a moment, here, in my own personal corner of L-space,” I said. “So I inserted you into this place temporarily. After we are done you will be returned to universe-X as if no time had passed.”

“Did you make the universe-“

“No, I have not activated the destruction of universe-X, nor will I ever be responsible for such a thing. When you return, it will be as you left it. Stable.”

“How did you...?”

I sighed. “As much as I would love to discuss the finer points of connection theory with you,
Twilight, it would not be right. I’m meeting you far too early as it is, but I convinced myself that I could make an exception.”

Twilight nodded, sitting down. “I think I understand. You’ve been watching me, haven’t you?”

“For longer than you realize. My story – my song - is closely intertwined with your own, believe it or not.”

“Your song?”

I let myself shake my head and smile – so young. “We all have a song. Songs like yours and mine ring out across the fabric of existence, while others just make a little peep amongst the waves. But everyone has one.”

“…These Songs actually mean something, don’t they? What?”

“You know I can’t tell you.”

“Am I allowed to ask any questions here?” Twilight said, frustrated.

“You can ask as many as you want. I wouldn’t expect answers though.”

“Then why am I here?”

I looked down at the closed book on my desk and shook my head. “Because I am a flawed pony, Twilight. And I let myself just bring you here. I wanted to tell you some things, show you some things, but now I’m having second thoughts…” I bit my lip.

Twilight smiled slightly. “You’re still me, aren’t you?”

I nodded. “We are very alike, in many ways. My awakening to the multiverse was just… much ruder. More sudden. In a couple weeks I knew more than you know now. It changed me drastically, suddenly, and not completely for the better. I’m very glad you’ve had years to accommodate.”

“I’m so sorry…”

“You have nothing to apologize for. You had nothing to do with that. I may be partially to blame for exactly how your side of things have turned out, but even then only slightly.”

“…Now I’m really curious.

“And I can’t tell you anything.”

“…What can you tell me?”

I frowned. Then I levitated a book off a nearby shelf. “I can show you something…”

There was a flash of purple magic, and the two of us were somewhere else – or, what we felt was somewhere else. In reality, it was just an illusion, a memory. Twilight saw me, a version of Rarity, a young human woman I knew as Creek, and the woman we both knew as Vriska. All of us were laughing and having fun as we ran away from a gigantic monster made entirely of candy, unable to take the thing seriously.

“…You were the Twilight who told Vriska about me,” Twilight said.

“Sharp mind,” I confirmed. “We were a lot like you. We had no real ‘home’ universe though,
nothing to build off of. We had our fun anyway. But… It came to an end one day.” Images flashed by. Rarity waving goodbye. Creek lying dead in a pile of stuffing. Vriska vanishing from a jail cell. Myself, sitting alone at a desk, scribbling in a book.

“Why are you showing me this?”

“I guess I just wanted somepony to tell the story to that wasn’t… Them.” I glanced at the eye on my chest and shook my head.

“…I may not know who they are, but there’s more to it than that. You’re going to show me what happens to my group, aren’t you?”

I smiled. “I’m not completely certain what happens to your group. My sight, while perhaps the strongest sight of all, knows the future waters are murky. But I can show you something of the future.” I cast another spell. There was a city neither of us had ever been to, because it did not exist. It was beautiful – architecture that was impossible, but got around this by existing within numerous dimensions at the same time. Ships flew to and from the docks. Magical and technological lights flashed from all angles.

Then there were the people. Ponies, humans, dragons, robots, plant-creatures, and hundreds of other beings Twilight had never seen before.

“Is this… what we build?”

“One of many,” is all I say.

I shifted the view to the center of a large building. There was a tremendous piece of stained glass on the central window, depicting several individuals. There were many Twilight didn’t recognize – a muscular man with a pink and blue spirit behind him, a dark blue humanoid in a white top hat, and a few others - but there were many she did recognize. Herself, Nova, Flutterfree, Renee, Pinkie, Corona, Toph, Vriska, Daniel, O’Neill… Immortalized in a window that put the halls of Canterlot to shame.

Twilight’s eyes started watering. “We… We do this?”

“You become something much more than you can comprehend in your present state. My Song was a song of understanding – your song will be a song of growth. A Song of Songs. The Song of the Spheres.”

“The Spheres?”

I spread my wings and extended our field of view. We left the illusory universe, condensing it into a spherical bubble. Other universes could be seen. I zoomed out quickly. Billions upon Billions of tiny spheres coalesced together, until they were little more than points of light in nothingness. Further still we retreated, until the universes began to take a roughly spherical shape. We could see two other large spherical clusters of universes, and a significantly smaller sphere in another direction. Dots spread out loosely between the Spheres and around them, but they always stayed near the larger structures.

“It’s… Finite,” Twilight realized.

“Yes.”

“Mind-bogglingly big, but finite.”
I chuckled. “Yes.” I gestured toward the shape of the entire multiverse that stood before us. “That song? That song that has driven this existence even when time itself cannot? That song – that song is the song you are a part of. A very **big** part, Charter-Princess.”

Twilight beamed. “I… I don’t know what to say, Twilence. Thank you? I…”

“You don’t need to say anything. I just need you to know how much I, and so many others, appreciate what you’ve started here.”

“I… I won’t let you all down! I’ll use this knowledge to give myself determination, to ensure I do what you’ve shown me! That’s probably why you showed me, huh? To ensure that I believe I **can** do it.”

I didn’t respond to this.

“…Is it time for me to return to Universe-X?”

“Yes, it is. Say hello to Twilight-X for me, would you? She’s **you** you know.”

“Not anymore. We’re differentiating a lot, and I’m sure **this** experience will just solidify that!”

I nodded. “Yes. Yes it will…”

“Will we meet again?”

“This will not be the last time Twilence and the Charter-Princess cross paths, I assure you. Our songs are intertwined. There will come a time in this progress that I will come into the open. I await that day with extreme longing. I’m so tired, Twilight. Tired of having to **watch** and **wait**.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

“I have no doubt you will. Goodbye, Charter-Princess.”

“Goodbye Twilence!”

And then I sent her to Universe-X. I returned to my desk and opened my book to write in it once more.

I sighed, deeply. That noise had become a habit of mine. A habit I had hoped to lessen by talking to Twilight, but it appeared not.

I once again waited.

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Twilight stumbled into the balcony railing. “Ow…”

Twilight-X blinked. “…Are you okay?”

“The strangest thing just happened. I was whisked away to a faraway universe to talk with a version of myself who called herself Twilence. She had… a lot to say.” Twilight rubbed her head. “I’m not sure I understood all of it, frankly. She was acting a lot like Pinkie does when she knows something she just can’t tell. But… I got a glimpse of the future.”

Twilight-X’s jaw dropped. “No way.”
“Yes way! We’re going to do amazing things that affect the entire multiverse! We are small for now, but we won’t be forever. Not even close to forever. The future is bright, and I have newfound confidence in… well everything!” She hugged Twilight-X for a few seconds. She pulled back, grinning. “Everything feels good, even if I don’t understand everything.”

Twilight-X stared at her. “You have to tell me everything.”

“After we get this evacuation done. It’ll take too long otherwise. You may not have seen me leave, but I was there for a while, and there’s a lot to unpack. Just know the future is bright, and we do make a difference. I think Flutterfree will like to hear that.”

“Yeah, she has been a little overwhelmed by it all as of late. She takes care of herself pretty well, but you know how she is. Still a Fluttershy at times.”

“I wonder what Pinkie thinks of what happened, or if she already knows about it. You know, I got the distinct impression that Twilence might have known more than Pinkie. She…” Twilight shook her head. “Yeah, no time to talk about that now, we’ve got to evacuate the universe.”

“Evacuating an entire universe… Ponyville today…”

“…tomorrow, the world!”

“Or the next city,” Twilight-X shrugged. “This is going to be a slow process. Weird, considering how well it went. We started, what, only a handful of hours ago?”

“Well, it was before noon, and it’s evening now, so… Yeah, handful of hours.”

Twilight-X glanced out at the skyline. The sun probably should have set already, but Celestia-X was drawing it out so the evacuation could have light for the next hour. It was a truly beautiful array of colors. She could see everything from red to blue in the sky, and it was a beautiful sight.

She didn’t care if she was part of some clone universe, this place was her home, and it was beautiful.

“Evening…” Twilight said.

“Hrm?”

“I like the word,” Twilight reiterated. “Evening. It means a lot too. Here I am, standing at the Eve of something great, and brilliant, about to close a chapter on my life. It’s also related to Twilight and… Great Celestia, I think I’ve found my name.”

“Evening?”

“Evening, Eve for short. Probably should come up with a last name to go with it… Corona didn’t though, so…” Twilight put a hoof to her chin.

“You sure?” Twilight-X said. “Because, you know, I might want to be Evening.”

“Oh. Riiight, we’re the same. HrmHmm…” Twilight rubbed the back of her head. “We can flip a coin later, winner gets to keep it.”

“If we decide we want to.”

“True. I guess we might think of something else. But it just seems… perfect, you know?”

Twilight-X smirked. “Yeah. That’s why I want it. It’s the perfect name for us. And we can’t just both
have it since we’re already so similar.”

“The point is to differentiate.”

The two sat in silence for a moment, staring at the elongated sunset.

“I worry, sometimes,” Twilight-X said, suddenly. “Remember the Spectacularium?”

“Oh, that thing. It was… Yeah, I remember.”

“It told everyone something about the future. It told Renee she would find love, it told Pinkie it couldn’t answer her question, and it told us…”

“We wouldn’t outlive our friends.”

“Yeah. I always thought we’d get to make them alicorns, or something, eventually. But… I’ve been remembering…”

“Some things the Pinkie Sage said. About all prophecies being ruined by dimensional travel.”

“Yeah. That. What if the Spectacularium was unable to take everything into account? I… I don’t want to be alone.”

Twilight sighed. “I know what you mean. We could only take so much comfort from a prophecy. They could easily mean one thing or another…”

“And be vague. It might mean some friends or only certain friends.”

“And whatever it actually means we probably won’t figure out until it’s obvious.”

“Yep.”

“Why’d we ask the Spectacularium that question again?”

“Uh… Don’t think we did. I think it just saw what we wanted to know the most.”

“Oh. Right. …What ever happened to the Spectacularium after Armonia was sealed away, anyway?”

“Why you looking at me? I have no idea! You’re the one who talked to the mysterious ‘Twilence’ and has extra information!”

Twilight looked down at Ponyville. “Yeah.” She took in a deep breath. “This is a beautiful sight. Even without the stuff Twilence showed me, Ponyville… Ponyville is amazing.”

“It’s changed so much.”

“I hope this beautiful world never gets destroyed, for any reason. We’ll protect it, any way we can.”

“You’ve got that right!”

The Twilights hoofbumped and then embraced. Then they glanced into the castle. Next to the open portal to Equis Vitis was a clock, telling them it was a minute until the actual evacuation started.

“Time to round them up,” Twilight-X said, spreading her wings. “Coming?”

“I think I’ll return to my-“
Then it happened. The moment that had been building up since the time the first portal was opened. The entire fabric of reality shook. Twilight and Twilight-X fell to the ground, only to find that the ground felt off somehow. It shook again, sending shivers into their very souls.

Outside, they could see it. They could see the sky start to peel away – the beautiful colors destroyed like they were nothing but paper. The Sun began to lose chunks of itself. Evaporating. Dimming. The landscape outside began to rupture with tumors. Mountains exploded – but didn’t unleash any substance, just dissipated into this shards of matter that might as well have been paper, paper that quickly disintegrated into nothingness.

They would have been dead right then and there, for the framework was prepared to rewrite the entire universe in a single second. Everything would have been paper-like shreds then nothing. But Starbeat had placed a spell – and that spell was triggered. A loud ticking sound that the Twilights recognized from their previous adventures across time came from the throne room, where the Map was. A spherical magical shell spread out around the castle, altering time, attempting to freeze it in place as it let out a swift tick, tick, tick sound.

It didn’t stop time – but it would have been bad for them if it did, for then they wouldn’t have been able to move. As it was, they could. And they had a slight edge on the speed of the framework, because the open portal was bleeding a regular timestream into the universe.

They moved like molasses, pushing their legs and wings as hard as they could. Every handful of seconds, one of their hooves would hit the ground, and a low thud would ring through their bodies. The ground beneath them would shake, flaking a bit of substance off as they moved, but they themselves remained stable.

As time went on, the motion of the alicorns only slowed. Yet, their minds – their minds ran in overdrive. They tapped into some force beyond themselves, something that knew their very lives were hanging in the balance. There was no way their brains could have perceived time at this slow of a rate, but they did anyway. It was an impossible event, but such things happened at times of this much importance.

The world fell out from behind them, revealing the structure of the framework. A metal room, much like the Nexus. It was only the size of a city block, but it had contained the entire universe. A few lights slowly started to blink as the machinery realized there was an open portal, time dilation, and remnant of the universe that had been wiped. A beam of green energy shot forth as time approached full stop…

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Twilight – and Twilight alone – fell through the portal. She turned to cheer on her counterpart, maybe pull her out with magic – but the portal snapped shut in her face. Twilight got to catch a glimpse of herself screaming in agony.

Renee, Nova, Flutterfree, and Pinkie ran into the room. “What happened?” Renee shouted. “We heard a scream!”

Twilight took her dimensional device out and dialed universe-X. “The universe was destroyed, that’s what happened!” She said through tears. She opened the portal, revealing the Nexus-like machine, trapped in a bubble of frozen time, unable to reconstitute a new universe.

“Nova, time dilation bubble, now.” Twilight ordered. Nova did as asked, surrounding them all in a field of normal time so they could walk in the frozen world on the other side. The ponies that weren’t Twilight felt dwarfed by the tremendous room, not quite realizing that it had somehow contained the
space of an entire cosmic universe within it only a few seconds ago.

“Find a way to reverse it…” Twilight muttered to herself. “There has to be a buffer in here somewhere…”

Pinkie was suddenly in front of Twilight. “Twilight, stop.”

“Get out of my way Pinkie!”

Everypony turned to stare at Twilight with surprised expressions. Pinkie didn’t take the outburst personally, she just moved to the side obediently.

Twilight could barely see through her tears. She teleported herself to the central pillar in the room, a structure three times larger than herself. It was covered in white metal strips that snaked in intricate patterns, patterns that looked like they were supposed to move – but naturally couldn’t in the plane of frozen time.

Then Twilight saw it. The portal that had connected to this universe and forced the reboot. A portal through which two individuals she recognized stepped out.

“RICK!” Twilight bellowed, teleporting right in front of his face, screaming with the loudest Royal Canterlot Voice she could muster. “WHAT DID YOU DO!?”

Morty held up his hands. “T-Twilight? W-W-What!?”

Rick was unimpressed. “Look, princess, I just did what I was supposed to do. Connect to this place, duplicate a universe. Or that’s what was supposed to happen. What the fuck did you do to this place? You froze it?”

Something snapped within Twilight. She flared her wings, pulled back her head, and lit her horn with a dark, black power.

Worry crossed Rick’s face for a moment. He reached for something in his labcoat.

Before the universe could see if Rick could have deflected unfiltered dark magic from the Charter-Princess, Pinkie appeared between them. “TWILIGHT! STOP!”

“HE KILLED AN ENTIRE UNIVERSE, PINKIE! A UNIVERSE OF US! THERE WAS A YOU OVER THERE! THERE WAS… THERE WAS!”

Pinkie hugged Twilight, crying herself. “I know. She knew. This was always going to happen. That world was not meant to stay.”

“That’s… That’s stupid!” Twilight shouted, dropping the Royal Canterlot voice. “I was told that we were going to do great things! I was told the multiverse would care! This isn’t great at all! This is horrible! We failed! We should have moved faster… We should have dropped all organization… We should have… We…”

Flutterfree grabbed Twilight by the shoulders and Stared at her, shocking Twilight into a calm state. “Twilight, we stopped this universe from ever creating or destroying another universe again.”

“I could fix this,” Rick muttered.

Pinkie drew a scythe out of nowhere. “Rick, I swear to all the Tower, that if you so much as try to activate this universe again, I will find you, and I will kill you.”
Rick took one look at Pinkie and decided she wasn’t bluffing. “All right Morty, looks like vacation in twin-town is cancelled. Let’s gooo-“

“Really Rick?” Morty said, throwing his hands out. “We just destroyed a universe! I didn’t know that was going to happen! How is – wait, nevermind, I know how it’s okay. Because you’re fucked up in the head!”

“Your point?”

“Morty… Take your grandfather and go,” Renee said. She glanced at Twilight.

“Morty doesn’t take me-“

“Rick Sanchez,” Renee stated in an official tone. “You are no longer welcome in the dimensional lands under the protection, alliance, or purview of Equis Vitis and its allies. Do I make myself absolutely, one hundred percent clear?”

Rick narrowed his eyes. “You don’t know who you’re declaring war on, unicorn.”

“I’m not declaring war. I’m just making sure you know never to come back. Do you understand!”

“He understands,” Morty said. “For what it’s worth, I apologize, though I know that’s stupid and probably just makes you hate me more. I, uh…” He sighed. “Look, it’s rough out there. You girls… You take care of each other.”

“We always do,” Flutterfree said. “…For what it’s worth, thank you, Morty.”

Rick mumbled something to himself.

Nova glared at him. “Get the hell out of here.”

“I’m going, I’m going…” Rick said, opening one of his green swirling portals.

Morty looked to them. “I’m glad you survived Majora.”

“Thanks,” Pinkie said, forcing a smile. “You’re a good kid, Morty.”

“I try,” Morty said, following his grumbling grandfather through the portal.

It closed; leaving the five ponies alone in the room that was a universe.

Twilight wiped her eyes. “Thank you. Thank you all. I…”

“It’s okay,” Flutterfree said, wiping her own eyes. “We’re always going to be here for you, Twilight. We didn’t vanish with that universe.”

“…I think… I don’t think I’m Twilight anymore. I…” she stood up tall, glaring at the pillar in the center of the room. “I am Charter-Princess Evening Sparkle. Or… Eve.”

“…Was that what she chose?” Flutterfree asked.

“Yeah. Yeah it was.” Eve stood up and wiped her eyes. “…Let’s go home.”

Pinkie did the honors of opening the portal. The five of them stepped through, once again in the grinder room.
The five ponies slowly trotted out of the room, heading for the Map – where they would no doubt talk for hours about what had just happened.

Eve lingered in the grinder room for a few seconds.

She glanced at the grinder itself. Smooth, clean, and working as it should.

She glanced at the bottom of her left hoof. It was dirty, worn, and now slightly wet from all the stress of the day. But it was still visible.

An ‘X’ made in permanent black marker.

She looked at the grinder again, just to make sure it didn’t have an X on it.

Eve gulped. She cast a spell on her hoof, removing the X forever.

Charter-Princess Evening Sparkle trotted after her… friends, tears rolling down her cheeks.
Pinkie Pie, Flutterfree, and Nova sat at a table in Iroh’s tea shop, their expressions dominated by the saggy lines of boredom.

“Your tea is getting cold!” Iroh called over to them from the counter.

“I know!” Pinkie called back.

“…I didn’t,” Nova admitted, glancing at her tea. She heated it up with her magic and took another sip.

“Why weren’t you drinking it then?” Flutterfree asked Pinkie.

Pinkie shrugged. “Because… Uh… You know, I don’t really have a reason. How unlike me!”

Flutterfree rolled her eyes, glancing at her own tea in disappointment.

“Let me get that for you,” Nova said, heating Flutterfree’s drink. The unicorn turned to Pinkie, but the earth pony had already downed her entire lukewarm cup.

“…Pinkie.”

“What? I just wanted to have some fun! Get you before you could get me! And… Yeah.”

Flutterfree blinked. “…Okay, I think we have a problem if we’re resorting to this to enjoy ourselves. We should do something.”

“But we can’t!” Pinkie blurted. “Renee and Eve both can’t make it, and a three mare band just isn’t right!”

“I could mirror myself, make it four,” Nova suggested.

“Nova, that doesn’t count!”

“Pinkie’s right,” Flutterfree said. “We go on adventures together, as a team. As friends.”

“Eve doesn’t much anymore,” Nova reminded her.

“Yes… And we aren’t as close to her as we could be because of it. It’s… sad, but there’s not much we can do about it, given who she is.”

“Which is why we need to keep the group together!” Pinkie cheered. “Don’t want Renee to feel left out!”

“She might have to leave eventually, though,” Nova said. “She’s been taking on more responsibilities – diplomacy, planning, politics, lawmaking. I can see her becoming too attached to that. It’s the new ‘high society’ for her.”

Pinkie frowned. “Yeah… But there’s always a chance that doesn’t happen, and she stays with us forever!”
“She dreams big, Pinkie. Too big. She can’t resist.”

Flutterfree nodded slowly. “Yes. She was really excited when O’Neill asked her to be the diplomat this time… She likes it. It might not demand too much of her time, but you never know.”

Nova blinked. “Do... the three of us have any reason to stop adventuring like this? Any obligations?”

There was silence around the table as the three ponies thought about the question.

“No, I don’t think so,” Nova answered her own question. “Not me at least. I don’t have a job, I have little patience for whatever it is the politicians keep doing, and I really don’t see myself settling down.”

Pinkie grinned. “Same! Do you have any idea how restrained you have to be in those meetings? It’s just impossible to speak in boring talk all the time. I’m much better equipped to make new friends for everypony!”

Flutterfree smiled. “You two really are perfect for this life, aren’t you?”

Pinkie shrugged. “It’s me we’re talking about, of course I am.”

“What about you?” Nova asked.

Flutterfree glanced out a window at the halls of the Hub. “I don’t know, really. I don’t see myself going where Renee and Eve are, too much to deal with. I might settle down, though at the moment I can’t think of a place or pony I’d really consider doing that for. I... I really do think I’m making these worlds a better place, with what I’m doing. It’s hard sometimes, but I don’t think I’m going anywhere.”

“We probably need somepony without a commanding disposition on the team,” Nova commented. “Pinkie and I aren’t exactly... subtle.”

“Or calm!” Pinkie chuckled.

“Oh, Pinkie,” Fluttershy said, “don’t sell yourself short. I’ve seen you handle things with as much grace and dignity as any Rarity could have.”

“Yeah. You just don’t like to,” Nova added.

Pinkie raised an eyebrow. “Oh, so we’re going full-on psychoanalysis today, are we?”

“I do have a point.”

“Eh. You do.”

Flutterfree furrowed her brow. “…Do you think maybe, if ponies leave the group, we can invite others to come?”

Pinkie nodded. “Of course we could! But AJ and Dashie still aren’t available.”

“What about Sweetie?” Nova asked.

“Has her own group to deal with.”

“…Corona?” Flutterfree suggested.
Pinkie put a hoof to her chin. “Maybe after she finishes her studies in Equis Cosmic?”

“But then Sombra would know everything,” Nova spat, expression souring.

“I’m sure we could convince Corona to-“

“Pinkie… Let’s just not, okay?” Nova said.

Pinkie raised an eyebrow. “Nova, Corona’s still a good pony, and Sombra’s not exactly evil-“

“Sombra’s a problem and you know it. I’ve been watching what she does closely. She’s got dirt on everyone. I’ve found dozens of instances of her using blackmail against important people. She even manipulated Luna once!”

Flutterfree pursed her lips. “That is true…”

“What does she do with the stuff she gets?” Pinkie asked.

“Ask for favors, get herself into more locations. I’m telling you, she’s going to control us all!” Nova raised a hoof.

“…Ooooor maybe she’s just looking for secrets.”

“Some things are supposed to stay secret!”

Flutterfree put a hoof to her chin. “She hasn’t told the world what really happened with Majora yet. Actually… Nova, you follow her actions closely. What has she revealed?”

“…Mostly secret addresses and classified information on the nature of other universes and a few scientific studies.”

“I think that may help us be more open with each other,” Flutterfree said. “We can’t really hide addresses from each other, so why try?”

“Just because it may have an unintended good side effect doesn’t mean she should do it!”

Pinkie nodded. “Yep, Nova’s right this time. Just because the explosion sends cake all around the planet doesn’t mean you should destroy the delectable ice cream mountain!”

Flutterfree pondered this. “Good point. There are secrets we want to keep though, and we never know when me might run into a universe where there’s a secret weapon to blow up everything.”

“Still no Corona, can’t trust her,” Nova asserted.

“Nova…”

Nova held up her hoof. “I mean we can’t trust her presence. She won’t betray us, but she’s in Sombra’s web.”

“Yeah…” Pinkie said, admitting defeat. “Ooh! What about Alushy!?”

“EVEN WORSE!” Nova blurted.

The three of them stared at each other for a moment and devolved into giggles.

Flutterfree looked around at the patrons of the tea shop. “Maybe we should consider a non-pony.
Toph already has her team, but there are others. Sparky.”

“Studying, and we don’t want Eve to think we’ve just replaced her,” Nova pointed out.

“Eve won’t think that!”

Pinkie nodded in confirmation.

“Still, it won’t look good,” Nova asserted.

“Mlinx?” Pinkie suggested.

“That’s a great idea,” Flutterfree said. “…I have no idea where he is though.”

“He may not be a fan of us, either,” Nova added.

“We could at least ask,” Flutterfree continued.

Pinkie grinned. “Yeah! Mlinx! Well, we’ll have to talk with Renee and Eve about getting new members…”

“Maybe Eve has an idea,” Nova said. “After all, she is working on that project with Cosmo right now. Maybe something will come out of it.”

“Sh sh sh!” Pinkie hissed. “Top secret stuff!”

“Well now that you’ve made a big deal out of it, everyone knows we were talking about top secret stuff,” Nova muttered.

“Oh. Oopsie.”

“It’s okay. Not like we’ve actually given any important information away.”

Flutterfree nodded. “Maybe we should talk about what somepony else is doing instead. Or find something to do ourselves.”

“And now we’re back to not knowing what to do with ourselves…” Nova muttered.

Pinkie looked to the entrance to the tea shop suddenly.

“What is it?” Nova asked.

“Wait for it…” Pinkie said, holding up a hoof.

They stared at the door for several seconds. Nothing happened.

Pinkie narrowed her eyes. “I was sure w-“

The doors flew open, revealing Trixie and Discord. “HEY! EVERYPONY!” Trixie called.

“Discord here has just created an arcade of chaos, open one-day-only! COME AND REVEL IN THE MAGIC!”

Pinkie grinned. “Let’s see what you’ve got! I bet you won’t hold a candle to the Pinkie Emporium!”

Discord grinned. “I bet otherwise.” He snapped his fingers and created an interdimensional portal that led to the Pinkie Emporium. He tossed a candle into it.
“Just take us to the arcade already,” Pinkie blurted.

“Right this way, people of the Hub,” Discord said, walking out with an exaggerated bow.

Flutterfree got out of her chair with a smile on her face. “Guess we know what we’re doing now.”

“Yeah! And do you know what the best part is?” Pinkie asked.

“What is it?” Nova questioned.

“I don’t have to worry about anything for once. We’re free to just enjoy ourselves today!”

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The absurdly over-the-top and oversized Enterprise flew through hyperspace, the diamond-like colors of the universe absolutely delighting Renee’s eyes.

“This is perhaps one of the most fabulous sights I’ve ever seen out of these spaceship windows!” she declared. “I can almost see the crystal structure within the patterns… I know it doesn’t actually exist, but even my eyes are fooled!”

O’Neill shrugged. “Meanwhile, my brain just has the word ‘shiny’ playing on repeat.”

Renee raised an eyebrow. “I am, admittedly, unsure if I should take that at face value or not.”

O’Neill just smirked, nodding to himself.

Renee let out a mildly indignant huff, turning to a sheaf of papers in front of her. She flipped through them with her magic.

“Studying for a test?”

“Reading up on the beings we are going to see,” Renee said. “It’s called preparing yourself.”

“That’s what mission briefings are for.”

“First of all, those who create mission briefings often forget to mention important details out of oversight. Secondly, didn’t you say mission briefings were for ‘letting everyone know we know less than we’d like without actually saying it out loud’.”

“I said that?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t give myself enough credit.”

Renee rolled her eyes. “Of course you don’t, General.” She flipped a page. “What do you think of these aliens, by the way?”

“That we know less than we’d like.”

Renee stifled a laugh. “Really, General, I can only get so much from briefings and these papers.”

“I only encountered the crystal women once, and I can best describe the experience as what a parrot must feel.”

“Ooh, that sounds dreadful.”
“I’m saying things. They understand these things. And then they go ‘aw, isn’t the little monkey adorable!’ …Though it was less ‘adorable’ and more ‘stupid’. I don’t think they believed anything I said as more than fantasies of an ‘inferior species’.”

“One would think your ship would be enough evidence to the contrary.”

“They thought we stole it. After we got to that point some things were said that I’m sure both sides regret and we started shooting at each other.”

Renee flipped through the pages of the report. “I know that.”

“And now you’re here to use your intricate knowledge of appearance, gems, and diplomacy to stop them from shooting at us this time.”

Renee adjusted her hat. “I’ll try my best, darling. How long until we arrive?”

O’Neill glanced at the screen. “Handful of seconds.”

“You know, you should really have an alert for tha-“

“Fifteen seconds until arrival,” the computer declared over the intercom.

Renee took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Nevermind then.”

O’Neill sat up straight in his chair so he would look presentable. Renee put her papers on a nearby workstation and stood up, taking a position to O’Neill’s right.

The Enterprise dropped out of hyperspace, finding itself in an area of space with no particularly close stars or planets. There was exactly what they expected to find – a green spaceship in the shape of a hand, significantly smaller than the Enterprise itself.

“Opening a channel,” the communications officer declared. “Open.”

Renee cleared her throat. “I am Renee Belle of the universe Equis Vitis. I have been asked by my good friends here – the Tau’ri – to intercede with you on their behalf. I assure you, whatever violent or regretful things they may have said, they are willing to make up for – within reasonable bounds, of course. All I wish from you, at this juncture, is a willingness to listen to that which I have to say.”

The hand ship sent a signal back, revealing a tall, green woman with a gemstone embedded in her left shoulder. Her body seemed oddly smooth, like it was artificially created rather than grown – and definitely inorganic.

“I am the Emerald of this ship.”

Renee bowed to Emerald as subserviently as she could. “Emerald, I thank you for holding your fire.”

“If you want to talk, I’m not going to waste power,” Emerald said. She spoke with a calculated, flat tone – but her eyes betrayed a mild disgust with the beings before her. Renee kept a close watch on the Gem’s face as she brought herself back up to all four hooves.

“Emerald, as I understand it, you and the Tau’ri were unable to maintain a dialogue for long. May I ask what you think that reason is?”

“They’re rude, disrespectful, and not to mention shouldn’t be out here among the stars in the first place.”
Renee shot O’Neill a look to shut him up before he started. “…Anything else? What about this ship?”

Emerald’s contempt and disdain vanished for a moment – replaced with momentary surprise that was quickly covered up in a stern expression that was more guarded than previously. “What about the ship?”

“Well, it is an impressive feat of engineering, and may be seen as a curiosity – or a threat.” She paused to let that sink in. “It is possible you had not seen anything quite like it before.”

Emerald chose her next words carefully, clearly having moved from ‘talking to a parrot’ to ‘this horse might have a brain in her somewhere’. “We were not able to explain every reading within the ship. The unknowns had little bearing on our retaliation, however.”

“Perhaps not, but it does lead me into something I’d like to offer.” Renee smiled brightly. “We are willing to tell you how we built some of this ship. Not all, you understand – state secrets and all that – but we have publicly available documents and schematics we can send to you if you’ll allow it.”

“Send us these schematics.”

Renee nodded to the communications officer. With a press of the button, the bare-bones schematics and an abridged history of the ship’s construction was sent over. Renee used her horn to write a note, letting the officer know to send some scientific theory data as well.

Emerald looked at the schematics herself, intelligent eyes sweeping through the information. She put the paper down. There was the slightest hint of a smile on her face. “So, you really did build this. Something unheard of for your kind, but if you really are from another universe, then everything changes.”

“I thought you might think that.”

“What else are you willing to give us?”

“There are many things, including the secret to interdimensional travel, which we can consider giving you if you’re willing to cooperate with us in discussion in a more… formal meeting,” Renee said. “It won’t do for us to do this when we’re in the middle of a trap, after all.”

O’Neill sputtered. “What?”

Emerald ignored his outburst. “I have no authority to make such a decision myself. I will have to bring this up with the Diamond Authority. But I shall regardless. And as for the trap you are in, we will leave the ships hidden and dormant.”

“Unless the Diamonds tell you to, of course. In which case we will defend ourselves. Or just leave the universe.”

Emerald ordered somebody to send a message. Then she turned back to Renee. “It should take only a handful of minutes for a message of that significance to be recognized. Until then, I am curious. What is the basis of this interdimensional technology?”

Renee shrugged. “I am no scientist, Emerald – I do not know the inner workings of the devices. They punch a hole in reality and we arrive somewhere else entirely. Sometimes with ponies – like myself. Sometimes with humans. Sometimes with something completely different – such as
“You have not encountered Gems before?”

Renee shook her head. “Not that I’m aware of. We have certainly had our run in with unusual creatures over the years, but nothing quite as crystalline as yours.”

“What is your highest race?”

“I suspect we don’t have as strong of a hierarchy as you, but if I may define ‘highest’ as ‘most powerful’ on an esoteric level, the Ascended of Earth Tau’ri are spiritual beings whose will can shape entire nations. We have a few beings on that level in our alliance. We are aware of ‘higher’ beings, but they aren’t part of us.”

Emerald looked worried for a moment. She opened her mouth to ask another question – but then warning lights started blaring on both ships.

O’Neill and Emerald stood to attention at the exact same time. “REPORT!” they bellowed.

Renee only caught her side of the report. “Unusual interdimensional energies surging. It isn’t us sir, and it’s not them either. Coming from another plane.”

“Spin up the Spectral Tube!” O’Neill ordered. “Seal the connection from this side!”

Mauve’s voice rang out over the intercom. “General, we don’t have a spell for that specifically-“

“Code it Mauve! Now!”

Mauve went silent – presumably he was working frantically to code the Spectral Tube.

“What are you doing?” Emerald shouted at them.

“We are trying to seal away whatever this is!” Renee declared. “We-“

A hole ruptured in space-time, taking the shape of a portal – but it wasn’t like any portal they’d ever seen. This one was jagged around the edges, lined with a blood-red glow. Inside, there was only blackness – no stars.

The portal moved, opening itself like a gigantic maw, teeth many kilometers long. It moved to envelop the two ships.

Mauve finished coding – the Spectral Tube of the Enterprise lit up like a unicorn horn, except with every color of the rainbow. The energies attempted to force the jagged portal away.

The effort hardly even slowed the powerful portal. Both ships were engulfed by the portal, shoved into a universe of pure darkness.

It closed, leaving the ships alone.

Emerald and Renee stared at each other. Emerald glared, demanding an explanation without actually saying anything.

“Emerald, look within yourself. Do you really think we could have done this?” Renee said.

“…It’s possible.”
“Please, we’re just little fleshy beings. We may have some tricks, but… that wasn’t one of them.”

Emerald nodded, saying nothing.

Renee allowed herself to calm down a bit - at least the Gems weren’t going to retaliate right away. Her response had been a gamble. She turned to O’Neill. “Now what?”

“Now we go yell at the engineers to get us out of here.” He pressed a button. “O’Neill to engineering! Can we get the dimensional drive active?”

“Negative, something’s wrong,” came the reply.

“Figures,” O’Neill muttered. “Well, Emerald, it looks like you’re stuck here with us until one of us can figure a way out of here.”

“It sure seems that way,” Emerald said.

“Right,” Renee said. “What we need to remember is that we’re in this together, whatever this is. What we should not be doing is shooting at each other.”


Renee took in a deep breath. “Of all the worst things that could happen… I wouldn’t say this is the worst possible but this is pretty far down there!”

O’Neill sat down in his chair. “In other news, Tuesday.”

“Sadly, yes.”

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Toph was not a fan of space stations. Rarely were they large enough to extend beyond her senses, and even when they were, she could always feel the nothing outside. It was different from air, from underground caves, even different from standing on the edge of an airship. Even then she could feel something out there, a vibration, a confirmation that stuff existed.

But on space stations there was nothing.

Not to mention people had made it abundantly clear that, in space, nobody can hear you scream. Why they felt the need to drive this factoid into her head was beyond her, she was sure people weren’t quite that cruel.

However, she had to be here, so she had to suck it up.

“Toph, you’re shivering,” Lieshy said.

“Am not,” Toph blurted.

Lady Rarity shook her head. She wore her mane in a different style now, and her spirid eyes were visible when she wasn’t wearing her helmet – like now. “You are. And you’re exciting the metal in the station. Much more and I think you’ll set off a structural integrity alarm. And we don’t want to deal with the bureaucracy that will entail.”

Toph found herself considering setting off an alarm so she wouldn’t have to be here anymore – but no, she had a job to do. They all did.
She steadied herself. “Right. Have we found anything yet?”

“We haven’t even left the port section,” Vivian commented.

“So what you’re telling me is we have nothing on Rose?”

“We know she’s here,” Lieshy said, holding up a pad. “She’s registered as on-station. Can’t tell you where, Cosmo isn’t all that concerned with knowing the location of every single pony in her empire.”

Toph furrowed her brow. “Is there an Arc-town on the station?”

“One of the largest not on a planet,” Lieshy answered. “Twenty percent of the population here are Arcei. Probably due to its proximity to the shipyard.”

“Then that’s where we’re going,” Toph said, marching down a random hallway. She stopped short. “…This isn’t the way, is it?”

“No,” Lieshy said. “The correct vector would be… in the elevator. We will have to become sardines.”

The four of them piled into the tiny, pill-shaped elevator of the station and descended into the station proper. Toph couldn’t see anything, and she had felt all of it earlier, so she gave no reaction. The other three, however, saw a spectacle. The station itself was one gigantic spherical room, filled with enough buildings to constitute a small city. Skyscraper spires rose up to the center, six of them connecting at a central hub building. Alongside each skyscraper were beautiful examples of curved architecture, giving the pearly buildings the appearance of being plants rising from the ground.

The elevator slid along the edge of the sphere until it found a location it liked, then it opened its doors. It looked like a dropoff if they were to just walk out, but the moment they left they found that what had been the ‘wall’ was now the floor, making it look like they were crawling out of a hole in the ground.

Toph grunted, coming to her feet. “Great, now my brain hurts as well. What else do these stations have to offer?”

“Ask and receive,” Lieshy said, gesturing toward a huge line of ponies and humans in labcoats, talking to each other in hushed tones.

“I smell secrets,” Toph commented.

“Not our problem,” Lady Rarity said. “Those are Cosmo’s scientists, they won’t be doing anything nefarious, especially this close under her watchful eye. We just need to find Rose. Lieshy?”

“This way,” Lieshy said, trotting to her left. “Should only be a block away.”

The four of them walked through the space-station city. Every section may have been lined with identically constructed buildings, but each area had its own character. They had arrived in a business sector, filled with serious individuals and people with places to be. They passed through a market sector, identified by all the extra tents and neon signs everywhere.

The Arc-town was unique because of all the runic designs scrawled on all the buildings. None of them were glowing with the magic of true runes, but the Arcei were trying. The Arcei themselves walked around without fear and worry in their eyes, highly contrasted from their way of life in Lai. However, they couldn’t be described as happy either. Some looked angry, some looked bored, while
others just looked like they wanted some rest in their lives.

Toph was not surprised it was one of the angry ones who talked to them first. He was a deep red stallion who spoke with the most condescending voice imaginable.

“Welcome to our little slice of the pie, visitors! What ever can I help you with?!”

Lieshy stepped forth. “Pocket of blue, ill advised.”

“…What?”

“Precisely. We’ll show ourselves around, thank you.”

“…No, you need a guide, visitors.”

“You know who we are, don’t you?” Lady Rarity asked.

“I have never seen you in my life!”

“You’re bad at this,” Lieshy deadpanned. “If badness were goodness you would be the best liar ever.”

Vivian shook her head.

Lieshy sighed. “This is what I get for trying to mix up my analogies…”

“It’s an effort!” Vivian encouraged. “Don’t stop now.”

“The conga line of fluffy rodents,” Lieshy muttered.

Toph pointed at the stallion. “Okay, buddy, maybe you can help us. Tell us if you’ve seen Rose around.”

“No idea who that is.”

“There it is again!” Lieshy blurted. “If you want to lie convincingly, stop it with the emphasis on certain words. It calls attention to them, and your tone, breaking the case wide open! The art is one of misdirection, nuance, and technicalities.”

“…Why are you helping me?”

“I can’t stand cringe. Now, let’s see what you’ve learned. Where can we find Rose?”

“I dunno.”

“Good, you lost the inflection, and your tone did not give away any direction. Your gaze stayed fixed on me, which is a plus, though I saw you momentarily twitch to the left, so I now have only a hundred and eighty degrees of fun to search. Give me a peppermint.”

“I… don’t have any candy.”

“Through your reaction you are thinking of fleeing, and the direction you wish to flee is also to the left, so I can deduce much, much more from what you’ve just told me. Probably a place with a lot of Arcei – a meeting locale perhaps? Oh, that shrinks it down considerably. You might as well just tell me where it is!”
“Never!”

“And touchdown,” Lieshy said, turning away from the stallion. “Rose is in the large building over there. We’ll have to dig through a probable sea of Arcei to get there. Furthermore, we should hurry – the tumbleweeds are rolling.”

“The streets are emptier than they should be,” Vivian translated.

“Thank you,” Lieshy said.

“I could have gotten that one,” Toph said.

“You didn’t though,” Lady Rarity declared.

Toph threw a hand into the air and began to walk toward the building Lieshy indicated. The four of them marched in the tremendous automatic door, entering what presumably served as a town hall for the Arcei. It looked more like a giant hotel lobby than anything. It was packed with Arcei – though there were some humans and other races around, so they weren’t too out of place. They got a couple of odd looks but nothing too concerning.

Toph tapped her foot on the ground, getting a better feel for the room. “Too many Arcei around. Can’t pick her out from what I know.”

Lady Rarity glanced around with all four of her eyes, making full use of her senses. “I can’t make out anything either. She might have sensed us coming.”

“Unfortunately expected… We will have to research,” Lieshy asserted. “I suggest more interviews where I tie up the conversation in our favor.”

Lady Rarity gasped. “I… I see Eve.”


Lady Rarity pointed. Sure enough, there she was, Charter-Princess Evening Sparkle, sitting in the middle of the hall, looking up at a large blank screen.

Toph led the group to Eve, confused. She placed herself in front of the Charter’s eyes. “Eve? What are you doing here?”


“Yes. We’re chasing an enemy of the crown,” Lady Rarity said.

“Lai-Roseluck?” Eve asked.

“Yes,” Lieshy said, narrowing her eyes. “…Why?”

“I received a tip from Cosmo that Lai-Roseluck was going to give a speech. I’m here because of the sensitive material I’m told it may contain.” She pointed at the screen. “Should only be a few minutes.”

Toph folded her arms. “Any idea where she is?”

Eve nodded. “Yes. Not here, she left recently, but I’ve got a tracker on her. She’s still on the station.”

“Can you take us there?”
The screen flickered on, revealing the face of a mare. She had a cream coat, red mane, blood red arcs, and two deep oculus eyes. She cleared her throat. “Ponies of the Equis Cosmic galaxy! I am Roseluck of Lai, an Arcei, one of many refugees who have made their way to your universe. To you, I can only thank you for your hospitality – those of you who live alongside us, anyway. I also address my fellow Arcei, for what I have to say concerns them as well…”

Toph nudged Eve. “You need to take us now, Queen Luna thinks she might have sensitive information.”

Roseluck continued. “My ponies, we have had something horrible held from us by our rulers, our elders, and those who claim to want to help us. Our great Mother and Somnabula are part of a wide web of lies – important lies. You may think our worst worry is that we might lose the culture of the runes, lose what makes us special. But it is more than that – our foals, if they do not receive their arcs by the time they come of age, will lose their minds, succumbing to mental illness!”

Murmurs ran through the crowd. Lady Rarity tensed considerably. “Eve, we need to get out of here, now.”

Eve spoke with a calm smile on her face. “Not quite yet. Let her go on a bit longer.”

“The leaders of the multiverse have done nothing to help us – and they know about this! But what do we get? More reports of ‘failures’ to recreate the magic of the runes. If these people have the power to destroy an entire race of genocidal aliens, how come they can’t reproduce the runes that give us our livelihood? Is it because they just don’t care about us? Do they want us to die? Given what’s happening to the demons, this makes a pattern. This-”

The feed was cut off, replaced with static.

Vivian looked at the crowd of Arcei – Arcei who were starting to look really angry. Arcei who looked ready for a fight.

“What the hell, Twilight!?” Lieshy blurted, slipping into her old name.

Eve winced audibly as she saw the name leave Lieshy’s mouth.

In the background, the crowd of Arcei slowly began to yell amongst themselves…

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As it turned out, the inky blackness of the universe O’Neill, Renee, and the Gems were in was not completely empty, like initial scans had suggested. Their first evidence of this was ten minutes after they had entered the universe – a small ship that looked like a sea urchin dropped out of an FTL mode that wasn’t quite hyperspace or shell, but something else entirely. It looked to be in poor shape – busted, broken, and leaking some kind of magical spark.

This did not deter it from attacking.

It created a bolt of plasma in the shape of a cone drill and sent it right for the Enterprise’s front. The warship’s shields absorbed the impact, flashing golden-blue as the energy was dissipated.

“Shields at 62%!”

“RETURN FIRE!” O’Neill shouted. “What in the hell hit us?”
Before he could be answered, the combined fire of the Gem Warship and the Enterprise destroyed the attacker with hardly any fanfare at all. There were a bunch of flashing lights, lasers, and then nothing but shrapnel from the little ship.

“What in…?” O’Neill shook his head. “What kind of idiot was that!?”

Renee furrowed her brow. “I have no idea…”

Emerald called them. “This world is not empty.”

“Clearly not,” Renee said. “It appears we may actually be in danger… That ship may have been defeated easily, but that was an impressive weapon.”

“We’re salvaging the pieces now,” Emerald said.

“Anything helpful?”

Emerald glanced at a report flying by on a nearby screen. “It’s unintelligible.”

“We have a translator spell,” Renee said. “…It’s likely why you can understand us at all.”

“Spell?”

“Yes, we have access to a force called magic – we can send you files on that later, right now we need to know anything we can about that place.”

“It is in your best interests if you share whatever you find,” Emerald said, sending the files over.

Renee knew a threat when she heard one. “Of course. General, do we have the data?”

O’Neill nodded. “Yep. Every bit as alien as expected.”

“Give it a little bit, we can find something in… It might take hours, depending on if it’s encrypted or not..”

“Hours?” Emerald demanded. “We don’t have hours.”

“Maybe we won’t need a complete translation…” Renee said. “We can adapt the spell with Mauve’s coding, correct? He can home it in on… say, navigation.”

“Believe it or not, we already have a preset for that,” O’Neill said. “We recover so many random computers we want to read. You wouldn’t believe how many of them are completely useless stores of scantily clad women.”

“…Unfortunately I think I can.”

O’Neill ordered the spell’s use, and within a minute a small section of the coded mess had been decoded. There were no words, but there was math. Math, and a few programs that gave coordinates in distance and two angles, as well as a constant for the speed of light.

“We’ve got a coordinate system,” Renee said. “It places us… 101 light years from the center location. Wherever that is.”

“Then that is where we go,” Emerald said. “Activate the drive.”

Space around the green hand folded in on itself. In a swirl of matter, it shot out of view in an instant.
Had O’Neill or Renee been students of theoretical FTL travel methods, they would have identified the method as one that relied on spatial distortion. However, neither of them were, so they had somewhat simpler reactions.

“Fancy,” O’Neill commented. “Follow them. Use the shell drive so we can stay behind them – don’t want to accidentally jump ahead.”

The Enterprise accelerated, slowly accumulating a shell of magical energies around it. The shell narrowed itself at the point and launched through space, shifting the cosmos around them like a drill. Not as fast as intergalactic hyperdrive, but they were able to see the outside world like this.

O’Neill turned to Renee as they traveled. “That Emerald is smart.”

“Without a doubt. I, for one, am glad to have someone who can realize we had nothing to do with this.”

“You know we can’t trust her.”

Renee furrowed her brow. “Technically, yes, but it is in our best interests to be as open and cooperative as possible, perhaps get her to trust us. Then maybe we can start really trusting her. Benefit of the doubt.”

O’Neill shrugged. “I’m not sure I’m willing to go that far.”

“You’re the one who called me here. I think I’m doing pretty well. Maybe give me the benefit of the doubt, hrm?”

O’Neill nodded. “Fine. But if it all blows up I get the right to gloat.”

“General, I think you always have the right to gloat. Well, perhaps right is the wrong word. It’s more like… when you gloat, it’s an unstoppable force.”

O’Neill shrugged, looking out the viewscreen at the empty black space they were passing by. “Usually you can see stars,” O’Neill said. “I can’t even tell we’re moving right now.”

“Think we’re in a heat-death universe?” Renee asked.

“I don’t know. All I know is it isn’t as empty as the others. Something saw us.”

“Maybe they are just like us? They looked bruised, battered, and… well, old. They could have been sucked in by the portal just like we were.”

“A void that sucks in ships? …I swear, I’m going to live through every single Star Trek episode before my life is up.”

“You are in command of the Enterprise. It’s just asking for trouble.”

“I might not be complaining.”

“Sure.”

“Arrival in fifteen seconds,” the computer chirped.

“You really should extend that,” Renee muttered.

“Maybe I will, maybe I won’t.”
They dropped out of FTL, allowing the shell to shatter around them. They came out right behind the
Gem ship, but the Gem ship was definitely not what they were focused on.

In front of the two ships was the largest structure any of them had ever laid eyes on. It was a spiny
structure made entirely of metal, with a vaguely spherical interior. Every inch of it was covered in
smooth metallic plating, with only scant features visible from where they were. One area had a
gigantic porthole large enough to stuff planets into, while another had so many smaller spines it was
impossible to count. One section appeared to have a radio satellite the size of a country alongside a
twisted coil of metal that had no discernable purpose.

O’Neill blinked. “I have no sense of scale really, but I can tell this is big. How big is our spiny Death
Star?”

“...The average diameter is consistent with the orbital distance of Jupiter,” a science officer
commented. “We’re still really far away.”

O’Neill snapped his fingers. “Oh! Carter talked about these things. They’re... They’re called...
Metro Ocean Brains!”

“Matrioshka Brain,” the computer corrected.

Renee looked up at the speaker the computer’s voice came from. “Thank you...? O’Neill, does your
computer usual-“

“You have clearance. Just think about what Cosmo is working on for us right now for your
explanation.”

Renee blinked, and then realization dawned. “Oh. Right. Nevermind then, carry on.”

Emerald called them. “Do you know what this is?”

“They called it a Matrioshka Brain,” Renee said. “Though what that is, I don’t know.”

“A machine built in multiple layers around a star – or solar system – to use all the energy within,”
O’Neill said. “No, we can’t build these, don’t ask.”

Emerald looked at a screen with the Brain on it, her expression that of a woman who wasn’t sure
what her worldview should be anymore. After a few seconds of silence, she spoke again. “We
should not disturb the structure – it would be far too dangerous.”

“Agreed,” O’Neill said.

“Incoming!” different officers yelled on both ships.

“Oh for the love of- can’t we catch a break!?” O’Neill blurted. “Prepare weapons again! Where is it
coming from this time?”

“A debris field in orbit of the Brain, ‘southern’ heading!”

The ship in question was just as bruised and battered as the previous ship they had seen, but of a
much larger and smoother figure. It vaguely resembled a horseshoe with a single protruding truss in
the center. A half-dozen drones flew around the smooth ship in a defensive formation. One of their
bays opened.

“Tremendous energy surge detected!” officers yelled.
“Whatever they’re building up, we don’t want it to hit us. Spectral Rod, deflect it,” O’Neill ordered.

A heavy missile shot out of the attacker’s bay doors, heading right for the Enterprise. The rod lit with its magic, grabbing ahold of the missile with telekinesis and twisting it to the side. The missile was detonated remotely shortly thereafter, lighting up the sky with a miniature sun. There was so much power both the Enterprise and the Gem Warship were tossed to the side.

“Shields at 50%!”

“We do not need to be in this many fights today…” O’Neill muttered.

The Gem Warship flanked the attacker, firing its main laser. The attacking ship had no shields, but the drones moved to intercept all incoming attacks, taking the brunt of the force themselves. The attacks that did get through found the ship’s hull to be incredibly thick and durable, though the weakened areas shattered with ease.

The Enterprise was only using the Spectral Tube, laser weapons, and physical turrets – keeping the drone weapons in reserve in case something worse happened. Soon, all the attacker’s defensive drones were destroyed, and its weapon systems were disabled. The attacker became adrift.

O’Neill opened a channel. “Your ship has been disabled. Surrender now, and explain yourself.”

To their surprise, there was a response. A man made of crystal appeared on their screen, composed of a greenish material.

Renee’s eyes widened. “A man of light…” she whispered to herself.

The emerald man slammed his fist onto his heavily broken console. “Explain myself? Explain myself? What kind of cruel man are you!? This is the Sinkhole! I needed material to survive, and you need it as well! But you know what? Screw you! Not giving you nothing!” He pressed a button and the ship self-destructed. It wasn’t a very impressive explosion, more like a burst of fire that vaporized the center compartments, leaving the rest to drift.

Renee, Emerald, and O’Neill all exchanged glances.

“Guess we’ve seen another crystal lifeform now,” O’Neill commented. “Not the best impression.”

“The Sinkhole…” Renee said, mulling over the information. “Ships are dragged here, and they can’t run on their internal energy forever. The have to resort to taking it from somewhere else – other ships, the debris fields…”

“Why has the Brain not been harvested?” Emerald asked.

“It probably defends itself,” O’Neill answered. “For all we know it’s responsible for bringing everyone here.”

“That seems plausible,” Emerald commented. “It looks as if this world is a difficult one to survive in. We need to be prudent.”

“Stick together,” Renee said. “Two ships are always better than one.”

“Agreed. Furthermore, that debris field – we need to scour it in case it has anything we may need. We may have plenty of reserves now, but as time progresses, those reserves could dwindle and we will wish we took the early opportunities to stock up on power.”
O’Neill nodded. “Take us in. Also tell Engineering to start scanning that Brain for dimensional weirdness.”

“Scans are picking up numerous active ships,” one of the officers said. “None within the debris field we are heading to, but in numerous places around the Brain. Most signals are extremely weak.”

“Probably busted to hell and back, not to mention desperate,” O’Neill said. “The light show we just put on will probably deter them, but you can never be sure.”

The two ships arrived in the debris field, where a truly tremendous ship must have met its end. Gigantic beams of metal that dwarfed both ships in size tumbled through space. Circuitry of alien design and bizarre shape flipped through empty space in the gravitational well of the Matrioshka Brain.

“No energy readings at all,” an officer announced. “Anything that could provide significant amounts of direct power has been scraped clean.”

“Anything interesting at all?” Renee asked.

“Definitely. Pretty sure there are a lot of hard drives, evidence of weapons systems, and materials coming up as ‘unknown’ everywhere. It’s a technological goldmine.”

“A goldmine no one here can use,” Emerald observed. “What good is technology if you barely have enough power to run what you know?”

“Burdensome,” Renee added. “But we could use it… if only we could get out.”

“You’ll like the report from engineering then,” the communications officer said. “They’ve figured out what the Brain is doing to our drive – it’s just a static frequency they can edit out easily. They say it’s probably just a side effect of it drawing ships here and not an actual dimensional block of any kind.”

O’Neill smirked. “We have a way out… But suddenly I’m thinking we should stay around a little while and poke through this debris…”

“Can we escape at any moment?” Emerald asked.

“With the push of a button.”

“Then we will stay for now as well. Let us search this alien place.”

The two ships set to work searching for salvage in the Sinkhole…

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“Eve!” Vivian said.

Eve held up a wing. “It’s not as bad as you think it is.”

Lady Rarity hefted her hammer as she saw the crowd slowly realize their presence. “I think their aggression is pretty bad…”

Eve spread her wings and lit her horn. “You’ll see – this was all part of our plan. Now that I’ve seen their reactions… I can go to Rose. I assume you all want to come along?”

“Of course we do!” Toph yelled.
Eve cast a teleport spell, taking them across the station to a simple cubic room, in which Rose was sitting.

“Right on time,” Rose said, looking right at them with her shifting eyes. “How do you like it now that your secret is out?”

“It isn’t,” Eve said. “Your message was blocked from transmitting anywhere beyond that room.”

Rose blinked. “What?”

Toph shook her head. “What?”

Eve took a position where she could see both Toph’s group and Rose without turning her head. “Cosmo and I knew something was happening here the moment Rose arrived on the station – the Arcei are monitored somewhat closely here.”

“I knew you didn’t trust us,” Rose spat.

“Not for the reasons you think,” Eve said. “We were able to determine you were setting up a secure galaxy-wide transmission for everyone to see. We reasoned that it probably contained something we didn’t want released, probably the Arcei secret. I was sent here to watch it unfold, to see what would happen amongst the Arcei. They… reacted with more anger than I would have liked, but not a truly horrendous amount. Lai-Somnabula will attempt to talk to them about it, to see if maybe we can release this information to the public.”

“Spare me your high-road arrogance,” Rose muttered. “You have no intention of telling anyone anything. You just want us to die out.”

“That’s not the case at all,” Eve said, voice cracking slightly. “I don’t want any of your children to suffer because of some fluke of biology.”

“Then where’s the cure? Where’s the runes? You’ve had years to figure out how to make them, and I’ve seen you all build much bigger things!”

“I assure you, we’re working on it,” Eve said. “In fact, this very station is where most of the research takes place. The research is why we watch all the Arcei here closely. Some of them are part of the efforts.”

“So you’re experimenting on us now?!”

“I- no! I-” Eve took in a deep breath and let it out, extending her hoof to relieve stress.

“Willing participants?” Lieshy asked.

“Yes,” Eve said, regaining control of her words. “It’s not hard to find an Arcei willing to devote themselves to continuing their culture of runes. We don’t tell them about the real danger we are trying to fix, and we also try to choose Arcei we think will keep quiet. I assure you, we’re not just throwing your ponies into labs and grinding them up.”

Rose glared. “I don’t.”

Lady Rarity interrupted. “Starcei once told me that, if anypony were actually willing to grind Arcei up to find the secret to creating Runes, it probably wouldn’t take long. But we’re not willing to do that.”
Eve nodded. “It’s out of the question, no matter how much the scientists think it’d help. We don’t harm our subjects beyond minor surgery.”

Rose pointed a hoof at Eve. “It… It doesn’t matter even if this all is true! We all have a right to know what’s been kept from us! What the dangers are!”

Eve narrowed her eyes. “Your Arcei were violently angry. I’m not sure Somnabula is going to be able to stop their rage, in which case we’ll have to confine them to this station until research is complete.”

“See? You’re just as controlling as I said you were! You just want to have things your way!”

“You’re an idiot,” Lieshy muttered.

“Excuse me?”

Lieshy opened her mouth, but Eve forced it shut with her magic. “Aaaa- let’s not send her into more of a rage than she already is, okay?”

Lieshy nodded slowly.

“I want to hear this,” Rose pushed. “Why am I an idiot?”

Eve looked Rose right in the eye. “You’re just driven – driven by anger. Anger against us. I think it’s simply because we have the ability to do whatever we want in your eyes – and that you can do nothing. You probably resent us for trying to help in the first place, don’t you?”

Rose glared, but said nothing.

“Would you like us to return you to Lai? You won’t be welcomed there. If you had been left there, you would have-“

“Armonia wanted Luna’s empire to fall. Do you know who would have risen from that?” Rose demanded.

Eve blinked. “You know about that too?”

“Of course I do, I’m a high-end oculus, and a member of her order. A defunct order that Maud is trying desperately to keep alive, the fool. The point is, who do you think would have risen once Luna fell? Us. We were poised to take control and enter into an age of Arcei. That was Armonia’s plan – to pay us back for all the suffering we’d endured for being different! But no, you all had to come in, give the stupid Spectacularium its intelligence, and throw everything off the rails.”

“…You know we tried to save Armonia, right?”

“You failed. And it was your fault in the first place the Sage got in that position.”

“You could probably trace the blame back to the man of light and the enchantress,” Lieshy said. “That’s where all of us were tied together.”

“They had no active part! They were clueless!”

“So were we,” Eve said. “We were reacting.”

“Who has that right?” Rose demanded. “To be able to just waltz in and accidentally change everything? That’s just wrong! Even more than doing it on purpose!”
Eve looked at the underside of her hoof. She put it down, and shook her head. “What if it is wrong? I don’t see us being able to stop. Or you being able to stop us. What would you have us do?”

Rose blinked, surprised by the question. “I… I…”

“You’re right. There is a problem. But anger isn’t the way to solve it. Neither is provoking a fight.”

“They still deserve to know.”

“She’s clinging to her last thread with deadly intent,” Lieshy said. “Lost cause, Eve. Nice try though.”

Eve shook her head. “No… I think I’ve got something else. You don’t have to like us Rose – but I think I can make you realize what you’re doing will only make things worse. I can show you something.”

“Eve, you should just lock her up,” Toph said. “Seriously, she tried to reveal classified information! That’s bad!”

“She’ll be punished somehow, regardless,” Eve said. “This doesn’t mean I shouldn’t try to show her the way. You all should come along – I’ve got something beautiful to show you.”

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O’Neill, Renee, and a few officers were standing in the same room as Emerald and a handful of her colorful Gem officers. They were in one of the Enterprise’s tremendous hangar bays, and they had collected a truly astonishing amount of interesting technology. All of it was powered down, but it was clearly going to be very useful. Dozens of unusual metal alloys, computer designs unlike anything they had ever seen, and fragmented weapons that operated on completely unknown sciences.

“Well, I think this has been quite the successful haul,” O’Neill said, looking at the pile. “It looks like junk.”

“It may be, but one Gem’s junk can be treasure to another,” Emerald commented.

“We have a similar saying. Not so different, you and I.”

Emerald raised an eyebrow, but notably didn’t flinch with disgust at the suggestion. “This is certainly enough to make the Diamond Authority think twice about just dismissing everything that’s happened.”

“We should probably head back soon,” Renee said. “Even if all the ships in here are weak and low on power, they could get clever eventually. We’ll have to offer them a way out, of course, but that’s only once we ourselves are out.”

“Offer? They’ve done nothing but attack us!” Emerald blurted.

“True,” Renee said. “But they were trapped here just like us – we should at least offer them a way out. I suggest we release a transmission as we leave, one telling ships that want to escape where the portal is. We can keep it open with a buoy or something. We can do that, right?”

O’Neill nodded. “We have some on board, makes it easier to move fleets.”

“Good. We’ll check in on them every so often, of course. Possibly even figure out how to shut off
“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Emerald asked. “They’ll come through and shoot at whatever they want. They’re definitely not welcome in Gem space.”

“I’m sure we can think of a place, right O’Neill? Equis Cosmic can always use more people.”

O’Neill nodded. “Definitely. All we need-“

Alarms started blaring. “PROXIMITY ALERT!”

O’Neill put a palm on his forehead. “Beam us to the bridge, open a portal for both our ships.”

“CODE ELDRITCH!”

O’Neill’s relaxed and laid back expression shifted to instant concern. Emerald, Renee, and the General were teleported to the Enterprise’s bridge. “Get the Gem ship on the line!” O’Neill shouted. “Tell them we might need to really break for it! What do we have?”

“It’s still coming out of the… FTL window,” an officer said, pointing at the main screen. A truly tremendous ship, multiple kilometers long, was pouring out of a wispy, impossible form of space tinted with red power. The ship itself resembled a battering ram with a brilliant plow at the front. The main body was covered in spires, giving it the appearance of a true warship, which it no doubt was.

Like all other ships they had seen, this one was heavily bruised, worn, and battered. However, O’Neill had the distinct impression the age of the vessel wasn’t going to give them the edge in a fight.

The Enterprise created a portal to the Gem universe, placing it between them and the warship. The Gems and Enterprise moved toward the portal, ready to get out of there.

The escape did not happen. The behemoth of a warship shot a single battering ram of energy from one of its many cannons, disrupting the edge of the portal with a calculated explosion. The escape route dissipated.

The attacker did not fire again. Instead, both ships got a hailing signal.

“They… Want to talk…” Renee said, rubbing her chin. “Oh, I’m not sure I like this…”

“Let’s play their game,” Emerald said. She turned to the communications officer. “Answer it!”

The officer glanced at O’Neill for confirmation – the General nodded.

A channel opened up. On the screen was yet another race completely foreign to all of them – a white, humanoid creature with muscles that were somehow both rippling and smooth. His ears were just holes in the side of his head flanking a forehead that was a smooth purple dome that glinted in the light.

The ship behind the white alien looked like it was falling apart. They could make out several people behind the alien, including an aged human standing at his side.

“Greetings, newcomers to the Sinkhole,” the white alien spoke with a voice that was distinctly higher pitched than expected, but somehow not any less threatening. “I am Lord Frieza.”

“I am Miss Renee Belle of Equis Vitis,” Renee added.

“I am the Emerald of this ship,” Emerald finished.

“Good, Now that introductions are out of the way, business.” Frieza flexed one of his wrists. “You have something I want – a way out of here. I’m in a cooperative mood today, so I’ll give an option where everyone wins. I picked up over your embarrassingly unencrypted transmissions mention that you’ve figured out how to escape. And it clearly appears that was no joke. So here’s how it’s going to be – you’re going to make a portal large enough for all of us to escape through and then all of us will go our separate ways. Sound good?”

Renee narrowed her eyes. “You have no intention of letting us live.”

A slight annoyance crawled through Frieza’s cocky smile. “If that’s what you want to think. How about some assurance? I come personally to your ship, so you have me as a hostage. Then once we’re on the other side we all go our separate ways.”

Renee used her horn to create a magical message for Emerald to see nearby. Can we count on the Gem armada for backup?

Emerald nodded – though it wasn’t as sure of a nod as Renee would have liked. But she didn’t want to get in a firefight with this gigantic warship. Renee nodded to O’Neill.

“…Seems like a fair trade,” O’Neill said.

“Splendid!” Frieza declared. “Oh, you humans are always so cooperative! Not to mention industrious – did you know this ship was constructed by humans of a distant universe? Some Imperium of Man or something. So many natural weaknesses in your physiology, but you always find a way to bring up some kind of technological solution, even if it involves messing with powers far beyond your control.”

Renee raised an eyebrow. Frieza was clearly trying to sway them to like him, but it was a rather pathetic attempt.

“Can we have your location so you may be beamed over?” O’Neill asked.

“Sure!” Frieza said. “Get my assistant Adama as well, such a prime example of human ingenuity.”

The older man next to Frieza just nodded wordlessly.

O’Neill nodded for the teleportation once the coordinates had been received. Emerald walked over to the communications officer and whispered something to him while Frieza and Adama were in transit.

“Lovely!” Frieza said, taking a stroll around the bridge like he owned the place. “You know, it can get so tiring engaging in firefight after firefight in that Sinkhole. Nobody understands diplomacy; it’s all war, war, war. The people who get into these big ships get there either by chance or brutal combat. Rarely any discussion anymore – makes it a bit boring.”


The Enterprise tunneled through reality with a portal large enough for Frieza’s ship. The Enterprise entered first, Frieza’s behind, and the Gem hand last – all three of them returning to the seemingly empty part of space where there had been a diplomatic ‘showdown’ only a few hours prior.

The portal closed behind them.
Frieza’s smile turned nasty. “And… you lose!”


Frieza grinned. “Well…” he pointed a two fingers. A beam of energy flew out of each, one hitting Renee square in the horn, the other knocking O’Neill’s gun out of his hands. “I might be a living superweapon.”

Emerald grinned. “We’ve got you as well though.” She nudged the communications officer, who sent out the signal. Suddenly, several dozen Gem warships appeared, surrounding the entire area of space.

Renee grunted, standing up. “Frieza, we have you surrounded. You best be on your way.”

“Sixty four,” Frieza said.

“…What?” Renee said, a sinking feeling coming to her stomach.

“I’ve done this conquering and controlling thing so many times I’ve taken to keeping track of how many times I hear certain phrases. By the way, ‘what’ stands at eleven-thousand two-hundred and five.”

Emerald growled. “You can’t be that cocky. You know nothing of the Gem armada’s capability!”

“I don’t need t-“

The teleported activated, taking Frieza away.

O’Neill smirked. “And now he’s adrift in the void of space. Sometimes I love the teleporter. …Sometimes.”

Emerald smirked. “He would need air to survive, being a flesh-bag. Ha! The fool!”

Adama slammed his hands on a table, speaking for the first time. “It is all of you who are being fools right now! Frieza has enough power in himself to survive in the cold vacuum of space!”

“Then we’ll just shoot him-“ O’Neill said.

“You don’t understand, General,” Adama continued. “He has the power within him to destroy planets in under an hour. Planets. He could face our ship directly and he would probably win.”

The room fell silent.

The entire Enterprise shook. Everyone’s eyes turned to the screen – where they could see Frieza, pointing a single finger with a relaxed expression on his face.

“GEMS!” Emerald yelled. “ALL GEMS, ATTACK THE HUMANOID! FULL POWER!”

“…Call all the help we can,” O’Neill ordered. “NOW.”

~~~

Eve, Rose, and Toph’s crew appeared in the observation room of a large laboratory. The window in front of them provided a perfect vantage point for a tremendous warehouse of the lab. Ponies, humans, and other races milled around, most in labcoats of some kind or another. The warehouse was mostly filled with houses made of clear walls, each with an occupant of some kind or another.
Several of these rooms were filled with Arcei, but about half were filled with a strange, gray, humanoid creature most of them had never seen before.

“You’ve imprisoned them!” Rose declared.

Eve shook her head. “Rose, they’re allowed out of their rooms whenever. That’s just where they sleep. Do you see the Arcei wandering around without labcoats? The empty rooms?”

“I bet they can’t leave the facility!”

“Most can, actually. Only those in the process of surgery or operation are forbidden from pulling out of the program. None have even tried to leave before their time is up, though – Cosmo chooses them well.”

Rose looked down at all the traffic, furrowing her brow. “…I don’t see any freshly created runes. I see poor imitations.”

“We quickly decided that we needed to go another route than just creating new Runes. After many months of failure in that department, we brought in another project. See the grey creatures?”

“I was wondering about those,” Vivian said, pressing her face to the glass. “I’ve never seen them before…”

“They were a once-dead race,” Eve explained. “They were from the stars of Earth Tau’ri, the teachers of the Tau’ri themselves. They were the Asgard, a race that was far older than most of us could imagine. But their technology failed them – their bodies became frail, unstable, and through many repetitive cloning procedures, impossible to continue living in for much longer. They stored themselves away into the Tau’ri’s many Asgard Cores, not expecting to ever be more than digital guides for their chosen race.”

“What does this have to do with the Arcei?” Rose demanded.

“Well, Cosmo used the Asgard’s cloning technology and her race’s impressive knowledge of magic to bring them back. The aliens you see down there were code only a few months ago. And we’re finally certain their bodies are stable, ready for their entire race to be reborn soon. You might hear about their return in the coming weeks yourself. It won’t be a secret much longer. This relates to your race because we’re using the same technology on the Arcei. It’s significantly more difficult – we’re trying to work out a genetic flaw present in your entire race – but we’re close. Soon, you won’t require arcs at all. Newborns can grow up without fear.”

Rose glared. “But that’ll destroy us as the Arcei! We’ll have no Arcs!”

“That may be a good thing,” a new voice said. The party turned to see Starcei strolling down the hall, Corona at her side. Both were in labcoats.

Rose growled. “…Mother. I knew you would have been part of this. Traitor.”

“Think, my child,” Starcei said, in as soothing a tone as she could manage. “It would help bring about peace.”

“But our arcs define us!”

“And who said that was a good definition? It sets us apart as pirates. As thieves. As murderer-“

Eve held up a hoof. “Starcei, I don’t think that’s true here. Rose has a valid point – runes are a part of
their culture. If they want to keep it, they should have the option. I may not be able to give them that option, but we shouldn’t call it evil.”

Starcei narrowed her eyes. “…If that is what you believe.”

Eve returned to Rose. “…What I’m saying is, we have hope here, hope that we can fix you. But we need more months of research to uncover it. And you know what your people are going to do if they hear about this – they’ll demand we return to work on recreating the runes rather than going with the genetic solution. And… I don’t think we’ll get that done in time.”

Rose glared. “You don’t mean…”

“If we try to recreate your Runes, we… Well, we’ll have to either work on more brutal experiments or have to let a few of your children lose their minds. Neither option is acceptable.”

“And ruining our culture is?”

Eve nodded. “When confronted with madness, death, or cultural loss… Cultural loss is the least of the evils.”

Rose’s resolve wavered. “You… You don’t have the right to make that choice!”

“I do,” Starcei declared. “I am your Mother, after all.”

“You betrayed us.”

“I did what was in your best interests at all times,” Starcei insisted. “And I am sorry for when I was mistaken, which was many times over all these years.”

Rose let out a breath. “At least you admit it…”

Eve nodded. “Do you see now, Rose? Do you see why you can’t cause a multiverse-wide scene over this? It’ll jeopardize the solution. And who knows? After we’re done, we could work publicly on creating new Runes for you. It might take a decade, but we could give them back. And you might be able to save your culture.”

Rose looked at Eve. “Damn it, you’re right. Damn it. Why do you always have to be so right? Always have the high ground? The power? The Understanding? What do we get!”

“Help,” Toph muttered. “Maybe you shouldn’t be so rude about it next time.”

Rose turned away, fuming.

“I think she’s got it now,” Lieshy said, turning to Eve. “What are you going to punish her with, now?”

“I’ll take care of that,” Starcei said. “Don’t worry about it.”

Eve looked at Starcei, studying her features. “All right. Whatever you decide to do to her is fine. I better not hear about anything crazy later, though.”

“You won’t,” Starcei assured. She put a hoof on Rose and led her away.

Corona coughed, making herself known. “So, I would ask what brings you to the lab, but that’s a little obvious.”
Eve smiled. “Corona!” She pulled the unicorn into a hug. “So good to see you! Sorry the visit had to start like… That.”

Corona smirked. “No problem at all. Toph, Vivian, Rarity, Lieshy.” She waved at all of them in turn.

“So, you work here?” Toph asked.

“Internship? Sorta?” Corona shrugged. “I signed up for more physics, and Cosmo insisted on placing me in the best institutions she could find. It helps to have friends in high places. So here I am, working on the top secret government project. While also working on my quantum arcane physics course. It’s a beast.”

“Glad to hear it,” Eve said. “We should grab a bite to eat some time, hang out again.”

“I’m free tonight,” Corona said.

Eve smirked. “Same. I had all day blocked off for this.” She turned to Toph. “You want to tag along?”

Toph shrugged. “Actually, I think Queen Luna will want to hear about this.”

“No offense, but you’ve given us a bit too much to think about,” Lieshy commented.

Eve smiled sheepishly. “Sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have dragged you along. Feel free to tell her anything you saw here – she should know about it already. Wouldn’t be surprised if she spaced it though, I only mentioned it to her once… I’ll teleport you to the dock directly. I know how much you hate space stations.”

“Thank you,” Toph said. Eve lit her horn and teleported the group away.

Eve turned to Corona. “So… How is it going?”

“Pretty good, as you can tell.”

“Yeah. Hey, I’m curious, how’s Sparky doing?”

Corona frowned. “I wouldn’t know. I haven’t talked to her much, and Sugarcoat doesn’t talk about her that much in her emails.”

“Oh… I’m sorry to hear that.”

Corona smiled sadly. “It is what it is. I can see you’re doing pretty well though.”

Eve nodded. “That I am. Charter-Princess. It’s a bit… overwhelming. Spike recently told me I’m the most important person in our corner of the multiverse, and I couldn’t even convince myself otherwise. And that doesn’t really feel good. Makes me feel like I’m arrogant for thinking I’m better than anypony, even if I don’t. …Right?”

“Can’t really identify, sorry,” Corona said, shrugging. “But I expect to hear a lot more about it later.”

“Right, of course. You finish your shift first. I have to talk briefly with Somnabula anyway. See you soon!”

“Same!”
“One! Two! Three!” Frieza said, blasting a single Gem warship to pieces with each of his attacks, pure energy shooting forth from his finger and disintegrating all resistance.

“He sounds like the goddamn tootsie pop owl!” O’Neill roared. “Somebody find a way to shut him up!”

“How can we even hear him!?” Renee wondered.

“Not important right now!” O’Neill shot back. “…Fire a drone. I want to see how he deals with it.”

Frieza continued decimating the fleet around him – one Gem ship at a time. He was purposefully ignoring the Enterprise, curious to see what it could cook up for him to face. He was hoping for some truly interesting things. It was also why his great Imperium of Man battle ship wasn’t even attacking – Frieza wanted to deal with it all himself. A good old fashioned curbstomp on naive little spacefaring races who thought themselves so high and mighty.

The Enterprise shot a single golden bullet at Frieza – a test of one of their more exotic weapons, he knew. He held out a hand, catching the squid-like projectile in his palm. It kept pushing, despite being at a complete standstill. Furthermore, it was still bleeding off damaging energy, a weapon clearly designed to puncture a vessel multiple times. Not all that interes-

It exploded in his face. There was no lasting damage, but it was unpleasant. “That was mildly annoying,” he declared.

“For the…” O’Neill rammed his fist into a wall. “Launch a full volley of drones and have Mauve start messing with the Spectral Rod. We’re going to ram some magic into him. Unless he has some bizarre immunity to that.”

Adama shook his head. “I do not know what your magic will do to him. I can tell you brute force will do nothing to him.”

“Figures,” O’Neill said. “Unless we can sic that Brain on him…”

“Good idea, but risky,” Renee said. “What if it decides to shoot us for interfering?”

“Right. Any ideas anyone?”

There were no suggestions. The volley of drones reached Frieza, accompanied by a handful of Gem ship lasers. Frieza grabbed several of the drones and rammed them into each other – and then the Spectral Rod activated, encasing him in a field of telekinesis. He was more than strong enough to overcome it, but he lost control of his arms for a split second. A handful of drones hit him dead on. They found they couldn’t penetrate his body, so they just exploded, sending him flying through the void of space.

Frieza grunted. “Clever trick…” He moved so fast that the telekinesis spell lost track of him and failed. “But still absolutely nothing.”

“Suck him back into the Sinkhole!” Renee said. She hit the intercom. “Mauve! Code a spell to send him to the Sinkhole in an instant!”

That spell did not take long to code – a simple adjustment to a normal dimensional spell. The multicolored magic touched Frieza. A portal opened and closed around him, but he dodged it.

“How fast is he moving!?” O’Neill blurted.
“Faster than our sensors can see,” an officer said.

“That’s it, hiding behind technology isn’t working.” Emerald declared. “Gems! Gather your best warriors – direct combat is required!”

“…Direct combat? Are you insane!?” Renee blurted.

Emerald touched the shining gemstone placed on her shoulder, summoning a double-headed scythe from the structure. “Maybe. But, if nothing else, I think he’ll appreciate some direct combat. Give more time for your ‘help’ to arrive. Which better be pretty helpful.”

“I sure hope so,” O’Neill said. “Teleport her outside, if that’s what you want.”

Emerald was teleported out into space, near Frieza. The remaining gem warships had begun to send their own warriors outside, each gem-creature producing a weapon from a brilliant crystal located somewhere on their body.

“Frieza!” Emerald declared. “You are an enemy of the Diamond Authority, and as such, you are to be shattered. You may lack a gem, but that purple dome on your head will do nicely.”

“Finally, bringing out the warriors! It’s been so long since I’ve seen a race opt for direct combat. Refreshing! By the way, twenty-two.”

“Shut up.”

“Nine million. Though most of that was from the hive-mind, so a bit hard to count with certainty…”

The gems charged, brandishing their personal weapons. Frieza took a similar approach to them that he took to the warships – blasting one of them at a time with a loose burst of energy. Most of their bodies poofed into nothing upon contact, leaving only their gems drifting amidst the stars. On the occasion where he hit a gemstone directly, the structure shattered completely in a much more violent manner.

Emerald herself was not shattered, but poofed, her gem ending up adrift.

“Is this the best you have!?” Frieza declared. “Really, I was expecting more from an interdimensiaonlly capable race-“

Then the help arrived.

“Thank the Stars…” Renee said, breathing out a sigh of relief as ships she recognized began to fill the sky. An entire fleet of Equis Cosmic ships, including the flower-shaped flagship that belonged to Cosmo herself. In the midst of the fleet were a handful of Tau’ri ships, and even a few from the Tau’ri allies. She spotted the strange white ships that belonged to a section of humans known as the Ori Remnant, and more than a few pyramid ships.

Cosmo herself teleported in front of Frieza – with two beings to her sides. Discord and Alushy.

Frieza raised the section of his skin where an eyebrow should have been. “Now these are some respectable power levels.”

“Can I turn him into a pot of petunias?” Discord asked. “I feel like that would be appropriate.”

“That would be awesome, but not quite brutal enough,” Alushy asserted. “I’m thinking we just hit him with the rainbow death ray. Cosmo?”
Cosmo narrowed her eyes. “Frieza, I know you can sense our power. Do you truly think you can win?”

“Three hundred and four.”

Cosmo blinked in confusion. “…Excuse me?”

“Classic bored asshole conqueror routine,” Alushy declared. “He’s counting the times he hears certain phrases.”

Frieza blinked. “Okay, that’s a new one.”

“Lemme try again. You’re about to get served by a fudgemothering vampire.”

“…You’re uncap-“

Alushy sunk her teeth into Frieza’s shoulder and tore off his arm. Discord moved next, turning Frieza into a baby.

Even in such an insulting form, Frieza still had power. He raised his hands, channeling power into a sphere of energy. “START FIRING!” He yelled, intending for his ship to finally help him.

“Don’t!” Adama yelled from the Enterprise, the signal going to the crew of Frieza’s ship. “We have a chance to finally be free of this tyrant!”

“Adama you son of a- where’d the purple horse go?” Frieza asked, looking for Cosmo.

Cosmo stood on the bridge of her flagship and activated the harmony energies – summoning what Alushy had called the ‘rainbow death ray’. Channeled between her and all the ships in her fleet, the power flew through the air and hit Frieza dead on. He struggled, but Discord had ensured he was in the form of a baby. He knew he was beaten.

“AAAAAAAA!” He threw the sphere of energy at the Enterprise. Everyone on board knew it would be enough energy to vaporize them in an instant – but Discord came to the rescue. He snapped his fingers, and the energy changed direction and headed directly back for Frieza.

“THIS WON’T BE THE LAST YOU HEAR OF ME!” Frieza declared.

Those were his last words as Cosmo’s power purified the very space he occupied.

Everyone took a moment to breathe.

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All gems who were not shattered would, with enough time, reform their bodies from their loose gems. Emerald had reformed her body rather quickly, going for a simple form so she could be active in the upcoming proceedings. She had sent an update message to the Diamond Authority, and they had responded instantly this time.

So currently an entire fleet of ships was headed towards Gem Homeworld space, including Adama’s warship.

Emerald, O’Neill, Renee, Cosmo, and Adama were all in a call together as they traveled.

“So I think it’s pretty clear we should leave that universe alone for now,” Renee declared. “No attempts at evacuation – who knows what other beasts like Frieza are in there?”
“There are more than I wish to admit,” Adama said. “To survive, you either become one… Or you sell yourselves to one. I shamefully had to do the latter. We are eternally grateful to you for giving us freedom from that horrid creature.”

“Anytime,” Renee said. “I still feel bad – so many lost souls in that universe… But there are just too many horrors we aren’t prepared to deal with in there.”

“While we cannot perform a complete evacuation, we could observe the universe closely,” Cosmo said. “Careful not to let any Friezas get a hold of the dimensional technology. It would be a slow process… But it could be done.”

O’Neill nodded slowly. “A new class of stealth ships may be needed…”

“By the way, O’Neill, I’ve got an old friend of yours on board.” Cosmo smiled. “I think he’ll be really glad to see you.”

“Does his name begin with T and end with R?”

Cosmo laughed. “By sheer coincidence, it does!”

Emerald blinked. “I’m missing something.”

“In-joke,” Adama said. “Perhaps something softly classified. It’s not important to us at this juncture, Emerald.”

“I’ll decide when something’s important to me or not!”

“It isn’t important to you,” Renee said.

Emerald raised an eyebrow. “What did I just say?”

“Consider it a suggestion.”

Emerald got the message loud and clear. “Right…”

Renee turned to Adama. “…Do you see any hope for the Sinkhole? Do you know anything about it?”

“I see little hope. There are records that suggest the Brain has been pulling in ships for billions of years. The war is unending, and even if you manage an evacuation it’ll still drag more into its grasp.”

“And I don’t suppose anyone is able to… alter the Brain?”

“Any who try are very quickly destroyed with weapons beyond anything the Brain itself brings into the universe.”

Renee sighed. “Right… Well, can’t save them all, unfortunately.”

Emerald looked like she wanted to say something, but didn’t.

Cosmo was the one that did. “Emerald, your race fascinates me. We have seen nothing like it in any of our travels. Do you care to introduce what you are to us?”

“We are Gems…”

~~~
Rose’s punishment was simple: she’d been given a week to wrap up any obligations she had in the multiverse, and then she’d be kept under the watchful eye of Starcei until it was believed she would behave herself. She would have little freedom otherwise, essentially becoming the ‘student’ of Starcei.

Rose would be forced to *live* in that lab.

She hated that idea.

But she knew Eve was right, she couldn’t act out. That would *hurt* her ponies, her Arcei, and she couldn’t do that.

But she wanted to hurt those *arrogant* people who thought they had the right to dictate *anything* about *anyone*. Who cared what Eve or Starcei or *anyone else* thought – Rose knew she was right. They needed to be *hurt* for what they were doing.

And she knew *just* how she was going to do that.

It wasn’t easy to get a portal to locations banned to the public, but in her attempts to be sneaky around Equis Cosmic’s security, she had become aware of some shady businesses around the multiversal society. With a bit of oculus power and ingenuity, she found a person who would open a portal for her to any world, and then open it an hour later for her to get back. It was a hefty price, but she didn’t care.

She found herself on Ardent, in one of the larger towns of Hyrule. People were already staring at her, curious as to what she was. She looked a bit odd, but not too out of place.

She walked with purpose right to the most important looking building in the town, the place where she could find protesters - people dissatisfied with the way things were being run. She walked up to the angriest looking human she could find.

“What do you want?”

“I want to tell you what your Princess and King have been hiding from you.” She pulled a booklet out of her saddlebags. “You’ll want to spread this around as far as you can. You all need to know.”

Then she walked away, leaving them with the knowledge.

The knowledge of what Ba’al’s forces really were.

The knowledge of the multiverse that had been hidden from them.

Rose herself would never be caught. Not even Sombra would be able to figure out who had started the fire…

But the fire itself would *rage*. 
Zelda may not have been the ruler of Hyrule – that honor was left to her father, the King – but she was certainly the public face of the royal family. She spoke to the people, calmed them, and performed most of the ceremonies. The people loved her, thought of her as one of them; as their voice in the way things were run.

She was also generally the member of the royal family to attend to foreign ambassadors, dignitaries, and other such visitors. Oftentimes this job was a tedious mess of trying not to upset the other person while still making her own desires known, but she had no worries about it this time. Prince Ruto was to meet with her today for the will of the aquatic Zora. He was always agreeable, kind, and understanding even when there were conflicting desires. She wouldn’t have to watch herself today, she was sure of it.

That is, she was sure of it until she actually walked into the room he was in. He was at the table, arms crossed, eyes narrowed. He never met her like that – he was always up and about, doing something, pondering some intellectual pursuit or other. He was a fan of pacing.

The fact that he wasn’t pacing put her on edge.

“Ruto, what’s-“

The fish-person took a small booklet out of his pocket and set it on the table. “I had this mailed to me today by those insurrectionists you have in your kingdom.”

“Surely you don’t believe a word they sa-“


Zelda took a seat, folding her hands and glaring at Ruto. “So? We’re allowed to have secrets.”

“I was hoping it was crazy…” Ruto sighed. “You really should have told us. My people won’t get angry – we’ll just cut ties. Again. But I can assure you we are definitely not the only people this was sent to. The others will be livid. I expect multiple ones to declare war.”

“That’s precisely why we didn’t say anything before,” Zelda said. “There would be too much conflict!”

“Well-placed intentions aside, it would have been better for you and your… ‘friends’ in this little booklet to have revealed it on your terms. As it is now, this is such a negative picture of the events… This is bad, Zelda.”

“…Yes. But we will stand strong, you know this, Ruto. Hyrule is the center of civilization. We will survive.”

“I know you will. The wars that come will be mixed, uneven, and a mess for everyone. I’m sure you’ll come out with the kingdom intact. But the damage will be done, and it will be a horrible next few years.” He glanced at the book. “Unless your friends do something. But I can’t speak for them.”

Zelda nodded. “…Thank you, Ruto.”
“For what? I’m not doing anything. I’m just declaring the Zora’s disapproval of your actions, and that we will be cutting ties for the foreseeable future.”

“For all the times you talked reasonably.”

Ruto let a small smile come to his face. “You are most welcome, Zelda.” He stood up, leaving the booklet on the table. “Goodbye.”

He walked away, leaving her alone.

Ten seconds later Zelda let out a panicked breath, struggling to keep her emotions under control.

The worst-case scenario had happened. Despite all the efforts she and Ganondorf had taken, the secret was out. The world of Ardent was going to enter an era of turmoil, and there was no way to look at it that didn’t place at least part of the blame on herself.

She picked up the booklet, examining it. There was no author, only a note on the back that told her it was copied from the original. She flipped through it for a minute, just enough to prove to herself that there was too much truth in it to deny. They were made.

She stood up and ran through the halls of the castle – right to the main throne room. She charged into the presence of her father. He was a large, rotund man who nonetheless had a commanding presence, and perhaps the most impressive white beard in the entire land. He was currently talking to his advisors, startled to see her appear suddenly.

“What is it, my dear?”

“They know,” she said. “The Zora have cut ties because of our secret. Who knows what the others are going to do.”

The King grabbed his royal scepter and stood up quickly. “Then we have no time to waste. We must take action. Our own people come first. That Daniel fellow left the Disclosure speeches here, did he not? Let us put them to use, if we can.”

Zelda nodded. “Yes, right away.”

“Send word to our otherworld allies as well – ask for assistance, anything they can offer. Anything at all. The road ahead will be long and difficult, Zelda. I know it. But together, we can face it.”

“Together. Those ponies really are rubbing off on us.”

“May not be a bad thing. Go, send word, find those documents. I’ll organize the advisors – and put the generals on alert.”

Zelda turned and ran through the castle to carry out her father’s instructions.

She held her face stern and pulled her unstable emotions as deep into herself as she could manage. They could not afford to mess anything else up in this delicate time – should her or her father’s resolve falter at any moment, the results would be disastrous. Such was the burden of the royal family, as it always was.

She prayed to gods that no longer existed that they would not have to stand alone.

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“You know,” Renee said to O’Neill as they sat on a crystal bench outside a Gem meeting room.
“Usually it’s Eve or Daniel I do this with. How come you’ve never been around when we meet with the leaders of other races?”

O’Neill stretched his arms out in front of him. “Well, it’s like this. I don’t enjoy talking to pompous self-righteous morons, and it just so happens that usually the people in charge are pompous self-righteous morons.”

“I see. Is that why you’ve kept as quiet in the meeting as you can manage?”

O’Neill nodded. “I’d rather not start a war because I mocked some Diamond or other.”

“That Yellow Diamond is quite the character,” Renee admitted. “From what I’ve gathered from the Zircons around, we would much rather have gotten Blue Diamond. A much more… understanding monarch. I’m having difficulty believing we’ll ever get Yellow Diamond to talk to us with even the respect she gives her servants.”

“She’s listening to your Cosmo,” Adama said from a different bench, having overheard their conversation.

“And the reasons for that are probably related to Starlight,” Renee commented. “She looks like a gem, and that just makes everything slightly better.”

Discord appeared between them. “You could send me in! I could prove ourselves to have power with a little dance routine! I can imagine it now – the history books proclaiming Discord as the one who convinced the Gems that talking to flesh-beings was worthwhile!”

“Two problems with that plan,” O’Neill said. “One, they’ll only accept you, not the rest of us. Two, Lord of First Impressions, you are not.”

“Humph. At least Alushy respects me.”

Alushy’s ears perked up. “Did I hear an invitation to insult someone’s very dignity? Because holy hell, am I tired of walking on eggshells around these Gems.”

Discord created a target on his chest. “Fire when ready.”

Renee held up a hoof. “We are not doing this again!”

“What’s the matter Renee?” Alushy jabbed. “Flashbacks to Esefem?”

Renee twitched. “Alushy…”

Alushy’s eyes widened. “Oh, I meant the Blackbird flight. Not the other things.”

“And that’s the closest Alushy will ever come to saying sorry,” O’Neill announced.

“I’ll take what I can get…” Renee muttered.

An Equis Cosmic unicorn ran into the room. “Urgent news from Eve!”

“What is it?” Renee asked.

“The secret is out on Ardent.”

“Dammit, I’ve just lost a bet,” Alushy muttered.
Renee took a deep breath and sighed. “Well… We expected this to happen eventually. I was hoping it would have lasted a significantly longer time. …I don’t think it would be a good idea to leave our obligations here, though. First impressions with spacefarers.”

O’Neill nodded. “Don’t want the Gems to think we don’t care about this. Or have more reasons to laugh at our ‘pathetic little monkey games’.”

Renee turned to the messenger unicorn. “Does Eve want us to do anything from here?”

“No, but she wanted you to know, so you didn’t come back to a surprise.”

“Does Eve have it handled?”

“I… Think so? The message says she and Daniel are headed over to Ardent to see what can be done. It also says to expect the worst.”

“Much as I hate to be that guy…” O’Neill began.

“No you don’t,” Alushy interjected.

O’Neill ignored her. “…Ardent’s problem is their problem. We have problems of our own to deal with here.”

Renee nodded. “And I’m sure Eve can do something without Cosmo, O’Neill, or anyone else who’s here. I have faith in her.”

“This Eve,” Adama asked. “Is she your leader?”

“As much as all of us can have a single leader,” Renee said. “She is the Charter, the reason we’re all together.”

“I can tell you all have a great respect for her – even those of you who hardly respect anything.”

“Great scott, I think he’s talking about me!” Alushy said.

“… ‘Great scott’, really?” Discord said.

“I’m mixing it up a bit.”

Adama ignored them. “The point is, someone you all respect that much… I trust her already, and I’ve never met her.”

“Eve certainly is something, Admiral,” Renee affirmed. “Though if I’m being honest, she’s not going to be able to stop all Ardent’s problems. There’s going to be a lot of broken trust on that world regardless.”

“What exactly did they keep secret?” Adama asked.

Renee gestured at everyone in the room. “Us. The other universes.”

Adama nodded slowly. “…I do not envy the position that world is in.”

“Nobody does.”

Cosmo poked her head out of the meeting room. “I’ve convinced her to let you all back in. I know this is annoying and somewhat degrading, but act at least a little dignified. Any rash actions will just
affirm her opinion that you’re all basically animals.”

O’Neill sighed. “Here we go… Round five…”

Discord looked to Cosmo. “I could-

“Whatever you were going to suggest, no. I don’t need her taking your words more seriously than most others.”

“Aw…”

They filed back into the presence of the gigantic form of Yellow Diamond, prepared for another onslaught of words from a ‘higher’ being...

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Zelda sat at her meeting table, glancing through scroll after scroll of legal documents she had been sent in the last few hours. Word spread fast when it was big, even without the communication technologies the rest of the multiverse had. She’d already received messages from the Gorons, Rito, and Deku. They ranged from outright threats of aggression from the Deku to restrained anger from the Gorons.

Gorons almost never got angry, which made Zelda most concerned about the scroll they had sent. They usually found it so easy to be polite… They had to be trying to send a message like this.

An aide opened the door. “Miss Sparkle and Mister Jackson are here to see you,” he said.

“Let them in,” Zelda spoke, taking care not to let her voice waver.

Eve and Daniel strode into the room, taking a seat across from Zelda. Daniel’s expression was unreadable, but Eve’s was like an open book – conflict was painted all over her face, along with sadness, discomfort, and a slight bit of guilt.

“Thank you for coming,” Zelda said. “We… are really going to need your help.”

“What do you want us to do? We’ll help however we can,” Eve said.

Daniel frowned. “Within reason.”

Eve looked like she wanted to correct Daniel, but after thinking a moment she realized he was right. She said nothing.

Zelda folded her arms. “When I told you why we wouldn’t participate in Disclosure, I told you why. Because war would break out. That’s still true. War hasn’t broken out yet, but I don’t need my agents to report back to know the Deku are already readying their army to demand our cooperation. They’ll almost definitely get the Rito on their side – the birds love the sharing of knowledge, and they’ll take what we’ve done as a personal offense. I don’t know about the Gorons, but it’s certainly possible they can be convinced to take action as well.”

“Is there no hope for a peaceful resolution?” Eve asked.

“There’s a chance we could convince one side to turn away with significant effort. But it seems unlikely we can convince them all.”

“Why not give them what they want?” Daniel asked.
“What they want cannot be given,” Zelda said. “We have an advantage due to knowing you. Simply giving them technology to explore and an audience with you will do next to nothing.”

“…Can’t they see that-“

“Eve, I don’t think you realize what we are.” Zelda looked into the distance, a sorrowful expression on her face. “Our societies do not function like yours. We don’t operate on peace, prosperity, friendship, economy, or anything like that. We are closer to the demons than any of the other societies. Kingdoms have worth via honor. If one kingdom gains too much power, the others attack and pillage to ensure an even playing field. We’ve attacked them, they’ve attacked us – there is almost always a small war going on somewhere to ensure constant competition and relational changes.”

Daniel nodded. “It’s somewhat like Dark Age society in Europe. Everything was based in Honor and Power. Your kingdom has lost its honor with the secrets and lies, and now it has too much power for such a low amount of honor. It isn’t seen as right.”

“Exactly,” Zelda said. “Currently, we are the enemy of society. It’s an unpleasant place to be – we’d been used to the Gerudo having that honor for the last few decades.”

“I don’t think we can change that for you,” Eve said. “Such a deeply rooted ideology takes time to work out.”

“I’m not asking you to change them,” Zelda said. “As much as that would be preferable, it’s unrealistic. I’m asking for direct aid – military. A single one of your ships would protect us.”

Daniel frowned. “We may have decided not to implement a non-interference policy, but this seems like taking it a bit too far.”

Eve sighed. “I’ve had to deal with so many people complaining about how we ruin societies by barely lifting a hoof. Their complaints are legitimate. If we interfere here, directly, we will be forcing a change. Demanding that your neighbors not do what they think is right and required of them.”

Zelda narrowed her eyes. “The death tolls will be catastrophic, especially on our side.”

Eve winced. “I… I know. But what if our ship doesn’t make them stop? We’ll slaughter them. I can’t order my ponies to do that! I don’t think they’d be able to pull the trigger!”

“Your people have no qualms with following questionable orders,” Zelda addressed Daniel.

Daniel shook his head. “And unlike Eve, I’m not even sure we should try to help you. We told you we could help with Disclosure, and you refused. Zelda, we told you this would happen.”

Zelda clenched her fist. “So? You were right, we were wrong. Now we have to deal with the fallout. You offered to help us before, I’m asking for that help now. Just a single ship from any fleet to defend us.”

“…I doubt the Oversight would allow Earth Tau’ri to act,” Daniel said. “Even if I did think it was the right course of action, it’s unlikely.”

Eve looked at the floor. “I… I could order the Feldspar. I could even staff it with humans from the AID, if I wanted. Luna wouldn’t shy away from the trigger. But…”

“Eve, aren’t you the Princess of Friendship?” Zelda interrupted. “We’re your friends. These other kingdoms? Have you even met them?”
Eve’s expression darkened. “You are supposed to be Loyal to your friends.”

“I thought so.”

“But your friends don’t always know the right way,” Eve finished. “Zelda… I’ll talk to the nations for you, I’ll go out of my way to talk to all of them, I’ll do a lot of things. But I… I won’t fight a war for you.”

Zelda slammed her fist on the table. “Twilight! I-“


Zelda’s violent outburst stopped before it could really begin. She slumped into her chair. “…You will at least bring this up with the other universes, won’t you?”

Daniel nodded. “Your request for aid will be forwarded to all parties with access to the Hub. You can expect some action to be taken – but I don’t think a military operation will be allowed.”

 “…Lai might,” Eve said.

Daniel nodded slowly. “That may be…”

“Just go, spread my message,” Zelda said. “We’ll need allies if we are to survive.”

“You have allies,” Eve said, smiling sadly. “I… I might change my mind. I’ll have to talk it over with the other princesses. I’ll do something, Zelda, you can count on that.”

“…Thank you, Eve.”

Eve nodded. “We should move quickly, in case things blow up faster than expected.”

Daniel bowed to Zelda as he stood up, and the two of them left.

Zelda shook her head – there wasn’t going to be any military help. No ships. Maybe some warriors from Lai. Cosmo had some ships in orbit, but they weren’t going to listen to Zelda…

But there was still Ganondorf. The Gerudo knew just like Hyrule did, they were to be ousted as well. They could stand together.

An aide poked her head in. “Zelda, news from our sources in the Gerudo Desert.”

“What is Ganondorf’s response?”

“…There was none. It seems as if the entire Gerudo kingdom has vanished.”

Zelda rammed her fist into the table, breaking one of its legs. “I will take this message to the King. You get me a new table.”

“Yes, your majesty.”

Zelda strode into the presence of her father. He already looked weary from the day – his burden had been speaking to the public of Hyrule. It could not have been easy telling them what had been kept hidden.

“Father, news from the Gerudo.”
“It’s not good, is it?”

“They aren’t even there anymore. I suspect Ganondorf moved them to another universe.”

The King shook his head. “Coward, won’t stand and fight.”

“The others probably aren’t going to help us either,” Zelda said. “I have some hope that the Charter or Queen Luna will provide some aid, but I do not see an army or a ship being lent to us.”

“Understandable. This is in no way their fight, and is in every way our own doing. …Had this happened after Disclosure, they would have given us aid, since they would have seen the wars as their fault.”

Zelda nodded. “But now it is only ours…”

“We have made a grave mistake, Zelda.” He put a hand to his forehead. “The years ahead will be long and hard. But we have strength – and despite what the others may think of us right now, we have honor. We can fight, and Hyrule will endure.”

“…Father, there are some dishonorable ways we can attain aid. I strongly urge we refrain from using them, but you should be aware.”

“Aware of what?”

“There are mercenaries in the other worlds who will work for a price. Gardis. Sombra. We could also steal artifacts from other universes. The Twili, perhaps.”

“You are right – we should refrain. Do we have no friends we can ask directly for favors?”

“…They won’t be able to provide an army, but… But I think I can get some.”

“Make those calls. It’s time to beg, Zelda.”

Zelda nodded and turned to gather whomever she could.

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Corona Shimmer strode into the throne room of Hyrule Castle, sunglasses on her face. Memories were swirling around her head – memories of Ba’al’s invasion, of the people she had killed, of what she had to do to Pinkie…

Stop thinking about the past. Sombra’s text informed her.

“I’m only here because of the past,” Corona whispered back. She took a moment to take in her surroundings – the throne held the King, Zelda at his side. There were only a handful of others in the room - Link, Toph, Lieshy, Vivian, and Lady Rarity. Corona caught the end of a conversation.

“…basically, Luna couldn’t send anyone because her ponies don’t like the outside worlds,” Vivian summarized.

“Came completely on our own,” Toph said. “The Queen definitely didn’t wink at us.”

Link nodded. “Definitely not.” He turned to Corona. “Glad you made it. Is Iroh coming?”

Corona shook her head. “He said that you needed to fight your own battles. …I respectfully disagreed.”
“Do you think we can expect Eve to do anything?” Zelda asked. Corona could tell from her voice that she was extremely strained.

Corona nodded. “She said she’d do something, so she’ll come through. I don’t think she’s willing to fight. I am though. I fought for this place once. Now that I have gotten to know it, I have even more reason to fight for it.”

Link bowed to Corona. “You are too kind. Thank you for stepping down to help us clean our mess.”

The King nodded. “It is an honor to have friends such as you.”

Suddenly, the Happy Mask Salesman was in the hall. “King Daphnes Hyrule, may I be of assistance?”

The King blinked. “…I did not expect you to come.”

The Happy Mask Salesman was standing right next to the King. “I happen to find this kingdom worthwhile. No matter how long I’ve lived, Hyrule has been the source of the heroes to face the darkness. I wish this kingdom to live long enough to see if it can do that without help from deities.”

“I thank you, Salesman.”

Midna popped out of Link’s shadow. “Told you he’d show up.”

Link shook his head. “I’ll never understand you, Salesman.”

“Depends on if you live long enough,” the Happy Mask Salesman responded, now an inch from Link’s face. “If this multiverse exploration goes far enough, you might find some answers.”

“After this is over I’m going back to my farm and my family,” Link said matter-of-factly. “I think I can live with the mystery.”

“Yes… you can,” the Happy Mask Salesman said, sounding almost disappointed. He turned to Zelda. “Princess, surely you have a plan?”

Zelda took a breath. “It is not much of one. The Kingdoms the Deku have convinced to join them in war will have to send declarers of war to Hyrule. They could be coming today, or in a week, but no later than that. There are a few ways this could go – we may convince them to engage in the art of settling dispute by one-on-one combat to the death, we may have to show them a power play to make them think twice against attacking us… But if that fails, we will have to fight directly in the wars.”

“Just hold their declarers hostage,” Lieshy suggested.

“We will not resort to dishonorable means,” the King declared.

“Good,” Lady Rarity said. “I will not serve a King who would consider such things.”

The King nodded. “I need to know what all of your experience with war is – Link, I already know yours. No need to speak.”

Midna raised her hair-hand. “I was trained in Twili military theory, though never really got to command any Twili battalions.”

Lady Rarity hefted her hammer. “I have served Queen Luna for decades, fought many battles as a wandering knight, and served under Starcei in many secret battles for the Arcei. I also have a natural
predatory instinct, should such a thing be required.”

“Uh… I was part of a military group,” Vivian said. “But I never really got to do anything.”

“I lived with the demons,” Lieshy said. “Aside from the jaunts with these people, nothing else.”

“I fought in the Hundred Years War against the Fire Nation,” Toph answered. “I’m best with small groups.”

Corona shook her head. “I’m just well educated in the way of physics, the only war I was actually in was the war against Ba’al. But I can give you this…” She pulled a large, rounded device out of her saddlebags. Circuitry on it flashed a dull red. “This is a modified portal device purposefully calibrated incorrectly. It tries to tunnel to a universe we can’t reach from here, and in the process will destabilize any space it comes into contact with. It could easily be used as a weapon.”

The Happy Mask Salesman went last. “I’ve caused and ended entire wars with my presence. Is that enough information?”

“Yes,” the King said. “Salesman, you have the abilities beyond our understanding. You can be the scout. Move in and out of places quickly and gather all the information you can.”

The Happy Mask Salesman nodded – and was gone.

“Corona, how many of those weapons do you have?”

“Seven,” she said. “Well, only this one, but I can calibrate the other devices I have in my bags in a few minutes.”

“Good. You’ll train our generals in their use. They are to treat you as an equal. Link, your honorary rank still stands as one of those Generals.”

Link bowed respectfully. Midna rubbed her hands together at the prospect of wielding a fancy space gun.

“Lieshy, I understand you are good with words?”

“Language is my clay.”

“You’ll talk directly to those who threaten us. Do whatever you can to gain information or get them to call off their attack.”

“It will be done.”

“Toph, you take Vivian and Lady Rarity. You will be given the best of our knights to form a task force. When the war starts, you will infiltrate one of the enemy kingdoms, taking them down from the inside.”

Toph twirled the Master Sword. “Got it.”

“And-“

It was then they heard the screams coming from outside the front doors.

Everyone drew their weapons. The King stood as tall as he could manage, slamming his scepter on the ground. “GUARDS! TO THE ENTRYWAY!”
Guards in full plate armor filed out from the hallways behind the King, taking up position at the front doors. The screams got louder.

“What is going on out there?” the King demanded.

Toph slammed her foot on the ground. “It’s hard to tell… It’s like a whirlwind is moving through your courtyard. …Your soldiers are being tossed to the side like they’re nothing.”

The King knew what this meant. “Men, fall back to me, stay behind our allies!”

The guards did as instructed, shuffling behind Link, Corona, and the others. Lieshy fell back as well, taking her position next to the King. Zelda herself stepped down, readying her magic for a fight.

The front doors imploded into a swirling void of blackness, letting the sunlight wash into the room. A man floated into the room – he had gray hair, wore a black cloak, and his skin was a pale white. His eyes glared at them, a piercing, unnatural red.

“What is the meaning of this!?” the King shouted, slamming his staff on the ground again.

The man produced a copy of the booklet and dropped it to the ground. “Your gods are gone, old man. Hyrule is no longer a protected, favored kingdom. You have no triforce, no power of light to protect you from the downfall you so rightly deserve.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Vaati. And I’ve been waiting for the moment to bring your pathetic privileged bloodline to an end for a long, long time.”

Toph gripped the Master Sword. “Just try it.”

Vaati obliged – he pointed a finger, and a bolt of shadow left his finger. The King caught the beam with his scepter, deflecting it to the side. “We may no longer have the gods on our side, but we are Hylians, dark wizard.”

“And not all their power of light is gone,” Toph said, holding the Master Sword high.

“The Triforce no longer gives that blade power.”

Toph smirked. “It’s not just the Triforce that was in here.” She swung the sword in the hourglass shape, freezing time. It was somewhat difficult to sense Vaati’s location, but she was able to triangulate from the direction everyone was looking. She drove the Master Sword through his body a dozen times before time resumed. “Somethin’ called the Phantom Hourglass, I think.”

Vaati’s body fell to pieces – then turned to dark, black smoke. The billowing smoke reformed the dark mage’s body in seconds. He fired a bolt of shadow at Toph. She tried to block it with a shield of earth, but the bolt moved too quickly. It hit her in the hands; forcing her to the ground and making her drop the Master Sword. “It is not enough,” Vaati said.

Corona fired her weapon, creating an unstable portal inches from Vaati. It tore off one of his arms, sucking it into a void of nothingness. He leaped back, holding the stump where his arm had been just a moment ago. Corona watched as he shrunk in size, reforming the arm with extra dark smoke.

“Just whale his form down!” Corona shouted. “It’ll be eno-“

Her gun was blasted out of her telekinesis. She was able to block the next spell with some minor
difficulty. “Come on guys! Attack!”

Link drew his bow of light, firing holy arrows at Vaati. Vivian brought a spark of fire down on the shadow creature. Lady Rarity swung her hammer from a long distance. Zelda cast protection and healing spells on all her allies.

Vaati was expecting this. He let most of the attacks hit him, the fire and hammer doing absolutely nothing. He devoted all his time to dodging Link’s holy arrows, always moving closer to the hero in green.

“Midna!” Link shouted. “This isn’t working!”

“Shall we try darkness?” Midna asked.

“…You sure you want to do that?”

She nodded, producing a strange red Twili device. In its presence, Link’s form changed from that of a human to that of a dark, black wolf. Midna took her place on his back, hair forming a powerful limb in the air. Midna pointed a finger at Vaati and grinned. “Fight fire with fire.”

Twili power surrounded Link, a mixture of darkness and strange, red magic. He bounded toward Vaati, mouth open in a roar. Zelda cast a power spell on him, and Corona added her own buff.

Vaati held out his hand, shooting another bolt of shadow, but Link and Midna absorbed it.

“What’s the matter?” Midna mocked, grabbing Vaati with her hair. “Can’t take your own power?”

Link drove his mouth right into Vaati’s chest, opening him up. Midna reached for the part of him that was his soul, attempting to rip it right out of the dark mage’s body. Corona aided with a well-aimed death spell, shaking the soul to its core.

But just like how Midna had absorbed Vaati’s power, he absorbed the darkness flying at him. Without emotion, he kneed Link in the jaw. The wolf went flying, whimpering from a broken jaw.

Midna stood alone, still holding onto Vaati’s soul. “You’re not getting rid of me.”

Vaati flicked her. She did fly off of him, but as she did so her power tore into his soul, forcing him to scream in pain, a scream that should have come when his arm was torn off but a few minutes ago.

Corona and Zelda moved as one, trying to trap Vaati in a cage of light magic.

He punched right through. “The light of this world has faded, princess. Your powers are no longer absolute. Nor is your hero’s. And this unicorn can do nothing to me.”

Corona growled. “Ideas?” She muttered.

I got nothing, sorry, came Sombra’s reply.

Corona shook her head. She fired a beam of light, but Vaati stopped it with nothing but a hand. The feedback shorted Corona’s horn out.

Zelda took a step back. “Where… Where is this darkness coming from? Our light was taken, but so was the darkness!”

“This darkness is my own,” Vaati said.
“And my light is mine,” The King said, stepping down from his throne. “Vaati, I-

Vaati shot the King again. This time he wasn’t able to deflect it with the scepter – he fell to the ground.

“Father!” Zelda shouted, running to him. She would have been shot too, were it not for Lady Rarity placing her hammer in just the right place to stop the attack.

For her troubles, the spirid was tossed to the side with another burst of dark energy.

Vaati appeared above Zelda and the king, holding up his hand for a killing blow.

“Vaati,” Lieshy said. “Do you not wish to explain yourself to your victims?”

“They know what they did.”

“I doubt they do. Who are you? Why has their success insulted you? What did they do – these individuals – to deserve this?”

“I am Vaati. My people are the Minish. We were crushed by your existence. You plowed through everything, not stopping to think that maybe there were tiny people living where you decided to make home. You cleared us away, thinking we were worth nothing, thinking we were legends.”

Zelda’s eyes widened. “…Wait…”

“You should have been the Minish this time, crushed by what you found beyond. But you weren’t. You were shown appreciation where we got none. You were protected. You were seen. That is a grace you didn’t deserve. You deserve to fall.”

Lieshy continued. “That may be the case, but don’t you thi-“

Lieshy got a shadow spark to the face for her words. “I grow tired of your stalling.”

Vivian grabbed Vaati by the leg. She tried to pull him into her pocket void, but he destroyed the very ground she was trying to drag him into.

Some of the guards thought they should try to do something, but they were tossed aside like bowling pins. He moved toward the forms of the King and Zelda. “Hyrule ends now.”

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Eve turned to the three friends that were with her. “I’m sorry to ask you to do this. I know none of you like war, violence, or anything like it. But Zelda is our friend. I cannot help her as the Charter – but I can help her as the Princess of Friendship.”

“I understand,” Flutterfree said.

“We still try all nonviolent options first,” Eve reminded them. “I’d much rather Renee be with us, but… She’s occupied. So it falls to us.”

Pinkie nodded. “We’ll do our best!”

“But prepare for the worst,” Nova added.

Eve pulled out her dimensional device. “We should go right to Hyrule Castle. Don’t provoke the guards by shouting this time, okay?”
Pinkie rolled her eyes. “That was one time!”

“One time that should never have happened,” Eve insisted. She activated her device, tearing a hole through space and time.

The four of them saw the carnage of a battle that was not going well – unconscious bodies everywhere, blood spattered on the ground, and a dark mage hovering over Zelda and her father, a hand raised.

Eve wasted no time. She launched a spell at Vaati, throwing him into a nearby wall. His smoked form repaired all the damage to his back quickly. He clenched his fist. “You just keep coming…”

Eve, Nova, and Pinkie stood firm while Flutterfree rushed to tend to the King. Eve cleared her throat. “I don’t know who you are, but you will not hurt our friends.”

“You are mistake-”

Eve teleported herself, Vaati, Nova, and Pinkie out of the castle hall and into the courtyard. “I don’t think I am.”

Vaati’s expression remained flat. He pointed a finger, launching a bolt of darkness. Eve absorbed it into her horn and cast a dark spell in return – a swarm of razor sharp knives hit him from all sides. Pinkie followed this up with a smash from a warhammer, knocking him to the ground.

“How did… You touch me?”

“I’m cheating,” Pinkie said.

“So am I,” Nova said, somehow in three places at once. Each location shot a beam of light at Vaati, burning him on all sides. With a quick motion, he repelled all their attacks. He shot a dark sphere of energy out from his center, forcing Nova and Pinkie to retreat to a safe distance.

Eve did no such thing; she took the full force of the attack head on, once again channeling it into her horn. This time she attempted a magic lock spell on Vaati, successfully chaining his leg before it dissipated into smoke.

Pinkie appeared behind Vaati and trapped him inside a giant lantern. She flicked the on switch, baking him in the light designed to pierce the darkness.

Vaati transformed into smoke, shifting out through the cracks in the glass, appearing again nearer to the castle. His form was smaller, but just as powerful. He moved faster than before, unleashing two powerful snakes of darkness from his fingers, both aimed at Eve. She could not absorb these quickly enough – they tangled her up in an ever-tightening knot. She was forced to teleport out of the hold.

Nova darted in from the side, moving far faster than any pony had any right to. She hit Vaati six times with her hoof before he caught her, hand right on her cloven leg. He twisted it, forcing her to the ground with a snap. She yelled out in pain, shuddering from the intense sensation.

Pinkie put on the Bomb Mask, exploding to drive Vaati away from Nova. She played a quick round of golf with the black sage, tossing him through the windows of three separate residences with a single stroke. “Fore!”

Eve teleported above Vaati, charging magic into her horn. She blasted him from above, driving him far into the road of the city. Nova took the opportunity to fashion a splint for her broken leg, forcing herself to stand up on her three remaining limbs. She teleported to the new scene of the fight.
Vaati let himself explode again, taking out several buildings in the process. The tremor shook the entire city, lighting fires in the streets.

Zelda could no longer see the fight from where she was, but she could see the smoke, the fire, and feel the explosions.

Her city was being destroyed.

The war hadn’t even begun.

“Hold still!” Flutterfree told the King. “You shouldn’t be walking on that!”

“I have to,” he said. “My people need me to stand strong against all darkness. I must fight to the bitter end! Never give in!”

“You’re hurting yourself!” Flutterfree chided. “You can’t fight at the expense of yourself! It’ll just kill you!”

“But it may help my people. Come, we must address the army. We can give your friends assistance…” He limped toward a door in the side of the throne hall, using his scepter as a cane. “We will not be able to win the war if we do not resolve this quickly. They will strike us when we’re down…”


“…Okay. I still think this is a bad idea.”

Zelda matched pace with the King. “What is our plan now?”

“Fight with what we had all along – Hylian power. The Hylian army. We will prove our honor through the battle stacked against us. Vaati will not be allowed to do much more damage – the Charter-Princess outclasses him, I am sure. What damage he has done will not ruin our army. We will fight a long, brutal war, likely more brutal than any other war we’ve been in. But we will not fall.”

Zelda glanced out a window to ponder this. She noticed a lot of flashing lights. “What are they doing?”

“Teleport-based fight,” Flutterfree answered. “They try to outmaneuver each other by appearing in random locations and teleporting each other around.” She stared at the colorful battle herself. “…Sometimes I wish I could help them at times like this.”

“Not everyone’s place is the battlefield,” the King said. “Our roles may involve intelligence or finesse in the battle. We all fight in our own way. It doesn’t matter how, so long as you are willing to go to the final breath.” The King wheezed.

“Do you have a doctor here?” Flutterfree asked.

“I’ll see the doctor when I’m done with this…”

Vaati teleported in front of the King with a flash of darkness, his body currently the size of a housecat. In an instant, he drove a bolt of darkness right through the old man’s heart.

“Father!” Zelda yelled. Had Eve not teleported in front of her with a shield, she would have been next. Nova pulled Vaati out of there with her own teleport. The encounter with the teleporting fight
had lasted only a few seconds, but it was enough.

Zelda saw her father on the ground. He wasn’t breathing, his eyes were vacant, but his lips were still moving.

*Must keep fighting*, he mouthed, over and over. Had he been able to speak, it would have been a *mantra*.

Flutterfree pulled her hoof away from his arm and looked at Zelda, tears in her eyes. “I’m… I’m sorry.”

Zelda turned away from her father and Flutterfree, walking toward the entryway. She walked down the stairs into the castle courtyard and fell to her knees. She rammed her fists into the ground and started bawling her eyes out, screaming toward the heavens. She wanted to shout to the gods, to demand *why*, to blame them.

But she knew they were no longer there.

She only had herself to blame.

This was *her* folly.

She felt a hand on her shoulder – it was Link, back in his Hylian form. He was limping, but very much alive.

“You… You don’t need to say… Anything,” she said.

He didn’t. He just kept his hand on her shoulder.

Zelda forced herself to look forward – and she saw them. A Goron, a Deku, and a Rito. Rock, bush, and bird. They were clearly warriors. Here to declare the war, coming to her despite the explosions all around. They were serious.

Why did they have to show up now…? She wasn’t presentable. She couldn’t be presentable. There was no way this was okay, none at all. Everything was wrong, and they were just here to make it worse. They…

Vaati fell out of the sky, currently the size of a mouse. Twilight lit her horn, driving a white sphere into his essence. He dodged – but fell right into Nova’s trap. A swirling sphere of blackness absorbed the rest of his essence. He said nothing as he *became* nothing. He didn’t even let his face shift to anger – merely maintaining contempt.

“Got him!” Nova said. “We-“

“YOU ARE BRUTES!” the Deku scrub shouted. “VIOLENT, HORRID, HONORLESS BRUTES!”

Eve strode up to them. “I assure you, this being was one of darkness, attacking the Hylian family without provocat-“

“BRUTES!” the scrub screamed again. “You are not worth our time! Princess Zelda, tell your father we are at *war!*”

“Skipping the formalities?” Link spat.

“You don’t deserve formalities, not after what I’ve seen here.”
Zelda looked the Deku shrub in the eyes. “My father is dead.”

“Then we declare war on you, Zelda Hyrule.”

Zelda wiped her eyes, turning to the Goron and the Rito. “Does he speak for all of you?”

The Rito nodded. The Goron hesitated a moment, but did as well.

“Very well,” Zelda said.

Eve turned to Zelda. “Zelda, I ca-“

Zelda stood up tall, looking around. Much of her city was destroyed. The courtyard was a horrid mess. Those people she could see were either scared, or angry. Many of these emotions were directed at Eve and her friends. …The spectacle had not helped matters.

*Must keep fighting…*

“No,” Zelda said under her breath.

“What was that?!” the scrub demanded.

“There will be no war.”

“WE’RE NOT GIVING YOU A CHOICE!”

Zelda turned to Link for a moment. She shook her head. “There will be no war because…” She hung her head. “Hyrule surrenders unconditionally.”

The three messengers blinked. Eve blinked. Link was the only one who didn’t look surprised.

Zelda held out her hands. “Take me and do with me what you will.”

“Zelda!” Eve called. “Think about-“

“This is how it needs to be, Eve. Don’t try to help me. You were right not to fight the war for us.”

“I… was?”

“Yes. …This is how you change people. Doing something different. I won’t fight for honor. Honor does not come from fighting to the bitter end.”

Eve turned to Link. He sighed, saying nothing.

“Go to your world,” Zelda said. “This one will not want anything to do with you for the foreseeable future.”

Eve held out a hoof to Zelda. “I’m… I’m sorry.”

Zelda shook her hoof. “I’m sorry too.” She glanced at Link, then back at the Deku Scrub. “…Actually, my surrender has one condition.”

“What?” the Scrub demanded.

“…You must leave New Termina alone.”

“Done,” the Goron said.
Link bowed to Zelda. “…Thank you.”

“Live your life, Link.”

“…I will.”

“Goodbye,” Zelda said. The Rito tied her wrists up and led her away. Eve, Flutterfree, Nova, Pinkie, Link, and Midna watched her go.

“…This is wrong,” Flutterfree said.

“There was never any way this was going to end with something right,” Eve said. “Let’s go. We aren’t welcome in this world anymore. Link… It was nice getting to know you.”

Link bowed to her. “Eve, you’ve done so much for us that we will never repay. Go and do the same for other worlds. Do not let their rejections deter you – what you do is good. Don’t forget that.”

“I won’t,” Eve assured him. “…You’re welcome in the Hub anytime.”

“I still have my device,” Link said. “Don’t worry. I’ll visit.”

“Good.” Eve opened a portal back to Equis Vitis. “But also… Live your life, Link. Your family needs you.”

Link nodded. “I’m not planning on abandoning them for anything.”

Eve smiled sadly. Then they left the world of Ardent – a world that had once been filled with friends, that was now a world of enemies.

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Renee stared at the messenger that had ran up to her the moment she left the meeting with Yellow Diamond. “She did what while I was in there!?”

“Zelda surrendered,” the messenger mare said. “I don’t know why.”

“Wh – why? We weren’t able to help her, but… She could have fought! She- Ugh, I should have been there.”

O’Neill shook his head. “We were busy.”

“What did we accomplish today, O’Neill? Not that much. They have ‘agreed’ to be ‘friends’ but really they still think of us as basically animals. Most of them will only treat us with anything approaching respect because we have something they want. I admit, that’s good, but was it really worth being here instead of there?”

“She found the solution with the least death,” Adama said. “You may not be able to see why she would surrender, but I do.”

“Some things are more important than winning,” Cosmo said. “…There will be times where the right answer is giving up.”

Renee blinked. “But how can we know that this was one of those moments?”

“Renee, we were never going to fight Zelda’s war for her, not like this. You know this, you know why we wouldn’t.”
Renee nodded. “It would set bad precedent and prove our most vocal detractors correct, yes, I get the idea. But there were other things we could have done.”

“Perhaps,” Cosmo said. “But we don’t know the entire situation from here. It’s likely that other paths of assistance were given – or wouldn’t work for other reasons. Given how fast the situation escalated, I think it would have exploded regardless of what any of us did. Adama is right – this way, there will be little to no death on any of the sides. We won’t have to make a show of power to stop the war in its tracks, Zelda won’t have to lead her entire kingdom into battle, and the opposing armies won’t even have to march across the land.”

“She was willing to sacrifice her pride,” Adama said. “It’s something I wish I saw in more people.”

“Her pride and her honor…” Renee said, mulling the thoughts over. “I still don’t like it.”

“I don’t either,” Cosmo said. “Giving up, even when it is the right move, is something horrid to experience. We will need to stand by her in these tough times, not as allies, but as friends.”

The messenger coughed. “Ardent is moving to cut off all ties to any other worlds, and Zelda has been taken prisoner. That will be difficult.”

Cosmo sighed. “They projected on to us, didn’t they?”

“Yes.”

Cosmo shook her head. “Depressing.”

“I can go change their minds,” Discord offered. “Wouldn’t be that hard.”

“Using force to twist an internal conflict our way is what we wanted to avoid in the first place,” Cosmo pointed out.

“What is the line?” Renee wondered. “Where is the line between ‘let them sort it out themselves’ and ‘we need to get involved’?”

“It’s a poorly defined line,” O’Neill said. “But, the way I see it, it’s like this. Is one of the sides evil? Yes? Then we fight them.”

Renee frowned. “A poor definition…”

“This kind of policy cannot be definitely defined – nor should it,” Cosmo said. “The multiverse is so wide and vast, making even a vague regulation for interference could ruin anything. We have to admit that we’ll make mistakes – lots of them – in what we choose to help, hinder, or just observe.”

Renee looked into the distance at the beautiful Gem cities of their Homeworld. “And this time… This time we made the ‘right’ decision as politicians, as leaders. But was it the right decision of a friend?”

“You will have to decide that for yourself, Renee.”

“…I know.”

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Link sat on a hill, looking down at Hyrule Castle and the city that surrounded it. Most of the smoke had cleared, revealing that there hadn’t been too much damage in the battle with Vaati. But all was not right – all of Hyrule’s flags had been taken down. Replaced with nothing. Already squads of
Rito, Gorons, and Deku had moved around the city, subjugating it. There were some citizens who tried to fight, but they were few, far between, and rarely any real threat to the ‘invaders’.

He wiped a tear from his eye.

Midna shifted on his shoulder. “…I want to go down there and kill them all. We *could* do that, you know.”

“The real armies would arrive,” Link said. “We couldn’t stand against them *all*.”

“Resistance is an option.”

“Zelda made her decision Midna, we just have to let this happen.”

Midna sighed, folding her arms around her knees. “Some heroes of Hyrule we are.”

“…The line of heroes ended with the Triforce,” Link said. “We are the last calling.”

“I know. What a way to end.”

“The source of most of the darkness in our world will never harm anyone again. Majora’s influence will fade from this world in a few years.”

“But what of the darkness Vaati found?”

“There will always be darkness and light, Midna. It’s needed. But there will be no more need for *us* to be there.”

The Happy Mask Salesman was standing next to them. “I was hoping I could make that not be the case. But even I cannot change something so fundamental.”

Link laughed bitterly. “Back from your trip?”

“I know precisely how to destroy all three opposing kingdoms with carefully executed plans. I could still tell you.”

“Don’t bother.” Link shook his head.

The Happy Mask Salesman looked through reality itself, at something Link couldn’t see. “For once, I am uncertain of something. I do not know if this is destiny, a change in destiny, or a lack of destiny.”

“Mixture of all three?” Midna suggested.

The Happy Mask Salesman let out his signature unnerving laugh. “You are wise beyond your years, Twilight Princess.”

“That title is defunct and you know it.”

“It fit,” he said. “I don’t think I’ll be returning to this world. Everything is done.”

“No more darkness?” Link asked.

“Malladus is gone, Ganondorf is gone, Vaati is gone, Beldum is gone, and *Majora* is gone. The great evils have either left, been vanquished by you, or by otherworldly powers. No longer will these powers constantly be reborn time and time again. There is no more source of darkness to perpetuate
“But the Goddess of Time won’t bring us back, either,” Link said. “I… Am the last of the heroes of courage.”

“In this universe, at least,” the Happy Mask Salesman confirmed. “It may not look like it, but this world has been saved. Completely. Forever. You should be proud, even in this time of sorrow.”

Link nodded. “Thank you, Salesman, for these words.”

“I do what I can.” He gave a wave – and then vanished. Behind him stood Toph.

“What a weirdo,” she commented, sitting down next to Link.

Link glanced at the Master Sword she had in her hand. “How’s the blade treating you?”

“It’s pretty sweet,” she said, flipping it over and over in her hands.

“You need to take it away from this world,” Link said. “I think it may be the last source of eternal power we have to offer. The Sands of Life themselves are infused in that blade. They’re what give it power over time. This world no longer needs such a powerful artifact within it – and I think it knew that the moment Majora was defeated. That’s why it lets you wield it. It knew there would be no foretold heroes after me, so it gave itself to you.”

Toph clutched the sword in her hands. “Why?”

“I don’t think even it has a purpose in mind. It found you worthy, and felt it needed to do something out there. Anything.”

Toph nodded. “…Why didn’t it hurt Vaati?”

“It did,” Midna said. “He just tried not to show it. All darkness hates the sword. Even I don’t like being near it.”

Toph smirked. “He ever stab you with it?”

Midna smirked. “Oh, you haven’t heard the story?”

Link facepalmed. “That was one time! I thought you’d turned into a demon!”

“And I don’t look like a demon now? …Or do you mean I looked like a giant bug?”

Link shook his head. “Seriously, sometimes I wonder about you.”

Midna nudged him with a playful smile. “Come on, you’d be bored without me.”

Link smiled. He pulled her in and gave her a noogie.

“Hey! Hey! Stop it! Ackpth!”

Toph chuckled. “You two… You sure Romani isn’t jealous?”

“I’m sure,” Link said, releasing Midna.

“I’m like a built in sister, or something,” Midna commented. “I am going to be the worst aunt. Literal devil on the shoulder.”
“I am so not looking forward to that,” Link muttered.

Toph smiled, standing up. “I think you guys will be fine. See you around. I’ll tell you what me and this sword get up to.”

The two nodded and waved as Toph earthbended down the hill on a wave of rock.

There was one more visitor to the hill before the day was over.

Renee stepped out of a portal, the Mask of Truth on her face. Link looked at her, frowning.

“This is how I came to you first,” Renee said, looking at him with the eye of the mask. “I had broken myself by taking everything too far. You showed me what was really going on, what people really were, and… And helped me onto the path to be what I am now.” She removed the mask from her face and adjusted her hat. “I should have been here.”

Link smiled sadly. “Maybe… But the more I think about it, the more I think this needed to happen this way.”

“I’m not saying I would have changed anything by being here, I’m saying I needed to be here,” Renee explained. “This place… It’s important to me. And I left it so I could deal with some aliens.”

“Your job is important, Renee.”

“So is this world.”

The two fell into silence.

Midna sighed. “Look, both of you. What’s done is done; you don’t need to keep trying to feel guilty about it. Chin up and get on with your lives. Seriously.”

Renee allowed herself to smile sadly. “Midna, you’re right. What’s done is done.”

“There isn’t much we can do about it now,” Link continued.

“In the future, maybe Ardent will want to join with us again,” Renee said. “But if they don’t, that’s their choice. It’s always been their choice.”

Link nodded. He reached into his pack and pulled out the Bow of Light. “…Renee, I want you to have this.”

“Dear…”

“I have no need for it anymore. It’s not as powerful or as legendary as the Master Sword, but… But it’s something.”

Renee levitated the arcane artifact toward her eyes, the holy energy exciting her senses. “…Is it okay if I give this to Flutterfree? She’s been needing something to use in a fight.”

Link smiled. “Giving someone strength is the best thing that bow can do. I trust her to only use it for good.”

Renee smiled. “Thank you, Link. For… Everything you’ve done.”

“Thank you Renee, for everything you’ve done.”
“Oh come on…” Midna facepalmed. “This isn’t goodbye. You’ll still see us around!”

“Right,” Renee said, smiling sheepishly. “Ahem. In that case, I’ll... see you around.”

Link bowed his head. “Until then, Renee.”

She left, leaving Link alone with Midna to watch the sunset.

Corona watched it from another hill, eyes sorrowful. She did not know what to think about these events. She didn’t think she ever would.

She knew Sombra was sending her messages on her sunglasses, but she wasn’t in the mood right now. She just... wanted to watch the sunset here at least once.

It was beautiful.

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Roughly a week later, the sun rose on Equis Vitis. A handful of minutes later, Princess Celestia looked up from her pad at Luna. “At least something good has come from this Ardent debacle.”

“Oh?” Luna said, looking up from her own pad.

“The activists attacking us for too much interference and destruction of culture have finally lost their fire,” Celestia explained. “There’s now an argument of if we should have interfered or not. Significantly better than outright condemnation that we couldn’t really disprove.”

Luna smiled sadly. “That’s good.”

“It needed to happen. Those voices were getting loud enough to destabilize everything. …To be frank, it was probably one of those voices who leaked the information to Ardent. I wonder if they’re happy with the result, whoever they are.”

“I like to think not. I like to think they’re filled with rage that their plan didn’t work. But now they can’t do much. Their movement has lost its fire.”

“And for that, we can be thankful. I was afraid their complaints would actually come to something – but we learned quickly. It’s much better to argue about which situations should be interfered with than to have a general consensus that we interfere too much. That argument actually goes somewhere and helps us develop as a people.”

“You’re speaking like we’re all one people, Tia.”

Celestia smiled coyly.

“…You have that smile, Tia. That smile that says you know something.”

“Oh, really? No, I never know anything.”

Luna smirked and rolled her eyes. “Fine, keep your secrets. I’m sure you’ll tell me eventually.”

Celestia nodded. “Well, I, for one, want some breakfast. There’s apparently a new dish from ‘Earth Ottoman’ that we’re going to really love.”

“I reserve the right to judge the meal harshly at a later time.”
Celestia chuckled.

Somewhere else, in a distant plane and planet, another Luna looked at the same report Princess Celestia had seen.

The Mistress looked to Siron and Ganondorf. “…Our ideas are being worked out.”

Ganondorf folded his arms. “We never needed their sympathy.”

“It would have helped, but it was never necessary,” Siron added.

“So… Nothing has changed?” the Mistress asked.

“Nothing,” Siron assured her. “Our power is still building, and they will know what it means soon. The question of interference will be the last thing on their mind when everything comes to fruition.”
The room was dark, damp, and metallic. Pipes snaked along the vaulted ceiling, carrying who knew what to who knew where. Some dripped, though it was unclear if the dripping was water, or if the pipe was even the source of the liquid. Greasy stains lined the floor, some in the shape of small footprints. An ever-present cloud of dust filled the air – not hindering vision so much as hindering comfortable breathing.

It was in this empty place that a portal appeared, leading right to the green pastures of Equis Concrete. Pinkie, Nova, Flutterfree, and Renee stepped through. The ponies overseeing the portal – the Twilight known as Dawn and the Pinkie known as Diane – remained on their side, waving them along.

“Interesting place,” Nova said, tapping her hoof on the ground. “Dawn, why did you want us to come here?”

“Look at the portal,” Dawn said.

It didn’t take long for them to realize – from the vantage point of the four ponies in the new world, the portal was moving, receding away at a slow rate.

Renee put a hoof to her chin. “Curious… I don’t believe that’s happened before…”

Pinkie perked up her ears, stamping her hooves on the ground. She leaned side to side, thinking. She stuck her tongue in the air.

“Pinkie sense acting up?” Flutterfree asked, trying to find the most comfortable way to fly with the bow of light on her back.

“Nope. Just doing science!” Pinkie pulled a level out of her mane and set it on the ground. The bubble in the liquid shifted slowly to the left, then to the right.

“We’re… rocking?” Nova said. “Weird.”

“We’re on a boat,” Renee deduced. “A very large boat, given the size of this maintenance shaft.”

Dawn facehooved. “Well if that’s all it is, we really didn’t have a reason to call you…”

“We’ll explore anyway,” Pinkie assured her.

“We’ve opened portals on moving objects before,” Flutterfree pointed out. “The portal never moved.”

“That was when the objects weren’t on a planet,” Nova reminded her. “The portals adhere to gravity. Otherwise we’d dial empty space most of the time because virtually every planet moves. Stars do too.”

“Oh. Right.”

“I thought I read a study that portals sometimes adhered to large structures as well?” Renee said. “Due to magic, or some other reason.”
“That… might be true.”

“It would explain why the portal’s moving so slowly,” Diane called from across the portal. “Boats move faster than this.”

“Clearly not something we fully understand,” Pinkie chirped. “We’ll dial back ourselves. You may need to save us from the zebra jungles!”

“You’re moving west,” Dawn commented.

“Then… Uh…” Pinkie shrugged. “There’s nothing evil out in your west is there?”

“Nothing at all.”

“Great. I’ll think of something clever to say later, I just know it.”

“You two better close the portal, you’re about to hit a wall,” Flutterfree commented.

“Right. See you in a couple hours!” Dawn called. Diane flashed them a smile and closed the portal.

The area was plunged into darkness. “Advanced darkness,” Pinkie corrected.

Renee and Nova lit their horns to brighten their surroundings. Their lights seemed small against the distant ceiling and darkness-shrouded walls.

“I say we follow the pipes!” Pinkie called.

Flutterfree flew up to the ceiling, tapping one of the pipes. “This one’s empty… This one’s broken…”

“We can follow an empty one, Flutterfree,” Nova called.

“Found one with flowing water!” Flutterfree called down, tapping one of the larger pipes. “It goes that way.”

“There be booty that way, matey!” Pinkie said, drawing a pirate’s cutlass and pointing in the direction Flutterfree indicated. “Today, we plunder this ship for its riches!”

Everypony rolled their eyes, knowing their pink poofy leader wasn’t being serious. They followed her bouncing form in a formation – Nova and Renee flanking, Flutterfree flying overhead, glancing behind them every so often. They had been ambushed one too many times over the years in dark places like this; it would be embarrassing if they let it happen yet again.

“I used to be terrified of these places,” Flutterfree commented. “Now? Dark and damp seems to be a recurring theme in the multiverse. All I want now is a coat.”

“Sorry, no coats right now!” Pinkie said.

Nova rolled her eyes. “And suddenly you’ll have all the coats we could possibly need when we’re on a beach world or something.”

“Exactly!”

“What I wouldn’t pay to get a rulebook to your powers.”

“It’s only a matter of time, Nova.”
Flutterfree glanced to Pinkie. “Are we at least close to getting answers about that?”

Pinkie just laughed.

“Take that as a ‘not even close’,’” Renee suggested.

Pinkie decided to walk backwards so she could grin cheekily at them.

Nova facehooved. “That smile haunts my nightmares.”

“I find it comforting,” Flutterfree offered.

“There’s no way that smile doesn’t cause at least little nightmares.”

“Ding!” Pinkie blurted.

Renee opened her mouth to comment, but something caught her eye in front of them. “Girls!” She called, pointing. Everypony snapped to attention, glancing in the direction Renee pointed.

Standing on top of a wooden crate was a human child – a girl – in a yellow raincoat slightly too large for her. The features of her face aside from her mouth were all hidden from sight with the raincoat’s hood. The mouth itself was frozen in a gasp of fear.

“Wait, don-“ Renee began, but the sound of Renee’s voice after the moment of silence startled the child out of her stupor. She leaped off the box and ran to one of the nearby walls.

“Wait!” Pinkie called. “We don’t want to hurt you! I’m Pinkie Pie!” She bounced after her, the others joining the chase.

Nova lit her horn in preparation to grab the child, but the kid was too fast. She slid through a hole in the wall’s metallic siding, leaving Nova’s sight range. The four ponies pulled themselves through the opening soon thereafter but there was no sign of the child once they were through, finding only a bunch of boxes packed in the space between walls.

There was a strange creature sitting next to a large, lit lantern. It was scrawny, humanoid, and had a cone-shaped head that looked as if it were made of bark. The cone might actually have been its head.

It glanced at them – not that they could see its eyes. It seemed not to care about their presence.

“Uh… hello?” Nova asked.

The creature continued warming itself at the lantern, paying them no further attention.

 “…Creepy,” Flutterfree said.

Pinkie poked her head out of a nearby crate. “Don’t see the girl!”

Flutterfree landed on the top box of a tall stack, looking around. “…Can’t see far in this darkness. She could be hiding anywhere.”

“I have a question,” Renee said. “…Why is this crawlspace so large? It’s more like a narrow shed than an area you’d build between two walls!”

Pinkie shrugged. “Dunno. Maybe these people just like to build big things.”

“Then why aren’t the boxes huge?”
Nova popped the top off one of the boxes and examined the contents. “…Powder.” She sniffed it. “I think it’s seasoning.”

Pinkie stuffed her face into the box Nova had opened and ate an entire mouthful of the powder. “Huh! Saffron.”

Nova gagged from the sight of Pinkie downing the dry seasoning. “Okay, so maybe this box is big. That’s a lot of saffron.”

“If this place opens up trade with us the Hub is going to have a field day,” Renee commented. “Saffron isn’t cheap.”

Then the lantern went out. The cone-headed creature let its arms sag in disappointment.

“Don’t worry,” Renee said, lighting the lantern with her own magic. “Have some more.”

The creature looked to her, made strange twitching motion with its head, and then continued to warm itself.

Nova pointed at the far wall. “I thought I saw some light over there, when it was dark.”

“I was able to see the creature…” Renee noted. The group moved where Nova had pointed, and they found another break in the wall. They filed out into a room much smaller than the one they had been in previously – but still far too large for them. It was cubical, empty, and had a single window off to one side.

They saw, for the first time, a doorway. There was no door in it – there didn’t need to be. The towering hole in the wall made them realize how small they truly were even with nothing between its frame. It was easily three stories high, maybe four, and it led out into a much more expansive room they couldn’t even see the ends of.

Maybe the ship wasn’t big. Maybe they were tiny.

“…Have we ever found a world of giants before?” Renee asked.

“No…” Flutterfree said, shaking her head. “And that worries me…”

“But the girl and the creature were the right size,” Nova said.

Pinkie pursed her lips. “This place was not made for them.”

“Or us,” Flutterfree commented.

Pinkie bounced out of the doorway into the expansive space. Behind them, there was a wall that rose as high as they could see, until the dusty air made it impossible to see further. There was a soft blue light somewhere far above them, clearly artificial, telling them there was a ceiling up there, somewhere. In the place where the sky should have been, they saw long cables carrying sacks and crates to and from locations they couldn’t lay their eyes on.

“Transport network?” Renee wondered aloud. “A wide open space for lines to carry things everywhere in the ship… Heavens, there’s no way we could explore even a fraction of this place on our own. We need to find someone to help us. Guide us.”

Flutterfree flew up, examining the wall behind them. “I see brighter lights through some of these windows,” she said. “I don’t see any giants though.”
“As good a place to look as any,” Nova said, teleporting up to her and pressing her face to a window. “Looks like… an apartment.”

It did look like an apartment – for a giant. It had everything a person would need: bed, dresser, and even a bathroom. There was no occupant, but the lightbulb in the ceiling was on.

Nova teleported them onto the inner windowsill. It was just wide enough to hold a single pony, giving them a good view of the expansive room. Now that they were inside, it didn’t look quite as normal. The shelves were extremely tall, going all the way up to the ceiling, while the bed was comparatively low – almost no legs on it at all.

“It’s too short…” Renee muttered.

“How can you say it’s too short!?” Flutterfree blurted. “It’s taller than we are!”

“For a being of the size that fits through that doorway, it’s short,” Renee corrected, leaping down onto the bed. “And the everything else is too tall. Very inconsistent.”

“Maybe this guy is a weird artist type,” Nova suggested.

“Don’t see any pieces of art,” Renee pointed out.

“The art is in the rooooooom!” Pinkie droned ominously.

Flutterfree rolled her eyes, flying to the door that led out of the room. She had to use her entire body to turn the door handle, but it didn’t take too much effort. The door swung inward, then outward, swinging with the rocking of the ship. Nova used her magic to open it the rest of the way, leading into a hallway.

There was nothing in the hallway besides a lightbulb – also on. The walls were green, and they could see a handful of other doors. They filed out into the space, looking for signs of life – but all that came was an eerie silence.

“I swear, there’s nobody here,” Nova said. “It’s like they all vanished!”

Renee adjusted her hat and narrowed her eyes, looking around with her careful eyes. She saw signs of large boots hitting the wooden floor they were standing on, but she couldn’t tell how recent these marks were. Being this small made it easy to see the details, but there was nothing for her to form a conclusion with.

As it turned out, she didn’t have to. They heard a door open behind the one at the end of the hall, and then the thump of giant footsteps. They stood firm as the scuffling steps approached the hall door. The knob turned, and the door swung in with a painful creak.

The creature that stood in the doorway was surely a giant – but not the giant any of them were expecting. Its head only reached about halfway to the top of the doorway, due to its extremely short legs. The miniscule limbs below contrasted highly with the giant’s arms, which were four times longer than they needed to be. Its clothes were old and ragged, but well fitted to its unusual body size, complete with sleeves that reached all the way to the grimy, wrinkled hands.

The head was the worst – it looked as if someone had taken the skin of a human being and pulled it as far back as possible, elongated the ears, and extruded the chin. A blindfold wrapped over where the giant’s eyes should have been. The cloth had been there so long it had essentially fused to the giant’s head, and it stank so much from years of use.
Flutterfree forced down her gag reflex. She flew up toward the blind giant, forcing a smile. “Hello, I’m Flutterfree. Can you understand me?”

The giant paused, listening closely. It made a strange clicking noise with its tongue that didn’t sound like language.

“I’m in front of you, flying. I can land, if you want.”

The giant’s response was to grab Flutterfree with one of his outrageously long arms, squeezing her tightly. Flutterfree screamed in surprise and fear.

“FLUTTERFREE!” Nova shouted, lighting her horn.

The blind giant heard this, turning its attention to the three of them. It made an inhuman growling, clicking noise. It reached for her with its other hand.

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Applebloom and Scootaloo were walking Sweetie Belle through the Pinkie Emporium of Ponyville, back to the lobby of the park’s hotel.

“I didn’t think rollercoasters were allowed to go off the rails!” Scootaloo shouted. “That was the best way to end the day!”

Applebloom nodded. “Yeah. Ah haven’t had that much fun in… Well, forever.”

“I can’t believe I never checked out the Pinkie Emporium before today,” Sweetie added. “My life was incomplete before today and I didn’t even know it!”

“Reminds me of the days we used to go Crusading,” Scootaloo said. “Just the three of us doing things for the sake of doing them.”

“Yeah,” Sweetie said. “Those were some fun times we had.”

“…Includin’ the tree sap?” Applebloom asked.

“Well, not all of it was fun. But I can be nostalgic if I want, Applebloom.”

Scootaloo blinked. “We’re old enough to be nostalgic for childhood. Why do I think that’s weird?”

“Because you spend your time contemplating the psychology of blank flanks?” Applebloom suggested.

“Don’t we all do that?”

“Yer the one doin’ most the work with that now.”

Scootaloo nodded. “Guess that’s right… I miss you girls sometimes.”

“Ah’ll be back to it when things calm down at the farm,” Applebloom said. “You know it.”

“And you can always call me over,” Sweetie said.

“You have your League,” Scootaloo said, shaking her head. “Taking the Crusaders into other worlds might be a bit more important than dealing with the misguided filly or two here.”
“Maybe,” Sweetie admitted. “But don’t _ever_ hesitate to call if you think you need me, okay Scootaloo?”

Scootaloo nodded. “You got it! …Hey, look, there’s the other yous.”

Sweetie looked ahead – sure enough, waiting at the front doors of the hotel were Sweetie Bot, Thrackerzod, and Sweetie Brute.

Sweetie waved to them – Bot and Brute waved back. Thrackerzod just nodded curtly.

“I’m feeling nostalgia again just looking at them,” Scootaloo commented.

“They’re not the same pony I was,” Sweetie reminded her.

“Right.”

“Bye then,” Applebloom said. “Looks like they want you for some adventure or somethin’.”

“Probably,” Sweetie admitted. “See you girls later!”

The Cutie Mark Crusaders parted ways, and the League of Sweetie Belles joined up. “So,” Sweetie said. “Squeaky not coming?”

A screen popped out of Sweetie Bot’s back, displaying the head of Squeaky Belle. “Sorry, busy with the war. You know how it is.”

“‘She does not,’” Thrackerzod corrected. “I am the only one here who has any idea what a real war is like.”

Bot beeped. “The encounter with the Smooze does not qualify?”

“No. That does not qualify.”

“I know war!” Brute chimed in.

“You just know the _idea_ of war. Frighteningly acquainted with it for somepony who’s never actually encountered it, I might add.”

“Yeah! The name Sweetie Brute will one day send fear into the hearts of ponykind! Muahahah!”

Squeaky cleared her throat. “Anyway, I can’t stay – I have to go. Enjoy yourselves without me. Get a souvenir!”

“I will acquire loot!” Bot said.

Sweetie Belle rolled her eyes. “So, Thrackerzod, how’d your mission for Eve go?”

“Adama’s ship is a piece of trash just waiting to explode and shatter the fabric of reality itself. It was clearly designed by idiots who didn’t understand that you can’t just randomly stick a core of power from beyond into every ship and think everything will operate normally. It does the exact same thing a hyperspace drive does except with a billion different drawbacks!”

“…Not well?”

“I recommended they gut that poor excuse for FTL out of their ship and replace it with one of the Tau’ri’s. I also pointed out that its very existence was rather insulting to certain individuals they
wouldn’t want to anger by mistake. It’s currently in Cosmo’s Shipyard.”

Bot poked her head in between the two of them. “Did you at least figure out how it worked?”

“By the skin of its teeth,” Thrackerzod summarized. “Let’s just go somewhere, I need a vacation.”

“We can go to the Sinkhole!” Brute suggested. “Watch things explode!”

“Get exploded, you mean?” Sweetie said, raising an eyebrow.

“…Maybe not?”

“Yeah, no.” Sweetie shook her head. “We should try something maybe a bit more… relaxing?”

“Mushroom World?” Bot suggested.

“We went there *last week*,” Brute complained.

“There’s always more interesting stuff to see there,” Sweetie deliberated.

“That would defeat our purpose,” Thrackerzod said. “We are an exploration unit, like Pinkie’s. We’re supposed to go to places that have not been fully experienced.”

“So that leaves out me taking you to Yakyakistan or something,” Sweetie said.

“Negative,” Bot chirped. “You can explore your own world!”

“There is Tauryl…” Sweetie said, putting a hoof to her chin. “But I don’t know, last I heard the centaurs weren’t friendly. At all.”

“I would offer to take you to my plane of origin, but our bodies would not survive the transfer,” Thrackerzod said. “I will have to wait for your interdimensional adaption technologies to develop further.”

“I am ready to experience seventeen dimensions!” Bot cheered.

“The fact that you think you can count the dimensions amuses me.”

“I know! What about Esefem?” Brute asked. “We could have a Red vs Blue battle!”

“They have not cracked the respawn yet,” Thrackerzod pointed out.

“I don’t want to get shot even if I *could* respawn,” Sweetie said.

“Acquiring data…” Bot droned. “Ding! Rarely does anypony talk about the other races in Earth Tau’ri. They have a lot of space we don’t see much of!”

“The Asgard made themselves known a couple weeks ago,” Sweetie said.

“There are others though! Database has… Jaffa, Ori Remnant, Wraith, Traveler…”

“We get the idea. There’s a lot,” Thrackerzod commented. “This sounds like a good use of our time. Go where the ponies generally do not.”

“We’ll need to charter a ship…” Sweetie said.

“There are many available ships,” Thrackerzod said.
“We can steal one!” Brute shouted.

“No, we can use our connections to Eve to charter one,” Thrackerzod corrected.

“Heh. You said Charter and Eve in the same sentence by accident.”

“I swear I will never understand mortal humor in its entirety.”

Sweetie Belle pulled out her dimensional device and dialed the Hub. “We’ll need to use one of the higher-powered portals to get to Earth Tau’ri.”

“One is open to Earth Tau’ri right now for sixteen more minutes,” Bot informed them.

“Let’s get over there then. Thrackerzod?”

Thrackerzod nodded and lit her horn, teleporting them all into the Hub, towards the open gateway.

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As powerful as Nova was, the sheer mass and force of the blind giant’s hand caught her completely off guard. Her shield broke with ease, but its presence made the hand fumble. She teleported out of the way, to the back end of the hall.

Pinkie appeared on top of the arm that held Flutterfree, pirate cutlass in hand. She stabbed the giant’s arm with it – doing as much damage as a needle would. It flailed in pain – but instead of dropping Flutterfree, it just squeezed tighter. “Gurk…”

The giant grabbed Pinkie with his other hand, but she was on his head the next instant. He grabbed her again, but she was standing on his shoe. He grabbed her again – definitely catching her – but she was somehow on top of his hand now. “Yeah, nice try. Nova! Can you teleport Flutterfree out?”

Nova lit her horn, focusing on Flutterfree. Somehow, the giant sensed what she was doing, rushing his free hand to her. She had to teleport herself out of the way. “He’s blind! How does-"

“He knows what we’re saying,” Renee realized.

The giant made a different sort of noise that might have been laughter.

“Then why doesn’t he say anything?” Nova demanded, firing a laser at the giant – regretting it as the pain made the giant squeeze Flutterfree again.

“Don’t think he wants to,” Pinkie said, appearing next to Flutterfree with a tub of lard in her hooves. “Gonna slide you right out of the-"

Nova teleported after the blind monster, trying to get a lock on Flutterfree – but it turned through another door. The giant may have looked like it was a slow, lumbering fool, but its stride was huge even with those tiny legs. Nova wasn’t used to dealing with a space this large in a battle – sure she could teleport in and out of open spaces easily, but the distance was almost always closed quickly. Here, there was just so much distance.

Pinkie appeared next to her. “Let’s wait for him to slow down, then teleport her out of there. We have to be quiet though. DID YOU HEAR THAT RENEE?!”
Rene glared at Pinkie from the hallway floor, but nodded. Nova surrounded the three of them in magic and levitated them over the floor, making almost no noise as they flew through the air. They followed the sound of the lumbering giant – passing through what appeared to be a library with pony-size bookshelves, a room filled with cages, and a strange hall with a bunch of doors that were more normal size. Nova ignored all this – she just continued in her pursuit of the giant and Flutterfree.

The giant eventually stopped in a room with one of the cables they had seen running through it, a hook passing through every handful of seconds, all empty. This was apparently a place where things were loaded. If Nova had to guess, the things that were loaded were probably in the neatly tied bundles of white fabric.

Good thing she didn’t. She set herself, Nova, and Renee gently underneath the bottom shelf of a cabinet, where they could see the giant and Flutterfree. It took all of two seconds for Nova to initiate the teleport, removing Flutterfree from the giant’s grasp.

Unfortunately the sudden release of her lungs told Flutterfree’s body that it needed to get air into itself right now. She sucked in a tremendous gasp that the giant definitely heard. The giant lowered its hand to the ground and stuck it under the shelf where they were hiding. Nova initiated another teleport, this time taking them onto the top shelf. The giant did not hear them appear, and kept rooting around under the shelf.

Pinkie tapped Nova on the shoulder and pointed to the cable that ran through and out of the room. Nova nodded, levitating the four of them to one of the hooks and following it out. They soon entered the grand, expansive area they had been in before.

“I’m getting tired…” Nova said, struggling to keep her telekinesis up. “Three ponies and myself is draining.”

Flutterfree spread her wings and grabbed Renee to take the stress off Nova.

“Just set me on the wire!” Pinkie said. Nova didn’t question it, and wasn’t at all surprised when Pinkie started walking along the wire like it was solid ground that required no special balance at all. Now that the unicorn was levitating only herself, she was no longer struggling.

“So… Where do you think we’re going?” Flutterfree asked, setting Renee down on one of the moving hooks.

“Those white packages are probably what usually go on this line,” Nova said. “So wherever that goes.”

“Do we have any idea what was in those?”

“No,” Nova admitted. “But I’m sure we’ll find out.”

It took about a minute for the hook to make it to the other side. The wall appeared identical to the one they had left behind; just as damp, dusty, and dreary.

There was one difference though – they smelled something good. Someone was cooking.


“That does sound good,” Flutterfree commented.

Renee shook her head. “You are all getting too used to consuming meat. ...To be fair, I am too.”
Flutterfree shrugged.

The hook entered the wall, and they found themselves in a giant pile of the wrapped white containers, each one around their size. They leaped onto the top of the pile and quickly discovered what the packages were – meat.

“Oh, so mister lanky was a butcher,” Renee deduced. “Wonder why we didn’t actually see any meat there though…”

“Why would you need to butcher on a boat?” Flutterfree asked. “Butchering suggests live animals. But on a boat you’d want to have stored meat, and you’d only kill your animal cargo if you ran low on food. You’d definitely not need to resort to this much.”

“They’re giants. Maybe they get hungry,” Nova commented.

“Or maybe it’s fish,” Renee shrugged.

“Or maybe their cows are the size of skyscrapers,” Pinkie said. “We could be standing on one cow!”

Flutterfree poked the bags, feeling them with her hoof. “The cuts are too small to be that. Not a regular cow either, or fish.”

“You have a freakish knowledge of butchering,” Nova said.

Flutterfree shrugged. “I know a lot about animals, anatomy, and how to care for carnivores. It comes from that.”

Pinkie leaped down from the stack of meat. “Well, we better get moving! Stuff to see!” She bounced to the door that was the exit. Flutterfree flew to the handle and opened it, letting them into what was clearly a Giant’s kitchen. They could see the backside of a fat giant cooking over a stove. To his right was a sink absolutely filled with dirty dishes. To his left, several unwrapped packets of the meat.

The ponies were struck by the smell of cooked meat coming off of everything in the room. They may have had no natural instinct to find the smell of meat enticing, but all four of them had tasted meaty meals in their journeys, and their bodies had learned to recognize it as food. Renee was the only one whose mouth wasn’t watering.

Pinkie glanced at Flutterfree. “Hey, your teeth are getting pointy.”

Flutterfree covered her mouth. “Eep!”

Nova rolled her eyes. “Hungry, huh? I’m sure I can snag you some of the meat…” With a carefully calculated teleport, Nova summoned a chunk of cooked sausage the size of Flutterfree’s head to them.

Flutterfree lost control and drove her slightly-sharper than usual teeth into the chunk of meat, ravenously devouring it.

Nova stared at the spectacle. “Y’know, I think I lost my appetite.”

Flutterfree lifted her head up and shook it. “I’m sorry – I’m really not sure what came over me. I just… needed to devour that.”

“Might want to see Eve about that when we get back,” Renee said.
“What did it taste like?” Pinkie wondered.

“A bit like… a cross between pork and veal.”

The smile on Pinkie’s face vanished, replaced with an expression of deep thought.

“It wasn’t like anything I’ve tasted before. Nova, you could get some more for her.”

Pinkie shook her head. “Nah, don’t feel like it right no—” Her thought was cut short when the four of them noticed something through the doorway.

They saw the girl in the yellow raincoat dash across the floor, right behind the giant chef. The chef saw the girl out of the corner of its eye. The behemoth let out a surprised noise – like a human who has just seen a rat, though the startled grunt was decidedly more monstrous. Despite the giant’s flab, it moved fast enough to grab the girl.

With its other hand, the giant reached for a cleaver.

Pinkie wasn’t having any of that. She appeared next to the giant, brandishing her own giant knife to meet the cleaver. “Nope! Not cutting up kids today!”

The giant tried to grab Pinkie, but as the blind giant had discovered, Pinkie couldn’t exactly be grabbed. Her pink form distracted the giant enough for Nova to teleport the girl away.

Flutterfree made herself known, drawing her bow. “Hey!”

The giant swiped at Pinkie one last time – in vain - before turning to Flutterfree. He barely had time to register there was a bow aimed at him.

The holy arrow of light sailed true, flashing with brilliant light as it shot through the air. It hit the giant right in the nose, drawing enough blood to drench Pinkie.

“DISGUSTING!!!!” She whined.

The giant was not able to think through the pain, it was only able to stumble around blindly, covering its nose with its hand.

“Let’s move!” Renee shouted, galloping across the kitchen to another door. Before she got there, the door flung open to reveal another fat chef.

Renee coughed. “I don’t suppose you’d be willing to believe the injury to your friend over there wasn’t caused by us?”

The giant reached for her – but it had been distracted enough for Nova to initiate a teleport into the rafters. Flutterfree and the girl were already there. Pinkie appeared a moment later, still drenched in blood. “I know my name. It is going to be Crimson Pie, pirate of blood!”

“Yeah, no,” Renee dismissed, turning to the girl. “Are you okay? Hurt?”

The girl looked at her, eyes somehow still shrouded. She said nothing – but her stomach growled.

“Pinkie, donut,” Renee said, holding out a hoof. Pinkie pulled one out of her mane, somehow making sure no blood got on it. Renee handed it to the girl – who swiped it quickly, downing it in only a few bites. Then she gagged.

“Are you allergic to donuts?” Flutterfree asked, holding the girl with her wing.
“Too… Sweet…” the girl said in a raspy voice that had clearly not been used in a long, long time.

“Oh,” Flutterfree said. “…Sorry, Pinkie only holds sugary food.”

The girl nodded, recovering from the rush of sugar into her system.

Pinkie walked up to the girl and sat down. “Hello there.”

The girl looked right at her.

“I’m Pinkie Pie! That’s Renee, Flutterfree, and Nova. What’s your name?”

“…Six,” Six answered. Her voice held uncertainty, but there was only a small amount of fear.

Pinkie smiled. “Don’t worry Six, we’ll help you get out of this place.”

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The ship the League of Sweetie Belles ended up on was one of the new Asgard vessels, designed by the lanky gray aliens themselves. The ship was smooth and thin, unlike the designs of the humans. In the back the ship extended out giving it a vague ‘T’ shape from above. Two spires of material stretched up and down from the back of the vessel, and a slight purple glow emanated from certain parts of the craft.

The League of Sweetie Belles was currently ‘dining’ with the Asgard Thor – if it could really be called that. It was more like staring at Asgard food cubes while talking to a gray alien that was shorter than Sweetie Belle.

“So,” Sweetie said, swallowing one of the cubes whole, unsure if that was acceptable or not. “How does it feel to be back?”

“Invigorating,” Thor said, though his calm voice did not match the meaning of the word. “I am aware many artificial intelligences would take offense at this, but living as a program is limiting.”

“How so?” Thrackerzod asked.

“Living as a program and retaining your organic personality and outlook requires that some… Limitations be placed,” Thor explained. “Were we to store ourselves as full AI, we would have no limitations, and that change would drastically alter us as we were. So we were limited – kept from growing beyond the bounds of a normal Asgard brain, prevented from calculating things too quickly, prevented from duplication of the self. We were prepared to live our entire existence as limited AI.”

“Boooring!” Brute droned.

Bot hit her across the head. “Sorry, Mister Thor.”

“It is all right. I understand that you come from different worlds, different cultures, and that some of you are technically children.”

“You’re a very patient person, Thor,” Sweetie observed.

“Asgard generally are. We have lived an incredibly long time. Princess Cosmo Sparkle would be young to an Asgardian.”

“And you’d be young simply because you measure age with timelines,” Thrackerzod said.
Brute perked up. “I thought time was made out of circles.”

Thrackerzod sighed. “My job is not to explain every little nuance in the multiverse to you.”

“You don’t know,” Thor said. It wasn’t a question.

Thrackerzod blinked. “You’re observant.”

“I am Supreme Commander of the Asgard Fleet for a reason, Thrackerzod.”

“...Why are you carrying us through space, again?”

“I wish to meet with the Ori Remnant, to extend official Asgard relations. I shall journey to the other powers in this universe after, and then perhaps to the Gems. We were simply going to the same place.”

“Huh. We get a grand tour. Sweeeeet,” Brute said.

“We must remember to stamp our passports for maximum collecting!” Bot cheered.

“So, how long until we get to the Ori Remnant anyway?”

“They are in another galaxy,” Thor said. “But a shortcut exists. A supergate.”

“Stargate for ships,” Bot explained.

“Precisely. We will be sent to the Ori galaxy, and make our way to Celestis – their capital. It is not far from the supergate.”

The ship dropped out of hyperspace in front of a gigantic ring structure floating in the middle of space. The supergate was currently active with a blue ripple pattern, ready to receive them.

“...Nice window,” Sweetie commented.

“We have an appreciation for beauty and elegance as well as function,” Thor said.

They entered the gate, transmitting directly to the Ori galaxy. They entered hyperspace again, toward Celestis.

Sweetie smiled. “So, I hear these Ori Remnants have an interesting story. They tried to conquer the Milky Way Galaxy, right?”

“That they did, at the behest of their old masters, the Ori. The Ori themselves were Ascended beings, much like your Discord. Unlike the Ascended who lived in the Milky Way, the Ori fed off worship and power, draining their followers for everything they could manage. They saw the Milky Way as an opportunity, and ordered their worshippers to conquer the place with technological secrets beyond even my people. It was a fight the Milky Way Galaxy was unable to win without help. But with a few Ascended tricks and an artifact known as the Ark of Truth, the Ori were banished and their followers redeemed.”

“So they’re just regular people now?” Brute asked. “Lame.”

“Far from it,” Thor answered.

“Yeah!” Bot interjected. “They’ve got wizards called Priors, and a lot of leftover ships!”
Thor nodded. “Almost all of the Ori Remnants are primitive people with little connection with each other, but they are in the unique position of having the most advanced ships in the universe and the most powerful… ‘magic’ as well. I would prefer to call it psychic ability, but as O’Neill would point out, I am talking to a room full of magical unicorns.”

Thrackerzod nodded. “Trying to pretend magic doesn’t exist would be pretty stupid.”

“There’s people who don’t think I exist,” Thor pointed out. “Earth Vitis’ people find my appearance unbelievable.”

“How so?” Sweetie asked.

“Their legends of aliens often include ‘Grays’, which I closely resemble. The legends of the Tau’ri were actually based on us, but on Earth Vitis there is no such evidence. So it’s just a conspiracy theory to many.”

“There’s a lot of conspiracy theories on Earth Vitis,” Bot said. “I was on the Internet a couple hours ago and I watched hundreds of videos like that!”

“Why in the name of Azathoth does your universe make robots go mad when they realize what they are?” Thrackerzod blurted. “Such a wasted opportunity…”

“Unknown,” Bot said.

“Whoever designed you had to somehow be the perfect mix of genius and absolute moron.”

“Low probability detected. That means I’m special, right?”

Sweetie smiled. “Yes, Bot, it does.”

“Yay!”

The ship dropped out of hyperspace around a planet – presumably Celestis. Thor turned around in his chair to address an unseen camera. “This is Supreme Commander Thor of the Cosmo-class vessel Mjolnir. I have an appointment with the Doci.”

A human voice replied. “Welcome to Celestis, Thor, beam down to the given coordinates.”

“I also have some passengers, a team from Equis Vitis, here for exploratory purposes.”

“Same location.”

Thor didn’t bother to respond further – he activated the teleporter without warning, materializing them all in a giant, domed room. The entire room was made of a marble-like material, and light filled the entire space, giving it the appearance of a holy room. There was a torch in the center of a large altar, but it wasn’t aflame.

A man with pale skin in brilliant white robes strode to meet them, his golden collar framing his head in a regal fashion. He bowed. “Supreme Commander Thor.”

“Doci,” Thor said.

The Doci gestured to the left. “The unicorns will be attended to by my Priors. We shall converse in my chambers.”

Thor nodded, saying nothing. The two of them walked away, leaving the League on their own with
the priors. They looked a lot like the Doci – though without the golden collars, just the white robes. “Welcome to Celestis.”

“We are the League of Sweetie Belles,” Sweetie said for them. “We’re here to learn about you and explore. So… A tour would probably be a good idea.”

“Very well.” One of the Priors raised a staff and tapped it on the ground. They were teleported somewhere else – a hallway made of the same marble-like material. It was largely abandoned, though they could see another prior walking through the hall with a regular human at his side.

The Prior that had teleported the League began to walk the other way, gesturing for the unicorns to follow. They came to a balcony that looked out at the entire city – it was a beautiful city, composed almost entirely from the pristine white material. It clearly had not been designed with technology of any kind in mind, for all the technological ports and such were recent constructions at the edges of the city, made of more standard materials. Celestis was a city built by godlike beings for glory to them, not for function. Now, it was a glorious piece of art surrounded by a ring of industrial practicality. Further out, there was nothing but a smooth planet – it looked crystalline.

“This is strange,” Sweetie admitted.

The Prior nodded. “We’ve had to adapt our city to the outside world – or worlds, as the case may be. We have ensured that the center of our city remains beautiful, at the least.”

He tapped his staff on the ground again, and they were in a large room with an empty wall in front of them. “This was where the Fires of Celestis once burned – the place the Ori physically existed most often. From our worship, their forms were not the calm, white energies of the Ascended in the Milky Way, but violent bursts of fire that raged eternal. But the Fires of Celestis are no more, and this city is our own.”

“Is that why the torch where we were was out?” Sweetie asked.

“Yes, but more indirectly. We chose not to have any open flames in the city center, using only electric and natural light. It is a reminder that the Ori are here no more, only the Remnants.”

Bot blinked. “Remnants? You call yourselves that?”

“There is a motion for the name Reform, but that has not gone through yet.”

“Reform sounds better,” Thrackerzod said. “Less embarrassment associated with the word.”

The Prior nodded ever so slightly. He tapped his staff again, teleporting them to a large, glass door guarded by two Priors. Through the door, they could see a room lit with blue light, under which sat an ornate black and gray chest. On top was a ring of orange symbols, with a red crystal nested in the center.

“The Ark of Truth?” Thrackerzod asked.

“Yes, this is the device of our salvation. It revealed the truth of the Ori, what they were, to the Doci, and his connection to all of us allowed every Prior everywhere to discover the truth. It is a powerful, ancient artifact, and the only object we still revere with anything close to what we once held for the Ori.”

Thrackerzod nodded. “I sense a lot of energy within it. It is connected to a great power…”

“Can I use it to make everyone give me ice cream?” Brute asked.
The Prior raised an eyebrow. “The Ark only works for things that are true, it is not an absolute brainwashing device. Even then, we will never reprogram it for any reason – we keep it locked away as a memory of what saved us, but are wise enough to know never to use it.”

“Convincing people of the truth… That Ark has the potential to be just as madness inducing as anything from my realm,” Thrackerzod noted. “The truth is a powerful weapon.”

“Your universe sure has a lot of really powerful artifacts,” Bot told the Prior. “I’m looking at three others right now!”

The Prior nodded. “Precisely. We have many defenses against threats, should we decide to use them. Most of them are a last resort.”

Sensing the conversation had died down, he took them to another location – the edge of the ‘marble’ section of the city, the connection to the industrial side. They stood underneath a tremendous arch. Behind them, beautifully constructed structures of art. In front of them, a mesh of industrial buildings of mixed designs – mostly human, but a handful of pony as well.

Unlike the central city, which was almost entirely devoid of life, the League could see activity here – children running, people working and laughing, and even a Prior actively preaching from a book, a metal disc sitting at his feet.

“I thought you rejected religion?” Thrackerzod asked.

“The book of Origin, while based on a lie, was designed by higher beings with the secrets to live a simple, happy life. The motives were nefarious – more worship for more power – but the wisdom within is still true,” the Prior said. “It is more of a guide than a religion now.”

“I think that’s great,” Sweetie said. “Finding the silver lining.”

Brute grunted. “Not bold enough. You should have burned all their books! Shown them who was really in charge!”

“There are no Ori for us to show,” the Prior said. “It is just us.”

The conversation would have continued, but as happened so often, something interrupted it. A young woman with pale blue hair and red gloves leaped out of a doorway, dashing for the Prior who was preaching. She leaped up, punching him in the face with her glove, a strange flash of light emanating from the attack. He keeled over, leaving the metal disc open to be grabbed. The woman grabbed it, running back for the door.

Bot placed herself between the woman and the door. “Enemy identified: Jenny of the University of Doors!”

Jenny stopped in her tracks. “Well this is bad timing. You’re pretty cute though.” She jumped over Bot, running directly towards the door.

Thrackerzod destroyed the door from a distance. “No escape for you.”

Jenny teleported in front of another door. The Prior destroyed this one by holding out a hand.

Jenny groaned. “You know we don’t like it when people figure out the door trick.”

Brute jumped onto Jenny, punching her in the face. “RAAAAAAA!”
Jenny snapped her fingers, hitting the filly with a flash of energy. “OUUUUUUCH.”

Thrackerzod encased Jenny in a ring of dark, pulsating power.

Jenny sighed. “Ivan, get them off me.”

“…Ivan?” Sweetie muttered to herself.

Ivan, as it turned out, was a man made of crystal. He strode into the square, hands outstretched. Everyone present saw gigantic, billowing red clouds filling the sky. Something roared in them, setting everyone on edge. They prepared for the worst.

“Thanks!” Jenny cheered to Ivan, having teleported out of Thrackerzod’s magic. She opened a door and slipped through it. Ivan himself – and his red clouds – vanished unceremoniously.

Bot blinked. “…An error has occurred. What?”

“Cowards! All of them!” Brute blurted.

Sweetie turned to the Prior. “What was that disc she stole?”

“An inhibition device,” he answered. “The Prior was using it to limit his powers, so the masses would accept him as an equal.”

“So she wants to remove the powers of some Priors…” Sweetie said, hoof to her chin. “…She wouldn’t be after the Ark of Truth, would she?”

The Prior’s eyes widened in horror.

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“I’ve never seen anyone so hungry before,” Flutterfree commented as Six inhaled everything Pinkie put in front of her, having by now gotten used to the high sugar concentrations.

“Don’t get much food,” Six commented.

Renee looked at the kitchen below them. “…Why not? Certainly seems to be a lot of food down there, and it’s not like it’s unhealthy for humans to eat meat.”

Six stared at her. The fact that her eyes were strangely hidden unnerved Renee. “…You don’t know, do you?”

“…Know what?” Flutterfree asked.

“You must have just gotten on the Maw…” Six stood up, pointing at the still-open door that led to all the tied sacks of meat. “…Those are human.”

Flutterfree’s eyes shrunk to pinpricks. Her gag reflex activated – but nothing would come out. Instead she just choked on her convulsion and passed out from the revelation.

“…human!?” Renee blurted, looking down with horror in her eyes. “That… That makes sense… The cages… The cuts of meat… The smaller things around… But why?”

“They’re clearly not animals,” Nova commented, struggling not to gag herself. “They understand our language… They know what they’re doing.”
“Monsters!” Renee blurted. “Evil, horrendous monsters! How could they do this? There’s enough meat in here to be made from tens of thousands of humans! Given the size of this ship, a… A genocide!”

“They farm us,” Six said. “Keep us locked in dark, damp places. Let us play. Let us think our lives will just be boring forever.”

“Despicable!” Renee yelled. “This needs to be stopped. I say we get the Enterprise in here and say in no uncertain terms that they have to stop what they’re doing.”

Pinkie frowned. “We do need to do something, but they won’t even talk to us. I don’t think talking will work. They’ve said nothing since we’ve been here.”

“Then what can we do?” Flutterfree asked, coming to. “W-we… This evil needs to be st-topped.”

Six looked at Nova. “You… have power. There is one giant in charge of all this, the entire Maw. The Geisha. If you kill her, the entire system will fall.”

“Kill?” Renee said. “That seems a bit…”

“No, Six is right,” Flutterfree said. “If she’s done this, she deserves to die.”

The ponies stared at Flutterfree.

“I understand that was uncharacteristically cold and brutal of me, but look around! This is genocide! If taking one life will solve that, I’m… I’m all for it.”

Renee turned to Pinkie. “Do you think it needs to happen?”

“I’m not getting a lot of clarity today,” Pinkie admitted. “I do think it needs to happen, but… I’ve just had the feeling like there’s more going on here we don’t see, and the revelation of the human… meat didn’t make it go away.” She turned to Six. “Where can we find this Geisha?”

“Top of the Maw,” Six said. “It’ll take a long time to get up to that level, and it will be dangerous. There are hundreds of giants up there, being served constantly.”

“A restaurant ship for human flesh…” Renee bristled. “This will not stand.”

“Can you get us to the outside?” Nova asked. “We can fly up the edge without too much effort.”

Six nodded. “There’s an outer window only a few rooms away.” She gestured for them to follow her along the rafters, through a hole, and into a cold, attic space. While the ponies had before moved slowly to take in their surroundings, Six ensured they moved quickly – she ducked through holes, cracks, and hatches with ease, having the layout of the area memorized. It didn’t take long for them to make it to the window – it was in a long, empty hallway.

The sight of sea and sky through it was somewhat startling to the ponies, who had only seen artificial light their entire time here. They could see no land through the window, though.

Nova levitated herself up to the window and looked around. To the side, she could see a small extrusion in the side of the boat – the Maw. “I can teleport us out there, but prepare for heavy winds!”

Everyone nodded. Nova teleported them to the metallic ledge, and the salty smell of the ocean filled their nostrils. The four ponies and Six looked up and down – the harsh waves of the sea were far
below them, and they could maybe see the top of the boat as they looked up – it was a bit too far away to tell. The wind was strong, but not strong enough to blow any of them over.

“…That’s a long way up,” Renee commented.

Flutterfree spread her wings and lifted Renee. “Let’s start moving then.”

Nova levitated Six onto her back. “Hold on tight,” she said as she levitated the two of them into the air.

“How is Pinkie going to get up?” Six asked.

Pinkie moved up the side of the ship with suction cups affixed to all four of her legs. “I’m suction cup pony, look at me gooooo!”

Renee raised an eyebrow. “Dear, if you lose traction on those things you’ll fall to your death.”

“You can’t kill suction cup pony!”

“…Good point.”

The five of them ascended to the top levels of the Maw, slowly but surely.

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The League of Sweetie Belles and the Prior teleported into the entrance to the Ark of Truth. The two Priors were still there, standing at attention. The Ark was behind them, unmoved from when they’d seen it earlier.

“We may have an incursion from the University of Doors,” the main Prior told the guards. “Be on your best watch. They have just taken a Prior inhibition device.

Thrackerzod lit her horn. “I sense something wrong with the flow of magic.”

The main Prior held out his hand, testing his powers – nothing happened.

“They’ve already activated it,” Sweetie said.

“Captain Obvious,” Brute muttered.

“Scanning… Scanning… Scanning…” Bot said. “Can’t find device. Strange.”

“It has to be within close proximity,” the main Prior said. “Either in the hall or one of the adjacent rooms.”

“Negative,” Bot said. “I would have sensed it. The material is not the same as the walls.”

Sweetie narrowed her eyes. “There’s something wrong here…”

“…I’m going to try something,” Thrackerzod said. “This will give you a headache.” She cleared her throat, and spoke out with an eldritch tongue – not quite as damaging to the psyche as Majora’s words could be, but she wasn’t kidding when she said it’d give them a headache. Everyone covered their ears from the noise that went directly to their brains.

“Boo.”
The scenery changed suddenly – no longer did they see two guards and a safe Ark of Truth. Now they saw two guards passed out on the floor, the disc laid between them, and the Ark being moved to a set of double doors that definitely hadn’t been in the room before. Both Jenny and Ivan were in the room. Ivan was the only one clutching his ears – not that his head really looked like it had ears, given its crystalline form. Jenny was standing upright, fixing Thrackerzod with an annoyed expression.

“You couldn’t have waited five more seconds?”

“No,” Thrackerzod said, lighting her horn.

“DINTIN!” Jenny yelled at the door. “LITTLE HELP?”

A robot smashed through the double doors. It had to duck to fit through the frame, but once it was through the gigantic machine stood ten feet tall, barely able to fit within the vaulted ceiling. The beast was roughly humanoid, its rectangular chest taking up the vast majority of its body mass. Its head was small compared to the bulk of the legs and arms, and blue lights flashed from various locations on its body.

Behind the robot, through the door, they could see another world – grand, sweeping plains of grass. In the near distance, there was a structure too tall to imagine, rising so far into the sky it might have made it to orbit. The mountains in the distance looked unnatural – one was even floating.

Thrackerzod swore she saw a green stripe on the moon, but the connection between dimensions faded before she could make sure. The doorframe was just a normal doorframe now.

Brute smashed the Prior inhibition device. “You’re doomed now.”

Jenny nodded to Ivan. The Prior raised his staff to unleash psychic power while Ivan took out a staff of his own. The robot – presumably named Dintin – charged the Prior, hitting a psychic shield the man had around him. The force of the multi-ton mech hitting him pushed the Prior back, interrupting whatever attack he was going to unleash.

The tip of Ivan’s staff flashed, enveloping the Ark of Truth in a beam of light similar to a transporter, sucking the essence of the artifact into the staff. Bot hit Ivan in his crystal face with a rocket launcher, making him drop the staff – a staff that Jenny swiped from the air.

She twirled it, winked at them, and teleported away.

“Bot, with me, I’ve got a trace on her,” Thrackerzod said, teleporting the two of them after Jenny. They saw her open a door – a door that should have led to another part of Celestis but instead led somewhere else entirely.

Instead of destroying the doorway, Thrackerzod held it open – throwing herself and Bot in after Jenny.

They were not in Earth Tau’ri anymore, but neither were they in whatever universe had been on the side of the doorway the robot had come from. They were in a world with brown grass on all sides. The wind blew, but there was an eerie silence everywhere. The door they had popped out of was part of a worn down shed.

Jenny turned to face them. “You really don’t want to do this.”

Thrackerzod and Sweetie Bot took battle stances. “Yes we do.”

“Oh, I don’t mean the fight.” She teleported behind them to the other side of the worn door. “I mean you don’t want to challenge me in a doorway chase.”
Thrackerzod teleported them through the doorway, to yet another universe just in time to see Jenny throw another door open.

“By Azathoth’s snores, this is going to get annoying really fast,” Thrackerzod muttered.


They pursued her, paying no attention to the confused mushroom people they had passed by. The next world was dark, stormy, and dominated by a spiky metallic structure…

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The higher levels of the Maw made an attempt to look nicer. The locations weren’t dark or damp – they were rather well lit, furnished, and organized. However, this did little to detract from the absolutely disgusting behavior of the giants. There were hundreds of them here, sitting at dozens upon dozens of long, wooden tables, spending all their time shoving industrial quantities of human meat into their fat, flabby maws. None of the patrons looked healthy, or even like they were enjoying themselves. They just had to continually shove more and more flesh into their gluttonous maws.

Renee wanted to hurl. They were safe from their position in a rafter, far above the giants themselves, but that did nothing to ease their nerves.

“They can’t still be hungry…” Flutterfree said.

“This place… It does something to you,” Six said. “It… Makes you hungry.”

Flutterfree nodded to herself, shame building within her.

“I have been eating a lot of cupcakes,” Pinkie noted. “This place is evil stacked on top of more evil isn’t it?”

Six nodded. Pinkie gave her another cupcake, which she ravenously devoured.

There was a moment of silence. Nopony or human felt like saying anything – they just looked at what was happening beneath them with growing sickness.

Flutterfree heard a sob. She turned to Six. “Shh… It’ll all be okay. We’re going to stop this.”

Six wiped her hidden eyes. “I know… It’s not that… It’s… Nobody’s ever done anything like this for me. Ever. I’ve… I’ve been alone. Always…”

Flutterfree hugged her. “You never have to be alone again, Six.”

Six started crying again, burying her face in Flutterfree’s wing. Everypony else piled onto the hug, sharing a moment.

They eventually left the mutual embrace, feeling the need to continue.

“Where to?” Pinkie asked.

“Next level should be next to her balcony,” Six said. “I… actually have never been this high. …Only heard about it.”

“Other kids?” Nova asked.

Six nodded. “There are… some. We rarely see each other. Never form groups… Never like this. …
We should have.”

“We’ll find them after this is over,” Flutterfree promised.

Six nodded slowly, clearly aware that some of them had probably already been captured. The five of them continued upward, climbing up a rope through a hole in the floor, finding the new wooden floors easier to move through. They came up at the bottom of a grand feeding hall, much more open than the previous ones. Nova teleported them up to the ceiling area again, avoiding the sight of the giants.

“I am running really low on power here,” Nova said. “We better be close, I’m not sure how much use I’ll be in a fight.”

Six pointed ahead – along one of the far walls of an eating hall was a balcony that overlooked all the disgusting, gluttonous patrons. Standing there, watching them all, was a giant unlike any of the others. She was thin, slender, and her proportions were like that of a particularly tall human. She wore a brown, close fitting dress, and a white porcelain mask covered her face. Her hair was long, slender, and seemingly perfect.

She just stared at the feast happening beneath her.

“She’s different…” Renee said, thinking aloud. “Why is she different? She’s not overcome with hunger… She’s very healthy… And she’s in charge… Why…?”

Six shrugged.

The five of them watched the Geisha watch the feast. The slender woman was so still there were moments where it didn’t even seem like she was alive – but the occasional twitch of a finger or shift of her feet indicated otherwise.

She eventually turned around, leaving the balcony to a private room. Nova teleported the five of them to the balcony the instant she was gone. Flutterfree carefully pulled on the door handle, opening the door.

The other side had a homey interior – not lit as well as the dining halls, but significantly better decorated. Photos of what could only be assumed to be the Geisha’s friends and family lined the walls. Images of eyes were placed everywhere in the space, giving it an eerie feel. A large oak staircase lead up to a small hallway with several doors – one of which was empty. They could hear singing coming from behind a door, the haunting, melodious voice meeting their ears and sending chills down their body.

“The feast is such a wonderful place to find a bride…

Just give her a bit of your time once you are inside…

What she can give lasts longer than this world’s simple goods…”

“She’s talking,” Nova said, this piece of news scaring her.

Pinkie nodded. “Can you teleport us to the door?”

Nova sighed. “Yes, but you better have some other plan than ‘mega laser blast her in the face’ because that’s not happening.”

The five of them soon stood outside the door in which she was singing. The door was ajar, allowing
them to poke their heads in. She was standing in front of a broken mirror, brushing her hair – looking at the shattered glass as if it showed her what she looked like.

“Crazy,” Nova commented. “Good to know.”

The Geisha raised a hand, levitating a teakettle to her grip. She poured herself a drink.

“Great. She’s got magic,” Nova muttered.

“So do we,” Flutterfree pointed out.

“And she’s twenty times larger than we are,” Renee said. “Which means whatever she does is twenty times stronger. We’d have to expend effort to move that teakettle… She’s not.”

“Right. So here’s the plan,” Pinkie said. “Flutterfree, shoot her in the back of the head.”

“…That might do it. It might not,” Flutterfree pointed out.

“If it doesn’t, well, I think we can handle her ourselves,” Pinkie said, taking out a pink shotgun.

Renee prepared some shields. Nova, being too low on magic to use her more advanced spells, just readied the standard laser. Six took a few steps to the left, away from the doorway.

Flutterfree lifted herself into the air and readied the bow of light, aiming right for the Geisha’s head. She took a moment to aim and unleashed the holy arrow. It flew true through the air – but the Geisha chose that moment to turn her head. Instead of going right through the back of her skull, it hit the side of her mask. The holy power hit the mask, reacting with it, shattering the upper part of it and drawing blood from the Geisha’s forehead.

She wasn’t dead, or even seriously injured.

She was angry.

She reacted – with a hand, she blew the door off its hinges. It flew right over Renee, Nova, and Pinkie, but it caught Flutterfree in its rapid rotation, tossing her down the staircase. Flutterfree had enough room to avoid getting crushed, but she left the rotation of the door in a tailspin, landing hard on an endtable. She broke a lamp in the process.

The Geisha took a moment to collect herself, looking at the ponies attacking her. “…What are you?”

Pinkie shrugged. “We’re ponies. Visitors from another world. Now it’s your turn to answer a question – why are you mass producing kid meat!?”

The Geisha stared at the pink pony. She extended a hand, lifting Pinkie into the air to be level with her own porcelain face. “…It is the means by which I extend my own life.”

“So we’ve got an evil harvesting of kids for the evil gluttony of a bunch of giants all for the evil purpose of extending your life?” Pinkie whistled. “That’s a lot of evil stacked up in a row there!”

The Geisha tried to crush Pinkie with her power, but as so many had discovered, Pinkie couldn’t accurately be described as a ‘solid’ state of matter. She bounced out of the Geisha’s telekinetic grip and stuck a suction cup to her mask. “You can’t kill suction cup pony!”

The Geisha tried anyway – she grabbed Pinkie again, this time casting a dark spell to latch on to her very life force. Renee threw a diamond shield around Pinkie to block the spell. “Sorry dear, not happening.”
The Geisha resorted to physical force, lifting a stool from the floor below and tossing it at Renee. Renee sliced through the object with a carefully calculated blade construct. Nova shot the Geisha right through the eye hole in her mask, making her yell out in pain. Pinkie brought a hammer down on her head, making her stumble. Pinkie threw the cutlass as well for good measure.

Six whooped. “HEY! Look what I’ve got!”

The Geisha turned to the child in the yellow raincoat – and saw an unshattered mirror. The giant screamed, retreating to the darkness of her room, unable to withstand the mirror.

“…Huh. Nice going, Six,” Renee said. “I didn’t figure that one out.”

Six just nodded, handing the mirror to Renee. “You should be able to use it better.”

“You bet I will,” Renee said, charging into the room to face the Geisha. The woman herself leaped from the side, grabbing Renee in a telekinetic grip, trying to choke her to death – but Renee moved the Mirror in front of her face. The Geisha screamed as if she were being burned, stumbling back even further. Pinkie waited there, walloping her on the head with a giant foam finger large enough to fit on the giant’s hand. The Geisha flailed wildly, reaching with her power for anything that could help her.

She threw a bed at Renee. Renee leaped out of the way, but the tremendous piece of furniture easily crushed the mirror.

“Dammit,” Nova cursed. “That was our chance,”

The Geisha charged Renee – but Renee, being a pony of style and fashion, knew the mirror spell. The sudden appearance of a reflective surface startled the Geisha – she stumbled, falling over the railing and down the stairs. She stood up quickly, grabbing ahold of Renee directly. She started draining the life from her.

It was not another pony that stopped her – it was one of the Geisha’s other doors flinging open. A universe made of cheese could be seen through it, and a particular human named Jenny was running on it. Jenny at first appeared to be the correct size for the doorway, but the moment she passed the boundary she shrunk to Six’s size.

“What the-“ she said, realizing the door had shrunk her and placed her in the middle of the doorway. She tumbled to the ground. She managed to control the landing, but the distraction was enough for Thrackerzod and Sweetie Bot to catch up. They didn’t try to restrain her – Bot shot an explosive missile while Thrackerzod grabbed the staff.

The Geisha looked at them, dumbfounded. Then she decided she didn’t care about this out of context problem and used her magic to toss the three newcomers into a wall, dazing them. 

Thrackerzod had no idea what was going on. She didn’t care - in her rage she summoned a creature of darkness from her horn, a best with three faces and two heads, screaming for blood. The Geisha absorbed it instantly with her dark powers.

Renee put a mirror in front of the Geisha again, forcing her back. The Geisha reached out with her magic, grabbed Thrackerzod, and threw the eldritch filly at Renee. Thrackerzod kept hold of Jenny’s staff the entire time and bounced off like a squeaky toy.

The Geisha sent out a burst of psychic energy, knocking everyone over who was near her gigantic person. She reached for Renee again. The unicorn was too dazed to create a shield - the life began to flow out of her. The Geisha began to laugh.
A bright ray of light shot through the back of her head, exploding out one of the eyeholes of her mask. She fell to the ground, dead.

Jenny whistled. “Ponies are hardcore, man.”

Flutterfree twitched, pointing the bow of light at Jenny. “Do you want some of what she got!?” she shouted, her voice wavering considerably.

“Uh… No. Thanks for offering though.”

“Well, now that the deed has been done…” Renee turned to Thrackerzod. “Uh…”

“Care to explain?” Pinkie asked.

Thrackerzod hefted up the staff. “This is a staff of holding. Jenny here used it to steal the Ark of Truth from the Ori Remnant.”

“Reform,” Bot corrected.

“Unofficial, Bot,” Thrackerzod retorted.

Bot beeped. “The stolen item has been reclaimed, and the perpetrator is in custody.”

“Look again,” Jenny said. She was standing in the cheese world, once again as large as the doorway. She saluted. “Ciao!” She shut the door.

“…Suspect has escaped,” Bot said, beeping sadly.

“We’re going to have to talk to that University eventually,” Renee muttered. “If only we’d encounter them without something going on around them…”

“We’ve got the holy artifact of the Ori Remnant, so we win,” Thrackerzod said. “What happened here?”

Pinkie cleared her throat. “Evil giant lady ran a boat where humans were cut up and eaten, feeding the gluttony of hundreds of giants, while she herself extended her own life with it… Somehow.”

“My money’s on that dark life-force magic,” Nova suggested.

“Yeah, probably that. Anyway, we’ve now liberated the boat from her influence and can work on saving all the other humans here. Oh, have you met Six?”

Thrackerzod pointed behind her. “Would she by chance be the girl eating the giant lady?”

All the ponies turned around to see Six doing exactly what Thrakcerzod described – devouring part of the Geisha’s flesh at the neck.

“SIX!” Flutterfree yelled. “WHAT ARE YOU DOING?”

Six coughed, spewing blood. “…Ending this.” She lifted a hand, the unmistakable power of the Giesha’s life-force magic rippling through it. She walked toward the balcony overlooking the feast.

With a twitch of her head, Six instantly drained the life out of every giant. The eating stopped all at once, replaced with the sound of fat, ugly bodies hitting the floor. “She was already draining their lives. Makes it easy.”
Pinkie turned to Six. “Six, stop it.”

Six turned to Pinkie. “…No. I am going to kill them all, Pinkie.”

“But-“

“They’re evil. They need to die. Every last giant in this entire world needs to die.”

“That makes you no better than them!” Pinkie declared.

“…I’m not eating them. I’m not harvesting their children. I’m just killing all of them. I’m not eating them. I’m not harvesting their children. I’m just killing all of them.” Six took off her hood, revealing her face. It was a beautiful face with smooth features, shining black hair, and a simple nose. Her eyes seemed to have a light of their own – a light that surrounded a gaze filled with rage, pain, and determination.

Pinkie shook her head. “Six, we can’t let you do that.”

“You can’t stop me,” Six declared. She leaped off of the balcony, effortlessly using her newfound powers to glide to the floor. She slipped down a hole to the next level of the Maw. From the sound of thuds, she killed an entire section of giants again.

“…Do we have a right to stop her?” Nova asked. “This ship… It has killed millions.”

“Maybe this ship, maybe, I’d have to think long and hard about it,” Pinkie said. “But not the world. We’ve got to stop her.”

Thrackerzod raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“The giants are a race. They can’t all be evil,” Pinkie declared. “I know they aren’t. Even if they all feed on humans, they could be taught what they were doing. If not… Well, after we’ve tried, it becomes our job. She’s just a kid who wants revenge. Thrackerzod, teleport us to her.”

Thrackerzod tracked the dark magic of Six, finding it with ease. All the ponies appeared in front of Six.

Six shook her head. “…I’m not going to fight you,” she said. “You showed me kindness, generosity, and made me smile. I’ve never been happy on this ship. You were friends.”

“But we have to stop you,” Pinkie said.

Six shrugged. “I’ll just keep running away. You can’t keep me.”

Pinkie pulled out her dimensional device, adjusting its coordinates. The device gave her a red message – invalid coordinates. But Pinkie knew the coordinates weren’t invalid, just blacklisted. “Authorization code: Pinkie, cupcake-nineteen-iota-g-u-m-m-y-m-a-u-d.”

Nova cleared her throat. “Authorization code: Nova, flare-seven-lambda-t-r-i-x-s-a-m-e-n-e-s-s.”

The portal device switched to green, revealing the location’s name: Nautica.

Pinkie activated the portal, creating a gateway right to the ocean world of Nautica. Thrackerzod teleported Six into it. Pinkie bounced through the portal and closed it behind her.

The two of them started falling toward the ocean below, but Pinkie pulled an inflatable raft out of her mane and activated it just in time to catch them.
Six blinked. “…What is this place?”

“This is Nautica,” Pinkie said. “This is where we put people we can’t safely contain.”

Six glared at her. “Take me back!”

“No,” Pinkie said. “…You’re too dangerous, Six. I’m sorry.”

Six levitated Pinkie into the air, stopping short of draining her life force. “Pinkie… They need to die.”

“No Six. They don’t. And I know you can’t see that… I’m s-sorry.” Pinkie choked, wiping tears from her eyes.

Tears streamed from Six’s own angry eyes as well. “H-how will I survive!?”

“T-there’s food in the raft. And plenty of fish for you to drain the life from,” Pinkie said. “Won’t be hard.” She sniffed. “Watch out for other prisoners.”

Six clenched her fist, moving to drain the life from Pinkie – but she couldn’t do it. She dropped Pinkie back onto the boat and sat down, crying.

Pinkie moved to comfort her, but she was pushed away. “Just go,” Six said. “The longer you’re here the harder it is.”

Pinkie nodded in agreement. She wiped her eyes – then dialed a portal back to the Maw.

Six tried to force herself through the portal, but Pinkie was already on the other side. She threw a pillow into Six’s face, forcing her back onto the raft. The portal closed before Pinkie could get another look at Six’s eyes.

Flutterfree rushed to Pinkie and hugged her. The embrace was silent.

Pinkie realized she was getting used to things like this happening. Condemning others, ordering deaths, playing with lives… It had become part of her.

She sighed. “Let’s go home. Have O’Neill deal with this place.”

“That… Would be a good idea,” Renee said.

The ponies left the world to return home – and to return an ancient artifact.
“Happy third Harmonic!” Pinkie cheered, unleashing a party cannon blast on the bridge of the Enterprise for everyone’s enjoyment. The confetti and balloons filled the bridge, turning the normally drab functional location into a party cave.

O’Neill took one look at the now colorful bridge of his ship. “Never did like this kind of party.”

“The punch is spiked,” Pinkie whispered in his ear.

“As I said, I absolutely love this kind of party,” O’Neill deadpanned.

Daniel rolled his eyes. Renee struggled to stifle a chuckle.

Nova grabbed a glass and filled it with the punch – the nature of which was no secret to anyone present, despite Pinkie’s prior whispers. She downed it in one swig.

Eve raised an eyebrow. “Careful now, Nova. We don’t have just a party today.”

“The ship can fancy-fly itself,” Nova answered. “And I’m not the one giving greetings to every world we pass.”

Eve nodded. “True… I still think you should keep yourself alert. Today’s a special day, you never know when you’ll need to be sharp.”

“Please, Eve, I know how to watch my drink.”

“Every time you and Trixie go out you come back drunk as a skunk.”

Nova chuckled. “Ah yeah, those are fun. But Trixie’s not here to be a bad influence on me. Rest easy, Charter, your loyal subject isn’t going to be drunk out of her mind on such an occasion.”

Eve pursed her lips, unsure.

Flutterfree put a wing around Eve. “Let her do what she wants. She’ll be fine.”

Eve nodded slowly. “Right… Right. Sorry, just been stressing a bit, is all.”


“Maybe we could give you a break this time?” Flutterfree wondered. “O’Neill could-”

“I am not giving the same speech seven times. Or eight. How many worlds are we visiting?”


“Huh. Coulda sworn we had more friends than this,” O’Neill commented.

Daniel shrugged. “These are the actively exploring words, Jack. We have Equis Ultra Fast as a friend, for instance, but this day doesn’t mean anything to them. Gems are the only addition from last time.”
“Strange friends they are,” O’Neill said.

“They’re just different,” Eve insisted. “They’re slowly learning to accept us as equals. Give them time, they’re a very old race, set in their ways.”

O’Neill nodded. “And that’s all good, I just reserve the right to shout back at them if they get too arrogant.”

“Just don’t cause another space dogfight, everything will be fine.”

“No promises. ...Also, isn’t there an Earth missing from the list?”

“Is there?” Eve asked, going over the list. “...Maybe. I think they requested we don’t visit them this time. Not sure why.”

Flutterfree shrugged. “Yeah… shouldn’t we get going though?”

“I was hoping Corona would show up…” Eve said, glancing at the clock. “I guess she decided to keep working. Or lost track of time.” She pulled the Journal out of her saddlebags and checked it for new messages – nothing. “Or she could be in mortal danger from some alien threat…”

Flutterfree shook her head. “She knows how to take care of herself, Eve. If there’s a problem.”

Eve nodded. “Right. We should get going.”


The Enterprise used the Harmony Core within itself to tear a portal across the multiverse, taking the ship into orbit around Equis Vitis.

“Hail the princesses, make sure we have a patch of sky for our show,” O’Neill ordered.

The communications officer looked up from her console, confused. “Sir? There’s no station to transmit to. I’m not picking up any long-range signals either. No communication network.”

Eve blinked. “That’s impossible, we may not have Earth Tau’ri’s level of infrastructure, but pretty much all of Ponyville is filled with communication technologies.”

“No satellites detected either,” the officer continued. “No Feldspar, no Equis Cosmic ships… Nothing.”

Nova put down her drink, an uneasy expression crossing her face. “…What does this mean?”

Renee looked out the window at Equis, narrowing her eyes. “Either something removed all that technology… Or we’re in a different universe. Or, I suppose we could be in the past.”

“Check Ponyville,” Eve ordered. “Show me a top-down view.”

An image appeared onscreen of Ponyville. It was not the crescent-shaped city they had woken up in earlier that day. Instead, it was a small town on the edge of the Everfree forest. Eve was able to recognize her castle, but had difficulty remembering if all the buildings had looked like that in the past.

“There goes the technology-removal theory,” Daniel said. He glanced at a secondary screen near the top of a nearby wall. “The coordinates are Equis Vitis’ though.”
“Something like the Nexus could have moved it around,” Renee said. “Remember how we couldn’t leave those universes because it had changed everything?”

“Then we need a way to test to see if universes have just been moved,” Eve said. “We’ll just have to teleport down.”

O’Neill let a small smirk come to his face. “Guess we finally get to go on a mission together, Eve.”

“The commanding officer is supposed to stay on the bridge,” Eve reminded him coyly.

“I’ve got a Captain to do that for me.”

Eve chuckled. “Right then. All seven of us?”

Pinkie grinned. “Yeah! Pony-Tau’ri joint adventure!”

O’Neill nodded to an officer. “Right outside the castle.”

The seven of them were swept up in a beam of light and deposited on the ground outside the front doors of Eve’s castle. It looked the same as always – tall, crystalline, and sparkling with harmonious magic.

“…Should we knock?” Flutterfree asked.

“Don’t want to interfere with the past if this is the past,” Renee said. “I think we just need to check the map room.”

Eve nodded. She teleported the seven of them into the map room. There were still seven chairs – though some of the decorations and banner she had put on the walls over the years were missing, replaced with other designs she didn’t remember ever having. “Probably an alternate universe…” she commented.

“How are we going to find Equis Vitis then?” Renee wailed.

“Someone from Equis Vitis will dial out eventually, we can follow that!” Pinkie piped up. “Eve’s got contingency plans.”

Eve smiled with more than a little pride. “Yeah, I do. Heh.” She rubbed the map. “Yeah, this doesn’t look right at all for the past. The Changelings have way too much infrastructure, the dragons actually have significant settlements... But everything else looks pretty close.”

“Could be a future-oriented world,” Renee suggested. “They may be rare, but they do happen.”

“This is going to mess with the party plans,” Pinkie grumbled. “They’re waiting for a good time and we have to wait for them to come look for us.”

O’Neill kicked something as he shuffled his feet. He raised an eyebrow, picking something up off the ground. “What’s this?”

“That’s a key,” Nova deadpanned. “What, you use automatic doors so much you have no idea what it is?”

O’Neill rolled his eyes. “I was wondering why it was on the floor.”

Eve glanced to him – and her eyes widened. “…No way…” She levitated the key in between her eyes, her pupils shrinking to pinpricks.
“What is it, Eve?” Flutterfree asked.

“This isn’t from this universe. I know this key. Equis Eldritch – you know, Thrackerzod’s world. I picked it up when we were first cycling through it. I placed it in a drawer along that wall,” she pointed to where O’Neill was standing. “…That drawer doesn’t exist though. No evidence of it ever having been here.”

Renee narrowed her eyes. “You know, Equis Eldritch’s Twilight told me about that key. She woke up one day, found it… and then had déjà-vu for a long time. She really had no idea what it was.”

“Thrackerzod talked about something similar,” Eve said, her expression slowly giving way to horror. “…She said the world had reset itself, and only her Twilight was able to remember. Thrackerzod could also remember because of her nature, but… Nopony else…”

Pinkie blinked. “This is Equis Vitis.”

“It’s been reset?” Nova blurted. “What does that even mean?”

“I… I’m not sure,” Eve said. “But this key is still here… It must be immune to whatever happened. But… The entire world is different. It’s like we never discovered the other universes at all.”

“We need to find Thrackerzod,” Daniel said. “She might have some insight.”

“She was on Equis Vitis,” Eve responded. “I… I don’t know what it means for her if the world resets and she doesn’t have a body here when it does.”

“Erased,” Daniel said. “We’ve had something similar happen on Earth Tau’ri – alternate timelines. Everything that was done before is just erased from existence. As far as we can tell all the things in the alternate timeline still happened, but at some point it’s just no more.”

“Like when I split our timeline,” Nova said. “We haven’t found those other timelines I created. We’ve found universes like them, but none where I was redeemed and fixed the timeline.”

“…Could somepony have been messing with time travel?” O’Neill suggested.

“I don’t think so,” Eve said. “Starswirl’s time spell was destroyed after Nova used it. Nopony’s tried to recreate it.”

“Officially,” Renee said. “You know there are projects going on under your nose. Remember Corona’s fancy new portal gun?”

Eve nodded slowly. “Yes.”

“There are probably a few more sinister projects going on people don’t want you knowing about,” Renee continued. “Somepony could have created a time spell and used it, and it backfired.”

“What we need to do is find out where the timeline has diverged,” Daniel said. “Then go back there and set it right.”

“You sound like you’ve done this before,” Flutterfree commented.

“I have. It’s… Interesting, to say the least.”

O’Neill snorted. “Interesting isn’t even the half of it. We’ve done it multiple times – went to the past to ensure our own victory, repeated the same day over and over again, went to the past and erased ourselves from existence only to be brought back later…”
Nova blinked. “And I suddenly feel like small potatoes.”

“Then there was the time with twenty Carters, but that was more multiversal than timeline based. … Hey, didn’t Carter visit an alternate timeline at one point?”

“I think that was another universe,” Daniel said.

“Ah. Sometimes it’s hard to tell,” O’Neill admitted.

“How are we going to get to the past?” Eve asked.

“We… might have a time machine,” Daniel said.

O’Neill grinned. “That we never use.”

“Why not?” Flutterfree asked.

“I did mention that we erased ourselves when we went to the past, right?”

“Oh. I see.”

“Better question,” Renee interjected. “How do we find out when we need to go?”

Nova pointed behind Renee. “I think we can ask her.”

The seven people turned to see Twilight Sparkle, Princess of Friendship standing in the doorway of the throne room. Her mane was straight, her tail well kept, and her ears complete. She was looking at them all with an expression of excitement. She broke out into a grin when she realized Nova was pointing at her. “Of course I can help! Oh, this is so exciting, I get to experience this from the other side this time!” She sat herself down on her throne, hooves on the map. “So, you’re from an alternate timeline?”

“We think so,” Pinkie said, taking over for Eve since the alicorn was in shock at seeing this particular version of Twilight.

“What’s your time like?”

Daniel shifted awkwardly. “Well, they’ve been exploring alternate universes for years…”

“We’ve made a lot of friends,” Pinkie added.

“Well we haven’t done that,” Twilight said. “Just one world here. Well, and Canterlot High, but that’s not really involved or anything. …I did think you looked odd for humans.”

“They’re actually normal,” Nova said. “Earth Viti – er, Canterlot High is somewhat abnormal.”

“…Woah, really? Weird.”

“Yeah, I thought so too.”

Pinkie jumped in. “So, let’s see where you diverge. You have the castle… Have you reformed Starlight?”

“Yep,” Twilight responded. “I do understand what an alternate timeline is, after all.”

“Oooooh, right,” Pinkie nodded vigorously. “Soooo – did you reform the Changelings?”
“Yep.”
“Bring back Starswirl?”
“Absolutely.”
“Stop the Storm King?”
“That was… fun.”
“Open the school?”
“Mhm.”

“Beat the…” Pinkie tried to figure out how to word the next event with the appropriate amount of vagueness. “Final boss?”

Twilight raised an eyebrow. “…I think so?”

“Righty-o. So it looks like she just didn’t find the bowling ball.”

Renee nodded. “Dear, listen closely and think. Did you ever watch a unicorn enchantress and a crystalline humanoid chase each other through portals?”

“Oh! Yeah. That was weird. I saw them, and then they were gone. I poked around but didn’t find anything.”

“Ding!” Pinkie declared. “There it is, she just didn’t find it. That’s when we need to go back to.”

“What date is it?” Daniel asked.

Twilight told them it was about seven years after that day.

“Guess this is still the present,” Nova commented. “Thanks Twilight, you’ve been a great help.”

“Oh, it’s the least I can do,” Twilight said, beaming.

Pinkie bounced up and down. “To Earth Tau’ri and the time machine!”

“Wait,” Eve said, suddenly. “Twilight, you do realize what this means, right? If we go back?”

Twilight’s smile faded. “Uh… No?”

“This timeline won’t exist anymore. You won’t exist.”

“I’ll be you,” Twilight said. “…Right?”

Eve twitched. “No, you won’t. You’ll be dead! All the experiences you and this entire world have had for the last seven years will be wiped from existence!”

Twilight looked down. “I… I know that. But… Don’t you remember Zecora?”

“…Yeah?”

“I mean, Zecora in the Changeling Timeline. She knew what was going to happen when we went back. She knew she, and her ponies, would…” she couldn’t bring herself to say ‘die’. “Wouldn’t exist anymore,”
“Twilight…”

“She was willing to make that sacrifice. So should I,” Twilight asserted, trying to keep her emotions under control. “It is I who should not be, Twilight.”

Eve didn’t correct her. “We both have a right to exist!”

“…I could come with you, but then I’d want to take my entire world with me,” Twilight said. “And that’s not possible, is it? If I went alone, it wouldn’t be fair.” She wiped her eyes.

Pinkie put a hoof on Eve. “She’s right, Eve.”

“No she’s not!” Eve blurted. “She doesn’t know what I do!”

“No, she doesn’t,” Renee said. “She doesn’t know of all the worlds we’ve helped save, of the friendships we are strengthening, of the future we are building. She just took us on faith, Eve.”

Eve took in a deep breath and glanced back at Twilight. “…I’m sorry.”

Twilight nodded, gulping hard. “It’s okay.”

Eve tossed her the key. “Take this. …You never know, it might do something.”

“It’s yours.”

“I wasn’t reset. You were,” Eve said. She thought for a moment – just a moment – that maybe the key would allow for some memories to pass on, something to be saved of this timeline in her when it was all done. But then she thought more – she wasn’t Twilight. She wasn’t the pony she had been talking to. She was Evening.

Twilight set it on the table, rejecting it. “I’m sorry… Eve. I’m… I’m not going to try to save myself.”

Eve nodded. “…You know, I forgot for a moment that you have seven more years of experience as well. I thought of you as me seven years ago. Not somepony else.”

“An honest mistake.”

The two of them shared a quick hug.

“Goodbye, Princess Twilight Sparkle,” Eve said, pulling back.

“Goodbye… Eve,” Twilight said.

Eve smirked. “Charter-Princess Evening ‘Twilight’ Sparkle, though that’s a mouthful.”

Twilight smirked back. “I can imagine.”

O’Neill called the Enterprise. “Seven to beam up!”

They were back on the bridge of the Enterprise.

Pinkie took out a broom and started cleaning up the party decorations. Nobody was in the mood anymore.

“Earth Tau’ri,” O’Neill ordered. The Enterprise took a moment to charge the dimensional drive to reach that far, but it wasn’t long enough for anyone to get impatient. The portal ripped through space,
and they moved through.

Instantly they received dozens of high priority hails from the planet below.

O’Neill put a hand to his head. “What is it now… answer the one from Stargate Command.”

O’Neill appeared on the screen. “This is General O’Nei-“ He stopped mid-sentence when he realized who he was talking to. “Which one is it this time?”

“A mixture of alternate universe and alternate timeline,” O’Neill responded.

The other O’Neill snorted. “The double mega combo. I was wondering when that’d happen.”

“I don’t suppose you’d be able to trust us enough to lend us your time machine?”

“Nope.”

“Yeah, had to ask.”

“Understandable.”

“So, let me guess, you never met the ponies and never explored the multiverse?”

“We ran into a bunch of our alternates, if that’s what you mean.”

“Yes, no. The Tau’ri cluster of universes is frankly a little boring and overdone. Not to mention full of duplicates of yourself that you can’t trust with more than a nickel.”

“Quite the handful. …Wait, back up. Did you say ponies?”


Other O’Neill stared at Eve from the screen. “…I’m not convinced your timeline is better.”

O’Neill shrugged. “We got a lot of help dealing with a lot of problems easier. They built us this ship. The Enterprise.” He smirked.

“Hey, no fair!”

“Proof my timeline is better.”

Other O’Neill knitted his eyebrows. “Can’t argue with logic like that. Does your lake have fish?”

“…It’s close enough.”

“Same.”

Renee blinked. “I think I’m missing context.”

“Yeah, you are,” Daniel said. “I’ll explain later.”

“I’m curious,” O’Neill said asked his counterpart. “How did we deal with the Wraith without help?”

“Slowly, with the help of Todd, and a lot of genetic science mumbo-jumbo.”

“And the Asgard are still stuck in their computers?”
Other O’Neill blinked. “You got them out?”

O’Neill smirked. “I just keep getting points. Can I have that time machine yet?”

“You know it’ll take months to get anyone to even consider that.”

“Yep. I could try to steal it.”

“We have a lot of ships. You have one big ship.”

“I like those odds.”

“I know you do. I do too.”

Daniel interjected. “Leeeeeet’s not jump to a firefight. I’m sure we can think of something.”

“There’s more to think about too,” Nova said. “What are the chances two different universes were temporally reset?”

“Stop Eve from finding the bowling ball, stop any universes from coming together,” Flutterfree said.

“It doesn’t work like that,” Eve said. “When Nova and I were splitting timelines, the Friendship Games on Earth Vitis went on unhindered. She couldn’t reach me through the Journal because things were happening while I was jumping timelines a universe over.”

“…Friendship Games?” Other O’Neill asked. “…How do you keep your sanity?”

“I tell myself the words are an inaccurate translation,” O’Neill answered.

Nova rolled her eyes. “My point is that this probably isn’t some random occurrence – two universes have been hit. That implies some kind of intent.”

“…We’re being attacked through time!” Pinkie shouted. “That’s cool and terrifying.”

“We need to check on our friends,” Daniel said. “Fast – for all we know these attacks are unfolding as we speak.”

O’Neill nodded. “Sorry me, looks like we gotta dash. Don’t be surprised if we show up again asking for that time machine.”

“I’ll see if I can get them to think about letting you use it.”

“Thanks!” He turned to his pilot. “Hub.”

The Enterprise powered up again, cutting a portal into the hub. The transmission cut out once they were through. “You know, I like talking to myself,” O’Neill commented.


“I talk to myself all the time!” Pinkie said.

“Case in point,” Nova said, gesturing at Pinkie.

Eve looked at the image of the Hub world from orbit. “Anything?”

“No,” an officer said. “No sign of any structures. The blue moon is pulsing with energy, though. …I think it might find us threatening.”
“Right, the Blue Moon Spirit would still exist…” Daniel said. “Well we already know this place was hit. Where to next?”

“Earth Vitis,” Eve ordered. The officer listened to her, not bothering to check with O’Neill. The portal opened much quicker, and they arrived in orbit of Earth Vitis.

“We’re getting interdimensional signals,” an officer reported.

“Thank the Stars…” Renee said.

Nova shook her head. “Hm… Looks like a lot of people are trying to contact us.”

Storm appeared onscreen. “So, before I say anything, can you explain what’s going on?”

O’Neill shrugged. “We’re being attacked on multiple universes through manipulation of time.”

“And I just lost a bet.” Storm shrugged. “So, how are we going to go about smashing this mysterious attacker’s face in?”

“Do you happen to have a time machine?”

“Nope. None of the artifacts we have here are anything like that. Wasn’t convinced time travel was possible until Eve right there told me she’d done it.”

O’Neill frowned. “Then I’m not sure what you can help us with.”

“Need soldiers? Agents? I’ve got plenty of all of them. Even have some ships in orbit you can borrow.”

O’Neill nodded. “Good. Equis Cosmic ships?”

“What else?”

“How many can you spare?”

“I’d say… Three. I’m ordering them to form up now.”

O’Neill checked his display of all nearby ships. “Got them. We’ve been checking our allies – do you know who hasn’t been affected?”

“Equis Vitis, Equis Cosmic, The Elemental Nations, Lai, the Hub – none of them are responding. We managed to make contact with a few minor universes – Esefem, Equis Outland, Earth Ottoman, Equis Concretion, the Mushroom World, and a handful of others. Nothing with heavy dimensional technology.

Eve felt a lump form in her throat. “Corona was on Equis Cosmic. She…” Eve didn’t want to think about it.

O’Neill folded his hands. “…Storm, your world may be next.”

“We’re well aware of this fact. I was actually on my way to a nice vacation on Earth Ottoman. I hear the food is great there.”

“Good luck with that,” O’Neill said. “If we can’t find you here, we’ll look there.”

Flutterfree frowned. “Do we know anyone who wants to attack us like this? To erase us?”
“Ardent, but they don’t have the means nor the will,” Daniel said.

“The Elements of Insanity?” Eve suggested.

“Looks like it’s time to dial Nautica,” O’Neill said. He typed a passcode into the computer system. Eve followed suit.

Storm waved them off. “See you on Earth Ottoman.”

O’Neill nodded. The transmission was cut as they translated. Nautica was a beautiful blue orb when viewed from space, a serene image that hid its true purpose.

“Picking up our satellites,” an officer said. “They report no craft leaving the planet.”

“Are the Elements of Insanity there?” Daniel asked.

“Found their base,” an officer said. “Picking up strong magic signatures consistent with what is known about the Elements of Insanity.”

“Teleport a probe down.”

They did. The camera managed to snap a whole five seconds of feed before Brutalight smashed it.

“That answers that question,” Pinkie said. “…Do we have any other enemies?”

“Sombra,” Nova suggested.

“Yeah, no,” Eve said, rolling her eyes. “She wouldn’t erase all her progress.”

“You asked for enemies.”

Flutterfree knitted her eyebrows. “I can’t think of anyone else who would want to destroy all of us… Who would hate us this much?”

“Activists?” Renee suggested. “They know their movement against us is losing traction, they could have found a time machine and decided to use it to bring about our downfall in a more… direct manner.”


O’Neill raised his eyebrows. “…The red fairy?”

“Yes. Our legends, remember; they tell of a guardian of time. Someone who watches over Equis Vitis’ temporal health. No other universe has this legend. And before any of you start, we know she’s real. I’ve seen her in Canterlot a few times, and so has Celestia.”

“She was also in our base at one point,” O’Neill said. “Two of her, actually. It was confusing and didn’t last long enough.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow. “So… Do we just need to find this Handmaid?”

“That’s the thing, we shouldn’t need to,” Eve said. “It’s her job to fix this sort of thing, at least on Equis Vitis. If she couldn’t do anything…”

Nova raised an eyebrow. “Doesn’t she spend her free time sweeping Canterlot Castle? How powerful could she be?”
Pinkie huffed. “Don’t judge those who keep things clean!”

Eve frowned. “I… actually don’t know. Our legends don’t actually tell much about her, and what it does say is often contradictory.”

“Makes sense, if she messes with timelines,” Daniel commented.

“True… The stories do agree she came from somewhere else. I’m willing to bet she’s from another universe.”

Flutterfree blinked. “Do you think this might have something to do with her? One of her enemies?”

“Maybe…” Eve said, scratching her chin. “We need more information! How can we get more information!”

Pinkie pulled a lightbulb out of her mane. “IDEEEEEAAAAAAAA!”

“What?”

“The Spectacularium has been reset!” Pinkie declared. “We can ask it more questions! It might even be a normal machine instead of a thinking magic thingy!”


The Enterprise shifted once again, appearing in orbit around the world of Lai, reset just like all the others.

“…Luna’s castle is gone,” an officer said.

“Applejack must have succeeded without our interference,” Nova said with a sigh. “Armonia got what she wanted – the kingdom fell. The Arcei probably run the nation now.”

“The original plan…” Eve said, pondering what this meant deeply. “…Take us to Spectacularium cavern.”

“Can’t teleport that far into the ground,” Daniel said. “We’ll have to start near the surface.”

O’Neill nodded. “Make it so.”

The seven of them teleported off the bridge and into the upper cave system. Nova lit her horn. “It should only take me a few teleports to get us there. Be patient while I charge…”

O’Neill suddenly drew his gun and pointed up the incline, toward the surface. “Hurry. I hear hoofsteps.”

Renee’s ears perked up. “You’re right…”

“Only a few more seconds…” Nova muttered.

Two Arcei appeared up the cavern, both equipped with rune-based weapons and high quality armor – clear signs that they were no longer barely surviving in this world. They saw the ponies and the humans. Confusion flashed across their faces only for a moment – it was quickly replaced with rage. They angled their runic staves at the seven of them.
O’Neill got off one shot, sending a bolt of energy through the left Arcei, stunning him. The other fired her weapon, unleashing a burst of fire that Eve blocked with her shield. Nova teleported at that moment, taking them further into the caves. There were no Arcei down there.

“So yeah, they’re in charge,” Pinkie said. “Good for them. Not for us.”

Nova executed another teleport, even deeper into the caverns.

“It does take a while to get down there, doesn’t it?” Eve said. “...I don’t remember it taking this long.”

Pinkie shrugged. “Sometimes things get glossed over. Right now we’re all pretty stressed and can’t just be without twitching a bit.” She shook her head. “Speaking of twitches, the Pinkie Sense is acting up. We’re going to meet someone surprising.”

“Already figured out the combo for that one?” Flutterfree asked.

“Yep. Slight burning in the back of the eye and a rapid head shake.”

Nova executed the final teleport, taking them to the base of the six Runes of Harmony. All of them were still intact, surrounding the crystalline building that housed the Spectacularium.

“The Arcei are probably coming down here for these runes,” Renee said.

“We got here at just the right time,” Daniel nodded.

“That you did…” a raspy voice met their own. It came from the top of a crystal spire – the form of a pink pony, impaled through the chest, but not dead. Undying.

Eve gasped. “Sage Pinkie!?”

“I thought I was going mad… But my visions were true… It was I who was not meant to be…”

“Hold on, we can get you down from there!”

“Freeing me from my prison… Will only bring about my end sooner than your actions… I would prefer the mysterious death… To one of agony…”

Pinkie looked up at the Sage. “…What happened to you?”

“You know…”

“They need to hear it.”

The Sage laughed bitterly. “You never came… I went forth with my plans… I began to see images of a future that never happened… I ignored them… I created my mechanism… I grabbed the mask… And it wasn’t enough…” she coughed. “I tried… But the Goddess defeated me… My mechanism, destroyed… My life, imprisoned on this spire for eternity…”

Eve looked at the Sage. “…You saved us, you know.”

“I know…” the Sage wheezed. “It brings some solace to my mind to know… I was worth something… I succeeded…”

“We can save you,” Flutterfree insisted.
“I am not meant to be… Even if you could… I cannot foresee the consequences…” She coughed. “It is better… To end a hero… Than to continue… And to be seen fully…”

Pinkie looked up at her. “I… I am sorry, Sage Pinkie.”

“You don’t need to apologize… Unless you’re doing it for taking too long… In which case just hurry up…”

O’Neill raised an eyebrow. “…I think I would have liked you.”

The Sage let out a short laugh and a smile. “What a delightful thought… General Jack O’Neill, you have a spirit… A strong, powerful spirit… Carry it to as many worlds as you can…”

O’Neill nodded.

“Ask your questions… The Spectacularium will not be able to be cute about it this time…” the Sage’s eyes shifted as she looked through her prophecies and beyond. “Had you not come here now… The prophecy would have been the last one… It was meant to fall by the hoof of the Arcei today…”

“I think I speak for all of us when I say ‘screw destiny’,” Nova commented.


“I know a lot more than that…”

They entered the Spectacularium – and the Spectacularium noticed them. It did not have any philosophical musings, personality, and it did not cause any confusion in anyone’s mind. It just took questions and answered them, one per person.

Who is attacking us?

The University of Doors.

What happens to the people in the current timelines once we rewrite them?

They cease to exist in any shape or form.

How can we access Time Travel?

Find a past Equis, one where Starswirl’s Time Spell has not been lost.

What has happened to the Handmaid?

She is struggling to repel an attack of this precision and magnitude on Equis Vitis in numerous time-states.

If we restore timelines, will everything go back to the way it was?

Aside from events that occurred during the temporal interactions, such as your movements in the Enterprise, yes.

Why are they attacking us?

They consider your interference with their prior complete freedom of exploration and dominion to be too much.
Where is their world?

They have many worlds, but the ir homeworld is…

The Spectacularium gave them the coordinates to their world. Then the information exchange ended, the crystal structure still standing.

“That… Was a lot to take in…” Renee admitted.

“The University?” Daniel spoke, aloud. “What did we do to them?”

“They wanted the Ark of Truth, we stopped them from taking that,” Nova said.

Eve rubbed her chin. “There have been a few more instances where we’ve encountered them – not us personally, other explorers. Usually we’re in opposition but… There’s no way what we’ve done requires this much retribution!”


“Well, we know where their world is.” Nova said. “Not sure how that helps us, the place is probably more defended than the Hub. …Was.”

“We do know what to do next,” Pinkie said. “We can find Starswirl’s Spell. I suggest Equis Ultra Fast, we know it’s still there.”

“You have to get out first…” they heard the Sage call to them. “And the Arcei are coming…”

The two humans and five ponies left the Spectacularium. Nova prepared the teleport. Pinkie waved to the Sage. “Goodbye, again.”

“Goodbye… Pinkie Pie… You’re doing well… Keep them on their track…”

Pinkie nodded. “I will. Oh, by the way…” she reached into her mane and pulled out a rocket launcher, tossing it to the Sage. She somehow managed to catch it despite her weakened state. “Have some fun while you’re up here, okay?”

The Sage laughed. “Protecting the Spectacularium until the end of time… Eh, why not…”

Nova initiated the teleport long before the Arcei actually arrived, passing them through the tunnels. Eve took the strain off of Nova to get them the rest of the way out. They finally appeared on the surface of Lai in a field of grass. They could see an Arcei city in the distance, built like a black version of Canterlot.

O’Neill called the Enterprise. “Get us out of here.”

Once again, they returned to the bridge. O’Neill sat down in the big chair, letting out a breath. “So our enemy is a transdimensional society with just as many resources as us, if not more. They’ve apparently found our little annoyances worthy enough to try to completely wipe us out with time shenanigans. And our resident time guardian is apparently not having much luck with stopping them.”

“Nice summary,” Pinkie commented.

“Take us to Equis Ultra Fast,” Eve ordered. The Enterprise listened to her call, ripping another portal in reality, the three flanking ships following through. They appeared in orbit around a blue-green world.
“Right, so the spell will be in the Canterlot Archives if it’s anything like our world,” Nova said. “If the Celestia here is in one of her… moods we’ll have to steal it. Luckily I already know how to do that…”

“We’re receiving a transmission from this Twilight’s castle,” an officer reported. “They say they already have the spell for us.”

Eve blinked. “Uh… That’s convenient.”

O’Neill snapped his fingers. “Teleport us down! Let’s see if we can visit every planet we come across today. I’m sure we won’t burn out the transporter.”

The seven of them appeared in front of the huge double doors of Twilight’s castle. Standing in front of it was the local Rarity – known as Mattie. She spoke with her signature ‘Australian’ accent. “Ah, ‘bout time you showed up.”

Eve raised an eyebrow. “How did you…?”

“I could say something about putting two and two together from Storm’s calls,” she glanced at Pinkie, “but I think we all know I just knew you needed it. Saves a lot of trouble, doesn’t it?”

Pinkie nodded. “Definitely! Where is it?”

They were suddenly inside the castle without any kind of transition whatsoever. “Right here. Center of the map – nice place, right?”

Eve shook her head. “Thanks, Mattie.” She levitated the scroll off the map to her eyes. “This looks right. Can you remember your alterations, Nova?”

“Easily,” Nova said, scrawling a few more magical letters into the scroll with her horn. “Done. We can take this to any map and jump to the past in that location.”

“That won’t help us on any Earth,” Daniel pointed out.

“Hopefully we can find the Handmaid,” Renee said. “She should find us if we start messing with time, right?”

“She didn’t find me,” Nova said.

“That’s probably because I fixed the problem myself,” Eve pointed out.

Nova shrugged.

Mattie cleared her throat. “By the way, I just want to make it especially clear that you better get my Sweetie Belle back. I understand that most other ponies absolutely hate pain and I happen to be well versed in dealing it out.”

O’Neill shrugged and nodded. “Got it.”

“Good. Now go jump to the past in another universe. Then get a time headache. Trust me, it’ll happen.”

“We already have time headaches,” Flutterfree deadpanned.

“Trust me, you do not.”
Pinkie blinked. “Wait, isn’t Dinkie the time expert?”

“Do you want the demon telling you how to save your universe?”

“Good point.”

O’Neill called the *Enterprise* again. “Guess what? Beam us up, we have what we need.”

They returned to the bridge. O’Neill returned to his chair. “Equis Vitis, pedal to the metal.”

The convoy of ships translated to a visibly identical planet, coming full circle.

“Before we go down, we need to work this out,” Nova said. “If we change something in the past while the *Enterprise* is in orbit, we might overwrite the *Enterprise*.”

Daniel nodded. “While we’re down there, the *Enterprise* should translate to Earth Vitis. We can translate there ourselves after we’re done.”

O’Neill turned to the officers on the bridge. “You all got that? Jump ship the moment we’re gone if you value existence.”

All the officers clearly valued their own existences.

They teleported down, then made a quick jump to the map room of Twilight’s castle. Twilight was still there, staring at the map.

“Oh! You’re back!”

Eve took in a sharp breath. “Y-yes. We need the table.”

“Oh – you got Starswirl’s Spell? Great!”

“Once we leave…”

Twilight held up a hoof. “I know. I also know something else.” She tossed the key back to Eve. “You’re facing an enemy that moves through time. You need a way to resist their attacks if they try to change your past. This key… might or might not do that, but there’s a chance.”

“But…”

“No buts, Evening Sparkle. Take it. Fix everything.”

Eve struggled to keep herself composed. “O…Okay.”

Pinkie turned to Nova. “You activate the spell. Everyone who’s coming, stand on the table.”

O’Neill, Daniel, Eve, Pinkie, Flutterfree, Renee, and Nova climbed onto the table-map. Nova levitated the scroll of Starswirl’s modified spell in front of her. She took a deep breath. “Here we go again…” she muttered, activating it with a burst of her magic.

White rings of energy rose from the edge of the table, surrounding them in a bubble of rising power. It collected overtop of them, creating a clear bowl of magic power. The round surface of the bowl turned with numerous moving gear icons that produced a regular ticking sound. The bottom face of the bowl – the open face – showed nothing but a blue-green vortex of temporal energy. Nova lifted herself into the bowl first. With its own power, it sucked the rest of them in.
Eve locked eyes with Twilight one more time.

“You should be the one to escape…” Eve whispered to herself, far too quietly for anyone to hear over the sound of the spell.

They were shunted through time itself along a conduit of energy. They could hear the incessant *tick tick ticking* of the construct the whole time they flew through the vortex. The journey lasted only a handful of seconds – they were soon shot out the end of another bowl of time in a green area a fair distance from Twilight’s castle.

Eve remembered this place *very* clearly. The moment everything changed – the moment the Enchantress and the Man of Light entered this universe on their chase.

“Invisibility spells!” she declared, prompting Nova to join her in hiding them all from the prying eyes of the world around them. They heard the unmistakable noise of the Man of Light entering the universe. They watched him and the Enchantress do the final phase of their dance – the fall, the capture, and the rapid exit.

Eve wasn’t looking at that, though. She was looking at Twilight Sparkle, the purple alicorn on a nearby hill, watching the entire spectacle.

*That* was the Charter-Princess.

“Did you see that?” Nova blurted. “The bowling ball just… *vanished!* Like it was turned invisible!”

“…Doesn’t the University have a guy that does illusions?” O’Neill asked.

“Thrackerzod did encounter a crystal being named Ivan that *might,*” Eve said, turning her attention to the mission. “Can you make it reappear?”

“If I can find the-“

“What are you doing here?”

The seven *invisible* people turned around. The Handmaid was right behind them. She was a humanoid with gray skin and two orange ram-like horns protruding from her mess of hair. She had two brilliant red wings coming out of her back, the color matching that of her robes. In the center of said robes was a symbol – a gear with ten teeth, clearly representative of Time itself.

“…Handmaid!” Eve blurted. “You’re okay! The Spectacularium said you were having difficulty dealing with this! …You look like Vriska, now that I think about it.”

“With what?” the Handmaid asked. “What’s the *Spectacularium?* You’ve seen Vriska?”

With a flash of red magic that took the form of several gears, another Handmaid appeared. She was heavily wounded, with rust-colored blood pouring from her chest. She snapped her fingers, pausing the flow of time for everything but her other self and the seven travelers from the future. “Past-me won’t know much,” Future-Handmaid said. “She’s witnessing this event for the first time.”

“But you’re interfering!” Past-Handmaid declared. “Now I have to keep the loop-“

“No, you don’t. Well, you do, but only partially. I’m cheating – from another dimension.” She coughed up more blood. “I’ve got a couple undoomed duplicates running around…”

Past-Handmaid put a hand to her mouth. “Oh, that can’t be good. How much perma-dying have we
been doing?"

“A significant amount.” Future-Handmaid said, sitting down. “I myself won’t last much longer. Listen, you’ll go with them for now. The first step is to capture Ivan here. Then… I’m sure another Aradia will get in touch with you.”

Past-Handmaid nodded. “I understand. …You sure this is going to be a Heroic death?”

“I tried to save an entire world by attacking a multidimensional society head on. Of course it is,” Future-Handmaid grunted. “No dream bubbles out here…”

“See you in the beyond. Or be you in the beyond.”

Future-Handmaid nodded. “Save this world, Aradia.” Then she keeled over, dead. Time resumed for a moment, but Past-Handmaid froze it again.

She turned in the direction of the seven visitors – not making eye contact, since she couldn’t see the invisible people. “Okay. I guess this means I have to introduce myself to you now. I am Aradia Megido, the Maid of Time. I was called to your world by the Harmony Forces that make up your Tree of Harmony, charged with protecting the timelines. Twilight? Starlight? Can I just say that wrangling that split-timeline mess of yours was a horrible mess?”

Eve coughed. “It’s Eve and Nova now. And Flutterfree and Renee. This is Daniel and O’Neill.”

“…Yeah, sorry, I haven’t caught up with the metatime,” Aradia said, sighing. “I have met O’Neill though. …There’ll be a future-me at some point who’s more caught up. I don’t even know what’s so important about this event, really, I just felt it happening.” She grinned, despite herself. “It’s a little exciting, clearly I’m at a pivot point in history! What is it?”

“That crystal man dropped a dimensional device,” Flutterfree said. “Eve finds this device and we start exploring the multiverse.”

“Except some bastard from the future has decided he’s going to make the ball invisible to keep it from happening,” O’Neill added.

“How far in the future?”

“Seven years,” Eve said. “We’re here using an alternate universe version of the spell Nova used to split the timelines.”

Aradia nodded. “Right, right. So, this guy from the future. We have to stop him from turning the ball invisible. How?”

“He’s a master of illusions, we think,” Daniel said. “We just need to get him to stop making the illusion.”

O’Neill readied his gun. “Hit him hard enough.”

“The other Aradia told us to capture him,” Nova said. “We should do that. …Also, Aradia? Sorry for doubting you existed.”

Aradia shrugged and smiled. “I was not aware you did. Or that it would be a problem. I have been pretty mysterious.” She turned to Eve. “Before we do this, you mentioned Vriska. You’ve seen her?”

“Twice,” Eve confirmed. “You know her?”
“We come from the same world. I always knew it’d be a long time before we ran into each other again, but I suppose the wait may soon be over.” She squealed slightly. “Oh, I’m so excited! There’s so much I want to talk to her about.” She bit her lip. “I hope I don’t have to hide myself, that… That would be a little depressing.”

“You are not at all what I was expecting,” Renee said. “It’s a good thing.”

Aradia’s smile widened even further. “People always say that! Sometimes multiple times – usually they wait for me to find something disturbing fascinating though.”

“…Do I want to know?” O’Neill asked.


“You find that… cool?” Flutterfree asked.

“Cool is a… Simple word,” Aradia said. “When I see my own body, I am reminded of the dual beauty of mortality and immortality, the inherent power within both modes of existence, their relations, and the way they dance eternally through these worlds of ours. I see myself there, one day – but I also see myself going on unending. It brings to mind the idea of a paradox, a paradox of life and death, of… of…” She shrugged. “Lost control of the sentence there. Wasn’t sure what I was going for. Maybe I should have just said it’s fascinating and beautiful.”

“Creepy,” O’Neill deadpanned. “Let’s get a move on. How are we taking this Ivan out?”

“Carefully,” Renee said. “He’s probably invisible, just like us. We need to find him first. Since time is stopped, that helps us significantly…”

“He may not be stopped,” Aradia asserted. “It is possible his time machine protects him.” Aradia pointed at Eve. “You have a temporal charm on you.”

Eve nodded. “It’s… a key,”

“I wonder what the reasoning behind that is.” She put a hand to her chin. “Might mean nothing. Regardless, from what I can sense that’ll keep your memories from being completely overwritten and will stop most temporal manipulation placed directly on you.”

“…Right.”

“You already figured that, huh?”

“Wait!” Daniel shouted. “If Ivan could be moving, and he’s a master of illusions… he could have been setting something up this entire time!”

Nova unleashed a magical-radar spell the moment the words left Daniel’s mouth. “I can’t sense anything! Must be an advanced cloak!”

O’Neill started firing his gun in a spread pattern across the area – starting near the time-frozen Twilight and moving around. He didn’t hit anything – but he saw some grass shift as something invisible repositioned itself. “There!” he shouted.

Eve doused the entire area in a reveal spell. The magic did as advertised – the light blue crystal man that was Ivan stood exposed in the grass.
He let out a prolonged sigh. “...Of course.” He snapped his fingers, creating seven different illusions of himself, but Eve dispelled those as well.

“Just give up, Ivan, your tricks do nothing,” Eve declared.

Ivan raised a hand, around which was a large, ticking watch. He moved to touch the device – but Aradia was on top of it. With a flick of her head, powerful telekinesis hit his arm, snapping the crystal limb off in addition to shattering the watch into a thousand pieces.

Ivan took one look at his broken watch and sighed. He grabbed his estranged arm and affixed it back to his body. Speaking with a deep, resonating voice, he addressed them. “Fine. Just take me.”

“Gladly,” O’Neill said, grabbing the backs of Ivan’s arms and pressing his gun into the crystal man’s back. “Don’t try anything clever.”

“Your mage has that taken care of,” Ivan droned, speaking with extreme apathy. “Do what you’re going to do.”

Nova nodded. “We should return to the future our way, Aradia, to ensure the spell completes.”

Aradia nodded. “Fine by me.”

Nova activated the scroll again, summoning the bowl to take them back to their time, taking Aradia and Ivan along for the ride. After another trip through the vortex, they returned to the map room – the map room they remembered. The one with extra bookshelves, dimensional devices, and maps of other planets.

“Woohoo!” Pinkie declared. “We’re back! Uh huh! We made it! Oh yeah!”

Eve whipped out the dimensional device, connecting to Earth Vitis. “Time to tell the others the good news.” They stepped through, arriving on a busy street near Canterlot High. They could see no ponies, no fancy technology – nothing.

O’Neill folded his arms and nodded. “Well, looks like they got this one as well. Enterprise, do you read?”

The Enterprise sent down a confirmation signal.

“Good, don’t know what we’d do without you. Beam us up. We’ve got two additions – a fairy of time and a prisoner who has illusion magic something fierce.”

They were back on the bridge of the Enterprise. Armed guards were ready to take Ivan away, but Eve held up a hoof. “Just restrain him. We need him for something, and I’m not sure what.”

Ivan shrugged, saying nothing.

Aradia twirled in the open space of the bridge. “Can I just say how nice the room here is? So open! I have to stick to hidden shadowy walls all the time, being the guardian of time and all.”

“Liberating?” Flutterfree asked.

“Yes. Very.”

O’Neill sat down in his big chair, letting out a breath. “Progress. Progress is good. Earth Ottoman, now.” They translated to the western side of the multiverse after a moment of power charging, arriving in orbit of an Earth.
“Message buoy,” the communications officer declared. “Storm has moved to Gem Vein, says the space rocks are still around. He’s congregating resources.”

O’Neill shrugged. “Meet him there then.”

The ship formation translated again to the Gem Vein, appearing in the middle of space. They saw a handful of Equis Cosmic ships, the Feldspar, and numerous Gem Warship hands.

“Hail the Feldspar,” Eve said the moment she saw it.

Luna’s face appeared onscreen. “It is good to see that not all of us have fallen to this cowardly invasion, Evening.”

Eve smiled. “Good to see you too, Luna. How did you survive?”

“We were moving through Equis Cosmic in preparations for the Harmonic and translated out in order to increase relative speed. When we returned, Equis Cosmic was changed. We eventually picked up one of Storm’s messages and came to Earth Ottoman – and then we remembered the Gems as a possible ally. As it turns out, they weren’t attacked, nor does it appear they will be. We’ve shifted universes several times to be safe, nothing’s happened.”

“Do we have any sort of plan?”

“Sadly, no,” Luna admitted. “We’ve been unable to acquire any information on our assailants, but we knew you were working on that. We just pooled our resources. The best we could get besides the Gems was Saxton Hale. Couldn’t find Thrackerzod or Alushy, and Siron didn’t think he would be able to offer much assistance.”

O’Neill raised an eyebrow. “Saxton Hale’s nobody to sneeze at. The resources he has… impressive, to say the least.”

Luna nodded. “What have you found out?”

“The University of Doors,” Eve said. “They’re the ones responsible for this. We got the coordinates to their world from the Spectacularium, should we need them. We also got the Handmaid – whose name is Aradia, apparently.”

Aradia waved. “Hello Luna!”

“It has been many moons since our last interaction,” Luna addressed Aradia. “It is a pleasure to see you so open this time.”

“Huh, it was only last week for me… I think. There are future versions running around.” She shrugged. “We’ve got a special case. I tried to take the University head on, and failed.”

“We can fight them with time travel on our turf,” Eve asserted. “We’ve already taken back Equis Vitis, it’s back to normal.”

“Celestia?” Luna asked, hopeful.

“Probably. We didn’t stick around to check – we came here.”

Ivan let out a short, barely interested laugh.

“…What?” O’Neill demanded.
“You. Thinking you won. There’ll already be another agent in the past, ensuring that bowling ball is never found.”

“…What?!” Luna declared.

“We have resources, technology, and an infinite number of these watches. We could do this for eternity. After a few failed attempts agents will come for you directly. We will notice this Gem universe.” He shook his head. “The University’s been doing this for a lot longer than you have.”

Renee looked to Daniel. “He’s right.”

“I know,” Daniel said, narrowing his eyes. “I know he is. They have the advantage. They got the surprise attack, and our most powerful resources are gone. We can’t fight them here.”

“What are we going to do?”

Aradia furrowed her brow. “I would suggest hunting down an immutability core – a device that will block all abnormal temporal interactions with a universe – but that would interfere with me and what I’ve done to protect your world. Not to mention alter the very nature of Nova’s timeline split irrevocably changing everything. I think it’s safe to say the same holds for most the other universes – they need time travel to be where they are.”

“…You could find one of those?”

“It’d take me a thousand years, but I could be back here in an instant.” Aradia furrowed her brow. “But while I’m out doing that, even if I return to this exact moment, they could still overwrite you or have defenses up of their own.”

“It seems as if we have to convince them to stop trying to destroy us,” Luna said. “Somehow.”

Eve blinked. She turned to the window, staring out into the stars. “…Today has been an unending stream of stress – event after event just keeps getting piled onto our plates, and we have no time to process, no time to think, and no time to understand what exactly is happening to us.”

“In more ways than you realize,” Pinkie grumbled.

Eve continued. “The University of Doors has attacked us relentlessly for seemingly no reason, taxing our very existence as friends.” She looked around at everyone in the room. “Let’s return the favor.”

“…What?” Luna asked. For the first time, Ivan looked like he was paying attention.

“We go after them,” Eve declared. “I don’t think we can out-time them on their world, but we can go to their world, and find out what would make them hurt. Find out what we can do to make them stop.”

Daniel nodded slowly. “A mission for leverage.”

“Yes. They must have something we can hit – and hit hard. Or, failing that, something we can threaten to hit.” Eve slammed her hoof on the ground. “I’d normally never consider such tactics, but they haven’t left us a choice.”

“I stand behind you,” Luna declared.

“I’ve been waiting for you ponies to get with the program,” O’Neill declared. “I’m all in.”

“I hope you don’t mind that I’ve been listening in on this conversation,” Storm said, his icon
appearing on screen. “I love the idea.”

Emerald appeared onscreen as well, a smirk on her face. “You know, I’ve always wanted a worthy opponent to launch the entire Gem Armada at.”

Eve stopped trying to hold in her expression – a mildly cruel smirk crawled up the sides of her face. “It’s decided then. We take the fight to them.”
The University of Doors could not be said to exist within one universe. It may have been centered around the universe known as the Ninth World, but the actual grounds of the University rarely intersected with that plane – most of the University existed on its own, separate from other planes. The aesthetic of the University’s conglomeration of dimensions was that of endless doorways and keyholes of all sizes, arranged in a most haphazard and unwieldy fashion. The doorways with actual doors in them tended to lead to random universes – some close, some far. At any given time images of dozens of worlds could be seen through the ‘natural’ doors of the space.

University buildings were generally not subject to this rule of otherworldly portals – their doors were more regulated. Which was to say the bizarrelessness of the pocket dimensions and impossible geometries could be learned within the grounds, while out in the dimensional cross spaces there was no hope.

In the effective ‘center’ of the torus-shaped Administration building, a meeting of the Cabinet was underway, consisting of University investors, the department heads, and the Headstone herself. The Headstone of the university was an older woman with white hair that continually flowed around her, indicative of at least seven different kinds of magic in her body. Her eyes had an unnatural amber color to them, capable of being both soothing and menacing whenever she wished, going for the latter at the moment. Her outfit was composed of red and white robes that appeared completely black when looked at from another angle, making it seem to the unobservant eye that she was changing her outfits. Numerous keys were affixed to her robes – some opened restricted doors in the university, others had mysterious functions the Cabinet could only guess at.

Her name was Elosa Audiir.

She glared at the Head of the Acquisition Department. “Would you care to repeat that?”

The man, despite being significantly taller than Elosa, shifted in his boots. “Uh… You know what, now that I think about it, never mind.”

Elosa folded her hands. “Open your thoughts to us,” she ordered.

He took in a breath. “I said that we need to do something about the otherworlder alliance. My department has been unable to acquire numerous devices, and they have attempted to prevent our acquisition of many others. The largest loss was the Ark of Truth, which the Philosophy Department had heavily requested.”

“That was in their possession, was it not?” Elosa asked.

“Yes… But that’s not the only instance. We’ve encountered their exploration teams, and they virtually never allow us or those in our employ to acquire the ultraterrestrial devices we seek.”

“Objection to thievery is not crazy,” the Head of the Security Department noted.

“I’m not saying it is crazy. I’m saying that it’s a hindrance to our research. To all the Departments, I ask, your most impressive toys and devices – it was the Acquisition Department that gave you them.
We open the doors behind which powerful artifacts lie. The Science Department’s weaver, the Life Department’s gene splicer, the Arcane Department’s… Arcanum. All of these and more came from our acquisitions, some through very complex and convoluted schemes.”

The Head of the Exploration Department rolled her eyes. “Your gifts to this University do not go unnoticed, but don’t cut us out. We’re out there too.”

The Head of Acquisition nodded. “Right. The point is, for the entire history of this University, we have operated with complete freedom. Disconnected from any universe, we have no oversight beyond what we institute ourselves. Every world was our oyster, ripe for the picking. This was exceptionally useful for the furthering of all our investigations. We did what was needed.”

“But now some young kids are on your lawn,” the Head of the Hinge Department ribbed.

The Head of Acquisition ignored him. “The worlds we have begun to open doors into intersect with the universes under the eye of the unusual otherworldly alliance. Their teams run into us more and more, and seem to have it in their heads that they are the defenders and protectors of the worlds they encounter. An absurd notion that has not only caused us significant difficulty, but also resulted in a handful of lost lives.”

Elosa narrowed her eyes. “I understand this. I would not be Headstone if I did not keep up with the cutting edge activities. What I want to know is what you plan to do to stop them.”

The Head of Acquisition summoned his courage. “They are young and weak, barely spread out over a handful of major universes. That means they are vulnerable. We can use our significant stores of knowledge, technology, and arcane power to deliver a crushing blow to them that will block out all interference.”

“The University is not prepared for a war,” Elosa declared. “Never has been, never will be. We are not a military installation. We survive by being above the other universes, not by subjugating them.”

“That may need to change,” the Head of Philosophy pointed out. “If this one group of otherworlders exists, what is to say there aren’t others? Some higher than the University? There is a chance we’d need to defend ourselves.”

“There is evidence of others,” the Head of Exploration added. “We’ve found clear evidence of a dead one run by sapient Stars. We may have encountered one run entirely by different versions of the being Twilight Sparkle, but that report is inconclusive.”

“Doesn’t the Datasphere itself qualify?”

“You know, it might. It does exist just about everywhere.”

Elosa nodded slowly. “That is something to consider in the years to come – constructing defenses. What is being suggested now is that we launch a strike, declare war. That is unacceptable.”

“I find the idea of a war delightful,” the Head of the Afterlife Department declared.

“Of course you would,” the Head of Life retorted.

“Who said it had to be a war?” the Head of Acquisition asked. “We have access to numerous outlandish technologies they won’t see coming. And thanks to our Investors, we have an unlimited supply of just about any device we wish.”

The entire Cabinet turned to the representative of Dracogen Enterprise, Jenny of the Red Gloves.
She had the most innocent smile she could manage plastered on her face. “So, you want us to mass produce something? Ain’t going to be cheap, I can tell you that.”

Elosa narrowed her eyes. “You’ve encountered the otherworlders directly on two of your outings for us. Do you think we need to take action?”

Jenny paused in her thoughts for a moment. “Well, they are going to keep stopping your Acquisition Department. They think they’re heroes.” She got a faraway look in her eyes. “I know what that’s like.” She shook her head. “It means they’re determined, naïve, and have too much idealism for their own good. Trying to get them off your back, to give you some slack in your morality, it’ll be like talking to a brick wall. If anything, they’ll try to reform you to something closer to their way of thinking. Which would mean no more taking whatever you want should you think you need it.”

Elosa nodded. “We cannot be required to stop completely. I understand that our progress in uncovering the secrets of the cosmos rely on acquisition.”

The Head of Acquisition turned to Jenny. “What we need is a way to take care of this alliance easily, quickly, and without too much of a headache. I can think of several ways to accomplish this with the assistance of your manufacturing.”

Jenny nodded. “I can too. I’m thinking of one in particular.” She pulled an egg-shaped device that functioned as a phone out of her pocket. “Put the Ticker into the mailbox,” she ordered. She pulled a small mailbox out of her backpack and opened the ‘door’ on the front of it, reaching through the mailbox to another universe. She pulled out an oversized watch.

Elosa recognized the device. “You plan to use time against them?”

“If you want. I can take a handful of my people and yours to each of their main universes, do some snooping, and find out the optimum moment for instability. Given how we barely understand how this works, there’s no way they’ll be able to put up a fight. We find the best point in their past, stop it for each universe that isn’t temporally connected to the others, and let time sort itself out.”

“There would be a few stragglers,” the Head of the Science Department pointed out. “Some universe jumpers will get the timing just right, or the universe in question will operate on the ripple principle.”

Jenny nodded. “I’m pretty sure you can take care of a few stragglers. If you decide to go through with this, that is.

Elosa furrowed her brow. “…Very well. Jenny of the Red Gloves, we once again request the aid of Dracogen Enterprises. Take care of our little problem so we may continue our innovation in peace.”

Jenny smirked evilly. “We will. I’ve always wanted to try something like this… Or maybe I already have, not like I’d actually remember.” She shrugged. “Give me everything you have on them. Everything.”

Elosa ordered that all known records of the otherworlder alliance be given to Jenny.

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Siron looked out over the corrupted lands of the world – his world. Every last bit of dark magic on his world was now under his complete control. He could summon an army of truly demonic entities to do his very bidding at any moment he wished.

He was considering deeply if now was the time to play that card. He had received the transmission – the alliance formed during Disclosure was currently nonexistent. He’d had a hard time wrapping his
head around exactly why, but he eventually decided it didn’t matter. They were gone. Besides the Gems and the University, he was the power now. While the existence of a University with enough power to rewrite universal history concerned him, he knew the University was relatively ‘distant’ to his world. If he played his cards right they wouldn’t feel the need to unleash their fury on him.

No, what had him concerned was the knowledge that Eve apparently had a plan to restore everything, returning Siron’s world to the place it had always been. He had always planned to, eventually, reveal his power and demand respect from all the universes with his might, knowing they wouldn’t want a war with demons, gerudo, and demonic entities from Majora’s remnants. They would have given in to his demands.

But this may have been an even better opportunity…

“It is a difficult decision,” Siron said at last, addressing Mistress Luna and Ganondorf. “We did not plan for this opportunity. We cannot be certain what will happen if we do move now – can we prevent them from restoring their suffocating power? Or will it be better to do what we planned?”

The Mistress frowned. “I prefer our original plan. This one… We will be responsible for destroying so much.”

Ganondorf shook his head. “We did not destroy it, the University did. If their plan succeeds, they will destroy what has replaced their worlds. Either way, one half of existence will not be. Our actions are not responsible for the loss of their lives.

“…You don’t actually care about lives.”

“But you do, and I respect that,” Ganondorf responded. “It is best if we are on the same page. I say take the opportunity to rise to greater power than anticipated. If their plan fails, this world could rise up and take the new place as center of multiversal civilization.”

“Extremely tempting,” Siron said. “Not to mention that every time I’ve stuck to my plans for the last seven years, something’s gone wrong. Some unforeseen variable or secret action performed that was beyond my control. There’s an opportunity here to be in control. To take advantage of a crisis. To accomplish what is needed.” He folded his hands.

Mistress Luna shook her head. “I don’t think we have the right, Siron. Not for something like this. Their work, suffocating though it was, wasn’t worthless.”

“Which is why we must take the mantle,” Ganondorf added.

“No, Ganondorf… We’ll actually be betraying them. Are we sure we are willing to utterly destroy them to achieve our freedom?”

“Yes,” Ganondorf asserted.

Siron slammed his staff on the ground, summoning an eldritch vortex of rocks and tentacles from the ground. It roared, marching off into the sunset. “I am the demon commander of a demonic army…” Siron mused. After a few moments of silence spent watching the beast destroy the very ground beneath it, Siron turned back to his two companions. “Even with the original plan, there was a chance we would actually have to attack. A true betrayal. I see no reason not to go all the way.”

“…Has what they done for us meant nothing?”

Siron paused for a moment. “…It means something. They’ll be welcome on this world, should they wish.”
Ganondorf shook his head. “Wait, what?”

“The Mistress is correct, we do owe them something,” Siron said. “They fought valiantly, and are fighting valiantly, and did much for us we did not ask for. We’re meeting them in battle with our customs – I am willing to adopt their policy of coexistence afterward. I can see it being worthwhile. Not the warrior’s way, but an exchange of honor all the same.”

Ganondorf folded his arms. “You put too much stock on honor.”

“Honor and power are all there is, in the end,” Siron said. “I thought you understood that.”

“That’s what my world thinks.”

“In a way,” Siron admitted. He turned to the Mistress directly. “Are you going to stand by us?”

The Mistress thought for a moment, finding herself staring at the creature as it moved even further and further away. It looked so small from this far away. So insignificant…

“Yes. I’m in,” she said.

“Good. Let’s go listen in on their plan.”

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Eve, O’Neill, Director Storm, Emerald, and Saxton Hale sat at the same table in the primary briefing room of the Enterprise.

“We’re all that’s left,” Eve began. “Some of us come from worlds that currently don’t exist. Some of us come from a world that was overlooked. Others…” she glanced at Saxton Hale. “… Are just here for fun.”

“You got that right!” Saxton Hale said, his voice far too loud for the small room.

“Right,” Eve said, taking his response in stride. She was the only one at the table not affected by his volume. “O’Neill, care to go over the situation?”

O’Neill stood up and cleared his throat. “First of all, we don’t know anywhere near as much as we would like. We know that this University of Doors is a multiversal society that has a development somewhere around our level, but probably higher. Going from information provided by the Spectacularium, they are attacking us through time with intent to erase us so they can have unrestricted access to every universe whenever they want. It seems rather petty to me, but that’s the reason, so we just have to deal with it. Since we currently do not have the resources to attack them directly, the plan is to go to their world, find what leverage we can, and exploit it to make them stop what they’re doing so we can fix it.”

Director Storm nodded. “Taking the fight to them, as Eve poetically put it.”

O’Neill continued. “Our resources are somewhat limited. We do not have access to our extremely powerful allies – they’ve all been overwritten, and while asking their overwritten versions to help is an option in cases like Discord, that will just open up a can of worms we are not prepared to deal with. Namely, those we ask may be rewritten themselves when we set things right. We do have Ultra Fast Discord on board, but he’s scatterbrained and we cannot count on him to come through. Most of our other powerful individuals are either unwilling to help, or just don’t exist at all. Thrackerzod, Alushy, and several others were in overwritten universes and had no alternates.”
“What are our resources then?” Saxton Hale demanded.

“Shipwise, the O’Neill, Feldspar, a handful of Equis Cosmic ships, and the entire Gem Armada. In terms of men and resources, we have the crew of those ships, a handful of AID agents that escaped with Storm, Saxton Hale’s mercenaries and weapons, and… the entire Gem Armada.”

Emerald smirked. “You’re welcome.”

“While the Gem Armada is impressive, we are facing a multiversal society,” Eve reminded them. “They assuredly have powerful allies and technologies of their own. Even with the assistance of a Discord, we might fall. Aradia has already said her impressive power over time wasn’t enough to defeat them.”

O’Neill nodded. “The enemy is powerful, has unknown numbers, and vast capabilities.”

“Sounds like we need to do a run for intelligence,” Storm said.

“We do. We have the coordinates to their main world. To avoid detection, we will send a small squad to the world to do reconnaissance. They will find out whatever they can about the University of Doors, their allies, and how they run everything. We are also attempting to find out more from our prisoner – Ivan.”

Eve nodded. “Luna is attempting mind-reading spells on him. They are… not failing, but not exactly working either. She’ll have a report for us eventually, but we cannot guarantee the information is accurate.”

Emerald clenched her fist. “So… We’re waiting for information, is that it?”

“For now, yes. It shouldn’t be for long, though. We just need to find their vulnerability, threaten it, and make them realize erasing us is not worth their time. This could involve time travel of our own, a direct assault on their planet at a specific point, or some other convoluted plan. Prepare for everything.”

Saxton Hale grinned. “I’m always prepared for everything.”

“I believe it,” Eve said. “We need a reconnaissance team. I expect you all have some suggestions for who should be on it?”

Saxton Hale and Emerald grinned.

~~~

Nova and Aradia sat across from each other in the mess hall of the Enterprise. Aradia was smiling. Nova found the smile a little unnerving.

“So… If time is so fragile, how do other Equis universes survive my timeline divergence?” she asked.

Aradia shrugged. “Lots of reasons, probably. The best one I can think of is that time travel rules vary heavily from one universe to another – it’s why, most of the time, time travel doesn’t change a timeline in more than one universe. In those worlds time itself was probably stronger, or followed slightly different rules to not create such instability. All I know is that your universe had a weak time definition that could destroy it if was used incorrectly a lot, so I was called to serve as its guardian. You’d be surprised how much I had to put up with, and you’d be surprised how hard it is to deal
with time travel from other universes interacting with this one.”

Nova blinked. “…I thought you were the Aradia that hadn’t experienced that?”

“Oh, I’m a further future version than the one you met. Swapped about an hour ago – she’s going to relive a semblance of what timeline I went through, even though it’s technically impossible to relive it exactly now, given what the University has done.”

“Have you been to the University?”

“Not directly, no. We’ve started… avoiding it. I’m a lot more willing to let dead bodies of myself start piling up than most time travelers, but it is a waste of valuable experiences to keep throwing ourselves at a brick wall of razor spikes.”

“That does sound like something to avoid.”

“Oh! I just remembered, I think I have something for you.” She reached into her red cloak, an annoyed expression on her face. “Be right back, I think I left it in the future.” She flashed away in her signature red gears of time travel, appearing back only a second later. In her hand was two objects – a flat piece of black plastic and a small ring.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a temporal sensor,” Aradia said. “I have a natural power within myself that allows me to sense the flow, ebb, and alteration of time. That sense is by no means normal. This can do that on its own. Since you’re going out into the multiverse to find time-exploiting enemies, I think it’s time for you to have a bit more than dumb-luck defenses against such things. I think you should have it.”

“M-me?” Nova blurted. “I almost destroyed time last time I messed with it!”

“I am the Maid of Time,” Aradia said. “That means I repair time itself with my powers. However, the Maid is not the only class to use Time, Nova. I think you would make an excellent Prince of Time, were titles to actually apply to you.”

 “…Prince?”

“It means destroyer,” Aradia explained. “But it’s not as bad as it sounds. Think, destroying the enemy’s time. The gift of destruction is not a bad one, Nova. I would consider making use of it.”

Nova blinked. “I’m not sure…”

“Just take the devices to let you **examine** time, if nothing else,” Aradia said. “The plastic goes around whatever front hoof you want, the ring goes around your horn to interface your magic with it.”

Nova wrapped the plastic around her hoof and levitated the ring onto her horn. The moment the ring fixed itself to her horn, the color of her magic shifted – no longer was it a consistent blue, but it rather rapidly shifted through blue and pink in a striped pattern. The plastic on her hoof lit up, revealing itself to be a screen. A dozen displays lit up with diagrams Nova didn’t understand at first, but slowly recognized as the information was channeled through her horn. Time was flowing at 99.8% standard speed and Aradia’s presence was setting off so many alarms.

“I think you’ll find this helps with your time manipulation spells,” Aradia said. “More precision in your acceleration and slowness. If you want, you could probably execute time travel through just your magic, now.”
“I’d rather not go that far,” Nova said. “Thanks though. Now I’ll be able to see them coming. … From the future? How does that work?”

“Won’t work in every universe, only some have time react as a whole when an event is changed. I wouldn’t recommend relying on it completely.”

Nova levitated a cup off a nearby table, discovering her telekinesis still had the striped pattern. “Is all my magic going to look like a painted zebra now?”

“As long as you have the ring on. It’s the affectation of the interface. I wouldn’t worry about it, it only changes the appearance.”

“Mmm,” Nova said. “So, now what?”

One of the television screens on a nearby wall flickered, displaying a familiar sugar-skull emblem. Nova’s expression instantly shifted to one of contempt; long before Sombra’s face appeared on the screen. “I see you survived the erasing,” Nova spat.

Sombra grinned. “Ah, hello amiga! Nice to see you too. Unfortunately, I’m not actually here to talk to you, I’m here to talk to you.” She pointed at Aradia. “Aradia, the Handmaid. I wasn’t convinced you were more than a legend, but here you are.”

Aradia nodded slowly, a tired expression on her face. “Hello Sombra. What do you want?”

“I am here to offer my services to taking down the University of Doors. On one condition.”

“Why would you need a condition?” Nova blurted. “You want us to succeed anyway!”

Sombra glared at her. “I want Aradia there to go to Equis Cosmic, alter time, and get Corona out of erasure. There is a somewhat high chance we will not be able to defeat the University of Doors. If that is the case, Corona needs to be saved through other means. Consider it… an insurance.”

Nova bristled. “You care so much for her, don’t you?”

Sombra ignored Nova’s comment. “Aradia, I will help your cause against the University in any way I can if you’ll do this tiny favor. Shouldn’t be hard to temporarily reset Equis Cosmic, you did it for Equis Vitis, right?”

Aradia nodded. “I’ll do it.”

“Thank you. That’s all I ask. The moment she’s in your fleet, I’ll know, and I’ll begin work.” The transmission ended.

Aradia stood up, holding out a hand to Nova. “Coming?”

“W-what? Me?”

“W-what? Me?”

“I’m taking the opportunity to take some company this time. You and… Renee and Daniel I think. That’ll work best. We’ll flip Equis Cosmic’s coin, forcing one side to darkness, the other to pristine light. And we’ll get Corona.”

Nova nodded. “…I don’t like helping Sombra. But we might need her. Just to be clear, I don’t have to be happy about this, and I won’t be happy about this.”

“I understand,” Aradia said. “I wouldn’t worry about Sombra though – she’s on your side more than some of your ‘allies’.”
“…What do you mean?”

“It’s not for me to say,” Aradia said, realizing she’d just let something important slip. “You are not far enough along for me to just tell you things. Not yet. I shouldn’t even be doing this, but the nature of this problem requires it. After this is done, I will go back to being a background presence until you are ready.”

“You sound like Pinkie.”

“Yeah. I do. The fun paradox is I think she actually knows more than I do about certain things. You’ll get to have me around before she gets to explain herself fully, because I don’t even know quite what she is.”

Nova blinked. “…Really?”

“Really.” Aradia beamed. “Isn’t that exciting?”

“…You find the strangest things exciting…”

~~~

The Ninth World was a planet dominated by a single supercontinent in one massive ocean. The continent itself was vaguely diamond-shaped, with strange circular structures the size of mountains positioned near each corner. Each of these structures were known as Clocks, to those who knew their real shape.

The Southern Clock, otherwise known as the Clock of Kala, was just barely visible in the furthest distance from the location the portal opened, a flat whitish line that rose just barely above the horizon toward the northeast. Since it was hundreds of miles away, this paid testament to how tall the Clock was, as well as calling attention to the bizarre geography of this land.

The portal itself had appeared in a large, green plain covered in dual-bladed grass. A stone obelisk floated in the air a few yards away. There was a large city nearby, composed of buildings that looked randomly slapped on at every location, surrounding an impossibly tall tower that led up into the sky, eventually narrowing too small to see. A bean-shaped pod was riding up the center of this tower, indicating that it really was a space elevator.

A handful of floating craft that might have been space-capable were seen around the city’s skies, lazily drifting around. There was no evidence of dimensional portal activity.

The investigation team – Pinkie, Flutterfree, Tempest, a Spy mercenary, and a blue one-eyed Gem called Sapphire – weren’t quite sure what to make of all of it.

“High magic content,” Tempest said, checking her scanner. “And I am picking up some portal activity in that city, but not very much.”

Pinkie shrugged. “Then we just go into town and ask around. We’re all human or human-esque right now for a reason!”

“It’s a strange feeling…” Flutterfree said, rubbing her back where her wings should have been, but weren’t. “Never get used to it.”

“It’s not easy to keep my form this large,” Sapphire said. “We Sapphires prefer to have a shorter body, takes less energy to maintain.” She absent-mindedly rubbed her gemstone, which was placed on her left elbow.
“Can you see anything?” Tempest asked.

Sapphire closed her eye, looking into something beyond. “…I do not see them attacking us when we arrive. They treat us just like any other traveler.”

“The oculi have competition now!” Pinkie chuckled.

The Spy stretched his neck. “We must move quickly – the longer we spend acquiring information, the more time they have to catch us.”

They walked into the city – or in the case of Pinkie, bounced, and in the case of Sapphire, floated. Sapphire assured them this world would not find her psychic abilities mysterious, nor would Flutterfree’s bow draw attention. She did not foresee any difficulty in that regard.

“So you’ll be able to tell us if we’re about to get ambushed?” Flutterfree asked.

“It is likely,” Sapphire said. “Though I may not be able to provide enough warning. And I am uncertain how my powers will function with time travel’s involvement.”

“It never hurts to have a seer,” Spy said. “By chance do you see any of the information we are about to acquire?”

“It’s not that specific,” Sapphire admitted. “Conversations are harder to see than actions.”

“Worth a shot,” Spy admitted.

As they approached the city, they saw other humans walking along the dirt road as well. The variety within them was amazing – some were clearly wizards, glowing with magical energies, while others were almost completely machines with hardly any flesh in them. The vast majority of them seemed to have some kind of random technological device – many of which were ancient in appearance. Like the devices had been dug out of a ditch somewhere. Those leaving the city had cleaner devices, but they were still of an unimaginable variety – some were made of metal, others plastic, still others some biological polymer that resembled jello.

The more people they saw, the more devices they took in. Almost every one looked unique. The majority looked as if they were found rather than made.

“This… is a weird place,” Flutterfree said. “We look normal compared to it. I can see why they aren’t giving us much thought.”

“I have spotted a few other races,” Spy said. “Red fish-men, burly troll-men, and I believe a single pony. Best not to shift forms though, they’re clearly a minority.”

“Right,” Pinkie said. “Let’s ask around then. First order of business, what is this place?”

A human man with glowing rings in his ears and metal spikes poking out of his head walked up to her. “Oh! Are you new to the Beanstalk?”

“…That is the best name. Ever. Of all time,” Pinkie declared. “Is that the entire city or just the tall thing in the center?”

“The whole city!” the man declared. “It used to just be the Beanstalk, but now everything is the Beanstalk. Can I be permitted to show you the sights and the… businesses?”

“Actually, we’re looking for information,” Tempest said. “What do you know about the University
“Never heard of it,” the man said. “We’ve got Dracogen University though, if you’re looking for education. Very spendy though, tens of thousands of shins to get in.”

“Jenny said something about Dracogen,” Flutterfree whispered to Tempest.

“Dracogen?” Tempest said, raising an eyebrow.

“Have you been under a rock all these years? Dracogen Enterprises…” he cleared his throat, preparing for a grand speech that was obviously designed to get them interested enough to spend money – but it could still be useful for intel, so the group listened with rapt attention. “Long ago, back when we were but a small town, the man Dracogen came to town with his amazing ability to duplicate almost any Numenera Artifact brought to him. He slowly built up his influence, bringing more and more prosperity to the Beanstalk through his business and connections. He made deals with adventurers as time went on, adding them as employees of his business. He eventually activated the Beanstalk Elevator, giving us dominion over space itself – but he sadly perished. His second, Jenny of the Red Gloves, took over for Dracogen Enterprises, and has continually pushed our influence over the entire Ninth World, the Moon, and beyond!”

Tempest grabbed onto that thread. “What can you tell us about Jenny?”

“Hrm? Oh, her. She looks like a girl due to some curse or something, but she’s actually much, much older. From one of the prior worlds – some claim as far back as the First World! But there’s nobody that old. She has seen civilizations rise and fall, and been part of many of those activities. She has now devoted herself to this Beanstalk, running everything of Dracogen Enterprises to further our advancement. I truly believe that it is by her gloved hands that we will finally uncover the true potential the Prior Worlds achieved – perhaps even surpass them, but that will be beyond my lifetime.”

Spy butted in. “So she… does what? Duplicate these Numenera Artifacts – technology?”

“That’s just Dracogen Enterprise’s primary export. They also deal in ships, mercenaries for hire, and are glad to go on any quests to discover ancient power. The entire Steadfast, Beyond, and even Augur Kala knows about them!”

“Where do they do all this duplication?” Flutterfree asked.

“The main room under the Beanstalk itself. You can’t go there though, it’s closed to the public. But you can go to their museum, which is right next door!”

“Thanks, but not right now,” Pinkie said. “We need to check in to a place to stay.”

“Oh! I’ve got the place for you – the Dracogen suites! Full of every luxury the Ninth World can offer, for a relatively cheap price as well!”

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Flutterfree said. “We’ll find it ourselves.”

The man’s face soured. “Fine then.” He charged off in a huff.

“…I think they haven’t gone through Disclosure,” Sapphire said. “That man would have mentioned such a feat if it were public knowledge.”

“So the University is secret. Great,” Tempest muttered. “Now what are we going to do?”
“We still have information,” Spy said. “We know that Dracogen Enterprises is *for hire* – perhaps we can *pay* them off destroying us? Or turn them on the University?”

“We have no idea if we’d have enough money,” Flutterfree pointed out. “…I’m not even sure what shins are.”

Pinkie poked her head into the conversation. “Plus, the University can probably just *find* any money they want in the multiverse and give it to Dracogen Enterprises! That’s *probably* why we see Dracogen out in the multiverse rather than the University a lot – they have a close relationship.”

“I can imagine…” Spy said. “If they have a duplication machine, and the University finds lots of unusual technologies, the University would want to duplicate as many as they could. It doesn’t matter why they would want to, there could be *any* reason, all of them very beneficial.”

“Can’t pay them off…” Tempest muttered.

Flutterfree looked up at the Beanstalk. “…What if we threaten to blow up their space elevator?”

“How would that help?” Tempest asked.

“You heard the man – he talked about Prior Worlds, he talked about technology as Numenera Artifacts. I don’t think *any* of this technology is theirs. They *found* it. They’re not going to be able to build another Beanstalk if its destroyed, possibly even *with* the University’s help. And if we can also destroy their duplicator…”

“That sounds like leverage,” Pinkie said. “That sounds like *good* leverage. Transmit the information back to the fleet. We should definitely keep looking around for more intel, but that’s enough for them to start making a plan.”

Tempest nodded, taking out her dimensional communicator. “Be prepared to run if this summons the police down on us.”

“It won’t,” Sapphire said.

She made the call and sent the information – nothing showed up to attack them. Tempest nodded toward Sapphire. “You are *useful*. Why didn’t we ever hire any oculi?”

“They tend to be… out there,” Pinkie said.

“I see…” Tempest said, not really seeing. “They’ve got it. They say to see if we can scout out this Beanstalk, find a way in, a weak point, anything.”

Pinkie started bouncing over there. “Let’s mooove it!”

The five moved toward the Beanstalk’s Stalk; the ladder to space itself.

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Ivan wasn’t sure how he got here – a feeling that was truly alien to him. He was on one of the upper levels of the Beanstalk – that is, he was at the top of the base building, with only the tether itself above him. It was essentially a balcony used to overlook the entire city of the Beanstalk. Were Ivan more poetically inclined, he would have called the view *beautiful*.

But he was not, and he didn’t really have the patience for such things as *beauty*. Though Jenny apparently did, since she was leaning against the railing, wistfully looking out over her city.
“Ivan,” Jenny said, turning to him, face uncertain. “Why do we do this?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, we’re so much better than them. They are but little ants that scurry around under our feet, amounting to nothing over their lives. And yet, here we are, up at the top here, giving them basically everything. Why is that?”

“I only do it because you do,” Ivan responded, gazing out at the city. “You probably do it out of some misguided feeling of loyalty.”

Jenny chuckled bitterly. “I guess so. Nine Worlds… I’ve been here in all of them. I remember that much, at least. I probably am this world, in a sense. To think I’ve opposed it before… To think I did in such recent memory…” she shook her head. “They say you become more consistent as you age. Apparently I’ve been stunted in more ways than one.”

“You seem pretty consistent to me.”

“Ivan! Are you trying to console me?” Jenny laughed. “How unlike you.”

“I said what was evident,” Ivan deadpanned.

“You are the worst at this.”

Ivan shrugged. “Who else would you talk to? Dintin’s an absolute idiot, Ezermond can’t hold a conversation, and the boss isn’t exactly the chatty type.”

“YVND,” Jenny said, the consonants slipping off her tongue in a sharp blurb that hardly sounded like a word. “Though instead of apathy, he has arrogance.” She shrugged. “Or I could talk to myself. That works. Sometimes.”

Ivan shrugged, saying nothing.

Jenny let out a sigh. “Well, I’m going to go sell a million glowglobes at inflated prices so we can build that monorail. Then I’ve got to make sure the Order of Truth doesn’t find out about our deal with the Convergence, and vice versa… Oh, and Dintin needs to go smash some giant’s face in for legal reasons. Have to rile him up for that.”

Ivan nodded. “I… I actually am not sure what I need to do. I’m not sure how I got here.”

Jenny raised an eyebrow. “You’re supposed to get the University of Doors to agree to our terms, remember? Forge an alliance?”

“I… I have memories of already doing that.”

“She agreed, and we’ve been working with them very successfully for years. I – Wait.”


“I was on a ship… Being interrogated… By –“ He stopped short. He then took in a deep breath and sighed. “That was clever.”

Luna walked in into the dream from nowhere. Dream-Jenny freaked out, pulling her fist back. Luna
just made the Dream-Jenny vanish. “That took you a while. I was able to get a significant amount of information out of this session, including a psych evaluation of Jenny.”

Ivan folded his arms. “This was just a memory, wasn’t it?”

“Your mind wouldn’t let me read it, so I forced you into a dream-state and suggested images until you latched onto a memory,” Luna explained. “I didn’t interfere at all. It played out until you were unable to continue without further cognitive dissonance. I’m surprised a master of illusions such as yourself was fooled for so long.”

“I’ve never had a dream before,” Ivan said. “I don’t sleep.”

“Just my luck,” Luna declared, allowing the dreamscape to revert to a backdrop of stars and auroras. “My opinion of you has not changed from our waking encounters, but my opinion of her has changed. I see a heart in there. In you, I just see… exhaustion.”

Ivan shrugged, making no further response.

“I shall take this information where we may put it to use. Enjoy your incarceration.”

“I won’t.”

The dream faded to black and Ivan woke up in the holding cell of the Feldspar. He saw Luna leaving the room, not giving him a second glance. …Waking up was an unusual feeling. He didn’t like it.

So, Luna had information. A way to exploit Jenny. Knowing Jenny, she probably would feel pressured by a threat to her city, her world.

Ivan decided it was what it was, and leaned back against the wall of his cell, turning his mind to other things.

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Aradia, Nova, Renee, and Daniel had discovered what had changed in Equis Cosmic very quickly. Captain Shockwave’s ship never arrived.

The problem was now a different one.

“How are we going to find when or where their ship changed course?” Daniel asked, currently stumbling in his pegasus form. “We don’t exactly have logs to work with. All we have is this Equis Cosmic ship.”

Renee smirked, “Daniel, it’s simple. We go to the past, about a day ago, more if needed, and find a directory that has her ship on it. Then we follow it forward in time until it diverges.”

Aradia nodded. “Exactly!” A mesh of red gears appeared around their ship – the EQS Ametrine – and they were a day into the past, twenty-four hours before first contact was supposed to be made.

“Question,” Nova asked. “Won’t the Apollo… not re-appear because it’s from another universe?”

“That only happens if we don’t reset it back to the default,” Aradia said. “The reason I was needed on Equis Vitis was because of a fact of most timelines – when you create one, a shadow of the old one is remembered, including the appearance and departure of interdimensional visitors. If time didn’t have a slight remembrance to it, every time the timeline changed, all dimensional activity
would be rendered moot. It’d make it impossible to move around in most sections of the multiverse. However, *because* these timelines are ‘remembered’ – it isn’t really memory, more like a knowledge of which event was changed – this can strain how much information a universe is designed to store. This causes universes to break. Universes that break… Do interesting things.”

“Such as?”

“You really don’t want to know but I think you’ll find out. I apologize ahead of time for the horrors you will find.”

Nova nodded slowly. “Coming from the creepy death-obsessed time-maiden, that concerns me.”

Renee nodded. “Quite. Daniel, do we know the closest Equis Cosmic base that *was* around before we showed up?”

“Already plotting a course,” Daniel said.

“Oh, you are just adorable trying to use that screen with your wingtips. *Hooves*, darling.”

Daniel rolled his eyes, switching to his hooves. “This is ridiculous.”

“Did we ever decide why his cutie mark was a mysterious rune?” Nova asked.

“Languages,” Renee explained.

“I don’t even know what language that rune is from,” Daniel muttered, glancing at his flank.

Aradia shrugged. “Who cares, really? You know what you’re doing in life, as do I.”

“Why do you get to stay in your form and I don’t?”

Aradia smirked. “I’m good at not being seen.” And like that, she was gone.

“…What?” Renee said, blinking. “Where…?”

Aradia reappeared. “It’s a mixture of moving really, really fast and using telekinesis to keep the air from whipping too much. Bit exhausting, but fun. …I generally just stick to shadows though. Nobody wants to think too hard about me most of the time.”

Daniel pressed his hoof down on the button. “Course plotted! Arrival in… Seventeen minutes.”

Araida turned to Nova. “Care to try it out?”

Nova glanced at the new toy around her hoof. “…Sure.” She lit her horn, the stripe pattern drawing the attention of Renee and Daniel.

“Mesmerizing…” Renee moaned.

“Yeah,” Nova said, focusing on her spell. She enveloped the ship in a field of her magic, and then *accelerated* the ship forward. They didn’t jump through the timeline – they just experienced *less* time. “We have arrived.”


Renee activated the communicator. “This is the EQS Ametrine requesting permission to do—” she stopped short. Out the main viewport, they saw the dual-cone shape of the station *explode* in a burst
Nova blinked. “…I think we found out why they didn’t show up.”

Aradia waved her hands, and the station was back in one piece. “We’re back five minutes,” she reported.

Renee tried again. “This is the EQS Ametrine requesting permission to dock.”

“Permission granted,” a very bored sounding receptionist said. “Bay 3.”

Renee guided the ship into the bay. There was no security – they arrived without any questions asked.


“They don’t have enemies,” Daniel reminded her. “It’s just them here. Bit lonely.”

Aradia poked her head out the hangar doors. The station was somewhat small – the only major commercial area right in front of them, and it wasn’t even the size of a football field. “Okay, so here’s what we do. We wait for the station to explode again, so we can find out where the explosion is coming from. I rewind, then we get closer. Then we get closer again.”

“Sounds like a long process,” Renee commented.

“You can afford to have patience with time travel,” Aradia said. “Though we have to be prepared. They could resist temporal shifts. So watch closely. They are likely to take the stealth approach again…”

The approach taken was the exact opposite of stealth. A gigantic being made seemingly of paper just walked out of a door, not even trying to be inconspicuous. The paper twirled around into a three limbed creature with no head – two arms, one ‘leg’ – all around a cubic center on which alien symbols flashed. The creature’s arms unraveled, touching the surface of the station a dozen different locations.

First, the lights went out. Then the station started to explode.

Aradia initiated a rewind just before Daniel’s wing got singed. She froze time – but the papery being was immune to the freeze.

It paused, looking at them. “I was not expecting a defense,” it said with a voice that sounded like seven different synthetic voices all vying for attention.

“I’m Aradia, Maid of Time,” Aradia said. “We need this timeline back.”

“I am YVND. No such thing is going to happen.” The papery tendrils unfurled themselves, flying at Aradia with electricity crackling all around them like a bunch of messy Tesla rods. Aradia used her impressive psychic power to divert all the limbs away from her into nearby walls. They tried to interface with the walls, but with time frozen, the station would not respond to the hacking being.

YVND resorted to something a little more basic – a complex matrix spell that hit Aradia from all sides with invisible force. She slowed relative time for them and accelerated herself. There were suddenly two of her – one behind YVND, tying his cubic center up with a whip. The version of Aradia that was surrounded by the enclosing matrix vanished into time, presumably to become the version behind YVND soon enough.
YVND didn’t react with rage – but with calculation. A series of lightning bolts surged from his core, striking a wide area. Nova and Renee blocked with shields while Aradia simply opted not to exist for a split second. Daniel, however, was hit right between the eyes.

Renee looked ready to panic, but Nova didn’t give her time – she used a rewind spell on him, returning him to health. “…Wha?”

“You died,” Nova said. “…Maybe?”

“I just can’t catch a break…” Daniel muttered. Renee pulled him into an embrace, using a shield of her own to defend him from another bolt.

“Daniel! You are not a cat!”

Nova snorted, returning to YVND, who was very busy dealing with the time-masterful Aradia.

Nova scanned the being – very powerful. Probably too powerful to be killed or disabled with a sneak attack. It was immune to being affected directly by time, and it probably had a time device of its own under those folds of paper somewhere…

Ah, there it was. The watch, deep within the central cube of YVND. Nova wondered if she could just… Maybe…

She teleported the device out of YVND’s center, bringing it right in front of her eyes. “Ha! Got it!”

YVND whirled around, calculating faster than any organic being should have been able to. Each papery strip flew toward Nova. She raised a shield, but it wasn’t enough to stop the onslaught of paper. It broke, and something was preventing her from teleporting herself, some field YVND was generating.

Aradia came to the rescue though. With the watch gone, YVND was no longer completely immune to time dilation. Aradia froze YVND in place. The maneuver was not a complete success – the cubic center did not move, but the papery edges managed to worm their way closer and closer to Nova.

Renee cut them off with a knife construct before they made contact. “Good heavens…”

“I think we’ve got another prisoner!” Aradia said, smiling. “…Whatever he is.”

“Dangerous,” Daniel said. “This… YVND was touching the station, and made it explode. He moved and calculated faster than any organic mind. I think he’s a digital interface of some sort, a supreme hacker.”

“Good thing we’re about to get Sombra on board then,” Aradia said. She glanced at YVND, eyes narrow. “…I think YVND here is somehow trying to hack my time stop. I… Well that’s certainly new.”

“I would say drop him on Nautica but I don’t think that’d hold him…” Renee said.

“Can we… take him out?” Nova wondered.

“I don’t think that’d be easy,” Aradia said. “…I think we can just dump him into open space though.”

Nova lit her horn, teleporting the frozen YVND several kilometers behind her at a high velocity. “That work?”
“Eh… Maybe?” Aradia said.

“He might have propulsion.” Daniel pointed out.

“Fine,” Nova said, teleporting them all back to their ship. “Let’s just take him to the future with us.”

Aradia resumed time – and then rewound their ship, so it left the dock. Before the station could question what they were doing, they picked up YVND and jumped to the future. With the station surviving, the EQS Counselor would meet with the Apollo and everything would occur as it was meant to. The appearance of YVND would barely be a blip on the security sensors of the station, given the halting of time itself.

“Take us to Corona’s station,” Aradia asked Daniel. This time, he was able to input the coordinates very quickly. Nova accelerated them so they were there in an instant.

Nova made a call. “Ahem. Corona? Do you mind if we… Borrow you for an emergency?”

Corona’s voice came back to her. “Uh… I was just heading to the Harmonic celebration. …Is this important?”

“Very. We’ll explain in a minute. Prepare yourself.”

“…All right.”

Daniel looked at his hooves. “Can we undo this now?”

Nova nodded, dispelling his form change. Renee teleported Corona onto the ship the moment afterward.

Corona was about to ask Nova a question, but then she was Aradia. She blinked. “Y-y-you’re the Handmaid.”

“Yes I am, Corona. My name is Aradia Megido – glad to finally meet you.”

“…If you’re talking like that, we’ve got a big problem.”

“You don’t know the half of i-“ Aradia blinked. “Okay, we need to leave YVND here. Now. I don’t know what he’s doing but he’s starting to move again. It’s like he’s hacking reality somehow.”

The lights in the ship began to flicker.

Aradia forced time to stop, preventing the ship from exploding. But her temporal shift finally strained the structure of the universe too much. The temporal energies from her, Nova, YVND, and the watch Nova was currently holding were just too much.

Part of the universe tore open. A skeletal hand poked out of the opening, pulling itself from absolutely nothing into existence. It clawed, revealing a skull in the shape of Aradia’s, horns and all. A tattered cloak of time clung to the skeletal being’s chest, and a partial halo appeared above its head.

“…Time Wraith,” Aradia said, eyes widening. “Get everyone out of here, NOW!”

Renee whipped out her dimensional device and dialed Gem Vein – forgetting for a moment that dialing another universe from inside a spaceship was a really stupid idea. Everyone – including Aradia and the Time Wraith – were ejected into the astral void of Gem Vein, their bodies exposed to the harsh reality of space itself. Aradia seemed unhindered – but so did the Time Wraith. It pointed a
finger at Aradia and charged.

Aradia didn’t even bother trying to manipulate time or accelerate herself. It would have been completely pointless against such a being. She used pure telekinesis to keep it at bay. Its bones cracked, but it experienced no pain. It drew a whip with one of its skeletal hands, lashing at her. She was unable to stop the whip as it lashed her across the chest, opening a wound.

“Killed by a Time Wraith,” Aradia muttered. “I so hate it when this happens…”

The wraith swung the whip again, this time lashing open Aradia’s neck, spilling rust blood into space itself. She fell backward, unmoving.

The Time Wraith turned to the ponies and human drifting through space. They were still alive… Still needing to die. It moved toward them…

A drone hit it from the side, exploding the Time Wraith into thousands of shards. Sombra’s puddlejumper flew through the scene, picking up all of the drifting people with a teleport. Renee, Daniel, Corona, and Nova hadn’t been in space long enough to lose consciousness, but they all screamed through their panicked breathing from the pain that came with the sharp change in pressure, the realization that their eyes had boiled themselves dry, and the bruising they had all suffered.

Aradia was limp, dead.

Sombra tended to Corona. “I’ve got you, okay? Everything’s-“

“HEALTH POTION!” Corona screamed.

Sombra shook her head. “Right, right,” she opened up a chest and grabbed a potion filled with red liquid. She uncorked it and doused all four of the space-injured people in the liquid. “There, you should start feeling better soon.”

“Not Aradia,” Nova muttered.

The universe apparently found Nova in need of disproving, for at that moment Aradia started glowing while her wounds healed themselves. She floated a short ways into the air and opened her eyes. She yawned and stretched her arms. “Ah, Sombra. Thanks for taking care of that.”

“…WHAT!” All of them said at once.

“Right, right,” Aradia smiled sheepishly. “I’ve got conditional immortality. If I am killed, unless the death was heroic or just in some way, I get to come back. Getting killed by a Time Wraith is rarely either.”

“…Convenient,” Daniel said.

“Yeah. It is.” She rubbed her neck. “Hurts like nothing else though.”

“…What’s a Time Wraith?” Nova asked.

Aradia sighed. “Universes in this section of the multiverse have a habit of summoning Time Wraiths whenever someone uses a bit too much time exploitation. We’d been using a lot to fight YVND, but we were still in the clear. It was… Whatever YVND was doing to break free that brought it. Though it still decided to make a replica of me…”
“So the universe punishes you by making you fight a skeleton of yourself,” Nova said. “That’s terrifying.”

Corona held her hoof up. “Can somepony or somebody explain what’s going on? HRM?”

“Right,” Renee and Daniel said at the same time, beginning a tag-team explanation.

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“The plan is simple,” Eve said. “Since the actual University’s locations and resources elude us, we attack their primary muscle: Dracogen Enterprises. All our space forces are to hold back in this dimension, ready to go at a moment’s notice. Saxton Hale’s teams go into the Beanstalk at specialized locations, using portal devices to appear right where they need to be every time. They plant Mann Co. explosives all over the Beanstalk and the Beanstalk Basements. There should be enough explosives to level the entire city. Sombra will keep their security from detecting the explosives until we want them to.”

She took a breath and continued. “Once all the explosives are set, our group will walk right up to the front door of the Beanstalk and demand an audience with Jenny. Our psych evals suggest she will accept, which is what we’re planning on. We talk with her a moment, then as a show of power summon our entire fleet around the Beanstalk to show her we mean business. We convince her that her city – and world – is more important than the destruction of ours. If she doesn’t agree to see us we reveal our ships anyway, and make the demands in a more public manner. And… if she doesn’t agree to stop overwriting time on our worlds, we press the button. The entire Beanstalk goes up in flame, and the instability will force the tether of the space elevator to wrap around the planet, drastically altering the world’s climate and bringing about an extinction-level event. If she still holds out we start bombing, always prepared for an attack from beyond time. Aradia, Nova, you’ll have to keep her from going back and undoing what we did.”

Aradia nodded. “Another version of myself is already on that.”

“Good.” Eve snarled. “I do not want to resort to violence, I want to talk her out of it with a bargain. But all of us must be willing to go through with all we threaten. Do you understand?”


Renee adjusted her hat. “You sure we shouldn’t be part of the mission teams?”

“Saxton Hale has that under control with his own specialized units,” Eve explained. “We need efficiency and military precision, and we don’t have enough Tau’ri soldiers.”

Everyone nodded. Corona let out a sigh. “This… This is a bit much, to be honest.”

Eve smiled sadly. “Corona… No offense, but you have no idea. You just got here.”

Corona rubbed the back of her head. “Yeeeah…”

Eve pulled her into a hug. “I’m glad you’re here to stand with us, though.”

“I hope this works…” Flutterfree said.

Pinkie grinned. “Look at us!” She pointed at all nine of them. “We are the heroes, Flutterfree. The top of the top, the best of the best. We will win at the end of the day, you can count on it!”

Nova frowned. “But at what cost Pinkie?”
“I… Really don’t know.”

“Yeah. That’s what has me concerned.”

Eve turned to O’Neill. “…I think we should begin sooner, rather than later.”

O’Neill nodded. “Agreed. Shall we?”

Eve smiled in confirmation. She and O’Neill both pressed red buttons in front of them and spoke their names and access codes.

“Begin operation,” they both said at once.

Sombra moved first – disabling the Beanstalk’s security measures with ease. It helped that the ‘security measures’ were hastily thrown together cameras salvaged from ‘Numenera’ stores hidden deep in the earth. Since Dracogen Enterprises had used their incomplete and spotty knowledge to set up the system, a master hacker had no issue working around it, despite some of the technology being foreign. She sent the message *Done* to Eve’s computer.

“Phase two,” O’Neill said, accessing communications. “Saxton Hale, you better do this right.”

“Like a kangaroo and a bicycle!” Saxton Hale’s voice came through. “IT’S TIME TO PROVE YOURSELVES MEN!”

Reports flew across the screen the nine of them were watching – bombs were being planted successfully. Teams laid charges, armed them to remote detonators, and left in under a minute. Only one team actually met any resistance, and they took out the guard with *ease*. There was no evidence any alarm had been raised.

The entire operation took less than two minutes.

“This is going very smoothly,” Nova observed.

“We’ve got to talk to Jenny now – the Armada is ready,” Eve declared. “Corona? You know what to do.”

Corona pulled out her specialized portal gun, already dialed to the Ninth World *and* set to the right location. The red portal took them all to the front doors of the Beanstalk. Upon these front doors was a symbol: a white knot of lines that resembled a four-petal flower. Some citizens looked at the newcomers with confused expressions, but nothing too alarming.

Eve turned on the Royal Canterlot Voice. “JENNY OF THE RED GLOVES, CEO OF DRACOGEN ENTERPRISES! I, CHARTER-PRINCESS EVENING SPARKLE OF EQUIS VITIS DEMAND AN AUDIENCE ON BEHALF OF MY WORLDS AND THOSE ASSOCIATED!”

The front doors opened. Jenny’s voice greeted them from a nearby speaker. “Come on in. Take the elevator. It’ll automatically take you to me.” Pinkie relayed the message to Eve.

“So far so good,” Daniel said. The nine of them walked through the doors into a large white hall, at the end of which was a simple wooden desk. Behind the desk, the elevator.

Dintin was there, watering a potted plant. “Oh! Hi there! Do you like the flowers?” he asked with the purest of innocent voices.
Aradia smiled. “I think they’re lovely, Dintin.”

“Ever consider devoting more time to flowers?” Flutterfree asked.

“Dracogen gives me lots of flowers. Lots of plants.”

Flutterfree nodded. “Oh. Okay.”

Eve turned to O’Neill. “The robot’s talking, isn’t he?”

“Yeah.”

“Great…” she turned on her ears. “…Looks like I’ll need these.”

“Hi!” Dintin said.

Eve smiled. “Hello, Dintin.”

“Going to Jenny?”

“Yeah.”

“She’s nice. You’ll like her.”

Eve bit her lip. “Oh, if only…”

The nine of them left the behemoth of a robot and entered the elevator, which was surprisingly roomy, easily holding all of them. It took them down… Down… Down into the ground. Eve mentally calculated – they had enough explosives to reach down this far, destroying whatever was hidden in the depths. She also calculated the exact distance she’d need to teleport to escape should it come to that.

The elevator eventually stopped, and the doors opened. They walked out into a large, open space filled with machines and magical artifacts of every imaginable kind. In the center of the room was a tremendous cubic structure made of a white metal. It had a half-dozen translucent limbs inside it, each one with a different bizarre tool at the end. It was slowly building one of the watches, seemingly from nothing. The watch was completed before their eyes. The arms vanished and the watch descended to the ground, onto a conveyor belt, and into the gloved hand of Jenny herself.

“I’m surprised you managed to find this universe,” she said. “It’s not like we give out its coordinates. We don’t have an easy-to-access Directory, like you do.”

Eve frowned. “We prefer to be open.”

Jenny turned around, looking Eve right in the eyes. “We don’t. We find it allows people to exploit us.”

“Like you’re exploiting us?”

Jenny nodded, a slight smirk on her face. “Exactly. You left yourselves open. The University eventually figured it’d just be easier to get rid of you than continue to deal with you. Since you made it this far, I think they were probably wrong, but that’s not really my concern now is it?”

“Do you know what is?” O’Neill asked.

Jenny raised an eyebrow. “Ah, the part where you reveal what your plan is. What is it? Do you have
Ivan captured? Do you have an army from a universe we forgot about? Do you have some sort of
time-scheme centered around your Handmaid over there?” She shook her head. “Really… Any
prisoners you have are duplicates, the University can face off against a single universe, and I’ve
already killed that red fairy over there three times personally.”

Aradia bristled. “Want to try and make it four?”

“Not particularly,” Jenny said. “You may not believe me, but I don’t like fighting all that much. I like
creative solutions. Sometimes that involves a carefully placed punch, but it more often involves
talking your way out of a situation, or using time to eliminate the ‘enemy’ completely.” She threw
her hands wide. “This entire basement is filled with creative solutions. The ancient technology of this
world is at my disposal! I’m bringing the Ninth World up from the ashes of the Eighth! Did you
know the Eighth World was a multiversal society? It’s true! I’ve found things that suggest they had
the power to create universes. Records of a skirmish between them and a group of sapient Stars.
Remnants of a clash that we can scarcely imagine!”

“You were a part of it,” Eve said. “We know how old you are, Jenny. You were there. You just
can’t remember.”

“Your point?”

Eve shook her head. “You know what, never mind. Here are our demands. We want you to restore
our timelines to the way they were, and not attack them ever again. You can do that easily.”

Jenny twirled the watch device in her hand. “Yeah, I can. But why would I?”

“Because we have bombs planted in every last inch of your precious Beanstalk,” O’Neill said.
“Enough to level the entire city.”

Jenny’s smile vanished in an instant. “There’s no way.”

O’Neill called Sombra. “You can reactivate their security system.”

Jenny pulled a computer pad out of her pocket and looked at it. Her panic was replaced with
confusion. “…There’s no bombs here.”

“…What?” Eve said. “All the missions were a success! All bombs planted and-“

“They were removed,” a familiar voice said from behind them. Siron strode out of the elevator, his
staff of green and red surrounded with an eerily familiar purple miasma of eldritch power. “I
removed them.”

Jenny blinked. “Who the heck is this?”

“Siron!? Eve shouted. “You… You removed them? Why in the name of Celestia would you do
that!? How did you do that?”

“I have gained complete control of the eldritch energies on my planet, Evening. I used it like
Majora’s hands – reaching into every location I felt like I needed to. I have been planning to use it to
establish myself and my people as a power in this multiverse for a long time. No longer under your
pretty purple hoof, no longer treated like nothing. Now we are the power here, and you are not. You
can no longer stifle us from what we wish to become.”

“Siron! You’re dooming at least six worlds to death!” Eve shouted.
“I’m not. She is. *I’m* just taking advantage of an opportunity.” He stamped his staff on the ground. “Give up, Evening. Your time in the multiverse is at an end.”

Tears rolled down Eve’s face. “Siron! Siron… Did our friendship mean nothing!? All we did for you, all that we gave you?”

“I have not forgotten,” Siron said. “Those of you that have survived are welcome to join us. But not as *overlords* ever again. We will stand as proud warriors, not as eternal *diplomats*.”

“Yeah, you failed to realize something,” Jenny said.

“What?” Siron asked, eyes narrowing.

“I don’t like you,” Jenny answered, smirking. “What you say about power, about honor, about hating the diplomacy – I don’t care if you won’t be a nuisance to University or not, I feel the *need* to wipe you out of existence just so you don’t propagate that stupid philosophy of yours.”

Siron glared. “Jenny of the Red Gloves, you are not my enemy. We will not interfere-“

“So what?” Jenny said. “I don’t give a crap. I don’t like you. You’re going to-“

“**Jenny, leave him be,**” a deep, resonating voice said. Before their eyes, a shadowy creature took shape, rising from the ground. It resembled a dinosaur, but made of almost nothing but bones. The eyes were hollow, the color a dull black, and shadow energies shimmered off at all angles.

“…The hell?” O’Neill blurted, reaching for his gun.

“Woah woah!” Jenny said, holding up her hands. “Let’s all talk about this like calm, rational people. *Dracogen*, why can’t I go kick this guy’s face in? He’s ridiculous! Listen to the warmonger!”

“He did us a favor, Jenny. He removed the bombs that would have destroyed what we’ve built on this world…” despite his size, he moved around the room with silence, and purpose.

“But-“

“**Genevie Hahn, you know your place. Ancient as you may be, you still serve me. And I provide all that you need for your precious progress.**”

Jenny clenched her fists. “Well, guess what Siron? Looks like the boss has given you a pass. Go figure. Go celebrate in freedom your human sacrifice or whatever barbaric thing it is you want to do.”

Eve blinked. “No…”

The Dracogen addressed her. “**You have lost, Evening Sparkle. Your worlds are no more. Your plans have failed. Already I have dispatched agents to take care of the timeline of Gem Vein. The University has been informed of your assault, and they will be hunting any loose ships that escape. Your best option at this point is to willfully surrender to Dracogen Enterprises and serve us in the multiverse, or go to Siron’s world. You and your worlds are no more.**”

Eve’s eye twitched. “No. I’m not letting all this sacrifice be for nothing!” She pulled the watch device Aradia had gotten from YVND out. “**LET’S SEE HOW YOU LIKE IT!**” In a fit of rage, she twisted the device into the *deep* past.
“Eve, no!” Both Jenny and Aradia yelled at the same time, activating their own temporal powers in a vain attempt to stop her.

And then everything shattered.

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“Beware the last of the sandwiches,” a synthetic voice said, bringing Eve to her full awareness. She blinked – she could feel that she was on top of some snow. In front of her was a strange cloaked creature. The single eye in the top of it was all that was visible, and even this eye told her nothing – it was just a red piece of glass as far as she could tell.

“What… Are you?”

“Ezermond.”

“…Luna mentioned that name in briefing,” Eve muttered, rubbing her head. “Where are we?”

“The stars align in the fiftieth position every last perigee.”

Eve shook her head. “What?”

“I like big books.”

Eve rolled her eyes. “Okay…” She looked at her surroundings. She was at the edge of a lake that was colored unnaturally black. There was signs that several struggles had taken place around this lake recently – blood in the snow, scraps of wood littered everywhere, and the occasional humanoid figure. She saw, in the distance, some people dragging what appeared to be a heavily mutated dragon head away. She spotted a boy wielding a warhammer as if it weighed nothing. She sensed… something from him. Something beautiful.

But he wasn’t what she was here to see.

She was here to see the girl with the red gloves, sitting next to the lake, looking at her reflection. To her side, there was a large piece of ship siding that read Mo’Cookies.

Eve lit her horn, charging it up with all the dark magic she could muster.

“The flavor of oreos is beyond you,” Ezermond said.

“SHUT UP!”

The girl looked up at the noise, eyes wide. She looked… not scared. Sad.

Eve’s horn lost all its dark magic in that instant. “…Who are you?” she asked, not sure why.

“…They call me Jenny,” she said, picking up a stick and poking the black water with it. “…We just saved the Empire, you know. The Black Witch is dead. Chaos is thwarted. All those vampires gone…” She shook her head. “I don’t know what it meant. At all.” She fell silent, not looking at Eve or Ezermond at all anymore.

Eve hung her head and walked away. A tear dropped down her cheek – she couldn’t do it. This child… This child had such a future ahead of her. Such a bright and long future. Eve knew – Jenny, both Jennys, had a heart in them. That heart may have been significantly flawed, but she also knew this world would be worse off without her. The world’s immortal guardian… Or citizen. Or something.
Jenny was waiting for Eve at the top of the hill – not the girl at the lake, but the Jenny that Eve knew from the deep future. “…Welcome to the First World,” Jenny said.

“First?”

“Yeah. The next one somehow becomes an exact copy of a default Earth,” Jenny explained. “The Third through Sixth I don’t remember enough to tell you solidly about. One of them was all digital intelligence, I think. No idea how I lived through that. Seventh was…” she shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. …What does matter is you didn’t do it.”

“I couldn’t. I… I saw her eyes. And I know she’ll do great things for this world in the next worlds…”

“One billion years of it,” Jenny said. “I’ve done bad too, you know. Joined up with a fellow called the Professor a couple decades back. Almost blew up a galaxy. I’m also pretty sure I’m the one who called the alien invasion when it happened.”

“…But a world needs its villains too,” Eve reasoned.

“I’ve been everything,” Jenny said. “Contradictory even to myself. I learn things, but then a thousand or two years later I forget it, and lose the impact.”

“How did you think it was okay to erase us!”

Jenny let out a bitter laugh. “Never thought it was. I just stopped listening to my conscience a long time ago.”

“Why?”

“Inconsistency, that’s why. The eternal changing of values every few thousand years. I just go with whatever people find acceptable at the time, because who the heck am I to judge? The University and Dracogen Enterprises are products of the Ninth Era, an era that is currently rather brutal. The Beanstalk is far too nice for you to get a good picture of our world – it’s really a grim, brutal place. You have to be willing to kill towns sometimes, just to survive.” She weaved her fingers together. “I think we both know that you and the University – and by consequence, you and me – would have come to a more violent head eventually had action not been taken.”

Eve shook her head. “I don’t believe that.”

“You’re still young,” Jenny said with a smirk.

Ezermond piped in. “At last, a bonding of the cheeses!”

“What is his deal?” Eve asked.

“Ezermond? No idea. The Philethis are a strange, usually secluded race that know a lot more about things than anyone else. This one has brain damage, so he follows me and my friends around for Datasphere-knows what reason.”

“Thank you,” Ezermond chirped

“And then occasionally he says things that make you think he actually has a brain cell left…” Jenny shrugged.

Eve frowned, shivering in the snow.
“…Just so you know, I’d still remove your worlds from existence with time travel. But… given the mess you’ve caused, I don’t think it’ll come to that anymore.”

“Mess?”

“You just broke time. Well, we broke time. I have no idea how we ended up in this specific when and where… A moment so important it’s still vivid to me, even after all these eons. I’m pretty sure – if I remember this world’s time travel right – that we’re going to get pulled back to where we left pretty soon. And then all hell is going to break loose.”

“How so?”

“You encountered Time Wraiths yet?”

“…Only heard – oh. Oh. How bad is it going to be?”

“We’re going to have to fight together. It’s going to be intense…” Jenny cracked her knuckles.

“Ready?”

Eve shivered. “I guess so.”

“Game – Go! Move – Set!”

And then things broke again.

~~~

It was as if nothing had changed in the basement of the Beanstalk.

Except now there was a tear in reality that lead to nothing right in the center of everything.

“Everyone, try to fight a Wraith that isn’t your own,” Aradia called as they poured out. “It’s always harder to face yourself!”

Everyone in the entire room got a Wraith – the nine ‘heroes’, Siron, Jenny, and the Dracogen himself. Each one was an aged skeletal form with the partial halo over their head, and all were out for blood – the blood of their counterparts.

“ALSO NO USING TIME TRAVEL THAT JUST MAKES THEM STRONGER!” Aradia shouted.

The fights broke out into so much chaos, Eve couldn’t make out anything that was happening. She just knew she had to get away from her own Time Wraith, and try not to think about how it might be the undead spirit of a certain Twilight Sparkle…

She went after Siron’s Time Wraith – that would be cathartic. She blasted it with magic, but only shifted the bones around. She went right to a dark magic death spell, but that did nothing at all to the Wraith – of course. It was probably an undead form of some kind…

Siron’s Time Wraith pointed its staff at her, summoning black energies at her. She used her own magic to turn the beam around, hitting the Wraith in the chest with its own power. Its ribs cracked.

Eve smirked – this Wraith didn’t seem to have Siron’s freaky new eldritch powers. That meant Eve could win – she had almost beat Siron back on that first adventure, and she definitely would now. She spread her wings and unleashed a series of needles through the Time Wraith, cracking its bone-white carapice. It shattered into dust, falling to the ground.
She turned to Siron. “You could be ne-“ she blinked. Siron was gone. No evidence of him at all. He’d run. That seemed so unlike him...

Wait, that was an idea. She tried to initiate a teleport – but found the temporal energies swirling in the area blocked the attempt. Siron must’ve had some sort of eldritch cheat… The thought made her livid. All this talk about being a warrior and he ran.

She saw O’Neill having trouble – he apparently didn’t get the memo and was fighting his own Time Wraith in hand to hand combat. Bones from the wraith drew blood from O’Neill’s own arms. The Wraith kicked him into a wall covered in Numenera technology, flooding O’Neill with electricity and more than a few needles. The Wraith looked as if it wanted to absorb him into itself.

Eve shot it with her knives, shattering many of its bones, but not enough. Jenny came to the rescue, punching the Wraith to oblivion with her special gloves and disconnecting O’Neill from the electricity. “Up and at ‘em General!”

He was not up and at ‘em – he was alive, but very dazed.

Then Jenny’s Time Wraith punched a hole in Jenny’s stomach. Jenny yowled in pain, but already Eve could see Jenny’s flesh healing itself rapidly. That explained how she’d survived so long, Eve supposed. She targeted Jenny’s Wraith, blasting off an arm.

The arm reformed.

Siron’s and O’Neill’s wraiths had been relatively weak, physically, because they were based on individuals with less physical power… Jenny’s wraith was going to be a problem.

“Oh, Jenny?” Eve asked.

“I didn’t think about this part!” Jenny admitted. “Uh, try something eldritch or ultraterrestrial!”

“Siron’s not here anymore!” Eve shouted.

“Crud. Hey Dracogen, maybe you’ve got-“

The Dracogen and his Wraith were locked in deadly combat, tumbling across the basement of the room, unable to do anything but claw and grab at each other with their psychic powers.

“Nobody gets the memo!” Aradia shrieked. “People are going to start dying if we don’t do something!”

“WORKING ON IT” Corona said, firebending away Nova’s Time Wraith. “SOMBRA, WORK FASTER!”

Suddenly, all the weapons in the room activated. Those that were pointing at Wraiths fired. Most weapons had marginal effect, but some blew off heads. Pinkie’s Wraith went down by a chance propeller to the back of the skull.

“Whew,” Pinkie said, relieved. “Glad mine’s out of the way.”

Eve saw Nova get hurt badly by Renee’s Wraith, the magic cutting down to the unicorn’s bone. Eve saw her Wraith keeping Jenny occupied… She saw her friends getting wounded…

She heard the Dracogen’s Wraith yell in triumph. It had killed its charge – and now the Time Wraith of a super enhanced magic reptile overlord was after the rest of them.
Jenny pulled a big fat gun off a nearby shelf, not bothering to check if it worked. The knockback threw her to the ground and crushed her spine – temporarily – but the beam sailed true. It hit the Dracogen’s Wraith – but the creature just absorbed it.

“We’re doomed!” Jenny declared.

Aradia fell to the ground, bested by Jenny’s Wraith. “Agh…”

Then Eve saw Daniel, stumbling around – right in the path of the Dracogen’s Wraith.

“DANIEL!” Eve yelled. When she shouted his name, Renee’s ears perked up and a haunted expression crossed her face. She knew what Eve’s tone meant.

The Dracogen’s claw embedded itself right through Daniel’s chest, piercing the entire heart. The limp human man was tossed to the side, breaking several ribs and the spine. His face was frozen open in shock, no longer able to move.

Renee made no remarks this time – no calling for help, nothing. She just ran to him and cried.

Eve couldn’t take it anymore – the sight of Daniel… The blood everywhere… She rose into the air, channeling all the power she could into herself. The pure, raw, violent emotion – she finally let it consume her. Her coat turned white, and her entire mane lit on fire. She tapped into magic she didn’t know she had, her flaming mane filling with the stars of Evening. She grabbed the entire planet in her magic, and screamed.

She drew power from the entire arcane field around the Ninth World – an arcane field stronger than almost any other she had encountered. She pointed a hoof at the Dracogen’s Time Wraith – and vaporized it with a burst of holy light, drilling a hole several meters into the ground. She moved to Aradia’s Wraith next, taking it out without much more difficulty. Then Jenny’s. She aimed-

Jenny’s Wraith teleported behind her and punched. Eve raised a shield, but the Wraith was beyond that. The single punch tore through, hitting her across the jaw, knocking the violence right out of her. Her colors returned to normal and she slammed into the ground, breaking a wing and a leg in the process.

She was drained. There was nothing left in her. Nothing at all… Nothing to fight with… Nothing… All was lost…

She saw a light.

…It wasn’t the light at the end of the tunnel, things hadn’t gotten dark yet. It was coming from… Daniel?

She snapped her eyes open, coming to full attention.

Daniel has a habit of dying.

He has Ascended before.

He’s Ascending now.

A being of pure energy and light erupted from Daniel’s soul, rising into the air. Thin, wispy tendrils of energy snaked around, feeling their way through reality.

The Time Wraiths stopped fighting to stare at the new presence.
With a single action, the Ascended being that was Daniel Jackson sealed every remaining Time Wraith away. Then he healed the wounds – Eve noticed then that Nova’s brains had been dashed out, and that Aradia had suffered a perma-death. But Daniel brought them back – including the Dracogen.

O’Neill started laughing. “They can’t stop him here! There are no Ascended rules in this universe! Way to go Danny Boy!”

The Ascended Daniel Jackson condensed itself into a small, white, human sized glow. With a pop, a human Daniel Jackson appeared, in a clean new uniform. He looked down at the uniform with curiosity. “I knew sending me back naked had to be some kind of cruel joke.”

Renee galloped at him and flung herself into his arms, planting a kiss firmly on his face. She had very clearly intended for it to be a graceful, passionate, emotional moment, but she had failed to take into account that she was a pony, he was a human, and neither of them had planned out his course of action. The passionate kiss quickly transformed into a fumble as both of them struggled not to fall over.

The struggle was completely in vain, as they both hit the ground with a thud.

Pinkie put down her camera. “I am keeping these pictures forever.”

Renee and Daniel started laughing – then the laughing stopped abruptly when Renee slapped him across the face. “Don’t you ever scare me like that again Daniel Jackson!”

“I didn’t have time to explain the pl-“

“Daniel Jackson, rule one of courting Lady Rarity, stop making excuses.”

“…That’s…”

“Something I made up just now that won’t have any meaning going forward but I felt the need to say,” Renee said, talking a mile a minute. “Good heavens my heart is racing and I’m not sure if it’s from joy, rage, or… I need to sit.” She sat down, taking in deep breaths. Daniel sat down as well next to her.

“Let’s let them have their moment,” Eve said. She turned to Jenny – and the Dracogen. “I think we need to resolve this.”

At that moment, Headstone Elosa bashed through the doors to the large room with a small troop of University personnel. “What is going on?” she demanded.

“They were more trouble than anticipated,” Jenny said, standing up and dusting herself off. “Looks like erasing them from time isn’t going to work. They’ve got too many tricks, luck, and frankly they just saved our lives.”

Elosa blinked. “…Jenny, you can’t be saying…”

“We’ll still take care of the problem, as promised,” Jenny assured her. “But we’ve got to take… Alternative methods.” She glanced at the Dracogen to ensure he approved – he nodded ever so slowly.

“Such as?” Elosa demanded.

“How about this?” Jenny said, rummaging through a nearby crate and producing a bunch of cone-
shaped things with lights at the top. “We put beacons in every universe we claim as part of our network. If we ever come across a universe that has a beacon that isn’t ours, we have to leave it alone. A complete cessation of interaction.”

Eve glared at Elosa. “That’s probably for the best.”

Elosa narrowed her eyes at Eve. “…It is true, there is now no longer an option for coexistence. Not that there ever really was.”

Eve shook her head at Elosa. “I fear what your University does to its universes. But… I’ll respect Jenny’s suggestion. Of course, Dracogen Enterprises has to follow the same rule.”

Jenny nodded. “Right. No contact. At all.”

Eve turned to Jenny. “…Jenny, I think I understand you a little better now. I might, with time, be willing to forgive you. But now is not the time.”

Jenny shrugged. “Eh… Yeah, you’re right.”

“I hate to admit it, but it is best if we part as enemies.”

Jenny folded her arms. “All right. I know how to make sure that happens.”

“Huh?”

Jenny punched Eve in the face and knocked her out.

~~~

Siron charged into the room Mistress Luna and Ganondorf occupied. “It’s all gone wrong.”

Ganondorf growled. “What?”

“There were these Time Wraiths, and I was ready to wipe them all out – and then I was elsewhere! Someone took me away! Someone tore me fro…” he turned to stare at the expression on Mistress Luna’s face. “You didn’t.”

“I did,” Luna said. “Everyone thinks you fled from battle. I already have the story circulating among the demons. I have video evidence.”

Ganondorf smashed his fist into the table. “What have you done!?”

“What needed to be done. You were taking it too far,” Luna said. “Way too far.” She pulled a dimensional device out of her mane and handed it to Siron. “You are not welcome on this world anymore, Siron. Your deeds are exposed. I suggest you take your staff and run before Eve throws you into Nautica for your crimes.”

Siron trembled in anger. He swiped the device from Luna, dialed a random universe, and left without a word.

Ganondorf glared at Luna. “Foolish princess, we could have-“

“Don’t pretend you ever thought you had the high ground, or philosophy,” Luna spat. “You just wanted power. At least Siron had something worthwhile in his motives. You were just a selfish pig. You go to your Gerudo. You are not welcome among my demons.”
Ganondorf looked like he wanted to fight her, but in the end he was unsure if he could win. He stormed off as well.

Luna sighed, shaking her head. She lit her horn, summoning the pillar Mlinx was imprisoned in.

“…It’s time to release you.”

Elsewhere, Siron appeared next to Fef. “We’re leaving.”

“Huh? What for?”

“We’ve been betrayed. We’ve got to go on the run before they stick us in Nautica.”

Fef nodded. “Got it. Where are we going?”

“I have no idea whatsoever. But I’ll think of something.” He looked at his staff, still brimming with eldritch power. “I’ll think of something…”

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Aradia watched as the universes returned to normal. The Dracogen recalled his agents, allowing the time in all universes to return to the way it was supposed to be. The buoys were set up in every universe in record time, spreading the signal to keep the University and Dracogen Enterprises away.

People who had been lost in time reappeared – such as Toph, Thrackerzod, and Alushy – and they were understandably horrified by what had happened to them. They had ceased to exist.

Eve still had the key. It had turned out to not be all that useful, in the end, since time itself essentially broke down, but it was a curiosity. Where had it come from? What was its relation to Equis Eldritch? Nobody knew, and nobody had any idea how to find out.

Already there was talk of using it to create temporal alerts, things that would detect temporal tampering from any source, hopefully alerting all other universes to it the instant it happened so action could be taken. The limited methods of time travel were catalogued, classified by all the governments, and readied for use at the push of a button.

There was no attempt at keeping what happened a secret. It would have been difficult to keep everyone who had been apart of it quiet. Most of the populace had no idea the true extent of the damage, but just telling them ‘an enemy had tried to erase them from existence’ had worked.

Aradia watched Eve address the masses.

“We have survived an ordeal – we were hit where it hurt, in our past, effectively removed from existence. We had to face what we would be without each other, and… I can safely say we are better off connected than we were apart. Furthermore, it is only because of our close ties to each other that we were able to fight back against this assault at all.

“We always thought there were going to be horrendous threats from deep within the multiverse, horrible things probably beyond our imagination. Well, we were right. There are things that can snuff us out like a candle. But there’s something else here – we survived. The candle relit after a moment of darkness, rising up higher than before. Because we have each other, we live. We thrive. We survive. And we show this uncaring multiverse that we have a magic between us.”

The crowd cheered. Aradia smiled – that was good.
Nova walked up to her. “You’re vanishing again, aren’t you?”

“Yep. You’re not ready yet. I took too active a role as it was.”

“…I think Eve’s pushing for Unification,” Nova said. “…Do you think…?”

“I’m not telling you if that’s the step you need to take or not,” Aradia declared. “Don’t try to weasel information out of me.”

“Right…”

“You’ll have to take what you learned here today and be the temporal eyes and ears for your people,” Aradia said. “You need to use what I’ve given you. Sometimes, your defenses could fail.”


Aradia smiled. “I’ve got to go – meeting with some madman in a minute. Don’t try to follow me, okay?”

Nova nodded. “I’ll just go talk to Eve. See you… Whenever you decide to show yourself again.”

Aradia saluted – then accelerated herself to her meeting place.

A blue phone box stood under a tree on Equis Vitis, the Doctor leaning against it.

“You messed up,” he said.

Aradia smiled sheepishly. “Yeah, I… I couldn’t deal with the threat on my own. Too much dying. Not enough saving people.”

“I’m referring to the Time Rift. That was a lot of Time Wraiths. If you hadn’t lucked out with that Ascended, you would have…”

“I know,” Aradia insisted. “But you don’t need to be such a downer about it! Come on, everything worked out in the end. Once again, the future is bright!”

“The future is a construct subject to change.”

“Wow, you’re in a funk. Have some hope Doctor! C’mon, lighten up a bit!”

The Doctor sighed. “Your unending optimism impresses even me, Aradia Megido.”

She gave him a finger guns gesture. “Ayyyyy.”

The Doctor rolled his eyes. “I would say ‘never change’, but… You need to take yourself more seriously sometimes. You have dominion over time. I know you can take it seriously, but you’re…”

“Too aloof?”

“Yes.”

Aradia put her hands on her hips. “This entire conversation is you being one big hypocrite.”

“There are certain places I do not stick my fingers, and you know it.”

Aradia nodded. “…I was called to serve this world, though. And I plan to keep doing that however I
can. That now extends to these *worlds*. …They have great potential, Doctor, I’m sure you’ve seen it.”

“I have… But potential is not good or bad.”

“Then it’s a good thing I’m here!”

The Doctor smiled and shook his head. “…It’s good that you think that.” He waved goodbye and entered the doors of the TARDIS, leaving the time, place, and universe behind.

Aradia waved after him, still smiling that smile of hers that was just slightly too large for her face.
Vriska Serket raised an eyebrow at the large robot she was talking to, a behemoth by the name of Dintin. “Wait, you’ve seen her?”

Dintin didn’t look up from the flower garden he was watering. “Red ram lady? Yeah. We had to fight her. Several times. Usually punching off heads only needs to be done once… Flower?” He held a blue and purple flower out to Vriska.

Vriska took it, blinking. “…Thanks. So, tank-boy, what happened to her?”

“Dunno. We stopped fighting, I think.”

“Why?”

“The ponies showed up,” Dintin said. “There was a big fight and some time skeletons.”


“…The little horses? The purple one?”


Dintin thought about this. “She had things on her ears.”

“Charter, got it,” Vriska said, grunting. “Oh, the irony…”

“Huh?”

“Nothing. Hey, you don’t mind if I take your luck do you?”

Dintin beeped happily. “Take whatever you need!”

Vriska saluted. “Thanks, robot nimrod.” Her eye flashed, and she stole as much luck from Dintin as she needed. He toppled over onto his back with a CLANG!

“Ow.”

“I wouldn’t try to do anything complicated for a few hours,” Vriska commented, tapping into her luck reserves. “Hastala-Vriska.” Her luck activated, allowing her to naturally slip through the dimensional fabric without any sort of flashy portal. She simply stepped into the air and was suddenly somewhere else – exactly where she needed to be.

She knew the Hub the instant she arrived even though she’d never actually been in the Hub before. Every time she’d shown up in the local neighborhood she’d only hung around various worlds, never actually bothered to come to the center of multiversal society. She found herself mildly impressed with the place – it was far from the first multiversal hub-world she had come across in her many years of travel, but each one was slightly different and had its own curiosities to offer.
This one in particular was more organized than most – things looked clean, there wasn’t a constant state of chaos, and there was actually enough space to walk around without bumping into people. Screens lined the walls, broadcasting news for the most part with only the occasional advertisement. She didn’t pay the screens much attention – she started walking down the Hub halls, absorbing the scenery.

That was to say, she was taking tiny amounts of luck from everyone she saw to improve her own reserves. It was so little they wouldn’t even miss it, but she would be able to find whatever she needed with ease soon enough. Plus, it did let her learn a few things about this place.

To her surprise, there were Gems walking around like they were citizens. She hadn’t encountered that many of the Gem race in her travels, but she knew they were generally arrogant and cared little for organic life. But here they were, living alongside ponies, humans, and dragons. Some clearly didn’t want to be there – a particular red Ruby shouting racist remarks was a prime example of this. But Vriska also saw a Peridot working hand-in-hoof with a unicorn to build a dimensional device from scratch inside a technology store.

Vriska noticed a computer terminal sitting outside the shop, a green neon sign hanging above it. **H**ook Up your Device to the Internet! **F**ree!

Vriska took her phone out of her pocket – it was one of those objects small enough for her not to store it in an 8-ball, even though she didn’t use it all that often. She walked up to the terminal, placing her phone on top of its primary shelf. The screen flashed green for a moment, quickly scanning the technology within the phone and recording its particular signal. **C**ell service and **I**nternet access initiated. You may need to accept some settings on your phone, depending on the **m**odel. If you need help, press the help button to open up the FAQ.

Vriska needed no help; her phone was already set up. This was hardly the first time she’d come across one of these devices, after all. She checked the data plans – the access really was free, but the Internet wasn’t unlimited, definitely choked. Who cared though, it would work for a simple search.

She typed in “Aradia” into the Hub’s default ‘google’ – which wasn’t really Google, due to the Hub deciding that such a prevalent service needed to not be linked to any particular company. It was… Noodle. “What in hell were they thinking…?” Vriska muttered.

The results popped up. **A**radia, the Handmaid. Vriska read the short article – not much was known about Aradia, but it was known that she had been protecting the timelines of Equis Vitis for longer than they’d been aware of the multiverse, and that she was still protecting it from the shadows. There wasn’t any information on how to find her, or where she was, or even when she tended to show up. There was a comment about how she liked to clean Canterlot Castle sometimes, like an actual Maid.

Vriska facepalmed. “That’s you, all right,” Vriska said, shaking her head and smiling. “Finally found you. Now I’ve just got to… see you. Yeah. Shut up self, that was a great sentence.” She put her phone away, pursing her lips. Her next step was to find someone who had run into Aradia. Charter-Twilight’s group would probably have the best information. Not that she had any idea where they were…

Not that her lack of knowledge really mattered. She could just walk around a while and she’d eventually find something – assuming some adventure didn’t drop out of the sky and ruin her fortune manipulation. She hated it when that happened.

She had to walk even less than she was expecting. She turned the corner and found herself in front of Iroh’s famous tea shop – and she saw Charter-Twilight standing right in front of it, talking to a version of Fluttershy.
“Chancellor, I do apologize, but the others rejected your application,” Charter-Twilight said. “They don’t think you’re involved enough. For what it’s worth, I voted for Equis Concrete’s inclusion.”

The Chancellor sighed. “It’s okay. You also don’t need to hide that they think our world still has problems.”

“Right,” Charter-Twilight said, nodding sadly. “Do you still want to join us for tea?”

“Of course. By the way, there’s a grey-skinned girl watching you intently.”

Charter-Twilight looked at Vriska. “Oh! Vriska! It’s been a while!”

“How many years on your end?” Vriska asked.

“Less than five, I think,” Twilight asserted.

“Eight on mine,” Vriska said. “Apparently last time I left I really shouldn’t have.”

Twilight raised an eyebrow. “How so?”

“Well, Twilight, remembe-”

“It’s Eve now,” Eve corrected, quickly. “Or Evening, if you want to be formal.”

Vriska smirked. “Finally decided on a name, did you? About time.”

Eve rolled her eyes. “Yes, we all know it was long overdue.”

“Yeah, regardless, I’ve finally found my old friend. Does the name Aradia ring any bells?”

Eve smirked. “Yeah, it does. I was actually wondering if you’d ask that. How about we talk about it over tea? I could introduce you to some world leaders and tell everyone a few stories.”

“You’re not getting multiversal information out of me.”

Chancellor Fluttershy shrugged. “We can certainly try.”

Vriska shrugged. “Eh, sure, why not. But this tea better be just as legendary as I’ve heard.”

“You will not be disappointed,” Eve declared.

~~~

Corona had graduated from three programs prior to this day.

The first had been high school, where she had been the center of attention and everyone had hung onto her every word.

The second was college, where she was just another student in the masses. Better than most, but not the best, nowhere close to the top of the line, just another budding physicist.

Then she’d gotten a ‘master’s’ equivalent on Equis Cosmic, but there wasn’t even a ceremony for that because she’d been so busy working on the Arcei and Asgard problems she’d basically forgotten it had even happened.

That was only a few months ago.
Today, she was part of a very small gathering – not even twelve individuals – to get what Equis Cosmic called an Overarch Degree, a degree that would currently pass as a PhD on the Earths. Apparently she had contributed more to the Arcei and Asgard projects than she’d thought, enough to qualify as ‘independent research’, even though it wasn’t all that independent.

But, well, here she was. Cosmo was standing over her, giving a long winded speech about how Corona was about as well educated in physics as she possibly could be, and probably deserved honorary degrees in biology and thaumic sciences as well.

Corona was only half-listening. She was busy contemplating that she’d basically just completely won education. How long had it been, ten years now? No… A little less than that. The education on Equis Cosmic had lumped two ‘degrees’ together into one. She now had nothing left to learn, unless she wanted to start from scratch… And she didn’t want to do that.

She didn’t need to spend any more time studying material or courses ever again.

She was so giddy she didn’t realize Cosmo was handing her the certificate.

“Ahem,” Cosmo said, an amused smile on her face.

“Right! Sorry.” Corona levitated the piece of paper into the air. A few camera flashes went off, including a gigantic burst of light from human Pinkie.

“That’s a keeper!” Pinkie declared, holding up an image.

“Pinkie, I’m blind now.”

“Not forever!”

Corona rolled her eyes. She looked up at Cosmo, who was currently just a purple fuzzy mass in her eyes. “Thank you, Princess.”

Cosmo smiled. “You earned this, Corona. Now go tack a PhD onto your name so you can impress all the humans.”

Corona smiled. “I will.” She turned to one of the other ponies present for the small event – Starcei. “Thank you for all your guidance.”

Starcei let a smile come to her face. “You were the one who kept asking all the annoying questions.”

“Can’t help it. I’m not apologizing.”

Pinkie gasped. “OH NO! WHO ARE YOU AND WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH CORONA?”

Sugarcoat rolled her eyes. “Being unapologetic has always been part of Corona’s personality.”

Pinkie narrowed her eyes at Sugarcoat. “…I can never tell with you.”

“That must mean I’m good at my job,” Sugarcoat deadpanned.

“Customer service representative…?” Corona said, confused.

“I wasn’t being literal.”

Corona blinked. “Ah. Right.” She turned to a familiar face that was sitting in the back of the room,
not saying anything. She trotted up to Sparky. “Hey, you’ve been quiet.”

Sparky forced a smile. “I just haven’t had much to say. You’ve done it Corona.”

“Heh, you’ll still be able to do it. You’re already a well-respected voice in the academic community.”

“Yeah…” Sparky said, looking at Corona. “I don’t know though. The more I learn, the more I realize that physics isn’t constant throughout the multiverse. Much of what we know is going to be meaningless in the future…”

“Then we just need to change with the times,” Corona asserted. “We’re on the front lines, Sparky. We get to write the new books.”

Sparky nodded. “You’re right. …But I’m not sure I want to deal with what you’ve been dealing with in order to do that.”

“You don’t mean Alushy, do you?”

“Are you talking about me?” Alushy called from the refreshments table.

“Yes, but it doesn’t concern you, so screw off,” Corona blurted.

“Yowch. The pain… It cuts like a searing knife deep into my cold, dead heart…” She didn’t interject herself into the conversation any further, though.

Sparky shook her head. “No. Well… Yes, that’s part of it, but that’s just a person. I mean…” She stood up. “You’re in a top-secret research facility. You have to keep secrets from everyone, even your friends, about what you’ve done here. You’ve probably held the fate of entire races in your ha-hooves. And… You’ve been part of decisions that you didn’t like.”

“We still saved the Arcei,” Corona commented. “The genetic repurposing has been a huge success on both sides. Not to mention the Asgard and all the new advanced medical techniques…”

“You’re not working hard on the runes anymore,” Sparky said.

Starcei heard this, her ears perking up to high alert. “…Sparky, where did you hear that?”

Corona raised her hands. “I didn’t tell her…”

Sparky shrugged. “I just deduced it. You say you are still working hard, but Corona here’s going away, and I don’t get the impression you’re in a rush. Since the danger is no longer imminent, you’re not putting as much resources into it as you once were. And yet, you keep telling the Arcei you’re working on it.”

“We are,” Corona said.

“Not as hard as you could be,” Sparky said. “And I understand there’s probably politics involved, and I don’t blame you for it, but I don’t think I could work in an environment where that kind of thing happens. Where what I do affects so many, but I’ll just be presented with… With… Oh what’s the word?”

“Bleh?” Corona suggested.


Corona smiled. “I understand. It’s just not for you. I’d talk to Eve if I were you; she could set you to
work on a public project. No secrets.”

“But you never know when what you find will need to become a secret.”

Corona nodded slowly. “…We can’t go through life in fear, Sparky.”

Sparky sighed, pulling her legs close. “I certainly have…”

“Well… I’m actually not sure how much I can help you.”

“We have drifted. You’ve been so busy.”

“I’d talk to the girls, if I were you,” Corona said. “Pinkie’s right there.”

Pinkie appeared right behind Sparky. “Yeah I am! Let me tell you, when Corona was unsure about what she was going to do in her life, I helped her out! Now I can help you! Come on, to the planning cave! I’ll get Applejack. We’ve got a destiny to uncover!”

Corona smiled. “You have fun with that.”

“Wait!” Sparky said, crawling out of Pinkie’s grasp. “Corona, what are you going to do?”

Corona smiled sheepishly. “Well I wanted to join up with Eve’s group, but given how Sombra has such close tabs on me, they couldn’t really allow that. So I’m going to Lai to join up with Toph’s, become a scientist for a world that doesn’t really have much in the way of science. Less top-secret stuff there.”

“…How did you keep Sombra from blabbing about this secret?” Sparky wondered.

Corona put on her sunglasses and smirked. “I called in favors. Plus, she doesn’t really want to bring about the collapse of the multiversal alliances. Here’s a little secret – Eve’s actually been working with her to bring about Unification.

“…I can’t imagine Nova’s happy about that,” Sparky commented.

“Nope,” Corona said. “But Nova understands why it’s needed.”

Sparky nodded. “I… guess so.”

“Enough chit chat!” Pinkie declared. “Destiny time!” She pulled Sparky away and out of the universe.

The voice of Sombra filled Corona’s ear. “Oh, so I have to keep your secret, but you can’t keep mine?”

“Give it a rest,” Corona said. “It defused the situation. There’s more to life than just keeping secrets.”

“Mmm,” Sombra muttered. “So are you going to go to Lai or what?”

Corona walked up to the refreshments table and munched on a small pastry. “Ah, I think I’ll stick around for a few hours and gloat a little bit about being Corona Sunset Shimmer, PhD. Revel in my success.”

“Make sure not to get too full of yourself, Amiga.”

“You’re one to talk,” Corona retorted.
Sombra’s only response was a chuckle.

Alushy smirked. “You know, half-conversations are the best. I get to imagine the most wildly raunchy things happening during the half I can’t hear. You’d love the image in my head, Corona.”

Corona raised an eyebrow. “Why are you even here?”

“Cause, my friend, I felt like taking a break. A walk, if you will.”

“Alushy, who did you kill?”

“Nobody!”

“…What body did you turn into a vampire and then kill?”

Alushy raised an eyebrow. “You’re a freaky bitch, you know that?”

“Alushy…”

“What? The body was going to be incinerated anyway, I just wanted to have some fun!”

“She does have a point,” Sombra chirped.

Corona facehooved. “I’m surrounded by bleh…”

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“Everyone, this is Vriska Serket,” Eve said, sitting down at the table, gesturing for Vriska to sit to her left. “Vriska, this is Jack O’Neill, Algernon Siwar, and you’ve already met Chancellor Fluttershy. Iroh will be joining us after he gets our tea.”

O’Neill adjusted his hat. “Was wonderin’ when I’d get to meet you.”

Vriska spread her arms wide. “Well here I am in all my glory. You want an autograph?”

“Pass,” O’Neill said.

Algernon – a tall man in green robes that formed x-shaped creases all over his body – furrowed his brow. “What world does this woman represent?” he asked Eve.

“Hey,” Vriska interjected. “You ask a question about me, you can ask it to me, got it?”

Algernon nodded slowly. “…Sure.”

“I am from a world very far from anywhere any of you have been. You could call it Alternia, or Sburb 2-B. Of course, that universe doesn’t exist anymore.”

“Really?” Chancellor Fluttershy said. “That must be hard on you, to not have a home.”

“Well, I do have a home… It should be a world called Earth C. Not that I have any idea where that is.”

“Do you think we could help?” Iroh said, arriving with tea for everyone. “We’ve checked a lot of universes.”

“Have you actually encountered my race besides me and Aradia?” Vriska asked. “No? Then you won’t be helpful.”
Eve sighed. “Sorry. You have been at this longer than we have.”

“No shit.”

Algernon raised an eyebrow. “Why is she here, again?”

“Do you have a wasp in your ass or something?” Vriska blurted.

“Vriska, calm down,” Eve cautioned. “Algernon’s just more used to official proceedings. You two just do things a little differently.”

“What is your story, anyway?” Vriska asked Algernon.

“I am from Earth Stand,” Algernon asserted. “One of the major worlds in this alliance.”

“You got a new major world since I was here last?” Vriska asked Eve.

“We’ve actually known Earth Stand since before we met Thrackerzod’s people,” Eve said. “They’ve been a part of our culture for a while. Or… Well, had been. Relations have been rocky. Their disclosure went so well too…”

Vriska raised an eyebrow. “Problems?”

“Ah, you don’t know,” Eve said, “Right, sometimes I forget.”

O’Neill raised an eyebrow. “Your Charter, everyone.”

“Har-de-har,” Eve deadpanned. “Vriska, this is a good segue into Aradia. We met her a few years ago, when another multiversal society tried to erase us from history, the University of Doors.”

“Does she have clearance for this?” Algernon demanded.

Eve raised an eyebrow. “If she didn’t before she does now. Plus, it’s not like we were able to keep most of this secret anyway. Everyone knows we were attacked. I’ll even officiate her clearance in some matter later with a simple push of a button.”

“It’s good to be the Charter,” O’Neill asserted.

Vriska stopped glaring at Algernon and looked back to Twilight. “Go on.”

“She helped us return time to its rightful place – though we had to sign a non-interference agreement with the University of Doors and we had to fight a bunch of time wraiths – then she gave Nova some pointers on how to manage time. After this fight for our right to exist in time, well, we realized that we don’t really stand together against the dangers of the multiverse. Beyond the University, there’s also the Eldritch Embodiment. They don’t care about us right now, but if they wanted to they could just wipe us out and Thrackerzod couldn’t do anything about it. There’s also apparently a Starcross Society out there somewhere that even the Stars fear. We… As we are now, we don’t compare to them. But, if we-“

“-form a Federation.” O’Neill interjected.

“We are not calling it the Federation!” Eve blurted. “We already have an Enterprise!”

O’Neill just shrugged and turned to examine his tea.

Vriska raised an eyebrow. “You’re pushing for Unification.”
“Yes. Yes we are,” Eve said. “And, well, I knew it was going to be hard, but it’s been much harder than expected. We’ve got seven universes lined up to be the founders. Earth Vitis, Equis Vitis, Earth Tau’ri, Equis Cosmic, Earth Stand, Gem Vein, Lai, and the Elemental Nations.” She glanced at Chancellor Fluttershy. “There were a few others who were interested, but whose applications were rejected for one reason or another.”

“We’ll join eventually,” Chancellor Fluttershy asserted.

“Most likely. But there’s been a lot of problems,” Eve declared. “I was expecting the Gem Vein to have the biggest issues, but no, it turns out it’s Earth Stand. Algernon can probably explain best.”

Algernon nodded. “My world, embarrassingly, is not being very cooperative. They went through disclosure, opened an embassy, and started connecting their society to the multiverse enough to be eligible for Unification consideration – and then they sealed up and walled off. I can’t explain why, all I can say is that communication is at a standstill. I’m the only member of Earth Stand in the Hub, and everything I try to take back or send to my homeworld never goes anywhere.”

Vriska raised an eyebrow. “…Really? Why would your world do that and not the other Earths? Aren’t they basically the same exact thing?”

“Not precisely,” Algernon said. “My world had a secret just like Earth Tau’ri and Earth Vitis, but it was a little more close to home. Magic was prevalent on Earth Vitis, enough so that people weren’t really surprised. Earth Tau’ri revealed itself after it had power on a galactic scale. But my world has a spiritual energy called Stands – invisible spirits that only some individuals on the world have control over. The powers of these Stands are so diverse, unpredictable, and misunderstood that the governments of the world have little control over them. Stand users are dangerous – not to mention bizarre. While there are some that heal by punching through things, there are others that create hordes of zombies, burn entire forests, or can even mold people as if they were a book. I know a man with the ability to pull ‘sound effects’ out of the air and use them in battle.”

Vriska raised an eyebrow. “Really…?”

“Yes, really. As I’m sure you can understand, the uncontrollable nature of these Stands has made the population on edge. The result is that the governments have stopped introducing them to new things in the multiverse, thinking they need to backpedal. Or that’s my best theory, anyway.”

“And it’s interfering with Unification,” Eve said. “We’re still a few years away from actually coming together, but the longer they don’t talk, the more likely we’ll have to cut them out. And one thing we do know is that they do not want to be cut out, and that’s just creating a political whirlpool that goes nowhere. We’re basically at a standstill until we can get them to open their doors again somehow, and currently Earth Stand requested itself be blacklisted, so… Going uninvited might cause an incident.” She twitched. “So yeah, it’s annoying.”

Vriska nodded slowly, expression incredulous. She felt something tug at the back of her mind. “Hey, Eve, can I talk to you for a moment?”

Eve sent a telepathic message to Vriska’s mind. Sure. Sup?

Vriska was not expecting telepathic communication, but she was skilled enough in her psychic powers to reciprocate. I mean out of sight of these bozos.

None of them have powers, Vriska.

Just take a moment.
Eve rolled her eyes. “Excuse us for a moment.”

“No problem,” the Chancellor said. Algernon’s expression just hardened.

Vriska and Eve took a step outside. “What is it?” Eve asked.

“That Algernon is full of complete bullshit,” Vriska said. “What he says doesn’t really make any sense – I mean, come on, lessening communication after a disclosure? Really? That can’t be what the people want. And the way he describes it… It just sounds too wild for words. Not to mention his face is untrustworthy and I’m pretty sure I felt something tugging at the back of my mind…”

Eve raised an eyebrow. “Vriska, you’re just being paranoid. Earth Stand, as a world, is our friend. I know people over there that I really want to see. I may not have known Algernon that long, and he’s a bit of a stick in the mud at times, but he’s trustworthy. And his Stand isn’t mind control, I’ve seen it. He boils water with it from extremely long distances.”

Vriska blinked. “Wait, he actually has a Stand?”

“Did you not believe that was a real thing?”

“I’ve seen a lot of things on my travels, Eve, a thing that causes such bizarre variations in powers is basically unheard of. He described things without pattern! Every power source has some kind of pattern. Mine comes from the twelve aspects of existence, specifically Light. Yours comes from arcane manipulation and produces effects with sparkles and other crap. But that? Something that varied and powerful? How would they keep it a secret if just random joes had random unpredictable powers that couldn’t be dealt with?”

Eve blinked. “You’re paranoid, aren’t you?”

“I just know something’s up, Eve.”

Eve shook her head. “It’s all fine, Vriska. Really. You just didn’t see or hear about them when you were here. Just by chance.”

“I don’t have bad luck like that,” Vriska muttered, clenching her fist. “There’s something up here, Eve.”

“Oh I have no doubt that something odd is going down on Earth Stand, but Algernon’s not the problem. Trust me, Vriska.”

Vriska lowered her hand. “…Fine. Do you at least know where I can find Aradia?”

“Ahh… no, Sorry. She hasn’t shown up for an extended time since the battle with the University. You’re welcome to hang around though, she’ll show up eventually. When she thinks the ‘time is right’ and all that.”

“Right…” Vriska said. “…You go back to your tea party. I’m going to go find something more interesting to do.”

Eve shook her head in mild disapproval “If that’s what you want.” She teleported Vriska’s teacup to her. “You should at least try it though.”

“Oh, right.” Vriska took a sip. She blinked. “…Did Iroh make it spicy?”

“He has a way of surprising people.”
“I like him already. Tell him this is the good shit.”

“Yeah, I will not be using those exact words,” Eve said. “I will tell him you liked it.”

“Eh, good enough.” She took another drink and walked off. “See you around, Eve.”

Eve waved back before re-entering Iroh’s tea shop.

Vriska turned around and glared a few seconds later. “Algernon… I’m on to you. I’m going to find out what you’re really up to. There’s no way what you said was true. You’ve just got all their brains molded the way you want… But not Vriska, oh no, you can’t fuck with ol’ Vriska’s brain… She fucks with yours.” She shattered the teacup that was in her hands. She ignored the cobalt blue blood that seeped out of her hand.

She walked away to plan…

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Corona trotted through Lai’s capital – just called the Capital – sunglasses on her face. The ponies of Lai paid her little attention; after all she just looked like a unicorn with sunglasses. She wouldn’t have gotten much more attention had she decided to go as a human either, the ponies had gotten used to the occasional man walking through their world.

Before, they would have viewed the presence of a human in their city as a threat, or a signal of negative change. But their attitude had altered because of recent events. Events that Corona herself had had a somewhat large hoof in. Sparky was right about one thing, there was a lot of disgusting “Bleh” around what Corona did.

“Feeling guilty?” Sombra’s voice entered Corona’s ear. She could hear Sombra drinking some kind of fruit smoothie on the other side of the feed.

“A little,” Corona admitted. “I mean, the result seems undeniably good, but… Well what’s done is done, I suppose.”

“Eh, it’s not that bad. Just cleverly letting a people believe whatever they want about a situation.”

“Riiight,” Corona said, trotting up to the palace. There were two standard unicorn-pegasus alicorns standing guard. They knew who she was and let her in without any questions. The moment she passed their wings, she heard some commotion behind her.

“It’s the General!” a pony cheered.

“Really? OH MY ARMONIA, IT IS HER!”

Corona raised an eyebrow and turned around to see what this was all about. She was only mildly surprised to see Toph running across the town at a breakneck pace, mild panic on her face. “Make way!”

Behind her was a large crowd of squealing fans, mostly consisting of ponies of Lai. Corona saw that Toph was not faster than the hooves of a pony, so she rendered her assistance with a quick teleport spell. Toph stumbled as she found herself in a new location, but quickly regained her footing next to Corona.

The alicorn guards crossed their wings, preventing the crowd from entering the palace grounds.
Toph took one look at the crowd and smiled. “Sorry! Maybe I can hang around later, but a General is always busy!” She waved, then turned a full one-eighty and ran into the palace hall.

“What was that about?” Corona asked.

“Somebody flipped a switch in those ponies,” Toph muttered. “They used to distrust me like the devil and now they think I’m their savior. It’s freaky.”

“Probably my fault,” Corona admitted.

“No, really?” Toph stretched her arms behind her back, trying to work out her tense muscles. She wore light armor these days, made of metal she could bend to improve her ability in combat. The design was clearly similar to Lady Rarity’s, though not anywhere close to being the behemoth mech suit the spirid’s suit essentially was. The metal plates were spread out, thin, and designed for mobility more than absorbing hits. The Master Sword hung to her side, always ready to be drawn at a moment’s notice. “I let Queen Luna promote me because I thought I needed to make ponies realize the outside was good. I was ready to deal with a lot of angry people, but not a bunch of fanatics.”

“It’s what happens when you let the people believe what they want…”

Toph looked out a wall. Corona knew she was ‘looking’ outside, but the unicorn couldn’t see through the solid wall. “Corona… They think we’re performing genocide for them. That’s not good! That’s bad!”

Lady Rarity strode into the hall. Her armor was not anywhere to be seen, though her hammer was slung over her back. She had eight perfectly healthy legs, and a fully grown mane to go with her four blue eyes. “We never told them that. We told them exactly what we were doing – making new bodies that didn’t need the arcs and would not pass on the Arcei genes.”

“We all knew how they were going to take it,” Toph said. “They hear ‘not pass on genes’ to ‘all the Arcei are going to die out because of the other universes! Maybe they were on our side after all! They’ve solved the biggest problem we’ve ever had!’ Morons.”

Corona sighed. “Yeah. Morons. …What I wonder is what’s going to happen if we discover how to actually make the runes.”

Toph frowned. “Whatever happens, Eve won’t let it happen until after Unification at this point. She cares too much. She’d push an incident under the rug just to keep the plans on schedule.”

Corona furrowed her brow. “Ah, the question, is that really the best choice?” This was met with silence, since nobody knew. Corona shook her head to clear it. “…Hey Rarity, how is that new body treating you?”

“Haven’t quite remembered how to use all eight legs effectively,” Lady Rarity answered, “but I have rediscovered the art of traction walking.” She skittered up the side of a wall, her hooves somehow adhering her body to the vertical surface. “Your science magic works wonders.”

“Creepy,” Toph muttered.

“It works,” Lady Rarity said.

Corona smiled. “Glad it is. We’re going to start using the process to help so many – we can grow new body parts for any pony, human or Asgard. Even a whole new body if needed. We could start curing disabilities.”
“Pass,” Toph said.

“Wouldn’t work on you anyway, not without special research like we did with the Arcei. You were born blind.”

Toph paused for a moment. “…What about Eve?”

Corona frowned. “I already talked to her about it. She… She said she’d think about it. That was a few weeks ago. I think it’s safe to assume the answer’s no.”

“I wonder why…” Lady Rarity wondered aloud. “I agreed to get my legs back on the spot.”

“She’s made it part of her identity,” Toph said. “She can’t hear, but that actually makes her look stronger to the people around her. The obvious ear-devices help make sure everyone who sees her anywhere knows she’s deaf, and knows how strong she is to still be the Charter.”

“If it was just that I think she would have told me,” Corona said. “I think it’s something else. There’s got to be some reason she’s made it her identity…”

Toph shrugged. “I dunno. None of us spend that much time with her. You should talk to Spike, or Renee. They’d probably have some insight.”

Corona nodded. Then she leaned against a wall and decided to change the topic. “So, I guess I’m with you girls now. What do we do around here?”

“Politics and quests, mostly,” Toph said. “As a General I don’t get to go out as much anymore and I have to keep close watch on Queen Luna’s policies. Because, apparently, I’m trustworthy or something.”

Lady Rarity nodded. “Queen Luna has something for us to go do about once a week. Some ancient evil, some crazy artifact, or just bringing back magic from another universe. If Pinkie’s group is about first contact for the most part, ours is more oriented to accomplishing specific goals.”

“Aren’t you here to set up a science guild or something?” Toph asked.

Corona nodded. “That’s what I’ll be doing when we’re not out doing something. I’ll probably take on apprentices once I’m settled in, teach Lai the ways of physics. The materials for my lab should arrive in a few days.”

Toph nodded. “And don’t think you can get out of immersing yourself in the politics of Lai. You’re here with us; you get to deal with it as well. Hope you’re prepared to carefully never mention anything about how you actually feel about the Arcei.”

“Right… That’s going to be harder than it sounds.”

Lady Rarity nodded. “Quite. By the way, Sombra?” Lady Rarity pointed her hammer at Corona’s glasses. “I know we don’t deal with much classified information here, at least not the kind that you care about, but Corona’s placement on this team will be in jeopardy if you screw something up in ANY way, understood?”

Corona blinked. “She says she understands clearly.”

Lady Rarity nodded. “Then welcome to the team, Corona. Let’s go meet up with Lieshy and Vivian. They should be in the training room.”
“Oh, do I get to see them fight?”

“Maybe?” Toph said. “Lieshy rarely does any fighting at all, but she’s not above trying.”

Corona smirked. “Well, if nothing else, I’ll get to see the training room.” She trotted down the hall.

“Other way,” Toph deadpanned.

“Right…” Corona said, turning around.

“Other other way.”

“…What?”

Lady Rarity spoke up. “She means through that door to the left, then seventh door on the right.”

“I’m reminded why castles are so annoying. I need a map or something…”

Toph smirked. “I don’t need a map.”

“Don’t you start.”

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Public Information on Earth Stand

Earth Stand is a Standard Earth currently experiencing the local year 2005. First contact was made slightly before the events of the Disclosure, and they have been involved in multiversal society ever since. Their world underwent its own Disclosure in the local year 2002, an event that upset the world somewhat due to the universe’s primary oddity.

While Earth Stand is known to house low levels of standard magic and physics that allow for natural undead, its primary difference is a largely mysterious form of spiritual energy known as a Stand. Only certain individuals have Stands, and their effects are so varied it is generally impossible to classify them by any hard set rules. The spiritual forms the Stands manifest in are only visible to other Stand users or with the use of other esoteric abilities that deal with spirits.

The coordinates to Earth Stand are blacklisted to prevent an influx of other universe travelers.

And that was generally all Vriska could find. Which was outright absurd. Every other universe she could find people talking on the Internet about - every single one had a conspiracy theorist nut at the very least looking at it. But not Earth Stand. It was just… accepted. It was mentioned in conversation as a fact of life, but there were no extensive files on it she could find. Almost as if they had been purged…

She did find evidence that Earth Stand had been blacklisted recently, maybe the information had actually been purged?

She threw her phone at a nearby wall – the thing was industrial strength, so it didn’t break. “Where the hell am I going to find purged information?”

Vriska felt a tremendous chunk of her luck vanish right as she said that. Dammit. I just used a huge bank of fortune on that. I’m going to have to watch my toe to make sure I don’t stub it… Why does me saying things have to trigger it? You think I’d get ahold of it after all these centuries but noooooo…
Vriska carefully picked up her phone, not all that surprised to see a pink sugar-skull on the screen. “...Sombra, right?”

*The one and only,* onscreen text informed her.

“Good. So, I need anything you can find me on Earth Stand. I know you save secret files.”

*Earth Stand? Odd choice. Nothing really interesting happens there.*

Vriska narrowed her eyes. *There’s definitely something going on here. I’m pretty sure Earth Stand doesn’t actually exist.* “Just get me those files. Files on Algernon as well, while you’re at it.”

*What are you offering me?*

“I know the coordinates of a world where the local physics give every conscious being within it control of the force of gravity. Nice secret, don’t you say?”

*Sounds like enough of a curiosity for this simple information. Done.*

They made the trade – Sombra sent her files to Vriska’s phone, Vriska sent the coordinates to the psychic-gravity universe.

*I’m not sure what you’ll get out of this.*

“It’s what I won’t get out of it that I’ll find interesting…” Vriska muttered.

*Perhaps you should see a mental health professional.*

Vriska rolled her eyes, ignoring Sombra’s message. Sombra soon released Vriska’s phone, no longer sending messages. The cobalt troll read through the files, of which there actually weren’t that many. There *was* an actual report on Earth Stand, about the world, politics, and the location of the primary embassy, but strangely there were no *coordinates.*

“It’s just a really good forgery,” Vriska said, beginning to absent-mindedly stroll through the Hub. “No coordinates… All the mentions of actual people are vague… And history is just copy-pasted from the standard Earth template… It’s like all the interesting bits are just pasted on.” She smirked.

“Yo, lady, you talking to yourself?” a burly Gem called – a Bismuth, Vriska thought.

“Yeah, so what?”

“Well, you just walked into a puddle of mysterious green ooze.”

Vriska looked down. Her boots were now covered in mysterious green ooze. She blinked. Right, her luck was down right now after the communication with Sombra. No matter, she’d just walk out and clean it off-

She stubbed her boot into a nearby stand selling fireworks. A firework went off and hit her in the face, sending her flying back into the mysterious green ooze.

She took in a deep breath and let it out, calming herself. *The curse of being a manipulator of luck, you can burn your own luck out so fast you don’t even realize it.* She stood up, taking a bit of luck from the Bismuth – she was an asshole anyway, she probably deserved a day of tripping and falling over – and walked away.

Vriska scrolled through the information. Earth Stand was clearly suspicious, but Algernon was even
more so. The file Sombra had on him had no backstory at all before a few months ago, when he showed up as Earth Stand’s ambassador. There were a few notes about how he had made great efforts to include Earth Stand in Unification Procedures, but his people were being impossible to work with.

The really bizarre thing was that Earth Stand’s files mentioned nothing at all about ‘being difficult to work with’.

“I do believe I’ve stumbled across a conspiracy,” Vriska smirked. “How wonderful.” Now all that remained was to figure out how he was pulling the blinds over so many people, and get proof that he was doing it.

Then she remembered she was a really powerful psychic.

She grinned, walking down the halls of the Hub, back toward Iroh’s tea shop. She absorbed enough luck to get herself back to manageable levels over the course of the journey. And, just her luck, she saw Algernon leaving Iroh’s tea shop as she arrived.

Perfect.

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Thrackerzod took one look at the eldritch behemoth charging the demon-Binary settlement and leaped into action, leaving the rest of the League of Sweetie Belles in the dust.

She had been afraid of this – with Siron gone, whatever he had been doing to the Binary world had stopped, and the eldritch energies had started to dissipate. But as happened so often when something was about to die, it wanted to make one last ditch effort to take something else out with it.

In this case, it was a gigantic octopus-creature with half-formed images of Majora’s mask all over it, trying desperately to become the master it so needed, but it would never be able to. It was subject only to madness. Half of its body twisted in and out of existence, while the other half switched from a rocklike composition to almost vaporous every couple of seconds.

It was also the size of a full grown dragon.

Thrackerzod knew this was the last stand of the remnant energy, and she knew what she had to do. She was going to have to take it out and purge this world of the corruption that had plagued it ever since Majora’s defeat. She lit her horn, summoning her own dark energies from a plane of existence far removed from the one her body occupied, filling her eyes with black energy and her horn with a deep red power.

The behemoth thought she was charging – so it entered a defensive posture. Exactly what Thrackerzod wanted: she drove her hooves into the ground, stopping several meters away from the behemoth. She quickly scrawled a magic circle into the ground and activated it, tapping into the eldritch halls of her real home. A portal of darkness tore through the earth of the Binary world, revealing a hand.

Thrackerzod was never really sure what she was going to get when she initiated a quick summon – sometimes it was a geometric creature, at others a standard devil-demon, while still another time she’d gotten a cloud of black smoke that could possess people. She’d never gotten a hand before, but she knew it would have power to assist her. With her magic, she ordered the summoned demonic hand to charge the behemoth, embedding itself inside the impossible girth of the beast.

The thing roared in what was probably pain, but Thrackerzod didn’t stop to figure out if it was. She
created another circle, summoning a fractal pattern that froze everything around it, sending it after the behemoth as well. The next demon was a centipede made of legs that tore through the fabric of reality. The one after that was an invisible manifestation of the force of thought. And the last... Just an ordinary shoggoth-thing. Somewhat boring, really.

It was enough though. The sheer variety of eldritch essences attacking from all sides had the behemoth confused – it was only made from one type of eldritch energy, that of Majora. As versatile as Majora’s power was, it was all derived from a single power. Thrackerzod was summoning whatever she could grab from the Eldritch Embodiment, not limiting herself to just spawn of Azathoth.

Just one of the perks of the Embodiment.

She decided it was her turn to act – she charged, her unicorn body moving far faster than it should have. She powered magic into her horn, transforming it into a blood-red drill. She spoke a command in the eldritch tongue and charged through the behemoth’s center in an instant.

The behemoth did not die – but the force of thought Thrackerod had summoned earlier entered the beast through the hole. The conflicting nature of the behemoth could no longer be reconciled with the vibrating force within it. The being that might as well have been insanity incarnate was essentially driven insane, divided into multiple personalities bent on devouring each other.

In the distraction, the fractal pattern and the demonic hand worked together. One froze parts, while the other smashed the parts to nothing. The behemoth slowly began to get chipped away.

“TAKING TOO LONG!” Sweetie Bot called from above, launching a barrage of rockets down on the behemoth. “Initiating explode sequence!”

Thrackerzod facehooved. “It’s not safe up there!”

“It is now 99% safe compared to the 13% safe it was before,” Bot declared.

“It could launch a wild attack!”

“That is the 1% non-safeness.”

Squeaky Belle called to them with magic. “Both of you stop arguing! Just make sure the beast doesn’t fall towards the town, okay?”

“Safety is optimized!” Bot assured her.

“It’s rolling like a bowling ball over here! Stop it!”

Thrackerzod acted quickly. She teleported between the rolling form of the dying behemoth, generating a shield of black energy. The demons and binaries that were watching the show had to turn away because of how impossible the walls were.

“I would apologize but they knew it was hard to look at the behemoth from a distance anyway,” Thrackerzod muttered.

The behemoth crashed into the wall of darkness – and shattered into nothingness. Thrackerzod dropped the wall and nodded, allowing all her summoned demons to vanish back to home. She turned around. “The deed is done.”

“That did not go according to plan,” Squeaky commented.
“Blame the robot,” Thrackerzod declared.

“You rushed out there without thinking! We had a plan that didn’t hinge on you giving the entire population headaches!” Squeaky blurted.

“I like Thrackerzod’s style,” Brute declared.

“You don’t get an opinion right now,” Squeaky muttered. “ Seriously, Zod, I—“

Sweetie Belle held up a hoof and walked forward. “I think we need to stop and look at Thrackerzod’s flank.”

Thrackerzod glanced – upon her flank, that had previously been blank, there was now a cutie mark. It was a crusader shield with the Elder Sign plastered on it. “…What?”

“That’s the symbol that defends against eldritch powers, right?” Sweetie asked.

“Yes. I’m curious as to why I’m not screaming now that it has found its place on my flank.”

Sweetie put Thrackerzod’s face in her hooves. “It means you’ve found your destiny as a pony, finally. You are Thrackerzod. Your talent? Defending mortals from the eldritch.”

“But I am eldritch.”

“So?” Sweetie smirked. “You can still be good at it.”

“Wait,” Brute said. “I thought we agreed she wasn’t going to get one since she wasn’t really a pony?” She pointed at her own mark she had gotten what seemed like a long time ago. Sweetie Bot gestured at her own as well.

“I just thought that, I wasn’t certain,” Sweetie said. “I’m glad I was wrong.”

“Mortal sensations are bizarre,” Thrackerzod commented. “Incorrect ideas should bring shame!”

“Not always,” Mlinx said, walking toward them with Mistress Luna at his side. “I thought I was wrong most my life about everything. Turns out being incorrect sometimes just means change.”

“I call non sequitur,” Thrackerzod announced.

Sweetie pushed Thrackerzod aside. “Hi Mlinx! Luna! We took care of that monster for you!”

“Thank you,” Mistress Luna said, bowing her head. “We are forever in your debt, as are the people of this planet.”

Squeaky winked. “Just doing our job.”

“What is our job?” Brute asked.

“Anything we want it to be!” Bot declared.

“So my job is to eat every custard I can find?”

“AFFIRMATIVE!”

Squeaky and Sweetie rolled their eyes. “So,” Squeaky said, addressing Luna. “How’s your planet doing?”
“Never better,” Luna declared, smiling softly. “I never realized how much the demons needed Siron gone until it happened. Now… They’re all happier.”

Mlinx nodded. “Who knew that once the chief was gone we’d find they didn’t actually care as much about being warriors as we thought?”

Luna smirked. “That’s all on you, you know. You came back and told them what they could be.”

“Is he the demon chief?” Bot asked.

Luna shook her head. “There are no more chiefs. I run this planet myself, now. Mlinx is just an advisor, just like Lexa. …I thought we told you this?”


Mlinx leaned down and scratched Sweetie Bot behind the ear. “I find it endearing.”

“You’re encouraging it!”

Luna chuckled. “Perhaps we should be more willing to encourage the innocent and gentle.”

Sweetie Bot grinned. “I have exploding rockets!”

“…Right, my comment has been invalidated. What fun.” Luna cleared her throat. “Regardless, if you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“A LIFETIME SUPPLY A BUTTERSCOTCH COOKIES!” Brute yelled.

“Something reasonable,” Luna said.

“You could keep Ganondorf on a tighter leash,” Squeaky said. “You’re giving him and his Gerudo too much freedom. They’ll try something eventually.”

Mlinx shook his head. “No… I’m giving him a chance to mind his own business. He saw what happened to Siron. Unless he’s a fool, he won’t try anything.”

Thrackerzod huffed. “Never underestimate a mortal’s capacity for foolishness.”

“Didn’t you get stuck in a toilet last week?” Brute pointed out.

“That... That is neither here nor there!”

“It sounds pretty foolish to me.”

“Humans just don’t know how to design toilets consistently!”

Everyone rolled their eyes as the League of Sweetie Belles devolved into another one of their ‘arguments’.

~~~

Vriska didn’t follow Algernon for long – it soon became clear that he was on an outing for pleasure instead of business, judging by all the window-shopping he was doing. So she might as well make her move.

Looking at him from across the street, she activated her psychic powers in their entirety. For practice,
she made a nearby human stick his hand in his mouth and take it out like nothing had happened. She still had the skill, good. She focused her mind onto Algernon’s, trying to touch his psyche. It was very unlikely she’d be able to read his mind – Vriska could only do that to the simplest of intelligences – but she should be able to gauge him well enough. Nothing concrete, but enough to point her in the right direction…

She found herself hitting a brick wall of psychic power.

She blinked, focusing her vision on him. She didn’t want to steal his luck – it might mess with some of the results – but she had to try something. She tried a direct psychic push, a command, a thought implant, even a simple sleep command. All of them had no effect.

She stared in disbelief – over the years she’d gotten exceptionally good at molding the minds of humans. If it were a pony, she wouldn’t have been so surprised, she didn’t have as much experience with their brain structure, but a human? He’d have to either not be a human, or have some kind of psychic power… Neither of which was true, from the file she read anyway. His ‘Stand’, if there was such a thing, could only boil water…

Wait, right, that was a lie. Dammit, whatever he was doing to the others was getting into her head as well. She had already forgotten about the psychic itch in the back of her mind… This guy, whatever he was, was dangerous.

Such an immunity to her psychic powers was all she needed. She placed her fist into her palm and switched into her orange god-tier clothing, ready for a confrontation. She walked right up to him. “Hey, Algernon!”

Algernon turned to her and smiled. “Ah, Miss Serket. I was wondering if I’d run into you again. I’d like to apologize for my behavior at tea earlier – I may have been under a lot of stress, but that’s no excuse for being so bitter toward you.”

Vriska blinked. “…What?”

“I was rather rude. I’m afraid I didn’t realize it at the time.”

“Well… Uh…” She shook her head, clearing it. “Wait a minute. You’re just trying to get me off your scent aren’t you?”

“My… scent?”

“Yeah! I’ve been looking up information about you, about Earth Stand, the whole shebang. Nothing adds up. How can you be the only ambassador? Why does no one question you? Why isn’t there a coordinate to Earth Stand?”

Algernon’s face flashed in surprise, but quickly turned to a stern, sour look. “I believe you are reading too much into things, Miss Serket. The coordinates were purged by request of Earth Stand governments. You have clearly gained access to information you were not supposed to-“

Vriska stole a tiny bit of his luck – only a tiny amount. Confrontations like this were a clever game. She had to spend some of her own fortune to get the edge in the conversation, while lowering Algernon’s own. However, when she used hers to get information or force his face to reveal an expression he would otherwise keep hidden, she might fumble up and fall into a corner by complete accident…

It was all in the luck of light. She was a master at it, but she wasn’t going to underestimate Algernon just because of that.
“What did you do? Your eye just flashed.”

Vriska smirked. “Vision eightfold. It helps me see things. And I really don’t trust you, Algernon.” She took a bit of his luck, which effectively removed his unyielding confidence.

“You have no proof of anything.”

Vriska stole as much luck as she was willing to from a bystander to give her the boost she needed to sell this. “Oh yes, yes I do. You see, I’ve been in contact with Sombra—“ the moment she said that, she felt her immense luck drain to below the line she would have liked. Dammit, he must know somewhere in there that Sombra’s been affected as well. But I can use this… “And I have many files with seriously damning evidence. Furthermore, I have a particular set of psychic powers…” She stole a bit of luck from him, trying to keep her luck from remaining abysmal – she just needed to ride the wave from the last bit of fortune she had spent a little longer, get him to break down… “And through these powers, I have realized that you either aren’t human or you have an impressive psychic power of your own. I’m betting the latter. And guess what, bucko? I’ve also noted that certain aspects of my power fluctuate at times that suggest your guilt. I’m sure of it, Algernon, and I can use the information in those documents together with my powers to get your secret out.”

There it was. Murder in his eyes. He was going to attack her, and she would defend herself. She’d probably kill him, solving the problem without needing any proof. And then she’d be the hero once again…

Then she felt her luck levels rise slightly without her doing anything.

*Uh oh. Something unfortunate just happened.*

Evening Sparkle and O’Neill charged out of the crowd, tearing Vriska away from Algernon. “OH COME ON! I had him!” Vriska shouted.

“You had him what!?” O’Neill shouted. “Scared? On the ropes? Terrified? What the hell were you doing to him!?”

“I was getting him to confess, nimrod!”

“To what!?” O’Neill demanded.

“Manipulating your minds for his nefarious means? What else!?”

Eve sighed. “Vriska, I told you—“

“And because your mind is under his influence of course you can’t see it,” Vriska blurted, taking a step back. “Argh! Why couldn’t you have waited just five seconds more!”

“Because they’re my friends,” Algernon said, glaring at her. “And they’ll come when I need their help.”

Vriska saw the menace in his eyes. She got his message loud and clear. “You bastard. Can’t you two see he’s doing the evil face!”

Eve and O’Neill turned behind them, only for Algernon’s vicious expression to become broken and tired.

Vriska threw an 8-ball into Algernon’s face and stormed off in anger.
“Wait! Vriska-“ Eve called.

“I’M DONE WITH YOU LOSERS!” Vriska shouted, flipping them off as she walked away. “Go ahead, doom yourselves to the conspiracy. I’ll go find some mountain on Equis Vitis and wait for Aradia. Dig your own graves, see if I care.”

She didn’t listen to Eve calling after her.

~~~

There was a restaurant known as the Tasty Treat located in the Canterlot of Equis Vitis that Renee and Pinkie had a special connection to, because they had helped bring it to life amongst the stuffy atmosphere of high society. It could be vaguely described as ‘Indian’ food, even though such a nationality didn’t really exist on Equis Vitis. The beautiful spicy smells wafted through the restaurant, and the entire place just felt homely.

Daniel Jackson sat at a window table, arms folded over his mouth. His mind was fixated on something deeply important, so important he didn’t realize the waiter walk up.

“Ahem,” the waiter eventually declared.

“Not yet,” Daniel said, coming out of his stupor. “She’s not here.”

“…You’ve been here half an hour.”

“I arrived half an hour early.”

The waiter blinked, then rolled his eyes. “I’ll be back in a few minutes then. Enjoy the smells, I suppose.”

“Sorry for taking up a seat.”

“We’re not full anyway.”

“Thanks,” Daniel said, returning to his deep contemplation. He stared intently at a knot in the table for a few moments before letting his gaze drift to nothing.

He had no idea how much time passed between then and when his thoughts were interrupted.

“My Stars, Daniel! Did you actually dress up?”

Daniel shot bolt upright as Renee took her seat. “Yes! Yes I did. Figured that you were always dressing up-“

“Daniel, Darling, I’m a seamstress. Well, ambassador, diplomat, and seamstress – nevermind, the point is, I make dresses, so I’m going to wear dresses.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow. “You’re wearing a dress fit for the gala and a hat that could fit an ant colony on it.”

Renee brushed her diamond-white dress and smirked, angling her hat so she could look at Daniel with the perfect level of shadow over her eyes. “I do suppose it is a bit extravagant for the Tasty Treat…”

“Anything is extravagant for the Tasty Treat. They’ll accept anyone.”
“One of the delightful things about this place,” Renee said, beaming. “A beacon of inclusion and hope. And here I am sullying it by being what might as well be a disco ball.”

Daniel chuckled.

“Did I ever tell you about that design that actually was a disco ball? I mean, it was an artistic expression, but I have to admit it did look a little ridiculous. I’m sure you can imagine.”

“I think I can. Though the image in my mind is more using the disco ball as a hamster ball. Or pony ball, I guess.”

Renee chuckled. “Daniel, that’s a brilliant idea. I’ll have to bring up the idea of pony ball races to Pinkie. Of course it’ll double as a dance party…”

“And a boutique?”

“Rarity for You: RACE EDITION!”

The two shared a laugh. Daniel’s died off first.

“Daniel, you seem stressed,” Renee said.

“Oh, you noticed that?”

“It’s not like my talent is noticing the beauty and details in things,” Rarity deadpanned.

“Ah. Right. Well…”

“Daniel, let yourself relax first. Order some food. Okay?”

“…Okay.”

From a table across the restaurant Pinkie twitched. “Oh come on…” she muttered under her breath.

“Oh come on, what?” Nova asked.

“Nothing.”

“It’s something,” Flutterfree said, glancing over her menu at Renee and Daniel. “I mean, she wouldn’t have told us to be here if it wasn’t going to be something.”

“I said nothing!”

Nova rolled her eyes. “Suuuure. Can we order yet?”

“Not until I say so!” Pinkie hissed. “We need to keep the menus over our faces!”

Flutterfree raised an eyebrow. “You know chances are pretty high Renee knows we’re here, right?”

“She doesn’t,” Pinkie asserted. “And I plan to keep it that way…”

Nova blinked. “I can cast a disguise spell so we can at least order some food. I’m hungry!”

“I would feel a lot less like an evil spy if I didn’t have a menu in front of my face,” Flutterfree commented.

“Fine! Cast the spell!” Pinkie muttered. “But don’t let them catch you staring at them!”
“I won’t be,” Flutterfree declared. “That’d be rude. Actually, this entire thing is kind of rude.”

“It’s cute,” Nova said.

“They are cute. We are rude.”

“But we get to experience the cuteness this way!”

Flutterfree blinked. “Okay, I understand Pinkie just kinda knows things, but you’ve spied on them before haven’t you?”

Nova bit her lip. “Er…”

“I can’t believe you two.”

“Just go with it this once, Flutterfree, okay?” Pinkie said. “Trust me. And be discreet.”

Flutterfree took in a deep breath. “Fine. I get to eat some of Saffron’s soup, at least.”

“A good part of your balanced breakfast,” Pinkie declared.

“It’s dinner,” Flutterfree deadpanned.

Nova shrugged. “It’s food.” She cast the spell, surrounding the three of them in a color-change field. The waiter walked up to them and took their order.

~~~

Vriska walked out of a dimensional store in the Hub with a portal device and a license. Apparently she’d been automatically signed up for one after she met Eve the first time, just so she wouldn’t run into trouble with the law later. Which was good, Vriska was really not in the mood for DMV insanity. She wasn’t even sure what the DMV equivalent for dimensional travel even was here, and figuring that out would probably be an ordeal in and of itself.

Regardless, she had her device, so there was no chance of luck backfiring and sending her somewhere else. She dialed Equis Vitis and marched through the portal, fully intending to just find a landmark somewhere and wait for Aradia to show herself. She was thinking a mountain, or some magical nexus of some sort. Perhaps she’d awaken some ancient evil to grab the Handmaid’s attention. And – wait a minute.

Vriska found herself in a room covered in papers. Through a window she could see stars. This clearly wasn’t Equis Vitis.

“FUCK!” She shouted, kicking a wall. “I just can’t catch a br—”

“I GOT YOU!” A voice declared – that of a Starlight. “Yes! Successful interception!”

Vriska tensed. “Who… Are you?”

“OH, I’M Starbeat, the expert on all thing Beat in this part of the multiverse. Oh, by the way, if I start kissing you for no reason, please don’t take offense – I do that sometimes and I’m so stressed right now I basically have no inhibitions left on my curse.”
“…Curse?”

“Shipping curse, I’m romantically attracted to anything I so much as have a ‘click’ with, hard to explain, we don’t have time anyway.” She cleared her throat. “You know Algernon’s up to something.”

“Yeah! He’s suspicious as all hell!”

“Good. I think he is too. I still remember him like a friend and have memories of everything he says, but I definitely, definitely don’t think anything matches up. He’s messing with everyone’s heads Vriska, and I’m only able to see it because I’m shunting all my willpower to keep myself fixated on him!” Her eye twitched.


“Yay!” Starbeat said, pulling a monitor out of the ceiling. “So, what really makes me sure something is going on is this.” She pointed at two graphs on the screen that meant nothing to Vriska. They looked pretty similar, but weren’t identical. “This graph shows the pattern of Beat around a Chrysalis when she tried to invade Canterlot in an Equis that was offset back several years. This graph shows us the beat around Algernon. They’re almost identical, though Algernon’s patterns are stronger.” She rubbed her hooves together. “But I can’t show this to anyone, because he’s in their heads. They’ll just dismiss it. So it’s up to you and me, Vriska. We’ve got to stop him from whatever he’s doing!”

Vriska nodded. “Right!”

“With the amount of Beat you have, I’m sure nothing can stop us!” Starbeat declared, putting on her goggles.

“…Beat.” Vriska said, a hint of nervousness in her voice. “Right…”
“Plan,” Starbeat said. “We need a plan.” She began to pace around the room, a somewhat impressive feat since there was barely room for the two of them to stand amongst the papers, boxes, and screens. “We either need to stop him or get everyone else to realize what he is.”

Vriska shrugged. “Normally I’d go with assassination at this point, but we have no idea if his mental effects will vanish after that and I kinda need to be able to hang around here after.”

“And if his mental effects don’t vanish, the relationship with Earth Stand will come to a standstill.”

“Yes. Bad.” Vriska furrowed her brow. “Do we have our own method of mental warfare?”

“You’re the most powerful psychic we know of. Officially.” Starbeat put a hoof to her chin. “The Spectacularium could probably shed some light on this, but he’s notoriously uncooperative.”

“The what?”

“Spirit on Lai that can answer just about any question. Nigh-impossible to track down.”

Vriska put a hand into her fist. “You’ve got strange seer ponies right? Just go get one of the freaky-eyes.”

“Maybe… The strongest oculus we know of is Maud. She’s a fair ways away, but I can teleport… But no, even if she could see, it’d just be her testimony. My testimony isn’t enough, your testimony isn’t enough. It has to be evidence.”

“Then we just need to find some evidence,” Vriska said, cracking her knuckles. “Something solid, something nobody could refute.”

“The Ark of Truth…”

“Hrm?”

“There’s a device that convinces people the truth of things, under the lock and key of the Ori Remnant. We could grab it and reprogram it… Ugh, but that place is nearly impossible to break into, and I’m not sure we have the knowledge to reprogram it.”

Vriska furrowed her brow. “I bet I could get in…”

“The University of Doors tried to take it once, and they almost succeeded. Security around the device is now so tight even looking at it is difficult. For all I know it’s a fake sitting right there, and the real thing is in another universe.”

“Lovely,” Vriska muttered. “Where else can we get evidence? There’s got to be something. There’s got to be some way… Earth Stand doesn’t exist, after all, that’s a big hole.”

“…Right,” Starbeat said. “Er, well… Wait, he still receives orders – or should – just like every other ambassador.”

“Yeah. Yeah you’re right!” Vriska opened her phone. “…Why are none of those calls in the files Sombra got me?”
Starbeat opened her mouth to answer but Vriska answered her own question.

“Right… She just conveniently didn’t think it worthwhile. Dammit, everyone’s doing exactly what he wants…” She put her phone away. “We need to listen to some of those calls he gets from ‘Earth Stand’ or whatever. See what he actually has to say.”

“That’s highly illegal,” Starbeat told her.

“Do I look like I give a fuck?”

“No, just reminding you to be wary of international incidents.”

“Mmm… So, the plan is try to intercept one of his secret communications.”

“Or just be around when he makes a call,” Starbeat said. “I know an invisibility spell. With enough luck we could avoid the magic scanners.”

Vriska smirked. “Something tells me it’ll take a bit of time to gather that much luck.”

“Probably. I suppose I could check the Beat levels around his-“

“Let’s not use the weird thing nobody understands, okay?” Vriska interjected.

“…But what if we need to?”

“We won’t need to. We have me, Vriska Serket, the luckiest troll alive!”

Starbeat’s bracelet started beeping intensely. Starbeat, having already been at her wits end today, didn’t even have the slightest bit of restraint left in her. She pulled Vriska’s head down and kissed her hard. Before Vriska could do anything Starbeat threw her over her back into the nearby wall. “Aherm. Sorry about that; curse and all.” She blushed furiously, wiping the blue lipstick off her face. “Try not to take it personally, like, seriously, do not, it’ll just exacerbate the condition until I can find a way to fix it.”

Vriska blinked. “…You really don’t want to even think about it with me. My race has very confusing notions of romance.”

Starbeat raised an eyebrow. “How so?”

“Well… Let’s just say there’s four kinds. There’s standard, then there’s the buddy-buddy moirallegiance which I swear your entire pony society is based on, kismesis which is all about hate-love rivalry sorta, and then the confusing auspistice which I really don’t have time to explain right now and never want to touch again.”

“The explanations of exotic romance is not helping my condition.”

Vriska blinked. “What even is your condition? I’ve been around a while and-“

“It’s a Beat curse. I come from a world where the Beat ‘dictated’ that romance needed to happen in contrived situations at an instant of ‘connection’. You ever watch how romance is portrayed in a lot of movies? Kinda like that. I left, and I still have the problem. I spend every waking moment fighting it and researching a way to remove the Beat curse from me. Caugh up to speed?”

Vriska winced. “On one hand, that must suck. On the other you must have a lot of fun, if you know what I mean.”
“I want to slap you for that remark but I have enough awareness to realize it’ll probably trigger that hate-love whatever thing you were talking about and I really don’t need that right now.”

“I dunno…”

“Let’s just go spy on Algernon already.”

~~~

Lai had no aliens, Luna eventually concluded. She had been taking the *Feldspar* around the stars of Lai for a few weeks now – leaving Celestia to raise the moon back on Equis Vitis – and just hadn’t found anything of much interest. It was like the cosmos of Lai was dead except for the one planet.

They *had* discovered that the nation of Lai only covered one continent. There was another continent on the planet, though without as much society. Queen Luna had been surprised to learn of two other kinds of pony races, fluffers and halos, each with their own unique forms of magic. Luna couldn’t bring herself to trust the fluffers since their magic altered how ponies perceived them, but the halos were interesting. The ring above their head functioned as a horn, but channeled power through how much other ponies believed in them. It was a peculiar magic system, to say the least. Luna even had a halo-pegasus crewmember on board from that discovery.

Luna tried to think of anything else they had found out by exploring Lai from a space perspective. Nothing. The Spectacularium hadn’t shown up, there was no evidence of other life, and every star they visited had nothing but barren planets.

It was mildly disappointing. She was contemplating returning to her quarters and playing a game since nothing was happening. But she decided to remain for the next system they checked.

Was she glad she did that. The moment they left hyperspace, Luna *felt* the power in the system they had found. She stood up from her chair. “Show me this system’s Star.” She demanded. A gigantic blue orb appeared on the *Feldspar’s* screen, creating blue highlights on the otherwise orange color scheme of the *Feldspar’s* interior.

Luna’s eyes went white as she forced her voice into the void of space where it did not belong.

**“STAR OF THE LAI UNIVERSE, I AM LUNA, PRINCESS OF THE NIGHT AND COMMANDER OF THE FELDSPAR. I REQUEST AN AUDIE.-“**

**“THERE IS NO NEED TO BE SO LOUD, YOU ARE UPSETTING THE PRISTINE QUIET OF THE COSMOS. I HEAR YOU, LUNA. WHAT IS IT YOU WANT?”**

Luna cleared her throat. “First of all, a name would be appreciated.”

**“VREOTLOH. NO TITLE, I AM BUT A STAR SITTING IN THE COSMOS.”**

“We have been exploring this universe for some time now, looking for signs of life besides that of Lai. We were wond-“

**“YOU WILL FIND OTHER STARS OUT HERE AND THE OCCASIONAL STAR HUSK, BUT NOTHING AS VIBRANT AS LAI. ARMONIA’S EXPERIMENT WAS A TEST RUN. MORE WORLDS WOULD HAVE BEEN MADE, BUT SINCE IT RESULTED IN HER DEATH, THIS UNIVERSE WILL NOT SEE MORE LIFE OF THAT NATURE.”**

“You’re very forthcoming with information.”

**“I HAVE FEW SECRETS, LUNA. YOUR POWER IS ON A PLANETARY LEVEL, SO I DO NOT
“SEE MUCH THE OTHERS CAN LOOK DOWN ON ME FOR DISCUSSING THINGS WITH YOU. THERE IS NO MORE STAR SOCIETY TO ENFORCE THE SILENCE. THERE HAS NOT BEEN FOR A LONG TIME.”

“What… Happened to your society?”

“THERE WAS A REBELLION OF LOWER LIFE FORMS AND A TRAITOR STAR. RATHER THAN ATTEMPT TO KEEP OUR HOLDINGS AFTER THE STARSTREAM WAR, WE SPLIT AND ABANDONED LARGER-SCALE MULTIVERSE OPERATIONS. COMMUNICATION NETWORKS ARE STILL AROUND, SO I AM AWARE OF YOU AND YOUR SOCIETY.”

“Think we’re being stupid?”

“NO DOUBT. I’VE BEEN WATCHING THE FIREWORKS SHOW FOR SOME TIME NOW. CAN’T WAIT FOR YOU TO FIND THE STRANDS. OR ANY D-WORLD.”

“Care to give me a hint?”

“THAT WOULD RUIN THE FUN. I CAN TELL YOU THAT THE UNIVERSITY AND THE EMBODIMENT ARE SHALLOW AND WEAK COMPARED TO WHAT WE ONCE WERE. THOUGH I CANNOT REALLY SPEAK FOR THE UNIVERSITY, THEY’RE NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK AND WE DO NOT HAVE MEMORIES OF THEM.”

“The Eldritch Embodiment was around when your society was?”

“IN SOME FORM OR OTHER, YES. THEY WERE THERE BEFORE US, AND WILL LIKELY BE THERE MUCH LONGER. THEIR METHOD OF MULTIVERSE ACTIVITY, WHICH IS MOSTLY APATHETIC, IS ONE OF THE SAFER ROUTES. THEY DO NOT EXPAND, LUNA. THEY REMAIN STATIC, UNCHANGING. A BIT UNUSUAL CONSIDERING HOW MUCH THEIR KIND IS ASSOCIATED WITH CHAOS AND DISORDER.”

“Is there any way to actually open a dialogue with them?”

“They only rarely discussed anything with us, despite us having more power than them. It is a rare Eldritch being willing to consider anything worthwhile besides their own kind. Most are driven only by their own selfish desires and whatever deity they draw their power and identity from.”

Luna raised an eyebrow. “Should we be worried about them?”

“If you start tapping heavily into Eldritch magics, yes. They will take action against significant drains in their power from nearby universes. Otherwise, you should be fine. Especially since you have one of their higher demons working for you. That’s unheard of.”

“We got lucky.”

“PERHAPS IT WAS VRISKA’S PRESENCE.”

“…I have another question. What do you know of her and the others who come from ‘distant’ parts of the multiverse?”

“Our society, at its height, was still unable to map out the multiverse. We had seen maps created by the highest societies, but those were
“CONSTRUCTED IN WAYS FOR MINDS NOT LIKE OUR OWN. THUS, I ONLY HAVE A GENERAL PICTURE.”

“Care to tell us what was on those maps?”

“YOU ARE ALREADY AWARE. YOUR RECORDS INDICATE YOU HAVE CAUGHT A GLIMPSE OF ONE IN THE DOCTOR’S TARDIS.”

“The four spheres. We’re aware of them. What do they mean?”

“THAT’LL BE BETTER FOR YOU TO FIND OUT ON YOUR OWN. I CAN TELL YOU THAT THE THREE PRIMARY SPHERES HAVE NAMES. WE CURRENTLY SIT IN THE Q-SPHERE. THE TAU’RI ARE IN THE E-SPHERE, WHILE THE ‘NORTH’ SPHERE IS THE D-SPHERE.”

“What of the southern sphere?”

“A SURPRISE.”

Luna raised an eyebrow. “You’re being a tease.”

“IF YOU WANT MORE INFORMATION, I’D GO ASK VRISKA. SHE KNOWS A BIT MORE ABOUT THINGS, BUT AS YOU’RE PROBABLY AWARE THOSE WHO KNOW THE SECRETS OF THE MULTIVERSE TEND TO PREFER THAT OTHERS DISCOVER IT ON THEIR OWN. AS A SOCIETY OR INDIVIDUALLY, IT DEPENDS.”

“It is an annoyance I’ve noticed. Why do they do that? It’s not like we hide the multiversal nature from most of the universes we encounter.”

“THERE ARE A FEW FORCES THAT, IF REVEALED EARLY, CAN RUIN A SOCIETY. THE IDENTITY OF THE SPHERES IS NOT ONE OF THOSE THINGS, I JUST PREFER NOT TO TELL YOU.”

“I think I know what one of them is. The Beat.”

“I WOULDN’T KNOW. THE STARS DID NOT DISCOVER WHAT THAT TRULY WAS.”

“Concerning.”

“IT IS EVIDENCE THAT IT IS SUCH A DANGEROUS PIECE OF KNOWLEDGE. IT IS ALSO POSSIBLE SOME STARS DID FIGURE OUT WHAT IT WAS AND KEPT IT SECRET.”

Luna pursed her lips. “Is there anything else you think the Stars might be keeping a secret from the rest of your kind?”

“OH CERTAINLY. NOT TELLING YOU THOUGH. NOT THE LEAST BECAUSE I’VE JUST GOTTEN SEVERAL DOZEN LINKS FROM PSYCHIC STARS TELLING ME TO SHUT UP.”

“Are you going to?”

Vreotloh made no response.

Luna sighed. “Guess that answers that question. Something tells me most of that wasn’t actually helpful or really new information. It’s almost like he was summarizing stuff we could have deduced or figured out with only a bit of research…” She ordered the Feldspar to send a report to Equis Vitis and then go to the next system.
It was a little later that Luna realized that conversation did accomplish something.

It showed how small and insignificant they were compared to the scope of the multiverse.

~~~

Starbeat put on an all-black stealth outfit, even though they were going to be invisible. Something about ‘looking the part’, she had said. Vriska opted to not use her god-tier form because she had bad memories of pixie dust trails from her wings ruining everything. No wings today, just default ‘ordinary’ Vriska.

The two of them could see each other thanks to Starbeat’s finesse with magic, and they had practiced using telepathy to communicate. Vriska wasn’t the best with pony minds, but with Starbeat letting her psychic powers in, there wasn’t much of an issue.

They had found out where Algernon supposedly received his ‘orders’ – at his home on the Hub, a tiny apartment that he had instead of a full embassy. Every other major world had a full embassy, so this was just more suspicious. The evidence kept piling up, but both Vriska and Starbeat knew they needed something solid to overcome the mental conditioning that was clearly happening.

The two of them watched as Algernon entered his apartment. They slipped in, quietly, right behind him through the door. Vriska felt her luck take a huge drop – they had just passed through a magic sensor. Vriska suspected that she had made it ‘jam’ or ‘glitch’ momentarily so it missed them. They were inside, able to watch him as he went about his business, but she was going to need to watch her luck levels – only Algernon and Starbeat were available for stealing from.

*He should receive a call in ten minutes, if the logs aren’t lying.* Starbeat reminded Vriska.

*I know,* Vriska responded. *I don’t forget things that easily.*

Algernon went about his home without a care in the world. He made himself a snack out of cheese and crackers and went to watch TV from a very comfortable looking couch. Vriska and Starbeat moved behind the couch so they could see what he was watching – a documentary on the Dual Migration. Starcei was currently on the screen, answering questions about how the Arcei felt the event.

Vriska and Starbeat only paid casual attention to this. They mostly looked at Algernon closely. He did nothing suspicious – just sat and watched the TV. He looked like he was about to fall asleep at one point, but woke himself up with a grumble and a groan.

Vriska checked the time. *It’s almost been ten minutes…*

*He might not actually receive orders, or make a report. This might help us…*

Suddenly, the TV screen buzzed with static, replacing the documentary with the face of a man. Most of the man’s features were obscured in shadow, but some facts could be discerned. He had pale skin, was wearing a black suit with shoulder pads and dark hair. Vriska couldn’t see his eyes because of the lighting, but she felt a chill run up her spine anyway – it was like he was looking at her.

He clearly wasn’t. “Algernon, report.”

*Recording this?* Vriska asked.

*Of course.*
Algernon cleared his throat. “Almost nothing has changed with the Unification situation, which is exactly what you wish. The process is at a standstill.”

“You’ve done well. I have no further orders for you at this time, just keep doing what you’re doing.”

“Very well.”

*Shit, this conversation is a lot shorter than it needs to be,* Vriska thought. *We’re not getting anything from this.*

The man in shadow continued. “Is there anything in particular you would like to report?”

“A multiversal traveler by the name of Vriska showed up. She was exceptionally suspicious and antagonistic towards me, but I took care of her.”

The man’s brow furrowed. “Vriska? You took care of her?”

“I did not kill her. I merely encouraged her to go somewhere else. The last I saw of her was several hours ago, storming off in a huff. There’s been no sign of her since. I could probably track her down if you wish.”

“Don’t bother. I’ll do it myself.”

It was at that moment Vriska felt like an *eye* was boring itself into the back of her skull. She could both feel it and *see* the jagged red design. She didn’t make a noise – but she deduced that they had probably been made. *We need to move, no-*

“Don’t move!” the man in the screen called. “I assure you, it’ll be much more interesting if you join Algernon and me for a meal. I, clearly, cannot be there personally, but we can discuss here.”

Algernon blinked. “What are-*“

“Algernon, Vriska is behind you with a unicorn. They’re invisible and are recording everything we say.”

Algernon stood up and looked behind his couch. “I don’t…”

*Ready?* Vriska messaged.

*Break for it.* Starbeat agreed.

Vriska punched Algernon in the face, sending him flying. Then she ran toward the door with Starbeat, not caring at all about the security alarm they had just tripped.

“Ladies, it would be best if you remained,” the man called to them from the screen. “We could resolve this peacefully. If you go through that door there’s no telling what will happen.”

“Taking my chances!” Vriska said, kicking the door down and running into the halls of the Hub, Starbeat close behind. Something must have dispelled the invisibility spell, because everyone could see them.

Which probably meant Hub security was after them.

When they heard the sounds of a siren behind them, they knew that to be true.

“Fuuuuuck,” Vriska cursed. She leaped backward, landing on Starbeat’s back. “Yaw!”
“Don’t treat me like a brainless horse.”

“Just move! I’ll steal all the luck I can for us, but you have to run! And teleport! We just need to get safe!”

Starbeat teleported to another hall. “They’ll have locked our dimensional devices.”

“I’m not getting enough luck for a translation without harvesting for a long time,” Vriska responded. “We’ll have to do something else.”

“There’s a gate-house we can commandeer three ‘halls’ down. If we can make it to another universe…”

“Less talking, more running and teleporting.” Vriska produced her dice and threw them behind her, summoning several cubes made of cheese to confuse their pursuers.

Starbeat galloped down the halls of the Hub, knocking over stalls and people left and right.

“Now probably isn’t a good time to mention that your hand holding tightly on my neck is probably going to make the curse worse.”

Vriska facepalmed.

~~~

To put it mildly, Discord and Trixie’s arcade had been a hit. It had originally been intended only as a temporary thing, but they had eventually decided to keep it operating all the time. With Discord’s powerful magic, it would be able to run for eternity on its own without much need for them to be there. The games would always be powered, the prizes would always self-dispense, and the money would be automatically counted (and sometimes even spent).

Today, however, both of them were actually there, on the stage. They were approaching the end of a rather elaborate magic show with the theme of fractals that had the gaming audience torn away from the many arcade cabinets, instead focusing on the impressive light show.

With a starburst inspired by a Mandelbrot set as the finishing move, Discord and Trixie bowed to impressive applause.

Discord stood up and gave the crowd a thumbs up (including the duplicate of himself that was standing in the audience and clapping extremely hard). “Thank you everyone for watching the one and only Discord and his assistant, the awestruck and wowed Trixie!”

Trixie shot Discord an exaggerated expression of annoyance. “Trixie is known as the Great and Powerful! And you are the one who’s the assistant!” She humphed and rolled her eyes. She shot the crowd a wink as she leaped off the stage. Discord followed suit.

“Don’t forget to trip your waitress,” he called.

“This isn’t a restaurant,” Trixie muttered. Discord responded to this by summoning several blocks of cheese. To his mild annoyance the blocks of cheese vanished a second after he made them, taken somewhere else. “…Odd.”

“Disturbance in the chaos?”

“Disturbance in the chaos.”
“So all is well?”

Discord grinned. “Exactly.”

Trixie chuckled. “Right. Well, what now? I suppose we can try to summon more cheese and eat it, or something.”

“Are you asking me out?”

“Hah! In your dreams, goat-face.” Trixie rolled her eyes. “The Great and Powerful Trixie has higher standards.”

Discord pretended to be injured. “Oh, you wound me so!”

“Trixie revels in your pain. Trixie is the tiger and you are the mouse.”

“The mouse that can turn your head into a grapefruit.”

“Don’t you dare…”

Discord’s ears perked up. “Well, I was going to, but there’s someone looking at us.”

“Oh?” Trixie said, looking around. “Who?”

Discord copied his head, creating a new one that came out of a nearby wall, staring right at the woman who was looking at them. She was a standard human of twenty-something with long auburn hair and dichromatic eyes – blue in one, gray in the other. Otherwise she seemed rather normal, if one overlooked her fit, muscular physique. She smiled. “Hey Thistle, long time no see.”

Trixie raised an eyebrow and smirked. She turned to Discord. “Thistle?”

“Nickname I gave him a while ago,” the woman answered offhandedly. “What’s up, you two?”

Discord raised an eyebrow so high it did a triple axle off the high dive. His other eyebrow clapped. “Can’t say I ever met you, miss…”

The woman paused for a moment. “…Right, sorry, I don’t actually see Discords all that often. I forget you don’t always know everything the others do.”

“Could you imagine the horrors if all of you did know everything the others did?” Trixie wondered aloud.

“I’m not sure if it’d be delightful or terrifying,” Discord mused.

The woman held out her hand in greeting, a smirk on her face betraying amusement at the antics she was witnessing. “I’m Jane Shimmer, Slider and Checkers Regional Champion.”

Discord snapped his claw, making his eyebrows duplicate and come together in the form of a hand to shake Jane’s. She wasn’t bothered in the slightest by this oddity. Trixie shook Jane’s hand with her magic next.

Discord smiled and shot Trixie a knowing grin. “Am I thinking what you’re thinking?”

“Option A is cheese blocks for everyone. Option B is that Trixie will become a tour guide to show her around the Hub because we like her.”
“Which means we’ve reached the next level in tours…”

Trixie grinned. “Yes! Take that, Pinkie! We can give tours to complete strangers as well!”

The two hopped up and down in excitement and did a combination hoofbump/high-five. Suddenly they both stood at attention, Discord himself wearing an army getup. “Jane Shimmer, take us to your Sunset!”

Jane just burst out laughing.

Trixie smirked. “Ah, the last name did mean something. Clever us, huh?”

“Trixie and Discord – ACE DETECTIVES!”

Jane raised an eyebrow. “…You sure about that?”

“Not at all!” Discord said.

“Hey!” Trixie blurted. “We don’t have to tell her that!”

Jane shrugged, chuckling a little as she did so. “Anyway, Sunny should be ready for lunch right about now. Over here.”

The three of them left the arcade and entered a diner. Sunny was a unicorn version of Sunset Shimmer with a shorter mane that looked more like actual fire than the bacon style Corona wore around all the time. She had a mechanical front left hoof, just adding to the mystery of her character.

“Oh. A Discord and a Trixie, Jane?”

“You bet!” Trixie said. “The Great and Powerful Trixie shall improve this lunch thirteenfold!”

“You’re overdoing it again,” Discord said.

“…Twelvefold?”

“I meant the Great and Powerful Emphasizer.”

“Bah, never enough Great and Powerful.”

The three sat down. Everyone was introduced in a quick, to the point fashion - discovering Sunny’s full name to be Sunset Parker - and then they ordered their lunch.

Trixie laid a hoof on the table. “Trixie has a question.”

Sunny smirked. “Go ahead, Trixie.”

“Trixie wants to know why you called Discord ‘Thistle’,” she said, an amused grin on her face. She clearly expected this to be good.

The food arrived, but Jane paid little attention to it because she was deep in thought, clearly pondering how to tell the story. “That goes back to when I first met him. I wasn’t in the best mood at the time and sort of misheard his name as Thiscord. After our first adventure was over I sort of didn’t see him again for maybe a year or so.” She looked uncertain about this.

“It was about ten and a half months,” Sunny confirmed.

“Yeah. So I was having some trouble fighting against this self-proclaimed god character. Evil laugh,
Goatee, 5000 contingency plans for how to gain immortality. I’m sure you’ve met the type.”

“Ba’al?” Trixie said.

“Ba’al,” Discord confirmed.

Jane continued. “Anyway, this guy was really a threat, so much so that my circle of Evermore needed to enlist the help of an actual god, one on our side anyway.”

“Evermore?” Trixie asked.

“Can we go back to her considering me an actual god?” Discord interrupted.

“No. Remember what happened on Earth Vitis? Just no.”

Sunny motioned for them to quiet down. “We’ll explain the Evermore thing in a second, just let her tell the story.”

Jane nodded and continued with her story. “Our friend Sam had the bright idea of asking our Discord for help, since she had her own encounter with him. When I went to go meet him, I realized that I didn’t actually know his name, not really. I tried a few options, but it was Thistle that got him laughing. In the end he basically fixed the problem immediately with… What I believe you would call his ‘usual flair.’ I was impressed enough to want to train under him and the nickname stuck like glue.”

Discord smirked. “I can’t say I disagree with the nickname, it seems completely unrelated but really does mean something. Most curious.”

Sunny looked at Discord. “Really? I always thought Thiscord was funnier.”

“That just means you have a better sense of humor than me,” Jane commented, putting an arm over Sunny’s shoulder.

Both Discord and Trixie, on cue, over-exaggerated being grossed out by the mild display of affection. Trixie waved her hooves. “Explain the evermore business before you reach the point of no return!”

Jane just laughed and pulled herself off of Sunny. She glanced at the unicorn to see if she wished to explain. Sunny cleared her throat. “Right, so, the name comes from back when Jane and I here first met. I was originally native to an Equestria that was pulled into a group of twenty-one worlds called the Recursions. Twenty-two if you count the Silent Forest, twenty if you don’t count the broken world the Combine created.”

Jane shook her head before looking at Discord. “Yeah, if you think your chaos realm is something, you’d be surprised that you might not actually be able to comprehend that broken world. Not even immortals could survive in there with their minds intact.”

“So, Evermore,” Sunny continued, “they’re the people that were pulled from all across the multiverse into the Recursions. Once there they’d come back to life if they died and could travel between the Recursions through something called Translation. They were basically gods in their own right, eventually.”

“Yeah, some power,” Jane dismissed. Sunny motioned for Jane to demonstrate the Translation. Jane smirked. “Fine, but I didn’t really want to draw too much attention.” Jane tapped into her magic and summoned some background music, including a quiet guitar and simple drums. She began to sing
softly. “well it’s strange my head is rememberin’ how the airplane flying over…” A thin gray bar measure appeared and began to circle around her.

Sunny motioned to the bar measure. “Each Translation is unique to every individual Evermore. Jane’s is music related, while mine shows up as a ring of fire. There was even someone who vanished in a puff of cherry blossoms. In Jane’s music notes you can see each world she can get to right now.”

Trixie, an impressed but slightly confused look on her face, spoke first. “Wait, you mean each of those notes is a different world?” Getting confirmation from a pair of nods, Trixie continued. “How much of the multiverse have you seen?”

At a nudge from Sunny, Jane stopped singing and the bar measure disappeared. “I wouldn’t know percentages, but we’ve been through over thirty-thousand worlds,” Suny declared, pulling a journal out of her inventory clearly marked with a fifty-one on the front. “I’ve been keeping track of them as we go.”

Discord and Trixie shared an impressed look for a moment before they turned back to the two sitting across the table. The draconequus and the unicorn simultaneously spoke a single name. “Eve.”

Sunny looked confused. “…What?”

Trixie spoke first. “She’s our Twilight, and she’s the one who started the whole exploring the multiverse thing. She’ll want to see your journals. She’d love the chance to add that many worlds to the Directory.”

Sunny blinked. “Wait, wait, is this not really Equestria? …I guess that does explain why nobody was really impressed by us sliding into the center of the mall.”

Discord laughed. “Mall? Oh, Baconhair, if only you knew…” he then looked wistfully into the distance with a knowing smirk and a dramatic pose.

Jane didn’t let him continue his thought. “Knew what?” she inquired, rolling her eyes at his pose.

Discord frowned. “Flutterfree would have humored the dramatic setup…” He returned to his normal posture and grinned. “This place you’re in isn’t just some location to do shopping on the weekend. It’s the Hub of interdimensional activity. It should be obvious – see, over there, that’s human Trixie.”

Jane looked behind her to see the human version of Trixie. “Huh.”

Trixie (the unicorn) waved. “HEY BEST FRIEND!”

“HEY BEST FRIEND!” Trixie (the human) called back before returning to her conversation with a version of Derpy with two heads.

Jane just blinked. “Well, I guess I just didn’t notice anything like that. Weird.”

Discord raised an eyebrow. “Everyone that’s showed up was impressed, even Rick from what I’ve heard.”

“He hid it well,” Trixie added.

Jane scoffed. “Rick… next time you see him tell him Beth is the worst.”

“Beth?” Trixie asked.
“His daughter,” both Jane and Sunny said simultaneously. Jane continued alone. “A Beth ended up becoming an Evermore and from the moment she showed up she caused problems. Not even in the normal way like classic villains, no, she was just the biggest bitch ever.”

Jane fumed, but Sunny was slightly amused by her outburst. “Beth met Jane and decided she had to be one-upped in everything. Jane didn’t appreciate it.”

“THE WORST!” Jane bellowed.

A round of laughs came forth from the table.

“You won’t have to worry about him,” Trixie said after the laughs died down. “Rick’s banned from the worlds around the Hub. He-“

At this moment everything was interrupted by Starbeat and Vriska crashing through the front door of the diner. Vriska threw her dice behind them, riddling the street with large gummy bear monsters that caught the pursuing Hub guard. Starbeat reared and teleported out of the establishment.

Jane blinked. “Well I certainly want to know the story behind who that was and what happened.”

Discord shrugged. “Vriska, a traveler of dimensions not unlike you two, and Starbeat, a unicorn cursed with stupid romance disease.”

Trixie rolled her eyes. “Not surprised they’re running from the law, but Trixie has no idea why.”

Jane and Sunny glanced at each other.

“You might want to act casual,” Trixie said. “They’ll question us.”

A Rainbow Dash with an artificial wing charged through a gummy bear into the diner. “YOU! DISCORD! Trace their teleport NOW!”

“Wasn’t watching closely enough.” Discord said, comically sipping his drink.

The Rainbow Dash twitched. “Did anyone trace that teleport?”

There was an explosion somewhere nearby.

“Nevermind. AFTER THEM!” The Rainbow Dash and her fellow Hub guard left the diner.

“So, how’s your food?” Discord asked Jane.

“Pretty good, if a bit salty,” Jane said, not fazed in the slightest, clearly used to this sort of thing happening.

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Vriska glanced behind her. “Rainbow Dash gaining.”

“Rainbow Dash coming from the side as well,” Starbeat said, teleporting them into another location. “It’s only a matter of time until we get a Twilight that jams our teleports.”

“We’re going to need a plan when we get to the gate,” Vriska commented, stealing the luck from a random Pinkie Pie in a cop uniform, enough to make her run into a wall and pass out. “Where will we go?”
“I have no idea, the Forest? It’s easy to hide in the Forest.”

“I think we should go somewhere associated with our pla- CODE PURPLE!”

“What the heck does-“

A laser from a Twilight Sparkle hit Vriska in the side. She managed to keep herself mounted on Starbeat, but the force made the unicorn stumble. Starbeat was forced to levitate herself and Vriska into the air to avoid toppling into a cabbage cart.

While they didn’t hit the cabbage cart, the next laser from the Twilight did destroy the delectable vegetables.

“MY CABBAGES!”

“I sense a pit of bad luck around him,” Vriska commented as they floated away. “Did you actually see the Twilight?”

“Vaguely,” Starbeat said. “I think she’s using some kind of ‘haze’ spell to keep us from locking onto her. I can’t even tell if we’re dealing with an alicorn or a unicorn.”

Vriska tapped into her vision eightfold, trying to spy out the Twilight – but she saw nothing. “I think she knows we’re onto her…”

“Bingo,” a voice said right next to Vriska’s ear. A burst of magic and confetti hit Vriska in the face. She held onto Starbeat, but this time both of them went flying into a wall rather than recovering. Then the Twilight was behind them, unleashing another explosion of magic.

“What in the…” Vriska said as Starbeat teleported the two of them to an upright orientation. The Twilight they saw was an alicorn, her distinctive features being pink tipped wings and a mane that had the consistency of cotton candy.

“Give me a break,” Starbeat muttered.

The Twilight smirked. “Hello criminals, I am Pielight.” She was suddenly behind them with a ruler decorated with streamers. “The best possible combination.” The ruler had the consistency of rubber and slapped Vriska right across the face, turning her head a full one-eighty somehow without snapping the bones in her neck – but drawing blood just the same.

Vriska spat. “Well you’re OP as hell.”

“Thank you!” Pielight beamed, producing a party cannon that looked an awful lot like a telescope and driving the two of them through a wall into what appeared to be a pony hot springs. Ponies with flower-based cutie marks screamed at the tops of their lungs.

Starbeat glanced at Pielight. “Wait, you’re a Pinkie. That means you know we’re the good guys, right? C’mon…?”

Pielight shrugged. “Yeah. Still gonna capture you anyway.”

Vriska twitched. *Teleport right after I throw these dice. I’m going to put a lot of luck into them, so we better be really close to the gate.*

Starbeat didn’t respond, she just nodded with a slight uncertainty in her expression.

Just as more Hub guards showed upon the spot – including that annoyingly persistent Rainbow Dash
with the metal wing – Vriska threw her dice and threw a lot more luck than she was comfortable with into her roll. Enough to guarantee something excellent.

“Excellent” turned out to be a miniature version of herself with a large head. It attacked Pielight with evil in her eyes, pulling on the tangled hair hard enough to draw blood.

“OWOWOWOWOWOW!” Pielight wailed.

“I’ll take it,” Vriska said, noting how the miniature-version of her had already started jumping from enemy to enemy, proving to be an excellent distraction. Starbeat unleashed the teleport, taking them to another part of the Hub, running at full gallop.

Vriska stole a glance behind them. “Okay, so, we need a plan. The Forest is a bad plan.”

“Do you have any better ideas?!”

Vriska bit her lip. Yeah. “Okay, so… Help me out here. You said Algernon was a lot like Chrysalis?”

“Yeah? I thought we were-“

“Just bear with me here. How was Chrysalis defeated?”

“The pony she was replacing was found and testified against her.”

Vriska cursed. “Dammit. We can’t do that here. Algernon’s not replacing anybody, Earth Stand doesn’t even exist.”

“Eh… Eheheheh…”

Vriska blinked. “…What does that laugh mean?”

“Please don’t be mad at me?”

“I’m going to be livid.”

Starbeat’s bracelet started beeping, but she managed to keep herself in the gallop. She was blushing brightly though. “Ah… You see, Vriska, I kinda thought the only reason you suspected Algernon was because you didn’t think Earth Stand existed-“

“Are you telling me a place with invisible spirit powers of such weird applications actually exists? How is he keeping it covered up? There’s so much that doesn’t make-“

“Earth Stand exists and… And I know the coordinates.” She bit her lip. “I, uh, decided to not correct you so you would still help me.”

“…You’re dead meat when this is over.”

“Oh I’d like that- ACK! NO! Bad Starbeat!”

Vriska grunted. “Just take us to Earth Stand with the gate.” She put a hand to the bridge of her nose. “Uuuuugh…”

Pielight and the Rainbow Dash with a metal wing appeared in a burst of pink-purple magic right behind them. It was at this time Vriska and Starbeat saw the sign for the building that housed the stargate.
“YOU RUINED MY HAIR!” Pielight called after them, the face of intense rage on her features.

Vriska glanced at her and stole her luck – but the Rainbow Dash was not affected. She bolted after them, using her artificial wing to improve her speed somehow. She tumbled right into them, forcing the three individuals into a barrel roll. Starbeat lit her horn, blowing up the wall between them and the stargate.

And then Vriska stole Rainbow Dash’s luck, trying to cash it in immediately. This had mixed results. Vriska’s hands hit a console, activating the stargate as she flew by it. Starbeat managed to cast a spell, inserting the correct coordinates into the portal. But none of them had much control over their movements, so Vriska, Starbeat, and the Rainbow Dash all fell through the portal as it opened, depositing themselves onto a new world.

Vriska briefly wondered why the sky was yellow before she lost consciousness.

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Toph charged into the training room just in time to distract Corona from Lieshy’s hoof. The yellow pegasus’s punch made contact and knocked Corona to the ground.

“LISTEN UP LADIES!” Toph called, tapping the ground with the Master Sword. “We got ourselves a mission.”

Corona rubbed her head. “Does it have anything to do with why Sombra’s been laughing at the Hub security?”

“Probably,” Toph muttered. “Looks like somebody by the name of Vriska Serket and Starbeat have got it out for Algernon, for whatever reason.”

“Why would anyone want to do that?” Vivian asked. “Algernon’s a nice guy!”

Lieshy raised an eyebrow. “For all of the ringtone. That is to say, you only met him for a short while.”

“But he was just so… I don’t know, really, but I know he’s a good person.”

“Yeah, me too,” Corona said. “This is probably a misunderstanding of some kind.” She tapped her sunglasses. “Sombra doesn’t have any idea either, but she told me that Vriska asked for all the files she had on Algernon, which wasn’t much. The guy just isn’t suspicious.”

Toph nodded. “Well, if Sombra’s not investigating him, he’s clean. Now, here’s where we come in. As it turns out, nobody on the Hub wants to risk upsetting the people of Earth Stand by breaking the blacklist. Algernon has been trying to communicate with his people, but they haven’t given the OK to go after Vriska, and we probably need to move fast before she does something disastrous.” She cracked her knuckles. “So we’re going to Earth Stand.”

“Won’t that break the blacklist?” Vivian asked.

“Yes,” Lady Rarity confirmed. “But we’re officially a loose group. Worst that happens is Earth Stand gets upset with Lai, and let’s be honest Lai is probably the least popular of all the major worlds at the moment.”

“Our relations have improved,” Lieshy commented.

“Only moderately,” Lady Rarity said. “This is just a way of mitigating the incident – if we get
discovered. Best case scenario, we get her and get back without letting Earth Stand realize we were there.”

“Plus, it needs to be done,” Corona added. “We can step on a few toes to stop something disastrous from happening. …Whatever it is.”

Toph nodded. “The situation is somewhat simple. Vriska and Starbeat fled to Earth Stand. They have a Rainbow Dash with them, probably a hostage. We don’t know exactly what they plan to do, but we do know they believe there’s a malicious conspiracy around Algernon. Everyone needs to take default human forms on the mission to blend in. Corona, I hope you’ve figured out how to magic as a human.”

Corona nodded. “Bit rusty with anything that isn’t firebending, but I can manage.”

“Good. We leave now.” Toph lifted the Master Sword high. “Let’s move.”

Vriska woke up to find a very interesting sight.

“What the hay is wrong with you?” a tied-up Rainbow Dash was shouting at Starbeat.

Starbeat in question was blushing and wiping her face furiously. “I… Have a condition.”

“No, really?” the Rainbow Dash blurted.

“Silence from the prisoner,” Vriska muttered, rubbing her head. “Right, so… I need to ask. Starbeat, is this Earth Stand?”

“Yes,” Starbeat said, pointing at a street sign that read Morioh, Japan. “I’ve been here before. This is Earth Stand’s primary multiversal city. Though…” She lit her horn, furrowing her brow. “No high magic levels at all. There’s usually at least one unicorn on the major worlds…”

“Is the sky supposed to be yellow?”

“…Yeah, I think that’s a Beat effect around Morioh,” Starbeat admitted. “Or, well, a bizarre atmospheric condition around just this town. I don’t really know.”

“So, we’re here now and we have a hostage. Time to figure out what Algernon’s been doing to this place. Despite the lack of magic, there is multiversal society here, right?”

“Yes. Morioh has the… Uh… Something I can’t remember the name of. It was built on the shoreline after their disclosure to deal with multiversal arrivals. We could go there… But if what Algernon says is at all based in reality, they won’t be happy to see us.”

“There’s bound to be someone there whose mind is easy putty,” Vriska asserted. “Though, I should probably check. Are Stands real things?”

“Well, I don’t know if the variety Algernon described is a thing, but I did meet the guy who could stop time. He might even be here now.”

“This could be fun,” Vriska said, putting a hand to her chin. “That said… I know Algernon is full of shit, but the existence of this place kinda removes most of my case. All I’m going off of now is the tone of that meeting and that look he gave me one time. He’s clearly planning something.”

“Glad we’ve got this cleared up,” the Rainbow Dash grunted. “Can you do what you came to do
already?"

Vriska shrugged. “Eh, sure. Lead the way, Starbeat. The more teleporting the better.”

Starbeat took a breath. “I am going to deplete my magic reserves eventually…” She lit her horn, teleporting them into the proper city of Morioh, the part near the ocean. They appeared in front of a tall building with a gigantic “J” in a large star shaped design on the front of the structure. Part of the structure was on the land, but it was clear that a significant part of it went into the ocean itself.

The citizens of Moiroh looked mostly like normal humans, though Vriska noted that many of them were more muscular than was to be expected from a standard population. Their reaction to their presence was odd – they did not act out of fear of the unknown, or anger that the unwelcome party had shown up, but rather with confusion – and perhaps a bit of anticipation.

Vriska decided to go with the direct route. She knocked on the door. “Hello? I’d like to talk with the people in charge here. Got some interesting que-“

The door flung open, revealing a man with dark green hair and a strange zig-zag headband. He took one look at Vriska and nodded to himself, an expression of contempt crossing his face. He pointed at Vriska. “Heaven’s Door.”

“Wha-“ before Vriska knew what was happening, something invisible hit her in the face, toppling her backward. For a moment, everything went fuzzy and memories swirled around her head, flashing seemingly unrelated events from her life in front of her eyes.

She regained control of her body seemingly in an instant, though clearly more time than that had passed since Starbeat was yelling at the man in an angry tone.

“I already told you, her memories check out,” the man said.

“You could have given us some warning!”

“Judging by what I read in there, I’m glad I didn’t.”

Vriska rubbed her head. “…Read?”

“My Stand,” the man said. “Heaven’s Door. It can read people like books to discover their true intentions. We’ve been waiting for someone from another universe to show up for ages so we could figure out what was going on. Apparently it was all Algernon. As much as I thought the man was a friend… It just makes too much sense.”

“Uh… who are you?”

“Rohan Kishibe. Manga artist and, more recently, Stand Agent. When I feel like it.” He opened the door further for the three of them. “You have to carry your hostage.”

“No problem.” Starbeat asserted.

“You’re just going along with this!?” the Rainbow Dash blurted.

“You saw me read her,” Rohan said dismissively. “I understand completely what’s going on now, and you’re just an amusing bystander at this point.”

“Uh…”

Vriska turned to Starbeat. “What did… he do?”
“His Stand turned your face into a book and he read through it like your diary,” Starbeat answered.

“…He didn’t learn anything… Private?”

“I have no idea. He did comment that it was too much to go through with his limited time. But at that point I was already shouting at him.”

“Right…”

They were led further into the building, the interior of which could best be described by ‘what would happen if several different people were telling one architect to build seven different things on the same spot’. Parts of the interior looked like that of a victorian era mansion, while on an opposing wall there was a meeting table that looked like it belonged in an office building. There were portraits of men lining one wall, while a computer screen displayed images of strange beings projecting from people – was that what a Stand looked like?

“Somebody likes dolphins,” the Rainbow Dash noted, looking at all the sculptures and imagery of dolphins around the interior.

“Jotaro does have a thing for dolphins,” Rohan muttered almost to himself, continuing on to a set of double doors. “The old man should be right through here.” He pushed the doors wide, revealing a cross between an office and a bedroom. The center was occupied by an ornate oak desk, while to the left of the room there was a large bed. A form slept in the bed, covered by blankets, while at the desk a truly gigantic man stood.

His features were sharp and beyond muscular. He looked to be in his thirties, though his attire seemed a little absurd for a man of that age. A large white coat dominated the appearance, completed with a strange orange triangle of fabric protruding out from the left collar, while the right had a metallic heart formed out of two dolphins. His hat completed the look, with emblems made out of a dolphin and the sun made to spell out “Jo”.

Starbeat’s bracelet started beeping furiously. Vriska noticed she was staring at the man’s impressive figure.

“You going to answer that?” the man asked Starbeat.

Starbeat put on a very fake smile. “Er, no.” She wiped some blood from her nose. “Too much today… This is why I don’t go out…” she muttered to herself.

The man looked at them, expression unreadable. “Rohan, what did you find?”

“Algernon’s not an ambassador from the multiverse for us. He’s been telling them that he’s our ambassador.”

Vriska blinked. “Wait, so he was playing the double game?”

The man at the desk nodded. “It appears so. I am Jotaro Kujo, miss.”

“Vriska Serket. You… don’t look like someone who would be called the ‘old man’.”

Jotaro gestured toward the bed. “That would be grandpa over there.”

“What?” the lump from the bed blurted. “Someone there?”

Jotaro nodded slowly. “Yes. We’ve got answers.”
“Well why didn’t you say so…” The lump in the bed slowly turned around, draping its feet over the edge and revealing the figure of a very old man most likely in his eighties. He grabbed a cane and stood up, his legs shaking as he did so. He had a face very similar to Jotaro’s, and despite his age he still had muscles, though of a considerably less absurd definition compared to some of the others they had seen in this world. He wore small spectacles on his face and had a short, scruffy beard.

Jotaro got out of the seat behind the desk, moving the chair for the old man to sit in. He took his time, but managed to get in without much difficulty. He coughed, grunted, and looked at Vriska. “Hello young lady. I am Joseph Joestar. And I… I…”

Jotaro coughed. “You want to know about Algernon.”

“Algernon? Pleasant fellow. I… Can’t say I’ve known him for long.”

Rohan turned to Jotaro. “When was the last time he had one of his meals?”

“I don’t know,” Jotaro said, pulling a phone out of his coat. “Hello, this is Jotaro. Grandpa needs a treatment. Bring it up as soon as possible.”

“Oh, is it lunchtime already?” Joseph said craning his neck back. “That’s nice…”

Vriska turned to Jotaro. “Why are we talking to this guy?”

“This guy is the head of the Joestar family and the foremost expert on anything supernatural and Stand-related. This is the man who represents our universe at meetings, like your Charter-Princess does for you.”

“He’s going senile.”

“Snails?” Joseph said. “There’s no snails, and there will never be snails. Bah.”

Rohan huffed. “See Jotaro? Even the new girl can see it.”

Jotaro’s expression did not shift. “He won’t be like that for much longer.”

As if on cue, a butler walked into the room with a small plate of pasta, setting it before Joseph. Joseph, even in his mental stupor, knew that he needed to eat – so he devoured the pasta in less than a minute despite his old bones.

Vriska blinked. “While him eating that fast was impressive, what exactly did that-“

Joseph’s head exploded, showcasing brain matter to everyone in the room. Vriska and Starbeat jumped, ready to jump into action – but less than a second later, Joseph’s head was back to normal and he was grinning like he’d just won the lottery. Forgoing the cane entirely, he stood up quickly, slamming his hands on the table. “OH MY GOD! I was being an absolute MORON.”

“What th-“ Vriska began, only to be stopped short as Joseph’s legs gave out from under him.

“Grandpa, you didn’t get the dish to help your bones.”

“I hate being old,” Joseph muttered, pulling himself back into his chair.

“…So was that a Stand or…?” Starbeat said, hoping for an explanation.

“We have a chef downstairs with a Stand that can cure almost any illness,” Jotaro said. “In the case of grandpa’s mind, it’s only a temporary measure for a few days at a time, but that’s enough for him
“RIGHT!” Joseph said, grinning from ear to ear. “Name’s Joseph Joestar, Jotaro over there is my grandson, and I’m the boss! Because the multiverse demanded a hub and I always wanted an excuse to build a house explicitly for adventuring. Though I did not want it to be half aquarium. Blame my marine biologist grandson for that.”

Jotaro’s expression did not shift at the slight.

“Anyway, Jotaro, catch me up. Something about Algernon and everyone being lied to, right?”

“Yes. He’s been telling them we don’t want to talk, leading to a complete lack of information passing through.”

“I learned some more from reading Vriska here,” Rohan said. He then proceeded to retell Vriska and Starbeat’s story of the encounter in Algernon’s room with the man in black.

Joseph furrowed his brow. “Don’t know any Stand users by that description. Jotaro?”

“Nothing.”

Vriska raised her hand. “Can I just say how freaky it is that he can tell a story where he wasn’t even there!?”

“It was an important part of your book,” Rohan said. “Furthermore, I’m a manga artist, in case you forgot. I make a living telling stories.”

“Riiight… Okay what other freaky things can you do so I don’t get caught off guard again?”

“There’s dozens of agents here right now,” Joseph said. “Can’t tell you them all. My stand is Hermit Purple, and it can locate people by taking ‘spirit photos’. Works across the multiverse as well, apparently. Jotaro over there has Star Platinum, which is really good at punching and can stop time. Mind telling us what you can do?”

Rohan opened his mouth, but Vriska glared at him. “I, Vriska, can manipulate my own personal luck, specifically by stealing it from others. I can also see hidden things with my vision eightfold and am a pretty powerful psychic. Starbeat here… has magic.”

“And a curse,” Starbeat said. “In case you forgot from last time I was here.”

“We haven’t,” Jotaro deadpanned.

“Eheh…” Starbeat said, nervously. She couldn’t take her eyes off Jotaro’s form for long.

“Vision eightfold huh?” Joseph flexed his hand. “Try using it on me.”

Vriska did as suggested – she saw something extending from his hand, but it was too insubstantial to get anything concrete. “Is there something coming out of your hand?”

“Yes. That’s my Stand, Hermit Purple. It takes the form of thorny vines that protrude from my body. Come to think of it… I’m going to try to find this man in black.” He pulled a camera out from somewhere and smashed it with the invisible vines. He pulled a single photo out of the wreckage. He furrowed his brow as he examined the image. “Odd.”

He laid the image on the ground. There was no picture of the man in black – just a flat representation of a red eye.
Vriska rubbed the back of her head. “He probably has a power that prevents that from working on him.”

“Bah,” Joseph said, folding his arms. “Guess we can’t find him that way. Still need to fix this though. I’ll go to the Hub and straighten things out myself, give that Algernon a good whack with the Hermit Purple Hammon combo breaker.” He chuckled to himself, pulling a bottle of whiskey out of… somewhere and taking a drink. “Shouldn’t be too hard.”

“You’re hardly in any condition to travel,” Jotaro said.

“Bah, just cook me up something for the bones and I’ll be kicking that poser to the moon and back.”

“I’ll go,” Jotaro insisted. “It’ll be faster.”

“Works for me,” Vriska said.

“…Wait, were you guys actually right?” the Rainbow Dash blurted suddenly. “No way…”

“Yes way!” Vriska smirked. “Algernon is goin’ down now. We’ve got all the proof we need!”

“Algernon has a mental effect cast on everyone,” Rohan reminded them. “We cannot be sure simple proof will be enough.”

“…There will be a team of some kind sent to find Vriska,” the Rainbow Dash said.

“Then we’ll just have to keep them busy while you do your work,” Joseph said, smirking. “Rohan, you’re with me. We’ll have some guests to greet.”

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Corona lowered her binoculars. “I don’t think stealth is going to help anymore.”

“Why not?” Toph asked.

“The Rainbow Dash is bound and gagged to the front of Joestar Central. Vriska’s probably already made her move and done… something to the Stand users,” Corona furrowed her brow, sticking a finger in her mouth. “We need to be careful that we aren’t caught.”

Lieshy fell over, punctuating the sentence. “…I hate human bodies.”

“What an uncharacteristically clear remark,” Toph muttered.

“I want you to feel my pain.”

Vivian put a hand to her face. “I don’t know… It feels odd to be solid, but not that bad. Feet are the hardest part.”

“Girls, focus,” Toph said. “We’re going to need to move in somehow. Vivian, you can take us to the void any time you want, right?”

Vivian nodded. To test, she disappeared into the ground, then came back up. “They won’t be able to see us there.”

“Good. We’re going to move forward with Vivian, try to get into Joestar Central and-“

“They see us,” Corona said.
Toph took in a deep breath. “How do you know?”

“There’s an old man waving a photo in the air in our direction. He’s smiling.”

Toph facepalmed. “Right, RIGHT, Joseph Joestar has that photo ability. AGH.” She stood up. “Hello Joseph!”

“Hey!” Joseph said, raising his fist into the air. “What are you doing in my universe?”

“Trying to catch a convict!”

“Is this feathery asshole the one you’re looking for? Quite the piece of work, I have to say. She was so indignant about being put up there!”

“Uh… No!” Toph called to Joseph. “She was a hostage.”

“A hostage? Her? She tore up half of Joestar Central! You’re going to have to pay extra for the damages, in addition to breaking the blacklist!”

Corona stood up. “Look, mister Joestar, we’ll be willing to compensate you however-“ she caught herself. “within reason. But we need to find a gray skinned girl with orange horns and a pink unicorn with goggles.

“No idea,” Joseph said.

Lady Rarity poked her head out of a nearby tree. “Perhaps you could find them with those photos you can take?”

Joseph blinked. “Oh, I can huh? True… You happen to have a Polaroid camera on you?”

“We are not Pinkie Pie!” Toph shouted. “We can’t just-“

Joseph produced one of those exact cameras from nowhere. “Oh, looks like I have one! Come over here, let’s see what I make!”

Toph nodded, ordering Lieshy, Lady Rarity, and Vivian to stay where they were with a quick motion of her hands. She and Corona walked up to Joseph. “What do you have for us?”

Joseph smashed the camera in his hand and took out a single photo. “Let’s see… I’ve found… Uh…” He squinted. “Excuse me, vision isn’t what it used to be…”

Toph swiped the image out of his hand. Then, after a moment of holding it in front of her face, she flushed red and handed it to Corona. Corona cleared her throat. “Well, it’s an image of a building…”

She heard a loud snap in the bushes where Vivian and Lieshy were. “…Hey, you two okay?”

“Yeah,” they called back. Corona nodded, turning back to the photo. “A building. Looks familiar actually… It’s – it’s in the Hub. They’ve gone back to the Hub, haven’t they?”

“How should I know?” Joseph asked, shrugging. “You’re the ones trespassing on my world. Speaking of that, don’t you know what kind of incident this is going to cause? I can get the current shogun down on your heads at any minute!”

Corona blinked. “…This Japan has a shogun?”

“I… guess?” Toph said.
Lady Rarity fell out of her tree suddenly, shaking her head. “Oh! Sorry, dears, I guess I… Just… Lost my footing…” She furrowed her brow. “That doesn’t make any sense…”

Corona blinked. “Wait… Mr. Joestar…”

Rohan leaped out of the tree Lady Rarity was in, landing right in front of Corona and Toph. “Heaven’s Door!”

Corona instantly felt her face pop open like a book, memories swirling around her mind until she couldn’t focus anymore and fell over.

Toph remained standing. She smirked.

“N-Nani!? Joseph blurted. “Rohan why isn’t she a book right now?”

Rohan glanced at Corona’s face – which was now opened up like a book, revealing an interior made of pages that told her life story. Then he glanced at Toph, a worried expression crossing his face. “Oh no…”

“Your power goes through the eyes, doesn’t it?” Toph called. “Well guess what? I’m blind! Woop!” She punched forward with her fist, driving a pillar of rock at Rohan. He leaped out of the way, grabbing a hold of Corona’s face-book as he did so.

“Don’t try anything or I rip some of her memories away.”

Toph glared. “I should cut your-“ She felt something invisible and prickly wrap around her body, holding her tight. She was surprised to sense Joseph pointing his hands at her, as if something was coming out of them and surrounding her.

“Now Rohan!” Joseph yelled. Rohan wasted no time – he wrote into Corona’s face-book cannot pursue Vriska to Algernon and cannot attack Rohan Kishibe. Then he closed the book and returned her to her natural state.

“Wh… Weird. Why am I on the ground?”

Toph tried to bend the metal on her armor to cut through the invisible wires, but since the metal was a physical object it could do nothing against Hermit Purple’s spiritual energy. “Mmmmm Corona! They used their Stands on us! He just wrote something into you like you were a book!”

Corona accepted this information quickly and pulled out a dimensional device with the intention of chasing Vriska back to the Hub. She moved a finger to the device… And couldn’t dial the Hub. “… What in the… I can’t activate it!”

Rohan stood up, smirking. “That is the power of Heaven’s Door. You won’t stop Vriska and Jotaro from bringing Algernon to justice now. Or be able to attack me.”

“Vriska already got to you!?” Toph blurted, continuing to struggle against the bonds. She twisted one of the metal plates on her suit around the hilt of the Master Sword…

“It was Algernon who got to you,” Joseph said, clearly far too old and feeble to be holding Toph like he was. “He’s gotten in everyone’s heads… He told you he spoke for us, and he told us he spoke for you… He almost ruined the friendship for his own nefarious goals…”

Toph wasn’t really listening – she had gotten ahold of the Master Sword. She flicked it out of its scabbard, twisting it with her body to slice at where she was sure Hermit Purple was. Sure enough,
the holy blade was able to hit the Stand, forcing Joseph to recoil. Cuts appeared on his arms as the invisible vines retracted.

Toph stood tall, smirking. “Joseph is down, and Rohan can’t do anything to me. I think I’ll chase after Vriska myself…”

Rohan grabbed Corona again. “I can always overwrite your friend’s personality.”

Corona tried to punch him – but found she couldn’t. It was a horrible feeling.

“You wouldn’t…” Toph said.

“Heaven’s Door!” Rohan opened Corona like a book. “I will.”

“Rohan!” Joseph grunted, pulling himself onto his knees. “Get a hold of yourself!”

“Stay out of this Joseph,” Rohan grunted. He grabbed some of Corona’s pages and threatened to tear them out.

“HOLY SHIIIIT!” Joseph called. “He’s gonna do it!”

Toph held her hands in the air and ground her teeth. “Fine. Algernon’s not worth it.” She sheathed the Master Sword and sat down, folding her arms. “Whatever happens is on you, you understand?”

Rohan released Corona’s pages and closed her book, returning her to normal. “I do. I think you’ll also find that you feel rather silly in about half an hour.”

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Eve, O’Neill, and Algernon were back at the tea shop, talking about what to do with Vriska.

“We should ban her,” Algernon was saying. “She’s been a menace. As much as I appreciate the Handmaid’s actions for us, we cannot take Vriska with her. Too disruptive, aggressive, and brash. She’s a danger.”

O’Neill furrowed his brow. “I don’t think so, Algernon. She’s not as bad as Alushy.”

“But she has no respect for our laws!”

“Alushy stole bodies from top secret morgues,” O’Neill pointed out. “Her respect levels don’t exist.”

Eve nodded. “That’s right, Algernon. I think we just give her a temporary punishment. If she wants to stay around and wait for Aradia, she’ll have to do some… Let’s call it extreme community service.”

Algernon steamed. “But-“

“But what?!?” Vriska yelled, kicking the door down, Starbeat and Jotaro flanking in behind her. “That’s right, but me!”

Starbeat facehooved. “That was lame.”

“Shut up.”

Eve furrowed her brow at the presence of Jotaro. “Jotaro? What-“
Jotaro pointed at the now terrified Algernon. “This man has been lying to both of us, keeping us separate, interfering with both Unification and our more general relations. His flagrant lying and manipulation of our minds has pissed me off. I am asking for your permission to beat him into the next century.”

“Jotaro, you can’t be serious, this is Alge-“ She glanced at the Algernon and noticed what his body language was saying. He was sweating profusely, his hand was trembling, and his pupils had shrunk to pinpricks.

Eve blinked. “Wait, what?”

Algernon stood up from his chair. “T-this is nothing Eve! J-Jotaro and I just had a misunderstanding is all!”

“What’s a ‘misunderstanding’ about telling us that the rest of the multiverse had blocked our entry?”

“I, I, well-“

Vriska pointed at him. “You know that you can’t just tell a planet that it can’t look at the multiverse and make it listen. You did something to all of them.”

Starbeat nodded. “And we’ve got you cornered.”

Eve took a few steps back from Algernon. “Jotaro?”

“Yes, Eve?”

“Permission granted.”

Algernon took a strange black, spherical artifact out of his pocket and looked into it frantically – but he could not move fast enough.

Because Jotaro could stop time.

The next thing anyone knew, Algernon was sailing across the room, the black ball flying from his hand. Several fist impressions had formed in his side in a single instant, and Jotaro was now standing behind where Algernon had just been. The black ball fell into an invisible hand right in front of Jotaro’s face. He examined the sphere, eyes squinting. “This isn’t one of the bowling balls. This is something else.”

Eve grabbed her horn in pain. “The… the magic! The magic is all wrong!”

Starbeat wailed – her Beat sensor had just exploded the moment the black sphere had been knocked out of Algernon’s possession.

Vriska stared – she had no idea what that ball was, but simply looking at it gave her a horrible feeling.

Algernon capitalized on the moment everyone was frozen. In an instant, he dropped the guise of a human, revealing his true form – a behemoth of a demonic entity with three gnarled heads, horns like dead oak trees, and three pairs of draconic wings. He rushed forth with supernatural speed, shrieking with the power of damned souls.

Jotaro’s Stand must have punched him, for an imprint appeared in his face – but it didn’t slow him down much. He twisted a hand forward, grabbing the black sphere. He held it high into the air.
Then he vanished.

Jotaro stared at where the black sphere had just been. “…Good grief.”

“What the…” Vriska said, holding a hand out. “I… what? I don’t even…”

Eve shook her head. “I… I don’t know either. That wasn’t anything we’d seen…”

“I thought I’d seen everything,” Vriska said. “Today’s been nothing but new, new, new! A circus of values!”

“Oh, you’ve been to the City of Rapture?” Eve asked.

“A version,” Vriska admitted.

“I hated those machines.”

“Ditto.”

Eve cleared her head. “Well… I think… I think we owe you an apology, Vriska. And you too Jotaro – your whole world was secluded because we didn’t catch that… thing.”

Jotaro just put his hand to his hat and adjusted it – probably his way of saying there was no need to apologize.

O’Neill smiled at Vriska. “You’ve got some spunk, don’t you?”

“Determination and stubbornness helps sometimes,” Vriska said, grinning.

Jotaro turned to Eve. “I take it this means you still want your Stand?”

“Wait…” Eve’s eyes widened. “The Stand research is complete? Algernon kept me from learning about that? How long?”

“Three months. I was told you didn’t want it anymore.”

“I WANT IT! I want to be able to SEE those abilities you have…”

Vriska took a step forward. “Hey, as reward for saving you from that guy, how about I get one too? Hrm?”

“You’re already powerful enough,” Jotaro said.

“Eve’s basically a god of magic.”

“She… Did something more important.”

Before Vriska could ask what that was, Eve sent a telepathic message to Vriska Tree of Harmony sent us on a Friendship Problem when we first arrived on Earth Stand. We kept his family from falling apart. He doesn’t like showing much emotion or weakness, so don’t make a big deal about it, okay?

“Oh…” Vriska said. “Well if I don’t get one of those awesome Stands, what do I get?”

O’Neill smiled. “Eve, I think I have an idea.”

Starbeat threw her hooves in the air. “You all have good luck with that! I’m locking myself in my lab
for a few weeks. I’ve had enough of this!” She wiped some blood from her nose. “So done…”

“Hey, Starbeat,” Vriska called. “You were an absolute bitch sometimes, but I couldn’t have done it without you.”

Starbeat’s bracelet started beeping. “You… You bitch!” She teleported away before she lost control.

Eve shook her head. “You… Did that on purpose?”

“Yeah. I’m a huge bitch sometimes,” Vriska said, chuckling. “So, O’Neill. What’s the plan?”

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“Daniel, dear, you’re moving your dessert around your plate.”

“Oh, it’s no-“

“Dear, I knew there was something up since the start of the evening, and I fully admit to telling you to relax a bit, but now the evening’s almost gone. You should bring it up now.”

“I…”

“Daniel Jackson, tell me what is on your mind. I insist.”

Daniel pulled at his suit collar nervously. Then he decided to go for it. “Renee, we’ve been together for… Well, officially it’s only been around a couple years, but it’s really been much longer than that. We started out just going out as a way to discuss business, politics – but then we got to know each other. Grew attached. And now here we are, sitting in a great restaurant way too overdressed for the occasion. You’ve rubbed off on me.”

Renee giggled. “Yes.”

“And, well, as absurd as that – wait, hold on, back up, that’s not, I-“

Renee raised an eyebrow as if to say ‘get to the point, Daniel’.

Daniel quickly pulled a small box out of his pocket and opened it. “Renee Belle, I want to spend the rest of this bizarre multiversal life with you, regardless of what happens. Will you marry me?”

Renee smiled, tears coming to her eyes. “Yes, Daniel. Yes. Of course I will.”

Daniel let out a sigh of relief.

“Now allow me to complain about how long it took you to do that.”

Daniel blinked. “I-“

“You bought that ring two and a half weeks ago and it has been a bulge in your coat pocket ever since,” Renee said.

“Nothing gets past you.”

“I only noticed because you started getting so nervous.” She pulled his hands into her hooves.

“Though I guess it did give me time to work on the wedding dress…”

“You already started working on that!?”
“I actually have it with me!” Renee said, pulling a suitcase out from under her seat and placing it on the table. “Oh I can’t wait to show you the stitching on-“ She raised an eyebrow. “You know, I expected Pinkie to launch a cannon off by now. As of yet she hasn’t ruined the moment. I’m honestly surprised.”

Daniel was still staring at the suitcase. “How…?”

“Daniel, you were preoccupied the entire time I’ve been here. Don’t feel ashamed for not noticing a suitcase. By the way, there’s a second one under your chair with your unfinished outfit. Not a standard tuxedo, let me tell you.”

Daniel processed this for a moment and then laughed. “I can’t wait to wear it.”

“Neither can I,” Renee said, chuckling deviously.

“Wait, should I be scared?”

“My love, you should definitely be scared. Very scared. Terrified, in fact.”

Daniel just smiled. “Of course.”

“The entire thing could come falling off at any moment!”

“You’re not serious,” Daniel stated.

Renee fixed him with a mischievous look.

“…You’re not serious,” Daniel said with a lot less certainty.

“You’ll just have to find out on the wedding day – ah! I can’t believe I’m saying that! Me, married! Oh how I’ve dreamed of this day since I was a fill-“

Pinkie’s Party cannon went off in her face.

“I’ve still got it,” Pinkie said, smirking at Renee’s bewildered expression.

“I… Wha…”

“You’re getting married!” Pinkie shouted. “I am going to be the best wedding planner ever! Girls! Come on out!”

Flutterfree held a menu in front of her face. “Pinkie shouldn’t this be a private moment…”

Renee rolled her eyes. “Well, ideally yes, but Pinkie actually let us have a few moments, so I’ll take what I can get. Plus, we will get plenty of private moments later. I suppose a different moment with friends couldn’t hurt.” She pulled Nova, Flutterfree, and Pinkie into a hug. “Come here.” With her horn, she pulled in Daniel as well.

Daniel laughed. “What, is Jack here too or something?”

“He’ll be around momentarily,” Pinkie said. “And by that, I mean three, two, one-“

The front doors of the Tasty Treat were kicked in, revealing Vriska, Eve, O’Neill, and Jotaro behind her. “GUESS WHAT BITCHES!”

Renee blinked, raising an eyebrow at Vriska. “…What?”
Vriska grinned from ear to ear. “I get to join your team.”

There was silence in the Tasty Treat.

Pinkie took a notebook out of her mane and scribbled some notes. “Yep. Wedding, new party member party, I’m going to be busy the next few weeks…”

Flutterfree glanced at Eve. “…Is she serious, Eve?”

Eve nodded. “She just saved us from some kind of conspiracy. I’m not asking you to take her permanently, but just give her a chance.”

“Oh, she’ll make a great addition to the team!” Pinkie said, sliding up to Vriska. “You will learn to love cupcakes, friendship, and rainbows.”

“Sweet,” Vriska said, smirking.

“Also, hey, Eve? O’Neill? Daniel and Renee are getting married.”

Eve’s jaw dropped to the ground in complete surprise. O’Neill just chuckled and said, “about time.”

“SO MANY CHANGES!” Pinkie squealed, throwing O’Neill and Eve into the hug that had just broken up.

“So… Many… Hugs…” Nova said, gagging. “Too… Much… Pressure…”

“Come on big guy!” Pinkie called to Jotaro.

“I think I’ll pa-“ A pink hoof came from nowhere and dragged Jotaro into the hug despite his strong, muscular protests. He soon decided to just accept his fate with his usual unchanging expression.

Vriska grinned. For the first time in a while, she actually felt happy. And she knew it wasn’t just because she was close to finding Aradia again. She felt like this was where she belonged, despite almost being run out less than an hour ago.

She was going to show these ponies how it was done.

~~~

Algernon appeared at the bottom of a great pit, next to a hole in a large, frozen lake. The breath from his three heads filled the area with fog.

Algernon held up the black sphere – such a powerful artifact. It had saved him. He owed it so much… He…

The black sphere was gone, its dark, magical swirls no longer in front of his eyes. Algernon began to panic.

“Right here,” the man in black said, holding the sphere up. “You don’t deserve to hold it.”

Algernon growled with all three sets of vocal cords. “VRI SKA DISCOVERED ME.”

“You should have done something about her quicker.”

“THERE WAS NOT AN OPPORTUNITY.”
“You and I both know that’s not the case,” the man in black said, putting the swirling orb into his cloak pocket. “Such a shame too. You Lucifers are usually such good servants when broken in properly.”

Algernon grunted. “I CAN TAKE A NEW FORM AND INFILTRATE FROM ANOTHER ANGLE.”

“They’ll be expecting it this time, and no amount of your penchant for demonic soul-twisting will be able to keep so many people in the dark again.”

“There are other ways—“

“Algernon,” the man said, folding his hands together. “You. Have. Failed. Horribly, I might add. Showed quite a lot of fear at the end there as well. So I’m afraid you are of no more use to me. Have a nice day.”

“WHAA- NO!”

Without even moving a limb, the man in black vaporized Algernon’s very soul through the connection they shared. The gigantic body of a true Devil turned to dust in an instant.

There was silence on the cold lake.

“Will this be a problem, Flagg?” another voice asked.

Randall Flagg, the man in black, turned to the red buglike being that was significantly taller than him. “They have a great destiny ahead of them Siron, but do not worry. If we play our cards right we can end that destiny. This is just a setback. There’s still much more we can do.”

Siron nodded. “What is the next step?”

“For now? Waiting. They’ll be on guard for a while. We just watch… And there will be a moment where their destiny can be ruined.” He smiled, turning to look beyond the universe he was in with a truly psychotic grin. “No one’s story is so big that I cannot destroy it.”
Eve felt her very spirit swimming inside her. It had… changed about a week ago, thanks to Earth Stand.

Her ability…

Well it was interesting enough that she had decided it needed to be kept a secret from the general population. Her close friends knew, as well as the world leaders, but otherwise… Well, she wasn’t going to comment on it. Let Sombra and the general population guess as to what it actually was.

She’d keep it a secret as long as she could so potential enemies wouldn’t know what hit them.

She tried not to think about it, focusing her attention back to reality. She was sitting in her castle library, taking a moment to herself and her books. In her magic she held a newer book – or, more accurately, new e-book – called the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Multiverse. It advertised itself as the best all-in-one guidebook for the entire cosmos you could ever find, though clearly it only dealt with the worlds Equis Vitis and its allies had uncovered. A lot of the stuff she was reading wasn’t new information to her, but occasionally she’d find interesting tidbits of information. For instance, she hadn’t known about the halos of Lai, or the luxurious hotels that Equis Cosmic was apparently ‘known for’.

Then there was the article on ‘how to alter your dimensional device’ that she was considering writing the editor about. Sure, there were warnings all over the piece, but the mere fact that it existed meant people were going to try stupid things and might end up launching themselves into a sun or something. Or getting past a blacklisted world, which could be even worse. They did not need Nautica breaching. Ever.

They were lucky they had placed orbital scanners around the ocean planet – they had caught Brutalight’s group trying to leave via rocket. They did not make it far before being launched back into the sea from which they came.

Eve wondered if there was an article on Nautica in the Guide. Sure enough, there it was – a small one that was clearly aware it was reporting mostly based off rumor and speculation. It knew that Nautica was an ocean world where highly dangerous prisoners were dumped, and that was about all the correct information it had. For some reason the Guide was convinced a blue headed supervillain was locked up there. Eve had seen the prisoner register herself numerous times; there was no such person.

She searched for some more articles. Tips on how to survive in unexplored universes, tips on how to discover your own universes, tips on making tips… The Guide was pretty extensive. It even had articles on the world leaders of most worlds.

It finally occurred to Eve to look herself up. Sure enough, she was there, and it was one of the larger articles to boot. It was a bit weird to read about her early life, education, and role in Equestrian History prior to the unlocking of the multiverse. It took her a few seconds to remember it wasn’t really her, and at that point she just scrolled past the whole section. She started reading again about the time the Embodiment was first contacted. The article was meticulous, describing her relation to virtually every major crisis she had been a part of, from the University, to something she didn’t remember in Gem Vein, and the whole Algernon fiasco. That last one didn’t paint her in a favorable
light, but even she had to admit she screwed that one up.

After that it was just a few paragraphs about what Eve was doing now. The Charter-Princess spends most of her time working diligently to further harmony and friendship in the multiverse, seeking the peace of all sides. She devotes almost every waking hour of her life to this, and has not taken an official vacation since the Aid of the Binary World was completed.

“Oh,” Eve said to herself, ears drooping. Had she really never taken a break? Ever since… That… She had thrown herself into her work and… And done nothing much for herself. Back then, it had seemed reasonable, but now? Here she was, hiding in her library just to clear her head.

She needed to fix that. Go out with the girls-

Oh, wait, today was ‘Stand’ day. Jotaro would be testing them. Eve supposed she could go watch, but that didn’t seem like what she wanted right now. Applejack wouldn’t be torn from her family given how it was growing… Rainbow Dash was at Stand day as well… Corona? Eve supposed she could go to Lai… But the thought didn’t call out to her.

It was then a lightbulb went off in her head.

She probably wasn’t the only one who needed a vacation.

She tucked the Guide under her wing and lit her horn, teleporting herself long-distance to the throne room of Canterlot. After checking a moment to see that nopony was currently talking to the Princesses, Eve grinned. “Celestia. Luna. Guess what?”

Luna yawned. “What, Evening Sparkle?”

“We’re going on a vacation.”

Celestia blinked. “We? Eve, I’m all for you taking a vacation – about time, really – but you’re alone here.”

Eve smirked. “You two are coming with me. It’s time for some princess bonding.”

Luna blinked. “Evening, we are two busy ponies-“

“And so am I, but I’m sure I can get us out. Or, well, Spike can rearrange the schedule, but you know.”

“Eve, the Sun and the Moon-“

“There are other Celestias and Lunas who will be willing to do that,” Eve declared. “I think we all need a break. Plus, we never hang out, despite all the time we spend with each other. We don’t always have to be the high-and-mighty rulers of Equestria.” She smiled. “Pleeeeeease?”

Celestia thought about it for a few seconds. “Oh, all right, I can leave things unattended for a while. I haven’t stretched my legs outside these castle walls in so long.”

“Sister!” Luna declared. “We cannot both le-“

“Luna, you and I both know you spend all your time on the Feldspar exploring your night. We can both leave just fine. And I bet you want to get out of that stuffy spaceship interior from time to time.”

Luna blinked. “This much is true.”
“And Eve is right, we do know ponies who can replace us for a short time, even if just for raising the
Sun and Moon.” Celestia turned to Eve. “We accept. Where did you plan on going?”

“Well, first there are these excellent locales on Equis Cosmic that are apparently to die for, and after
that… oh I guess we’ll bounce around wherever we want.”

“Locales,” Luna said, raising an eyebrow. “Renee must be talking your ear off about the wedding.”

“While true, my use of the word has nothing to do with that. It was just appropriate.”

“The book you have under your wing uses it,” Celestia observed.

“Er… yes!”

“This isn’t going to be a ‘by the book’ thing, is it Eve?”

“No,” Eve said with complete certainty. “It’s just what gave me the idea, after reading the article
about myself. I apparently work way too hard.”

“I could have told you that,” Celestia said.

“Look who’s talking,” Luna chided.

Celestia rolled her eyes. “I suppose that is why Eve’s here. Let’s let everypony know we’re going –
and then get out before they yell at us not to leave.”

Eve nodded. “That better be all the work we do.”

Luna huffed. “One can hope.”

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Jotaro Kujo was not a man for speeches – that was more the old man’s department, or Josuke, or,
hell, almost anyone else at Joestar Central. But Joseph was not available at the moment – something
about learning to fly a spaceship – and Jotaro was the de-facto second in command of the whole
operation. Not to mention the fact that this day was essentially his idea, and it was up to him to judge
everyone here.

A young girl tugged on his pant leg. “Daddy? They’re waiting for you.” She was about twelve
(though she would be the first to tell you she was pretty much thirteen) and had green hair done up in
an odd style that had a ponytail and two nubs on the top of her head that would have resembled cat
ears had they been pointy rather than round. “Come on, go and do something cool! Star Platinum
them into amazement!”

A small smile crawled up Jotaro’s features. “Most of them can’t see Star Platinum, Jolyne.”

“Well then just strike a pose! You’re good at that! Just… Go be awesome!”

Jotaro shook his head. “Good grief…” He took his daughter’s advice though, opting to have Star
Platinum shove the double doors of Joestar Central open. He could see his own Stand, which took
the form of a muscular man of similar stature to Jotaro himself, except with blue and pink skin and
metallic balls on the ends of its fists.

Jotaro walked out with his hands in his pockets and his posture as tall as he could manage. He took a
moment to observe the people who had been selected standing outside. There were only twelve
admitted today, though he could see they had brought their friends along to watch. He cleared his
throat. “All participants, line up in the grass over there. Two lines of six. Rest of you, just stay back, this will get explosive quickly.”

He noticed rather quickly that thirteen people were actually lining up. He glared at Vriska. “Vriska, you’re not a participant.”

“Oh, just give me a chance Jotaro, c’mon.”

“No,” Jotaro deadpanned.

“No! No! No!” Jolyne echoed from behind him, giggling.

Jotaro folded his arms. “Go back to the rest of your team that isn’t participating.”

“Fiine,” Vriska muttered, walking away like she was some eight year old who hadn’t gotten dessert. She joined up with Nova and Pinkie, who were hanging around near the back. Pinkie had already produced a commentary stand, complete with functioning microphones. Jotaro shrugged – he didn’t mind if the pink pony commentated. It’d be good to teach the participants to deal with distraction.

Jotaro examined the remaining twelve. There were some ponies – Flutterfree, Renee, Rainbow Dash, Trixie, the metal-winged Rainbow Dash they had tied up a few weeks ago, and the alicorn Jade from Equis Cosmic. There were a handful of humans as well: O’Neill, Daniel, Tempest, and the Earth Vitis Applejack. On the more ‘alien’ side were Emerald and Thor the Asgard.

Jotaro cleared his throat. “You are here today to determine if you are worthy to receive a Stand power. You are all here because you were selected – your powers aren’t as extensive as some of your colleagues, and it has been suggested that the way to catch up to them is to gain something new. This may be true, but I want you to forget all that. You are here today to prove not your need, but your ability. You must have a fighting spirit, honor, devotion, and determination for me to decide you are ready. I do not know how many, if any, of you will pass.”

“Oh, I think you’ll be surprised,” Rainbow Dash said, smirking.

Cocky, Jotaro thought. Already lost a point. He reached into his coat and produced a long, ornate arrow made of a mysterious metal. “This is a Stand Arrow. You are beyond lucky that Evening encouraged us to engage in Stand research when she first arrived, because the only way to be given a Stand prior to a few months ago was to get shot with this thing. It was extremely painful and had a high chance of just killing you. Not just because of the wound, but because the metal that bestows a Stand is an alien virus that devours your biology from the inside out if your genetics aren’t immune. The Speedwagon Foundation has worked with us to create a pill that will inject this virus into your system, but also cure it just after you have been given a Stand.” He glanced at Emerald, uncertain exactly how they were going to give her a Stand given her non-biological nature, but he knew Stands could be affixed to objects, so there had to be some way to do it. Probably with magic.

“In order to get that pill, I will have to examine how you react when faced with a strong opponent. So you all will fight one at a time so I can judge your styles, and what it means about you.”

“We’re all going to fight you?” Renee asked, her hoof in Daniel’s hand.

“No, You’re fighting Josuke,” Jotaro said, stepping aside, Jolyne scurrying behind him. Behind the two of them was a young man with the weirdest Elvis-esque hairdo of all time. It looked like Elvis had flattened his hair slightly and put a grid pattern on top of it. “Hello alien beings!” he chuckled as he said this.
“I am Josuke Higashikata. I’m looking forward to punching all your faces in.”

“Question,” O’Neill said. “Why are we fighting reject Elvis?”

Josuke’s expression darkened. “…Did you just mock my hair?”

O’Neill raised an eyebrow. “Yes?”

Jotaro put a hand on Josuke’s shoulder. “Rein yourself in for fifteen seconds, Josuke. We-“

Josuke clearly didn’t listen to Jotaro. He rushed toward O’Neill, fist flying. Jotaro grabbed Josuke’s head with Star Platinum, flattening the younger man into the ground. “Ahem. O’Neill, you will be Josuke’s first opponent, but I must explain the rules first.”

Josuke summoned his own Stand – a humanoid pink and gray Stand with a more metallic appearance than Star Platinum – and tried to punch the pink-blue Stand away. He had little success with this maneuver, seeing as Josuke couldn’t see where he was punching.

Jolyne bounced up and down. “Oh! Oh! I know the rules! Can I tell them please daddy?”

Jotaro nodded, using Star Platinum’s other hand to pin Josuke’s Stand. Jotaro himself hadn’t even moved a muscle.

Jolyne climbed up a small rock. “All right! The rules are very simple – use only non-lethal force! Josuke’s Stand, Crazy Diamond, may be able to heal almost all wounds, but he cannot heal his own. This means that Josuke is allowed to punch you as hard as he wants, but you can’t, so just deal with it. The benefit you have is that Josuke doesn’t know what you can do, but you know what he can! Watch out for Crazy Diamond’s fists if you have a way to detect Stands! Otherwise… Well, just fight as long as you can, but expect to lose!”

“How do we know when we’ve lost?” Flutterfree asked.

“You’ll know,” Jolyne giggled, getting off the rock and moving to stand next to her father. “Can I use Stone Free?” she asked.

“I’d like to see a fair fight,” Jotaro said, releasing Josuke. “So no. I know you’re excited that you’re finally able to summon it, but now is not the time.” Ever since Jotaro had told his family about Stands, Jolyne knew she could get one because of the rule of heredity. She’d only activated it recently.

“Aw…” Jolyne muttered.

The moment Josuke was released, he flew at O’Neill, roaring. “YOU DO NOT INSULT MY HAIR!”

“Are you still on that?” O’Neill said, shaking his head. He produced a zat gun and fired at Josuke, not in the least surprised to find some invisible force protecting the young man. Jotaro could clearly see Crazy Diamond deflecting the bolt of blue electricity. Jotaro was impressed when O’Neill used the deflection of the bolt to his advantage, using it to determine where the invisible Stand was. O’Neill performed a roll under Crazy Diamond’s fist and shot another bolt at Josuke from the side. Crazy Diamond was not fast enough to block this bolt, and Josuke’s body was stunned.

“A GREAT PLOY BY O’NEILL!” Pinkie announced. “BUT THE FIGHT ISN’T OVER YET FOLKS! JOSUKE ISN’T DOWN!”
O’Neill raised an eyebrow. “Most people fall over after one of those.”

Josuke grunted through the stun of the zat gun. “I’m not most people. I am-“

O’Neill shot him again before he could even get started on his monologue.

“Josuke!” Jotaro shouted. “Remember, other universes *interrupt* us! Remember to stop discussing your moves!”

Josuke barely heard Jotaro – with two shots, he was falling down. He knew he probably should have been killed by that shot, but he was just too *determined* for that. As he fell, he used what little awareness remained in him to control a single punch from Crazy Diamond. The spirit’s fist went right through O’Neill’s stomach, shattering his spine and coming out the other side. O’Neill gagged for a moment – but then the pain was over, because Crazy Diamond repaired the damage he had just caused with a golden-yellow glow.

Then Josuke hit the ground, grunting.

“Josuke wins!” Jolyne declared. “Lethal hit to the stomach!”

O’Neill touched his stomach, eyebrow raised. “Huh, not bad. I wasn’t expecting Elvis-boy to have so much gumption in him.”

“Jack, seriously, stop insulting his hair,” Daniel said.

“What? He’s down. He can’t hear me.”

“He’s not down,” Thor informed him.

Josuke was in fact sitting up – and he looked livid. “WHAT THE HELL IS WITH YOU AND MY HAIR!?"

“It-” O’Neill did not get to finish, because Crazy Diamond punched him across the face, knocking him into the dirt.

“Not healing that one,” Josuke muttered. “Have a sore jaw the rest of the day, pig.”

Flutterfree flew over to him. “You okay?”


“For the record, I think the hair is fabulous,” Renee announced.

“Finally, someone with good sense,” Josuke said.

“I’m thinking of the best suit to I could design to go with it…”

Josuke lit up. “We’re going to talk business after this is over, Renee.”

“I’m next!” Rainbow Dash declared, rushing Josuke with a burst of speed. Crazy Diamond punched her out of the air with ease. “Ow…”

“AND RAINBOW DASH IS DOWN BEFORE THE FIGHT EVEN BEGINS!” Pinkie declared. “WHAT A MATCH!”

*That’s what she gets for being cocky*, Jotaro thought.
"Two down, ten to go!" Jolyne cheered. "Goooooo Grunkle Josuke!"

Flutterfree raised an eyebrow as she helped O’Neill back to his feat. "Grunkle?"

"He’s technically my grandma’s half-brother!" Jolyne explained. "The Joestar family is... bizarre."

Jotaro adjusted his hat. "Good Grief... Next?"

~~~

Eve had to admit, the Guide was right about Equis Cosmic’s luxurious hotels. And because alicorns, while still rare, weren’t unheard of in Equis Cosmic, there were services designed especially for the three of them. Currently it was the perfect massage treatment by what Eve assumed were descendants of Aloe and Lotus, two of the best spa ponies Eve had ever known.

The three princesses were currently laying on their stomachs, wings open but facing downward, relaxed. It felt good to get a massage by somepony who understood the differing physiology in the larger alicorn wings.

She let out a sign of contentment.

"Somepony needed to release her stress," Celestia commented.

Eve let out a relaxed chuckle. "Yeah... I’ve had so, so much stress over these past few years... So much I think I forgot what not being stressed feels like. This... This is good."

Luna made a “mhm” noise but otherwise didn’t contribute to the conversation.

"I can’t believe I almost never go offworld... " Celestia said. "There’s so much wonder to be seen out here."

"You’re busy running Equestria," Eve said.

"But it’s like you and not taking a break. I could have made time to just explore for a bit, like I would have in my younger days, but I didn’t. I only went when I was called – usually by you."

Eve smirked. "Still feels weird, me calling you somewhere. You’re still the princess."

"Hey," Luna grunted with only the smallest amount of effort. "I’m a princess."

Eve nodded. "Yes Luna, you are, sorry. Not what I meant though, Celestia’s always been my teacher – still is, in many ways."

"Eve, you’ve long since become my equal – surpassed me, in many ways," Celestia said.

"Me? Surpass? Ahah – no. I’m nowhere near as cool-headed as you, nowhere near as serene, nowhere near as wise, nowhere-"

"Sh sh sh... Eve, relax. It’s okay to admit your success. You’ve done more in under a decade than I’ve done in a thousand years. Just because I was your teacher doesn’t mean you can’t surpass me. And it doesn’t mean that I can’t admit that."

Eve blinked. "It just doesn’t process, Celestia. I get what you’re saying, and it makes sense, but internally I know I haven’t accepted it yet."

Celestia chuckled. "Part of being a pony – or human, or anything. Our internal workings are often
paradoxical. We can know one thing but feel something very different. It’s a very strong dichotomy within ourselves, and it’s something we spend our lifetimes resolving. It may be a pain, but it makes life interesting.”

“I assume you’re aware of the three-fold theory of pony nature?”

“Yes. The humans also have a similar one.”

“Mhm. The ‘person’ is split up into three distinct ‘natures’. There’s the reason, then there’s emotion, then there’s ‘desire’ or physical drive. These three natures are constantly in conflict with each other, driving the paradox you described. But when they are united, they provide peace. You could describe trying to resolve our internal paradoxes like that, right?”

Celestia smirked. “You could do that. It even fits well. You could also take it further. Some individuals have stronger reasonings, or more of a handle on their emotions, and some are more gifted with the physical nature of themselves. In order to achieve peace in the naturally unbalanced state, people need to work together, to find a medium. You, Eve, are an example of that kind of peace, believe it or not.”

“I know – a purely logic driven pony changed to understand emotions on a more fundamental level, to the extent of being the Princess of Friendship. I’m not strong in the ‘physical’ nature though. I mean, I don’t even have some drives.”

“Nothing to be ashamed of, it just makes you different. Though it does explain why you’ve never gotten yourself a stallion.”

Eve raised an eyebrow. “It’s not like you have one either.”

“Where do you think Blueblood came from, Eve? There was a royal family, long ago.”

“Curious. So are you well-balanced in all three natures then?”

Celestia smiled. “I am nowhere near as smart as you are, Evening.”

“Smarts doesn’t have much to do with it – it’s a separate gift. Philosophically speaking, the mental nature is all based in reason. You’re really good at making quick, on-the-point decisions.”

“Admittedly I base that more on my empathy than reason, but you do have a point. It’s like we’re opposite sides of the same coin, in a way. I’m naturally emotional but learned reason, and you’re naturally gifted in the mind and learned friendship.”

“And meanwhile here I stand, in the middle, with a very physical desire to not talk brain-thumping philosophy anymore,” Luna grunted. “You two can’t possibly consider this relaxing.”

Eve and Celestia chuckled. “We kinda do,” Eve said. “Well, probably more me than Celestia, but you know.”

“The point is that your thoughts are alien to mine,” Luna declared. “How about we try… Complete silence for a while.”

“That sounds like a great idea,” Celestia agreed.

“Silence!?" Eve blurted. “How ca-“

“Shhhhh…’’ Luna and Celestia called to her.
“But-”

“But, enjoy the feeling of being in your own skin and doing nothing,” Celestia declared. “It’s a good skill to have.”

Eve took in a deep breath and released it, allowing herself to drop into the realms of not thinking. She allowed the massage to work its way into her mind, turning the complex calculations she normally ran into putty. Time began to dissolve as she lost herself in the calmness...

An alarm started blaring, accompanied with red lights, ruining the whole experience.

Luna sighed. “There’s a crisis we need to help deal with, isn’t there?”

Celestia stood up from the massage platform. “It appears so…”

Luna grunted, lifting herself up as well. “Let’s deal with it quickly.”

Eve rubbed her forehead – this was just great. She was never going to catch a break.

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The Rainbow Dash with the metal wing had her artificial limb shatter into a million pieces by an invisible force. “Ponyfeathers!” she blurted – she had been sure Crazy Diamond was on her other side, but she had guessed wrong. She fell to the ground and rolled over several times until she came to a rest at the wall of Joestar Central. Crazy Diamond repaired her wing a second later.

Josuke cracked his knuckles. “That was a nice trick, keeping your earth pony part of you hidden until the end. A good trump card. Well, that’s eleven down-”

“TEN!” Pinkie corrected from her megaphone stand. “JADE BEAT YOU FAIR AND SQUARE.”

“Alicorn magic cheats,” Josuke muttered. “I would have won if I knew she could just put me to sleep.”

“I doubt it,” Jolyne called. “I didn’t see a way to dodge it!”

“Right… Right… Who’s the last one?”

Flutterfree walked up, bow of light in her hooves. “That would be me.” She pulled the string back, the arrow within glowing with a holy light. “I really don’t know what this will do to your Stand if you hit it, so…” She thought for a moment, and set the bow on the ground. “…I guess I won’t use it.”

Renee gasped. “But Flutterfree! That’s your only weapon!”

Flutterfree took a breath. “I’ll just try to do my best.” She spread her wings and took a deep breath. “Ready, Josuke.”

Josuke looked at her with uncertainty. She could tell he summoned Crazy Diamond, but she had no idea where. Flutterfree decided to fly into the air, to gain some mobility.

“FLUTTERFREE TAKES TO THE SKIES! WHAT IS HER PLOY?”

O’Neill clenched his jaw. “She doesn’t have one,” he muttered.

Flutterfree decided it was best to just keep moving. When Crazy Diamond did hit her, it wasn't head
on – it was on one of her back legs. This threw her into a tailspin dive. She strained with all her might to fly toward Josuke. Her aim was true – but the invisible Stand stopped her short, slamming her into the ground.

She stood up, spreading her wings. Blood was pouring down her face – even though she knew it would be healed in an instant whenever the fight ended, she still felt the panic rising within her. Her breathing increased rapidly – but she forced herself to calm. *I have to try harder. I need to prove myself.*

Crazy Diamond hit her again. Flutterfree used the force to fly in a loopdeloop, ramming right into Josuke’s head.

*Got him!*

“IT’S A HIT FROM FLUTTERFREE!”

Josuke peeled her off his face as if she was a bug. “Uh…”

Flutterfree blushed. “I guess that didn’t go so well huh?”

“Nope.”

“…Just end it. I’m not going to punch you in the face right now, that’d just be mean.”

Josuke healed Flutterfree back up in an instant. He set her down on the ground, expression mildly confused. He turned and walked to Jotaro without the usual fanfare.

“AND JOSUKE WINS! ELEVEN FIGHTS OUT OF TWELVE! THE MAN HAS STAMINA!”

O’Neill walked up to Flutterfree. “That was some pretty good ass-pulling.”

“I was pathetic,” Flutterfree stated matter-of-factly. “He didn’t even feel any pride in defeating me. I think he just felt sad.” She sighed. “I definitely didn’t win.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” O’Neill said. “You tried with the very limited resources you had. You didn’t even have a plan. So, yeah, you definitely failed this fight. But I don’t think your strength is in combat anyway.”


Nova walked up to Flutterfree. “...You seem happy for somepony who just got their ass handed to them on a plate.”

“Oh, O’Neill gave me a little pep talk.”

“Already?!”

Vriska laughed from nearby. “The old man is stealing your job, Nova!”

“Actually the pep-talk thing is usually Pinkie or Flutterfree’s job,” Nova called back.

Vriska shrugged, accepting a smoothie from Pinkie and drinking it obnoxiously. Nova rolled her eyes at this.

Renee and Daniel walked up to O’Neill and Flutterfree. “So, what do you think our chances are?” Daniel asked.

“You almost had him, Jack,” Daniel pointed out.

“Oh, I thought you were talking about all of us as a whole. I’m pretty sure I get to continue. The rest of you…”

Renee bit her lip. “I do admit, he caught me off guard. Such power in those punches. Couldn’t see them well enough with my magic.” She rubbed her side. “I swear, it still hurts.”

“Phantom pain,” Flutterfree said. “Just try not to think about it.”

“You didn’t actually get a broken leg,” Renee muttered. “He went easy on you.”

“Yeah,” Flutterfree admitted. “He did…”

“AHEM!” Josuke called, grabbing everyone’s attention. “Jotaro’s ready to decide who moves on!”

“…moves on?” Tempest asked, confused.

“That was not the only round,” Josuke said, rubbing the back of his head. “The second one will decide who actually gets in.”

Jotaro nodded. “Four of you are out. Trixie, Rainbow Dash of Equis Vitis, Tempest, and Jade.”

“What!” Tempest blurted. “I did much better than most of these people! And Jade? Jade actually beat you!”

Jotaro folded his arms. “You fought with too much anger and aggression to be trusted. Jade clearly already has enough power within her. And as for the rest of you – Trixie did not fight with honor, but cowardice, while Rainbow Dash was simply too cocky and brash.”

Rainbow Dash blinked. “But… But… But…”

“My decision is final,” Jotaro said. “You four are out. The remaining eight will move to the final ‘test’.”

Jade nodded. “I thank you for allowing us this chance, Mister Kujo.”

Jotaro nodded. “You had honor and strength, Jade, but your life has already given you all you need.”

Jade bowed in respect, then left the universe.

Trixie huffed. “The Great and Powerful Trixie didn’t need you anyway!” She opened a portal and left. Tempest did the same, but wordlessly.

Rainbow Dash walked over to Nova. “Well, guess I’m out.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself, I think he’s a bit hard to please.”

“No kidding. I’ll be sitting with Pinkie, cheering you on.”

Jotaro called their attention again. “I will now ex-“

Jolyne tugged at her father’s pant leg.
“…Jolyne will now explain the rules of the next round.”

“All right!” Jolyne shouted, getting back on her rock. “Listen up! You eight will be fighting each other in a battle royale on this grassy arena right here! Josuke is on hand, so you can use almost any method besides instant death to subdue the enemy! When only one fighter is left standing, the round will be over, and the people who get their Stands will be decided! You’ve got ten minutes before we begin! Make sure to be at your marked areas by then!”

“What mark-“ Renee began, but suddenly there were eight markings in the grass that looked like fist imprints. “Uh…”

“Time stop sure is useful!” Pinkie called. “This is gonna be a great deathmatch!”

Renee turned to Daniel. “What say you, darling? Fight together?”

“Definitely,” Daniel said, twirling a zat gun – and then dropping it.

O’Neill raised an eyebrow. “Well if you two lovebirds make a team…” he grabbed Flutterfree. “We’ll be a team as well!”

“I can’t believe I’m still here,” Flutterfree said.

“You must have impressed them with something.”

“Mhm.” Flutterfree paused for a moment. “You know what? Yeah.” Her expression became much more competitive. ‘O’Neill, let’s pound these two into the dust!”

“Oh it! IS! ON!” Renee declared. “You do not know what kind of war you have declared! The power of love is at our backsides, and we shall use it to emerge victorious! It’ll be so romantic~!”

O’Neill facepalmed while Flutterfree giggled.

Renee narrowed her eyes. “We’re going to bring it, you two, don’t you dare think otherwise.”

O’Neill twirled his zat gun and didn’t drop it. “I wouldn’t dare underestimate a prissy white unicorn.”

…I’m not sure if that’s an insult or not.”

“Assume yes,” Daniel suggested.

“Good. More motive to win. You two better bring your best!”

“We will!” O’Neill called.

Flutterfree smiled. “Right.”

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As it turned out, three alicorns could ‘deal with it quickly.’ In this case, ‘it’ was a group of humans with a spaceship that decided, while drunk, that it would be a good idea to shoot whatever building they came across with their ‘slightly illegal’ weapons.

It just so happened that the building that looked the fanciest was the hotel-spa the royal alicorns of Equis Vitis were staying in.
The crew consisted of three men and two women, all of whom were armed to the teeth and dressed like raiders from a bad science fiction movie.

“What universe are they from?” Luna asked, examining the five humans they had tied up.

“Earth Vitis,” Eve mumbled. “They seem to have a higher concentration of these kinds of nutcases than Earth Tau’ri and Earth Stand. The current theory as to why is that they’re further along in the future, and apparently the further into the 2010s you get with an Earth the less rational the people become.” She gestured at the five of them. “They just want to look like cool raiders, so they do. And then they decide that acting like them is a good idea. Then they get drunk and get a little too into it and somehow acquire illegal weapons.”

“This happen often?” Celestia asked.

“Not really,” Eve admitted. “It just happens enough that it really draws attention to Earth Vitis.”

“Hey! You don’t get to shame us! Versist!” the leader of the group shouted, spitting on the ground.

Eve fixed him with a ‘seriously?’ look.

“Don’t you dare look down on me, you high and mighty bitch!”

“Right, can’t talk to these people,” Eve declared.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Celestia said, leaning in to the leader. “Sir, can you tell us why we’re being Versist and ‘high and mighty’?”

The man looked at her with rage. “You’re… You’re asking? What the hell is wrong with you? This is exactly what I’m talking about, you see?”

One of the girls piped up. “Yeah! What he said!”

Celestia raised an eyebrow. “I see that you’re angry. And it’s not at us – you’re angry at the world. Afraid as well, wanting to protect yourselves from the change however you can. I understand the feeling, believe me, but I also understand that acting on that inner desire is not—”

“Are you talking down to us?” another one of the men said. “Listen to the sun god! Oh, praise her for being so pristine and regal!”

Celestia shook her head. “You do not need to praise me. You do not even need to like me. You can hate me for all I care. I’m just here to help you.”

“Screw you and your help. It’s gotten us tied up.”

Celestia took on a sad smile. “You can be released – it’s not like anyone actually got hurt. You’re just confused, and you need some guidance.”

“Wait, hold up,” a second woman said. “Are you going to let us go?”

“Praise the sun!” one of the men declared. “It has come to save us!”

The leader who had been so rude before adjusted his expression. “I… I… We’re so sorry princess. Can you ever forgive us?”

“I can forgive you, easily. But you do need to understand that forgiveness is a gift, an—”
Eve grabbed Celestia by the wing. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

“Eve, I’m just—“

“I know, I need to talk to you now.” She dragged Celestia a few meters away.

“Eve, I was getting through to them!”

“No, you were being used.”

“Of course I know that, Evening,” Celestia raised an eyebrow. “They changed behavior far too quickly. But after I had given them the talk, they wouldn’t be able to forget it.”

“Celestia, things are very different out here. That works really well with ponies on Equestria, and with most ponies, but those kinds of people?” She gestured at the five tied up humans. “They’re not going to change their ways because a princess gave them a pep talk. I’ve met many of these kinds of humans, and they will do almost anything to keep from changing how they look at life, including lying to themselves and getting extremely angry. Human minds are not as malleable as pony ones, generally.”

Celestia blinked. “You’re certain of this?”

“Definitely, in this case. We do need to forgive them – but they can’t just be let off the hook. They need to be put in the system and watched. Fined at the very least for the damage they’ve done, and… Okay if I’m being honest here punishment doesn’t really help them change either, but at least it deters them from being stupid even more.” Eve sighed. “I’m sorry Celestia, but the idea of quick redemption doesn’t work that often out here, especially with the humans from Earth Vitis.”

“This… is somewhat depressing.”

“It’s not your fault, you rarely deal with these kinds of people. You’re separated from the politics of most Earths, seeing only our friends from those places. But you do need to learn. They’re a very stubborn race. You have to learn to make judgment calls.” She glanced over her shoulder. “It is possible that one of them could have changed after just one conversation. But if we want to change one of them, it takes forming a relationship with them over a long course of time. And we generally don’t have time to do that. So we have to make the best of the situation.”

Celestia nodded. “I understand. I am sorry I didn’t understand this.”

“It’s okay,” Eve said. “Ready to go back?”

“Sure.”

Eve trotted back to the prisoners. “Yes, you are forgiven.”

“Woohoo!”

“You’re still going to jail for possession of weapons illegal in Equis Cosmic without a license. And destruction of property.”

“Bullshit!” one of the women shouted. “She was going to-“

“Shush,” Luna said. “You’re going to be offered a deal.”

Eve nodded. “If you tell the authorities where you got the illegal weapons, and how you got them to this universe, your sentence will be significantly lessened. Understood?”
The leader nodded.

“Good. Law enforcement will take you away now.” She walked away, Celestia and Luna following her.

Luna stretched her wings. “Well, despite that, I still feel invigorated by the massage. Let’s go somewhere else though, I’m done with this place.”

Eve produced the dimensional device. “Where do you want to go?”

Celestia blinked. “Uh… You know best Eve, you decide.”

“I have no idea what else I want to do.”

“Gem Vein,” Luna said. “They’ve got some cool worlds. And judging by the Gem that just walked out of that portal, one of them is closely related to this planet. We could walk there right now.”

“Sure, why not. Give me a sec though.” Eve checked to make sure the connection was safe with a tiny portal before opening a larger one. The three of them stepped through to one of the Gem Vein’s fully developed worlds. Which was to say, they appeared on a crystalline platform off the edge of a building – above them, buildings rose into the sky, and below them, the gigantic geometric structures descended further than they could see. As far as the three alicorns were concerned, there was no surface to the planet.

They saw mostly Gems walking around in every color of the rainbow. Some gems were smaller than the alicorns, some larger – some looked at them with curiosity while others just continued about their day without giving them a second glance. Eve could see a few non-Gems around, presumably from the world they had just left. Pegasi were the easiest to see, but a human or two walked around like they belonged. Eve wondered if they had jobs – Gems were notoriously big on keeping things organized and within a ‘purpose’. They had little patience for those who didn’t have a place in society.

“Everything looks… very organized,” Celestia commented. “Mechanical, almost.”

“Gems are technically artificial lifeforms,” Eve commented. “They are made, not born, though I’m not exactly clear on the process behind making a Gem. They operate a lot like machines at times, while their internal magic makes them a bit more than that. They like every cog to be in its place. It’s a bit restrictive for my tastes, but it works for them.”

Celestia looked down at a group of Peridot-Gems walking in formation, talking about furthering magitech with unicorn power. One Peridot in the back looked really, really bored. “What if there is a Gem that doesn’t want to fit in the gears?”

“Ah,” Eve said, sighing. “They used to just shatter Gems that didn’t fit in.”

“…Used to?” Luna asked.

“That’s one of the good things about Unification. We can say we won’t allow such wanton disregard for life in a legal system for any race involved in the process. The Diamonds really want to be part of the multiversal unity, so they were willing to adjust. The punishment for not fitting in is ‘banishment’ most often, which just means they get shipped to the Hub or some other universe. I think it’s an elegant solution, frankly.”

Celestia furrowed her brow. “I- Of course, Eve, you know best.” She laughed nervously. “Should I not even be talking about these things here?”
Eve shook her head. “The Diamonds aren’t that totalitarian Celestia. Just don’t insult the Diamonds themselves and you’ll be fine.”

“Right, right. Of course.”

“…Are you okay?”

Celestia smiled. ‘I’m fine, Twilight. What can a pony do on a Gem world such as this?’

“They aren’t much for recreation, but they do have competitions we can watch,” Eve said.

Luna raised an eyebrow. “Combat training? This sounds interesting.”

“How many?” Celestia asked, looking around. “Should we wave someone down?”

Eve pulled out the Guide. “I can just find it. You two just walk around, I’ll be right here.”

“Walk… Around?” Celestia said, blinking.

Luna smirked. “Come. Tia, let us watch these Gem women hustle about their city! Hurrah!”

“Do they want to be called women?” Celestia asked. “I’m not sure. They don’t actually have a gender, if I’m remembering what I read right. But ‘it’ sounds derogatory…”

“Every Gem I’ve come across is referred to as a ‘her’,” Luna said. “So it’s safe to make that assumption. Though it’s not like I’m an expert or anything.”

Celestia nodded slowly. “Right…”

‘Heh. Look at that orange Gem down there. Can’t hold all those boxes. Why doesn’t she just use a hover lift? I know they have them.’

Celestia looked down at the Gem having such a hard time. Her mischievous inner nature forced a smile to her face. She had the sudden urge to use her magic to fix all the boxes in an instant, just to mess with the Gem, but she held herself back. What if that wasn’t accepted here? She didn’t know this culture. It was a whole other universe – nothing like Dragons, or Changelings. Even more alien than humans.

She shook her head and backed away from the edge.

“Tia? Are you doing okay?”

“I’m fine, Lu-“

“Found it!” Eve declared. “It’s three buildings that way! Ready for a bunch of teleports?”

“Are they okay with that?”

“Who cares?” Luna declared. “TO THE COMBAT ARENA!”

Celestia gulped, waiting to teleport until after Eve had teleported herself.

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There were eight. Flutterfree, Renee, O’Neill, Daniel, the Rainbow Dash, Thor, Emerald, and the Earth Vitis Applejack all took positions in a close circle. All eight of them could see all seven of the
others. The arena wasn’t exactly small, but it wasn’t going to be a long fight given how close everyone was.

Flutterfree turned to O’Neill – and he winked at her. She winked back.

Renee gave the two of them the playful death eyes. Daniel tried to as well, but he just didn’t have the face to sell it.

“Ready!” Josuke yelled, holding a gun in the air with Crazy Diamond. It just looked like it was floating to everyone.

“SET!” he called, and all eight people prepared for chaos.

Crazy Diamond fired the gun. “GO!”

The Rainbow Dash, Emerald, and Applejack charged into a fray with each other. Flutterfree noted that they weren’t going to be a problem for a while, so she focused on Daniel and Renee. She flew into the air, pulling back the string on her bow of light – only for Renee to tear it out of her hooves with her telekinesis.

“Sorry darling,” Renee said, drawing the string of the bow herself. “Nothing personal, you understand.”

O’Neill interrupted her use of the bow with fire from his assault rifle. Renee blocked it with a magic shield, but it did make her lose aim with the bow of light. Flutterfree dove in, reaching her hooves out for the bow, only to run right into another of Renee’s shields.

“Daniel, dear, shoot her!”

Daniel drew his zat gun and fired at Flutterfree. She flipped into the air, dodging the bolt of energy just barely. Daniel took the opportunity to get on Renee – she reared up, grinning. “Now we’ve got you.” Daniel fired multiple times, his fire accentuated by Renee’s crystalline magic.

Flutterfree hid behind O’Neill. “I need that bow to do anything!”

O’Neill ducked behind the rock Jolyne was always using, allowing it to absorb the impact. “I’m going to throw a grenade. You make use of the opportunity, okay?”

“Got it,” she said.

Renee chuckled to herself. “We have them now. Cornered behind a – GRENADE!” She shrieked, rearing onto her hind hooves in panic. This made Daniel fall off, causing Renee’s attempt to flee to fail – she was not used to being a mount.

The grenade exploded right next to them.

Flutterfree had been going for her bow, but the moment she saw the grenade explode much closer to the two of them she shrieked. “Renee! Daniel!”

“Crap,” O’Neill muttered, leaving his cover and running for the two of them. He had seen limbs go flying.

Flutterfree held Renee’s hoof – which felt lifeless.

“JOSUKE! GET OVER HERE NOW!” O’Neill shouted, checking Daniel. “That was just a distraction shot, what the hell?!”
Josuke touched both Daniel and Renee with Crazy Diamond, returning them to the world of the healthy in an instant. “Calm down you two,” he told Flutterfree and O’Neill. “They’re fine and they were always going to be fine.”

Flutterfree grabbed her chest. “I… I… I just saw Renee’s leg go over there and I panicked and I couldn’t think and…”

O’Neill grabbed the bridge of his nose. “I thought… It might have been a bit much. It was…”

“…Just supposed to be a distraction?” Daniel suggested.

“Yeah,” O’Neill said. “That. You weren’t even supposed to feel anything more than a rush of air from it.”

Josuke shook his head at the two of them. “You two aren’t out yet. The fight’s still going.”

Flutterfree looked up to see the Rainbow Dash coming at them, full speed. She dodged out of the way – but O’Neill didn’t. He fell to the ground, out cold.

Flutterfree picked up the bow of light and aimed. The Rainbow Dash thought she couldn’t fire fast enough – she was wrong. The arrow sailed true and hit the Rainbow Dash right in the mechanical wing, breaking it again. She fell to the ground, out.

Flutterfree lowered the bow and looked around. Emerald’s gem was on the ground, Applejack was being healed by Josuke and taken off the field… Was she the last one standing?

Then she felt an energy weapon hit her in the back of the head. She fell to the ground, out.

She came to only a moment later, realizing Thor was standing over her. “Oh. I… I kind of forgot about you.”

Thor nodded, extending a gray hand to her. “My race is small and diminutive, easy to miss. I just took advantage of this and waited for the fighting to be over before making a move.”

“Clever Thor, as always,” O’Neill said, sitting up. “Ow, my back…”

“I’m old. It was hurting beforehand.”

“You? Old? Spend time with Joseph. Then you can learn what old means.”

“SPEAK OF THE DEVIL AND HE SHALL APPEAR!” Pinkie called, pointing to a car that had just pulled up to Joestar Central. Joseph Joestar came out of the passenger side, cane in hand.

“Ah, old man,” Jotaro said. “How was spaceship flying?”

“Crashed it,” Joseph said. “To the surprise of everyone but me.” He laughed bitterly.

“Aw…” Pinkie said, hopping up to him. “That’s sad. Here, have a consolation cupcake!”

Joseph smirked and took it. “I heard you also knew the art of pulling things out of nowhere.”

“Yeah!” she produced her party cannon. “What kinds of stuff can you do?”

“In my prime I got an airplane from nowhere,” Joseph said, grinning. “That was fun. That was also
the first airplane I crashed. Into a volcano. Ah, memories…”

Flutterfree glanced at Jotaro. “Is he…?”

“His mind is fine right now. All that really happened.” He rolled his shoulders. “Old man, you’ve come at a good time. I’ve selected four new Stand users.”

“Oh? This should be interesting.”

Flutterfree held her breath – had she been selected? She made it to second to last, but she knew from last time that Jotaro wasn’t deciding based just on performance.

“First, Thor, you’ve proven yourself to be level headed and intelligent, even under extreme stress. You remain reasonable at all times.” Jotaro tossed the small gray alien a pill. “You also won, so that just adds to your merit.”

“This gift humbles me,” Thor said, downing the pill. “What results should I expect?”

“You should be able to summon your Stand after only a few seconds – but it does sometimes take a few days for a user to figure out how to summon their Stand. If you can’t make it appear just by willing, don’t overstrain yourself.”

Thor nodded. “I am starting to see more… I assume the pink being next to Josuke is Crazy Diamond?”

“Yes. And this is Star Platinum.”

“Impressive.”

Flutterfree sighed. “Still can’t see them.”

Jotaro moved to the Rainbow Dash next. “Rainbow… Dash. Do you have an alternate name?”

“Razor Will of Lai,” she said. “About time you asked.”

Jotaro tossed her a pill as well. “You show determination, an awareness of your own limits, and a deep loyalty. You’ve earned this.”

“Oh come on!” Rainbow Dash shouted. “She gets one?!"

Joseph shrugged. “This may also be an apology for us using her as bait with Toph’s group.”

Jotaro grabbed his hat. “Good grief…” he turned to O’Neill. “You are clever, plucky, and while you ramble a bit you deserve that title of General you hold. You also show concern for others, and perhaps the strongest warrior spirit here.” He tossed him a pill. “I was going to give this to someone else since you were getting too invested in a competition, but you overcame that.”

O’Neill swallowed his pill. “Thanks.” Unlike Thor and Razor, who had yet to summon their Stands, O’Neill’s came forth almost instantly. Flutterfree only knew because of his reaction. “My Stand… is a piece of sushi?”

“Looks like a fish to me!” Jolyne called. “A nice red fish!”

“It’s sushi,” O’Neill said. “…Sushi. Nice name.”

“Stand names usually have a bit more than that,” Josuke called.
“Is there some rule to them?”

“We used to name them out of tarot cards,” Jotaro said. “We ran out. We sometimes add colors, but only if you want.”

O’Neill examined his Stand. “…Crimson Sushi. That’s your name. What does he do?”

“I have no idea,” Jotaro said. “That’s for you to figure out.”

He then turned to the last one he accepted – Flutterfree. Flutterfree’s eyes widened. “…Really?”

“Yes. You are the kindest person I have ever seen. Normally I would consider that a weakness, but you showed today how it drives you to fight, even though you have almost no powers to your name.” He tossed her the pill. “You deserve this probably more than anyone else here.”

Renee sighed. “Well, Daniel, looks like we lost.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow. “Mind telling us why, Jotaro?”

“You became obsessed with the competition,” Jotaro explained. “In addition, Daniel, you don’t really have the spirit of a warrior, and Renee, I believe you already have enough of an edge.”

Renee bowed. “Of course. It is your decision, after all.”

“Regretting giving Eve one?” Daniel asked.

Jotaro looked into the distance. He didn’t answer.

Flutterfree downed the pill. She felt its weirdness swim into her almost instantly. The first thing she felt change were her eyes. She could see what she couldn’t before. Crazy Diamond was the easiest – the pink and gray humanoid was still out, holding Emerald’s gemstone, slowly realizing that it couldn’t force Emerald to reconstitute her body. Flutterfree was overcome by the strange shapes of the humanoid – it seemed to have mechanical pipes on the back of its neck, a strange heart design on the top of its head, and… Well it just looked alien.

She saw Star Platinum for a moment – still alien, though not as odd. A heavily muscular man with strange, flowing hair and an angled face. Its fists had metal balls on their ends, and its pink and blue skin had simple designs made of squares on them. The Stand wore a loincloth that Flutterfree presumed was actually a part of its body.

Flutterfree caught a glimpse of Hermit Purple – just a bunch of purple thorny vines that extended from Joseph’s hands, currently being used to mess with Pinkie’s tail. Jolyne’s Stand – Stone Free? Was that the name? – was a blue being made of strings which had currently made a jump rope for the girl that she was enjoying tremendously. Stone Free was only as large as Jolyne herself, just like how Star Platinum was the size of Jotaro.

And then there was O’Neill’s new stand – Crimson Sushi. It looked like a deep, red fish about half the size of O’Neill, with three fins instead of just two. It had two, deep, black eyes with no pupils, and a third eye floating away from its forehead a couple inches. The third eye seemed to both burn and freeze at the same time. She felt like it was staring right at her, even though it was looking more in Jotaro’s direction.

Then Flutterfree’s Stand activated without her even trying. She felt it course through her body – thousands of tiny wires spiraling through her muscles. She felt her face shift in structure slightly as the Stand revealed itself. Her stomach did a flip-flop, feeling strangely hungry all of the sudden.
Then the Stand itself appeared in front of her – green lines traced out from her wingtips, forming mathematical patterns similar to the kind she had seen on math chalkboards in the school of friendship. Circles upon circles came together, forming a pinkish-purple flower shape in front of her. Mathematically speaking, the lines were forming a spirograph shape, but Flutterfree couldn’t help but see anything besides a flower. A lotus made from math…

“Lotus Locus,” she said, the name just coming to her suddenly. “This is Lotus Locus. Or Lolo for short.”

She then realized everyone was staring at her. “What?” she said, confused.

Jotaro leaned down to look at her. “Your Stand… It activated its effect.” He pointed at Thor and Razor – both of their Stands had apparently been forced to reveal themselves. Razor’s was a pegasus made entirely out of metal and wires, while Thor’s was a series of three glowing spheres that constantly orbited around each other. “Everyone can see those. Not just us Stand users.”

Flutterfree looked around. “Oh, so… So mine reveals what is hidden?”

“In more ways than one, dear,” Renee said, producing a mirror. Flutterfree looked into it – and was startled. It was definitely her face that looked back, but it wasn’t quite the one she had woken up to this morning. Her eyes were now red, her ears slightly pointed, and her mouth had fangs.

She checked her wings – still normal pegasus wings. But her face… It was almost like when she had been a vampire pony in the fruitbat incident, long before they had found the multiverse… Hadn’t Eve said that that spell had never completely gone away?

Flutterfree looked at the spirograph form of Lolo. “You… Awakened this?”

Lolo couldn’t speak or think on its own; it just shifted, extending its green neon lines in vaguely vine-like patterns around itself.

“I… I’m not sure how I feel about this,” Flutterfree said. “Besides hungry.”

Applejack the human tossed her an apple. Flutterfree caught it in her mouth – as if by instinct – and drained it of all its juices. “Thanks. You know, that didn’t feel very weird at all, actually…” She stretched her wings.

“So… You’re a vampire?” Jotaro asked.

“Of sorts,” Flutterfree said. “Though I mostly hunger for fruit instead of blood. Though I wouldn’t put it past these teeth to devour flesh…”

Joseph put a hand on Jotaro’s shoulder. “Easy. She’s clearly not like our vampires.”

Jotaro nodded slowly. “I can see that.”

“You had a run-in with vampires?” O’Neill said.

“The biggest enemy of the Joestar family was a vampire by the name of Dio,” Joseph explained. “He’s caused more than a few problems for us, even after he was killed.”

Flutterfree nodded. “I promise not to devour any of your flesh or cause your family any trouble. I do want to know what Lolo can do… And I think everyone else here wants to know what their new Stands can do as well.”
Jotaro nodded. “I’m uncertain, since most Stands are unique, but from what I’ve seen Lolo looks to be a utility stand, like Hermit Purple, rather than combat oriented.” He glanced around. “Its ability appears to be a sort of Revelation, the uncovering of what is hidden, unlocking the potential within. I have no doubt that you’ve received a significant boost now that your ‘vampire’ nature has been brought forth.”

“Alushy is never going to give you a break,” O’Neill said.

“No, no she isn’t…” Flutterfree said. “Can I turn it off?”

Jotaro shrugged. “Try recalling your Stand.”

Flutterfree wished Lolo to vanish, and the expansive patterns of waves and spirals retreated into Flutterfree’s body. Not much looked different to Flutterfree.

Renee raised her hoof. “I can’t see the Stands anymore.”

Flutterfree glanced at the mirror. “But I’m still a vampire.” She checked her teeth in the mirror. “Odd.”

“Wait,” Joseph said. “I thought vampires didn’t have reflections? …Your next line will be ‘different vampires do different things’.”


Joseph grinned mischievously. “I’ll never tell.”

Flutterfree looked at herself in the levitating mirror – and smiled.

She decided she was going to make the most of this. She now had a power, something new, something not to be afraid of. She would use it to bring kindness to the multiverse. She would use it to help her friends on her quests.

She would find the potential in everyone she came across.

It was at this point the mirror disappeared, replaced with Renee. “Uh…”


Flutterfree blinked, sticking out her hoof. It went right through Renee - hitting the mirror. “Oh. You change the visual locations of objects?”

“Looks like it!”

“AUGH! This rock wasn’t there before!” Rainbow Dash shouted, holding her hoof in pain.

“Yes it was,” O’Neill said, chuckling. “I’ve been given too much power…”

Flutterfree activated Lolo fully, removing all of O’Neill’s illusions. He had already scrambled the locations of everyone in the field just for fun, evidently. “Good thing I’m here to keep you in check.”

O’Neill smirked.
A Jasper kicked a Smoky Quartz in the face, poofing their body and letting their gemstone drop to the ground. She raised her fists in victory.

Celestia started clapping – but quickly realized that the other Gems watching weren’t. She lowered her hooves instantly. “Do we… clap?”

“Clap if you want to,” Eve said. “You’re here to enjoy yourself after all.”

“But is it acceptable?”

Eve bit her lip. “Well, I wouldn’t say it is, but the Gems are pretty official about this. Go ahead and show your difference.”

“Show my difference?”

“Yeah! Do what you want.” Eve looked around nervously. “You’re Celestia!”

“But, I’m supposed to follow you since you know more.”

“Follow me? You? Don’t be ridiculous—”

“For the love of my Moon…” Luna grunted, producing a dimensional device and taking them to another universe. She dragged all of them in and closed the portal behind them. They found themselves on a planet where a man was making sandwiches.

“…This is new,” he said. “Name’s Arthur. Arthur Den-”

“Yeah, nice to meet you Arthur, give us a moment we’re going to have a heart-to-heart,” Luna said. She turned to Eve and Celestia. “You two.”

“I’m sorry I don’t know how to act out here!” Celestia decreed. “I jus-”

“Stop that. Stop that now. You do know how to act. You are Celestia, princess of the Sun and ruler of Equestria. You just let Twilight get into your head – she corrected you once, because you needed it, and suddenly you thought you needed to follow her in everything. And Eve—”

“What did I do?”

“You didn’t notice what was up with Celestia, and then you felt nervous about telling her what she needed to do because she still has an air of authority in your mind. You felt bad about telling her off.” Luna cleared her throat. “Let me make one thing clear. Neither of you two are the teacher of the other anymore. You. Are. Friends. You might even be family of some kind. But you’re not mentor-student, not at all.” Luna let out a deep sigh.

Celestia blinked. “…You’ve been holding that in for a while, haven’t you?”

“NO, REALLY?” Luna blurted. “You have no idea how long I’ve seen you two doing this. I thought you’d resolve it yourselves and we could just enjoy ourselves today, but no. Looks like I have to do it.”

Eve blinked. “Well… This has been illuminating. I… I’m sorry. I’m just not sure if I can move past Celestia being my teacher that quickly…”

“It’s been years,” Luna declared. “Make an effort. You were doing well at the philosophy discussion, as much as it annoyed me. I saw what you two needed to be right there. You had it. And… Well it worked.” Luna rubbed her head. “Clearly, I am not a master of emotions or the mind,
as this little rant should make obvious, but I hope my point is getting across.”

“Loud and clear,” Celestia said. “…Luna, what do you suggest we do to get past this?”

Luna shrugged. “I don’t know. Go on a vacation and actually relax? Instead of getting nervous about everything?”

Eve lit up. “Equestria. Let’s go to Equestria to take our vacation. Ponyville is the perfect mix of Celestia’s and my domains. We could go to the Pinkie Emporium!”

“That sounds wonderful!” Celestia declared.

“And do you two promise to not worry about how the other thinks?” Luna asked.

Eve and Celestia gave her uncertain looks.

“…I’ll take that as a ‘we’ll try’. Good enough.” She turned back to Arthur. “Sorry about this.”

Arthur shrugged. “Not the weirdest thing that’s happened. Would you like to stay for lunch? I can make sandwiches. I’m really good at it.”

Luna smirked. “Yeah. Yeah we can stay for lunch. How many sandwiches do you all want?”

“Forty-two,” Celestia answered.

Luna blinked. “Why forty-two?”

“I have no idea, actually, it just seems like an appropriately absurd number.”

“Fine then. Forty-two sandwiches,” Luna declared. “Can you do that?”

Arthur was staring at them almost like he’d seen a ghost. “…Coming right up.” He set to work.

Eve blinked. “I wonder what his story is.”

“Probably something either very interesting or very boring,” Celestia answered.

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In the Hub, there was a small building that housed a single man by the name of Ford Prefect. This man was the self-proclaimed genius behind The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Multiverse. He was drinking a cup of coffee, examining his ‘reader-submitted requests’.

Back in the day, he had been a single editor for a Guide of a single universe. But now, here he was, the man in charge of a Guide for an entire multiverse. And the best thing? It was self-correcting. Any time there was a clear error, there would be an angry email sent directly to Ford, and he would edit the Guide instantly.

He loved the message Eve set – so many vast corrections on so many articles she just read and submitted her thoughts on. He could write entirely new articles based completely on her rants! It was glorious!

Plus, he could also say that ‘the Guide brings even Princesses closer together’ based on the story she had relayed. She was just trying to congratulate him on a successful book that did some good, but he was going to milk that for everything it was worth.
Oh, and her direct assertion that “Don’t Panic” was definitely a good piece of advice for every explorer wasn’t bad either.

Life was good.

Another email popped up from one of his sources that totally-wasn’t-Sombra but he-totally-knew-was-Sombra. It was about Flutterfree and vampirism on Earth Stand…

That’d be interesting.

He’d probably write this one himself, rather than handing it off to some secondary writer like usual.
A Wedding Between Worlds

Renee had known exactly where she wanted to get married since she was a little filly. If she was in a reasonable mood back then, she would have admitted that it was never going to happen. She just wasn’t important enough, wasn’t *connected* enough, to have the perfect wedding at the perfect place.

Now was a very different story. When the time had come to choose a location, it turned out she had already been making plans.

The wedding was to be held in the grand hall of Canterlot Castle, the same place the Grand Galloping Gala was held every year. The highest class location in all of Equis Vitis – *the* place she had set her dreams on. There had hardly been any debate – she said that was where the wedding was happening, and that was where it was happening.

It did help that Daniel didn’t really have any specific place in mind – the SGC wasn’t a very impressive place on the inside, and the other world he had called home didn’t exist anymore. He thought Canterlot hall would be perfect, even though his experience at the last Gala had been… lackluster. Admittedly at this point everyone knew the Gala was a bore because of how regimented and ancient it was – this celebration was being crafted by Pinkie Pie, so it was guaranteed to be better in almost every conceivable way.

It was the day of the wedding. A beautiful, crystal clear day with a slight chill leftover from Winter Wrap Up the week prior. It was early enough in the day to still be considered morning, so not all that many ponies of Canterlot were out and about. The streets didn’t look dead, but they certainly weren’t choked with hoof traffic. It was in this scenery that Reverend Starlight Glimmer found herself as she trotted to the front gates of Canterlot Castle, humming a little tune of worship to herself.

She was not surprised at all when the royal guard barred her entry, as they were supposed to do with virtually anyone. “It’s okay, I’m the Reverend. For the wedding.”

They stared at her blankly.

Rev summoned her invitation and Equis Vitis marriage license. She raised an eyebrow. “This proof enough for you?”

“You’re just… early,” one of the guards said. “That’s suspicious.”

“Yeah, we’ve got to be extra careful,” the other added. “Last time I was on guard duty during a wedding there was a Changeling invasion.”

Rev raised an eyebrow. “I’m early because I’m the ‘officiant’. Plus, I can’t be the first, I’m sure Pinkie’s already there.”

“She’s the only one,” a guard said. “I don’t-“

“REV!!” Pinkie’s squeal smashed into everypony’s eardrums, forcing them to wince. The Pink Party Pony was suddenly standing in the middle of the three of them. “Yay! You made it! You can help me set up!”

Rev adjusted her collar and nodded. “Of course. After I make sure the podium i-“
Pinkie picked up Rev and dragged her past the guards before they could object. Rev didn’t even get to see the rest of the castle; she was dragged through the double doors of the Gala Hall sooner than should have been possible.

The interior looked absolutely gorgeous. The walls were lined with shimmering, crystalline banners with intricate designs that were reminiscent of languages from hundreds of worlds. A larger banner that hung across the ceiling bore a stylized version of Renee’s cutie mark and a symbol Daniel had chosen to represent himself: a point with three lines coming out of it creating a sort of reverse triangle. The symbol was that of a world Daniel had once called home: a world that had been destroyed, Rev knew, long before Earth Tau’ri had made contact with Equis Vitis. Daniel had had a family there, once.

Rev shook her head – today was not a day to think of past tragedies, but to look to the future. Besides the shimmering banners, there were also perfectly trimmed indoor bushes, a number of abstract statues constructed from magic gemstones that filled the hall with a warm color, and a stage with a pew made from a synthetic Earth Tau’ri material that Rev could not identify. It sure looked cool.

“Yeah, Renee was totally here last night,” Rev said. “Do you even have a job to do at this point?” she asked Pinkie.

Pinkie smirked. “You bet it Revvy!” She produced a round table from nothing. “Ka-BAM! Still need tables! Lots of tables! Round tables spread everywhere!”

“It’s a welcome change from dividing the families down the middle,” Rev commented, walking up to the futuristic pew and finding it satisfactory. “Symbolic as it is, we are going to be here a while. And it would make Daniel’s side look rather small.”

“There’s not even any reserved seating aside from the primary table!” She threw a long, rectangular table down at the front of the room, slightly to the side of the aisle that was being created by the other tables. “I’ll push that into a central position later.”

Rev nodded. “Guess I’m sitting there after the ceremony?”

“You bet! I can change it if you want though.”

Rev smiled. “I’ll sit there, don’t worry. Though I will be mingling. I hear you’ve got quite the punch.”

Pinkie smirked. “I mean, I dooo but I won’t be using that punch until after the actual ceremony. Renee would shred me if something went wrong before that.” She shivered. “The wrath of the fashion horse is something you do not want to experience.”

“The wrath of the party pony is worse, from what I hear,” Rev commented, using her magic to lay some tablecloths on the tables.

“Eh, maybe. Probably. Definitely.” Pinkie set up an entire snack table with a flick of her hoof. “But I’m a lot less likely to completely freak out at some drunk pony breaking a chair, or something.”

“Rarits tend to be like that.” Rev summoned silverware from the aether and arranged it in what she hoped was the correct arrangement for Equis Vitis customs – many universes were annoyingly slightly different on that count. Pinkie wasn’t objecting, so it was probably right.

Pinkie furrowed her brow. “You know, normally at this point I’d sprinkle confetti everywhere, but Renee knows what she wants. I’ll just create a different sort of surprise…”
“If I don’t get an explosion of some kind I’m going to be disappointed,” Rev said with a smirk.

Pinkie blinked, then chuckled. “You’re quite the pastor.”

“I’m still a Starlight. I get to be wild from time to time. And it’s a myth that being a Reverend requires being calm, serene, and boring all the time. Joy is one of the fruits of the spirit after all; and being regimented, high, and mighty kinda goes against that.”

“Gotcha.” Pinkie slid up close to her. “So00000… How’s Flutterfree been doing?”

“Of course you know,” Rev said, not surprised in the least.

“She actually told me about her visits, but yeah, I would have known regardless,” Pinkie smiled.

“Well, she’s doing great right now. It never ceases to amaze me how internal conflict can invigorate somepony’s faith. She’s been much more than a passive observer at the service lately ever since she got Lolo.”

Pinkie patted Rev on the back. “You do good work, Rev.”

“Thanks. Though I’m sure she would have gotten through the ‘I’m a vampire’ thing with you girls as well.”

“Eh, the others were kinda treating it like it was no big deal,” Pinkie admitted. “Noooot the best thing to do. She needed somepony to take her fears seriously.”

“She’s a strong mare,” Rev said. “I find it strange how Fluttershys can be both the weakest and strongest individuals across the multiverse. I’ve met ones that would break at the sight of injury, while Flutterfree is ready to take on the entirety of the cosmic cruelty and be nice to it.”

“That’s our Flutterfree all right!” Pinkie declared, completing the setting of the table.

“…Who else knows?” Rev asked. “I’ve been encouraging her to tell everypony, but I know she hasn’t.”

“I know, Applejack knows, Discord knows, and Renee knows. Renee only found out recently, because you came up in wedding plan conversations.”

“Discord’s keeping a secret?” Rev shook her head. “Do my ears deceive me?”

“He’ll do almost anything Flutterfree asks him,” Pinkie explained.

“Should I be preparing a service for them?” Rev joked.

Pinkie chuckled. “Hey. Rev. They’re standing right behind you.”

Rev flushed purple as a grape and slowly turned around. “Why h-hello Discord! Flutterfree! You’re here early!”

Discord just stared at her and blinked while Flutterfree covered her face with her wings.

Discord put a claw to his chin. “You know, I can’t say I’ve ever thought about it that way.”

Flutterfree whimpered.

Rev put a hoof on her shoulder. “Hey, Flutterfree. It was just a joke – though admittedly probably
Flutterfree removed her wings from her face, revealing her red eyes. “I… It’s okay. I have come across several others of us who are like that. But we’re not. Okay?”

Rev hugged Flutterfree. “Of course.”

Discord glanced at Pinkie. “So, where’s the chaos punch?”

“Not until after, Discord. Think of Renee.”

“I’m thinking of the priceless look on her face.”

“Diiiscooooord…” Pinkie droned.

“I kid. …Mostly.”

“DISCORD!”

“Fine, fine, I’ll behave.”

Pinkie glared at him. “I better not hear a maybe in there.”

“Perhaps.”

Flutterfree, having recovered from her embarrassment, fixed Discord with an eyebrow raise. “Discord, please behave yourself for Renee’s wedding, ’kay?”

“Okay…”

“Good.”

Pinkie nodded. “Well, if you guys are arriving, I should probably get to greeting duty!” She appeared next to the grand doors of the hall. “ANNOUNCING PINKIE PIE OF E-“ she coughed on her own speech.

“Nice,” Diane deadpanned, trotting into the hall with a camera. She started taking pictures of the decorations.

“I was introducing myself…” Pinkie muttered.

“Yeah you were!” human Pinkie said, appearing behind Diane.

“Oh no! We’re in the same place!” pony Pinkie squealed. “REALITY ISN’T READY!”

“REALITY BETTER GET READY, BABY!” They did a combination hoofbump/high-five.

Diane trotted out of the hall.

“Hey, where are you going?” Rev asked.

Diane forced a smile. “I was just here to check out the decorations as possible inspiration. Wasn’t all that interested otherwise.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Diane waved, then left.
“Yeah, that’s a weird one,” human Pinkie said.

“She’s doing pretty well though!” pony Pinkie added.

“Yep!”

Rev shrugged, turning back to Flutterfree. “So, whenever we talk about Lolo it’s always about how you can cope with what it does. Have you figured out some fun things yet?”

Flutterfree smiled. “Well, besides tapping into the ‘potential’ of everyone around me – still don’t understand how that works exactly – Lolo’s body is very flexible. I can stretch it out for miles and set up ‘cameras’ along the lines to help me see things. So long as nothing breaks them, it works great. By the way, I’m making you glow again.”

Rev looked at her reflection in one of the crystalline statues – her eyes had a soft white glow to them and her cross necklace was floating. “Ah. Just don’t let any actual undead touch me, everything should be fine.”

“Alushy’s going to try to touch you anyway,” Flutterfree commented.

“Alushy has enough durability to survive a holy exorcism by a Pope,” Rev commented. “I am not worried for her sake.”

Flutterfree chuckled. “Sounds about right.”

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The attendees of the wedding slowly trickled into the hall, turning the empty room into quite the bustle of activity. There were guests from every single one of the major worlds – humans from AID, Toph’s team from Lai, some scientists from Equis Cosmic along with Cosmo herself, many Stargate Command personnel, some Asgard, the Joestars, and even Emerald. Notably she was the only representative of the Gem Vein, here more out of curiosity than anything else.

There was also a set of people nobody had seen in awhile.

“Link!” Vivian called, rushing to him. “Oh we haven’t seen you in forever!”

Link smiled, holding Romani tight. “It has been a while.”

Lieshy took her position next to Vivian. “I’ll say. How’s the family?”

“We’re doing well, considering,” Romani said. “Most people don’t realize that we were your friends, so we’ve lived in relative peace.”

“Good for raising kids,” Midna said, appearing out of Link’s shadow. “Bad for adventures. There hasn’t been anything dangerous in a while.”

“You avoided war?” Vivian asked.

Link nodded. “No wars broke out. Ardent stands as a strong alliance… Against anything from other worlds.”

Toph walked up to them. “That might be good. You didn’t get attacked by the University. Your world is probably safe from anything out here, now.”

Link furrowed his brow. “That is right… Still feels wrong though.”
“Don’t I know it.”

“How’s that sword been treating you?”

Toph twirled the Master Sword. “Excellently. I’m basically Queen Luna’s personal General now, so I must be doing something right with the hero’s destiny.”

“I remember when I first met you,” Link said. “You were a stubborn kid.”

Toph smirked. “And now look at me, a stubborn woman. So impressive.”

Link laughed. “Yes. That is exactly what you’ve become.”

“I would ask for a sword duel, but that can wait for later,” Toph gestured behind her. “How about snacks for now?”

“Oh, snacks!” Midna said. “I need exotic snacks back in my life. GIVE!”

Elsewhere in the hall, Vriska was strolling around, whistling innocently. She leaned against a bare wall, glancing nonchalantly at one of the indoor bushes next to her. She smiled at the bush. “Nice get-together, huh miss bush?”

The bush did not respond.

“Do you want me to play stab-the-bush? I’ll enjoy it, but something tells me you wouldn’t.”

“Go away,” Starbeat called from inside the bush. “If people see you talking to me they’ll know I’m here.”

“They’ll just think I’m crazy.”

“I’m pretty sure there’s at least one person in this room that can read minds, probably more.”

“Very powerful psychic.”

“Pinkies just know things.”

“They’ll give you a berth.”

Starbeat groaned. “Look, Vriska, I’m just here to observe the wedding and be part of it in some way. But you and I both know the romance in this area is so strong that I won’t be able to escape it. So this bush is my home. And nobody gets to know I’m here.”

“I found you easy.”

“You cheat at life.”

“It’s only cheating if you get caught.”

Suddenly Jotaro was standing behind her. “Cheating?”

Vriska suddenly took her gaze off the bush and started walking away from the wall. “W-wow! You have good ears there, Jojo! But rest assured, there’s no unfair gaming practices here! Eheheh!”

Jotaro narrowed his eyes. “Hmm…” He glanced at the bush. “Yare yare daze…” He turned and walked away without another word.
Vriska blinked. “…That guy. I don’t get him.”

“He’s observant,” Starbeat said. “And just… so big…”

“What happened to your beeping bracelet? I know it should have just gone off.”

“It’s disabled right now. I’m not giving away my position, that’d be stupid. Now shoo, I have observations to make.”

Vriska shrugged. “If you say so. Want me to bring you some punch?”

“I can teleport it myself.” Vriska heard a slurping noise from inside the bush. “Being a unicorn is nice.”

“Not as good as a troll.”

“Debatable.”

“You wanna debate?”

“Not right now. Maybe later. Can you just… Stop talking to the bush now? ’Kay?”

Vriska shrugged. “Fiiiine.” She walked away, meeting up with the Pinkies for a chat. She found them talking with Applejack – a very pregnant Applejack.

“How’s it feel to no longer be the only married mare of your friends?” pony Pinkie asked Applejack while Vriska sat down on a nearby snack table.

“Bout time,” Applejack commented. “Y’all are takin’ too long.”

The Pinkies giggled. “Well, don’t get your hopes up for anyone else, we’re still single and expect to stay that way for a while!”


“Yes! That’s me!” Vriska said, bowing in an exaggerated manner.

“Ahn invitin’ you to Sweet Apple Acres. If you’re gonna be hangin’ around my friends as much as Ah hear you are, you get to hang with me as well.”

 “…Why do I feel like this is going to be some kind of test?”

“It is.”

Vriska smiled. “They’re right, you are the honest one.”

“It’s no small part of me,” Applejack admitted. “Ah would ask you to tell me about yourself, but there’ll be time for that later.”

“Thank gog.”

“Hmm…”

“Did I just lose an Applejack point?”

“Yes.”
“Fuck.”

“Lost another one.”

“Wonder how deep I can dig this hole.”

Applejack smirked. “Oh look at that, you just gained a ‘point’. Good for you.”

Vriska fist-pumped.

In still another location in the hall, Flutterfree and Rev were talking.

“Well, technically speaking, it’s Divine magic, not divine gifts,” Rev said. “Sure, I have holy spells and enchantments, but they’re not really miraculous. You can trace them back to a source.”

“Oh, like Thrackerzod?”

“Precisely, except of the Divine flavor rather than the other… unsavory types.” She bit her lip. “I mean no offense to Thrackerzod, but what she is and what she does, while not the worst type of blasphemy, is pretty bad.”

“I’ve seen what she does. It is pretty disgusting. But she uses it for good.”

Rev nodded. “She is an interesting case, I have to admit. Not sure what to make of her, to be honest. She’s technically worshipping some thing to get the power she does, but her physical body and mind allows her to deviate from the essence she is derived from. I’m honestly a little curious if that’s possible for a true Demonic presence.”

Flutterfree blinked. “You ask the deep questions, don’t you?”

“Yes. Regardless, back to my point – I get my Divine powers from a source, this is true. You might even call the plane of existence it heralds from a ‘Heaven’. I do not worship the ‘god’ within though, he’s just a pale shadow of the real thing. But I still get power from the ‘Heaven’ through what’s basically a loophole in the way eldritch-type magic works.”

“That’s… a little confusing.”

“You bet it is. There’s a prevalence of gods in the multiverse. When you run a church you have to be very careful about what your doctrine actually is. Like, if you’re me, make sure you’re always describing the God who is the creator of the entire multiverse and exists outside it.”

“How do you know, though? We’ve run into lots of priests who are sure their powers come from a higher power of some kind. But most of them probably come from Divine sources like your own.”

Rev smiled awkwardly. “We don’t know, not really. There’s a lot of different answers to that question, but I prefer the one that goes something like this: ‘Well, all these Divine sources were created by God, so technically all the powers also come from Him, albeit indirectly’. Admittedly, this opens a loophole for ‘evil’ and ‘Demonic’ powers in some cases, but that’s how it is even with non-eldritch powers. Basically you can’t really tell for certain because we have limited mortal minds, but in most cases it doesn’t matter. Use your powers to be good and serve. And if you’re aware of where they come from, don’t pretend they come from God Himself. …Even if everyone is going to assume that.”

Flutterfree raised an eyebrow. “Constant problem for you?”
“The amount of people who want to worship users of Divine power is absurd,” Rev muttered. “It’s why I virtually never use any unless there’s some serious Demonic presences around.”

“…What are Demonic powers like?”


“Oh, should I-“

“No, you’re curious, and I should answer. I think you’ve run across a true Demonic presence, once. By the name of Algernon.”

“…Really?”

“I’m not certain, but from what I heard it seems that way. True Demonic presences are nothing like the impossible-to-comprehend beings like Majora. Neutral Eldritch things are as varied as humanity itself. Demonic things… they’re often an attempt at a different sort of impossibility. Pure evil. But given how evil cannot exist without good, and how many people disagree on what pure evil is, the attempt just doesn’t work. You get beings that are physical manifestations of vices that make no attempts to hide what they are – and then you get things like Algernon.”

“Why do I have the feeling the Algernon-like Demons are much worse?”

“That’s because they are. The highest Demonic presences of that kind can fake anything perfectly. Being a friend. Being a hero. Being a lover. They can get into your head with or without magic powers. They may have lots of different motives, but the primary one is to turn people to their side, and to keep them away from anything Divine or holy. They revel in death, destruction, lies, and…”

she shook her head. “Just like there are shadows of God in the multiverse, there are shadows of Satan. And some of those shadows… They can build themselves up in a world, flawlessly acting like a perfect individual with no faults. They’re not called fathers of lies for nothing. And then… They can do whatever they want.”

Flutterfree shivered – but then set her face. “But we’ll face them.”

Rev smiled sadly. “Normally I’d encourage you in that. But… they know exactly how to turn confidence against you. I myself was fooled by one wholeheartedly, despite my unwavering faith.”

She looked into the distance, memories of the past haunting her. “I’m not sure there’s any advice I can give for dealing with one once they set their eyes on you besides pray.”

Flutterfree nodded. “Got it.”

“Let’s talk about something that isn’t related to the possible corruption of everyone from all angles,” Rev said.

“How do you think Renee and Daniel will be as a married couple?” Flutterfree asked.

“I’ve seen their love,” Rev said. “It’s not a holy one, but it’s a strong one. They’ll be happy, and I don’t need to be a Pinkie to be certain of this. I’m honored to be chosen to officiate it.”

“You’re welcome,” Flutterfree said, smirking.

“Yeah. Thanks.” It was at this moment Rev saw danger coming directly at them.

Nova was marching right at them, the smile on her face clearly plastered on.
Rev turned to Flutterfree. “Just keep talking,” Flutterfree told her. “So, any special plans for your words during the service?”

“I’ll keep it mostly the same,” Rev said, regaining her composure. “I’ve removed the religious language from their vows, but that’s about it. I did consider ‘man and pony’ for a while, but ‘man and wife’ works better, I think.”

Nova arrived. “Oh, the wedding vows? I take it you’re going to bless them?”

“Yes, of course,” Rev said, feeling her stomach tighten into a knot. “One of the things I’m allowed to do.”

“Riiiiiiight…” Nova said, taking a few steps around Rev. “I guess that’s right. I am still a little surprised Renee didn’t ask Celestia to officiate.”

“It was partially Daniel’s decision,” Rev explained. “Weddings are regularly performed by the local pastor on Earth Tau’ri, and I’m the local pastor here, so… Yeah. This is a combination wedding, after all.”

“You operate in Ponyville.”

“The pastor they know,” Rev said. “And don’t worry, I’m not going to give a sermon here. Just remind them of the importance of marriage and all that stuff.”

“Mhm,” Nova said. “You have to admit, it looks suspicious. Almost like you were recommended, or something.”

Flutterfree raised a hoof. “I recommended her, Nova. She’s a good pony. She won’t outshine Renee like Celestia would, and most of the people here know her from around Ponyville.”

Nova glanced at Flutterfree suspiciously. Flutterfree’s crimson eyes didn’t falter.

Rev put on a smile. “Let’s not put a divide between each other. This is a wedding, and you two are friends. We don’t need to walk over each other’s hoo-”

“You think you’re so high and mighty aren’t you?” Nova said, turning to Rev.

Rev’s smile vanished. “No. I am no better than you.”

“Oh, is tha-”

“OH LOOK WHO IT IS!” Flutterfree blurted with excessive volume. “ALUSHY!” She used Lolo to wrap around Alushy’s wing and drag her closer – not that Rev or Nova could see this action. “Alushy, have you met Rev? She’s going to be performing the ceremony.”

“Ah. The resident holy warrior,” Alushy said, smirking. “I hear rumors that you can blast a mean holy laser.”


“Oh come on, just a little thrust. I’m sure I can handle it.”
Rev slapped her. “How’s that?”

Alushy rubbed her cheek. “Not what I meant but I like your spirit!”

Nova walked closer, raising an eyebrow. “Alush-”

“Sh sh sh, Nova, Nova, take a few seconds. Breathe.”

“Wha-”

“I SAID BREATHE, BITCH!” Alushy shouted at Nova.

Nova was unfazed by this. “Bitch? Me?”

“Yes,” Alushy confirmed. “You were being enough of one that Flutterfree pulled me into the conversation to defuse it. Imagine that, me, pretty much the most chaotic thing other than chimera-snake-boy over there, called to defuse a conversation.”

“Defuse a…” Nova blinked, finding that Flutterfree and Rev were no longer next to her and had moved to opposite sides of the room.

Her left eye twitched. “I wasn’t done yet…”

Alushy lowered her glasses. “You’re telling me. Something’s got you livid.”

“She’s brainwashing Flutterfree, that’s what. I just know it.”

“That’s pretty cool, actually.”

“No it’s not!” Nova blurted. “It’s insulting to her life and will ruin her. She clearly can’t see this, so I have to do something.”

Alushy facehooved. “Welp, good luck, wedding crasher.”

“What?”

“Nothing. I said nothing,” Alushy grunted, walking away.

~~~

Renee was sitting in her dressing room. She stared at herself in the mirror – she had no more makeup on than she usually did, which was to say just mild eyeliner and the eyelash extensions. This was twofold – she was probably going to burst into happy tears at some point, so she didn’t want her entire face to be ruined, and because overdoing the face would take away from the sheer magnificence that was her dress. It was a brilliant white decorated with almost a hundred tiny blue diamonds. The silken fabrics that made up the outfit were arranged in such a way to make it appear that the dress was glowing, even though there were no light sources within the folds of the fabric.

“Evening,” she called behind her. “Read me the preparation checklist again.”

Eve saw her lips move in the mirror. “Dress?”

“Check,” Renee said.

“Mane?”
Renee examined her complex intertwined braids that twisted around in helix-like patterns in some places; it certainly looked complete to Renee. “Check.”

“Tail?”

Much the same as her mane, though only the edges of the luxurious hairs were visible near her back hooves due to the dress. “Check.”

“Jewelry?”

Her ears were pierced with the finest sapphires she could find. “Check.”

“Hooves?”

Sparkling. “Check.”

“Horn?”

She rubbed her polished horn. “Check. You know, sometimes I envy the sharpness you alicorns get in your horns.”

Eve looked up at her horn. “Never really noticed.”

“You wound me, darling. As the years go on you just get larger and more impressive. I’m waiting for your mane to start flowing any day now.” Renee commented.

Sweetie Belle, the only other pony in the room, spoke up. “Don’t eastern unicorns have pointed horns?”

Eve nodded. “That is true. Anyway, next on the list… cleanliness spell.”

Renee nodded, lighting her horn and casting a spell on herself. “I knew I forgot something. With all that punch around, I have to be on my best guard.”

“I don’t,” Eve smirked.

“Yes, so good to be you.”

Sweetie Belle blinked. “Uh, why don’t you have to be concerned Eve?”

Eve blinked. “Oh. I guess that’s technically a secret. Sorry, Sweetie, didn’t realize.”

“Okay…?” Sweetie Belle said, confused.

“Sorry Sweetie,” Renee said, slightly embarrassed. “I guess we forgot you don’t know everything. Rest assured it’s not a secret about you or your friends. Just something we don’t want any of the villains knowing.”

“You sure talk about it rather openly for being that big of a secret.”

“We’re ponies,” Eve said. “We’re kinda bad at lying. Unless you’re Nova.”

Renee smirked. “At this point I should counter with all the times I managed to deceive and get away with it, but that’s not exactly something a lady should brag about, so instead I’ll just remind us that Pinkie has big secrets she never tells us.”
“But when there’s a secret she can tell she’s likely to explode into a dozen pieces at any moment.”

“That was a day, wasn’t it?” Renee smirked. “Remind me to let Pinkie know ahead of time if I’m pregnant and make her hold it in for a day, just to see how she does.”

The two mares stared at her.

“I kid, I wouldn’t be that cruel.”

“That’s not what we’re staring at you for,” Eve said. “It’s—"

“Dear, I know it’s not going to be like that, I know how biology works even if half the universes we come across haven’t the foggiest idea.”

“Exaggeration alert,” Sweetie commented.

“Thank you Sweetie Bot,” Renee ribbed.

Sweetie rolled her eyes.

Renee continued her thought. “Regardless, it probably wouldn’t be good for me to have foals anyway, seeing as my job is exceptionally high on the ‘time required’ and ‘danger’ spectrums. I’m half expecting an assassination attempt or something in the next hour.”

“Pinkie confirmed our lives aren’t in danger today,” Eve said. “She was certain. She rarely gives me her certainties.”

“Probably means her certainty doesn’t matter much then, hrm?”

“That does seem to be how it works.”

“That still makes absolutely no sense to me,” Sweetie muttered.

“Ah well, not something to question today,” Renee asserted. “She’ll tell us when she’s able to. Right now I’m about to get married. Renee Jackson has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?”

“You will have a nice ring before the day is out!”

“Amusing,” Renee deadpanned. She took a breath in, and released. “Eve?”

“Yes?” Eve responded.

“Thanks for everything. Thanks for keeping me calm up until this point. Thank you for showing me the multiverse that led to this moment. Above all, thank you for being such a good friend all these years.”

Eve blushed. “Aw… Renee. You do—”

Renee pulled her into a hug. “You mean… So much to me… Stars, I’m already crying…”

Eve magically wiped the tears off of Renee’s face. “You should save those for the groom, Renee.”

“RIGHT! To the hall!”

“The ceremony doesn’t begin for another twenty minutes,” Sweetie said.

Renee twitched. “I need ice cream to fuel my nonexistent patience, now!”
“Way ahead of you,” Eve and Sweetie said at the same time, each producing a gallon of ice cream they had brought separately.

~~~

Daniel examined his outfit. It was… sort of a tuxedo? In a way? It had long tails of fabric coming off the back that dragged behind him, and orange stripes all over it that resembled a combination of stargate glyphs and tree shapes. He knew it was supposed to contrast the blue and white of Renee’s dress, but he still felt a little silly. The collar was larger than he was used to, the tie had a lot of symbolic designs he wasn’t sure made any sense, and the buttons were just as black as the suit itself making nearly impossible to put on.

He wasn’t sure if he was some sort of reject vampire or a tropical bird.

“How do I look?” he asked.

“Like a great warrior, Daniel Jackson,” Teal’c declared.

“Like the mannequin of a clothing designer,” O’Neill described.

“That doesn’t tell me anything.”

“Oh, you mean your appearance. You look like a Phantom of the Opera reject.”

“Gee, thanks Jack.”

O’Neill tipped his hat. “Glad to be of service.” O’Neill was in his full dress uniform, hat, medals, awards, and all, giving him quite the impressive stature. Teal’c had opted for a standard tux rather than traditional Jaffa ceremonial dress, which probably would have made Renee freak out.

There was silence in the room for several seconds.

“Daniel Jackson, you are perspiring,” Teal’c observed.

“Surprise, surprise…” Daniel said, trying to adjust his collar to allow more breathing room. “I mean… What exactly is it she sees in me?”

“Danny boy, if you’re just asking that question now you’re in hot water,” O’Neill observed.

“No, I mean, I know why in that sense, I mean… Why me? Why not some high society type? Or… Or…” he started breathing too heavily to talk properly.

Teal’c put a hand on Daniel’s shoulder. “Daniel Jackson, you are a man who has saved millions of lives countless times, not with violence, but with words. You are a warrior, yes, but not a warrior in the way most understand. You seem meek and uncertain on first glance, obsessed with things that don’t matter. But to those who know you, we see a heart that cares deeply for everyone. Even those who may not deserve your trust get it. It is this heart that Renee sees – the heart of a gentle lion.”

O’Neill blinked. “I was going to say he’s got nothing but good timing, but that works too.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow. “You’re great at providing support, Jack, hope you know that.”

“I’m just gettin’ you to loosen up a little. You’re going to go out there, be the most dapper dashing Daniel imaginable, and you’re going to marry that pony.”

“I am?”
“You are!”

Daniel took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Not if I pass out from nerves first.”

“They have spells for that, I believe,” Teal’c offered.

“…Of course they do.” He stared at the mirror. “How long do we have?”

“Oh, fifteen minutes?” O’Neill said, glancing at his watch. “Give or take some.”

“I am going to sit here for fifteen minutes and not stress myself out.”

“I believe it is too late for that, Daniel Jackson,” Teal’c said.

“I thought Jack was supposed to be the not-so-helpful one?”

“He just tells it like it is,” O’Neill said, placing his hands behind his head.

“…Great.”

O’Neill shook his head with a smile on his face. “Look, Daniel. I’m not one to get sentimental, or even take much of anything all that seriously even in the face of death, but let me be real with you. You and Renee? You belong. Everyone saw it before you two did. Well, not everyone, but you get the idea. I’m not going to give you some sunny ‘oh it’ll be happily ever after’ crap, but I will say that your life will be a lot worse without her in it. Got it?”

“…Got it.”

“Good. Glad we had this talk.”

“Well it’s certainly done something. I’m a bit too out of sorts to see what it is, but there’s something.”

“Hopefully you won’t figure it out within the next ten minutes.”

“It hasn’t been five minutes, Jack.”

“Eh, I wasn’t sure before. I’m not sure now.”

Daniel sighed. “Teal’c, how much longer?”

“Eleven minutes.”

“Well, suddenly that doesn’t seem like very long at all. Something could still go wrong though…”

“Nothing’s going to go wrong in eleven minutes, Daniel,” O’Neill said. Then he realized what he just said. “Dammit.”

“Jack what have you done?!”

“Let’s talk about something else, Daniel. Like my best man speech. I’m curious how many of your deaths we should actually count.”

“Ja-“

“I’m thinking seven, but there’s a possible eight, maybe nine. Need your opinion. Or else I’m just going to embarrass you by bringing Vala up.”
“You wouldn’t.”

“I would if you don’t calm your ass down.”

“His posterior is not part of his emotional state,” Teal’c said.

O’Neill blinked. “…That was a good one, Teal’c.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t think it’s calming Daniel down though.”

“You think!?” Daniel blurted.

“Need to try something else… have a zat gun?”

“Oh no, no we’re not doing that!” Daniel shouted. “We… We… We…” He slumped down into his chair and held his head.

“Good enough for me,” O’Neill said. “If he’s not back to normal in three minutes we get him an energy drink or something. Otherwise, good work men.”

“I’m the only other one here, General O’Neill,” Teal’c observed.

“I was congratulating myself.”

“Indeed.”

~~~

The ceremony would begin in fifteen minutes or so. Flutterfree was allowing herself to relax a little – she had managed to avoid Nova this long, so she likely wasn’t going to have to actually confront her until after the wedding. Which was the ideal result – she really didn’t want to ruin this for Renee and Daniel. Normally she would just talk it out with Nova at this point, but the timing was terrible.

“I really should have told her sooner, huh?” Flutterfree said to the Pinkies and Vriska – the latter of whom was stuck in her god-tier form because of Flutterfree’s proximity.

The two Pinkies nodded. Vriska blinked. “Told her what?”

Flutterfree paused, considering if she should tell Vriska or not. “You’ll probably figure out soon. If not, ask me tomorrow – I’m going to have to confront Nova before then. Which is to say pray really really hard that she doesn’t blow up at me.”

“Nova can’t stay mad at you for anything,” human Pinkie said. “Well, that’s not entirely true, she’s more angry than the rest of us, but your friendship is much stronger than that.”

“I’d worry about other ponies she unleashes her personal anger on,” pony Pinkie added.

“Yeah… But after the wedding Rev won’t be around, so that probably won’t be a problem.”

Vriska slurped a mysterious blue smoothie. “Hey, by the way, Nova coming right for this snack table. Should we be concerned?”

The Pinkies blinked. “Maybe…” pony Pinkie said. “But she wouldn’t dare try something this close to the ceremony, would she?”
Vriska narrowed her eyes. “She’s got the look of someone with a vendetta. I wouldn’t bet on it.”

Flutterfree began to walk away.

“Hey Flutterfree!” Nova called. “Wait up!”

Flutterfree turned around – Nova’s voice didn’t seem hostile. It seemed like she genuinely wanted to talk to her. Flutterfree decided to wait for her. As she approached, Nova entered Lolo’s field, forcing the ring around her horn to activate a soft striped magical glow on her horn – nothing close to how her horn looked when it really was active, but enough to be visible. “What’s up, Nova?”

“I… I want to apologize about earlier. I interrupted a conversation with a bunch of assumptions that I just… I acted upon in a really jerky way, and that was wrong. What you said was right, she’s just the right choice for the job and I shouldn’t hold some kind of vendetta against her because of my past. I’m… I’m going to have to work past it. It’ll take time.”

“Oh…” Flutterfree said, pleasantly surprised by this response. She smiled. “Apology accepted Nova. I’m sorry for setting Alushy on you.”

Nova nodded. “Yeah… Can you believe I actually went as far as to convince myself you were being brainwashed by her? I mean, that’s just ridiculous – you were just talking. Nothing else going on.”

Flutterfree’s smile faltered. Nova’s own nervous smile faltered in turn. “F-flutterfree?”

Pony Pinkie inserted herself in between the two of them. “Can we not do this now? The ceremony is about to start and-“

“Pinkie, stop,” Nova said. “I want to know what’s going on.”

“But-“

“Nova’s right,” Flutterfree said, shaking her head. “We’re here right now. I’ve… I’ve been dishonest, and not saying anything will just make it hurt more.”

Pinkie nodded slowly and got out of the way.

Nova pleaded with Flutterfree. “…Please don’t tell me it’s what I think it is.”

“It probably is,” Flutterfree admitted. “I’m a part of her church. Have been for a while. It’s only really been serious for less than a year.”

“A YEAR!? Nova exploded. “You’ve been listening to her stupid SLOP for A YEAR!?“

Flutterfree stood her ground. “Yes. Longer, actually. Quite a bit longer. And it’s not stupid slop, it’s great truth about the nature of existence, and what we’re supposed to be.”

“Holy hell, she really has brainwashed you,” Nova spat. “Haven’t you learned anything from our explorations? These ‘gods’ are just fakes! Spirits, Stars, and Deities that aren’t all-powerful, aren’t good, and definitely aren’t worth devoting our lives to!”

“Nova, that’s not how thi-“

“THAT’S EXACTLY HOW IT WORKS!” Nova shouted. “There’s some being that has POWER and because it has POWER people think it is worthy of their praise. Maybe it even created them! But it NEVER deserves that!”
“This is different. Ther-“

“DIFFERENT? How the HELL is this any different? Flutterfree, listen to me. We’re going to find whatever god it is Rev serves. It’ll happen eventually. Mark. My. Words.”

“NOVA, LISTEN FOR ONE DAMN SECOND!” Flutterfree shouted. Her eyes flashed. Those who could see Stands would have seen Lolo’s spirograph patterns surround her and rotate aggressively.

Vriska dropped her drink. Nova took a few steps back, startled.

“Thank you,” Flutterfree said, returning to her normal calm tone. “Nova, I understand why you hate this idea. You grew up thinking the Stars were perfect beings that watched our every move and controlled our fate toward what was good and harmonious. Then you found the Stars were just like us, except they thought a little differently. Having your entire worldview shattered like that… I know it must hurt. You never talked about it much, but I knew. I’m sorry I didn’t try to learn more about it, that’s my fault. But this… This is a little different. There’s more here than just revering some thing. That book? That Bible? It is the single most common book in the entire multiverse. It exists in almost the exact same form in every one – even in worlds that aren’t human dominated. It talks about more than just legends and stories with morals – it contains wisdom, songs, a history shared by so many. Thoughts on the nature of good and evil, forgiveness, hope, and… and…” Flutterfree wiped her eyes. “There’s a lot there, Nova. I understand it isn’t for you. I hope that may change one day, but…” She shook her head. “It means a lot to me, now. I see in what she teaches a reason for what I do – a reason to help everyone. Hope that it is possible to fight against all the horrors in this multiverse with so much darkness and evil. To me it means that there really is someone up there watching us, and He wants us to succeed and help all these people!”

Nova took a step back, tears in her eyes. “She… She’s really gotten to you.”

“It wasn’t her, Nova.”

“Yes it was. I know how this works, Flutterfree! This is exactly how I enslaved that entire village! I used what I believed and clever wordings to get ponies on my side! It didn’t matter if what I believed was wrong or right, I could do it!” Nova spread her hoof. “Don’t you see? She’s just like me!”

Rev grabbed Nova’s hoof. “Yes. I am.”

Nova was startled by Rev’s sudden presence. “…You.” She said, not even trying to hide the spite in her voice. Why did Rev have to be ever so slightly taller than her?

“I am like you,” Rev continued. “I’m impulsive, angry, and I tend to let my ideals shine through my words and shape ponies. This is both a good and a bad thing. But like I keep trying to tell everyone, I’m never the last authority on this matter. I’m just an interpreter. There are other interpreters, other ideas, that should be considered. I think I’ve found the right on-“

“That’s right, you think,” Nova blurted. “I thought too!”

“I made that village too, Nova.”

“Oh good! Glad we have that in common. Then you know what we thought back then? We thought that we’d found the right answer! The right way of thinking about things! But you know what? That’s impossible!”

“Of course it is, I’m going to be wrong about some things, and so are you!”
“EXACTLY!” Nova shouted. “Now listen to me, this stuff? This worshipping of some higher God? That’s stupid! How can you worship something you don’t know is really good? What if you find out someday that you can find your God and realize that, oh wait, he’s an absolute asshole who’s basically clueless?!”

Rev’s expression darkened. “I believe in a God that exists outside the multiverse and is incomprehensible even to the eldritch beings that swim in the Embodiment. I believe that the angels and demons we see across the multiverse are pale, dreamt up imitations of the real articles. I believe we live in a world of lies that needs an absolute beacon of hope.”

“There is no absolute beacon!” Nova shouted. “Look around! I know you traveled the multiverse before coming here – you’ve seen horrors. You know exactly how whatever you think is true can be turned on its head at any freaking moment because things are never the same anywhere! There is no metric, Rev!”

Rev twitched. “Oh, and, pray tell Nova, what drives you?”

“What the hell do you mean?”

“I mean why do you keep going? Why do you struggle against the darkness of the multiverse? What is the point? There’s no truth according to you, Nova. Everything changes. In one place something is evil, and in another it isn’t.” Rev was definitely shouting with malice of her own at this point. “You take this away, everything’s dead!”

“There-”

“There’s what? Harmony? That Tree of yours is just the half-resurrected corpse of a Star and you know it. Fate? Putting your trust in fate? Well in that case, some ponies are just doomed to be villains, and some are made heroes. Am I the villain? Am I the hero? Well it’s certainly not my choice, now is it, Nova!?”

“I live because I have my friends! I define my own rules based on myself and them! That’s how, you dense dogmatic bitch!”

“FRIENDS DON’T MEAN AS MUCH AS YOU THINK THEY MEAN!”

“OH WELL I’M GLAD YOU YELLED THAT SO LOUD THE ENTIRE ROOM COULD HEAR IT!”

“I’M GLAD YOU REVEALED YOURSELF AS WELL, NOVA! COMPLETELY HOPELESS!”

“WHO NEEDS HOPE? IT’S JUST A SENTIMENT!”

“DO YOU EVEN HEAR YOURSELF?”

“GO TO HELL!”

“RIGHT BACK AT YOU!”

“DO YOU WANT TO DO THIS? WE CAN DO THIS, RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW!”

Rev laughed. “VIOLENCE? HA! THAT SOLVES NOTHING!”

“EVERYPONY STOP!” Pinkie shouted, smashing a gong right in both Nova and Rev’s ears.
“THE CEREMONY IS GOING TO START IN A MINUTE!”

Nova and Rev rubbed their ears, not quite able to process what had just happened.

“You two should be ashamed of yourselves!” Pinkie shouted, albeit with less force. “This is Renee and Daniel’s big day, and you are this close to absolutely ruining it! If they came in here to this… It would…”

Nova and Rev hung their heads in shame, their rage gone in an instant. “…I’m sorry,” they both said.

Pinkie nodded, shaking her head. She pulled them both into a hug. “I know. I forgive you, and so does everybody else. But we can’t dwell on that right now – it’s a big day. Nova, go take your seat. Rev, go to the podium. Let’s get through this, okay?”

The two Starlights nodded. They magically cleaned up any tears that had been on their faces and moved to their positions, tired. Everyone in the hall slowly began to sit back down.

Nova sat down next to Flutterfree, looking at the floor.

“Nova…”

“I’ve never been a worse friend than this,” Nova said.

Flutterfree put a wing around her. “…Yeah.”

“You’re… Not mad?”

“I’m still mad. I’m still very mad. But you need this right now.” Flutterfree looked up at Rev standing at the podium. “She needs it too.”

“…What?”

“You hurt her just as bad as she hurt you,” Flutterfree said. “There was never going to be a winner in that shouting match.”

Nova hung her head.

On the podium, Rev realized she wasn’t going to be able to keep herself under control, no matter how much she prayed or struggled. So she lit a horn and cast a temporary spell on herself – forcing herself to gain a serene smile and a calm demeanor.

She felt dirty for using it, even though she realized she had no choice at this point.

*Forgive me.*

While the drama of recent events was fresh in the minds of most of the people in the hall, it suddenly took a backseat to the event itself. The separation of the fight had come at the perfect moment – right after Rev cast her composure spell, Daniel and O’Neill came into the hall, Daniel taking his position in front of Rev’s podium, O’Neill standing behind Rev. Eve took her position mirroring O’Neill’s on the opposite side, leaving a space for Renee.

Renee herself appeared through the front doors of the hall, walking past all the guests, her father and mother following right behind her, two unicorns that were never more proud in their lives. Renee paid little attention to the crowd for once in her life – she entered with a graceful stroll, but completely forgot to keep it up when she saw Daniel. Her gaze did not leave his until she got to her
position mirroring his own. While her parents took their seats at the main table, it became clear that while Renee’s and Daniel’s outfits looked rather ridiculous on their own, the shapes and colors did compliment each other as a whole.

Renee handed the bouquet she held in her magic to Eve and sassily removed her veil with her magic, revealing a smirk. Daniel smirked right back.

Rev cleared her throat. “Dearly Beloved, we are gathered here today in the presence of these witnesses, to join Renee Belle and Daniel Jackson in matrimony commended to be honorable among all; and therefore is not to be entered into lightly but reverently, passionately, lovingly and solemnly. Into this – these two persons present now come to be joined. If any person can show just cause why they may not be joined together – let them speak now or forever hold their peace.” Just to be safe, Rev cast mute on Alushy. The vampire probably wouldn’t do anything, but you never knew for sure with that kind of troublemaker.

“Seeing that this moment is likely to be the most significant one in both of your lives, I ask that you take this marriage as a beginning of your lives together. Today signifies the creation of a new home, a new family. May you be fulfilled by each other’s deep love. May you be overjoyed by the promises you are about to make and the wonders you will experience with life together. Remember that in every marriage, there are good times and bad, times of joy and times of sorrow. Marriage is more than just an arrangement – it is a journey, one as brilliant and tense as any foray into an unknown universe. The main difference is that this journey is enhanced by the love, trust, dedication, and faith you share in one another.”

Rev turned to Daniel. “Daniel Jackson, do you come here freely and without reservation to give yourself to Renee Belle in marriage?”

Daniel nodded. “I do.”

“Renee Belle, do you come here freely and without reservation to give yourself to Daniel Jackson in marriage?”

Renee squeed for a moment before echoing Daniel. “I do.”

Rev nodded. “Having heard that it is your intention to be married to each other now, I ask you to declare your marriage vows.”

Renee went first this time. “I, Renee Belle, take you, Daniel Jackson, to be my husband – to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, no matter what plane of existence we may find ourselves in, or what the future may hold, to love and to cherish; from this day forward until death do us part.”

“I, Daniel Jackson, take you, Renee Belle, to be my wife – to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and cherish; from this day forward until death do us part. And, depending on how the death goes, probably even after that.”

There was a chorus of soft laughter from the room. Renee had to wipe happy tears from her eyes.

O’Neill handed Daniel the rings – one small enough for his finger, one large enough for Renee’s horn. Wordlessly, Daniel placed the large ring on Renee’s horn. Renee took his small ring and placed it on his finger.

Rev stamped her foot in satisfaction. “By the power vested in me by around a dozen different
universal legal codes, I now pronounce you man and wife. You may now kiss the bride.”

Unlike their first kiss, which had been a mess that collapsed in on itself in a manner of seconds, this one went much smoother, likely because they had gotten practice in at this point. Renee stood up on her hind hooves and slung her front legs around Daniel’s neck, pulling his face to hers. The kiss didn’t last long – only a few seconds – and for everyone watching it still looked a bit odd, but that didn’t change anything about what it meant. It, in a word, was perfect.

“I present to you, Daniel and Renee Jackson!”

Then there was applause – applause from everyone. Many faces had tears in their eyes. Rev removed the spell she had on herself – she wanted her own applause to be genuine.

It was then Pinkie’s party cannon went off – but it didn’t release confetti. Instead, it released small, sparkling gems that descended slowly to the ground, filling the room with a beautiful sight that Renne would have described as divine.

Instead of walking down arm-in-arm, which would have been exceedingly awkward for Renee, Daniel just got on her back and they descended toward their table. They didn’t get far – people and ponies rushed up to congratulate them, to shake hands, and to give encouraging comments.

“Ah see you finally joined me,” Applejack said, managing to get to the front of the crowd despite her currently awkward frame. “Think the others will anytime soon?”

Renee shrugged, upsetting Daniel’s balance but not knocking him off. “Not anytime soon, Applejack.”

“Figures,” Applejack said. “You two have fun now, y’hear?”

“Oh, we plan on it.”

“Speaking of fun,” Alushy said, pushing herself to the front. “Pony. Human. How’s it work?”

“I figured that you, of all ponies, would be the one to know,” Renee snapped back.

“Touche.” Apparently this answer satisfied her, and she left.

Carter went up to Daniel. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you like this, Daniel. It’s good for you.”

Daniel smiled. “Thanks. I think. I’m not really processing this yet, give me a minute.”

“IS THERE A TIME MANIPULATOR IN THE HOUSE?” Vriska shouted. “I know the answer’s yes. Nobody going to give this man a minute?” No response. “Shame.”

The congratulations and comments just didn’t seem to end – but eventually the two of them got to the table, O’Neill and Eve close behind. Renee’s parents had clearly been wondering if they should have started eating all on their own. But that worry was over, and the festivities could begin.

“Hey Rev!” Eve called. “You joining us at the table?”

“No, sorry,” Rev called back. “I’ve changed seats. After all, Pinkie set this up as a mingle, right?”

Eve smiled back. “Well, see you around then!”

Rev walked across the room, right over to Nova and Flutterfree. She sat down at an empty chair across from them.
Nova stared at her. “So…”

“Nova, after this, we’re going out for drinks,” Rev declared.

“…Drinks?”

“Yes. Drinks.”

“I should probabl-“ Flutterfree began.

“No,” Rev said. “It’s just going to be me and Nova. And probably a lot of cider.”

“Isn’t drunkenness-”

“Yes. It is. We probably won’t drink that much.”

Nova raised an eyebrow. “…Okay, I’m intrigued now.”

“Good. We need to work this out without screaming at each other. But for now…” She turned around to see O’Neill giving his toast. “Let’s listen to some embarrassing stories about how many times Daniel has kicked the bucket, hrm?”

Nova let out a sigh of relief. “Yeah… Yeah I think I could do that.”

~~~

Rev downed an entire keg of cider and slammed it down, the empty vessel making a satisfying thunk against the table’s surface.


“It’s a sin,” Rev muttered, ramming her forehead into the table. “But look at me, it’s how I cope. Absolutely brilliant.”

“I dunno, I think it makes you more relatable,” Nova said, taking a sip of her own mug.

“That might be the point. Sometimes I wonder…” Rev shook her head, trying to clear it. “Anyway, the point. We’re a couple of… Of…”

“Complete assholes?” Nova suggested.


“No argument from me. Almost ruined the day. Had Pinkie not been there…” She didn’t want to finish the sentence, opting instead to take another drink.

“…We need to find a way to live with each other.”

“Normally I’d just say avoid the topic altogether, but…” Nova bit her lip. “Yeah, that’s not going to work. There’s just… there’s no way this…” She shut herself up before she went on a rant again.

“This is definitely a problem. We… Well, we both hate what the other believes, basically. Ding ding, how smart am I.”

“Genius levels.”

Rev chuckled. “I discovered the secret to FTL travel in another life…”
“I did that for… some reason.”

“The best reason. Reasons.”

“…What?”

“Yeah I don’t even know what I’m saying anymore.” Rev laughed. “I don’t even drink much anymore. Usually I’m pretty low stress. But today … Oh today. You had some good points.”

“I… Did?”

“Well, I mean, it is a little ridiculous for me to believe in that big man in the sky th-”

“I did not say that!”

“Shoosh. I’m using metaphors. …And now I’ve lost it. Whatever, it does seem kind of silly, at times. I have no way of getting any proof He’s really out there, and when I do run into something like Him, I know virtually instantly it isn’t Him.” She rammed her hoof into the table and burned a cross-shaped imprint in it with her Divine powers. “See that? That doesn’t come from Him. That comes from some shadow elsewhere in the multiverse.”

“Uh… kay. I think I knew that, maybe?”

“Yeah.”

“You were right about me as well,” Nova said. “It… it does seem kinda hopeless, at times. There’s a lot of happiness and friendship, but those Gems… Sombra… There’s too many gray areas. And I can’t just live by my own defined morals, because those have been proven wrong before. And Eve keeps admitting she’s wrong in a lot of things… It’s like nobody’s right about anything.”

“Gotta love that truth.”

“I just… I guess I do believe that there’s some sort of truth, or harmony, or destiny – probably fate. I can’t live like there isn’t something. There has to be good, there has to be bad, otherwise what am I even doing with my life? Why do I fight so hard? …I really need to apologize to Flutterfree. She found her answer. I walked over it like it was trash.”

“Mhm…” Rev said, examining her empty keg. “I… I don’t know anymore. We’re just going to keep yelling at each other. The only reason we’re not right now is because we’re both drunk and filled with guilt and shame and other unpleasant nasties.”

“Neither do I. Maybe we just need to keep talking until we do know. You know?”

“Don’t know.”

“Like… We agree to meet and talk to each other about the world, the multiverse. And we agree not to get angry about what the other says or believes. That way we can try to understand each other. Think… Think that can work?”

Rev blinked. “Holy potatoes…”

“Holy potatoes? That’s your expletive?”

“I was saying that’s a good idea!”

“I’m still stuck on ‘holy potatoes’,’” Nova giggled. “Potatoes. Pff.”
“Yes, yes, laugh why don’t you.”

“Gladly,” Nova chuckled. “…You really think it’s a good idea?”

“Well, even if we don’t end up understanding each other… We could still respect each other. And we wouldn’t do it because we were avoiding certain parts about each other we didn’t like, we would… We would talk about them. Openly. No anger would build up…”

“There will be anger though. But… But we’ll just let it out on the spot so it doesn’t stew and become nasty.”


“Tomorrow. Though without the cider next time.”

“Yeah, clearly,” Rev muttered, leaning back in her chair. “Ugh… Flutterfree is going to be so disappointed in me…”

“...Hey, welcome to the club.”

“Wait, weren’t we already in that club?”

“I don’t know anymore.”

“Then we should talk until we do know!” Rev slammed her hoof on the table, flipping it over. The two mares stared at the mess they made – but then started laughing.

They got thrown out seconds after that. But they didn’t care – they had begun a conversation that would likely never end.

It was one way to start a friendship.
Five Ba’als stood in a clearing in a Lai forest. One of them reached into his robes and pulled out a small, pink Rune. “This Rune has power,” he declared. “Enough power to bring this world to its knees without anyone knowing it was us.”

“They’ve stopped caring about us,” a second said. “Think we’re nothing compared to the threats the University and other secret powers pose. They are wrong to do so.”

“Even without our ships, our cloning, or our former glory, we can still—” a gigantic hammer hit the Ba’al that was talking in the face, knocking him to the ground.

“What the-” the next Ba’al lit on fire, discovering quickly that speaking while aflame was a bad idea since the flames got into his throat.

The next Ba’al fell when he noticed he had been cut in two across the midsection. The fourth got a magical laser to the face that knocked him down.

Only the Ba’al with the Rune remained, shaking. “Show yourselves!”

“Okay,” a calm voice said. Lieshy walked into the forest, approaching Ba’al. “Here I am.”

“J-just you?”

“Yes. Just me. An adorable yellow horse. *Neigh.*” Lieshy smiled when the last Ba’al jumped at her noise.

He held the pink Rune to her face. “I will use this, don’t think I won’t.”

“What is that?”

“It’s the Rune of Elysium!”

“Huh. Doesn’t ring a bell. Maybe you should just hand it over, because I definitely don’t feel any fear toward it. I’ll probably burn you even if you use it. Or cut you in half before you can use it. Or something.”

Ba’al’s hand shook. Then he dropped the rune to the ground, raising his hands into the air.

“Good boy,” Toph said, suddenly standing behind him with both his hands already cuffed. “There’s a particular dungeon with your name on it. Hope you enjoy your cell mate, I hear she’s lovely to talk to.”

Lieshy picked up the Rune. “He called it the Rune of Elysium. Any idea?”

“Nope,” Toph said. “Anyone else?”

Lady Rarity strode into the clearing, her eight-legged armor making quite the commotion on the ground. “The name doesn’t sound familiar.”

“I feel like I’ve heard it before, somewhere,” Corona said. “But that’d be another universe, so… If it’s related at all it’d be like an alternate version.”
Lieshy shrugged. “Turn it over to the science types then. And by science types, I mean Corona in her lab when we get back to the capital.”

“Mhm…” Toph said, kicking one of the Ba’als. “You know, I thought we were done with these guys. Guess some survived.”

“They really aren’t that threatening anymore,” Corona said. “Definitely evil, definitely caused a lot of damage back then, but… I think they’re just trying too hard now. Those that choose to just live their lives are probably the smartest.”

“So few of them do that though,” Lady Rarity pointed out. “Their minds are almost exactly the same.”

“How can they stand each other…” Toph wondered aloud.

Corona took the Rune from Lieshy and scanned it. “Regardless, this thing has a lot of magic in it for such a small piece. It’s probably got some effect that can be triggered, since Ba’al thought he could use it.”

“No doubt something he would use to conquer,” Lady Rarity said. “It is his thing.”

“Mhm… Definitely need more equipment to get a judge on the thaumic structure… Hey! Vivian! Do you by chance have that tool with the red and blue lights on you, by chance?”

No response.

“Vivian?”

Vivian came out of the treeline. “Oh. Sorry… I was just looking at a flower. No, I don’t have it – I think I dropped the toolbox somewhere. Or didn’t bring it. I’m not sure.”

“Vivian, it was your turn to watch the tools!” Toph called. “If one of us drops the ball on an important mi-”

“I’m sorry. I’ll go look for it…”

Corona walked up to Vivian with a concerned expression. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

Corona removed a boot. “No, no you’re not.”

“Corona do-”

A few seconds later, Corona removed her hoof and slipped her boot back on. “You’re homesick? Why didn’t you just say so?”

“I didn’t want to bother you…” Vivian said. “We always have so much to do…”

“We can go to your world for a day,” Corona said. “No problem at all. Right Toph?”

Toph paused for a moment. “…Sure.”

“What universe is your home, dear?” Lady Rarity asked. “I’m actually not sure.”

“The Mushroom World,” Corona said, standing up tall. “I can’t believe you never told us that was
your home, it’s such a nice place!”

Vivian smiled awkwardly. “You never asked.”

“It’s settled. We’re going to the Mushroom World before we do anything else,” Corona said.

“I’m the General here,” Toph pointed out. “…But I happen to agree. I like the Mushroom World too, though I’m not exactly sure what the fuss is about.”

“You need eyes,” Lieshy deadpanned.

“I think I’ll stay blind so Rohan can’t read me like a book thank you.”

“I still can’t punch him… Or shoot him…” Corona said. “I try every time I see him and I can’t do it….” Sombra’s voice came into her ear, though the others couldn’t hear it. “Oh you can shut up.”


“You little imp…” Corona said with a jovial smile. She pulled her special dimensional device out of her pocket. “So… Yeah, we can dial the Mushroom World from here, just need to shunt through one extra universe… Do we want a specific location?”

“Eh, anywhere’s fine,” Vivian said. “My sisters will know I’m back when I return. It won’t be that hard to find them.”

“Vivian has sisters,” Lady Rarity said. “…You never talk much about yourself, do you?”

“Not really?”

“Huh. Well, I guess I am finally going to get to see this fabled Mushroom World.”

“Wait, you’ve never been!?” Lieshy blurted. “How can you explore the multiverse and not go to the Mushroom World!”

“We’ve never been sent,” Lady Rarity declared. “May I remind you most of the things we do are on Lai. And I don’t go offworld unless I have particular reason to.”

“Boy, are you in for a treat,” Corona said, completing the dialing on her device and tearing a red hole to the new universe. “Welcome to the Mushroom World!”

They stepped through the portal.

And then something far more interesting happened elsewhere in the multiverse.

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“Daniel, Love, where’s the air freshener?” Renee called, poking through all the cupboards in their house with her magic.

“We’re out!” he called from the bathroom.

“That freshening spell isn’t going to take care of the socks forever!”

“I’ll buy some when I’m out!”

“You’ll get distracted by diplomacy! I’ll probably forget because of whatever life-threatening
situation I end up in today!” She pursed her lips. “I wonder if I could call Sweetie…”

Daniel came out of the bathroom, dressed for work – which was to say he had clothing of enough quality to look presentable, but nothing all that classy, and wore a brown jacket overtop. “Asking your sister to go out of her way just for air freshener?”

“Well when are we going to get time? It’s Tuesday! The weekend’s not for a while. We could guess that I’ll probably have an outing that ends early – or will end up in a place where I can buy air freshener – but that is just a gamble.” She levitated her hat off a hook and placed it on her head.

“We could probably just order it online,” Daniel commented.

“I…” Renee blinked. “Actually that’s a good idea.” She pulled out her phone and jumped onto the Internet, finding that with a quick search for ‘air freshener’ she found half a dozen places wanting to sell through the net. She quickly ordered a brand she thought she recognized (so hard to tell these days, which she supposed was a good thing), and put her phone away. “There we go, crisis averted!”

Daniel reached down and scratched her behind her ears, bringing an expression of bliss to her face.

“Meow.”

Daniel stopped instantly and looked down. “…Did you just meow?”

“Yes. Yes I did,” Renee said, chuckling. “Verdict: is it cute or just weird?”

“Can it be both?”

“Oh, most definitely.”

Daniel shrugged and rolled his eyes, opening the front door, Renee following him close behind. The ‘street’ outside was one of the halls of the Hub – their house was just one of the many sections of the interdimensional nexus. It had not been difficult to convince Eve to give them the area and let Renee turn it into a fashionable abode. The furnishings were not quite done – after the Honeymoon across the multiverse the two of them had been quite busy catching up with the work that piled up – but it was still a cozy place to live. Although it did run out of groceries and toiletries from time to time. They were still working out a system.

Daniel walked toward the Tau’ri embassy. “Well, I’m off to try to be the middleman between the Gem Vein and Lai. That should be fun.”

Renee chuckled. “At least you know what you’re doing. See you tonight!”

“Maybe we can discover the wonder of takeout pizza. Or Chinese.”

“I’m thinking Earth Ottoman or Lai food!” Renee called. “We’ll talk about it later!”

Daniel smiled back at her and waved.

Renee let out a simple, contented sigh before taking out her dimensional device and dialing Equis Vitis. She appeared a fair distance from the castle, but it was no issue to walk through downtown Ponyville to get to Eve’s base of operations. She arrived in the main hall after a brisk walk, finding Pinkie, Vriska, and Nova already waiting.

Nova was talking to Vriska. “-basically, we can trace individualism in humans back to the era of
slavery, when authorities got questioned. You *could* claim that the rise of individualism and the disregard for communal authority led to the general society of factions that is driving more ‘contemporary’ versions of Earth apart. *Our* introduction to the equation has clearly twisted that perception back towards community, but even we have individualism within our pony minds. Rev theorizes this came about after Luna’s Rebellion, but I think it has deeper roo—"

Vriska held up a hand. “Stop. Your philosophy is going over my head.”

“Oh, sorry. Just got a little excited there,” Nova blushed. “It’s just that we talk about such *interesting* stuff sometimes!”

“I can tell,” Vriska commented. “Asking the big questions, or something. It’s just that I kinda stopped asking the big questions a while ago, figured I was fine with me and that’s that.”

“That’s an individualist outlook on life, and as we have been discussing that is probably not the *best* philosophy, at least not on its own, there needs to be other - And right, sorry, you’re not listening.” Nova rubbed the back of her head.

“I think it’s great that you’re talking about how everything is!” Pinkie cheered. “Makes for good discussion!”

“Hey, I’m curious,” Nova said. “I hang my life on the belief in fate and destiny, Vriska here is mostly for herself, what’re you for?”

Pinkie tapped her head. “Can’t tell you yet! Sorry!”

“Well that’s convenient for you.”

“Think of it as me leaning on knowing things. That’s not what it is at all, but the closest I can say. Though, going off of what you were saying earlier about not making certain things the *only* authority, I also love to see ponies smile!”

“Well that’s obvious.”

Pinkie grinned. “You bet! Renee, what about you?”

“… Hrm. I suppose I believe in the community?” Renee mused. “I’m really not sure, I’m not big on hammering down an exact philosophy in life.”

“It’s definitely not for everyone,” Nova said. “It’s perfectly fine to follow the ideals of others. I mean, they could be *wrong*, but nopony’s really got it right.”

“Quite,” Renee admitted. Noticing Flutterfree walking in the front doors, she waved.

Flutterfree waved back with a warm smile. “Hey everyone! So, Pinkie, where are we going today?”

“Saxton Hale has discovered a bizarre dimensional connection on Esefem,” Pinkie declared. “He would normally investigate it himself, but today he’s going to hunt dinosaurs in the Hub jungles. He figured he’d extend the offer to *us* rather than just send his agents! Isn’t that nice of him?”

“The man doesn’t want to waste any money,” Renee pointed out. “If he’s not going to get a ‘manly’ experience out of something, he won’t pay more than he needs to.”

“Right. But we get to have an adventure, so who cares?” Pinkie pulled out her dimensional device. “*Everyone* ready?”
Vriska smirked. “Aw, you remembered this time!”

Pinkie winked, opening the portal to Esefem.

“What’s this place like, by the way?” Vriska asked.

“Boy are you in for a treat,” Nova answered. “It has to be seen to be believed.”

Esefem never changed much. Sure, the base that the Tau’ri installed in the universe had expanded, but other than that there were still Red and Blu fights, still pockets of complete and utter weirdness, and still copies upon copies. Nobody was any closer to figuring out respawn, nor the reasons this universe acted the way it did. Efforts to understand it had tapered off over the years as it became obvious they did not have the requisite interdimensional knowledge to really tear the place apart.

So the research mostly fell to Saxton Hale and his section of Mann Co. He was no closer to figuring it out than anyone else had been, but he occasionally found new weapons or new technologies, or a strange race that could be very useful to the other universes. It was a well known fact that the majority of the alternate versions of the ponies came from this world, from different ‘peaceful’ pockets and the like.

They hadn’t spent much time taking in the scenery – they were told the coordinates of the dimensional connection, and Nova teleported them to the place: a rocky outcropping in the middle of the desert, just like almost everywhere else on Esefem.

“So…” Pinkie said, leaning in to Vriska. “Verdict on Esefem?”

“I… have to admit,” Vriska said. “I have not been to a universe quite like this one in all my travels.” She blinked. “It’s interesting to find something completely new, to say the least. I mean, I’ve seen respawn before, and universes with duplicates, and universes with complete randomness… But nothing set up quite like this. And the memory thing…” She put a hand to her chin, pondering what it meant rather than saying anything.

Renee smirked. “Don’t know everything, do you?”

“Yeah I have no idea what this universe’s deal is,” she admitted. “That should concern you.”

Pinkie shrugged, moving on with the mission. “Flutterfree, activate Lolo!”

Flutterfree spread her wings, summoning the strands of Lolo into existence, the spirograph forming a halo around her head. As it activated fully, it revealed its own appearance to all four present who normally couldn’t see such things. The Stand felt around the area, drawing everyone’s attention to a point in the air that was now clearly a rippling point in the fabric of spacetime. “There it is,” Flutterfree said. “The signal.”

Nova lifted her hoof and checked the scans on her screen, her horn surging with the power from her ring. “Let’s see… Minimal temporal energy, and… Yeah, definitely weird. Most points like this on Esefem are one way – that is, they drag ponies in. This one is two way.”

“Safe?” Renee asked.

“The other side’s not quite normal, but I’m not reading anything lethal,” Nova answered. “Should be fine.”
“What are we waiting for?” Vriska blurted. “Open it up!”

“Waiting for you to get impatient, dear,” Renee smirked.

“…I just got burned.”

“It was a sweet burn too,” Pinkie added. “Nova, open it up!”

Nova cast a magical circle around the point in spacetime. The circle created seven claw constructs that tore into the ripple and forced a portal open. The other side was clearly a version of Ponyville.

Flutterfree blinked. “I just got the strangest feeling of déjà vu.”

“It’s a Ponyville, of course you did,” Vriska pointed out.

“It’s not that. It’s… The energy of this place. Something’s… Different about it. It’s not a bad feeling, but… I’m trying to remember…”

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Do you know the answer?

~~~

The five of them were walking in the Ponyville on the other side of the portal.

Pinkie furrowed her brow. “Hrm… Something weird just happened…”

Vriska raised her eyebrow. “How so?”

“I… I’m not sure,” she said, concern evident on her face. “Call it the Pinkie Sense.”

Flutterfree held up a hoof. “I think we have other weird stuff to look at. Look at the people.”

Everyone looked around – Ponyville, despite being clearly built for ponies, was inhabited by Earth Vitis style humans. But they all seemed… flat. As if they were nothing but static images. The explorers could hear them talking to each other – but their mouths didn’t move, instead their entire bodies moved up and down with the words they spoke. When they walked, their legs didn’t move, although their limbs clearly could move, since they saw a version of Derpy pointing at something. In the distance, they could see Canterlot Castle – with a giant photorealistic human head floating next to it with a big smile on its face.

“What?” All five of them said at once.

Flutterfree frowned. “This… This is really familiar…” She felt something touch her hoof. She reached down, picking up a ball that was half red, half white, and had a single button in the middle. Pinkie poked her head toward it. “What’s that?”

“No idea. Just… found it at my hooves.”

Vriska pushed the button on it. The ball popped open in a flash of white light. In an instant, the ball was gone, replaced with a piece of paper that had “XDXDXDXDXDXDXD” written all over it with a strange, cartoonish face drawn in the background.

Renee blinked. “I say, is that one of those crude Internet meme things?”
I… Think so,” Flutterfree said, raising an eyebrow. “What…?”

“Read the other side,” Pinkie said.

Flutterfree did as ordered, flipping the paper over. The other side was plain and only contained two words.

_Free them._

Everyone stared at the words in silence.


“Whatever it is, it’s a quest,” Vriska said. “We’re just going to have to figure it out.”

“How much luck do you have stored up?” Renee asked.

“Not enough to slip through universal boundaries, but _enough_. We’ll find _something_, though I can’t exactly promise how _quickly_ we will.”

“Talk to the locals time!” Pinkie declared. “Let’s see what this… place is all about.”

“It’s almost like everything is low resolution,” Nova observed.

“Aacute observation,” a new, deep, frog-like and _synthetic_ monotone voice greeted them. The voice came from what was apparently this world’s version of Fluttershy – whose appearance was exactly like that of Equis Vitis’ Fluttershy when she was a teenager. However, the appearance was still _flat_, just like all the other inhabitants of this Ponyville. She spoke by bouncing up and down, which was frankly rather disorienting up this close. “You look a lot more expressive than us.”

“Uh, yeah,” Nova said, realizing that _they_ definitely weren’t flat, and apparently the universe they were in didn’t _require_ flatness – otherwise they would have been slowly converting.

Pinkie grinned. “I’m Pinkie, that’s Nova, that’s Flutterfree, that’s Renee, and that’s Vriska! We’re interdimensional explorers!”

The Fluttershy walked up to Flutterfree. “You’re not here to tell me you’re here to save me from an ancient evil, are you?”

“Uh, no? I’m here to… ‘free them,’ though I have no idea what that means.”

“Great. It sounds like we will be going around the weird overly complicated train again,” Fluttershy said. Suddenly her voice changed to one that was clearly feminine, but still monotone. “You have an interesting name, I have to say.”

“Oh, I changed it so not to confuse other Fluttershys. …Why did your voice change?”

“That happens now, ever since the reboot.” As if on cue, a boot flew past Fluttershy’s head and hit Vriska in the face.

“BOOT TO THE HEAD!” Pinkie cheered.

Vriska blinked. “I feel like I’m missing an in-joke.”

Fluttershy continued focusing on Flutterfree. ‘Changing names sounds like it’d help. Because if last time is any indication, we’ll run into two or three other Fluttershys in a void with sausage rolls. I
“Think I’ll go with… Aiskera.”


“It sounds cool.”

“Respectable reason,” Vriska said, standing up and dusting herself off.

“Do you know of anyone who needs to be freed?” Renee asked Aiskera.

“All of us are trapped in this world we call home and this life we live.”

“I’ll take that as a no?”

“Sure.”

Pinkie appeared behind Aiskera. “So why not introduce us to some people around town?”

“We could go to Twilight’s,” Aiskera suggested, her voice switching once again to a different male monotone. “I – god dammit, why’s it changing so often today?”

“Convenience and establishment,” Pinkie said. “TO TWILIGHT’S!”

Aiskera led them through Ponyville. As they passed through the buildings, they realized that even the town and the scenery looked flat. It was like reality wasn’t all here. The humans went about their lives, every last one speaking with a monotone and having only limited body movement.

Vriska whispered to Pinkie. “Okay, I have never seen anything like this. I can’t even begin to imagine what the deal is with this place. I at least had ideas about Esefem.”

“It looks like a shoddy mish-mash of random images,” Nova commented, pointing at an orange walking around like it was some kind of animal. “I… I don’t even know at this point.”

A purple car ran through a nearby house, somehow managing to blow a hole through it and not topple the entire structure. This world’s version of Rarity was driving – though how she was even doing it without moving her arms and legs was anyone’s guess. The car passed on by behind them, and a giant basketball came from the sky and bounced back into nothingness. A standard skin-tone human ‘walked’ past them, cheese and windmills in his hands.

Renee blinked. “I… What?”

“This is only slightly weirder than Esefem’s complete randomness,” Flutterfree said. “Trust me, I know. …Maybe that’s why it feels familiar to me.”

Suddenly, this world’s version of Sweetie Belle was standing in front of Pinkie. Pinkie stared at her. “Uh… Hi.”

“Hi,” Sweetie Belle said with a deep voice that sounded like it was short on air, but just as monotone as everyone else.

“…Okay fine,” Pinkie reached into her mane and produced a hamburger. She threw it into the air.

“BURGER!” Sweetie called, running after the flying food with extreme speed and malice, like she was some kind of force of nature.

“Huh,” Nova said. “…Sweetie Burger. I think the League will like her.”
“I’d be afraid of her, she destroyed a reaper once,” Aiskera said. “And—”

“HOLY SHIT!” Vriska shouted, jumping and hiding behind Aiskera. “W-w-who is that?” She pointed across the street.

Aiskera looked where she was pointing. “That’s Brad.”

“BULLSHIT! That’s Nicolas Cage!” The man she was pointing at appeared to be a standard type human with a strange smile, black outfit, and a face that was trying too hard.

“Uh… No, that’s Brad.”

“Well then it’s an alternate version of Nicolas. Oh, this always happens…” She started breathing heavily. “Every time I meet one of him… Every fucking time…”

The four ponies looked at each other in confusion.

“How do you not know who Nicholas Cage is!?” Vriska blurted. “You are closely intertwined with the culture of three Earths! Nicolas Cage is the best actor of all time, in any of them, hands down, and if you say otherwise I will gut you open on the spot with something creative.”

Pinkie blinked. “I mean, I know who he is, but the girls don’t really watch that many Earth movies.”

“I am making all of you watch every film this dream boat is in. You will understand.”

Renee raised an eyebrow. “I think you’re fixated.”

“S-shut up.” She looked over at Brad again. “I… I’m going over there.”

“Sure. Knock yourself out,” Aiskera said. “I’ll watch you flounder like a fish.”

Vriska took in a breath – showing nervousness to the ponies for the first time. She put on a smile and walked up to Brad. “Hey, Brad, I hear—”

Brad started screaming, did a triple backflip in midair, and ran away. A skull with a trumpet appeared in front of Vriska’s face and tooted.


“Sometimes these things happen,” Aiskera said. “You are reacting far too much to it.”

“To what?”

This world’s version of Applejack passed by and said “appul”. A flat apple the size of a person fell from the sky and hit Vriska, crushing her in an instant. “Ow…” She muttered.

Pinkie chuckled. “That’s… Vriska, are you sure you have good luck right now?”

“I’m starting to think this universe is rigged.”

“Appul,” Applejack said. Another apple fell on Pinkie.

“Justice…” Vriska said.

The two apples walked away and did a dance off into the sunset.

“Is there an explanation for that?” Renee asked Aiskera.
“Those are appuls.”

“I can hear you misspelling it,” Nova muttered.

“Appuls are people. You eat apples. Right Appuljack?”

“Appul,” Appuljack said, summoning another appul from the sky, this time aimed at Nova. Nova used her magic to deflect it into the other two. It worked like a bowling ball and pins, quite literally bowling them over despite their round shape.

“Let’s just get to Twilight’s already…” Nova muttered.

Suddenly this world’s version of Pinkie Pie appeared. “IT’S TIME!”

~~~

Do you hear it?

~~~

The flat Pinkie Pie was wearing an outfit with a green hat, golden bowtie, and red-white candy cane. She stood behind a counter decorated with game-show colors, and the five interdimensional explorers were sitting behind contestant booths.

The flat Pinkie Pie continued speaking. “FOR PINKIE PIE’S SUPER duperamazingfantasticincrediblebrilliantgreatmarveloushilariousstupendousbreathtakingplotprogression QUIZ!” her voice was just as monotone as the others, but the high pitched tone gave off an air of excitement. “TODAY we have with us five contestants from another universe entirely! Introduce yourselves!”

“What in the-” Renee began.

Pinkie Pie the pony coughed. “Just introduce yourselves, girls.”

“Uh… Okay.” Renee cleared her throat. “I am Renee Jackson of Equestria, Equis Vitis. I’m a diplomat and explorer.”

“I’m Flutterfree Asquall, and I’m from the same place. I like animals and I’m a semi-vampire who explores and I help everyone I can find.”

“I’m Nova Glimmer. I explore and make sure time doesn’t explode. I don’t do time travel.”

“I’m Pinkie Pie, leader of this operation and party pony extraordinaire!”

“Vriska Serket. I’m a god of Light. How’s that for cool?”

“Most boring introduction I’ve ever heard,” the flat Pinkie declared. “You can call me Quizzy if you want! Now, FIRST QUESTION, what is Sweetie Belle’s favorite food?”

Flutterfree ringed in first. “Hamburgers! Or just Burger.”

“If this is just gonna be a quiz on what we encountered…” Vriska muttered.

“I’m sorry, that’s wrong,” Quizzy declared. “She’s actually partial to leeks.”

Flutterfree blinked. “Uh…”
“NEXT QUESTION! What is Jotaro Kujo’s catchphrase?”

“How would you know that?” Renee asked.

“WRONG!” Quizzy said. “The answer is ‘Yare Yare Daze’. I would also have accepted the other translations, ‘Good Grief’ and ‘Gimme a Break’.”

“I knew that! I was asking you a question!” Renee said indignantly.

“So that’s what it means…” Nova mused.

Pinkie raised her eyebrow at Renee. “Do you really need to ask her that Renee?” She pointed at herself, and then at her counterpart. “Come on. She clearly knows things.”

“Oh. …Right. Never mind.” Renee folded her front hooves and huffed.

“NEXT QUESTION!” Quizzy declared. “How many stars are there in the night sky tonight?”

Pinkie rung in. “There are absolutely no stars in the sky tonight!”

“Correct! You win a telescope!”

“I’m not even going to try to wrap my head around that one,” Nova muttered.

“NEXT QUESTION! What is the number of-”

Vriska rang in before the question finished. “Nineteen.”

“Correct!”

Vriska rolled her eyes. “Why are we playing along with this again, Pinkie? I me-”

Quizzy continued. “You get to spin the Wheel of Brad!”

Vriska stood up tall with a grin on her face. “I HAVE NEVER BEEN SO HAPPY IN MY ENTIRE LIFE.”

The Wheel of Brad was a wheel with mostly different human faces on it, many of which were Nicolas Cage. Vriska spun the wheel, enticed by the result. The wheel turned… and turned…. And turned… Until it achieved liftoff and disappeared into nothing.

“Congratulations. You got Brad,” Quizzy declared.

Vriska blinked. “…I’ll take this as a victory.”

“NEXT QUESTION! What is Elysium?”

Nova rang in. “The human Greek concept of an afterlife for the chosen of the gods.”

“Correct! You win an all-expenses paid trip to space!”

“Sweet.”

“LAST QUESTION! Where is Aiskera the Fluttershy right now?”

Flutterfree looked around. “Huh… She isn’t here…”
“Correct!”

~~~

What is that song in your mind?

~~~

Twilight’s Laboratoribrinarisium.

26:92, February 31.

Twilight’s house was the Golden Oaks Library, just like it had been many years ago on Equis Vitis. Twilight herself looked like her teenage Earth Vitis counterpart, albeit just as flat as the others and wearing what appeared to be a black military hat for some reason.

“Oh! Visitors! Fluttershy, you should have told me you were bringing guests!”

Aiskera nodded. “I’m going by Aiskera for now.” Her voice was feminine again.

Nova blinked. “Okay, that was weird.”

Pinkie frowned. “There’s something more going on here than rapid changes of scenery. Did any of you hear something?”

“Like what?” Vriska asked.

“A… Song?” Pinkie hit herself in the head. “I feel like something’s slipping through the cracks. I don’t even know what I’m talking about anymore.”

Flutterfree decided to leave the contemplation of songs to the rest of her friends – she walked up to Twilight and introduced herself. “Hi, I am Flutterfree-”

Twilight’s eyes suddenly turned red and her body started shaking without her speaking.

“Uh…” Flutterfree gulped. “Girls, I think Lolo just activated something…”

“Everyone hit the deck!” Aiskera called.

Nova did the next best thing and teleported Twilight outside. The five explorers and Aiskera watched through the window as she transformed. With a powerful white light, the human body of Twilight Sparkle was gone, replaced with a gigantic black thing made of metal that resembled a bug with two claws. The large abdomen had Twilight’s cutie mark on it. The mark’s purple color really didn’t look like it belonged on the dark structure.

“Did she just turn into a spaceship?” Nova asked.

“Yes. A Reaper,” Aiskera said. “I forgot she could do that. I guess she forgot about it too, since the Reapers lost control of her. And were defeated.”

“You know what, I’m not even surprised anymore,” Vriska said. “For all we know this is what we were supposed to find.”

“I THINK IT WAS,” Twilight said. She spoke not with a monotone, but with a droning, deep ringing
that wormed its ways into their minds. “AS I AM NOW, I DETECT A SIGNAL IN DEEP SPACE. I AM CALLED TO IT.”

“Finally, some direction,” Nova muttered. “Care to take us on board?”

“I DO NOT MIND AT ALL. I DO NOT EVEN FEEL A LITTLE EVIL NOW THAT I HAVE RETURNED TO THIS BODY. IT FEELS… NATURAL.”

Renee raised an eyebrow. “…Normally I’d feel concerned, but I’m with Vriska at this point. Let’s just go with it.”

Pinkie nodded. “I think that’s what we need to do anyway. Let’s go!”

“I SHALL CHOOSE A CREW. ALL OF YOU. AISKERA. APPULJACK. QUIZZY. BRAD. SWEETIE.”

“Sweetie?” Renee blurted. “Why?”

“BECAUSE I FEEL LIKE IT. IT IS NOW TIME FOR AN ABSOLUTELY BADASS TEAM SHOT.”

Suddenly they were in a dark metal room presumably inside Twilight. Appuljack, Quizzy, Brad, and Sweetie Burger were also there, all in uniforms that said SPORK-COM on them.

“TODAY, WE FLY TO SPACE,” Twilight declared.

“To find out what we need to free,” Flutterfree said.

“I’m beginning to wonder if that was just a joke,” Nova commented.

“I don’t think it was. I think it meant something. Something very important…”

A human version of Vinyl appeared out of nowhere. “Hey, can I come along?”

Quizzy shook her entire body like it was about to explode. “No, you’re just too OP and badass.”

Vinyl vanished in a puff of logic.

~~~

Do you see that this isn’t meatspace?

~~~

Pinkie frowned, looking at the planet Twi-Reaper was showing them as the ‘source of the signal’. It looked just like someone had taken a stock photo of an apple and slapped it onto a starry background.

“Girls, something is wrong here. I have no idea what, but it’s something,” Pinkie declared.

“Something is very off. Not with the people we are with – though Twilight the Reaper is a bit odd – but something else.”

Vriska nodded. “I keep getting a bad feeling as well. Like… We’re jumping.”

“You’re noticing that too?” Pinkie said, raising an eyebrow. “…I’m supposed to be the only one who notices that. Well, besides for the moment with the Quiz show… I think.”
Vriska frowned. “I don’t like what that suggests.”

“It may just be an effect of the universe we’re in.”

“Even if that’s true, that doesn’t make me feel any better,” Vriska said. “…Do you know the answer?”

“What?”

“Just something that’s stuck in my head for some reason…” Vriska said, furrowing her brow. “Twi-Reaper! Are we going down to the planet yet!”

“SURE THING.”

“Also, where’s Brad?”

“LEFT HIM AT THE CAKE-MART WE PASSED.”

“…Okay.” Vriska narrowed her eyes. “I remember that happening, but I’m sure I would have done something about that… reacted in some way…”

Everyone minus Brad and Twi-Reaper appeared on the surface of the apple-planet. Twi-Reaper herself transformed back into her flat human form, descending right next to them. “That was fun. I do have a leftover desire to assume control though…”

The planet they were on was made entirely out of apple skins: the mountains, the trees, the buildings. Everything was apples, including the people – every last one of them was an ‘appul’. An appul wearing a hat walked up to them. “No.” He said with a monotone voice that was probably meant to be much more intimidating than it was. “No, we do not want you here. This is the last appul safe haven. We had to flee here after the Great Appul War.”

“Wait, that actually happened?” Aiskera said. “I wasn’t all that clear on that.”

“It happened. We were defeated soundly. We had to flee to this planet to escape from the fighting.”

“I can’t remember how we defeated Chester the Cheetah… Huh…” Twi-Reaper said. “That’s weird.”

“Memory is the key,” Quizzy said, holding up a green crystal in the shape of the Greek letter epsilon.

“In the name of Elysium, I demand you to get off our planet,” the appul demanded. “Or we will have to use force.”

Vriska took on a fighting stance. “Bring it, fruit.”

The appul drew a gun from nowhere. “If you insist.”

Appuljack stood tall, glaring at the appul. “Appul.” She said. Another appul dropped from the sky, crushing the aggressive gun-wielding fruit. Appuljack pointed a hand at the appul settlement in the distance. “Appul appul appul appul appul appul appul.” Meteor-like appuls fell from the heavens, demolishing the entire settlement.

Appuljack folded her arms in pride. “They will never bother us again. We are freed from the insurrectionist appuls.”

“YOU CAN TALK!?” Nova blurted.
“She’s been talking the entire time, silly!” Quizzy and Pinkie said at the same time.

“I mean something other than ‘appul’.”

“Of course I can,” Appuljack said. “I just chose not to.”

“So… Was that it?” Flutterfree asked. “We… destroy a town of angry militaristic fruit…?”

Twi-Reaper frowned. “No. The signal is still strong. But now it isn’t here…”

“Something’s moving around,” Pinkie said.

Twi-Reaper turned back into her Reaper form. “LET US CHASE AFTER THE SIGNAL.”

~~~

What trap do you find yourself in?

~~~

“Trap,” Nova said, suddenly. “We’re in a trap.”

Pinkie blinked. “We are?”

“I’m sure of it.” She looked at the pattern of hyperspace as it flew by on Twi-Reaper’s monitor.

“There’s a trap. A… There’s something. Things blend together in our memories… We’re being led around on a string… It wants us to keep chasing… It’s just… Agh, why can’t I remember?”

“Seriously, who has the answer?” Vriska asked. “There’s gotta be an answer here somewhere!”

Aiskera glanced between them all. “Well, I admit this is odd, but not as weird as some of the things we’ve run across. There was a Greggs in the middle of universal nothingness once, and I was eaten by a sausage roll. One of me, anyway.”

“These worlds…” Renee said. “These worlds – this one, and the ones like Esefem. They’re just too odd to be natural in any way. There just has to be some force behind them.”

“The Beat?” Nova asked. “Maybe…” She checked her screen. “Starbeat has given me a way to detect it if I want… But I’m scanning right now. It’s only a little higher than normal.”

“I don’t know what the Beat is, but there is a force behind our universe,” Aiskera said. “This is a world born from the struggles in a great war.”

Renee raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Do tell.”

“It’s a long and complicated story, but I’ll try. There were two beings – one called Overlord Faust, and the other Overlord Hasbro. They came from a world I don’t pretend to have any idea about, but through some method they worked together to create a universe filled with ponies, friendship, and magic.”

Everyone except Vriska was suddenly paying attention – this was the first time they’d had confirmation that universes could be created. The strange universe-construct that copied universes wasn’t a creator, just a copier. This was something new.

Aiskera continued. “But Hasbro wanted to do something new with the world, something involving less depth and more shoddy plastic so he could make money off of the world in some way. Faust
abandoned the world after this, leaving it to Hasbro alone. Only the creations within the world could fight back – and fight back they did. Three mysterious strangers - the gods - came from seemingly nowhere and helped the creations fight Hasbro. The gods gained some control back, splitting the world into three separate universes. Each of the gods placed themselves into each world’s version of Fluttershy, as protectors in case they would be needed again."

Renee nodded. “Is that why you know so much, dear?”

“I believe so. The War between Hasbro and the creations began anew when the three gods were reawakened, and the universes collapsed into one - the reboot. I think the War is still going on in the actual reboot universe. I’m not entirely sure how this world relates to this story, but I have the memories of all three Fluttershys, although I know I’m not a vessel for the gods anymore.” Aiskera looked into the distance. “Hasbro’s agents have occasionally infiltrated this world, and we’ve stopped them every time, but he hasn’t made a move in a while.”

“Maybe you just didn’t realize this time,” Nova said. “There’s something happening to us. Maybe his agent is a more subtle type?”

Aiskera nodded. “I… suppose that is possible.”

“I think I have it,” Vriska said. “This war that might still be going on in the other universe… You’re probably ‘trapped’ in the fight, and need to be ‘freed’ right?”

Aiskera paused for a moment. “That’s possible.”

Pinkie furrowed her brow. “So… Let’s assume that is what we’re here to do – stop this ‘war’ of kinds that may or may not actually be happening. To do that we’d need to find out where these ‘gods’ and Hasbro are. Find the war that has this world in its grasp.”

“Is there anyone who would have a connection to where it’s happening?” Renee asked. “We can try to trace it, since we’ve got dimensional scanners.”

“Aiskera, perhaps,” Vriska said. “She remembers; she might have a connection.”

Nova scanned Aiskera. “I’ve got nothing, sorry.”

“Can we find one of Hasbro’s agents?” Renee asked. “They must have a connection in them. Or at least some answers.”

“They’re all dead,” Appuljack said. “Well… Except maybe Sunset.”

“Then we need t-”

~~~

How close can you be and still fail?

~~~

They were suddenly adrift in space around a ‘planet’ that was literally just a tennis ball. Twi-Reaper was not in her Reaper form.

“WHAT THE FUCK JUST HAPPENED?” Vriska shouted. “…How am I talking? How am I breathing?”

“I was just hacked, don’t you remember?” Twi-Reaper said, answering the first question but ignoring
the more practical ones. “We have to defend ourselves! We’re being attacked!”

Thousands of horrendously bright colored ponies charged at them, looking nothing like the soft cute ponies that came from most Equises. They moved with even more rigid motions than the rest of the beings the travelers had seen in this universe.

“It happened. We were *skipped*,” Pinkie said. “And that *definitely* wasn’t a natural one! We were trying to find this world’s Sunset and something *stopped* us!” She produced her party cannon and unleashed it, the power of the party pushing the badly colored ponies further away into space.

“What even are those?” Flutterfree asked, summoning Lolo to surround her and baring her sharp teeth.

“Chrysalis’ bad OCs…” Aiskera said. “But I have no idea why they’re attacking us. They are servants of Faust…”

“There’s something messing with us,” Nova declared. “Something has us in its grip. It… Well I would say it’s messing with time, but my readings aren’t showing anything!”

“It’s not messing with time,” Pinkie said. “It’s messing with all of reality. It’s *fundamental*.” She punched one of the bad OCs across the face and smashed another one with her hammer. “Think, everyone, think! What has been happening to us!? What’s the answer!?”

“Clearly, something has it out for us,” Renee declared, making use of zero-gravity to fire her magic crystals in complex patterns. “Something that’s… It’s putting thoughts subtly in our head, isn’t it? Without us noticing?!”

“In the in-betweens…” Pinkie muttered, grinding her teeth. “Oh, that’s clever… Of course I wouldn’t see that…” She hefted her hammer, a plan forming in her mind. “Vriska. Take *all* the luck you can from these OCs. Go ahead and go for lethality.”

Vriska nodded, a slight smirk growing on her face. She glanced at every bad OC she could, absorbing their luck until they reached *heart attack* bad luck. They weren’t overly fast or clever, so they didn’t think of any way to avoid what she was doing. They fell like dominoes.

“Right!” Pinkie said. “Now… Now find us Sunset Shimmer.”

“Luck isn’t that specific,” Vriska commented. “I need a lead. Hey, Aiskera, where is Sunset?”

“Back at Equis!” she called.

“Right.”

Pinkie nodded, smiling. “Twi-Reaper, you should be unhacked. Turn back into your Reaper form and take us back to Equis. We can find her, and we ca-”

~~~

Where can you go in this me-

“GOTCHA!” Pinkie hollered, grabbing a hold of the Fourth. “Let’s take this somewhere else, shall we?”

*What can you do to the Voice of Elysium?*

~~~
They were all in absolute blackness. Twi-Reaper was still a Reaper, but the rest of them were just standing in the darkness. There wasn’t ground, but they could walk around anyway, somehow.

“What… is this place?” Renee asked.

“A void of some kind,” Aiskera said. “Last time I was in one of these it was Twilight’s Mind. But since there’s a giant Reaper here I kinda doubt it’s the same place. I do wonder if we can get a Greggs to appear though.”

A Greggs did appear. It was a modern restaurant building with a blue color and the scent of food coming from within.

Pinkie facehooved. “That’s not the point! The point is that my plan worked.”

“What plan?” Renee asked.

“I was trying to force our pursuer to act by cobbling together a plan with a lot of importance in my voice,” Pinkie declared. “I was ready for it to try to shift everything again. I stopped it – and now we’re here.”

“The Voice of Elysium…” Vriska said. “That’s what it’s called.”

“I know that too…” Flutterfree said.

“It’s here with us,” Nova said. “Physically.”

Aiskera narrowed her eyes. “The Voice of Elysium… One of my memories has Hasbro mentioning that name. He put it at the end of a list, like it was the creation he was most proud of. I had no idea what it was at the time.”

“We still have no idea,” Vriska blurted. “HEY! VOICE DUDE! SHOW YOURSELF!”

Quizzy stood up and twirled her cane. “Will the Voice of Elysium reveal itself? Vote now on your phones.”

Pinkie pulled out several dozen phones from nothing and pressed YES. Aiskera did as well, after she had gone into the Greggs and gotten a sausage roll.

Do you let yourselves see me?

The Voice of Elysium appeared in a starburst of fractal color. In the center of the seemingly endless plane of color, there were a few rings made up of a repeating pattern of the same animating image – a pixelated Fluttershy riding a skateboard with sunglasses on her face. The numerous rings of this animation rotated around a central hole, where a single large skateboard Fluttershy winked in and out of existence.

Quizzy’s jaw dropped. “No way. You were the Voice of Elysium this whole time?”

Vriska facepalmed. “We’ve never met this guy.”

“That’s what you think.”

Do you like my form?

“It doesn’t make any sense, and it’s way too colorful.” Nova deadpanned. “The resolution is also crap.”
Pinkie smirked. “So, Voice of Elysium. We have you right here where we want you. Nova! Grab the connection this thing has in it to the correct universe! I know it has it somewhere in it!”

Nova lit her horn and checked her scans. Her confident smile vanished. “Pinkie! It’s not working!”

Did you think you could do anything to me in my domain?

“Right…” Aiskera said. “Hasbro’s greatest creation would inherit some of his power.”

“The Voice of Elysium can control the way this reality functions!” Pinkie exclaimed. “Duh! AGH! Why didn’t I see that!?”

~~~~

Can you hold a candle to the Voice of Elysium?

~~~~

Vriska clenched her fist. “Do you ever speak in terms that aren’t questions!?”

What do you think?

Vriska looked around to see where they were – it was on fire, wherever it was. Probably some cheesy version of hell. “You know what, doesn’t matter. I never actually used that luck Pinkie asked me to accumulate.” She took out her dice. “Are you ready for this?”

The Voice of Elysium did not respond, but its presence was still very much visible through the flames of this universe. Vriska rolled her dice, spending all the luck she could muster – forcing the eight eight-sided dice to all roll eights. The highest possible roll.

Her outfit transformed to black-blue spined armor, and her entire body began to glow with a blue-white aura. “THIS IS THE POWER OF MINDFANG!” Vriska shouted, charging the Voice of Elysium and sticking her sword right into the pixelated Fluttershy at the center.

The Voice of Elysium didn’t shudder or otherwise react; even though Vriska knew her attack was capable of making even universe-guardians falter. She knew it had done something. ...It had to.

~~~~

What can brute force do to a force of nature?

~~~~

Suddenly everyone could see each other again, this time in a plane of ice. Several of them were singed, but all had survived through some method or another – it wasn’t important precisely how. Twi-Reaper was back in her human form with many scratches all over her body.

The Voice of Elysium was still before them, and the plane of ice was trying to devour them by slowly folding in half while a voice in the distance said ‘slam jam’.

“Brute force won’t do it!” Pinkie shouted. “What we need is another force! Something that could be considered unchangeable! Something that is just accepted and that the Voice can’t do anything against!”

Aiskera looked to Flutterfree. Flutterfree nodded.
“Pinkie!” They shouted. “HAMBURGER!”

Pinkie’s angry face was shocked into stunned silence. Then she laughed. “Of course!” She pulled a hamburger out of her mane.

Sweetie Burger was still with them, despite having not done anything for as long as most of them could remember.

“Celestia, I love me a Chekov’s Gun,” Pinkie remarked. She threw the hamburger at the Voice of Elysium, some force catching it in the middle of its pixelated Fluttershy rings.

What is this?

“BURGER!” Sweetie Burger yelled, charging at the Voice of Elysium. For whatever reason, the Voice could do nothing to stop the burger-crazed girl – her love of burgers was just one of the absolute facts of existence in this universe.

The Voice of Elysium put all of its focus on that one girl, trying desperately to overwrite a rule of life.

“I can’t get a signal still!” Nova declared.

“Who cares?” Pinkie shouted, activating her dimensional device. “Let’s get out of here!” She opened a portal to a new universe, finding a real vacuum of space – without air.

They were all ejected into the absolute space, but Nova was prepared. She surrounded them all in a bubble of magic, allowing them to continue breathing and remain together in the cold void. She teleported Sweetie Burger and the hamburger to them as well. The girl cared not for the danger that they had just escaped, or the role she had just played in said escape. She just wanted to eat her hamburger.

The Voice of Elysium followed them through the portal, appearing as a fractal pattern even in the real space of a normal universe, the pixel animations in the center still rotating like before.

You thought escape would be able to save you?

“This wasn’t an escape,” Nova said, holding up the screen on her leg. “You can’t control all of reality here. Which means I’ve now got the coordinates of the universe you connect to.”

What will that do to-

Nova activated the portal inside the Voice of Elysium, tearing a hole right in its center. She threw the bubble that contained all of them through the opening, into a brand new world.

Here, the sun was eternally setting. The sky was completely orange, and the land was nothing but a seemingly infinite golden yellow field. It seemed as if the nature of the world was frozen.

Nova lost control of the magic bubble at this point and it popped, depositing all of them on the ground. The group stood up, dusted themselves off, and took a moment to look around.

They were in the middle of a battlefield all right, but it wasn’t at all what they were expecting.

On one side were hundreds of flat individuals – ranging from copies of people they had seen in the world they had just spent most of the last several hours, to numerous Reapers, appuls, potatoes, oranges, and even a few alternate versions of some characters. There were a couple floating heads, a
handful of ponies, and a bizarre assortment of poor quality images.

Three individual Fluttershys stood at the front of the army of everything – a red, green, and blue one, with the blue one in the front wearing a gray hat that looked somewhat like a lampshade. There was a laptop in front of her.

On the other side of the battlefield there was only one individual – a blue square with the loose words *Hasbro* printed on it, and a strange “D” shape that might have been a mouth underneath it. He had a laptop as well.

“About time you got here,” the blue Fluttershy said.

“Zed Ex…?” Flutterfree said, remembering. “…You were the one who helped me on Esefem back then!”

“Yes. That was me.”

“Wait,” Hasbro said, his voice just as monotone as all the others – but significantly more sinister sounding. “When did you get the time to go away and help her?”

“The time you went away to summon your Grim Reaper,” Zed Ex declared.

“That doesn’t make any sense, you were hunting me down.”

“…Foreshadowing?”

“This level does not operate like that, Zed Ex Insanity.”

Pinkie laughed.

Hasbro turned to her. “Why do you laugh, otherworldly Pinkie? You think you know more than I do? Let me tell you something – you don’t. This is not the only world I have created, and it is not the only one with your kind. I have made dozens of universes with ponies, constantly deriving more and more worlds from them. Do you think you came from a void? From nowhere? No. You started out as an idea. *My* idea.”

Pinkie laughed again. “Wrong-O! Not only was it not really your idea, my universe has nothing to do with your sad little creations!”

“You can think that, Pinkie. But you will find eventually that you are wrong. You will discover what Creativity is. Or, rather, you would, if I did not plan to kill you right here, right now.”

Vriska, still in her full eight-eights form, smirked. “Now that I can see you, Hasbro, I can kill you. It won’t take much.”

“Why do you think the entire army on the other side of the divide has not attacked me with their overwhelming might?” Hasbro asked. “It is because these two laptops are running the universe you were just in. Where the *rest* of the creations remain. We cannot fight each other directly, for the moment we do the world we are fighting over dies. All it will take is either me or Zed Ex to push a button, and everything is deleted.”

“How on earth is that computer hooked up to the existence of another universe?” Nova blurted.

“It is not something you would, or can, understand,” Hasbro declared. “Now that you are here, you can only join the standoff with the other side. All your multivariable power will not be able to kill me
— or even harm me — before I could destroy that entire universe. I don’t care what secret powers you have back where you come from, there is nothing you can do. I am an Overlord.”

“…You aren’t really here,” Aiskera said. “This is what remains of the original three universes. Your real form is in another world, the one where the Overlords dwell. Where you use us to make money.”

Zed Ex nodded. “Good observation, self.”

Hasbro laughed. “Then you realize that even if you kill this body, I can hold this world hostage from above! I created the Equestria Girls from another universe, I can create a new world from this one and discard it!”

“But you’re not,” Nova said. “It must be difficult for you to do that.” She rubbed the back of her head. “This… This is all a bit much for me to understand, but I think I do. You live in some world where you use the power of Creativity to create universes, and the creation of unique and interesting universes is part of the economy of your world. That… That sickens me, but I understand, I suppose. But it must take a lot of effort to make a universe, and you’d rather fight an intense battle with your creations than start from scratch. You want them imprisoned so they can bow to your will – to make sense.”


“Because we decided to intervene,” Zed Ex stated. “He had a pristine, horrendously boring world that would have been for nothing but selling toys and extending out overplayed high school drama.

Hasbro paused for a moment. “How does this help any of you do anything? You’ve comprehended the game of universes, good for you. But you still cannot do anything, not while a universe sits in these computers, just waiting to be destroyed by the push of a button. This cold war has to continue for eternity, otherworlders, and it must be fought by proxy. They have the numbers, but I have the power.”

“This is stupid!” Vriska shouted. “The moment either one of you wins the cold war, the other can just make it worthless with a push of a button!”

“So you actually have a brain,” Hasbro commented. “You are right. Complete victory on either side would be disastrous. If I achieve victory, they will not think it right to let the created live in what they’d view as a ‘hellhole’. If they achieve victory, I will pull the plug because the existence of a lost universe would be an embarrassment. So we are eternally stuck in this game of back and forth, editing reality in subtle ways to turn the world into something we desire. Tipping the balance from absurdity, to order. They think they are winning now.”

“We are winning,” Zed Ex said. “The possibilities within the world are nigh endless. There’s so much imagination, adventure, and life.”

“But you are not Overlords,” Hasbro declared. “You are but self-proclaimed gods sticking their noses where they do not belong. You do not have the Creativity to create your own, you only work from derivation. Plagiarism. My power far exceeds that of your own, it will only take time to achieve a ‘winning’ condition.”

“Are you going to go on about the copyright strike thing again? Did it really upset you that much?”

“That has nothing to do with this. This has to do with these newcomers to the war. They need to realize they cannot interfere, or an entire universe of creations will be lost.”

“...There has to be a way,” Pinkie declared. “We were asked to free them.”
“Free them?” Hasbro declared. “They are creations. They cannot be ‘freed’ as you understand it. They are limited by their creators, and in this case those gods who interfere. They may have freedom, in some shallow sense, but their nature is determined.”

“Sometimes your creations surprise you,” Pinkie asserted.

“That does not mean their nature is not determined.”

“Then explain how we just dragged all of these ‘creations’ to a purely physical universe,” Flutterfree demanded.

“...You did what?”

“My theory was correct,” Zed Ex said, suddenly. “The creations, the Equestria Girls, can exist in other universes apart from your created hierarchy with just the correct type of universal connection. I found Esefem a while back, by complete accident, but when I did I knew what it meant. A way out. So I prepared - I waited for these heroes to learn more about the multiverse, I waited for the creations to develop as people, and I waited for everything to be ready. I actually went to Esefem recently to leave a little something to encourage Saxton Hale to investigate at just the right moment.”

Hasbro shuddered. “You planned this!?”

“Yes. I also left them that vague hint you would realize nothing from. You thought it was impossible to free them. That turns out it’s not the case.” Zed Ex pushed a button on her laptop. “I have just initiated a comedic ‘vacuum’ routine over the entire universe contained within. Normally this would do nothing, but if an opening were to be created to the universe, everything in would be explosively released.”

“There is no way that would work!” Hasbro declared.

Pinkie Pie smirked and produced her dimensional device. She dialed the universe that sat in the computer. “It’s time to free them.” She opened the floodgates – and the vacuum command did exactly what it was supposed to do. Everything within the cosmos of the random, bizarre, and wacky universe was ejected into the sky in a brilliant splash of colors and brilliance. The entire universe was shot out of its virtual reality and into the next level of existence.

Hasbro was completely silent. He pressed the button to destroy the universe. It did what it was supposed to do – the portal stopped connecting to the universe that no longer existed – but nothing was destroyed with it. He had destroyed an empty world.

Zed Ex was suddenly pointing a sword at Hasbro. “I’ve been waiting a long time for this, mate.”

Hasbro created a gun out of nothing and shot his body, removing his consciousness from the universe.

“...Poor sport,” Zed Ex commented. He turned to the interdimensional travelers. “Well, you all took quite a long time to get here, but I guess it all worked out in the end. I’m not apologizing for manipulating you to get here. We’re all alive, you should be proud of that. I do have one other thing to ask you though.”

“What?” Pinkie asked.

“Can you take them out of this universe as well? It’ll take time for Hasbro to act from the level above this one, and they really don’t want to be here when he figures out how to send another agent like the Voice of Elysium here. If you do so, everyone here will be forever in your debt.”
Pinkie smiled. “Well, evacuating an entire universe might be difficult… But I’m sure we can do it! Just have to contact the rest of the universes, get some fleets here.”

A Reaper spoke from in the sky. “WE WOULD BE WILLING TO LEND OUR SPACE.”

“Wasn’t your race bent on galactic extermination and or conquest?” Twi-Reaper asked.

“YES. BUT SINCE THE STANDOFF WAR WITH HASBRO STARTED WE HAVE GROWN TO APPRECIATE THOSE WHO WE HAVE STOOD BY ALL THESE YEARS. ALSO YOUR FRIENDS WOULD PROBABLY DECLARE WAR ON US WITH YOUR INTERDIMENSIONAL TECHNOLOGY IF WE KEPT OUR OLD WAYS, AND THAT IS NOT SOMETHING WE WOULD WIN.”


“I’ve barely understood anything that’s happened today,” Renee admitted. “But… I guess we did something good?”

“Yes. We did,” Flutterfree asserted. “And I am looking forward to an in depth explanation from Zed Ex…”

Zed Ex forced her body to *shrug*. “You know, I don’t think I’m in the mood. We saved this world, our work is done. I could say something about ‘you’re not ready to know the answer’ but that’s stupid. I just don’t want to explain it to you. We leave our people with you.” Then both her and the other two gods vanished.

Aiskera spoke up. “Huh. I guess I’m all that remains of the gods now.”


“Sometimes you just need something to mean nothing but sound cool anyway,” Aiskera answered.

“…I’ve never been more proud of anyone in my life,” Zed Ex decided.

Nova lit her horn. “Oh no you don’t go vanishing again, we have-” Zed Ex was gone already.

“…Damn.”

“We’re not getting any answers to our questions are we?” Renee asked.

“Probably not,” Aiskera said. “I think they and Hasbro were the only ones who could actually answer them. Sorry.”

Nova sighed. “It’s okay. I just don’t want to be the one to tell Eve we came across universal creation and still don’t understand it.”

Apparently *nobody* wanted to be the person to tell Eve about that, because silence fell across the land.

“Let’s just work on getting all of you out of here,” Pinkie said. “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Vriska put her hand to her head. “…I do have a question though. What happened to the Voice of Elysium? It didn’t follow us in to this universe…”

Nobody knew. Nova checked the universe they had left the Voice in, but it wasn’t there. They
decided not to worry about it for now since they had a universe to evacuate - even if it was small compared to most other universes, it would still take significant effort to round up everyone.

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“The Rune of Elysium just surged,” Lieshy said. “Make note of that in the experiment log when you get to it, Corona.”

“Gotcha,” Corona said.

They were in the Mushroom World – a place so long kept in the background, finally brought to the forefront. The world was a simple one – medieval, but with a more simple way of life. Everyone was happy, carefree, and the occasional bad guy was always beaten up by some hero or other at some point. The inhabitants of the world – mushroom people with red dots on their heads – were always welcoming to the interdimensional traveler, even if they really didn’t understand what was going on. They were a simple people with simple desires in a world filled with magic, fantasy, and eyes in many of the hills that seemed to serve no purpose.

It was a beautiful and mostly peaceful place, generally. Vivian had informed them of less hospitable locales, including a town she knew well called Rogueport, but that was far from the land they currently occupied.

Lady Rarity smiled – she currently had her helmet off, although the rest of her armor was still on tight. “I must say, this place is a nice break from all the interdimensional drama. A place that doesn’t really care that much about the other worlds but invites us to stay anyway. There should be more places like this.”

“I know, right?” Corona said, smirking. “Just a great place.”

“Eh, not always,” Vivian said. “My sisters used to be quite cruel. And my mother was basically Majora.”

“Dark things lurk,” Lieshy commented.

“Your sisters seemed fine to me,” Corona told Vivian. “Though Marilyn was of… few words.”

“They’ve come around,” Vivian admitted. “I will say it is nice to come back here. I should visit more often.”

“Definitely,” Corona said.

Toph shrugged. “I still don’t get what the big deal is.”

Corona rolled her eyes. “Party pooper.”

The conversation didn’t get any further – not that it needed to, really. A small woman – not a mushroom person – walked up to them. She had blue skin, pink hair, and an oddly square-shaped head. “Excuse me, are you General Toph and Company?”

Toph nodded. “That’s us.”

“I have a request.”

“Lady, we don’t just take requests from random people.”

“The Mushroom World, as much as it doesn’t like to admit it, has connections to other universes –
one of which is where I hail from. I am Nastasia. And in return for telling you about a network of universes connected to this world, I want you to find some lost friends of mine.”

Corona blinked. “Lost?”

“Yes. If you want to know more, come with me.”

Toph directed herself toward Vivian. “You okay with this?”

“I’m definitely curious,” Vivian admitted.

Toph nodded. “Then lead the way, Miss Nastasia.”

Nastasia nodded. With only a slight bit of effort, she generated several black cubes around each of their bodies. The universe seemed to swirl around them – and then it was replaced with a completely different universe. They stood on top of a castle made entirely of black material floating in a milky white expanse.

“…Interesting portal device,” Corona commented. “How does it work?”

“It’s an innate ability to tap into the dimensional nature of reality,” Nastasia said. “There’s a city that exists in its own universe called Flipside, where the power is cultivated. You couldn’t really call it a multiversal society though – the people who live there were not the ones who built it, and definitely don’t know how to operate it.”

Corona took out a journal and started recording notes magically. “This is fascinating… Why haven’t you told anyone about this before?”

“I do not visit the Mushroom World that often, and you do not make a point of advertising your presence there,” Nastasia said. “But once I knew you existed I knew the next group who came would be the one I asked to help. We are currently on a structure called Castle Bleck, built around what I believe you would call a Nexus universe. Years ago, someone tried to destroy every universe connected to the Nexus, thinking it would wipe out the entire multiverse.”

Vivian gasped. “That’s horrible!”

“The Mushroom World was endangered as well. Do you remember the purple void in the sky, Vivian?”

“…Yeah. I do. I never knew what that was… I thought it might have been Mother.”

“It was not. It was this castle, eating away at reality,” Nastasia said. “When that evil was stopped and sealed away forever… Two very close friends vanished somewhere into the multiverse. Some thought they were dead, but we know they’re alive. Too many prophecies and visions to discount…” She led them to a room in the black castle that was all white. At the front of the room was a simple circular altar. “This is where they vanished. Do you… Do you think you can find them?”

Corona pulled her specialized dimensional device out. “Who were they?”

“Lady Timpani and Count Blumiere,” Nastasia said, standing back so the team could get to work on the altar. “I’m sure they’re happy together, wherever they are, but… I’d like to see them again.”

Corona activated her device, using its scan mode to search for dimensional instability and connections. “Definitely something here,” she said.
“What kind of thing?” Lady Rarity asked.

“Not sure… The readings are somewhat faint. Maybe I just need to dial it up to get an exact connection…” She smiled. “Well, that was easier than expected. I’ve got coordinates to another universe. …And hoo boy, is it going to take a lot of power to go that far. Not quite as far as Earth Tau’ri, but it’s out there.”

“Do you have the power?” Nastasia asked.

Corona lit her horn. “Come on guys, gather round. Let’s try to charge this up.” Vivian and Lady Rarity pushed their power into the device while Lieshy and Toph stood around close by, pretending to be useful.

Then the device had enough power.

But it did not act like it was supposed to.

Corona realized this slightly too late. She moved to hit the ABORT command –

- but by the time she hit it, they were already somewhere else. The five of them found themselves standing in a forest where no two trees looked quite the same – some were clearly Everfree Forest trees, while others seemed to come from the Mushroom World. The forest looked like an amalgamation of different trees and plants from all over.

“…What happened?” Toph asked.

“Something went wrong,” Corona said, setting her dimensional device to search to see if it could find a connection nearby. “We were dragged here.”

Vivian looked around. “Looks like Nastasia was far enough away not to get caught.”

Lieshy narrowed her eyes. “…Did she do this on purpose?”

“No,” Toph said. “Her heart was racing just as we left. She didn’t have this planned.”

“That could mean a lot of things,” Lieshy pointed out.

Vivian began to search around. “Nice place though. Are these the coordinates you entered, Corona?”

“Yes, I’m sure of that,” Corona said. “This forest is where that Count and Lady ended up. Or this universe, at least.”

Vivian poked her head into a bush. “Ew… There’s some old torn apart puppet in here…”

Lady Rarity levitated the puppet out of the bush – it was about the size of a human, made almost entirely out of sackcloth, and had clearly been there for a long, long time. It was so far advanced in rotting Lady Rarity was surprised it hadn’t disintegrated yet. “Ech… I think this thing has some sort of protection spell on it that wasn’t working quite properly…”

Toph frowned. “It’s making me uneasy,” Toph said. “Its face… It has metal teeth in it. Corona, please tell me you have good news.”

Corona smiled awkwardly. “I have bad news.”

“Do you have any good news?”
“Well, the portal device isn’t broken.”

Toph raised an eyebrow. “Fine. What’s the bad news?”

“Something’s preventing us from dialing out. I can’t even detect a connection. It’s like we went down a one-way street.”

Vivian blinked. “So we’re stuck here?”

“For the moment? Yeah.”

Toph rammed her foot into the ground and created a rock tent. “Welp, time to prepare for the long haul. We don’t know anything about this universe, but we’re going to be here for a while. Who’s ready to rough it?”

Lady Rarity sighed. “I’m not, but I can.”

Vivian put her hands to her mouth. “Do you think Nastasia will tell the others what happened?”

“We can’t bet on that,” Toph said. “Nor can we bet that they’ll be able to get us back if that connection really is one-way. Let’s assume we have to find a way back on our own. Corona?”

“I’ll work on it,” Corona said. “Sombra will probably tell them something even if Nastasia doesn’t. Rest of you, make a base or something. Find food. Make sure nothing’s poisonous, that sort of thing.”

Toph raised an eyebrow. “I’m the General here, Corona.”

Corona was no longer listening – she was trying to figure a way out.

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**CORONA FEED – DISCONNECTED**

Sombra stared at the screen in disbelief – she’d *never* lost Corona’s signal before. She scrambled to get it back – but there was nothing. No sunglasses, no phone, not even a universal connection she could exploit.

She was gone.

Sombra sat back and let out a stressed sigh.

That was not a good sign…

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_Do you think I am gone?_
A Sweetie Belle went from being in a comfy room in the palace, to dropping into the mud under heavy, unrelenting rain.

Except she didn’t. She was vaguely aware of both locations in her mind, almost as if one eye was seeing the palace while the other saw the depressing weather, only the resolution was so low it was hard to differentiate them. Her mane was nowhere near as wet as it should have been getting in anything that could be considered unrelenting rain.

She had been expecting the locations to resolve themselves in an instant – the fact that she was aware of both at once for more than a microsecond concerned her. Then when the feeling of both worlds started to fade, she panicked. She lit her horn, attempting to pull on something on either side, to possibly drag herself through by her own power and avoid the unsettling thought that she might be cut in two.

Her efforts were completely in vain. The vague images of the palace and muddy landscape retreated from her senses completely, replaced with overwhelming blue. She could see all shades of blue dancing around her as if she were inside some kind of aurora, the dance of beauty hypnotizing her.

She was now standing on top of a slab of chiseled stone bricks that floated in the mysterious blue aether. She could see half a staircase made of the same material to her left, and a loose column floating slightly below her. She could have sworn the staircase led to something, but as she twisted her head to get a look, the platform she had seen out of the corner of her eye vanished.

She’d never been to somewhere like this…

She checked to make sure she was still Sweetie Belle. She was – a young unicorn mare with a unique cutie mark on her flank. She was not aware that virtually all Sweetie Belles got some variation on the Crusader shield, so she did not think it that unusual that her mark was a pale musical note in front of a shattered, pink starburst. Everything about her was as she expected to find it, including all things she wished didn’t translate with her.

What she did know was that something had gone wrong. She knew, somehow, that she wasn’t supposed to be here. That this place wasn’t part of her journey. And that set her on edge.

“What brought me here…?” she wondered aloud, speaking with a voice that held worry, but nowhere near as much fear as a mare her age should have felt in the situation. Instead of cowering, or calling for somepony, she leaped off her platform onto the stairs and started climbing them, just to see what happened.

Just because she wasn’t supposed to be here was no reason not to explore.

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Charter-Princess Evening Sparkle stood on one of the many solid black balconies of Castle Bleck, allowing herself to stare deep into the murky whiteness that surrounded the structure. Her mouth twisted into a frown of uncertainty, only accentuated by her defining features. Her long, pointed wings were drooping and the metallic hearing devices pulled her ears down further than they would normally have been. Her normally windswept mane seemed to sag, a trait normally reserved for the
Pinkie Pies of the multiverse.

She was looking for answers in the murky whiteness. Answers she knew she wouldn’t find.

It had been a few weeks since General Toph Beifong, Corona Shimmer, PhD, and their entire team had vanished from this very universe. The entire collection of allied universes had sent their best scientists over, and they had easily found the coordinates to the universe that they had gone to. The problem was the connection was almost certainly *one-way*. No probes they sent through returned anything back, no matter how much energy or magic was packed into them.

The only reason they knew the team was alive was because of the mystic oculi of Lai, who graciously used their divination to determine that, at least for now, all members of the team were alive and well.

Eve still wanted to see Corona’s face. Corona had probably seen Eve’s face – given all the recorded messages she had sent through – but Eve couldn’t see hers.

She was quickly running out of ways to get Corona back. She had gotten every bit of information about this place that they could from those who knew about it. She had even gone to the ancient structure that was Flipside-Flopside, only to find that its denizens had no idea how it operated, merely living there and using it to access other universes connected to the Castle. All that seemed to remain was for Eve to wait for her people’s dimensional understanding to catch up to the problem. And that could take… Years. She didn’t want to leave Corona there for *years*. For all she knew the one-way universe was a horrible, dangerous place with death around every corner, and the team had only managed to survive because of their experience with many different worlds.

She sighed, forcing her gaze away from the milky space around her, but not really looking at anything on the perfectly smooth castle either. She just stared into the distance, trying to force herself to *leave* this universe, to go back to Equis Vitis and perform her duties as Charter-Princess, the effective leader of the multiverse. There were many official appearances she had neglected, a lot of work she had offloaded onto Spike so she could be here and research personally…

Eve knew she had to go back, and was slowly convincing herself to take out her dimensional device and return. She took one last look at the operation on Castle Bleck – machines composed of both human metal, pony magic, and Gem crystal lattice were strewn everywhere, every last one analyzing the dimensional fabric of this location, flashing lights as they discovered new things, but none of them blaring a discovery about the world they needed to get to. They could see nothing.

Eve saw one of her counterparts, Sparky, the version she had known the longest. Human, purple, and a well accomplished scientist at this point. She may have grown very disillusioned with all the government secrets and political plays that were happening as of late, but she knew Corona better than Eve herself did. She likely wouldn’t leave here for a long, long time.

The Charter decided it was best not to disturb her, to make her feel guilty for staying so long. Sparky did not have the responsibilities Eve did, so bringing them up would only be rude and detract from her work. Eve briefly wondered if she was being selfish in her thoughts, but she quickly pushed the ideas out of her head. She pulled out her disc-shaped dimensional device, memories of when she first met Sparky flashing through her mind.

She sighed, setting the dial to the Mushroom World. She could dial Equis Vitis directly from there.

But then something caught her eye and gave her pause. There was a letter on the ground in front of her hooves, bearing a seal with her cutie mark on it. She picked it up, wondering what it could be. Celestia rarely sent her letters anymore, preferring to use the much more reliable Interdimensional
Email System that would go right to her phone in most universes. Plus, going through the trouble of sending a letter through magic to this universe from Equis Vitis was rather inefficient.

Curious, she broke the seal on the letter.

She was no stranger to translating between universes. She had used portals, stargates, ‘flipping’, pure magic, and any number of other methods to jump the boundary between worlds. The feel of this method was not of one she had experienced before, though it was reminiscent of an adapted teleport spell. The flash of white light she had experienced probably looked to everypony else like she had just decided to teleport herself, albeit without her natural magic color.

She was suddenly standing in a plain, square room with simple beige tiles and green striped wallpaper. Behind a wooden podium was a purple alicorn of a slightly smaller stature than Eve’s own, notably without the silver ear devices or windswept mane. Much closer to what Eve would describe as a ‘standard Twilight’.

The standard Twilight spoke. “Name?”

Eve, despite her prior depression, let a confident smirk come to her face. I certainly wasn’t expecting something like this, but I can already tell this is going to be fun. “I am Charter-Princess Evening Twilight Sparkle of Friendship and the-”

“No need for titles. Birth name only please.”

Eve blinked. Ah, the familiar feel of bureaucracy. “Twilight Sparkle.”

The standard Twilight scratched a tick mark on a sheet in front of her, telling Eve that she probably dealt almost exclusively in Twilight Sparkles. Curious. She tore a piece of paper off a pad and placed it on a tall stack of papers, handing it all to Eve. Wordlessly, she directed Eve to an exit door.

Eve raised an eyebrow, but figured it was best not to make a fuss. Clearly this Twilight was at her wit’s end with her job; best not to aggravate her. The Charter walked out of the room, finding herself in a hall with similar wallpaper and tiling to the room she just been in, which was to say boring.

There was only one door at the end of the hall.

Curious, Eve turned on her hearing devices for a moment - the slight pain she experienced from forcing herself to hear was prominent, but she didn’t plan to listen for long. “Next!” the Twilight called from behind the closed door. Eve heard the sound of a pop followed by a “Name?” The voice of another Twilight came through the door – one clearly much more angry and bewildered than Eve had been .

Eve smirked slightly – sometimes it helped to be interdimensional, so you could just take this sort of thing in stride. She turned her ears back off and opened the door at the end of the hall. She found herself in a waiting room filled with many different Twilights, the walls and floor of the same dull design everything else had been so far. The vast majority of Twilights were alicorns, though Eve spotted a couple unicorns sitting in the corner. She was not surprised to find that only one of them had a defining feature besides herself – a single scar across one eye.

Eve saw they were all busy staring at and filling out the forms presumably given to them by the receiving Twilight in the other room. Eve opened her mouth to speak to the closest Twilight.

“Read the rest of your letter… and please, don’t talk to me right now. I need time to process this.”

Eve nodded to herself, understanding the reaction. She did chide herself for not reading the letter in the hall; it seemed obvious in hindsight. She summoned a chair from the aether so as to not disturb
any of the other Twilights and unfurled the scroll, preparing for what was assuredly going to be an interesting read.

This is a mandatory summons by the Inter-Universal Council of Sparkle.

You have been called upon to participate in a trans-dimensional census of all possible entities falling under the designation of “Twilight Sparkle.” Upon breaking the seal on this envelope, you will be teleported into pocket dimension 5P-4RKL3. Please follow any and all instructions given by workers during the registration process. After registration is complete you will be returned to your home dimension with a token that can be used to return to this pocket of reality at any time, as well as a complimentary bookmark. We will contact you again if any additional information is required, or if you have been selected for census duty.

We thank you for your cooperation in ensuring the efficiency of this operation.

Twilight Sparkle

Designation: DB-9K>Z

Grand Secretariat of Equine Resources

Eve raised an eyebrow. If they can do all this interdimensional power, why didn’t they just have the spell activate upon reading? …Unless there are Twilights who don’t read, I suppose… Actually, come to think of it, why is all this paperwork paper? They clearly have a large influx of Twilights and a digital interface would be much more effective…

Her next thought was. Yeah, I’m definitely not reporting for census duty. Though this tells me they haven’t encountered another dimensional Twilight, at least not one on a large scale. This is definitely going to be an interesting day.

Another Twilight came into the room – a standard one. She opened her mouth to address Eve, and she warmly accepted it rather than rudely interrupting. “W-what is going on? H-how is this possible?”

Eve smiled. “Don’t worry. This is just a census of all beings like us across the multiverse. Your letter will help a bit, so make sure you read it. After that, I think we fill out this paperwork.”

The new Twilight, still a bit dumbfounded, relaxed a little and nodded. “R-right.” She moved into the room a bit and sat down, looking at her letter.

Eve pulled out her dimensional device, but didn’t activate it. She just checked the coordinates of the universe she was in, finding that her system did not have the letters sequence ‘5P4RKL3’ anywhere in it. She shrugged, labeling the universe Sparkle Census.

Instead of taking one of the inkwells and quills from a nearby cabinet, she summoned a pen from the aether and began to work on the forms, all the while racking up things to complain to the higher-ups about when they finally realized what she was. She wondered how long it would take.

Probably a while, given the lethargic expression on the silver-badge-wearing government employee Twilight watching all of them.

Good. That gave her more time to figure out exactly how she was going to go about this.
Pinkie Pie appeared in the center of a circular stone slab with seven columns around it. She saw various platforms and staircases surrounding the circular platform, their gray, dulled color standing out against the blue aurora that seemed to surround everything.

“Of course,” Pinkie muttered to herself. She took a step to the left, waiting for the rest of her team.

Renee appeared next – a Rarity with a fashionable detective hat and a ring line on the base of her horn, though the latter detail was only noticeable to people who were looking for it. “…Pinkie? What just happened?”

“Our portal was intercepted,” Pinkie said. “Other than that, not sure. The others will be joining shortly.”

 “…Surely they saw us vanish and won’t come in after us?”

The third member of the team, the yellow Flutterfree, appeared on top of Renee. Her ears were slightly pointed, her eyes red, and a few of her teeth were sharpened. “Oh! Sorry Renee – wait. This isn’t Equis Eldritch.”

Renee grunted. “Intercepted, apparently. Let’s move before the the others fall on us.”

Flutterfree and Renee moved to the side just in time to let the fourth through, Nova Glimmer. She landed on her hooves and looked around, confused. “I could have sworn I saw you all on the other side…” She examined the high-tech touchscreen wrapped around her hoof, checking it for unusual readings. “This place certainly isn’t normal.” She lit her horn, the small black device around it accentuating her magic into a striped blue and pink pattern as she scanned for details. “No time dilation - at least not internally… But a lot of space dilation…”

Renee looked at Nova standing there without getting crushed. “You think Vriska’s luck saved her?” she asked.

“Possibly,” Flutterfree answered. “Or, as I think Pinkie would say, we’re just waiting for comedic timing.”

Nova glanced at Pinkie. “…Should I move?”

Pinkie grinned. “Probably.”

Before Nova could do anything, the humanoid gray-skinned dual-horned shape of Vriska appeared, her boot hitting Nova right in the head. Vriska smirked, flapped her cerulean butterfly wings, and adjusted her glasses. “And I ace the landing. The crowd goes wild!”

Pinkie gave her a pity clap.

“You just don’t understand my stage presence…”

Nova levitated Vriska off and her and tossed the girl to the ground. “Right, so that’s everyone. I’m going to take a wild guess and say we can’t dial out for some reason.”

Pinkie pulled out her dimensional device and tried a few settings. “Bingo.”

“Fun. So… What are we going to do?”

Pinkie smirked. “What we always do when we go to a new universe, silly! Explore!”
“I meant about us not being able to return.”

Pinkie winked. “Same thing!”

Nova facehooved. Renee smirked. “You’re one of the ponies who put her in charge, dear.”

“I wonder at times if I should mutiny,” Nova muttered.

“Now Nova, what would Eve think of that?” Renee asked, putting on an exaggerated expression.

Nova rolled her eyes and didn’t dignify that with a response.

“Hey, Vriska!” Pinkie called. “How much luck do you have?”

“Standard amount,” Vriska called. “I’d need to find a small city to get enough luck to slip between dimensions. Not entirely sure that’d work here.”

“Nova, is this like the Brain in the Sinkhole? Do we have a signal we can override?”

“Not that I can tell,” Nova said, reading through all her scans. “Can’t make much sense of this place, to be honest.”

“Question,” Vriska said, holding up a hand. “What am I supposed to think when you don’t tack on ‘to be honest’ at the end of your observations? That you’re lying all the time?”

Nova facehooved. “That’s an Applejack question, not a me question.”

Pinkie turned to Flutterfree. “Can Lolo see anything?”

Flutterfree blinked. “You know, I haven’t tried.” She closed her eyes, activating a power within herself. Normally Lolo was an invisible force when used, but whenever Flutterfree focused on tapping into its power with any serious focus, it appeared clearly to everyone as a mixture of pink spirograph patterns and green intertwining mathematical curves. The flower-like spirographs tapped into the hidden nature of things, attempting to reveal them, while the green lines extended all around to increase the range of the search.

A few stone platforms that were previously hidden from view appeared, but otherwise nothing happened.

Flutterfree dropped Lolo’s activity. The power became invisible again, but the platform remained in their sights. “Not much to see, apparently,” Flutterfree commented. “My attention was drawn to the edges of platforms. I think if we move off this disc we’ll see other things. Also, gravity is reversed on that staircase.”

“Good to know,” Nova commented.

“Let’s take the inverted staircase then!” Pinkie declared. “Seems the most interesting.” She bounced to the floating staircase, easily flipping herself upside down for the gravity. The rest of the team shrugged and followed. Nova and Flutterfree had no difficulty at all given their magic and wings, while Vriska just got lucky and landed perfectly. Renee…

She missed the jump and fell off the staircase, screaming, into the blue void below.

Nova used her magic to catch her and bring her up. She was still screaming. “Renee. It’s fine.”

Renee blinked. “Oh. I see it is.” She flushed slightly. “I guess I haven’t left all my old ways behind
“Some things never change!” Pinkie called. “Now come on, I see a very long platform at the top-bottom of this staircase!”

Flutterfree looked back the way they’d come. “The platforms on the other edge of the disc are… gone.”

“We’re never going to be able to see very far in front of us,” Vriska pointed out.

Flutterfree extended Lolo’s green strand to the disc. “Well, I’ll use Lolo as a trail then. We’ll always be able to follow it back.”

“How far can you extend her again?” Nova asked.

“A few miles,” Flutterfree said. “I can also always see what’s happening at certain locations.” She forced a spirograph to appear in the center of the disc, not that anyone else could see it in this form. “We’ll know if anyone else shows up there.”

“Good enough for me,” Vriska said.

Pinkie nodded. “Onward then! We’ve got a mystery to solve!”

It didn’t take long for them to lose sight of the disc they had appeared on. They jumped to a strange, cubic piece of stone, and the disc vanished, but they could see many more platforms of differing shapes and sizes. After a few more jumps, they started to see patterns. There was a clear preference for staircases and flat slabs, though they had seen geometric shapes, rounded arches, and even a few larger ‘pieces’ that looked like entire buildings; albeit ancient, ruined buildings.

Gravity was always consistent on any one platform, but every jump carried with it the risk of gravity changing. It always treated the closest stone ‘piece’ as ground, but the direction was inconsistent and on the round platforms this inconsistency turned out to be a big issue if you couldn’t balance.

Vriska was currently standing on a spherical piece of stone at a ninety-degree angle to the others. “See? Easy?”

“Luck is cheating,” Nova deadpanned.

“Bah, I’m just good at balance.” Flapping her wings, she returned to the gigantic platform that resembled the Roman Coliseum, if the entire floor had been made of the same stone brick pattern rather than sand.

Nova furrowed her brow. “We’ve been moving around a while now. The readings haven’t changed, and there haven’t been any signs of life besides these structures, and none of them even have markings on them.”

“I haven’t seen anything at any of my nodes, either,” Flutterfree added. “How’s your map doing, Nova?”

“Well enough to know that this place isn’t Euclidian. This Coliseum would be right on top of that donut staircase if it were. Clearly, it is not.”

“We need a new plan,” Vriska said. “How about we jump? Would we fall forever?”

“A question to ask later!” Pinkie said, pointing. “Look! People!”
Three people – humans – had just appeared on the other edge of the Coliseum. The leader was an old man with a gray hat and gnarled staff. His companions were a man with metallic green balls on his clothing and a strangely shiny smile standing alongside what appeared to be a woman walking like a frog.

Both Pinkie’s team and the old man’s team tensed when they fully noticed each other’s presence.

Pinkie, to her credit, just smiled and waved. “Heeeeey there, who are you guys?”

The old man spoke with an aging voice, but also with deep conviction. “We are an exploration team for the United States of the Multiverse.”

“Oh, how crazy is that?” Pinkie declared. “We’re explorers too! We don’t exactly have a name for our alliance, but, you know, Unification is still being processed.” She giggled.

Vriska raised an eyebrow. “Never heard of the United States of the Multiverse.”

“And we’ve never heard of you!” the man behind the old leader called, entering what appeared to be a sort of battle stance. “And I see green trails coming off that yellow pegasus there!”

Both the froggy woman and Renee asked the same question at the same time. “A Stand user?”

The old man narrowed his eyes. “I do not trust this situation in the slightest.”

“Aw c’mon, have a little trust!” Pinkie encouraged.

“That’s exactly what someone trying to fool us would say,” the woman said.

“…Good point,” Pinkie admitted.

The two teams stared at each other from across the Coliseum, both unsure of what to do next.

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Equis Cosmic was known as ‘that universe with all the spaceships and real estate’. Princess Cosmo Sparkle, the leader of a galactic pony empire, was not ashamed of this label by any means. She loved having the races of the multiverse fill up her once lonely galaxy, breathing life into a world she had once thought her race would stand in alone.

That said, the most recent race that had shown up was… interesting to say the least.

“You’re staring at me again,” a ‘human’ Twilight Sparkle said, herself a member of the mysterious ‘Flat’ race. They had come from a universe recently freed by Pinkie’s team, where everything spoke in monotone voices and bounced up and down like pieces of cardboard instead of using body language. The physics of the universe they were native to was, admittedly, rather limiting. Now that they had come out to the larger multiverse they had grown accustomed to a more ‘standard’ physics model. They had gained the ability to use full body language and expressions, though they still didn’t move their mouths when talking, still spoke with strange monotones, and still looked flat no matter what angle they were examined from.

This particular Flat went by Twi-Reaper - Twiree for short - because of her unusual ability to transform into a type of synthetic spaceship life-form known as a Reaper. Otherwise she walked around looking like any other human Twilight, except with a black military hat on for some reason.

Cosmo sighed. “Sorry. You have to admit, you stand out like a sore thumb.” She realized it was a bit
odd for her to say this, since she was a tremendous alicorn with a beautiful flowing mane and enough magic to set off panic alarms by walking into the wrong buildings.

“I like it that way,” Twiree declared. “So… Do you like the fleet?”

Cosmo looked out the window of the space station they occupied, examining the hundred or so dark Reaper ships outside, all of which looked like a cross between a bug and a squid. They also looked flat, despite Cosmo having been on board the ship-people numerous times. “I don’t know. I’m not certain letting ships with the ability to hypnotize most people move freely is a good idea. Even if you say you won’t, and I know you aren’t, people are still going to ask questions.”

“The moment you figure out how to disable it, you tell me,” Twiree said.

Cosmo nodded. “It appears as if your ships ‘just work’, Twiree. Nobody can figure out how to upgrade your systems, much less turn them off.”

“Then it’s a good thing we’re so powerful, right?”

Cosmo smiled. “Certainly.”

“I predict obsolete ships in a few years,” an AI chirped from a crystal on Cosmo’s regalia. “Progress is unavoidable.”

“Starlight…” Cosmo shook her head. “They’re unpredictable and, despite adapting somewhat to our universes, still don’t fully operate by our rules.”

“That’s what makes us awesome!” Twiree declared, giving a thumbs up to Cosmo and the Starlight AI. “Got anything for us to blow up?”

“Unless the University decides to attack or something, no,” Cosmo said. “Just take this area of space as your own and enjoy it. It’s yours. Don’t go enslaving anypony.”

“We won’t!”

And then two letters appeared in front of them.

They stared at them.

“Starlight, where did these things come from?” Cosmo asked.

“Unknown. Could be a Celestia. Or a Spike. I am not aware of all the developments of magic messaging.”

The two versions of Twilight Sparkle lifted the letters up. Cosmo opened hers first.

“Name?”

Cosmo blinked at the small room she was suddenly in. “Wha…” she shook her head – she was being asked a question. “Princess Cosmo Sparkle o-”

The Twilight Sparkle behind the podium sighed. “Birth name. No titles.”

“Twilight Sparkle.”

There was a quick mark on a piece of paper and a large stack of paperwork was given to Cosmo. She was directed out of the room.
Cosmo raised an eyebrow. “What is this?”

“Just go to door at the end of the hall, you’ll understand.”

Cosmo nodded slowly, walking out of the room and down the hallway. She heard a “Next!” come from the receiving Twilight’s mouth as the door closed behind her. Then she heard “Name?” again.

She was not surprised to hear Twiree’s distinctive monotone voice. “What in Celestia’s potatoey behind just happened? Egad!”

Cosmo decided to wait for Twiree to get out, taking a moment to actually read the letter and gain some understanding of the situation.

“Name, please.”

Cosmo was most interested in the token. Return to this dimension from any universe? That must have taken some doing. Corona’s all-purpose-dialer was still a bit shaky and awkward to use, not to mention excessively flashy.

“Twi-Reaper of th-”

“Birth name only.”

Cosmo furrowed her brow, checking her own dimensional device. The coordinates did not match up. She supposed there was more than one way to determine one’s place in the multiverse. She wondered if this Council of Sparkle had run into any other multiversal societies… Clearly not one with Twilight Sparkles in it, but that didn’t rule out the possibility of others.

“…Plastic horse number one?”

“…What?”

“I don’t know what I first was! I’m a derivative creation!”

“…What’s the name you went by most of your life?”

“Twilight Sparkle.”

Cosmo was struggling to hold in her laughter. Twiree came through the door a few seconds later, the face of the receiver Twilight that of somepony who couldn’t wait for the work day to be over but also knew it was still technically morning.

“So. This is odd,” Twiree said. “Not as odd as home, but still.”

Cosmo levitated the stack of papers out of Twiree’s hands. “Read your letter, it’ll help.”

Twiree did so as they made their way to the door at the end of the hall. They entered the room filled with Twilights, and were pleasantly surprised to find Eve there.

“Ahh, Cosmo! Twiree!” Eve said, getting up from her chair. “I was wondering if I was going to see any familiar faces.”

“So, you got dragged into this mess first?” Cosmo asked. “Fitting, I suppose.” She glanced at the pile of partially filled out papers in front of Eve. “You’re cooperating?”

“Yes. I’m waiting until they realize what I am.” She glanced at the employee overseeing them. She
seemed to not care that they were talking, or even notice that they seemed like old friends.

“…Are our government workers like that?” Twiree asked.

“On Earths? Sometimes,” Eve said. “On Equis and the Hub? Generally not. And Twiree, don’t look now, but it seems most of these Twilights haven’t seen a human. Or, if they have, your speech patterns and motions are freaking them out a little.”

Twiree blushed and waved to the other Twilights in the room. “Hi! I’m Twiree! I don’t bite!”

Half of the Twilights moved away from her.

Twiree sagged. “What does a girl have to do to be liked around here…”

“Fill out paperwork,” Eve commented. “Lots of it is simple, but they sure like abstract questions. I’ve taken it upon myself to answer everything with absurd accuracy.”

“Let’s work on it together then. Be good little Twilights,” Cosmo commented. “Starlight, prepare to provide scarily specific data.”

“Yes, Cosmo,” the AI said.

“Here’s a fun one,” Eve said. “Favorite color.”

“White,” Comso said.

“I think you’re the first to not put down ‘Purple’ or ‘Lavender’ in a while,” Eve commented.

“It’s the color that burns against the dark loneliness of space,” Cosmo decreed. “A reminder that we are not lost in the void.”

“Woah… Poetic,” Twiree commented.

“Total magical output over the last six months,” Eve read. “Starlight, got those numbers?”

“Yes,” the AI chirped. “I have Cosmo’s down to the seventeenth decimal place. Rest of you just get full numbers. For Twiree that’s an issue since her number is so small, but at least we’re not putting down the highly incorrect zero.”

“Better than the rest of these Twilights are doing,” Eve commented. “What do they expect them to do? Estimate?”

“The horror!” Twiree declared. Cosmo nodded in agreement.

One of the other Twilights heard the conversation. “Wait, can you give me a number for my magical output?”

Cosmo lit her horn. She grabbed a quill and scribbled the number on the Twilight’s form. “Not as accurate as what we have on the rest of us, but certainly better than anything you could have remembered.”

“…Doesn’t this refer to magical output? Like, including stressed times?”

“As I said, the spell only gives an estimate based on the strength of your thaumic essence,” Cosmo decreed.
“…Thanks,” the Twilight said.

“Do me next!” another called, walking up to her.

Cosmo smiled – she was going to be here for a while. But she was several thousand years old as it was; waiting was nothing to her.

Twiree was starting to twitch from boredom already, however. Hopefully she didn’t decide to go full Reaper and destroy this room with her sheer size.

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Groups consisting of only one type of individual from across the multiverse were not rare. In Eve’s little alliance, there was one group in particular that people thought of in relation to this – the League of Sweetie Belles. They had no census, no mandatory membership, none of that. What they did have was a lot of young white unicorn mares (and girls) who had a lot of fun together ranging from a day at the Pinkie Emporium to saving a universe from a cruel monster or something. They were young, but few of them could still be considered children.

Quite a few members of the League were currently walking up what appeared to be an infinite staircase floating among blue aurorae.

So many Sweetie Belles. The default from Equis Vitis still had the name Sweetie Belle, but all the others had their own nicknames. Thrackerzod, Sweetie Bot, Squeaky Belle, Sweetie Brute, and the two humans, Sweetie Burger and Suzie Belle. Burger was the only one of them who was a child, though she was one of the Flat race so it was unclear if she was actually going to age or not as time went on. Suzie was from the world known as Earth Vitis, Sweetie Belle’s direct human counterpart.

“I’m bored,” Sweetie Brute moaned. “Can we punch something yet?”

“You may attempt to punch me,” Thrackerzod answered. “Then you will discover the power of the Old Ones at your throat, driving your mind even further into insanity than it already is. You will likely try to punch me again, and then the cycle will perpetuate itself until your brain is so mushy you start to think that you are the target.”

Brute blinked. Then grinned. “Sweet.”

Squeaky Belle facehooved. “Brute, don’t,” she said, her distinctive helium-like voice heavily contrasting the gravely and deep voices of Brute and Thrackerzod. “We need to stay together and not fight. We’re in an unknown location for unknown reasons with unknown danger and unknown enemy status!”

“Burger,” Sweetie Burger commented in the monotone that was signature of her kind.

Suzie looked down at the young girl. “Sorry, I already gave you the last one.”

“Oh. …We need to get out of here before I kill someone.”

“The danger levels have doubled,” Sweetie Bot droned in a robotic voice that was somehow much more expressive than Burger’s. “Beware the Burger Girl.”

“Yes yes, we know,” Sweetie Belle – the Sweetie Belle – said. “As the de-facto leader of all of you, I decree that we stop talking about killing and violence and instead focus more on finding a way out of here.”
“I thought Thrackerzod was in charge?” Burger asked.

“We don’t have to make the chain of command rigid,” Squeaky reminded their newest member. “The League is all about equality, adventure, and… well it was about cutie marks, but virtually all of us have them now.”

Every Sweetie that wasn’t a human glanced at their flanks – all with variations of the Crusader shield on them, even Sweetie Bot, despite the fact that she didn’t appear to actually grown in size as time went on.

“So beautiful…” Sweetie commented. Despite having had it for so long, she still couldn’t stop staring at it.

“We’ve stopped moving,” Thrackerzod commented, nowhere near as infatuated by her mark as the others. “Not moving means not looking for new things and not finding a way out of this mess.”

“Can’t you just ask your demon buddies?” Suzie asked.

“I am cut off from Azathoth,” Thrackerzod said. “I feel no connection to the Embodiment.”

“Oh cool!” Sweetie Belle declared. “That means you can think truly for yourself now, right? Riiiiight?”

“…What a terrifying thought,” Thrackerzod muttered. “But true. Though I have doubts my individualism is worth being stuck in a blue death trap for eternity.”

“I thin-” Suzie began, but her words were cut short by a loud crack. All the Sweeties looked down, shocked to find that the stone platform they were standing on had cracked through the middle. The smaller half broke off and started falling into the depths of the blue aurora below, dragging Suzie, Squeaky, and Brute with it.

Bot acted quickly, leaping off the platform and flying down to them, catching Suzie and Brute in her front hooves while her back unleashed rockets to keep them from falling further. Squeaky teleported herself to a platform that was not falling apart.

Thrackerzod felt the ground beneath her shifting, but she refused to lose focus. She teleported the rest of the League to the platform Squeaky was on, reasonably sure she got everyone. Bot dropped those she saved on top of them all, creating a pile of adorable white fluff. She landed and bowed. “Saving quota reached at 114%!”

“I think Bot’s processor is broken,” Brute commented, crawling out of the pile and shaking her head. “It’s over a hundred percent again.”

“But there are only seven of us!” Bot commented. “We saved eight.”

Thrackerzod and Sweetie Belle blinked. “Wait, what?” All the Sweeties pulled themselves up and out of the piles. They checked and, sure enough, there were eight of them.

Sweetie Belle went over a mental checklist. Me, Zod, Bot, Brute, Squeaky, Suzie, Burger, and… She came to a Sweetie Belle she didn’t recognize.

“You didn’t come here with us,” Thrackerzod addressed the mare.

“Uh, no,” the eighth Sweetie said. She was young – maybe not quite a full grown mare – and had a unique cutie mark on her flanks of a shattered starburst and musical note. “I came alone. I heard
screams so I ran over and… Well, then I was in a pile of myself. I do have to admit, this is new.”

Thrackerzod sniffed. “She has touched eldritch before,” the deep unicorn decreed. “There’s something else off about her as well. A significantly higher magical output than a normal Sweetie.”

“Zod, lay off,” Sweetie Belle called, putting on a warm smile. “We’re the League of Sweetie Belles. I assume you’re named Sweetie Belle?”

The eighth Sweetie nodded. “Yep.”

“Do you… Have a nickname we can call you? To avoid confusion.”

The Sweetie pondered this. “Well, I call myself Interdimensional Sweetie sometimes…”

“Mouthful,” Brute pointed out.

“I’ve also gone by… Allure before.”

Sweetie Belle picked up on the tone in her counterpart’s voice. “You don’t like that name.”

“…No. It was given to me in a universe by a horrible manipulative pony who wasn’t really my father. …Sorta.”

Sweetie Belle looked at her, something stirring within her heart. “…Thrackerzod, are you feeling something from her?”

“I’m feeling a lot of things from her,” the eldritch unicorn commented. “Be more specific.”

“Like… She’s ‘bigger’.”

“She’s smaller than you and me.”

“That’s not what I mean…” Sweetie said, putting a hoof to her chin. “I’m not sure how to describe it. But… I think she deserves the name Sweetie Belle.”

“Oh boy, back to name-prefixes?” Squeaky grabbed her head. “Ooooooh boy.”

“No,” the lead Sweetie Belle declared. “I’ll take the name Allure. It won’t be painful to me. You can be Sweetie Belle, Interdimensional Sweetie.”

The Sweetie Belle stared at her. “…You don’t know what it means.”

“Do I have to? It won’t mean to me what it means to you. To you, it’s a bad memory. To me, it’s taking something I think sounds nice and making it my own to help somepony else.”

“…Thank you.”

“You’re welcome!”

“You’re choosing a name!? Suzie blurted. “You said you weren’t going to choose one!”

“It just feels… Right,” the newly-dubbed Allure said, extending her hoof to the mare with the honor of being called Sweetie Belle. “I, Allure, extend an invitation to you, Sweetie Belle, to join the League of Sweetie Belles.”

“What comes with membership?” Sweetie Belle asked. “I mean, it sounds really nice, but I don’t
really know what you do.”

“Get lost in a maze of impossible blueness,” Thrackerzod deadpanned. “That’s what we do.”

Brute cheered. “And we’re great at it!”

Allure rolled her eyes. “We’re a bunch of friends who have fun across the multiverse. Sometimes we have great adventures, other times we just hang out at the Pinkie Emporium.”

“…Pinkie Emporium?”

“An amusement park run entirely by versions of Pinkie Pie.”

Sweetie Belle’s jaw dropped. “That sounds equally amazing and terrifying.”

“That’s the general consensus,” Suzie said.

“We should probably introduce ourselves,” Allure said. “I am Allure now. This is Thrackerzod, Sweetie Bot, Squeaky Belle, Sweetie Brute, Sweetie Burger, and Suzie.” She took a breath. “Wow there’s a lot of us.”

“What is your story?” Sweetie Belle asked.

“Simple version?” Allure waved a hoof in the air. “Our Twilight – Eve – discovered interdimensional travel and has been creating a multiversal society over the last few years. I eventually joined in on the fun on an adventure where I met several versions of myself, and we just stayed together after that, doing whatever we wanted. Unlike Pinkie’s or Toph’s group, we don’t have any real missions. We just do what we want.”

“Which usually does not involve getting lost,” Squeaky added. “Something intercepted us and brought us here.”

“Same,” Sweetie said. “I was between worlds and then… Here. I was not supposed to be here. By the way, half of you have bizarre voices.”

“An oddity of our universe cluster,” Allure said. “Most Sweeties actually sound like you and me.”

“I know. I’ve met a few.”

“That’s what I’m curious about,” Suzie said. “What is your story?”

Sweetie smirked, the expression of someone who had clearly told her story a lot of times. “Well… Back in my original universe, I shattered my Twilight’s essence into a… lot of pieces. They were spread across the multiverse, and my body was sent out as well. I’ve been collecting fragments of Twilight and moving from universe to universe, trying to re-assemble her.”

“You remind me a bit of Vriska,” Allure said. “She’s trying to find her home as well, and her friend. Though her friend isn’t in a million pieces.”

Sweetie blinked. “I’m… not the only one? That’s… I’m not sure how to feel about that really.”

“You’ve seen some things,” Thrackerzod said. It wasn’t a question.

Sweetie nodded slowly. “Yeah.” She looked at them all, looking like she desperately wanted to talk about something else. “You… are part of a multiversal society? Would you… know how to get me home?”
Allure took out her dimensional device. “Well, not right now, since this place keeps us from dialing out for some reason. But if you have any sort of connection to it within yourself, we can probably find it. Depends on how far away your world is, from what I understand.”

“So… That’s a maybe?”

“That’s a maybe,” Sweetie declared. “Actually, why not tell us what worlds you’ve been to? We may have been to some of the same ones!”

Sweetie clearly started going through a list in her head. “Well, there was one where Twilight and Trixie were a couple…”

“Could be any number of universes,” Suzie pointed out.

Sweetie seemed mildly surprised that didn’t surprise them. “The one where prankster Nightmare Moon took over Equestria and used Twilight as a… special kind of slave.”

Allure winced. “Ouch.”

“Lots of Nightmare Moon worlds,” Thrackerzod commented. “A few are pranksters. Can’t say I’ve heard of that use of Twilight though. Eve generally takes care of any Nightmare Moon that’s evil if the denizens of that universe can’t.”

“Oh, you help worlds like that? I generally don’t get to accomplish that much…” She shook her head. “There’s the one where the Elements of Harmony were immortal.”

“That’s a new one,” Squeaky said. “At least, as far as we know, only Twilights are immortal.”

“…Is it normal for Twilights to be alicorns then?”

“Most are, yeah,” Allure commented. “I take it yours was a unicorn?”

Sweetie nodded. “And most of the Twilights I encountered are as well. …I guess I’m an outlier, huh? Even with the cutie mark…”

“It means you’re unique,” Squeaky said, smiling. “I think that’s what Sw- Allure sees in you.”

“Heh. Yeah. Let’s see… Everyone’s gender was swapped in one, a universe where Prince Blueblood was experiencing the same day at the Gala over and over again…”

“Oh, that jerk?” Allure said. “Wow, that must have sucked for you.”

Sweetie raised an eyebrow. “Wasn’t horrible. Blueblood makes a nice adoptive brother.”

Blank stares.

Sweetie grinned. “I see I finally got something that fazed you.”

“Yeah,” Allure said, shaking her head. “Did not expect that one…”

“There was the one where ponies turned Equestria into a wasteland,” Sweetie continued.

“I recognize that one,” Allure said. “Megaspells, right?”

“You’ve been!”
“Not me personally, no. I read a book from there though, written by some mare named Littlepip. She’s actually working for Eve now. Though… from what I hear that world isn’t much of a Wasteland right now.”

“Really? Did they fix it since I was there last?”

“They fixed it before we arrived. Years before. We came in the after-party.”

“Oh! …Well then, did you meet the Goddess-Trixie? Puppysmiles?”

Allure rubbed the back of her head. “I… don’t know about Puppysmiles, but I do know the Goddess is dead.”

“…Oh.” She looked at the ground. “…Well then. Spike?”

“Yes, that world’s Spike is still around.”

“Ask him about me,” Sweetie said. “I only met him very briefly at the end of my stay, but if you can…” She furrowed her brow.

“We’ll try. Anywhere else you’ve been? I can tell you’ve got quite the list,” Suzie asked.

“The one where my everypony was fighting a war against my ‘dad’ and some guy named Titan, the one where I could see the essence of magic and was taught by Discord, the one with a weird time distorting fairy world, and the one with humans and ponies working together to fight aliens.”

“Yeah, sorry on the rest of those,” Squeaky said. “All either not familiar or too vague and common.”

“She’s not talking about one,” Thrackerzod said.

“You can sense that?” Sweetie blurted.

“I may look like a unicorn, but I am not. I am what you might call a demon, though an Eldritch Scion would be more accurate.”

Sweetie backed away. “You’re… one of them?”

Thrackerzod frowned. “…I think not. I think you encountered a True Demonic presence, based on the energy flowing off of you that isn’t from the shards of Twilight Sparkle. I am sorry for what you must have seen.”

“T-thanks.”

Squeaky pulled Thrackerzod back. “Eheh… Don’t mind Zod here, she’s a little creepy and morbid, but deep down she has a heart and will defend us with her life.”

“Doesn’t she just return to the Embodiment when she dies?” Burger asked.


Sweetie Belle blinked. Then she shook her head and laughed. “This… This is refreshing. To see so many of you who are me, but who also understand.”

“…Only Thrackerzod has any idea what you’ve suffered,” Allure said. “I can feel that we haven’t been through as much as you, despite having been at this longer and having visited more worlds.”
“I don’t think that matters,” Sweetie said, grabbing Allure’s hoof. “We are Interdimensional Sweetie. We are the League of Sweetie Belles.”

“I take it you’re in?”

“Of course I’m in! Now, let’s find a way out of this strange place!”

“Ahem. Now may not be the time to mention this but someone’s watching us,” Suzie said. “There’s a column over there with a man behind it.”

All eight members of the League of Sweetie Belles turned to look at the floating column. They heard a deep sigh. “Welp, I’m made!” a male voice declared. A human figure clad in full armor and orange fabrics leaped off the column and onto the piece they were all standing on. He was huge for a human – comparable to Jotaro – and wielded a large halberd. “The name’s Gilgamesh. It sounds to me like we’re all in the same pickle.”

Allure blinked. “Oh. ...Oh, this place is drawing dimensional travelers, isn’t it?”

“90% likely conclusion!” Bot declared.

Allure rubbed her horn. “This could get really complicated, really fast…”

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“Name?”

“Sparky Sparkle.”

The Twilight taking her name let out a snort. Sparky fixed her with a look. “What?”

“Nothing.” She wrote the name down on a piece of paper, chuckling. She handed Sparky the paperwork and directed her down the hall.

“I don’t have time for this! I need to look fo- and you’re not listening to me anymore. Great.” She clutched the papers in her hand and charged down the hall, stewing inwardly. How dare they take her away from her work? She needed to find Corona! She…

She threw the door to the room with all the Twilights in it. “Ah, Sparky!” Eve called, smiling. “I was wondering when you were going to notice your letter. I assumed you got one.”

Sparky blinked. “Is this YOUR doing?”

“What? No! I was dragged here just like you, Cosmo, Twiree, Twix, and Equis Eldritch Twilight here.”

Equis Eldritch Twilight was not a pony Sparky knew. The name told her she was Thrackerzod’s Twilight, and that was it. Sparky could have sworn Thrackerzod had mentioned her Twilight was a unicorn, but the pony before her was an alicorn. “…Is this all of us?” Sparky asked.

“Probably not,” Cosmo said. “But we’re approaching completion with our papers. Here, let’s help with yours. Starlight’s great when it comes to data you wouldn’t normally know.”

“Uh…”

“Just go with it,” Twix, who was still a unicorn, said. “Means you don’t have to figure out what any of it means.”
Equis Eldritch Twilight took a swig of beer presumably conjured up by one of the other Twilights in the room. “I did not become the god of arcane relations to be subjected to a stupid census.”

“Renee would chide you for speaking so highly of yourself,” Eve commented.

“What? My Celestia calls herself a god all the time!”

“Your Celestia is a violent dictator,” Eve said, barely paying E E Twilight any attention.

“Man, it still feels so weird hearing ponies say that without instantly having a fear of death.”

Twix shrugged. “I’m just waiting for Trollestia to give me wings or something.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” E E Twilight said. “You have to be prepared for this sort of thing over years, geared up and bred, and… Oh wait, that’s right, I forgot. The textbook case is Eve. Just solve a spell and BAM.”

“I wouldn’t put it past Trollestia to just give me wings for a day and then remove them,” Twix commented.

E E Twilight glanced at her. “…How did you…”

Twix shrugged. “I’m no Pinkie, but I’ve picked up cues over the years.”

Sparky turned to Eve. “Eve, why are we just letting ourselves be subject to this? We can demand to see their leaders.”

“Oh, we will,” Eve said, smirking evilly. “We’ll fill out their forms. And then I’ll open a dimensional portal right in front of mc-sleepy-pancake up there and make her freak out. I’m compiling a list of complaints. ‘Abduction of the Charter-Princess’ is sure to send chills down the spines of whatever kind of pony this Grand Secretariat is. Or the rest of the Council, I suppose.” She rubbed her hooves together. “I’m almost looking forward to it!”

Sparky blinked. “…What about Corona, Eve?”

Eve sighed. “Sparky… I want to find her too. But I think we both know that, not only do we need a break, but we don’t have the resources to find her yet.”

“I’ll agree to the break. But as soon as we’re done here I’m going back to the Castle and I’m going to find her.”

Eve smiled sadly. “If that’s what you think needs to be done. Who knows, maybe you’ll be the one to solve the problem with your science!”

Sparky looked away, unsure of herself.

Cosmo put a hoof on Sparky’s shoulder. “Do not doubt yourself, Sparky. You have a drive and intelligence within yourself that surpasses most Twilights. You are, to put it mildly, a technological genius. If you apply yourself, you will succeed, given time.”

Sparky nodded slowly. “Right.”

“But for today, give yourself a chance to relax,” Twiree said, grinning. “Trust your Flat doppelganger, we’re going to have some fun today with a multiversal civilization.”

“…Are you sure we want to upset them?”

“That’s a form of upsetting.”

“Ah, they’ll realize we’re friendly soon enough,” Eve dismissed. “We’re all Twilights here.”

“Mhm…”

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“Do you guys have any names?” Vriska shouted at the humans at the other end of the Coliseum.

“I am Gandalf,” the old man spoke, tapping his staff on the ground for emphasis. “This man is Gyro, and the other is known as Froppy.”

“Ribbit,” Froppy said.

“Dumb name,” Vriska said, folding her arms.

“Wanna say that again, pasty?” Gyro said, plucking a green metal ball off his clothing. “Cause we can go.”

“Oh, I’d love to see what those balls of yours can do…”

Renee facehooved. “This is a landmine of bad wording.”

Pinkie cleared her throat. “Hello Gandalf! Gyro! Froppy! I’m Pinkie, this is Renee, Vriska, Nova, and Flutterfree! We don’t need any trouble or anything!”

“What are you doing here?” Gandalf asked.

“Lost,” Nova said. “Dragged here while en-route to another dimension.”

“Same,” Froppy added.

Pinkie pulled out her dimensional device. “This is how we travel universes. It’s not working right now. You?”

Gyro pulled a round ball out from under his hat, blue rather than green like the ones on his clothing. “This. If you know what Stands are, then you should know about Spin. You use it to activate this.”

“Spin?” Flutterfree said, cocking her head. “Is that anything like Hammon?”

“What’s that?” Gyro muttered.

“Clearly their Stands are of a different kind,” Gandalf pointed out. “Since most of them are horses, this does not surprise me.”

“We actually got it from a human wor-” Flutterfree began, before she noticed Renee and Nova glaring at her. “Uh, yeah. Guess I’m not supposed to say things like that. Oops.”

“Secrets, eh?” Gyro said, taking a few steps forward. “How about you tell us those secrets? Like what this place is?”

Nova rolled her eyes. “Non-Euclidian limited-visibility universe. No idea why or how it’s blocking our escape, or how it brought us here. We came in together and got sent here instead of our actual
destination.”

“Have you found anything of interest?” Froppy inquired.

“Just lots of rocks and gravity weirdness,” Pinkie giggled. “This Coliseum is the biggest one we’ve seen!”

“No markings?”

“Nope,” Pinkie confirmed. “Not a one.”

Gandalf rubbed his beard. “This is most concerning. Not one, but two groups dragged here by some unknown force while they were traveling elsewhere…”

“Could others be dragged in here as well?” Flutterfree asked.

“It’s safe to assume so.”

“…There could be dozens,” Renee said. “And they might be only a few platforms away from us and we couldn’t even see them! This place is huge, after all…”

“Hooold it!” Gyro shouted. “Why are we talking with them? For all we know they could be the ones who put us in this mess!”

Vriska pointed a finger. “Hey, ballsy, that’s my line! I bet you’re responsible.”

Nova and Froppy facehooved/facepalmed. “Stop being dense.”

“You stop being dense!” Vriska and Gyro shot back to their respective teammates.

Pinkie held up her hooves. “Okay, so, nobody knows if we should trust the others’ side. That’s fine, we don’t have to trust each other. Buuuuuut it would probably be better if we stick together. If either of us are responsible, one might slip up! But if both of us are just trapped here and telling the truth, we could work together! It’s win-win!”

Gandalf nodded. “That seems reasonable, unless one of us has an extremely creative plan that involves leading us around.”

“Well then you guys take the lead!” Pinkie cheered.

“Pinkie!” Renee hissed.

Pinkie made her tail twitch on purpose and winked at Renee.

“Oh. Well, okay then.”

Froppy narrowed her eyes – she’d seen the tail twitch and wink. She whispered something to Gandalf.

Gandalf leaned into his staff. “We accept. Now we-”

“OH FRICK!” They heard a female voice scream to the left of the Coliseum. Everyone turned to see what appeared to be a girl with pale-blue hair and red gloves standing there. She was staring at Pinkie’s group. “Uh… FANCY RUNNING INTO YOU HERE!”

“JENNY!” Nova shouted, horn lighting up with impressive power. She shot a bolt at Jenny, blowing
up a significant portion of her and the Coliseum wall behind her. She regenerated on the spot, as was her custom, but the fight had already begun.

Gyro summoned his Stand “Ball Breaker!” He called. The entire coliseum began to rotate as the green humanoid appeared, swirling with crackling energy. Flutterfree activated Lolo, ensuring that everyone could see Ball Breaker – the sudden visibility of the Stand startling Gandalf and Froppy.

The full activation of Lolo also revealed the blue crystalline Ivan standing next to Jenny. He let out a deep sigh and shook his head. “Of course…”

“Why are we spinning!?” Jenny shouted.

“Ball Breaker is an amazing Stand!” Gyro shouted. “It is the power of Spin incarnate, with it I ca-”

Vriska decked Gyro in the face. “You talk too much.”

Gandalf raised his staff, summoning impressive white magic. Renee attempted to catch it in her shielding, but her magic was pathetic compared to his own. It exploded, and the Coliseum rocked, all the while continuing to increase its Spin.

And then Froppy sighed, deciding that yes, it did look like they were going to have to fight.

Pinkie twitched. “OH COME ON!”

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“So… You travel worlds how, exactly, mister Gilgamesh?” Allure asked the tall Gilgamesh as he and the rest of the League leaped onto a platform shaped like an arch.

“The Void.”

“And how does that work?”

“It just works,” he said. The unicorn who had been allowed to keep the name Sweetie Belle knew he was probably smirking under his helmet, but nopony could see that.

Allure quizzed Gilgamesh more about his area of the multiverse, which apparently only had a few pony worlds, much like how the explored ‘east’ multiverse held mostly pony worlds with a handful of human worlds. Sweetie paid cursory attention to the discussion, learning more about larger-scale multiverse structure, but she found the armored man to be a bit too obsessed with legendary treasure and weapons.

She was much more curious about the existence of Sweetie Burger.

“So… Why do you move like that?”

“Something about other-world physics,” Burger said without moving her mouth. She shrugged. “All I know is I’m here now and I feel great. Do you know how to summon a hamburger?”

“Uh… No,” Sweetie said. “I’m just thinking, how are you talking without moving your mouth? Or your lips?”

“The mysteriousness is immense,” Bot said, injecting herself into the conversation. “All tests are inconclusive.”

“But… How is that even possible?” Sweetie asked. “What’s making the noise?”
“Noise comes from the mouth,” Bot answered. “Cannot determine anything else.”

Squeaky coughed. “Sweetie, Burger here comes from a world where things are different. You know this world we are walking around in has differences in gravity?”

Sweetie looked up to see Gilgamesh on a platform above them. “Yeah, I see that.”

“Well, imagine if universes could have other things changed. Friction. Time. The nature of sound itself. Laws of motion.”

“So what, are things like Conservation of Energy not a thing in some universes?”

Squeaky nodded. “Many systems of magic break the ‘rules’, though most don’t. Burger comes from a place where reality was dictated by ‘Creativity’. We don’t fully understand what it meant, and I’m not sure we want to.” She gestured at Thrackerzod. “Zod comes from another sort of different world. That body isn’t her real form. Her real form exists in a state of multiple dimensions we can’t see all at once. If we were to enter her true home universe, we would either die or go mad.”

Brute butted in. “I wouldn’t!”

“Your madness is well established,” Squeaky deadpanned. It didn’t have the effect it was meant to due to her helium-speak.

“Yay!”

Sweetie raised an eyebrow. “Does she really have insanity?”

“We think so,” Squeaky said. “She likes being brutal to things. Punching. Killing. She likes suggesting roofies as a solution to just about every problem, for some inexplicable reason. My Scootaloo may have been worse, but at least she had some smarts in there.”

“Your Scootaloo was brutal?”

“Yeah. We did have to be though – the three of us were undercover Generals in our world, bred to fight a perfect war.”

“…That sounds insane.”

“-ly brilliant,” Squeaky finished with a smirk.

“I’m serious, you’re not much older than me. You had to be a kid… That’s not right.”

“No, it’s not. But it was extremely effective. The enemy could never figure out who was giving the orders. And… Well, the war is over now.”

“Are you saying the ends justify the means?”

“I’m not sure what I’m saying, Sweetie,” Squeaky admitted. “What I am saying is that it’s behind me, and at this point there’s no use dwelling on it. I am what I am.”

Sweetie smiled. “Sometimes I wish I could be somepony like you.”

“What? Raised to be a General?”

Sweetie shook her head. “No. Able to leave the past behind me.”
Squeaky smiled warmly. “It is a nice skill. But what I went through is nothing compared to you, from what I can tell.”

Sweetie nodded. “That… That doesn’t change anything. Your sufferings are still your own. Don’t lessen them just because somepony’s had it worse.”

“Words of a friend?”

“Paraphrase, of sorts,” Sweetie confirmed. “The world I was in just before this one. It was the first time I saw humans. Wasn’t expecting to see more so soon.”

“Get used to it,” Suzy said, having overheard her comment. “Humans are the most common race in the multiverse, so much as we can tell. We’ve just got so many ponies here because we’re in a cluster of pony universes. The Tau’ri explorations in the western multiverse have yet to actually find any pony worlds there.”

“Wow. Wonder why they’re the ones?”

“No idea,” Suzy said. “I’m not Eve, I don’t ask the big questions. Sw- Allure up there does. But that’s why she’s the leader.”

Sweetie Belle looked ahead to where Gilgamesh and Allure were talking, Thrackerzod trailing just behind. “…She’s me, isn’t she? The me I would have become if I… Hadn’t messed up.”

“I don’t think so,” Suzy said. “You seem a bit… different. More magically inclined. Allure has never been good with magic, and is still only passable with it. Zod does all the heavy spell lifting.”

“Huh…” Sweetie said. “…I think I’m going to go talk to her, you don’t mind?”

“Not at all,” Suzy said with a wink. “The League treats conversation fluidly. Which is to say it starts up and breaks off all the time because there’s so many of us all the time.”

Sweetie nodded and trotted to catch up with Gilgamesh and Allure.

“…and that’s how I got my seven millionth copy of Excelipoor.”

“You have some bad luck,” Allure commented. “Never got the real deal, did you?”

“Held it a few times,” Gilgamesh admitted. “But I never can keep ahold of an Excalibur. Other legendary weapons, yes, but that one? It eludes me.”

“Sounds like you may have a Beat curse.”

“Beat curse?” Sweetie asked.

“Oh,” Allure said, taking in Sweetie’s presence. “Didn’t see you there, you move pretty silently huh? Yeah, a Beat curse. It’s… Well I really don’t understand it, since Starbeat really doesn’t like explaining things at length. It’s a curse that makes you… do things a certain way? I think? Starbeat’s makes her feel uncontrollable romantic attraction toward random people at seemingly random times.”

“…Weird.”

“Yeah, I don’t really know what I’m talking about,” Allure admitted. “So, what’s up?”

“I was wondering. Did you ever actually become an apprentice under Twilight Sparkle?”
“Me?” Allure laughed at the thought. “She struggled to teach me proper telekinesis! So, yeah, no I wasn’t her apprentice. That’d be Nova. Though I believe her title is Protégé.”

“Ahh. Like Twilight was to Celestia?”

“Right!”

“What’s Nova like?”

“Well, her name was originally Starlight Glimmer, and she used to be evil. Enslaved a town, tried to destroy time, all that. She’s now a member of Pinkie’s team and keeps time from getting destroyed. She’s very snarky and… Let’s just say she doesn’t have as much tact as other ponies.”

“Ahh.”

“Really phenomenal at magic though.”

“Does she have any artifacts?” Gilgamesh asked, suddenly.

Allure sighed. “Is that all you… No. Her tools would only work for a unicorn.”

“Shame. Do any of you have artifacts?”

“If you want to go steal an artifact, find the red bug-king Siron and take his staff,” Allure commented. “That thing’s more trouble than it’s worth.”

“I shall go on this quest to steal the rod! And I sha-”

A human woman’s fist came flying out of seemingly nowhere, beaning Gilgamesh right in the face. His strength should have been able to withstand the blow and injure the incoming wrist, but instead the attacker’s fist remained perfectly healthy and Gilgamesh went flying backward, over the edge of the platform they were standing on.

“Ha!” the strangely normal-looking woman shouted. “That’ll teach you not to kidnap little adorable unicorns!”

Every Sweetie Belle facehooved. Thrackerzod teleported Gilgamesh back up.

“…Why would you do that? Now I have to hit him again!” the woman said.

Allure cleared her throat. “Mister Gilgamesh is not an enemy nor is he kidnapping us. He’s lost here just like we are.”

“Told you,” a version of Sunset said, teleporting next to the woman. “But do you listen? No.”

“Who are you two?”

“Well, I’m Sunny, since apparently I can’t just be Sunset,” Sunny said. “This is Jane.”

“Jane bio identified!” Sweetie Bot declared. “Ooooh, you’re a dimensional traveler too!”

“Just adding more and more evidence to the pile that something’s drawing our kind here,” Thrackerzod muttered.

Squeaky nodded. “The question is why. Or how. Got anything on that, Zod?”
Zod shook her head. “Nothing.”

“Wait, hold up,” Jane said, raising a hand. “Zod? As in, Thrackerzod?”

“…Yes?” Allure said, cocking her head. “You heard of her?”

“I know her. Hey, Zod! It’s me, Jane!”

Thrackerzod blinked. “…I have no idea who you are.”

“You… Don’t? But what about-”

“Just like Discord,” Sunny said, putting a hoof on Jane. “Not all of them are the same.”

“But Zod is already a version of Sweetie Belle! How can there be more than one Zod?”

“There was more than one of all of us, at one point,” Allure said. “Copying universe.”

“Wait, that’s a thing?” both Jane and Sweetie said at the same time.

“Yeah, it’s a thing,” Allure said. “…Not anymore though. A guy named Rick destroyed it.”

“Rick…” Gilgamesh said, clenching his fist. “That man had Excalibur…”

Sweetie glanced around the group and to Jane’s own somewhat angry face. “It certainly seems like this Rick isn’t very popular.”

“He’s banned from interacting with the alliance,” Bot piped up. “I hear Pinkie even gave him a death threat!”

Sweetie blinked. “Wait, what? Pinkie! Pinkie’s don’t… Well I guess there was that one time… And that one other time… Yeah, I’m not surprised anymore.”

“Pinkies are quite volatile,” Thrackerzod said. “We should be thankful that most Pinkies take our side.” She stopped in her tracks. “Everypony, I sense something. Be on your guard.”

They found themselves on a circular disc platform with seven columns and a gap where an eighth should have been. Nearby was an inverted staircase. Other than that, they saw nothing.

Thrackerzod furrowed her brow and lit her horn, scanning the area. “Well isn’t this a pleasant surprise.”

“What?”

“I’ve found one of Lolo’s nodes,” Thrackerzod said, walking toward the center of the disc. “Ahem. This is Thrackerzod to Flutterfree! We have the League of Sweetie Belles here, plus a new Sweetie, a man named Gilgamesh, Jane, and Sunny. We will follow along your path to-” She blinked. “Lolo just vanished.”

“…Can anyone explain to me what’s going on?” Jane asked.

“Flutterfree has a power she’s named Lolo,” Thrackerzod answered. “It can spread itself thin and watch over certain areas. I used my soul-sense to see the normally invisible body of it, which was set to observe this area. Something must have happened on Flutterfree’s end to make her recall Lolo.”

“A fight?” Brute asked.
“Possibly.”

“Then let’s go to the fight!” Brute cheered.

Allure shook her head. “We don’t know for sure which way it is. All we know is that Flutterfree is here, and maybe which direction she went. But without an actual path… We can’t find her.”

“So we stay,” Squeaky declared.

Sweetie raised an eyebrow. “Waiting? In a place like this?”

“It’s something,” Suzie admitted.

Gilgamesh twirled his halberd. “In that case, MISS JANE! I challenge you to a duel for insulting my honor!”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am serious. I never kid. Except when I was a kid. And when I act like a kid,” he chuckled. Then he produced a sword, somehow wielding the halberd one-handed. “Come at me.”

Jane rolled her eyes. “Sure, why not?”

Thrackerzod frowned. “Hold it you two. I’m still sensing something here. It isn’t Lolo.”

A ball of pink fluff dropped from the sky, hitting the circular platform in the center, driving a crack right through it – not enough to separate the two halves fully, but hard enough to knock everyone down.

A flat-maned version of Pinkie Pie stood up, pupils the size of pinpricks, and her teeth somehow sharp. “Looks like your auntie Pinkie has too many Sweeties to deal with! Let’s cut the number down, shall we?”

Jane wasted no time. A sword was summoned into her hand from seemingly nowhere and she charged. And then Pinkie wasn’t there anymore, she was behind the woman.

Jane, to her credit, was expecting this, almost as if she had experience with this exact type of opponent. She twirled around in a perfect motion, bringing the sword down on the Pinkie’s head. It bounced off.

“Damn,” Jane cursed, flipping back so the Pinkie’s gigantic knife couldn’t hit her. It was at this point the Sweeties that could attack did so. Sunny, for her part, fired a bolt of fire.

Gilgamesh decided to one-up her. “Flare,” he decreed. Magic flew from his hands and into the Pinkie’s body.

“Oooh bad bad move Gilgamesh!” Pinkie chided, already feeling her insides heat up to supposedly intolerable levels.

Gilgamesh narrowed his eyes. “How so, pink one?”

Pinkie put the bomb mask on her face. “I can explode and be just fine. You’ve just given me quite the boost! The answer is yes, you can explode twice!”

“TAKE COVER!” Sunny yelled.
And the Pinkie exploded twice, shattering the stone disc into a dozen pieces and engulfing the entire platform in smoke. The rumble rippled through the unusual universe, shaking up the platforms everywhere...

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Eve looked through the sets of paperwork for herself, Cosmo, Sparky, Twiree, Twix, and E E Twilight. “I think we’ve got it. Everything done with higher than average accuracy, exactly what they want for their files, I’m sure.” She smirked. “Almost time for the fun to begin.”

Cosmo nodded. “In a minute though, I’m still helping some of the others with their papers. Or, well, Starlight is, I’m just the vessel.”

“I work you like a slave, apparently,” Starlight chirped.

“Funny,” Cosmo commented.

Eve arranged all their stacks of papers neatly and prepared them for turn-in. She saw the door open again, announcing a new Twilight. As she had gotten used to this past hour, she began to speak without really looking at who had come through the door. “Hello. You should probably read your le-

She didn’t get to finish her sentence. She lost her grip on the papers when she registered who was standing in the doorway.

She was an alicorn Twilight Sparkle; her defining features being from her color scheme. Her purple coat was darker, her mane was more of a deep blue, and there was dark magic about her.

Brutalight Sparcake.

Eve’s ears flattened back instinctually, but the rest of her took a posture of unbridled rage. Her eyes glowed like spotlights, her mane began to swirl with the magic that made up this universe, and her horn prepared a spell designed to bore its way through her skull. Had anypony present been a Stand user, they would have seen a powerful white glow with three nested gyroscopic rings amidst it appear behind her. Great, judging eyes lined the rings of her Stand, ready to do its master’s bidding.

Brutalight just screamed like a scared little filly, tears coming out of her eyes.

A sign of stress.

A sign of having too much to cope with.

Eve dropped the show of power instantly. “…Do… Do you know who I am?”

The ‘Brutalight’ whimpered and shook her head.

“I… I’m sorry,” Eve said. “It’s just, somepony with your fac-”

The moment Eve took a step forward, ‘Brutalight’ scurried into a corner, folding her wings around herself.

Eve looked down at the ground, ashamed.

Cosmo put a wing around Eve, gesturing at Twix to go comfort the ‘Brutalight’. “Eve…” she spoke, her voice soothing.
“I… I was going to kill her. I was…”

“The mare whose face she shares took your hearing, and the lives of many,” Cosmo said. “Had it really been her, escaped from Nautica, you would have been right to take drastic action.”

“But… But it wasn’t!” Eve blurted. “Look at her! She’s a scared pony!”

The ‘Brutalight’ was accepting a comforting hoof from Twix, but wasn’t saying anything, or even looking out through the cracks of her wings. Eve knew she wouldn’t be out for a long time because of her.

Sparky put her hand on Eve’s other shoulder. “Let’s just turn the papers in and do what we wanted to do, okay? She probably would benefit from us going anyway.”

Eve nodded. “I’ll… I’ll be sure to check in on her later. But… Yes. Yeah, you’re right.” She took in a deep breath and stood tall.

“…You recovered quickly,” E E Twilight declared.

“I have to,” the Charter-Princess responded. “It’s my job, essentially.”

“That it is,” Cosmo said. “Twix, come on. We’re done here.”

Twix patted ‘Brutalight’ on the back one more time. “Hope you… get better. Ask the mares around here what to do on your papers. Some of them have some idea.” She trotted up to join the others. “Yeesh, she’s been messed up.”

Eve nodded. “I… I know.” She shook her head, leading all of them to the employee with the silver badge. “Ahem. Miss Sparkle?” she asked.

“Yes?”

“The six of us worked together and have our forms to fill out. We’re all good friends, so I hope you don’t mind.”

“Of course not, friends are always a-” she blinked. “…Wait a minute. You can’t be good friends. It clearly says here you’re all from different universes.”

Eve smirked, pulling out her dimensional device and dialing the Forest. “I am Charter-Princess Evening Sparkle of Equis Vitis, and I am one of, if not the, most important individual in multiversal society in the alliance I am a part of. I have been a good girl and filled out all your paperwork – as accurately as I possibly could, I might add – now you be a good girl and take us to your leader. Or leaders.”

The Twilight paled at these words. She glanced at her silver badge. “I… I think this is above my pay grade,” she stammered. “Ah… Just… step on the platform over there. You’ll get your designations and I…” she flipped through a booklet with the title Census Duty and You, clearly dissatisfied with the information it contained. “I’ll have you teleported to one of the Council’s waiting rooms! Yes, that’ll work. You’ll, uh, receive your designations in your mind and then you’ll… Er…”

“We’ll wait?” Eve said, raising an eyebrow. “Fine by us. But we’ll be timing you.”

The Twilight gulped. “O-of course. R-right away. If you h-have any interdimensional business that needs t-tending to, don’t hesitate to use your device to return. …Actually, don’t do that, only use it to make calls, I can’t have you vanishing.”
“All right,” Eve said. “We won’t leave. Just step on this pad right here?”

“Y-yes,” the Twilight said, lighting her horn. “The coordinates have been changed.”

The six of them stepped on – and all of them suddenly got a series of letters and numbers encoded into their mind that represented them. Eve sensed she was given a special designation – AΩ-4219. *Alpha and the omega, huh? Wonder what exactly I did to get that.*

Then the six of them were in a well-furnished waiting room, complete with coffee, crackers, magazines, and a few other snacks. The wallpaper and tiling was still exactly the same though.

“You think a million different Twilights could be more creative,” Sparky commented.

“Or maybe they just can’t agree on anything,” E E Twilight said. “Also, apparently I’m M4-N-delta-P5. I guess you have a name to call me now.”

“Welcome to the party, M4,” Twiree said. “Now, I wonder if there’s anything juicy in these magazines!”

Eve opened a cupboard and found *Sparkle Census Code*. She smirked. “Cosmo, I think I found something for us to read while we wait.”

“That’s going to be really, really boring,” Twix commented. “I wouldn’t bother.”

“That is why she asked me to come over rather than you,” Cosmo pointed out. “I agree we should at least attempt to be versed before they show up. It could be hours, for all we know.”

As they studied the code of the Census, back in the actual paperwork room, a certain mare looked out from between her wings.

The six of them were gone.

*Good.*

Brutalight let a cruel smile come to her face. *That was just too easy.*

~~~

“Okay, I’m saying it now,” Nova said. “This Gyro guy is ridiculously overpowered.”

“Oh? What makes you say that?” Pinkie asked.

Nova gestured at how they were holding on for dear life on the edge of a rapidly-spinning Coliseum.

“Oh, yeah. That. Funny, that.”

“NOT REALLY!” Jenny called, holding on a few meters to their left.

“YOU CAN SHUT UP!” Nova called back.

“…I thought we agreed I wasn’t evil last time?”

“I CAN STILL MESS YOU UP JENNY! MESS YOU UP *GOOD*.”

“Pff. I could be pounded into pulp and still survive.”

“It doesn’t have to be permanent.”
Gyro’s own team wasn’t doing much better – Froppy and Gandalf were barely hanging on at the other end, while Renee had encased herself in a crystal bubble to keep herself steady. Only Gyro, Vriska, and Flutterfree were actively doing anything of use – and Flutterfree was just using Lolo to keep herself rooted to the ground and make sure Vriska could see Gyro’s stand.

“GYRO!” Gandalf called. “YOU ARE GOING TO SPIN US OFF!”

Gyro smirked, his false golden teeth glinting in the blue light. “I’m not making it spin any faster, old man.” He smirked. “Just let me teach this bitch a lesson and we can move on to the others.”

Vriska ducked under Ball Breaker’s attack, but was unable to dodge a direct attack from one of Gyro’s own steel ball projectiles. The green sphere hit her in the arm, using the Spin to throw her back. She was open to attack from Ball Breaker.

She tried again to steal luck from Gyro, but Ball Breaker got in the way, and despite being able to see the Stand she apparently couldn’t steal the luck from it. The Stand kicked her right between the legs, driving her into the ground. Stone chunks went flying.

Gyro’s eyes widened, curiously looking at his leg. “Huh. Guess Ball Breaker lives up to his name.”

Vriska winced, pulling herself up to her knees. “Utter… Bastard…”

Gyro smirked. “I’m quite the guy. You know, I think I might actually have a song for you…”

Vriska summoned her dice and threw them at Gyro’s feet. His momentary distraction of looking for a song had given her all the time she needed. The dice rolled a high result, producing a very satisfying result – a wrecking ball from nowhere. Ball Breaker was unable to do anything to the wrecking ball before it hit Gyro. gyro attempted to use the Spin on Vriska’s rolled attack, but the velocity at which he accelerated was too much. He didn’t lose consciousness, but he lost his concentration. Ball Breaker was forced back into Gyro’s body, and the stable Spin of the Coliseum began to drift back to a more manageable speed.

Vriska stood up, hands on her hips. “H-ha! I win!”

A steel ball hit her right between the eyes, knocking her over.

Gyro laughed, wheezing and holding his chest. “H-ha! I win!”

Vriska groaned, rubbing her head. “What the fuck is your deal?”

“My deal? Let me tell you about-”

“ENOUGH!” Gandalf said, slamming his staff into the ground, sending out a magic shockwave that forced everyone who had just gotten back on their feet to fall back down. “Gyro, cease this contest. The rest of you…” he narrowed his eyes. “You’ll be coming with us.”

“What makes you think we’re going to do that?” Nova said.

Gandalf encased her in a sphere of white magic, freezing all her motions. “This is why.”

Pinkie tensed. “Gandalf… I know you don’t like to do this. Why don’t we put the staff down, and talk thi-”

“I cannot take any chances,” Gandalf decreed. “You are all far too powerful to be trusted without a leash.”
“Yeah! Gandalf!” Jenny whooped. “Good on you for choosing the right side!”

“This applies to you as well.”

“I don’t give a rip about that unicorn,” Jenny deadpanned. “What makes you think I’ll do wh-” she saw Froppy sitting on top of Ivan, having wrapped the crystal man up in her tongue. “IVAN! Again? …You were captured by a frog? How in…”

“No illusions,” was the only answer Ivan offered, making no attempt to even struggle against the froggy tongue.

Jenny curled her fists. “I just… I…”

Pinkie took in a breath and opened her eyes. “Gandalf. Listen to me. We want to work together.”

Gandalf recognized something sinister in her tone. “…Are you threatening me?”

“I can get Nova out of there before you can do anything,” Pinkie bragged. “And then where would you be?” Suddenly, she was behind him. “I have a certain… set of skills, you could say.”

Gandalf narrowed his eyes. “You aren’t sure you can. You tensed earlier.”

“Observant! But do you really wanna take that chance? It’d be much better if we could be friends. Or at least not try to hold each other hostage. I-”

Jenny teleported herself to Froppy and kicked the frog woman in the side, forcing her tongue to release.

Steam shot out of Pinkie’s ears. She opened her mouth and instead of a word, a high pitched BEEP came forth, before turning into a regular sentence. “-it Jenny! Why would you do that!”

Jenny hoisted Ivan up and saluted. “Sorry, no time to… To…” Jenny was beyond surprised to see one of Gyro’s steel balls hit her in the face. Renee had thrown it with her magic. Ivan shot off a shard of crystal, Pinkie drew her hammer, Vriska prepared her dice, Gandalf raised his staff…

And then a blue phone box fell out of the sky, sideways, bringing the entire conflict to a standstill.

The Doctor poked his head out of the side of the TARDIS, the now open door billowing smoke. “Okay, clearly… Clearly that did not work.” He waved smoke out of his face as he left the TARDIS behind him. “That’s going to take a while for her to repair… Boy oh boy oh boy. He put a hand to his head and shook hit. “Eeegh. What on earth have I walked into?”

“Three-way free for all,” Jenny said.

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. “Riiigh-”

Vriska threw her sword at the Doctor. He dodged by a hair’s breadth. “Who the- oh.”

“HEY ASSHOLE!” Vriska called. “REMEMBER ME?”

“Oh I could never forget-”

“OH BOY DO WE HAVE A LOT TO TALK ABOUT, YOU AND ME.”

The Doctor pointed the sonic screwdriver at her.
“…Really?”

“Yes. Really.” the Doctor coughed. “Pretty sure there’s something in you I can aggravate… Considering how beaten and battered you look.”

“Bullshit.”

“Okay fine, it’s complete baloney.” He put the screwdriver away and shrugged. “But! But, you still don’t want to kill me!”

“Gog, your face is much more annoying than the last one,” Vriska put a hand to her forehead.

Pinkie turned from the Doctor to Vriska. “So… I take it you know each other?”

“Know each other? Oh you bet we do,” Vriska spat. “He and I traveled together for a long time. And there’s a ton of things wrong in that fucking sick mind of his, I could go on for days. But let’s start with primary complaint A. You know exactly where Earth C is.”

“Well I wouldn’t say exactly and – bother, just shut up a moment, Vriska, would you?”

“Me? SHUT UP? Do you eve-”

“Good, good.” the Doctor put on a smile. “So, just to make sure everyone’s caught up to speed, we’re stuck in a universe that’s drawing in dimensional travelers seemingly at random. I am the Traveling Doctor, and that there is my TARDIS, a spacetime machine. Now, that TARDIS is one of the most advanced and fully optimized machines in the multiverse. I just spent the last few hours trying every trick I had in the book trying to escape this universe. As you can see, that didn’t work.”

“What does that mean to us?” Gandalf demanded.

“It means that I, a man who knows the entire multiverse, has been trapped here. If that’s not a sign of something exceptionally sinister at work, I don’t know what is.”

“So basically, you’re telling us to panic,” Flutterfree deadpanned.

“Yes! Wait, no. No that’s not it at all! The point is, quite clearly, none of us would have the capabilities to do this.”

“Except you,” Jenny pointed out.

Pinkie twitched. “I’m going to have to start dealing out ‘shut up’s like they’re candy, aren’t I?”

“It’ll certainly be something like that,” the Doctor said.

“What’s the best course of action?” Gandalf asked.

“You’re actually trusting this guy?” Gyro interjected, but seeing Gandalf’s nod he shut up. Apparently the gray wizard knew something Gyro didn’t.

The Doctor folded his hands. “At the moment, I suppose we find as many of our compatriots as we can and form a band.”

Flutterfree cleared her throat. “I spotted the League of Sweetie Belles and a few others back where we started. My group, that is.”

“And how did you do that?” Jenny asked.
“Lolo. My Stand,” Flutterfree said. “It was interrupted in the fight, but I saw them. I can find the way back.”

“That sounds wonderful!” the Doctor said, clasping his hands together. “Unless anyone has any better ideas?”

“YEAH!” a gravelly voice declared – one that was unfortunately familiar to too many here. “STOP BEING SENTIMENTAL PUSSIES!” This was punctuated by a burp.

Everyone – including the Doctor, Jenny, and Gandalf – let out a pained sigh. They knew who it was – Rick Sanchez and Morty. The mad scientist with no moral code whatsoever, and his grandson who everyone thought needed to be somewhere else.

Rick smirked at them, his distinct spiky blue hair drawing their attention as he entered the Coliseum. “Doc, you see, as it turns out Time Lord technology just isn’t cut out for this sort of thing.”

“If you could have escaped, you would have already,” the Doctor grunted.

“I was searching. I can get out of here with just a toothpick and my own hair.”

“You have no idea what’s going on here.”

Rick laughed. “Bah. Twelve-pier type universe, constructed by the Weavers in the Dark Era, repurposed with an interception quota keyed to regular travelers.”

“That’s obvious,” the Doctor decreed. “But the security measures are beyond that.”

“You telling me you haven’t tried the microverse tunnel?”

“How are you going to make a microverse with the supplies you have!?”

“That’s a yes!” Rick pointed and laughed. “You burned out your TARDIS without doing that? Oh, and here I was thinking I was talking to some enlightened immortal alien who travels through time.”

“Excuse me? I ne-”

Vriska interrupted. “Can you two just fight already and kill each other? Seriously, the multiverse would be so much better off without either of you running it into the ground.”

The Doctor and Rick continued shouting at each other, with Vriska occasionally butting in just to point out that they both were complete assholes.

Morty decided to sit down next to the ponies. “Hey.”

“Hey. You don’t look much older,” Nova observed.

“Time difference,” Morty said. “Slower on my end by quite a bit. What’s been going on in your neighborhood?”

“Oh, you know, just trying to unify a multiversal society,” Renee added. “No biggy.”

“Cool. Cool. How’s Twilight doing?”

“Eve, now,” Pinkie said. “She’s doing good. Rick definitely traumatized her. He’s still not welcome.”
“If the Doctor weren’t doing so good a job of it I would be giving him a piece of my mind…” Renee declared, narrowing her eyes. “I might just do it anyway.”

“So… You got Vriska on your team?” Morty asked.

“You know her?”

“Heard of her,” Morty said.

“Anything… bad?” Flutterfree asked.

“Nothing compared to Rick. She’s been responsible for a lot of death, but… Definitely still a hero.”

“Good,” Flutterfree said. “…They’re still going at it.”

Jenny decided enough was enough, teleporting between the two of them. “ENOUGH! I. Am. Tired of this! Just stop the fighting! Work together for one stupid minute and use your phenomenal minds to get us out of here!”

“Find others,” the Doctor said.

“Microverse,” Rick said, folding his arms.

“Well then why don’t we just split up?” the Doctor said, waving his hands around.

“What a great fucking idea!” Rick blurted, drawing a gun and pointing it at the Doctor. “How about I just split you up into a million pieces? No regeneration from this baby, Doc, no siree.”

The Doctor put his hands in the air. “W-why?”

“I dunno. I’m bored. Drunk. Sick of walking around in circles. Or maybe I just want to mess with Flagg, who knows?”

“You do more of Flagg’s bidding than any of his actual servants.”

Rick raised an eyebrow. Then he made a decision. Shooting the Doctor would have long-term consequences that he would likely live to regret, but hitting the TARDIS…

“Riiiiick….” Morty said, sensing what his grandfather was preparing to do.

Rick shot the TARDIS.

The explosion tore the Coliseum in half.

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“Heh,” Eve said, closing the Sparkle Census Code. “They only have minimal regulations for multiverse-aware Sparkles. I guess they assume they won’t have anything big. They probably don’t have any experience with other societies.”

Cosmo furrowed her brow. “They don’t seem to be malicious though, merely studious. At worst, highly obsessive-compulsive.”

“What’d you expect? They’re us.”

Twiree huffed. “I can say for a fact that I am not obsessive-compulsive.”
“You’ve stacked every single magazine in this room you could into a perfect column,” Eve observed.

“Uh… Yeah I guess so.”

Twix pulled out her phone and checked the time. “It’s been an hour, officially.”

“It could be much longer,” M4 pointed out. “This is bureaucracy, Twix. You don’t just get to go ‘oh, sweet, something unexpected? Let’s just drop everything and deal with it.’ Doesn’t work.”

Sparky looked at the ceiling. “Maybe we should have just gone through orientation and caused a ruckus in the general population.”

“That would have just been rude,” Eve said. “They may have a desire to announce this in a particular way. We don’t want to force their hoof that much without first learning who they are. Though I’m pretty sure we can guess what forty million Twilight Sparkles will do.”

It was then that the door to the room opened with a small click. A grandiose alicorn stepped through the doorway. Her height was slightly above that of even Cosmo, and her mane was distinctly more impressive than Cosmo’s flowing magical locks, instead swirling with the power of what appeared to be a galaxy. On her chest was a pin that identified her as the Grand Secretariat, Council Member.

“Ah, we’ve been waiting,” Eve said, taking a step forth. “I am Charter-Princess Evening Sparkle of Equis Vitis. The Twilights you see before you are all my colleagues – Cosmo, Sparky, Twiree, Twix, and M4. We have some questions.”

“I am the Grand Secretariat.” She raised an eyebrow at that. “That’s some trick you pulled.”

Eve smirked. “Well we were kidnapped without warning. We should probably be livid.”

The Grand Secretariat sighed deeply. “While that is true, you clearly are not.” She glanced at Sparky. “…Most of you. I wonder why you decided to give that Twilight such a hard time.”

“For fun,” M4 said.

“More than that,” Cosmo added. “If we were found or discovered at that point, it would be better for you than if we were discovered among your general population. This allows you more control, if you can accept that. The only Twilights who know are the ones we helped out in that census room and the employee.” She blinked for a moment, clearly not used to looking up to talk to anybody.

The Grand Secretariat nodded. “I see that, though you are aware the ponies you helped will probably spread the news.”

“Unavoidable,” Eve commented. “We’ve encountered thousands of Twilight Sparkles that know of our existence, even if they aren’t part of the alliance. I think chances are good you’ve already let one through. I mean, what are the odds you get me first and not some others?”

“Unlikely,” the Grand Secretariat admitted. “Your point is a valid one. We have no need to keep such a secret from our population, however. They’ll probably be ecstatic about this.”

Eve chuckled. “I’d imagine so. I remember how I was when I first went out and began exploring…”

The Grand Secretariat’s expression softened, accepting that she was talking to another Twilight, not some foreign ambassador. “Do you mind describing your alliance to me?”
Eve nodded. “As we explored, some universes we encountered joined us. There are a few dozen of them, ranging from Equis worlds like our own, to spaceborne places, to entirely human worlds in the western multiverse. Or E-Sphere, I suppose, if the Stars are to be believed.”

“It is not easy to get a Star to talk,” the Grand Secretariat commented. “But yes, the information is accurate. We have heard the E-Sphere term from other sources.”

Eve continued. “After an attack from another multiversal society known as the University of Doors that tried to erase us from time, we decided we no longer needed to just be friends, but form a fully Unified conglomeration. The process is coming along nicely, with eight of our worlds planning on being the founders, and several others lined up to join afterward.”

“How much longer are you expecting for this to become official?”

“Few years. Local time. There’s already been a lot of processing happening. Hammering out the details and getting the public on our side at this point. Surprisingly easy compared to Disclosure.”

“Not something we’d be aware of,” the Grand Secretariat said, shaking her head. “Most worlds only have their Twilight Sparkle contact us. Very few of them actually interact with us on a full scale. You could say this is the only universe we actually own out of the millions upon millions we have eyes on.”

Eve raised an eyebrow. “You’ve really never run into other societies?”

“Besides the Stars? There are actually a couple. The Eldritch Embodiment, and another group that I would rather I not reveal to you.”

“Mysterious,” Twix commented, but said nothing further.

Eve nodded. “That is your choice. We’ve encountered the Embodiment as well – actually have one of their kind in our employ – and the aforementioned University of Doors.”

“You have an Embodiment being with you? How’d you pull that off?”

“Luck,” M4 said. “She was on my world, trying to kill me to fulfill a ‘contract’ for abusing Eldritch power. Turned out there was a third option.”

“Mmm. And this… University?”

“We are not on speaking terms with them,” Eve declared. “After they tried to wipe us out for no reason other than ‘meddling in artifact acquisition’, we struck an accord that we wouldn’t touch any universe they had a beacon in, and they wouldn’t touch anything we had a beacon in. That was the last contact we had.”

“I will need to contact them myself at some point, to tell them of our existence. You understand, of course.”

Eve nodded. “I don’t expect much, but if you can get them to talk and play nice, I won’t stop you. Have anywhere I can give you the coordinates?”

“Later. Speaking of coordinates, I assume you’ll want a trade?”

“We’ll give you ours if you give us yours.”

“Not counting secret or blocked worlds.”
“Of course. Deal?”

“Deal.”

The two mares shook hooves.

“That was easy,” Twiree said. “Wish I could still summon easy buttons from nowhere, though.”

“You’re from a low-res universe, correct?” the Grand Secretariat asked.

“Uh… That sounds right?”

“Their universe is unique,” Eve explained. “Far as we can tell, anyway.”

“Not entirely,” the Grand Secretariat clarified. “Exceedingly rare, but I’ve seen a couple of beings like her.”

“Oh sweet! Any around?”

“Sadly no, they rarely come to the Census.”

“Aww…”

“Which leads me to a question I want to ask you,” the Grand Secretariat said. “We have never come across a group of Sparkles with extensive multiversal connections, such as yourselves. This puts us in an odd situation. Usually, we automatically allow every single Sparkle to become a citizen automatically, no qualms about who they are or what they do. It occurs to me that it should not be automatic in this case. Being a part of two multiversal societies might reflect badly on you.”

Eve nodded. “Cosmo and I definitely cannot, seeing as we’re leaders of our respective worlds. The rest of you… I honestly don’t mind if you accept citizenship. We’re not picky back home.”

Sparky shook her head. “Nope.”

Twiree and Twix shrugged. “Don’t see why not,” they answered.

M4 pondered this for a while. “I’ll take it. But, Grand Secretariat, I do have a question.”

The brilliant alicorn smiled. “Ask away, little one.”

“Why do you all think that’s endearing…” M4 shook her head. “There’s clearly a step above citizenship, isn’t there? Those ponies you have working for you, with the badges. More… official ones.”

The Grand Secretariat raised an eyebrow. “I see what you’re getting at, but I fail to see why. You know so little about us, why would you want to become an employee?”

“My world’s leader, Celestia, is… The fact that I said this never leaves this room, understand? She’s a brutal leader. Effective, probably not evil, but brutal. Brutal enough that the other universes are cautious to even deal with her on friendly terms, generally cutting ties when possible. The alliance doesn’t really have any reason to accept or deal with us.”

“I see. You were thinking you could be a more official ambassador between our worlds?”

“It… seems like something more worthwhile than using these wings just to look pretty, eternally terrified of actually going against Celestia despite technically having the power to do so.”
“Will she not be upset at this?”

“She might,” M4 admitted. “But I think I’m safe.”

The Grand Secretariat smiled warmly. “…Believe it or not, M4, I’ve met other versions of you. Not just Twilight, but the Twilight that exists in an eldritch lock and under a brutal self-proclaimed god. Most are rather unpleasant to be around. You are different. You should be proud.”

M4 gestured at Eve. “I owe it to her version of Rarity. Got me to look at things a little differently.”

“I shall arrange for a more detailed tour of our facilities, to describe to you what working with us would actually entail. If nothing else, it will give you a good picture to tell the others.”

M4 bowed. “Of course.”

“Cosmo, Eve, you two are the government authorities in the room. I shall take you personally to talk to the University and discuss future relations.”

Eve nodded. “That seems fine.”

“And for you three… You’re bored. I suggest taking a stroll through the Sparkle Census proper, enjoy the luxuries we have.”

Sparky raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“About half the buildings we have are bookstores.”

Sparky’s grumpy exterior faltered. “H-half?”

“Half.”

Twix blinked. “This place is Twilight heaven.”

“What about our token and bookmark?” Twiree asked. “The letter sai—”

Suddenly all six of them had a token and a bookmark.

“I wouldn’t use the token if I were you, I’d wait until this is all resolved,” the Grand Secretariat suggested. “But there you go. Let me make some calls, and we can all go about our ways.”

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A chunk of stone flew through the blue space, singed slightly from an explosion. Holding tightly to the chunk were four versions of Sweetie Belle and the woman known as Jane.

“I see another platform!” Squeaky shouted. “Everyone, get ready! Jane, I’ve got Brute, you get Allure and Sweetie!”

“Which is which?” Jane asked.

“Get the ones I don’t have in my telekinesis!” Squeaky blurted, lifting Brute off the platform. She teleported, taking herself and Brute to safety.

Jane rubbed her hands together, nervously. “Here goes nothing.” She grabbed Allure and Sweetie by the backs of their necks and kicked off the hurtling chunk of stone. She perfectly twisted her body through the air, adjusting to the sudden shift of gravity. She pulled her arms back so the Sweetie
Belles wouldn’t suffer most of the impact force. She hit with a satisfying smash, cracking the platform slightly, but nothing serious enough to be concerned about.

She winced slightly as she set the two unicorns down. “Ow…”

“You’re pretty strong,” Allure observed. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” Jane muttered, rubbing her leg. “Ow…”

“Did we see what happened to the others?” Sweetie asked, worry evident on her face.

“I saw Zod and Sunny flying the opposite direction,” Jane said, standing to her full height.

Squeaky furrowed her brow. “I thought I saw Gilgamesh fly away, but I’m not sure.”

“Considering that we aren’t charred pieces of fur and meat, they’re probably fine,” Allure commented. “Though I do worry they won’t be able to stick a landing in this place…”

“We need to find them,” Jane said. “We…” she put her hand to the bridge of her nose and shook her head. “Dammit. We have no way to do that, do we?”

“Zod was the one with the soul sense,” Squeaky said. “That’s the only thing I think would really work in this place. Not that even that would tell you much, given the mess of directions…”

“I need to find Sunny,” Jane said. “If there’s one psychotic Pinkie out there, there might be worse things.”

“I bet Rick’s here!” Brute blurted.

“Lovely,” Jane muttered.

Sweetie spoke up. “…Psychotic Pinkie? Is that a common thing?”

Squeaky frowned. “It’s… more common than a lot of other variants. Most Pinkies are happy party ponies, don’t you worry.”

“Something worries me though,” Allure said. “She had a bomb mask. Only our Pinkie has that mask, as far as I know.”


“Maybe,” Squeaky said. “Or maybe she stole it. We already know Flutterfree is here, Pinkie probably is as well.”

“Pinkie versus Pinkie smash fight!” Brute suggested.

Jane shook her head. “This is getting us nowhere. We need to do something.”

“Walk around until we find others?” Squeaky suggested. “That’s all I’ve got right now.”

Jane curled her hand into a fist.

“It’s not ideal,” Allure admitted. “But… I really don’t think we have many other options, unless we want to see what happens when we let ourselves fall for eternity.”

“Pass,” Sweetie decreed.
Jane folded her arms, but nodded all the same. She started walking in a random direction, hopping onto a spiral-shaped ramp platform. The Sweeties followed after her.

Sweetie thought to herself while they continued on. They had an enemy right now – and that enemy was a Pinkie. Murderous, insane, and just plain terrifying. That was certainly bothering her, as was the fact that nobody even took a moment to think the explosion might have killed her. It was just accepted as fact that the Pinkie was still out there, probably hunting for them.

But there was a worse thought in her mind. That Pinkie was probably just like them, drawn here by force, from wherever she was in the multiverse. Whatever had brought them here, it was above that Pinkie. It was above all of them. And it hadn’t even shown its face. …If it even had such a thing.

“I am going to gut whoever’s done this,” Brute muttered to herself.

Sweetie turned to her gravelly-voiced counterpart. “What if they don’t have a physical form?”

“I’ll attach that Pinkie to my leg and then punch it.”

“…That’ll work?”

“Yep. …Probably. It’d do something.”

“Hey. Mind if I ask a question?”

“Not at all! Make it deep, personal, and juicy!”

Sweetie smirked. “Why are you so violent all the time?”

“It just feels right to smash the pulp of my enemies into the ground with a satisfying crunch!” Brute declared.

“I don’t think that’s it.”

Brute raised an eyebrow. She looked beyond Sweetie. “I grew up in a cheerful world without consequences. Equis Ultra Fast has some amazing problems with it, but it’s still a cheerful Equestria with lots of friends and random adventures. I wanted to dye capes with chicken blood, and nopony stopped me. Nopony ever stopped me. Out here, they think I’m useful. And it feels good to be useful, you know?”

Sweetie frowned. “I guess so. But don’t you ever think you’re a bit, I dunno, much?”

“Bah. No such thing. Liking the feel of the skulls of your enemies beneath your hooves is just fine! Muahahaha!”

Sweetie got the feeling she was supposed to be terrified of this version of herself, but she couldn’t bring herself to take Brute at face value. There was an air of… of absurdity about her. It was odd.

“INCOMING!” Allure shouted, snapping Sweetie out of her thoughts. In the relative distance, a large chunk of what appeared to be half of the Roman Coliseum was sailing toward them, spinning slightly.

Jane put her hand to her face. “…I see people on that thing.”

Squeaky took in a deep breath. “HEY! LOOK OVER HERE!” she shouted with the highest pitch she could manage, which was definitely shrill enough to shatter glass had it been around.
That got the attention of the people on the Coliseum fragment. “I see… Pinkie’s team!” Squeaky told them. “I think the-

Nova teleported herself, Vriska, Pinkie, Flutterfree, Renee, and a tied-up Jenny to the platform. Sweetie took a moment to look at them – Pinkie was indistinguishable from any other normal Pinkie she’d seen, but the others all had a defining feature. But it was more than just a red eye here, a hat there – she saw something in their eyes that she didn’t usually see in the versions she ran across. These ponies weren’t naïve, but they also weren’t beaten down by what they had seen. Sweetie had encountered both ponies who held simple lives, and ponies who had been forced into brutality and lost so much. These ponies… They still had joy.

A smile came to her face. She felt safe around them already.

Allure ran to Renee and hugged her. “Renee!”

“Oh, Sweetie! I guess you got dragged into this mess as well then?” She hugged her sister. “Don’t you worry, we’ll find a way out of this.”

“It’s not Sweetie anymore, sis! I chose a name!”

“Oho? Finally decided that you weren’t the Sweetie anymore?”

“Yeah. I’m Allure.” She tossed her mane back. “Fitting, right?”

Renee smirked coyly. “Indeed it is. Wherever did you get the idea?”

Allure pointed at Sweetie Belle. “From her. She’s the Sweetie Belle now. She’s been through a lot – traveling on her own across worlds.”

Renee walked to Sweetie Belle, smiling. “Hello, Sweetie Belle. I am Renee Jackson.”

“…Jackson? That’s… different.”

“Oh, I’m married dear. I understand that’s not that common.”

“Ooooh!” Sweetie perked up. “Who to?”

“A man you probably wouldn’t know. Daniel Jackson, archaeologist from a version of Earth.”


“What? There’s nothing wrong with that!”

“Oh, not like that!” Sweetie smiled nervously. “I met a Twilight who was interested in a human, last world I visited actually…”

Nova blinked. “A Twilight? Weird. Twilights seem to be the least likely out of all of us to actually hook up with anyone.”

“It’s just I’m used to thinking of ‘Rarity’ as…” She realized where she was going was probably a little insulting and stopped.

Renee put a hoof on Sweetie’s shoulder. “I know what you mean. All of us have changed out here, Sweetie. We definitely won’t be the ponies you remember. It’s one of the reasons we change our names. We all say it’s just practical, but it also represents that we’re different now. That we’re no longer ‘standard’.”
Sweetie nodded. “I see. I suppose I have only seen you married once, to Blueblood.”

“What!?” Renee shouted, aghast.

“He was much nicer in that universe!”

“I would assume so, if he actually lived up to my standards. Anyway, you’d like Daniel, though I don’t think he’s here. He had no reason to leave the Hub, so no chance to intercept one of his translations…” Her cheerful demeanor lessened slightly as her thoughts drifted to her husband.

Flutterfree walked up to them. “We’ll get you back to him, don’t you worry.”

Sweetie felt something come from Flutterfree and touch her – touch her real self. What lay behind the appearance of a simple unicorn. The façade fell instantly – and Sweetie froze as her inner, very private self was exposed for all present to see.

She was made of crystal, in creality – her hair was quartz, her coat was shimmering. Her eyes were solid orbs of rock and little dots of obsidian speckled her body, mostly on her legs.

She knew they could all see. But she couldn’t move – she just stood, emotionally frozen, unable to think due to the sudden shock.

“So beautiful…” Renee said, a hoof to her mouth.

Vriska took action. She pulled Flutterfree back. “Stay away from her.”

“Wh- Why?” Flutterfree asked. “She’s so-”

“I said back off,” Vriska said, leaning down to be eye level with Sweetie, the illusion of a normal unicorn slowly returning to her. They just stared at each other, silent, for a full minute, while the rest of Pinkie’s team, the Sweeties, and Jane just watched.

“What did they call them?” Vriska asked, voice soft. “In the world you were in.”

“…Changelings,” Sweetie said, voice haunted.

Vriska nodded. “The one I spent time in called us the changed. Simpler, but a bit more demeaning.”

“You’re changed too?”

Vriska shook her head. “No… They couldn’t break me. I was too defiant.”

“How’d you survive?”

“I’m conditionally immortal. I can only die if the death is Heroic or Just in some way. Being killed by a slave-master demonic being for being defiant is neither. They really wanted to kill me, but not even the Beast himself could. So instead of changing… I was subject to every death imaginable.”

“I can’t tell if that’s worse or better.”

“It was a tradeoff,” Vriska said. “Though I don’t have a permanent bodily change to remind me… constantly.”

“How’d you get out?”

“My Twilight saved me. The one I was traveling with.” Her eyes gained a distance to them. “She…”
She couldn’t take the horrors of that world. She evacuated as many as she could without the Beast finding out, but the moment he did…” Vriska sagged. “She destroyed that universe.”

There were a few gasps from the audience. Sweetie and Vriska didn’t hear them. Sweetie just looked right into Vriska’s eyes. “I… I don’t blame her.”

“Doesn’t make it right,” Vriska said. “She beat herself up about it for so long afterward. There were happy, normal people in that world, still. But… We didn’t have the power to destroy the Beast with any other method. …And as you can probably guess, we found that there was definitely more than one version of the Beast out there. That world… That world type is not unique.”

Sweetie hugged the troll, a few tears rolling down her face. “It’s… so cruel out there, sometimes.”

“I know,” Vriska said. “But we have to watch. To make sure we aren’t the source of the cruelty. … Gog knows, I’ve certainly been the source of too much…”

“You’re a good person,” Sweetie insisted. “I can tell.”

“You met me two minutes ago,” Vriska deadpanned.

“And the first thing you did was talk to me. That’s good, Vriska.”

Vriska smirked. “Well then, I guess I’ll take it! Vriska, best empathizer ever!”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

Vriska shrugged. “I’ll take what I can get.” She turned to Flutterfree. “She won’t feel comfortable being revealed, Flutterfree, even though we’ve already seen.”

“I… I know,” Flutterfree said, sagging. “I… I want to hug you and say I’m sorry, Sweetie.”

“Not your fault,” Sweetie said, wiping her face. “I understand. Whatever you did, it’s automatic, isn’t it?”

Flutterfree nodded. “I’m still sorry.”

“You’re forgiven. Try not to worry about it, okay? Just… I’d like to look like a pony.”

Flutterfree nodded. “Yes, of course, wouldn’t dream of doing that again.”

Allure walked up to Sweetie and smiled. “And just for the record, none of us care what you are or what you’ve been through. You’re still Sweetie Belle.”

Sweetie smiled. “Thanks. …Anyway, I have a question. Why’s that woman tied up?”

Everyone glanced at Jenny. “Oh, her,” Renee said. “She’s a bit of a ruffian who was largely responsible for trying to erase us from time. Not exactly evil per se, but we can’t exactly trust her.”

Jenny grunted. “Try to erase universes from time once and you get it held against you for the rest of your life…”

Jane raised an eyebrow, speaking for the first time in a while. “Erasing universes from time? You expect it not to be held against you?”

“Well when you put it like that it sounds unrealistic.”
“It is unrealistic! What kind of person does that for… for… Why did they do it?”

“They were hired,” Nova answered.

“FOR MONEY!”

Jenny sighed. “Can we move on?”

“Sure!” Pinkie said. “Ahem. So, we’ve all been meeting other dimensional travelers, and have clearly been brought here against our will. Some of us have been separated from others, and really want to get back to them. There’s also a few unsavory types walking around, including a psychotic version of me.”

Sweetie blinked. “How’d you know that? You weren’t there! We didn’t mention her yet!”

Pinkie turned to Sweetie and smiled. “You’ve met more than a few Pinkies in your travels, right? Don’t we seem… unique, most often?”

“How so?”

Pinkie smirked. “Oh, say, being able to do different things in a nested time loop, despite every other pony following a predictable pattern.”

Sweetie’s jaw dropped. “How…?”

“The how is such a big secret that not even my friends know – yet. But it’s still good to realize it. Pinkies tend to know things. Sometimes it’s nothing more than a sixth sense, but often it’s a lot more.” She winked. “Most of us don’t make a big deal about it, but out here, well, it helps a lot. So make sure to remember this – if you’re in a universe where you think ponies won’t believe you, or where ponies think you’re a threat, try the local Pinkie Pie. There’s a chance she just knows. Consider it a tip.”

Sweetie grinned. “Thanks! That’s a- wait. You’re telling me this for a reason, aren’t you?”

Pinkie smiled sadly. “Yeah. We’re not going to be able to get you home or help you on your journey today. You’ve still got a song of your own that’s been interrupted by this – you’ll have to get back to it.”

“Oh…”

“But, I can give you something! Bring out your notebookbook!”

“How do- nevermind.” Sweetie rolled her eyes. She lit her horn and pulled her book out of her pocket dimension. The journal, record, and holder of many objects was encrusted with numerous magic spells and crystals. Sweetie flipped it open to a blank page.

Pinkie pulled a pen out and scribbled a bunch of numbers and sequences on the sheet. “If you ever get access to a dimensional device of any kind, Sweetie, the stuff on these pages should let you find our world, Equis Vitis, or the Hub.”

Sweetie looked at it. “I don’t understand any of this.”

“Yeah, you probably won’t. But anyone who knows about dimensional devices should be able to use it to get you here. I don’t think you’ll find anything like that until after or near the end of your quest. But after that, come by and say hello when we’re… Not trapped in a big blue aurora thing!”
“Oh!” Allure called. “And we can look for any fragments of your Twilight for you! Save you the
trouble of finding a few of them, if we can!”

Sweetie looked at the notebook, circled the page with the dimensional coordinates and theory on it,
and put it away. Then she beamed. “Thanks. A lot. Any other tips for my journey, anyone?”

Jane spoke up. “Find someone special.”

Sweetie smiled. “Yeah… I don’t think I’ll be hunting for that. I never get to stay around very long, or
bring anyone with me. But thanks.”

“What are we all giving her advice for?” Brute blurted. “We’re not done yet! We’re still stuck here!
We gotta do something!”

“Might not have had time for it later,” Pinkie said. “This was the best moment.”

“So you know why we’re here?” Sweetie asked.

“No,” Pinkie said, twitching slightly. “No idea. And that really bugs me. I’m aware of lots of people
who are here, and that Eve isn’t here and doing something fun elsewhere, but the reason eludes me.
Maybe the other me knows.”

“Capture a Pinkie…” Vriska mused. “That’s going to be difficult.”

“No doubt!” Pinkie said. “No, I don’t know why she has the bomb mask either. I just know she’s
here, somewhere. And out for blood.”

“Then we gotta stop her,” Allure said.

“Yeah!” Sweetie cheered.

“Everyone, prepare yourselves!” Pinkie said. “Joint mission find-out-what’s-going-on-and-capture-
other-Pinkie is A-GO! THIS WAY!” She bounced along more of the stone rocks, a big grin on her
face.

Sweetie decided she liked this Pinkie, and no longer felt confused as to why she was in charge. It just
seemed right.

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Brutalight Sparcake had left the Sparkle Census Orientation tour the moment she found an
opportunity. The sooner she became unpredictable, the less likely Charter-Twilight – or Eve,
apparently – was to be able to trace her the moment she realized she’d been duped. Someone would
check Nautica eventually and find she wasn’t there… And she couldn’t allow herself to be caught.

Her first plan had been to wait until she got her dimensional token and bookmark, but she’d scanned
the tokens other Twilights had – one-person only. That was not helpful in her mission to free
Nautica, nor did it help her get to any other universe. So she’d bailed and begun her search for some
other method. The tokens were clearly just regulated dimensional devices – they had to have more
complex things around.

And since this was a collection of millions of Twilights, one thing in particular was easy to find.

Information.

Brutalight had no doubt there were a few government secrets around, but she also knew that
something as fundamental to this world’s existence as dimensional travel wouldn’t be covered up. So she was currently on the lookout for a library.

And Celestia, was she enjoying herself. The urge deep within her to kill had been forgotten momentarily. She was just elated by what she was seeing and smelling. Masses of purple moved to and from hundreds upon hundreds of buildings that went on for miles. The soft artificial light above everything… The buildings built with such perfect mathematics… The way everypony just knew where they were going and how to run a city structure smoothly… It was amazing. It looked like how a city should look. A restaurant here, a theater there, and bookstores. Bookstores everywhere.

Oh, and the smell. Not only did it not smell like endless seawater, but it also smelled like books. Freshly printed, ancient, magical… Every flavor of book. She was in heaven right now.

Despite her unusual color scheme, few Twilights paid her any mind. She was just another variant among millions. They weren’t rude – merely uninterested, or trying not to get themselves confused. Which worked for Brutalight since she didn’t want to be noticed. But she sure noticed other Twilights. A white one with a fiery mane. A hydra. What appeared to be a fusion between Twilight, Sunset, and Starlight. She could have sworn she even saw a pony with her color scheme, making her ruse back in the paperwork room much more credible.

She smirked – this just got better and better. They would never be able to find her now. And her luck was only increasing, because she finally saw something that wasn’t a bookstore, but a library. There was a sign that said no checkout, read-in only, but Brutalight didn’t mind. She knew spells for quick information absorption.

She walked right in, a smile on her face. It, for once in her life, wasn’t a fake smile – she really was giddy about what she was going to find in here. The librarian Twilight – a deer – saw her and grinned back. “New, I take it?”

“Yes. And I want to learn everything I can.”


The deer whistled. “You’re going to be here a while. All of shelf 3B is on that. It’s why I had to stop checkouts – too many Twilights demanded to keep the books forever.”

“I can imagine,” Brutalight said, tapping her hooves together. “Thanks!”

“Don’t mention it!”

It occurred to Brutalight that she had actually said thanks. Great Celestia, her mood must have been through the roof. She decided she didn’t have any problems with this at the moment. She walked up to shelf 3B, making a cursory inspection of titles. A thick, purple volume entitled Dimensional Magical Theory called out to her. She took it, went to a table, and started reading, caring little that there were two dozen other Twilights at nearby tables doing the same thing.

The information was absolutely fascinating, and it described numerous methods for dimensional travel, most involving some sort of device, but she did eventually find what she was looking for. A spell for dimensional travel that worked on ‘picturing the universe you want to go to’. It cost an absolute ton of magic, a bit more than she thought she had on her right now, but with a little magical scamming it would be doable. Except…

For the first time she found information she didn’t like. The personal dimensional spell was
prohibited by the ‘arcane lattice’ that permeated the entire Sparkle Census. Only spellcasters with a specific license could use it. They didn’t want just any-Twilight getting a hold of the secrets to unhindered dimensional travel, did they? Well, there had to be ways around this. The tokens may not have been exploitable, but there were surely other things…

She pulled her letter out again. Just like the tokens, the spell in it was personal and only worked for one universe. But… These letters had to be given to new Twilights somehow, didn’t they?

Brutalight closed up the huge purple tome and placed it back on its shelf. She did a bit more inspection and found the book she needed – *Dimensional Application in the Sparkle Census*. She skipped the parts about employment, the cycle of universes, and duplicate differentiation. She did stop to read the part about how the time dilation for the Sparkle Census was so extreme that, once you left, it would be like no time had passed. Apparently this universe had been chosen as the location for the Census because of that very fact. Curious.

But not what she needed. She needed to read about the letters. There it was – the letters ran on a machine deep in the Sparkle Census called the Examail Center, or just X-mail. The device was exceedingly complicated and the inner workings weren’t exactly public knowledge, but the book described the basics. The X-mail Center had a highly complicated ‘grinder’ device beneath it that always looked for new universes, and universes connected to those universes, and so on and so forth. Each universe it found had a ‘magic probe’ sent into it, that would search the space for a Twilight, while the few universes that didn’t allow magic were catalogued for personal visitations by exploration teams. The ‘probe’ would recognize Twilights and request a letter from the X-mail Center, which would then use its immense magical power to teleport the letter to her location. The probe could take eons to search an entire universe, and didn’t stop after finding a single Twilight, but given the sheer number of universes it was searching and the tendency for Twilights to cluster in certain locations, it worked just fine.

Brutalight’s evil smirk returned, replacing the simple joyous grin she’d had but a few minutes ago. This grinder device, the one that found new universes. It was in the X-mail center. She could hitch a ride with one of the letters, then use the spell she had just learned to travel anywhere she wanted.

She put the book back on the shelf and walked out of the library. The librarian spoke up. “Have a nice day!”

Brutalight ignored her. Who had time for pleasantries? She had a mission.

~~~

The other half of the League of Sweetie Belles – Thrackerzod, Bot, Suzie, and Burger – had a group of their own elsewhere. After the explosion they had found themselves with Sunny and Gilgamesh, and since then they had picked up two other dimensional travelers.

“So, how many of you did you say there were?” Suzie asked the pair.

The human Twilight and Sunset pair smiled. Twilight put on her ‘explaining’ face and answered. “The Sunlight Slider phenomenon is almost a ‘law’ of the multiverse. We’ve run into no less than a dozen different pairs on our journeys. Some of them are romantic; some aren’t. Some of them are lost; some are traveling just because they can. The fact is, there’s a lot of us, and I’m surprised you haven’t run into any before this big mess of ours.”

“Curious,” Thrackerzod said. “From our experience, Twilight is the least likely one to hook up with anyone.”
“Eh, that might just be pony Twilight,” Sunset commented. “They’re not immune, but I do see more humans than ponies out here.”

Sunny spoke up. “I met a pair of Sunlight Sliders. Me and Jane, that is. The amount of sappy things that left those two’s mouths put us to shame.”

“Yeeeeeah, sorry about that,” Twilight apologized. “Some of us get a bit overbearing.”

Sunset snorted. “You could say that.”

“DIIIISGUSTING!” Burger droned.

Gilgamesh pointed at the youngest member of the group. “This girl knows what’s up.”

Burger beamed with pride. “Yes!”

Suzie facepalmed. “Ugh…”

Thrackerzod stopped short. “Something’s coming.”

“The Pinkie you guys mentioned?” Sunset asked.

“No,” Thrackerzod said. “I’m getting a very distinctive eldritch feeling. Be on guard.”

Gilgamesh drew his halberd and a gigantic pistol. “I’m always on guard.”

“Sure it won’t be something like you?” Sunny asked Thrackerzod. “Maybe it will be the Thrackerzod I know. She’s an Evermore traveller too, like us.”

“I would recognize a signature derivative of my own. This is not it.”

“LOOK OVER HERE!” an overly chipper voice yelled. The loud individual was a tall, humanoid creature with four arms. She had two large fuchsia wings that matched the color of the carapace on every inch of her body. Two yo-yos hung from her hands, and her six eyes were the only features on her otherwise flat face. “HIII!”

“FEF!” Thrackerzod blurted. “What in the name of Azathoth are you doing here?”

“Distracting you,” a deeper, authoritative voice droned. Thrackerzod cast an attack spell behind herself without looking, but it was too late – the bug-demon chief Siron had already extended his staff at Thrackerzod. The staff latched onto Thrackerzod, pulling at her existence. Her eyes lost the deep fire they had to them, and the intense red aura of her magic vanished, replaced with the soft green most Sweetie Belles had.

Thrackerzod fell to the ground, breathing heavily. “W-WHAT DID YOU DO!”

Siron raised two of his hands into the air, keeping the other two held tightly onto his staff. “I took all the eldritch energy within you. I half expected you to be an empty shell when I was complete, but it turns out that I was wrong.”

Thrackerzod tried to kill him with a death spell – but only a soft green spark left her horn. She stared at her horn in disbelief.

“Stand back!” Sweetie Bot shouted, standing in front of Thrackerzod. “I’ll protect you!”

Twilight, Sunset, Sunny, and Gilgamesh readied for battle while Suzie leaned down to protect
“I do not know who you are,” Siron decreed. “But know this staff contains much more power than what was stored within that filly. If you let me take all the Sweetie Belles with me, I won’t harm any of you.”

“Buck that,” Sunset said, readying herself. “I’ve g-”

Sunset’s reward for talking first was a green and red beam that tore a hole through her chest, disintegrating her heart in an instant.

She tried to speak, but found she couldn’t. She slumped to the ground.

This predictably sent her Twilight into a rage. A purple sawblade construct flew at Siron, but he was able to deflect it with his own magic. Gilgamesh and Bot moved as one, firing their guns without holding back. Siron’s staff acted, erecting a black wall of tentacles not unlike what Thrackerzod would create in a similar situation.

Fef leaped into action for her chief, swinging her yo-yos wide. One hit Bot to no effect, but the other wrapped around Twilight’s neck and slit her jugular. She tried to howl in pain, but only gurgled, managing to stumble to where Sunset had fallen.

Siron didn’t even let her have a moment, crushing her neck with his magic.

Sunny finished casting a complicated spell. A lattice of amber crystals appeared around Siron, pointing their sharpest edges right at him. They flew at him from all directions. Siron figured out with some difficulty that the projectiles were telekinesis resistant.

He had to use his staff to protect himself, a burst of black surrounding him and devouring all the amber shards. Gilgamesh took the moment to attack, bringing his halberd down on Siron’s head. Siron used one of his free hands to catch and break the handle of the weapon.

“How in…?”

“MISSILE LOCKED!” Bot yelled, firing off a missile that should not have been able to fit in her tiny body. Sunny infused it with explosive fire.

Gilgamesh got in on the fun – despite the disaster last time he had used the spell, he did it again. “Flare.”

Siron was engulfed in heat and fire, his entire form no longer visible to the attackers.

“…What was he?” Sunny asked, bewildered.

“Dunno,” Gilgamesh said, throwing a boomerang at Fef without looking now that he no longer had a better opponent to face. She fell flat on the ground, tangled in her own weapons. “I do know there was no wa-”

Siron’s fist flew out of the clearing flames, punching a hole through his neck. Gilgamesh fell backward, lifeless.

Siron stepped out of the flames, staff held in one of his higher hands. Green, red, and black energy coursed through many cracks in his crimson carapace, giving him the appearance of something held together by neon lights.
Sweetie Bot froze in fear. He had clearly been damaged – but all the cracks they’d made were just filled. It was as if nothing had been accomplished.

Sunny didn’t let this deter her. If fire wouldn’t do it, perhaps a multi-elemental blast. She put everything she had into a concussive force of ice, lightning, earth, and a mixture of other powers.

The staff summoned a black shield that absorbed everything. Siron levitated Sunny into the air with his red telekinesis. “I don’t know who you are. I don’t know who any of you are. But you stood in my way. And you…” He pointed his staff at her. “Like Thrackerzod, you have something in you.”

“Don’t you dare!” Thrackerzod shouted. Then her eyes widened – her voice wasn’t deep. She sounded like a normal Sweetie Belle.

Siron ignored her, pulling the energy from Sunny. “Something interesting in there… a dimensional power that does not come from within you or without… Something beyond…” he laughed. “Exactly what this Juju is meant to control.”

Sunny felt something at the core of her being vanish. She knew in an instant that her innate ability to translate to other universes had just been removed.

“Why?!” She yelled. “Why do this?!”

“Because I need hostages,” Siron declared. “People love Sweetie Belles. They always want to save them.” He narrowed his eyes. “Goodbye, Sunset.”

“Wh-”

In an instant, Sunny had a hole where her heart used to be. Impossible. I had all the defenses up. I...

Siron’s staff flashed an evil dark color. There was much more in there besides just Thrackerzod’s power. Much more.

The last thing Sunny saw was Siron rounding up the four Sweetie Belles. All four, terrified, broken, scarred…

What did Siron need hostages for!?!

~~~

There were precisely four individuals trapped in the blue aurora that hadn’t been encountered yet by anyone but each other. These four had become fast friends, though two had already known each other prior.

Their names? Star Butterfly, Marco Diaz, Ditzy Doo, and Jenny Everywhere.

Their appearances? Blonde teenage girl with heart blush stickers. Teenage boy with simple red hoodie and hair. Gray-skinned human with feathers on her neck. A woman who could only be described as the ‘everyman’ made female.

Star waved her wand at Jenny. “So you’re telling me you’re, like, everywhere?”

“Versions of me, anyway,” Jenny said. “It’s in the name. I’m everywhere. I’m pretty sure a universe that one of me hasn’t visited at some point is beyond rare.”

“And you’re sure you don’t need dimensional scissors to travel?” Marco asked, holding up his pair of scissors. He tried again to cut the fabric of space-time. Nothing happened.
Jenny nodded. “Yep. I’m what I call a shifter. I just slip through the cracks of worlds – sometimes without meaning to. It’s a little disorienting, but also a lot of fun!”

“And you’ve neeeever seen a place like this?” Star asked.

“Nope,” Jenny said, shaking her head. “I mostly tour Earths though.”

“Earth, best world,” Marco said, smirking.

“Hmph,” Star commented, folding her arms. “Mewni is better.”

“Jenny, as the resident ‘Everywhere’, what do you think about Mewni?”

“Never been,” Jenny said. “It’s not a standard world.”

Star gasped. “That just means it’s something special!”

“I’ve been,” Ditzy said. “It was brief. I had corn thrown at me. I still don’t know why.”

Marco smirked. “But Earth is, according to the illustrious Everywhere, the most common world. So it’s special as well.”

Star folded her arms. “Or just like pennies in the multiversal purse!”

“…Odd metaphor.”

“I know!”

“It’s nice to have some regularity,” Ditzy offered.

“Didn’t your world suddenly change one day? Or did I hear that wrong?” Jenny asked.

Ditzy rubbed the feathers on the back of her head. “Yeah, that’s why I said it would be nice. I don’t really get a lot of regularity. Just a lot of bouncing around, magic transformations, and insanity. Lots of insanity.”

“Sounds fun!” Star chirped.

“It can be.”

“Hey, what’s that up ahead?” Jenny asked, pointing at the next platform, one shaped like a cross. There was some kind of fuzzy pink lump sitting on it.

“Dunno,” Star said smiling. “It’s pink though! I want it!”

Marco threw his hands in the air. “Star, we don’t know what this thing is! It’s the first thing we’ve seen since we’ve gotten here besides Jenny!”

“It’s a Pinkie,” Ditzy offered. “…Maybe. Something seems off.”

Jenny, to her credit, didn’t engage with her companions. She slowly walked up to the pink fluffy thing, curiously looking at it. It looked like a horse… But it was a little small.

The pink pony looked up at her with deep blue eyes.

“Why hello there!” Jenny said, smiling. “Are you lost too?”
"Yeah."

"THAT PONY JUST TALKED!" Star cheered. "Best! Day! Ever!"

Ditzy looked at her, suddenly struck with the realization that she was the sane one in this group.

Jenny kneeled down, taking the pony’s talking in stride. "What’s your name?"

"Pinkie Pie."

"Well, Pinkie, we’re going to find a way out of this mess," Jenny said softly. "Do you want to come with us?"

Pinkie ignored the question. "Have you ever heard of the One Steve Limit?"

"What?"

"Oh, it’s just a thing to follow. To avoid confusion."

Jenny raised an eyebrow. "I don’t see-"

Pinkie pulled a sword out of her mane and drove it right through Jenny’s skull. The psychotic pink pony let out a sigh of relief. "Ah... That’s better." She removed the sword and tossed Jenny’s body into the blue aurora below. She turned to Star, Marco, and Ditzy. "So! Who wants to go on a-"

"SPIDER WITH A TOP HAT!" Star yelled. The wand in her hand surged, summoning forth a small spider with a top hat on it.

Pinkie didn’t wait for the top hat to turn into a laser-shooting gatling-gun like she knew it would. She leaped off the edge of the platform after Jenny’s body, laughing the entire time she was within their auditory range.

Marco, Star, Ditzy, and Spider With a Top Hat just stared down into the abyss; long after the pink pony had vanished.

~~~

Eve, Cosmo, and the Grand Secretariat stood in front of a giant television screen located deep within the Sparkle Census.

"This is... well, we just call it the Display," the Grand Secretariat said. "We can use it to communicate with other universes, anywhere in the database."

"How’s it work?" Eve asked.

"Opens a tiny portal, enough to send a small spark spell through. It latches onto that spell and broadcasts image signals through it, allowing a display to appear on the other end without actually having a screen. It sends images back as well, all the while making sure the extreme time-difference is compensated for with its own dilation spell. Useful for talking to Twilights that may live in extreme environments."

"I can imagine," Cosmo said. "Starlight, upload the coordinates of the Ninth World to the Display."

"Done," the AI chirped.

The Grand Secretariat blinked. "...I would have preferred to know you had an artificial intelligence
“on your person prior to this moment.”

“Just a Starlight in here living the dream,” Starlight responded.

“…Fair enough.” The Grand Secretariat lit her horn, accessing the inner workings of the Display. “Anything I should expect?”

“Some girl named Jenny,” Eve said. “She should be easy to deal with and direct you to the University itself. If they don’t detect the display, we can always turn on a beacon, make them think we’re trying to claim this universe. That’ll get their attention.”

The Display fizzled to life, showing an image that was unmistakably the Beanstalk of the Ninth World – a tremendous space elevator that housed an entire city at its base. Humans were the most common race, but any number of completely alien forms could be seen walking at the edges.

After nothing happened for a few seconds, Cosmo gave the beacon code to the Display. Instantly, a troop of Dracogen soldiers appeared around the Display.

“Ah! Hello, Dracogen Enterprises!” Eve said, smiling. “This is the Grand Secretariat Twilight Sparkle of the Sparkle Census. She wishes to speak with the University of Doors.”

The leader of the troop, a red fish-skinned man, made a call, calling it a “Code P-9.” A second later, a holographic image appeared of a bizarre creature made of a synthetic, papery material coming out of a cubic interface. Blue lights flashed on the ‘face’ of the cube.

That’s YVND, Eve sent to the Grand Secretariat’s mind. Not part of the University directly.

YVND spoke. “Why should I direct you to them?”

“Because I want a second opinion,” the Grand Secretariat said. “Right now, the only stories I have about the University come from these mares, and as I believe you know they aren’t very positive ones.”

YVND nodded. “Very well. I shall patch you directly to the Headstone. I do not expect the conversation to be long.” The hologram faltered, buzzing with static for a few seconds before coalescing into a new form – that of a five-limbed robot wafting with glowing blue magic.

Looks like the Headstone has changed.

“A new society, hrn?” the robotic being chirped.

“Yes, I am the-”

“I got all the information already, no need to repeat yourself. You call yourselves the Sparkle Census?”

“Yes.”

“There are no Twilight Sparkles here, so you are of no concern to us. Do you wish to distinguish your beacons from the Charter’s?”

The Grand Secretariat raised an eyebrow. “Yes?”

“Send the desired frequency over now so we may determine which worlds are under your purview, and which ones are ours. Any overlaps are first-come first-serve. We will let you have any such worlds for the next month unless we find reason for dispute. Is this all?”
“I was hoping to open relations…”

“The University does not need to interfere with the affairs of other multiversal societies. It is a mistake the previous Headstone made, not a mistake I plan to repeat. We will stay out of each other’s way. Goodbye, Grand Secretariat.” The feed cut.

“Is that all you wanted?” YVND asked, appearing on the feed again.

“No, but it’ll do,” the Grand Secretariat answered. “I don’t suppose you have anything to say?”

“At the moment, no. I will create a more formal method by which to communicate. A line to the Dracogen communication center is being transmitted to you. Use that to get our attention next time, you sent us into high alert.”

Eve raised an eyebrow. “Does that apply to us as well?”

“Yes, it does,” YVND decreed. “Though I can’t see why you would want to talk with us. Now please disconnect, whatever you’re doing to adjust for the temporal dissonance is blowing out the sensors in this universe.”

“Apologies,” the Grand Secretariat said. “Different methods will be used from now on.”

“See that it they are.” YVND vanished. The Grand Secretariat shut the Display off.

“They were… cheery,” she commented.

Eve shrugged. “They weren’t as angry as I was expecting. I guess that’s what new leadership does. I think they explicitly didn’t want us contacting them again last time.”

The Grand Secretariat raised an eyebrow. “Was I being used as an excuse to dance around a treaty?”

Cosmo smirked. “Perhaps.”

“Wait, what?” Eve shook her head. “…Cosmo, why did you not let me in on that part of the reasoning behind this?”

“You might have objected,” Cosmo said. “Besides, now we have communications and a ‘treaty’ between the University and Sparkle Census. Worked out for everyone involved.”

“…Huh. Sorry, Grand Secretariat.”

“It is no issue,” she responded. “We are all known for using occasional underhanded tactics to get a desired result. The art of simply not saying something is an ancient and powerful one.”

“I’ll say,” Eve agreed. “Or, if you’re Pinkie, say a million things that have nothing to do with the secret.”

“Or any number of other random methods.”

“That, in and of itself, is a method…”

“True,” the Grand Secretariat said, summoning a book she had just been reminded of. “This reminds me, do you have a working Pinkie theory of any kind?”

“What do you mean?” Eve asked.
“Why they are so different. So energetic. So beyond physics…”

“Well, my Pinkie admitted that she knows things, but she also said she can’t tell me why or how.”

The Grand Secretariat blinked. “…That’s rare. Most Pinkies won’t even admit they have something different about them. Tell me more.”

Eve smiled. “Our Pinkie seems standard, at first, but when you get to the meat of it…”

~~~

Thrackerzod couldn’t think.

That wasn’t true. She could think. On the level of a simple organic being.

She no longer had the backup methods of information access stored in her eldritch nature. She had no memories that she didn’t form with this body. She had no power. She knew she was Thrackerzod, ‘high’ demon in service of Azathoth and the Eldritch Embodiment. But she could no longer comprehend what that meant.

She was nothing but an organic mind. If she had memories of the Embodiment, she would go crazy. The thought that her home was now toxic to her was horrifying.

She knew how to get her powers back – a simple circle and a dimensional device could tap her soul into Azathoth’s nature again. But she couldn’t do that in this place. In this place she was just a plain unicorn, barely more than a filly, who could scarcely comprehend what was going on around her.

Who spent all her time trying to realize her place in existence, but shying away because her true nature was impossible for her current self to comprehend.

She realized with some horror that she was probably going to be driven mad by this simple paradox of memory.

Was this what others felt when she confronted them?

She wished she could remember what she confronted them with…

She started crying.

Bot glanced at Thrackerzod. She was so out of it she had to be carried by Suzie. “…Is she going to be okay?” Bot asked, having long since stopped trying to get a response out of the completely normal unicorn.

“I… I don’t know,” Suzie said, sighing. She turned to Burger, who wasn’t doing much better – barely able to walk behind Siron in her tearful state. All of them were.

Thrackerzod was dimly aware of this. If only we had a hamburger. All our problems would be solved.

Suzie hefted Thrackerzod. “Come on… Allure and Squeaky are gone Zod… You’re the one who knows what to do…”

“Your leaders are scrambled,” Siron said. “Take charge yourself.”

Suzie glared. “Not everyone is a warrior, Siron.”
“Everyone should be,” Siron responded. “And soon, everyone will see that.”

“How? What are you going to do?”

“…You’re not as terrified of me as you look,” Siron said. “Trying to get information about my plans from me? That’s not something a scared girl does. That’s something a clever mind does.” He turned to face her. “But you aren’t a warrior of the mind. I can see it in those eyes of yours, girl. You hesitate. Flinch.”

Suzie couldn’t meet his eyes.

“Thrackerzod was a proud warrior,” Siron continued. “Unflinching. Able to act even after she had been broken, for a time. That is the kind of person you should become to survive – or, if not that, to have honor.”

“Yeah!” Fef emphasized, lessening the threatening nature of Siron’s speech considerably. “We’ve gotta stand strong!”

Siron, despite this cheery interruption, seemed to find it fitting. “Yes, Fef. As you can see, Suzie, there is more than one type of warrior. But what defines us is an unwavering urge to fight for ourselves and what we care for. Your pathetic willingness to give in for the sake of feelings and friendship… It cannot be tolerated.”

“Are you trying to convert me?” Suzie blurted.

“Perhaps. Or perhaps I just haven’t had someone who disagrees with me around as of late.”

“Yeah! Fl-”

“Fef, say nothing,” Siron said. “Our plans need to remain completely secret, there is some chance they get something out.”

Fef nodded. “Right. Sorry, Siron.”

“Just be more careful,” Siron stated. “All we need to discuss with them and those around us is how to get out of this place.”

“I was beginning to think you had caused this, somehow,” Suzie muttered.

“Just another one in the trap,” Siron muttered. “Since walking around and exploring has done nothing, the purpose of this place – if there is such a thing – is to meet the others trapped here. I think there may be two dozen or so here. The answer is either for us all to meet up and work together – or for there to be a last man standing in a conflict.”

“A game?” Suzie said. “What kind of game is this?”

“I don’t know,” Siron answered, narrowing his eyes. “And depending on who the designer is, the way of the warrior may not be the way to win. Which is why you live.”

“Leverage.”

“Yes.”

Suzie paused. “…You know there’s a chance this is just some ancient universe left behind by an unknown civilization that acts on its own. Doing things just for the sake of doing it. There may be no reason.”
“If that is the case, we are likely doomed,” Siron stated. “No one here has the resources to analyze the universe from the inside out… I saw that Doctor. He had tried.”

“The Doctor’s here?”

“And several other geniuses. Rick, for one. They’re stuck as well,” Siron clutched his staff. “The world we are in is beyond them.”

“…You respect this place, don’t you?” Suzie blurted.

“It has all of us trapped. We are powerless,” Siron elaborated. “Of course I admire something that is this effective against everyone in it. If there is a being behind this, it has power. Perhaps not honor, but a warrior’s instinct.”

“Or it’s just bored,” Bot suggested.

Everyone stopped in their tracks.

“What?”

Siron took in a breath. “The machine has a point.”

Fef blinked. “She does?”

“If you had unparalleled power… Wouldn’t you be bored? And just start doing things to break the monotony?”

“Totally!”

Siron put a hand to his face. “This could be problematic… If the only reason we are here is to ‘see what happens’.”

Silence fell over the two demons and their four prisoners. They kept walking, on the lookout for anything, anything at all. There was nothing.

Thrackerzod opened her eyes and looked up at Suzie. She managed to choke out two words.

“I’m sorry.”

The soft, gentle voice was too much. Suzie started crying after such a long time keeping it in.

Siron didn’t stop her. He didn’t even chide her.

~~~

Sparky, Twiree, and Twix sat in one of the Sparkle Census’s many Hayburgers. This particular one was run by an earth pony Twilight who had mastered the art of hoof-magic. Each and every burger was essentially a potion in a more substantial form. Sparky and Twix had ordered magic rejuvenation while Twiree had ordered Unlimited Energy Extreme. The other two were watching her cautiously, waiting for the insanity to kick in.

Twix took a bit of her hayburger and turned the page in a book she had just bought. “I have to say, that bookstore Twilight really knows how to give me a good read. I mean, mmm, I’m not a standard Twilight and this is just amazing.”

“That book’s enchanted to be interesting, I bet,” Sparky said. She looked out the window at the sea
of purple ponies walking around.

“You haven’t touched your food!” Twiree said, having already downed her burger… Without opening her mouth. Somehow.

“Not hungry,” Sparky said.

Twix sighed, closing her book. “Sparky, what’s up?”

“I need to be looking for Coro-”

“That isn’t it,” Twix said. “Everybody knows if that was really what’s bothering you, you would have left by now. But you’re still here.”

“I… I don’t know,” Sparky said. “Actually, I do. I just… When this all started, I was beyond excited to explore, to find out more, to make new friends, to learn. Now? I can’t stop hearing about… All the terrible things. There’s nuclear wasteland worlds. Worlds with horrendous creatures that torment every living thing. Versions of myself who have destroyed everything. And there’s all the secrets, pressure, and underhanded things.”

“It’s what has to be done in the face of all the darkness,” Twix said. “The magic of friendship doesn’t always work, you know, as much as we want it too. There are… other forces.”

Sparky put her chin in her hands and sighed. “I invented that dimensional device everyone holds now, or at least the theory behind it. Some days I wonder if I shouldn’t have done that. Just… Let the explorations remain just small explorations and not enable a society to form.”

“I don’t think that would have stopped it long.”

“Plus, you’ve done a lot of good!” Twiree said. “My universe wouldn’t have been freed without you! Many ruthless leaders have been deposed, evils sealed away, and the quality of life on virtually every world in the alliance has increased!”

Sparky shook her head. “And then there are horrible superweapons we can’t let anyone know about, deceptive stories about scientific procedures, things not said in order to keep the population in check, and political pressure to ensure cooperation. Gem Vein and Lai are riddled with these sorts of things. Yes, I get it, it’s needed, and I can’t think of an alternative to it. I just start thinking it’s not worth it… Or the multiverse is just evil, or something. Maybe that’s the real enemy, existence itself.”

“Could be,” Twix admitted. “Why not fight it directly then?”

“…I can’t do that,” Sparky admitted. “It requires… too much. Too many lies, too many deceptions, and I know there are people who get sent to their deaths.” She looked into the distance. “I miss the days where it was just me, Corona, and the girls, and it looked like nothing would change. But we got older… And the world changed drastically…” She shook her head. “I think I need to pull out of the game. Stop studying all the high-end science and just… become a librarian, or something. Live on Earth Vitis in a town where there’s little danger of an interdimensional incursion.”

“If that’s what you want. Some people are just more suited to settling down. Maybe raising a family.”

“W-who said anything about raising a family?!” Sparky said, flustered.

Twiree smirked. “Oooooh, listen to that stutter! Got somebody in mind, hrm…?”
“I… Er…”

Twix rolled her eyes. “Go easy on her, Twiree.”

Twiree deflated. “Aw…”

Twix looked out the window. “I think you should do it.”

Sparky blinked. “Hrm?”

“Look at all those Twilights out there. They could be out exploring the multiverse, using the resources of this place to discover bold, new things. But they aren’t Eve. They’re running hayburgers, shops, and above all opening bookstores. It seems like that’s what most Twilights want to do, apparently. Cool as all this is, most of them just don’t feel the drive Eve does.”

“I’m not Eve…” Sparky said, turning the thought over in her head. “I’m definitely not Eve.”

“No, duh,” Twiree said.

“We were different before we even met too,” Sparky wondered. “I think the Fluttershys were the only other ones like that. The rest… the same. I wonder why that is.”

“You going to run some experiments to find that out?” Twix asked.

“God, no,” Sparky laughed. “I’m pretty sure I am just going to become a librarian at this point. Not here, of course.”

“Of course.”

“Of course!” Twiree echoed, wanting to get in on the ‘repeat’ fun.

Sparky rolled her eyes. She grabbed her hayburger and took a bite. She took one chew before stopping short. She spat it out, gagging.

“Problem?” Twiree asked.

“That’s… not meat… I can’t believe I didn’t realize…”

Twiree and Twix started laughing. After Sparky stopped gasping she joined them.

~~~

“Plan…” Pinkie muttered to herself. “Nova, what’s my plan again?”


“There’s gotta be a better way to do this,” Jane muttered.

“If you want another goal, it’s to defeat the crazed Pinkie!” Allure suggested. “That’ll be nice!”

“I’ve got another side-quest,” Vriska suggested. “Find the Doctor and kick his teeth in.”

Renee turned to Vriska. “What did happen between you two?”

“Have you ever had a friend for years only to discover they were lying to you about basically everything?” Vriska asked. The rest of her team, Jane, and Jenny (still tied up) nodded. “It was like that. He was… one of the first people I traveled the multiverse with. I learned a lot from the asshole
about how things work. But I was always trying to get home. And he knew it. But he would never take me, and I had always assumed it was because he didn’t know where all the worlds were. But lo and behold, captain immortal asshole of time did know. And after that... I realized all the other things he’d done.”

“Oh?” Renee asked, egging her on to continue.

“I remembered... All the times he’d manipulated me to produce a specific reaction just because he wanted a particular outcome. All the times he talked me out of using my power because we had no ‘right’ to interfere. All the times he just demanded everything about him be a secret. All the times he’d walked away from a problem not because it was too big for him to handle, but because it wasn’t his business’. And then, like a complete hypocrite, all those times he let his emotions get the better of him and destroyed things. The man may not be a killer like myself, but he’s destroyed far more lives than I could ever hope to.”

“...Siron,” Flutterfree said. “That’s who I’m imagining right now.”

Nova nodded. “Yeah. He seemed... to always be there for us. Against Majora... And then it turned out he never was. He was always plotting.”

“And none of us could believe we didn’t see it sooner,” Renee said. “I think... I think we understand, Vriska. The pain.”

Flutterfree nodded. “I don’t think the Doctor’s a Siron though... I think he’s just misguided.”

“Couldn’t you say Siron’s just misguided, in a different way though?” Allure suggested.

Pinkie spoke up. “One has all the power and doesn’t think he should use it. One doesn’t have the power and thinks he deserves it.”

Renee gasped. “S-Speak of the devil, and he shall appear...” she said, pointing at a platform that had just appeared in their field of view.

There stood Siron, Suzie’s neck held tight in one of his hands, while the other three Sweeties were tied up behind him. “Don’t move or I kill these fillies.”

“GIRLS!” Allure shouted, voice cracking. Squeaky had to hold her back from doing something crazy. Brute growled, hoofing the ground aggressively.

Nova lit her horn, preparing a complex teleport.

Siron raised his staff. “You don’t want to do that, Nova. I can still kill them with this.”

“I bet I can teleport that away from you,” Nova muttered.

“You’ll find it’s protected,” Siron said. “Furthermore, if you think you all can rush me in one attack, know that Fef is hiding nearby and will kill someone in the chaos. Your best course of action is to listen to me.”

“Yeah, right,” Vriska said, looking at him with her eye. “Let me jus-”

“Vriska, look at this staff. You know what it is, don’t you?”

“So it is a Juju,” Vriska said. “…I haven’t seen something from my home worlds in a long, long time. What’s that one do? Time jump? Shift everyone through a calendar? Cause candy crush
“It’s intended to kill Horrorterrors,” Siron stated. “You know what those are, don’t you?”


“I do not know who the green god was all those eons ago, Vriska. I know it was bestowed to my kind to be passed down to me, where I would finally unlock it.”

“What’s a Horrtererror?” Nova asked Vriska.

“You know that Azathoth Thrackerzod is always talking about?” Vriska asked.

“…Yes?”

“Imagine a lot of those guys.”

Renee sighed. “I’m afraid the illustration is lost on us…”

“It’s enough for my point,” Siron said. “Majora was pathetic fuel for this staff. I have since found a much more suitable source and made it my own. I easily killed the four interdimensional warriors protecting these four with it. I have my doubts I could take you all on at once, one of you might get lucky. So here we are. You are all going to listen to me, or these prisoners die. All four of them.”

Jane ground her teeth. “Bastard.”

“I don’t know who you are,” Siron said. “But whatever you’re thinking of doing, don’t. I sense the same power in you that I sensed in that unicorn. I could take it away with this Juju.”

Jane’s pupils dilated. “You didn’t… You couldn’t have…” She took a step forward.

Sweetie pulled on her with her magic. “No! Jane, don’t! We have to-”

“There is no way you beat Sunny,” Jane said, clenching her fist. A power surge sent Sweetie flying backward. “It’s flat out impossible. We kill gods. You’re just a bug!”

Flutterfree acted first. Now that Sweetie wasn’t near Jane, she didn’t care about not getting close. She leaped toward Jane – not caring that the woman’s appearance changed the moment she got within a meter. Jane was taller, covered in ancient burn marks on one arm, and covered in brutal scars just about everywhere else. Her eyes were black, with only a single red pupil in the right.

Flutterfree tackled her, wrapping Lolo around every one of Jane’s limbs – but the ‘woman’ tore them effortlessly, despite not being a Stand user. She glared right at Flutterfree, face that of rage.

Flutterfree used her Stare on Jane. Jane froze in place, unable to look away from the deep, red, vampiric eyes.

“Nova… Please tell me you have a time stop prepared…” Flutterfree managed.

“Done,” Nova said, freezing Jane in time. “Now we just need to find something strong enough to keep her…”

“I can weaken her considerably,” Siron offered.

“We’re not going to do what you want,” Allure shouted at him. “Let her keep herself!”
“As long as you keep her restrained somehow,” he said.

“So…” Pinkie said, grunting. “Siron, what’s the plan?”

“We’re going to force all the others to join us,” he answered. “If they won’t, we kill them. Simple as that.”

“Why?” Sweetie blurted.

“Because we need to get out of this place. And as far as I can tell, the purpose of this place must be us. So I’m going to bring us all together.”

“Under you,” Jenny prodded.

“Yes. Under me. As it should be.”

Nova ground her teeth. Pinkie had to put a hoof on her to steady her. “All right, Siron. Lead the way.”

They set off, the frozen form of Jane carried by Nova.

Jane couldn’t even think – she was frozen. Frozen on a single thought.

_Sunny isn’t dead._

~ ~ ~

A feather in Gilgamesh’s inventory lit on fire, covering his entire body in holy flames. His wound healed to manageable levels and he took his first after-death breath.

He stood up slowly, casting Curaja on himself, restoring his vitality to full. He checked his inventory – that was the last Phoenix Down. He’d need to return to standard Void worlds to get more. So hard to come by…

He looked at the three bodies – Sunny, Sunset, and Twilight. All very dead.

No matter. He was alive now, he could fix that. He lifted his hand into the air, conjuring magic into his limb. “Arise. Arise. Arise.”

Holy light enveloped the three bodies, healing their wounds in a couple seconds and restoring light to their eyes.

Sunny gasped. “What the… Holy…” she shook her head. “In all our god-killing days…”

Twilight rubbed her head. “Ow… Headache…”

“You’re welcome!” Gilgamesh jingled. “Deus Ex Gilgamesh, at your service!” He bowed.

“The problem isn’t solved,” Sunny said, shaking her head. “He got the Sweeties.”

Twilight nodded. “We’ve got to go after him. He won’t be expecting us to be alive.” She noticed that Sunset was still slumped on the ground. “…Sunset?”

Sunset’s head _twitched_. She slowly craned her neck to meet Twilight’s stare. The sight of her face made Twilight and Sunny jump back - her features were twisted, as if animated by strings rather than life. Her eyes were dead, and her mouth hung open slightly. The thing let out a laugh. “Death… A
fun thing… You should tr-"

Gilgamesh stabbed her through the head with a holy sword before she could finish her sentence. Her head exploded, disappearing into smoke.

Twilight shrieked. “WHAT DID YOU DO!?"

“Came back wrong,” Gilgamesh said, standing up. “Outside the Void’s universes, that happens sometimes to people with spirits that aren’t quite right. She would have tried to kill us.”

Twilight ran over to the burning corpse of Sunset. “Sunset!” She wailed. “I… We…” She couldn’t say anything – she just broke down.

Sunny gulped, looking to Gilgamesh. “Let’s try not to die again.”

“I’m out of self-revives, so that’d be a good idea,” Gilgamesh commented.

Sunny nodded. “We’ll head out in a minute. Let’s… give her some time.”

“Fine by me. I would figure saving those Sweeties would be more import-”

“IT IS!” Twilight shouted, standing up. Sunny detected trace amounts of magic flowing from the Sunset’s corpse into Twilight. Flaming wings shot out her back, a horn of light lanced forth from her forehead, and the cuffs around her wrists lit up with fire. “We are going to save those girls. And Sunset will be avenged. I am the Sunlight.”

Normally, Sunny would have tried to discourage the use of a dead lover’s magic to empower oneself for revenge, but she held her tongue. It was better right now for them to have extra firepower against… that Siron. “We need to track them,” she said, trying not to look too closely at Sunlight.

Gilgamesh nodded. “Lucky for you I’m an excellent tracker. The scuffs on the stone from that carapace of his are easy to follow. This way.” He hoisted his sword and charged. Sunlight followed after him with angry tears.

Sunny shook her head at the tragedy and followed.

~~~

M4 decided she liked the Twilight known as 4T. There was nothing to differentiate her from any other Twilight besides a Census badge; her appearance was normal, just like M4’s. Apparently 4T was far from normal, though – she was one of those Twilights who weren’t happy just asking questions, getting answers, and then sitting down. She had to explore, to understand, and to adventure. In those ways, she was like Eve. Had she been the one to discover dimensional travel, M4 had no doubt that 4T would have become Eve, given time.

4T was currently showing M4 around the Examail Center. “And that in the center is the dimension grinder, one of the seven wonders of the Sparkle Census,” 4T declared, holding out a wing and a hoof. The dimension grinder was immense, easily as large as Canterlot Castle itself. It was round in shape, overall, though the handful of spires that came from seemingly random sections were quite pointy. Hanging wires and valves channeled into the grinder from all sides, providing it magic, power, and information. Gigantic screens displayed the coordinates of every single universe it was testing, including the ‘nesting order’, or the path that led back to the Sparkle Census universe.

“Impressive,” M4 admitted. “Why don’t you have these interesting things in the waiting room? It’d get Twilights more interested.”
4T shrugged. “We’re in the process of changing a few things, that being one of them, but aesthetics is a secondary concern as I’m sure you’re aware.”

“Right.”

4T teleported them to a level below. The grinder was still visible, but none of the screens were. The underside didn’t look any more or less interesting than the top.

What was on this level were conveyor belts. Letters rolled in, mass produced by a matter fabrication device, all heading toward one of three magical teleporters. Every handful of seconds, one of the letters was hit with a burst of magic, and teleported away.

“This is where your letter was just a couple hours ago,” 4T said. “Produced here, then enchanted with a dimension as soon as one is found, then sent away. If a letter doesn’t receive a response in a few days, another one will be sent. Or – hey, maybe one of the Twilights who works here all the time can tell you more.” She pointed at an alicorn Twilight with a hard hat, the letters GM printed on it. “Hey! GM!”

GM looked up. “Oh! Uh… What are you guys doing here?”

“Giving a tour to a potential new employee,” 4T said. “She’s from a multiversal civilization, looking to become a bit of a diplomat between our worlds.”

M4 waved. “Hi. GM huh? Lucky letter combo.”

“It definitely is,” GM said, stretching her wings and folding them behind her back. “It also helps that my job title is General Manager. I won the lottery.”

4T nodded. “M4 was wondering about how this place worked.”

GM raised an eyebrow. “You saw the conveyor belts didn’t you?”

“Larger-scale.”

“Oh. Right.” GM moved to a large computer screen. “Here’s the controls for the Letter Network. Every letter has a magical transponder we use to locate it. They ping off each other to maximize efficiency and lower the drain on the grinder itself.”

“A thaumic web across dimensions?” M4 said. “…What do you use it for?”

“Nothing,” GM said quickly. “Well, besides determining which letters haven’t been seen, or which ones have been forgotten about.”

“That strikes me as inefficient,” M4 said. “I mean… I’m new here and all, don’t think I’m telling you how to do your job, but wouldn’t you be able to turn this web into a scanner for, well, just about anything dimensional in nature across the multiverse you’ve got covered?”

4T blinked. “Huh. That does seem like a good idea. Wonder why we don’t do that…”

GM’s smile grew. “Yeah. Isn’t that strange? Guess it’s just another bureaucratic inefficiency that 4T here is gonna have to iron out. Heh.”

“Guess so,” 4T groaned. “Probably should take you to the research labs, so you can see how much of a mess that is…”

M4 held up a hoof. “Wait a moment… GM, are you hiding something from us?”
GM clearly gulped. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

“Well now I’m sure you’re hiding something,” M4 said, pushing. “You see, there are cues of lying, at least in nervous people. Twitching, exaggerated movements, darting eyes, overly large smiles… gulping.”

4T blinked. “…M4, I think you’re right. She is hiding something.”

GM narrowed her eyes. “Well great, now I’ve got to take care of you two.”

“No, just tell us what you’re using the network for, we hav-”

GM lit her horn.

M4 suddenly felt really tired…

~~~

Brutalight dropped her invisibility spell. GM, M4, and 4T all lay on the ground, asleep thanks to her handiwork. She would have preferred to listen longer, but she couldn’t have been sure what GM’s spell was going to be. There was clearly a conspiracy of some sort going on here. It would have been ever so interesting to find some real dirt, but she had to put her own escape above her desire for knowledge.

She made a cursory inspection of the information onscreen. From the information she had absorbed in the books, she had a general idea of what it displayed. Letters in millions upon millions of universes. Their connections, their movements… But there was also something else there. There were several spots of blue light spread around the network, unmoving, sitting at locations between universes. Odd. There was nothing between universes. Connections didn’t actually have physical ‘distance’, merely an energy requirement to pass through.

It would be interesting to look back into this once she returned.

But first…

She turned to the conveyor belts. They were still operating. All she had to do was get on one of those letters and go to another universe. She’d have to time it just right…

But she was Brutalight Sparcake. Of course she could time it right. She was getting out of here.

~~~

Gyro, Gandalf, Froppy, Ivan, and the Doctor traveled in their own group, the Doctor taking point with his sonic screwdriver.

Their current plan was to find the TARDIS. It would, if nothing else, be safe on the inside. Given how long it had been since the explosion, the insides should have been fine.

“Are you sure you can find it?” Gyro demanded. “Nothing we have can make heads or tails of this place!”

“I am a Time Lord,” the Doctor stated. “In the section of the multiverse from which I hail, time and space are so fluid the very rules of inter-universal causality can be altered like a lightswitch. On. Off. We have learned to adapt. I know exactly where the TARDIS is in relation to us, and it will only take a bit more hopping around to arrive.”
“I don’t know…”

“I trust him,” Ivan said. “The Doctor’s name is associated with many things. A liar is not one of them.”

The Doctor forced himself to stop at this. “…You heard Vriska, didn’t you?”

“Clearly a personal matter. You’re heralded as a hero.”

“You’ve only seen a small section of the multiverse…” the Doctor said, shaking his head. “You will find that the name of the Doctor can mean anything. That of the Traveling Doctor even more so.”

Froppy turned to Gyro. “He knows what he’s doing.”

“What, all it took was a little speech?”

“Exactly,” Froppy said. “That’s all I needed. I’m not sure what kind of man he is… But he isn’t misleading us. Not right now.”

Gyro folded his arms. “Fine. But until I see a blue phone box I will remain-”

“There she is!” the Doctor cheered, his somber tone gone in an instant. “She’s even upright!”

Then the doors of the TARDIS opened from the inside. All five of them froze when they saw Pinkie inside – Pinkie with a flat mane and a knife in her hooves.

She looked them over. “Shame. I was hoping Rick would find it first.”

The Doctor took a ready stance. “I would ask how you got past the TARDIS security system, but that would be pointless. I know what you are.”

“You don’t. Not fully,” Pinkie said, twirling her knife. “That’s the twist!” She leaped into the air, knife held over her head. “Let’s see if yo-”

One of Gyro’s steel balls hit her between the eyes, pushing her back into the ground. She stood up, rubbing her head.

“I forgot how OP you were…” Pinkie muttered.

“That should have knocked you out at least,” Gyro commented. “Good show. Goodbye.”

Pinkie dodged to the left, avoiding the invisible fist of Ball Breaker.

“The hell!? Sh-”

“No, she can’t see it,” the Doctor said. “She doesn’t need to. She’s thrown aside her inhibitions. We need to run.”

“Spoilsport!” Pinkie called. “You know I’d just stab one of you in the back…” she giggled. “Oh, whatever. Time is candy!” She produced a squeaky hammer. “Wheeee!”

Gyro sent more steel balls at her, but she deflected all of them with her squeaky hammer, a comical squee going out every time she hit one. At the same time, she twisted her body to avoid the actual punches of Ball Breaker and the Spin it was inducing around her. “Gotcha Gyro! I g-”

Ball Breaker landed a hit on her stomach, forcing her to drop her squeaky hammer and go flying into
the air higher… and higher… and higher…

Gyro blinked. “…Usually they come back down.”

Ivan put a hand to his head. “The gravity could have altered up there due to another platform. I’d consider it a victory.”

Froppy narrowed her eyes. “She was too confident. She’s not done with us.”

The Doctor nodded. “No doubt, but we’ll have some time befo-”

“NOPE!” Pinkie shouted, falling out of the sky at a speed far faster than terminal velocity. She brought a very real warhammer down on Gandalf. He managed to raise his magical shield just in time, holding her immense force above him.

“You shall not pass,” Gandalf decreed, entrapping her in his magic now that she was close.

Pinkie giggled. “That’s what you think.”

There was a party cannon behind Gandalf. It went off, knocking him forward, into Pinkie. He lost control of his spell – enough for Pinkie to produce a sword. Gandalf fell into the blade.

“GANDALF!” Gyro yelled. He moved, but it was not him who got there first. Froppy’s tongue wrapped around the freshly freed Pinkie. The sticky appendage yanked hard on the pink pony, throwing her off the edge of the platform and down into the blue aurora.

“INTO THE TARDIS!” Froppy yelled. “NOW!”

The Doctor, Ivan, and Gyro didn’t need any prompting. They ran for it, Gyro in the back. Gyro turned just as the door started closing.

A single pink hoof stuck itself through the door, holding it open. Pinkie pulled the door back open. “Heya!”

Gyro just went with an old fashioned kick to the face to get rid of her. He forced the door of the TARDIS shut. “…I’m not a fan of running, but that clearly wasn’t going to end well.”

“Gandalf…” Froppy said, trying to steady her breathing.

“Nice place,” was Ivan’s comment of choice.

The Doctor placed his hands on the console. “I can move us to a different location in this uni- Oh no.”

There was a giant cake on the part of the control console reserved for in-universe location management.

“This is going to take too long,” the Doctor said, furrowing his brow. Whatever he was going to say next was cut off when the entire TARDIS started shaking.

“What’s that?” Gyro demanded.

“She’s moving us!” the Doctor shouted. “She’s gone completely off the deep end!”

“Where’s she taking us?” Gyro demanded.
“How would any of us know that?” Ivan asked. “She’s clearly psychotic.”

“I… Just.” Gyro threw his hands in the air. “Fine. Anyone got a plan?”

“Help me get the cake out of this console,” the Doctor said. “That’s our best bet.” He flicked on a screen on a back wall. “We can see what’s happening outside with this…”

three kids appeared on the screen – teenagers, one with gray skin. They saw Pinkie carrying a TARDIS, apparently recognized her, and ran off.

They could hear Pinkie laugh. “Run my little children! It’s best if you stay far away from everyone else! Remember nothing but me about this whole trip…”

~~~

Siron and his captives heard fighting, but they couldn’t see it. They heard the sound of a deranged pink pony laughing above all other things. They heard the screams of children…

Siron clenched his fist. “That could be a problem.”

“Hey, at least you won’t have to convince us to fight that thing,” Vriska commented. “Hard to be more evil than you, but from the sounds of those laughs, we got ourselves a true-born murder-crazed psycho.”

Siron didn’t remove his grip on Suzie’s neck. “We’re going in the direction of that laughter. With our firepower, we can take her.”

Pinkie sighed. “I am not looking forward to having to kick myself in the face again…”

As they set out, Sweetie Belle looked frantically around for a way out of the situation. Siron still had a grip on Suzie’s neck, and they still had no idea where Fef was…

“What are we going to do?” she whispered to the rest of the League.

Squeaky racked her brain. “I have no idea. If this were a military op, I’d give the order to rush him with the acceptable risk of losing the hostage. But this isn’t a military op. There’s no armies or countries on the line. This is just us.”

Allure narrowed her eyes. “There’s going to be a fight soon, a big one, right?”

“Yesss….” Brute said. “And then, we are going to save Suzie and make Siron feel sorry he was ever born…”

Sweetie looked at Brute, thinking for a moment about the brutality of the statement. But… it looked like they needed to do that. She had no idea how strong he would be otherwise…”Right.”

The voice of Vriska entered all of their minds. You girls planning something over there?

Squeaky motioned for all of them to act natural. She tapped her hoof on the ground once, to indicate yes.

Good. When the fighting breaks out, we do everything we can to get Suzie out of his grasp. There’s a group following us that’ll take care of Fef. We’ll release Jane and Jenny as well, so this entire place is going to blow like a pop stand.

Squeaky tapped the ground to confirm.
“Plans… Plans are good,” Sweetie said. She turned to the vacant form of Thrackerzod. The mare was no longer crying, but there was still no life in her eyes. “…Did you get that?”

“Mm? Yes…” she said, almost in a whisper. “Yes… Good plan…”

Sweetie looked at Allure. “…I thought she’d be better without her darkness.”

Allure sighed. “I thought she might be as well. …Clearly not. She needs it.”

“We have to get it back to her. And save Suzie. And stop all the bad guys. And get out of here.”

“Tall order.”

Sweetie nodded. “At least we’re not going up against the incarnation of evil.”

Allure smirked. “I like the sound of that.”

Siron glanced behind him, hearing the raised voices. “What are you all so happy about?”

Allure put her hoof over her mouth. Sweetie glared at Siron. “We’re talking about what we’re going to do to you after this is over.”

“Plotting revenge…” Siron let himself chuckle. “Carry on. After everything, life would be boring without the occasional attempt on my life. I expect to see all of you a few years from now, ready to challenge me and my race. I would want it no other way.”

Sweetie narrowed her eyes. “Something’s messed up with you.”

Siron turned away from them. “Our worlds are just different, Sweetie Belle.” He was clearly no longer paying them much attention. The group moved on in silence, preparing for an encounter with pink fluffy death.

~~~

Eve, Cosmo, and the Grand Secretariat stood at the top of a tower within the Sparkle Census, looking at the sprawling expanse of buildings below.

“Not even 1% of your members are actually here right now, are they?” Cosmo asked.

“You’d be correct,” the Grand Secretariat answered. “The Census has very few permanent residents, compared to the number of Twilights who are part of us. Many never come back here. Some only return when looking for an answer to a mysterious question. To others, this is just another city they visit sometimes. There’s even the occasional team sent here on a Friendship Problem Mission by the Tree of Harmony or a version thereof.”

“That reminds me of a question I had,” Eve spoke up. “The Tree of Harmony – evidence we’ve been collecting suggests it used to be a Star. But the Stars were multiversal, and we’ve found so many versions of the Tree.”

“That is, not all versions of the Tree are a Star,” the Grand Secretariat said. “A lot are, but I wouldn’t say the majority. Many of the trees really were created by Starswirl and not based on an already present Harmony Force, like I assume yours was. But as for those that are the remnant of the Star known as Castor…” She looked into the distance. “It is one of the things we know about the Star Society. They had alternates, just like we do. There were thousands of Castors. Thousands of Corots. Thousands of Siriuses. But unlike us, they didn’t live alongside their counterparts, they made their minds one. We
have no idea how, but every version of Castor was the same Star in their society, connected through magic beyond our understanding at all times. So, in many ways, there was only one Castor, and she did the same thing every time. She always ended up crashing into a world that eventually becomes Equis. Sometimes.”

“That’s one of the strangest things we’ve noticed,” Eve said. “While there’s a lot of commonality, and Standard Equis is everywhere, it seems like the origin of our world changes from universe to universe. There’s sometimes a creator alicorn. Sometimes everything just happened naturally. Other times…” she put a hoof to her chin. “Why would dozens of different start conditions and histories result in nearly the same outcome at nearly the same time?”

“Ah, the Thread,” the Grand Secretariat said. “Not a force we understand, at all. We’ve been able to detect this strange force around worlds, individuals, and events, as if it’s tying them together.”

“We call it the Beat,” Cosmo said.

“A fitting name, given its generally rhythmic nature.” She shook her head. “We are certain it is the reason for so many similarities – alternates, converging probabilities, goals – but we haven’t the foggiest idea how. Or why. Or what it even is.”

“Welcome to the club,” Eve said, furrowing her brow. “Though we never thought it was responsible for alternates and converging history… Though that makes sense. It seems tied to patterns and events…” she shook her head. “I don’t pretend to be the expert. I could have you talk to Starbeat, she spends all her time studying it since she’s cursed by it.”

“It sounds like something for the scientists to iron out later.”

It was at this point an alarm went off in the Grand Secretariat’s ear. She lit her horn, face serious. “What is it?”

A voice came out of her horn, that of a Twilight. “Tampering at the Examail Center.”

“That’s not enough for a class N alert.”

Realizing that there was probably an important message she wasn’t hearing, Eve turned on her ears and winced.

“Twilights were sent to intercept. The entire squad was wiped out by strange swords that killed with one slice and prevented healing magic.”

Eve gasped. “No…”

The Grand Secretariat glanced at Eve while continuing her conversation. “Do we know which Twilight it was?”

“Darker color, otherwise standard alicorn. Running through records now.”

“It’s Brutalight Sparcake,” Cosmo said. “She’s the Twilight we warned you about. The one we had imprisoned.”


“No, that’s not it,” Eve said. “When we were working on our papers we saw an alicorn come in we thought was her, but didn’t act like it. She…” Eve stamped her hoof on the ground. “She fooled us!”
The Grand Secretariat spoke into her horn again. “Search recent arrivals, within the last three hours.”


“I’ll deal with her personally,” the Grand Secretariat said, hanging up. “…When you warned me about her you could have mentioned the pony that looked like her.”

“I’m sorry!” Eve said. “I didn’t-”

“I know,” the Grand Secretariat interrupted. “But right now ponies have just died in the Sparkle Census. That doesn’t happen. I’m not going to hold you accountable, our security did let her through, but you are going to help fix this problem of yours.”

Eve nodded. “Of course.” She shut off her ears, in order to be ready.

They teleported away.

~~~

Rick and Morty ran across platform after platform, following a little ping on a yellow sensor in Rick’s hands.

“Rick are you sure we should be running toward the noises?” Morty asked his grandfather.

“That’s where the TARDIS is,” Rick said. “And we need that thing for the microverse.”

“Oh, that thing you shot and blew up?”

“The Doctor needed to be kicked down a peg. Plus, I wouldn’t have had free access if he’d been near the thing.”

“You were trying to kill the Doctor. The Doctor, Rick!”

“There are other Doctors out there. Again, if I wanted to kill him, I would have at least aimed at him Morty. Screw your brain on right.”

“Not that one and you know it!”

“He’s a self-entitled asshole who needs to stop finding immortality loopholes.”

“God, Rick, do you realize how much you’re describing yourself?”

Rick didn’t dignify this with an answer. He just returned his focus to the device in his hands. “Getting close. Hard left, Morty.”

“Har- woah.” Morty skidded to a halt, noticing that the platforms came to an abrupt halt. They stood on the edge of a round platform with eight spokes, and the spoke was barely large enough for Morty to stand.

In the center of the round platform was the TARDIS – with a pink pony sitting on top of it. She grinned. “Hi, RICK!”

Rick stopped short, narrowing his eyes. “Who the fuck are you and what the fuck do you want?”

“Oh, dropping the bombs already I see?” she giggled, producing a long knife and twirling it on top of her hoof. “Let’s see. Do you remember the Pinkie that promised she’d kill you if you did
“I have so many death threa-”

“That’d be the interdimensional Pinkie, Rick,” Morty said. “The one we saw trapped in here earlier.”

Rick blinked. “Right. That one.”

Pinkie jumped off the TARDIS and twitched. “On that day, I promised myself I’d kill you. I became this so I could do it. So, to answer your questions… My name is Pinkamena Diane Pie. You killed my friends. Prepare to die.”

Rick pulled out a gun and fired. Pinkie just appeared behind him and drove a sword through his chest and pulled up, cutting him in half effortlessly. She was not surprised in the slightest to find the Rick was made out of smoke. She threw the knife behind her, swirling her hammer around at seemingly random.

She hit the invisible Rick, sending him flying into side of the TARDIS. He grunted. “Ergh…”

Pinkie opted to just throw knives at him instead of getting close again. He activated a device to deflect them, but one got through and hit him in the arm.

“RICK!” Morty yelled.

“Don’t yell, Morty,” Pinkie said. “Be happy. Be happy that he doesn’t care enough about you for you to be worth taking hostage.”

“…That’s not a good thought.”

Pinkie laughed. “Well, it means you get to live through this! Probably. I might just lose all sense of pony-ness and kill you after. I’ve gone completely bonkers, see.” She produced a machine gun and tried to riddle Rick with bullets, but he somehow dodged every last one.

Rick pulled out a strange, round, crystalline device. “I am not going to die to a pathetic pink pony.” The device activated, sending out a shockwave that knocked Morty out like a domino and paralyzed him to boot.

Pinkie just grinned. “Nice try.”

“Fuck…” he muttered, resorting to pulling out a gun and firing it at the TARDIS. Pinkie pulled a mirror shield out of nowhere and reflected it into his other arm. Rick fell back.

“Guess what, Rick?” Pinkie giggled. “There’s nothing here for you to use! I’m blocking the TARDIS, you’re running out of supplies on your person, and there’s nothing here but blocks of stone. Your tenacity means nothing here.” She dropped her weapon, opting for a long, overly sharp knife. She started to sing as she moved closer to Rick. He fired at her again and again, but she always just shifted at the right moment, twisted to the left, or jumped over whatever he threw at her.

“I want to cut you open, see your colors run! I want to play I want to have a friend to have some fun! Don’t be afraid, don’t cry, just give in! This is the last time I’ll see you again!”
She pinned his arms and legs to the ground with knives, stopping his retaliation. A weapon appeared in his hair and shot her, boring a hole just under one of her eyes. She didn’t care.

“So come on, relax, just sit still!

You belong to me and you will~!

Keep quiet and look me in the eye!

Cos~”

The poofy-maned Pinkie appeared and hit her across the head with a hammer. “STOP!”

The psychotic Pinkie laughed. “Of course! You had to save him – someone had to, at least this early. I’m not surprised. Just, oh, livid. Why do you let him live, Pinkie Pie?”

“This isn’t what we do!” Pinkie called back. “This isn’t our type of par-”

“IT IS NOW! HE KILLED ALL MY FRIENDS! ALL OF THEM! THE DAY YOU GAVE HIM YOUR ULTIMATUM, I VOWED HE WOULD PERISH BY MY HOOF!”

Pinkie’s eyes widened as she put two and two together. “No… No… Pinkie-X?!”

“Yes! Pinkie-X!” Pinkie-X cheered, laughing. “Oh, you know, the mare who knew the universe was gonna die ahead of time, along with you? The one who convinced you she was going to stay?”

“You were going to stay!”

“Last minute heebie-jeebies!” she cackled. “ Couldn’t stay. So I left just before it happened. I could have lived normally… But nope!” She pointed a knife at Rick. “He needed to pay. And it just so happened that I was in a unique situation to actually be able to do it!”

Pinkie hefted her hammer. “You let the death you were supposed to have consume you.”

“Exactly! Wasn’t even that hard! Just exaggerate the power a little bit, drop the inhibitions, and presto! I was a monster. It feels liberating, you should try it!”

“No,” Pinkie said, hitting her counterpart with a hammer, tossing her off the platform. “I will never be you. I’m not the only survivor of a universe that was supposed to fade into nothing.”

Pinkie-X gasped. “Oh my! You don’t know!”

Pinkie blinked. “…Don’t know what?”

“You’re going to be so mad when you figure that out,” Pinkie-X laughed.

“…That doesn’t matter.” Pinkie hit her counterpart again. “You’re coming with me.”

“Alrighty! Sure, I’ll be a distraction. Bring on the bloodbath!”

Pinkie sighed. “That’s one way of looking at it.” With a push off the ground, the two pink balls of fluff bounced onto another platform, and into the sight-range of Siron.

“PREPARE YOURSELVES!” Siron shouted.

~~~
“Shit shit shit…” Brutalight swore to herself as she teleported quickly through the Sparkle Census.

To put it simply, the letter teleportation network turned out to have a highly subtle security spell to prevent exactly what she had been trying to accomplish. Then the guards had shown up. Then she had to kill them. And then the real alarms went off.

She knew she was being hunted. Because of her color scheme, she wouldn’t just be able to vanish into a crowd. Not to mention the fact that an ‘evacuate sector’ alert had gone out, and the streets were quickly losing all Twilights as they returned to their home universes in an instant.

She couldn’t just return to Nautica, she’d never gotten a token…

She realized with panic that she didn’t have a plan anymore besides run. And run in a universe controlled by a multiversal association of Twilight Sparkles was probably a bad idea…

She didn’t see any other option though. She kept running.

Her teleport-gallop was interrupted when a Twilight Sparkle made entirely out of purple miasma appeared in front of her. “Come with me if you want to live.”

Brutalight opened her mouth to ask a question, and then decided to just screw it and follow the miasma Twilight without a fuss. The Twilight seemed to appreciate this, nodding to her and gesturing to a nearby building. They entered one of the doors to find a bookstore inside.

The miasma Twilight floated to the back of the building and pulled on a small, blue book. The two of them were teleported away to a large room with no entrances or exits. The floor was made of glass, below which a complex series of gears could be seen, every notch marked with a magical rune of some kind. A handful of other, angry looking Twilights stood in the room, looking at Brutalight.

“Welcome to the underground,” the miasma Twilight said. “This is our outgoing device. It only needs a few more minutes to spin up, but then we can take you away.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“The Council doesn’t do enough, that’s why,” another Twilight said. “So we’re going to make them. It seems like you may have something for us.”

“There is a prison world by the name of Nautica,” Brutalight said. “It has my friends and numerous other prisoners I’m sure could be of some use.”

“Good,” the miasma Twilight said. “They have no idea where we are. And they won’t be able to find us in just a couple minutes.”

~~~

Sweetie Belle readied herself for the perfect moment. She saw the two Pinkies coming, bouncing in their direction. Pinkie-X leaped off of Pinkie, pulling a red metallic axe out of nowhere. Siron acted, focusing on her with the energy of his staff…

NOW. Went Vriska’s psychic burst through the minds of everyone.

Sweetie knew her cue. She moved, leaping next to Siron while most of his focus was on Pinkie-X. He did see her, but it was too late. She pulled a beautiful, crystalline blade out of her pocket dimension, cutting the hand that held Suzie completely off. The dark energies flowing through Siron went to replace the limb, but Sweetie had already placed herself between Suzie and Siron.
Siron would have killed Sweetie and Suzie in an instant, but the plan took this into account.

For Jane had been released.

A blade glowing with the power of a legend none knew cut Siron down the back, making him scream out in pain. He slammed his staff on the ground, surrounding himself in a protective bubble of eldritch energies, but Jane was far too persistent. Her power was too strong – Siron may have wielded power within that staff beyond most of what Jane had seen, but his body was still that of a mortal. And mortals were easy pickings for Jane. She drove a boot into his chest piece, cracking it in a dozen different places. Blue blood spurted out as he skidded back a few feet.

He knew one thing in that instant.

If he played his cards right, he could beat Jane. Tear a part of her soul away, force her to make a mistake in her rage, and then kill her. He could do it.

He could not kill her if she had backup.

Vriska came flying from behind Jane, placing a boot right in Siron’s face. Jenny came from the other side, infusing her glove with transdimensional energy that went right through both his natural and eldritch armor. His staff returned power to him, but still he stumbled and gagged.

“Dammit…”

He was going to lose this fight.

But he was a warrior. He would never back down. If this was his end, he would go down with as much fire as possible.

Jane’s magics were too strong to destroy in an instant, and that Jenny had a habit of regenerating from any wound. It was time to see if Vriska was being Heroic right now…

He drove the staff at her, shooting her with Juju energy – and missed.

*She was stealing his luck.*

Vriska grabbed him by the neck. “Nice knowin’ ya.” She pulled him over her head and smashed him into the ground, cracking the platform.

Siron, despite his current unlucky disposition, *still* fought. He tapped into the power in the staff bestowed to him so recently, pushing his assailants back. He stood tall.

“JUST DIE ALREADY!” Jane shouted – but then the rage in her eyes died out as she noticed what was happening behind Siron.

Fef had been tossed into view by Sunny. *She was alive.* The rage drained from Jane’s face.

Siron took his opportunity, driving his fist into her stomach. It *did* go through – but he broke all his fingers in the process on her truly absurd defensive magic.

Jane, to her credit, barely flinched at what had to be outrageous pain. “Not many get through my defenses…” she muttered.

Jenny punched Siron and Vriska kicked him, forcing his fist out of Jane’s chest. He went sliding back.
Fef wasn’t doing much better. Sunny, Renee, Nova, Gilgamesh, and that flaming Twilight now known as Sunlight were on her. Despite her skill with her weapons, she had lost her stealth advantage. She was not going to win, and Siron knew it.

“FIGHT TO THE END!” Siron shouted.

“GOT IT!” Fef responded. She planted a foot on Gilgamesh, pushing him into Nova before she could initiate a time spell. She swirled her yo-yos around, nicking Renee, Sunny, and Sunlight.

Sunlight took the opportunity, grabbing hold of the yo-yo and pulling Fef in. The yo-yo swirled with enough force to cut Sunlight’s arms down to the bone, but the woman just flat did not care.

Fef pulled the second yo-yo through Sunlight’s chest – but still, the fiery being cared not.

“Why aren’t you dead!?” Fef shouted.

“I’m about to be. And so are you,” Sunlight decreed. She turned her entire body into an explosion that rocked the platform everyone stood on. Both she and Fef were vaporized in an instant.

Sunny sighed visibly.

“FEF!” Siron shouted, pain evident in his voice. He struggled against his opponents – but now Gilgamesh and the others were on him as well. His eldritch energies lashed out, but he no longer scared them.

They scared him instead.

A warrior does not let fear control him.

Siron roared, continuing to fight back against immeasurable odds.

Pinkie-X and Pinkie fought in the air. “Would you look at that!” Pinkie-X said. “That worked! Siron’s going down!”

“So are you,” Pinkie said. “You… You are a disgrace to Pinkies.”

“Yep!” She lifted a hoof to stop Ditzy from crashing into her, forcing the magical wings coming out of her back to destabilize.

Pinkie had to take a moment to throw a balloon to Ditzy so she wouldn’t hit the ground too hard. “You won’t hurt anyone else.”

Pinkie-X pulled a knife out of her mane, sneering. “Guess whaaaaat?”

“No!” Pinkie said, grabbing for the knife, but Pinkie-X was already behind her.

“Random knife throw of death go!” Pinkie-X decreed, throwing the knife at a random individual on the ground.

Allure didn’t see it coming; she was busy watching the struggle with Siron.

Thrackerzod, even in her ruined state, did. She didn’t need her mental faculties to act. She leaped in front of the knife, ready to take the blade for her friend.

Allure saw Thrackerzod move, having just enough time to register the knife coming right for the two of them. There was no time to speak, just enough time for Allure to process what was going to
The knife was going to hit Thrackerzod in the neck… But at the speed it was going it would probably go through Thrackerzod, and hit Allure in the face. There was a chance the knife deflected off her horn, but-

She didn’t get to continue the thought experiment. Sweetie Brute leaped into action, punching the knife just before it reached Thrackerzod. The blade cut her front leg down the middle and spun out of control, missing Thrackerzod entirely and cutting Brute through the neck. Blood spurted over Thrackerzod and Allure. Blood sprayed from the mare as Brute fell to the ground.

“Take… That…” She managed before her breathing stopped.

“BRUTE!” Allure screamed, running after her. There has to be someone here who knows healing, there ha-

The next wave of force from Siron’s defense hit. Anypony standing strong or prepared for it would have no difficulty resisting the shockwave. But the limp body of a young unicorn was nothing but a ragdoll to it. Brute was thrown off the edge of the platform into the aurora below.

Allure lit her horn, attempting to grab Brute’s body with her telekinesis, but the body was too heavy and moving too fast. “SQUEAKY! NOVA! ANYPONY!?” Allure yelled.

Squeaky was fighting Siron. Nova was trying to fight Pinkie-X. They didn’t hear her.

Pinkie and Sweetie heard her though. They heard the devastating pain in that voice, the further loss of innocence, the shattering of her world.

Sweetie knew she would not be able to lift Brute at this point – so she cast a lightning spell at Pinkie-X. The bolt connected, but only singed the pink pony slightly. It would have been comedic if the mood weren’t so tragic.

Pinkie-X laughed. “I think we should play again!” she produced another, identical knife. “Which one of your friends is next, Pinkie? What do you-”

A green steel ball hit Pinkie-X in the side of her chest, forcing her body into a tailspin.

Gyro spat on the ground as he walked into view. “THAT’S FOR GANDALF!”

Rick stood next to him, holding a truly gigantic piece of machinery clearly cobbled together from items inside the TARDIS – definitely used without the Doctor’s permission. He pointed it at Pinkie-X. “No pink bitch gets to tell me I’m going to die.”

“I AM A PONY! NOT A DOG!” Pinkie-X shouted, forcing herself to stand. She produced a gun out of her mane and aimed at Rick.

Rick was faster. A burst of blue-green energy wrapped inside orange fractal patterns burst from the device, hitting Pinkie-X in the face. A sound of ticking could be heard all around her. The gun went first, dissipating into thin shards that were basically sheets of paper before vanishing.

Just like how her universe had been destroyed.

Pinkie-X looked to Pinkie to speak her last words.

“Now you won’t know until it’s too late.”

Pinkie-X was no more.
Siron was the only true enemy left standing – and with a steel ball to the face, his muscles finally gave out. His limbs locked and he fell to the ground, unable to exert himself anymore.

Vriska produced her sword, ready to cut off his head in one fell swoop.

~~~

Sparky, Twiree, and Twix received the *evacuate sector* alert just like every other Twilight – directly in their minds. They quickly reached for their tokens. After all, if they were being told to evacuate, it was probably for a good reason.

They would have left had I not stopped them.

“You need to stay,” I said, drawing their attention. “M4 is in the middle of this at the Examail Center. You need to find her.”

Sparky blinked. “Wha…?”

To them, I just looked like a normal alicorn Twilight with an artificial eye in my chest. It was best if it remained that way, for now. But I needed to get them to act.

“Twix,” I said, addressing the one pony at the table who *knew*. “You *need* to go there. It’s what needs to happen. It is the next line.”

Twix’s eyes widened in understanding. “We need to go. Now.”

Twiree blinked. “What? What did that even mean?”

“It meant… Something. Yeah. We need to go to this Examail place.”

Sparky looked at my eyes. She saw somepony who was not just telling the truth, but telling an urgent one. “Okay. We’ll go, mysterious Twilight.”

I nodded. “It’s Twilence. Thank you. And for what it’s worth, I am sorry.”

“Sorry?”

But I was already gone.

Sparky stared at the place I had just been. Twix snapped her out of it. “Wonder about it later, we need to *move*. Something big is happening.”

They stepped outside to find the streets almost abandoned – Twilights had clearly listened to the evacuation order. They saw the Examail Center in the distance, but none of them were great at long-range teleportation.

Twiree solved this problem by transforming into a Reaper and carrying them the distance in a matter of seconds. She transformed back into her Flat form and grinned. “Instant travel in style, girls!”

The three of them ran into the doors of the Examail Center. Red lights were blaring on every wall in the building.

They saw bodies of Twilights – petrified, lifeless forms. Sparky knew exactly what had happened to them the moment she saw them. “…Brutalight.”

“What?” Twix asked.
“The pony who took Eve’s hearing. She’s here.”

Twiree and Twix readied themselves for a fight. They followed the trail of petrified corpses down a flight of stairs, to a level with conveyor belts continually feeding letters into teleporters. One of the conveyor belts was frozen, with an alert of some kind on it.

“Two of the Twilights aren’t petrified!” Sparky called, leaning down to check them. Their designations came to her as she checked – M4 and 4T. They had been the victims of a powerful sleep spell. Sparky undid the enchantment, but they weren’t going to be very aware of themselves for a while.

Maybe they could answer some basic questions in their grogginess though…


“GM… The Twilight… She was suspicious… Then… What…?”

4T pulled herself up and stumbled over to a console. Rubbing her eyes, she pressed a button. “Emergency shutdown! Code four-T-alpha-charlie-nine-pi.”

All the conveyor belts stopped in an instant. They could still hear the grinder operating, but all processes had been brought to a standstill. 4T grunted. “We… We’ll need higher clearance to purge the… Whatever… she’s doing… Ugh that was a powerful sleep spell…”

Twix was the one that saw her – a Twilight in a hard hat trying to carefully sneak up the stairs without being noticed. “Hey! Where do you think you’re going??”

GM glanced back at them with panic. “Ponyfeathers.” She teleported away.

Sparky had a pretty good idea where she’d gone, and Twix did as well. The two of them executed a short range teleport outside the building. Sure enough, there GM was, galloping away.

She pulled out her return-home token.

Sparky shot it out of her telekinesis with a magic laser. “No you don’t! After her!”

Twix didn’t even need to be told.

The chase across the Sparkle Census began.

~~~

One of Gyro’s steel balls hit Vriska in the hand, stopping her sword from landing the killing blow on Siron.

“What the fuck!?” She shouted. “Gyro, I had him!”

Gyro looked at his hand like he couldn’t believe what had just happened. “I… I was just told to do that. Who the hell…”

“Me,” a new voice declared, walking into view on top of a spherical piece of stone. He was a blue, humanoid, metallic creature with numerous blue spikes coming out of his head that resembled far-reaching groups of hair. His face was made of rigid metal – the only indication of life coming from glowing red points in the black recesses that were his eyes. “I told you. I’m also telling you to stop everyone from fighting or trying to kill each other.”
Jane tightened her grip on her sword. “You know what? Who cares about that guy?” She swung her sword down at Siron, only for Ball Breaker to induce Spin in the blade, tearing it from her hand.

“Please, stop,” the blue being said, holding a hand to his head. “Stop killing each other. The test is over because someone tampered with the settings. I’d like very much to know who managed to do that.”

Rick grinned. “Aha! I knew I had you there!”

“Rick, I was watching you closely, you did not have time to initiate your microverse plan. You can rest easy knowing it *would* have worked, of course I would have stepped in the moment you did it and blocked the new universe off. But even if you did manage to do it in secret, that would not have altered the interdimensional web holding you all here.”

“You…” Nova muttered, seething. “You did this! Who are you and *why*?”

“I know him,” Pinkie said. “I met him when I was running away from my problems. He’s… He’s like Melinda, except on a larger scale. Trying to fight him would be a bad idea…”

Jane wasn’t having any of that. “Oh, really? Well *I’m* not going to admit defeat, I-”

Gyro threw a steel ball at her. She retaliated, deflecting it with nothing but her hand, crushing the metallic weapon in her grip. She pulled back to throw the crumpled lump at the metallic man.

The ball sailed straight through the hologram that was the metallic man.

“In case it isn’t obvious, I’m not actually here. I’m safe and sound in my office,” he said, appearing in the middle of all of them. “I’m only making an appearance because something unforeseen happened.”

“You didn’t answer Nova’s question,” the Doctor said. “*Why* did you do this?”

The man looked at them all. “Think of this as… an audition.”

~~~

Eve, Cosmo, and the Grand Secretariat traced Brutalight to a bookstore – an abandoned one. They filed into the building to find not a single sign of Brutalight. All the books were well organized, there was no evidence of a fight, or much of anything at all.

It was just a bookstore.

Eve bit her lip. “Where is she? She went in here, we know it…”

The Grand Secretariat lit her horn, scanning the room. “I sense that she was in here very recently, but isn’t anymore.”

“Teleport?”

“I should notice if a personal teleport occurred… And then we should have still been able to track her physically.”

“…Did she go offworld?”

“Impossible,” the Grand Secretariat said. “She was never given a token, and the others will not work for her.”
“Unless she got help,” Cosmo said, running her hoof across a bookshelf. “I sense another pony in here as well. One with a significant store of magic…"

The Grand Secretariat frowned. “If somepony helped her, that suggests there are ponies in the Census hiding from us.”

“Probably are,” Eve said. “We get a lot of enemies from within on our side of things. I wouldn’t be surprised if you’ve got a traitor Twilight…”

Cosmo tapped the crystal that held Starlight. “How can we track the two of them?”

“Magical signatures analyzed. The non-Brutalight’s is strong enough to be tracked. They moved toward the back of the store.”

The three alicorns did as Starlight suggested, finding themselves at the back bookshelf.

“They grabbed one of the books,” Starlight said. “…It activated an enchantment. An extremely well hidden one, even knowing it’s here I can’t pin it down.”

Eve started pulling on random books, trying to activate it.

“Are we sure that’s a good idea?” Cosmo asked.

“I do-” Eve pulled on the right book, and the three of them were stealth-transported to the secret bunker room. The gears clicked below them and the center glowed with a soft blue power.

They didn’t particularly care about that. What they cared about was Brutalight and the ponies she was with.

Brutalight saw them. “Fuck.”

Eve glared. “You are going back to Nautica, Brutalight.”

The blue power in the center of the room flashed, creating an active portal to a snowy world.

Brutalight smirked. “I don’t think so.”

~~~

Sparky and Twix ran after GM. The two pursuers had adopted a mounted pursuit – Twix offered the legs, and Sparky created a rocket-like burst of magical energy to propel them forward even faster.

GM glanced behind herself, a pained expression on her face. She teleported on top of a building. Twix followed with her own teleport.

“She’s got more magic than I do… Just a unicorn here!” Twix reminded Sparky.

“I’ll teleport next time,” Sparky said.

“And you have even less than me! Not to mention this little rocket boost! How are we going to- oh wait, right. Obvious.”

‘Obvious’ was Twiree transforming into a Reaper and flying overhead, firing orbital bombardment lasers at GM. The buildings she ran across were destroyed in an instant.

“We sure are lucky this place is evacuated…” Twix muttered.
“What *is* that!?” GM shouted back at them. “I… what!?”

“Twiree!” Sparky called. “A Flat. Hope you enjoy!”

GM decided that, clearly, fleeing wasn’t an option anymore. She spread her wings and flew into the air, sending a barrage of spells at Twiree’s hull.

“*THAT’S NOT GOING TO WORK.*”

GM paled, realizing Twiree was right. “No… No no no!”

Sparky pointed at her, smirking. “Do you realize now?”

“Just let me go! I… I’ll be forced to kill you if I don’t think I can win otherwise!” GM shouted, tears coming to her eyes. “I don’t want to do that! And… And if I do lose, I’ll be forced to kill myself! You don’t want that! Just… Just let me go!”

Sparky blinked. “Are yo-”

“She’s telling the truth,” Twix said, narrowing her eyes. “I think.”

“Twiree!” Sparky shouted. “Reapers can indoctrinate right? Start doing that!”

GM freaked out. “NO THAT IS THE WORST THING YOU COU-”

Twiree started *shaking* the air around GM with a super low pitched, droning *noise*. It wormed its way into GM’s head, trying to mold it like putty.

Sparky knew it took a while for Reaper Indoctrination to have any long-term effect, but when used directly the short-term scrambling of the thought process was incredibly effective. The way GM grabbed her head and started screaming incoherent gibberish was a bit beyond what Sparky was expecting, but she was going to take it.

“Twiree, see if you can trap her in your carg-”

Something in GM *forced* her to act against what she herself was at her core. “I’M SORRY!” A dark red beam shot forth from her horn, going right for Sparky. She raised a magical shield, expecting to be able to block it easily.

It passed right through the shield and her body. No part of her body exploded, no blood came out, and no bruises formed.

Her heart just *stopped*. Her lungs couldn’t move, and her brain was barely able to process anything she was seeing. Vision blurred to black, sounds that were probably shouts from Twix faded to nothing, and the sensation of ground beneath her fell out. It became void.

Did she even have a body anymore?

She had no idea. She barely had *any* idea.

She tried desperately to hold onto anything: idea, image, or otherwise.

*Corona…*
“An audition?” Nova echoed, glaring at the blue metallic man. “Care to explain?”

“Gladly,” he said, pacing around the area despite having nothing more than a holographic body. “Using a pre-existing network of dimensional connections, I created a program that would, when activated, scan an area of the multiverse for individuals who were versed in travel. Once it located these individuals, it would wait for them to translate – through any method – and intercept them as they were translating, bringing them here. I would then watch while these few dozen individuals interacted with each other. I would study how they fought, how they made allies, what their abilities and dispositions were.”

He motioned for Gyro to come to him. “Then I would take whoever I decided was worth pursuing to work for me. Gyro here was my first choice.”

“And the rest of us?” Allure asked.

“Those of you who weren’t chosen would be sent back to translation without any memories of the event. To you, it would seem like your friend just vanished in a translation accident. Since time in this universe means almost nothing in other universes, it would seem instant to anyone looking at you. None of you would be able to trace anything that had happened here.”

“…Slave-driving monster,” Vriska muttered.

“That is how you see me. It won’t be soon. Even though I had to end the auditions early, after I make what selections I can, I will send you back and you still won’t remember anything.”

Several gasps rang out.

“There are many of you trying to make backup memories, or write things on your bodies. That will not work. You will be returned as you arrived – well, assuming you’re still alive.”

“You’re not going to get away with this,” Jane said. “This… ploy of yours.”

“For all you know, Miss Jane, you’ve already been the victim of a similar ploy. How would you remember? I’m sure you’ve been exploring long enough to have translated somewhere and realized that, for some reason, one of the people you left with didn’t arrive at the destination. Sure, it could have been natural. Or it could have been someone like me.”

Jane didn’t have a response for that.

Sweetie did. “You’re just like the Beast.”

“Sweetie Chronicle, I am not a demonic entity with no purpose besides amusement and being evil. Those I take live the life of heroes. They retain their personalities, minds, bodies, powers, and everything that makes them them. They just cannot refuse my orders.” He snapped his fingers, a sound he was very satisfied with.

“You change them. You force them. Your only difference is that you don’t think you’re evil.”

The man shrugged. “Wouldn’t call myself good either. Merely necessary.” He put a hand to his chin. “Well, it’s becoming clear to me that I will not be able to figure out who messed with the network. But that is not something I need to know. I’ll just take who I want and wrap this up.” He pointed at Siron. “You, come here.”

Siron’s rage-filled eyes lost all defiance in an instant as something entered his mind. He walked to the man and took a spot beside Gyro.
“Gyro was selected because his tenacity and power set was exactly what I needed to keep you under control while I spoke. Siron, I chose you because you have power, drive, and had this actually been a contest, you were so close to winning.” He looked at the rest of the travelers. “I would have chosen Pinkie-X as well, but Rick erased her from existence. Therefore…”

“You won’t be able to put a chip in my head, magical or otherwise,” Rick muttered.

“Rick, come here.”

Rick’s eyes locked forward and he walked up to Siron. “…What the fuck. This can’t be real, I have a million different…”

“You are a dangerous one, Rick,” the man said, looking closely. “You ruined the society of the Council of Ricks. But let it be known, the Council? It was on a civilization level below my own. You may have had access to fantastical minds and technology, but I have things even you wouldn’t be able to comprehend. And since you’re always more effective in pairs…” he pointed at Morty, gesturing for him to come. Morty had no choice. “You too.”

“R-Rick? What are we gonna do?”

“Listen to the blue buckethead, apparently,” Rick muttered.

“You’ve g-got a plan, right?”

“I’ve always got a plan.”

“Your recursive mental double-reacharound has been destroyed,” the man said. “Clever trick you were planning, but ultimately foolhardy. And just in case… Rick, disable any other plans you have to defeat me.”

“Fuck you,” Rick muttered, pulling a strange blue orb out of his ear and throwing it off the edge of the platform.

“And if you sense it come back, you will tell me before it can do anything.”

Rick twitched.

The blue man walked to the edge and chuckled. “Do any of you know what this place is?”

The Doctor nodded. “A remnant.”

“Right on the money, Doctor! A remnant. Perhaps of the Weavers themselves, though I am personally of a mind it isn’t anywhere near ancient enough for that. It, itself, is an experiment in space and time, to bring the ideas of folding space together with visual illusions and gravity. Abandoned so long ago… What they learned from this, if anything, is lost to the annals of metatime. In other words, a perfect place to appreciate the true vastness of everything.”

“…You’re crazy,” Ditzy observed.

“Quite true. But I am quite effective.” He pointed at nothing. “Ivan, I choose you for daring to be clever enough to use illusions at a time like this.”

Ivan revealed himself to be next to Jenny, messing with some Numenera technology. He dropped it and walked to the other four.

“Wh- am I not good enough?” Jenny blurted.
“You’re just a billion year old child,” the man dismissed. “You have knowledge and power, but lack consistency. You’re more useful to me if you remain at your position in Dracogen Enterprises.”

Jenny fumed.

The man walked to Jane and Sunny. “You two… You two are very interesting. A powerful couple from a faraway dimensional incident. Old, wise in the ways of the multiverse, and a threat to most gods.”

“You bet we are. Why not take us? I’m sure we won’t find a way to kill you anyway,” Jane deadpanned.

“You’re less dangerous than Rick, and I’ve already taken him. What makes me hesitate is your desire to settle down. You already have a permanent home on Equis Vitis. You won’t be as effective out in the field with that attitude.”

“I’ll never be effective to you.”

“It would just take slightly harder-handed conditioning.” He nodded to himself. “I do think it is worth it though. J-”

“STOP IT!” Sweetie yelled, summoning her sword from the aether and holding it to Siron’s neck. “Stop it or I cut off his head, right now.”

The blue man held up a hand to make sure Gyro, Ivan, Rick, and Morty didn’t try anything. “You’re a clever filly, Sweetie Chronicle.”

“If you give me any orders I cut this guy’s head off without thinking.”

The man folded his hands. “I’m not sure you really will, Sweetie Chronicle, but you are correct in assuming I cannot take that risk. Not the least because I can’t actually condition you to me.”

“Why not?”

“There are certain individuals for whom conditioning would be dangerous. Those part of something larger, for instance. You have a powerful flow of ka, little one. One that it would be unwise of me to tamper with. It is the same reason I haven’t taken any of Pinkie’s group, despite Vriska being, quite literally, the catch of the millennium.”

“Gee, thanks,” Vriska muttered.

“So here’s the deal, Sweetie Chronicle. You have my Siron. You have leverage. If you return him to me, I will take Jane and Sunny as my servants, and then I will return the rest of you to your worlds. I will take no more – I would have liked Gilgamesh, but I can cut my losses. However, if you refuse, I will allow you to kill Siron and take some of the League of Sweetie Belles instead.”

Sweetie froze. “Are… Are you toying with me?”

“I’m making assurances,” he said. “I believe you’ll let Siron live with these conditions, regardless of if you were actually willing to kill him or not in the first place.”

Sweetie began to sweat.

“Take your time.”
The Grand Secretariat and Cosmo faced all the extra Twilights in the room. Cosmic and Harmony magic flew out in a powerful flurry.

This flurry meant nothing to the deaf Eve, who was focused entirely on Brutalight and the open portal right next to her. The dark alicorn had opted to *run* rather than face Eve, galloping for the opening. She lit her horn, preparing a teleport.

Eve was not going to let that happen.

She summoned her Stand. Nopony in the room could see it but her, and that was just the way she liked it. The three rings aligned perfectly, creating a disc shape. A swirl of blue and white energy coalesced in the center of the rings, indicating the activation of its ability.

The green energy of the portal died instantly, vanishing. The glow on the runes below them vanished, becoming nothing more than etchings in the machinery.

Brutalight whirled around with a sword – but found that her blade had not only disintegrated, but that her own telekinesis had failed her. She tried to cast a laser, but her horn was *dead*. Her internal organs twisted inside her, driving a feeling of sickness deep into her.

Brutalight pushed through it. She reached for a wrench nearby, finding that her hooves no longer had any traction to them. She didn’t care – she lifted the wrench with her wing and hurled it at Eve.

Eve’s horn didn’t even light up to deflect it. Some *aura* just shot the wrench deep into the side wall.

“What… What are you doing?”

“I could brutalize you in ways you cannot imagine,” Eve said. “Boil you atom by atom and yet keep your consciousness in a jar. Sew all your bodily orifices shut with thread made from essence of ants. I could throw you into Majora’s black hole.” Her eyes bored deep into Brutalight’s poor excuse for a soul. “But, instead, I’m just going to send you back to Nautica. That’s the difference between you and me.”

With a flick of Eve’s head, Brutalight was no longer in the Sparkle Census. She was back on a world covered in water, ready to begin cursing the heavens anew.

Back in the Sparkle Census, Eve turned to Cosmo and the Grand Secretariat. They had easily taken care of all the other Twilights. “Grand Secretariat, I need to place an anti-translation matrix on a planet.”

“It shall be done in only a couple of minutes our-time,” the Grand Secretariat said, already getting on her horn-phone to order some ponies around. She talked with them for a bit.

Cosmo looked at Eve. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine. She’s locked away again, and even if she did get translation knowledge, she still won’t be able to escape. *And* I didn’t lose it and kill her on the spot. So that’s good. Yes.”

“You’re still having flashbacks.”

“Of course I am! That mare traumatized me! I have dreams about her torturing me that never go away! But… But I am *okay*. I don’t feel like destroying an entire civilization, and I don’t feel like blowing Nautica up. I just… I just want her to stay there, forever.”

“Whatever you’re talking about, stop,” the Grand Secretariat said. “There’s a situation at Examail
Central. I need to shut down the entire letter system – someone’s hacked us. You need to go find your friends. They’re chasing a traitor.”

Cosmo and Eve glanced at each other, concern crossing their faces.

~~~

“Sparky!” Twix yelled, watching in horror as the human fell to the ground in an instant.

She’d raised a shield! Twix had seen it! But the beam – it had just gone through. Through everything. Not a scratch on her body…

Soul magic.

A spell specifically designed to kill without leaving any wounds that could be healed. Intangible, accurate, and brutal.

What’s Eve going to think? What’s Corona going to think? I got Sparky killed! I… Twix had enough awareness about her to dodge the incoming soul laser from GM.

“I’m sorry!” GM shouted again, firing another laser. “Orders! I… I can’t ignore them!” she grabbed her head, still reeling from Twiree’s noises. “AAAAAAAAAAAA”

Twix dodged another soul laser. “Twiree! Shoot her or something!”

“SHE IS TOO CLOSE TO ME FOR WEAPONS FIRE.”

Twix retaliated with a bolt of her own, missing GM by miles. “Then… jump away! Shoot from a distance!”

Twiree didn’t question this idea. She initiated a single-instant FTL jump. This destroyed every building from where she started to where she ended about a kilometer away.

The effect of the indoctrination lessened with distance. GM was able to gain some of her mental faculties back – enough to see the attack from the planetary bombardment laser come right at her. She swerved out of the way, but it caught her wing, burning it off.

She screamed. In that instant, GM lost all hope of winning the fight. She lit her horn, preparing to use her soul magic on herself.

Twix narrowed her eyes – she knew she was only going to get one shot at this. She fired off a singular, tiny magic laser at the falling form of GM. It hit her right in the horn, cancelling the soul spell and making her lose consciousness. Twix caught GM’s limp form in her magic. “…We’re gonna get that conditioning out of you, don’t you worry.”

Twiree floated back, slowly, before turning back into her normal form. “We got her!”

“Yeah,” Twix said, setting GM down gently. “We did.” She glanced over at the body of Sparky. “…But I don’t think she’s getting back up.”

Eve and Cosmo appeared on the scene in a flash of purple magic.

“Where’s the traitor?” Cosmo demanded, ready for a fight.

Twix gestured at the prone form of GM. “We got her. Bu-”
“SPARKY!?” Eve screamed, her voice cracking. She teleported right to the human, propping her body up with her telekinesis. “Sparky don’t you do this!” She levitated her glasses back onto the motionless face. “Sparky! SPARKY! Y-you still need to find Corona! You n-need to k-keep us from going too far! You need to show us t-the way! You… You need to save us from ourselves… You…” She couldn’t take it – she buried her face into the clothing of her old friend.

Bitter tears and wails of agony escaped the mouth of the Charter-Princess that day as she held the scientist who had been too pure for the multiverse.

From my vantage point on a nearby building, I wiped my eyes.

I left.

I couldn’t watch anymore.

It was too painful.

Who cared if the alternative was worse? That woman lived up to her name. She had a unique spark of light in herself. A spark that was extinguished by cruelty, necessity, and fate.

She never got to become a librarian.

She would have been happy there.

~~~

“What’s it going to be, Sweetie Chronicle?”

“I… I…” Sweetie glanced around nervously. *Just a few more seconds… Have to buy some time…* “Why do you keep calling me Chronicle?”

“Spoilers,” the man chuckled. Then he paused. “You might understand the meaning of the word in the future, you might not.”

“It doesn’t matter to her,” Pinkie growled.

”I can use it should I wish, Pinkie Pi- Wait… asking me a *question*?” he put a hand to his chin. “It’s almost like you’re stalling for time… What could you possibly be stalling for?”

Sweetie didn’t look down, but she knew – knew Thrackerzod had been moved right underneath Siron. Right under his staff. Sweetie had no idea how much longer it would take for Thrackerzod to regain her power, but…

“Sweetie, are you hiding something from me? Some angle I’m not seeing?”

“Yes,” another voice declared. “She’s hiding me.” The voice started out feminine and meek, but quickly became deep, guttural, and *authoritative*. “Look at the head while I sit at the feet!”

Thrackerzod leaped into the air, red returning to her eyes and darkness swirling around her. “BY THE NAME OF AZATHOT-”

“This was your plan? Seriously? The name of Azathoth means nothing in this secluded pla-”

“You aren’t transmitting from this universe,” Thrackerzod said, lighting her horn. “You left a connection open. By scanning your hologram I have found a way out.” A magic circle pentagram combo appeared in the air behind Thrackerzod, brimming with red, unholy light. “And I can use that.
The man sighed, snapping his fingers. The magical circle vanished in an instant and Thrackerzod fell to the ground. “I admit; that was more of a plan than I thought it was. But, sadly, I have more control over the fabric of existence than you planned for. Who was it coordinating this in minds behind my back? Vriska? Probably Vriska.” He turned to her. “I’m sorry, Thief, but your gambit failed.”


“And guess what?” Pinkie said, holding up a timer with ten seconds left on it. “Your time is up.”

“Time?” the man shook his head. “There is no time limit…”

“The Grand Secretariat is going to order the network of dimensional letters shut down right… about… NOW!”

The metallic man realized too late what she was referring too. In a universe parallel, the Grand Secretariat disabled all of the letters, recalling all of them for the time being and bringing the grinder to a full halt. The virus that had been placed in them – the virus that was keeping all the interdimensional travelers in the blue aurora – activated its destructor protocol.

Everyone but the metallic man himself was teleported to the places they were originally going to before being intercepted.

“Of course…” the man grunted, clenching his fist. “The Census operates on slowed time as well… Events can happen there while events happen here. Why didn’t I see that!” He growled. Now they would remember him. Remember what had happened here. What he was. Some of what he was doing.

He wouldn’t be able to operate in this section of the multiverse like that.

He could try to hunt down and kill all of them… But no doubt some had already sent messages to their governments, or made sure they wouldn’t just forget one day. Not to mention that the Doctor was one of them…

He would just have to cut his losses and get out of dodge.

The man snapped his fingers, summoning the five servants he had selected before time ran out: Gyro, Siron, Rick, Morty, and Ivan. “We’re leaving,” he said, opening a portal to another universe with ease. “All of you, time for orientation.”

Gyro smirked at the man. “They got you good.”

“Yes. They did. But it was pure luck. Nothing but pure. Luck.” He sighed. “I can admit defeat though. They’ve kept me out of their worlds. If that is a good thing or a bad thing, I cannot say, but they certainly won.”

“Pussy,” Rick muttered.

The man didn’t dignify Rick with a response. He just waited for them to cross through the portal before closing it. He cut the holographic transmission, leaving the blue aurora universe abandoned once again.
“FUUUUCK YOUUUUUU SHINY BLUE GUY!!!” Vriska shouted to the heavens, giving the clouds in the sky the bird. “Oh, did I not say that loud enough for your arrogant prick of a mind to hear? I said FUUUCK YOUUUUUUU! GET DUUUUUUUNKED ON!!!”

Pinkie and Flutterfree let out immense sighs of relief. “I wasn’t sure there was a way out of that one…” Flutterfree said, wiping her brow.

“We’re fine now!” Pinkie said. “Out alive, with all five of us, and with memories!”

Nova rubbed the back of her head. “Yeah…”

Renee stamped her hoof on the ground. “Girls.”

“Hrm?” Nova said, looking up.

“I need to go find my sister,” Renee said. “…One of her friends has just died.”

The four who had been celebrating and relieved prior were suddenly brought back to the cold harsh reality of the world. People had died in that horrid place – and not just bad people. Leaders. Friends. Lovers…

“You… You go do that,” Pinkie said. “I need to talk to Eve.” She shook her head. “Everyone else take the next few days off. We all need a break.”

Nobody complained about this.

As Pinkie left, though, something nagged at the back of her mind.

What is it I don’t know?

~~~

Allure did a head count.


No Sweetie.

No Brute.

Good, Allure thought. I don’t think I could have handled seeing her body.

Thrackerzod took in a deep breath and let it out. “I… I feel incomplete. And it is not because I lack Azathoth’s essence in me. The connection is restored. It is…”

“Brute is gone!” Bot wailed. “Why? Why did that happen?”

Squeaky tried her best to keep her features flat. “Death is a part of war. We knew… We knew what we were doing when we started exploring.”

“But we don’t do that!” Suzie said. “We don’t purposefully go to unknown places! We aren’t in danger as much as the others! We… We were going to have fun today! Not lose one of us!”

“Two,” Allure corrected. “Lose two. Sweetie isn’t here either.”

“She’s back wherever she came from,” Squeaky said. “Still looking for the shards of Twilight
“Sparkle.”

“You… You think she’ll be able to find us some day?”

“I hope so. I think… He would have taken more people had she not been there.”

Thrakerzod nodded. “She had a unique spirit. She deserves to keep the name.”

“And we will always remember her,” Allure asserted. “Her. Brute. And all the other Sweetie Belles we meet along the way.”

“Affirmative,” Bot agreed.

Renee opened a portal in front of them and walked out. She rushed to Allure and hugged her tight. “I’m so sorry…”

Allure couldn’t hold it in. She started crying. “Renee I… I…”

“I know it’s not okay,” Renee said. “It will never be okay. Ever. All I can say is that I’m here. I’m here for all you girls.”

The rest of the Sweeties hugged her – sans Thrakerzod, who stood to the side, looking down at the ground.

Her eyes watered.

She had lost everything that made her herself in there… Had become a completely normal unicorn…

She finally, after all these years, understood what it meant to be one of them. The pain. The sorrow. The limitation. The fear. The…

She couldn’t stop herself. She threw her body into the hug pile as well.

They remained like this for a few minutes.

Thrakerzod eventually broke the silence. “There’s something we need to do.”

Everyone turned to her. Wordlessly, Thrakerzod opened a portal to a very particular universe.

Equis Ultra Fast.

Sweetie Brute’s home.

Thrakerzod led them right to that world’s version of Carousel Boutique and knocked on the front door. The Rarity of this world, Mattie, opened the door, a harrowed look on her face.

“…You know,” Thrakerzod said. It wasn’t a question.

The world shifted. Mattie opened the door again, without closing it.

“…What i-”

“Just tell me, Thrakerzod,” Mattie said with her strangely Australian accent. “I need to hear it.”

Thrakerzod cleared her throat. “Mattie. I… We… I… I can’t do this.” Thrakerzod shook her head.

Allure gulped, holding out a hoof to keep Renee from talking for them. “Miss Mattie? Sweetie
Brute… is gone. It was a… A psychotic Pinkie.”

Mattie closed her eyes and bit her lip hard enough to draw blood. “T-thank you for telling me. E-excuse me. I need a… A moment.”

“We understand,” Allure said.

Mattie went back into her house – not bothering to close the door properly, just ‘editing’ it back into a shut position. She walked to her fridge and took out a gallon of ice cream.

She stared at it for a minute.

She threw it out the window. “Worthless tub of dairy…”

She grabbed a glass from the cupboard. Water. She needed water. Delicious… Sparkling… Water…

She threw the glass across the room into a nearby wall, shaking all over. “This… Isn’t the pain I want…” she managed through the tears that rolled down her face.

She crumpled to the floor and didn’t move for hours.

~~~

Jane and Sunny sat in their house in Appleloosa. They had been silent ever since they’d gotten home.

Jane talked first. “Sunny… Are we allowed to settle down?”

“What kind o-”

“I’m serious. Is there some force out there that just won’t let us enjoy our lives!?”

Sunny sighed. “…Maybe.”

“What’s going to happen next? I lose my translation as well? What about a part of our souls? Maybe we end up like that Pinkie, transformed by some psychotic demon-lord, scarred forever by brutal trauma? What if it only happens to one of us? Or… Or…”

Sunny pulled her in for a hug. “Jane. It’s… I don’t know. But if there is something out there, something messing with us, it doesn’t really matter. We will deal with whatever it gives us, okay?”

“…Okay.”

~~~

Jenny looked at her Wall Of People I Really Want Dead.

There were three photos, each with a plaque under them of the target’s name. There was The Professor, Carl Carlton, and Metallic Blue Asshole.

It had been a while since she’d declared war on a single person with enough passion to place them on the wall.

But he had Ivan. And he had toyed with her like she was a child.

He would live to regret that.
Whatever his name was.

…That was quite possibly the part that angered her the most.

~~~

Froppy hopped into the presence of perhaps the most powerful man in the entire United States of the Multiverse.

“Ribbit. You asked to see me, Ambassador?”

The man nodded. He was rather muscular, tall, and had long blond hair with curls at the ends. His suit was simple, professional, and also light pink. Above the pink suit was his face – the features were smooth, but not young, and his eyes were very serious.

“Yes. Froppy of Earth-MH1-Japan, you are receiving virtually every award we can give you for exemplary service to your country, as I am sure you are aware.”

“I am extremely honored.”

“Due to your exemplary service, I am also extending a unique offer to you. Instead of being put on assignment after a short break, you can leave my service permanently. You have given us more than enough information and service in this one outing than you could be expected to in your entire record. You’ve earned the right to settle down.”

“With all due respect, I want to be reassigned as soon as possible so I can search for Gyro.”

A smile came to the Ambassador’s face. “I expected as much. I will demand you take at least a few weeks leave, so a psychiatrist can check you and keep you grounded, but I will put you on a new team right after that. One with the explicit goal of not only finding this blue man, but also all the other travelers he had trapped in his game.”

“Thank you.”

“That is all, Froppy. You make your country proud.”

“Ribbit. Thank you again, Ambassador Valentine.”

~~~

Sparky Twilight Sparkle

Earth Vitis

2001-2026

Scientist. Mage. Friend to all.

Eve stood, staring at the gravestone of her old friend. The humans had been around earlier – Applejack, Pinkie, Fluttershy, and Rarity – but they had left. Eve knew they would be back. They would not be able to put their old friend out of their mind.

And neither would Eve.

But Eve stayed longer, because she knew… She knew that Sparky had wanted to leave. Had wanted to have a simple life.
Now? Now she would never have that life. Never realize what her potential actually was. She had been so young… And so tired of everything…

“Who’s going to make sure I don’t go too far now?” Eve wondered.


“…I know. But she was the one who called me out. I didn’t really have anyone checking me besides her.”

“I will, Eve. You know that.”

“Yeah…” Eve shook her head. “You know what sucks?”

“That she’s gone but because she’s gone you think that things have turned out pretty well?”

“Yeah. Yeah that’s exactly it. We have a good, strong tie with the Sparkle Census, because of her we were able to free everyone from that blue guy, and… And, well, if she hadn’t done what she did before that moment, everything could have crumbled. We could have lost people. …More than we did.”

Pinkie sighed. “Sometimes… Sometimes there is a time when death needs to happen. And when it doesn’t, things go wrong.”

“Are you thinking about Pinkie-X?”

“Yeah. We… That is, Pinkies… We have the power to change things. But sometimes, there’s a cost. She accepted her cost, which… Which really scares me. Will I accept a cost like that, someday? Will I become a psycho just because I can’t accept something?”

“At least you have a choice.”

“Choosing isn’t always good… And I know that knowing isn’t always good either, but… The way she spoke about it. It’s important.” She shook her head. “I don’t suppose you’d have any idea what kind of big secret I have no idea about, do you?”

“No,” Eve lied through her teeth, tears suddenly rolling down her cheeks at high speed. “No, I-I have no idea…”

Pinkie pulled her into a hug, none the wiser. “There, there, Eve. There, there.”

“There…” Eve said, choking on her breaths. Each one was painful.

~~~

The metallic blue man led the five newbies into his office. “And this is my office. It’s white right now, but sometimes I like it black. The aquarium can be stocked with any fish you feel like picking up, but that’s not a command. And that’s my desk, it…” he froze. “It has a person in it.”

“Collector,” the man in the chair said, rotating around. He tossed the Collector's second – a woman with pink hair and an eyepatch – to the ground. “You’ve stepped into my sphere of influence.”

The Collector didn’t flinch – but he was still afraid. “Flagg, why are you here, and what do you want?”
“Simple, really. Give me Siron back. I have need of him. Do that, and we will leave with no further interaction with you or your people. Keep him, and you’ll find out why the multiverse fears the name Randall Flagg.”

The Collector sighed. “Fine. Take him.” He snapped his fingers, removing the conditioning on Siron. “Take the Juju too.”

“Glad we had this talk,” Flagg said, smiling. “Have a nice day. And give my regards to Lightning when she comes to, she was most delightful.”

“Bastard,” Gyro blurted.

Flagg grinned at Gyro. “It would be a better use of your resources to struggle against your Master than to wage war against me.”

Gyro got the implication.

“Until our paths cross again, Collector.” With an exaggerated bow, he and Siron were gone.

The Collector moved to check Lightning. She was still alive, hardly damaged at all. “You four,” he told the newbies. “Tend to her every need until I get back. I have contingency plans to make.”

He left them with her, nervously tapping his knuckles together.

Was this a sign that the time was coming soon?

No… Not yet. But it was closer than he had previously thought.

~~~

Sweetie Belle returned to her part of the multiverse in an instant. She felt the comfy room in the palace and the rain again. The fuzziness went away.

Well, they had won, she guessed. That had been a bit sudden, but she realized it had to be. She hoped the League was going to be okay without two members… They seemed strong. She kept in mind what Pinkie had told her, and remembered the dimensional secrets she carried in her book. She smiled as she went from being in a comfy room in the palace, to dropping into the mud under heavy, unrelenting rain. Which would have been annoying at most if not for one little detail.

She had been dropped right in front of an enormous tank.

With a rather loud meep of surprise, she jumped and rolled out of the way, rain water and mud splashing around as she scrambled back and away from the gigantic tank. Her eyes wide and mouth agape as she took in the colossal machine that had almost rolled her over.

It rolled past, spraying her with a fresh cloak of mud and debris. “Stop! Stop!” a mare shouted, as it rolled on. Then the mare jumped from the rear of the tank into the mucky ruin. “She’s not dead and she’s not red,” she called out as she walked through the obscuring rain. Step by step she came into view.

The rain sleeted along white hide and black metal. The unicorn’s hide was interrupted here and there by obvious mechanical limbs. Red and black mane and tail lay limp in the wet as she approached. “Hey! You okay?” she called out.

"Guh." Sweetie spit out some mud and shakily stood up, blinking. "I'll be okay, I think... just let me
get rid of this." Purple and white energy emanated from her horn and slowly the mud dripped down until she was completely clean, if still soaked through to her crystal core. "I have to say, I've tasted a lot of mud but this is the worst so far," she confessed grumpily. "You really need to watch where you're driving that mech of yours, though. I almost became one with the road."

“Hey, look before you teleport,” the mare said as she nodded back towards the idling tank. “Come on,” she added with a nod over her shoulder. “Let’s get out of the rain.” She struggled to reach the back of the tank, her heavy metal limbs bogging her down more than once before she reached the rear of the vehicle. Hands popped out of the ends of her forehooves, and she clambered up, then looked back at Sweetie and offered a hand up... something most ponies didn’t do.

“Blackjack, what are you doing?” the stallion asked as he peered down at the strange mare.

“Offering someone we almost ran over a ride, okay, P-21?” Blackjack replied without averting her eyes or her easy, slightly tired, very wet smile.

"It's the kind thing to do!" Sweetie added, calling up to whoever was up there as she gratefully took Blackjack's offered hand. "I'm kinda lost here, you know? Just let me hang out until I get my bearings and then I'll be out of your mane. Pinkie Promise!"

Blackjack considered her a moment at that, then shrugged. “No problem.”

And the journey of Sweetie Belle continued…
Toph, master earthbender and inventor of the art of metalbending, was a very good architect.

It had only taken her a couple of days to create her team a huge house as their base of operations. She didn’t want to call it a mansion – since it wasn’t exactly the most comfortable of constructions – but it was certainly the right size. Everyone had their own room, something that passed for a ‘bathroom’, and a storage room. There was also a grand hall they had decorated with all sorts of plants, rocks, and other interesting things they’d found over the month they’d been stuck.

In that month, they hadn’t learned much. They had found many, many of the sackcloth things, all in advanced stages of decomposition. In the depths of a few caves, they had found entire ‘nests’ of the scraps. Best they could tell, these ‘puppets’ used to be alive, but something happened that killed all of them.

They had also found a few abandoned settlements. Ghost towns with no sign of a single living inhabitant. They had found evidence of people that had been eaten by the sackcloth creatures, which made everyone very glad all of them were dead and rotting.

Otherwise not much had happened. They had no difficulty surviving – Eve had kept sending food and supplies through to the universe, despite having no assurances any of them were still there. Eve had stopped sending personalized letter updates as of about a week ago, so they probably weren’t putting as much effort into resupply as they had been. It wasn’t much of a drain on resources to keep five people fed.

They actually had extra food since Toph would hunt an animal every now and then. Some of the creatures were familiar, while others were clearly alien beings composed of clear meats that tasted like taffy, to name one example.

Their days were simple. Be bored. Or go scouting. Lieshy was currently out scouting alone, leaving the other four of them to be bored.

Being bored meant ‘bonfire contest’ at the moment, even though it was the middle of the day. Toph was pretty sure this was just asking for a forest fire, but she really didn’t have a reason not to start a forest fire, since the forest wasn’t really keeping them safe from anything and nobody lived here. It would probably be healthy for the overly lush forest anyway.

Vivian turned around from her gigantic fire, eternally fueled by her magic. “Yay! Watch as my flames soar into the sky, spiraling smoke into hurricanes!”

“That’s nothing,” Corona said, chucking another log onto her bonfire location. She focused her magic, lighting the entire pile of wood up at once. “Au natural,” she commented. “And larger than yours, Vivian.”

“Hmph. We’ll let the others be the judge-“

Toph stamped her foot, activating a bunch of metallic plates inside her pile of wood. It lit on fire in a rather normal and uninteresting fashion. At least, until the arcs of lightning started sparking out of the pile.

Corona blinked. “…Why didn’t I think of that?”
“Because you wanted to have ‘big fire’ and didn’t think outside the box,” Toph explained. “This is why I’m the leader.”

“But I’m the scientist!” Corona said, indignant. “I’m supposed to be clever.”

“You’re all about to lose,” Lady Rarity decreed, coiling up some of her spirid silk in an empty bonfire pit.

“…Just the silk?” Vivian asked. “…What did you enchant it with?”

“Fun,” was Lady Rarity’s only answer. She lit her horn, placing a single spark on the small pile of silk. The white line vibrated for a few seconds before erupting into a tremendous pillar of green fire that seemed to have no top.

Toph paused, able to feel the intensity of the flame. Judging by the reactions of everyone else, it also looked far more impressive. “What are the terms of surrender?”

“I don’t have to make any food for a day,” Lady Rarity decreed. “All of you, cook for me. The Lady doesn’t need to be the only one with culinary skills.”

“I can cook!” Corona blurted.

“I can’t,” Vivian said. “Neither can Toph or Lieshy.”

“Liehsy isn’t here right now,” Corona observed.

“Speak of the butter,” Lieshy said, landing in between the four bonfires. “I see you’ve all developed a strangely similar insanity. Is it contagious? Should I hide?”

“Just make sure you bow to Lady Rarity’s every whim for a while,” Toph answered. “It should pass. Regardless, you’re back early, wasn’t expecting you to be back until tomorrow. Did you find something?”

“Yes. I found signs of recent habitation. There is a cabin many miles to the southwest. It was inhabited by at least two individuals, humanoid. There was a small garden next to it. I didn’t make contact.”

“Were you seen?”

“No,” Lieshy asserted. “I recommend we set out now, we might be able to make it before nightfall. Sooner if we don’t care how much Toph destroys the landscape.”

Toph craned her neck, smirking. “I say we go head out. Anyone got anything here they need to watch or wrap up?”

Corona shook her head. “Sadly, it looks like the ‘microverse’ idea Eve gave us in her last letter is a dead idea for now. I just don’t have the knowledge, energy, or background to create a new universe. And then step two is still just a bunch of question marks on the whiteboard.”

“Then I’ll put out these fires.” She raised a foot.

All four of Lady Rarity’s eyes widened. “Wait Toph you don-”

She had already shoved blocks of earth over all four bonfires. Three of them snuffed out easily. Lady Rarity’s decided it needed to explode rather than get snuffed out. The five of them went flying into a nearby tree made of fuzz.
Toph sighed. “What a great start to the day. Lieshy, get us down.”

“Right.”

~~~

“YOU THINK YOU CAN DEFEAT ME ALONE, LITTLE PONY?” The voice of the Eater of Worlds boomed with the words of the Stars. Fitting, for the Eater of Worlds was a Star, a Star who refused to die on this pathetic pony world. All it needed was power, and it would have that soon enough. The foolish mortals of this world thought they could kill the Eater with a giant moon rock, but all they did was play right into the cosmic entity’s plans. Now all that stood between the Eater and full resurrection was one pony. “YOU TIRE. YOU WEAKEN. ARE YOU AFRAID TO DIE ALONE?”

The Eater’s current physical form was tremendous – a mixture of many different materials and powers taking the form of a floating white snake rippling with green energies. Whirring blades of metal swirled around every section of the body while certain areas coursed with tentacles. It was truly a horror.

And yet, one white alicorn stood defiant against the Eater, despite being no more than a bug to it. Her body from the neck down was almost completely robotic, save for her brilliant wings. With her magic, she levitated a large gun and a mystic sword. Her mane was red and black, striped, whipping in the winds of the climax. “I am not alone!” Blackjack yelled, flapping furiously toward a nearby platform.

The Eater of Worlds struck, his blades assembling into a bizarre geometry that focused the local energy into a green beam of death. Blackjack didn’t run. She dove straight for the center of Eater, skirting the edge of the beam. “Everyone I’ve made friends with and who helped me is here with me now!” She fired her shotgun, the bullets empowered with silver moonlight. Visions of her friends flashed across her face – most of whom she had lost over her long, long journey. All of that loss, all of that pain, all of it… It was culminating in this battle.

“They are everything!” Blackjack contradicted. “Together, they got me here! Every one, every single person, who’s helped me get to this point!” More images flashed past her mind – souls. The Eater could see them, and it angered it to its core. “All of us, working together, as friends, have a power you can’t imagine!”

“THEN THE SOLUTION IS SIMPLE! ALL OF YOU MUST DIE! YOUR SOULS SHALL ACCOMPANY ME FOR ETERNITY!”

The smart decision would have been to back down, retreat, or regroup from the Eater’s next attack. But as Blackjack loved to remind everyone she came into contact with, she was not a smart pony. She dove right through it, trailing smoke behind as she moved. “No! No more! It’s time we’re free of you!” She attacked relentlessly – sword, gun, magic – raging against the being of death and destruction. “Everypony I’ve cared about and loved is with me! You’re the one who is alone! You’re no—”

And then destiny changed.
Had this universe gone on as it was supposed to, Blackjack’s body would have died here, defeating the Eater. The moon rock would descend, allowing the spirit known as Tom to take the Eater’s energy, and both would vanish into the night. The day would be won and Equis would live a happy future.

That is what happened in the world known as Equis Regarden.

This was Equis Fallout. Which meant there was an opportunity to change something.

A fleet appeared in the sky above Blackjack and the Eater. Neither of them knew what the ships were, their smooth designs unlike anything they had ever seen, all centering around a large central ship that resembled a gigantic flower. Next to this ship was an outlier, one of a more rectangular design.

“The fuck?” Blackjack said, no longer focusing on her battle. “Aliens?”

“…I KNOW NOT EITHER.”

The rectangular ship went up to the descending rock that held Tom, using a multicolored rod affixed to it to encase the rock in rainbow telekinesis, stopping its descent on to the Eater of Worlds.

The laugh that came from the Eater was horrifying. “YOUR PLAN IS NOW WORTHLESS!”

The fire that had been in Blackjack’s soul crumbled. That was it, without Tom, there was nothing. No way to actually kill the Eater. These aliens were probably invaders of some sort who were going to try to use the Eater just like ponykind had, and ruin more than just this one world with the corrupting power. She would fight, like she always had, but… But the fight wasn’t over. There was going to be more death, more hardship, more…

“You might want to cover your eyes,” a deep, guttural voice said. Blackjack was surprised to see two ponies behind her – a white unicorn with red eyes, and a gray mare with a brown mane.

“Sweetie Belle? Littlepip? The fuck!?”

“You should probably listen to Thrackerzod,” Littlepip said. She looked slightly older than Blackjack remembered. “It’s going to get really bright.”

The Eater moved to drive blades into all of them. Thrackerzod’s eyes flashed a deep, black color, erecting an eldritch barrier to twist the knives back onto the Eater. Thrackerzod spoke in the eldritch tongue, her meaning still clear to all who heard it. “Eater of Worlds, you will learn your place in death. Your influence on this world is over. You shall die, and this time you shall take no one with you.”

“WHAT DOES THE EMBODIMENT CARE ABOUT THIS WORLD?”

“Nothing. I work for them.” She pointed at the ships, which had began to shoot beams of harmonious white energy between each other.

The Eater of Worlds realized it might need to take some action. It launched a green beam of death at the central ship.

The central ship retaliated – a beam of harmonious white energy overcame the Eater’s green death easily. The harmony that wiped entire planets of evil was focused on one singular entity in a laser of overwhelming brightness. The Eater screeched, barely having time to form a thought as its essence evaporated into nothing.
Blackjack didn’t look away, even though she was already effectively blinded.

It had been over in an instant.

She hadn’t even needed to do anything…

All her friends. All those memories that had stood alongside her. All this power…

All pointless. Saved by a bunch of aliens from the sky.

She turned to Thrackerzod and screamed – despite not being able to see anything at the moment.

“What the fuck!?”

“We just saved you, Tom, and a lot of damage that would have resulted from the two colliding,” Thrackerzod deadpanned. “We would have liked to alter more, but we weren’t aware of this world until a few hours ago. You’re welcome, by the way.”

Blackjack’s features twisted in rage, tears forming in her eyes – but she couldn’t formulate a thought.

Thrackerzod sighed. “Let’s see if this ‘Tom’ is going to be more receptive…”

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Eve sat behind a double long desk, craning her neck. To her side was a gray unicorn mare known as Littlepip who had agreed to be called ‘Pippy’ for the time being, to avoid confusion. The room they were in was repurposed from one of the abandoned Stables of Equis Fallout, which had quickly been turned into sort of a ‘base of operations’ for the multiversal alliance. They’d already made an announcement to the powers of the Wasteland, and were giving them some time to process the offers of aid. Though, if Eve was being honest, the aid wasn’t optional. She knew that, in Pippy’s world at least, the world had rebuilt itself eventually. But there was still a lot of hardship they could avoid.

“Are you sure you’re ready to meet yourself?” Eve asked Pippy. “I mean, you’ve been in the unique position of not having an alternate until today. Do you just want her to walk in here?”

“I’ll be fine,” Pippy insisted. “She deserves this much, at least. Both of them do.”

Eve nodded. “I trust your judgment. After all, this is your world.”

“This is my past,” Pippy said. “…It would have been so much better if we could have arrived earlier. So much death could have been avoided.”

“We could arrive before the war started. That’s the best-case scenario.”

“Do you think we’ll find an… ‘Equis Ministry’ some day?”

“It’s certainly possible. If there’s one alternate version of your universe, then I expect there’s more. Who knows exactly how many?”


O’Neill’s voice came over the intercom. “You’ve got two visitors.”

Pippy echoed the announcement so Eve received it. She nodded. “Let them in.”

Blackjack walked in first, expression just as sour as Pippy rememberered it from earlier that day. They were clearly going to have to talk her down, but Pippy had faith they could. Behind Blackjack was a
mare almost identical in appearance to Pippy – but slightly younger, and without the tiredness in her eyes.

She still had the spark and drive. Good. Pippy missed that.

“I want some answers,” Blackjack demanded, taking one of the two open seats. “Start with why you look like Twilight Sparkle.”

Littlepip nodded slowly, taking a seat next to Blackjack. She was considerably less angry but looked a lot more confused, unable to take her eyes off Pippy.

Eve took a breath. “I am Evening Sparkle, but before that, I was Twilight Sparkle. Roughly a decade ago, I discovered the secret to interdimensional travel. Suddenly me and my friends were able to travel to different universes. Places where ponies spoke in lies, places where there were no ponies, places where space didn’t make sense, and any number of other bizarre locations. Instead of taking the path your world did – a path toward war – we took a path to other worlds. We made friends, allies, and are currently in the process of turning our alliance into a fully fledged, unified nation.” She gestured toward Pippy. “We found her world a little over a year ago.”

Pippy nodded. “In my time… Blackjack defeated the Eater herself. And I was stuck in the Single Pony Project for… A long, long time, even after the world had mostly rebuilt itself. I controlled the weather, keeping the peace. There was a lot more pain… But I want you to know that we did win. But when I heard that we’d found another world, one that hadn’t quite experienced all the pain yet, I knew we had to act.”

Eve nodded. “And I accepted her proposition. Stopping the Eater was just the beginning – we have a general idea of how things played out in her universe. With aid, we can improve the quality of life on this wasteland of a planet much faster.”

“You don’t have to worry about anything,” Pippy told her counterpart. “Go. Be with Homage. We can run the S.P.P. Possibly replace it with something better, even. We also have numerous sets of the Elements of Harmony and know who the Elements of this world will be. It won’t take long to get those fixed. You can have the life I didn’t get to have.”

Littlepip stared at her, eyes wide – and sad. “I… I will. Thank you.”

“What gives you the right?” Blackjack asked, suddenly. “Why would you just swoop in and change everything about a world? Do you do this to every one you come across!?”

Eve shook her head. “No. Most worlds we leave alone. But, Blackjack, your world is particularly dark, desolate, and full of death. We were in a unique position to not only provide help, but to provide help with foreknowledge. The years ahead will still be rocky, but nowhere near as rocky as they would have been. Your world will have direct access to all multiversal services we have to offer, including the ability to relocate. Equis Cosmic – the world where most of the ships in the fleet you saw came from – has plenty of space for refugees, if you decide to take that route.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about!” Blackjack shouted, slamming her metallic hooves on the desk, splintering parts of it off. “You just swooped in here and did everything! What about all those ponies who sacrificed? Who poured their very lives into this world?”

“They’ll still be re-“ Pippy began.

“No, they won’t!” Blackjack shouted. “They will be forgotten! Because you will be remembered instead! Their sacrifices mean nothing because you just had to show up and mess with things!” Her
wings flared in anger.

“Blackjack,” Littlepip warned. “You’re angry. They’ve helped us. We should be thanking them.”

“You still have Homage,” Blackjack muttered. “Your friends are still out there. You have a future. What do I have?” she gestured at her body and her wings. “I’m a motherfucking fusion of a crazy unicorn and Princess Luna. I am the Maiden of the Stars, the Princess of Winning. My friends are either dead, changed, or have some purpose in life. What do I have? What do they have?”

“You’re being selfish,” Eve said, the slightest hint of distaste in her mouth. “Would you rather we did nothing? Because we could have. You would be dead. Tom would be dead. And the millions who will die in the coming years would also be dead. What makes you think the fulfillment of your quest is more important than that?”

“It’s not just my quest, Evening,” Blackjack muttered. “I know hundreds of ponies who poured their lives into making the world improve just slightly. Ponies who became devoted to the idea that they must do better. Do you see what your interference means? It means all that effort to do better was pointless! It would have been fixed by you regardless of what they did!”

Eve sighed. “Blackjack, don’t sell yourself or those hundreds of other ponies short. What you’ve done – especially you, from what I’ve heard – is more impressive than anything we do or can do. We just have resources and power. You, with none of that, fought against a world that wanted you dead, and won. Had we not arrived, you would have still beat the Eater. Know this, Blackjack.”

Blackjack looked like she wanted to scream in pain and anger some more, but Eve’s words had gotten to her. She was being selfish. She was focused on herself, and her relationships, and what she’d lost. These ponies really were helping with everything they had… And she was rejecting them. She sat down. “I… I’m sorry.”

Eve smiled warmly. “It’s okay.”

“…Where do I go now?”

Pippy smiled. “You can go anywhere. You can visit my world – Equis Regarden – or any of the others. As Security, one of the heroes of the Wasteland, it’ll be easy for us to get you a dimensional device and a license. You will be heralded as a hero. You could stay here and be a leader, the ponies will definitely accept you, considering what you are, but I don’t think you want that. Or you could just join some of the dimensional teams and go kill evil things in other universes. There’s a pony named Alushy I think you’ll like.”

“I’ll… need to think about it,” Blackjack said at last.

“I won’t rush you,” Eve said. “And don’t feel like you have to do anything. We’ve got this.”

Blackjack nodded slowly, mind a mix of conflicting thoughts and feelings.

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Spike of Equis Fallout was a full-grown dragon who had taken to using the many machines of the Wasteland as his eyes out in the world, becoming the Watcher, an entity that guided and assisted ponies on their adventures to make the world a better place. He had been a major part of both Littlepip’s and Blackjack’s quests. He still wasn’t sure to think of Eve and her otherworldly help, but he wasn’t going to fuss about powering the purifying essence of the Gardens of Equestria with alternate versions of the Elements of Harmony.
It was… hard to see faces that he remembered from so long ago again, but he was able to understand they weren’t the same ponies.

It was still a bit disorienting to talk to three Sweetie Belles at the same time.

“What did you want to know, again?” he asked them, still processing.

“You were aware of Puppysmiles, correct?” Thrackerzod asked.

“Yes. …She’s not alive, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“We… figured as much,” Allure admitted. “What we wanted to know is if you ever saw one of us – a Sweetie Belle – with her. As the Watcher.”

Spike raised an eyebrow. “No…? Should I have?”

Squeaky sighed. “This isn’t the right universe.”

“For what?”

“A member of our League is lost, jumping from universe to universe,” Thrackerzod said. “One of the universes she visited, she was with Puppysmiles and met you. We’ve checked both Equis Regarden and here… Neither was right. There must be another one out there, somewhere.”

“Ah. A lost friend,” Spike said, looking into the distance. “…I hope you find her, one day.”

“I hope so too,” Allure echoed. “It might not be for a long time though, going off what Pinkie says.”

Spike smiled. “Glad you’ve figured out that Pinkie Knowledge can be very helpful. Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if she was taken more seriously in the War…”

Squeaky shrugged. “We shouldn’t get hung on what-ifs, Spike.”

“Yeah. You’re right.” He returned to look at them. “So… I’m curious. You’ve been around a lot, right?”

“Right.”

“Did any Spike ever try to eat the Elements?”

The three Sweeties blinked.

“I… I don’t know,” Squeaky said.

“We should ask Eve’s Spike,” Allure said. “He’d know.”

“I think he’s here, actually,” Spike said. “Making sure the Gardens go off correctly.”

Allure glanced at the tall machine that Element Bearers from across the multiverse were working on. She did, in fact, see Eve’s Spike. He was clearly not a baby dragon anymore, but he still looked tiny in comparison to the two-century-old Spike she was standing next to.

Allure waved him over.

“I bet you feel relief,” Squeaky said to big-Spike. “The Gardens of Equestria… You’ve been keeping them safe for a long time, haven’t you? And now they’re going to activate, cure the
Wasteland of all the taint, and everything’s going to be sunshine and rainbows.”

Big-Spike chuckled at this. “You’re right. This… This is a relief to see.”

Eve’s Spike finally got to them. “What did you guys want?”

“Question,” big-Spike said. “Have any Spikes tried to eat an Element of Harmony?”

Eve’s Spike blinked. “Uh… Yes. That has happened. We do not speak of the incident.”

“…Now I’m curious,” Thrackerzod said.

“Nope, sorry, you don’t get to know anything.”

“Spike, we have at least three sets of the Elements of Harmony with us right now,” Thrackerzod said. “We can run an experiment.”

“Y-you don’t want to do that!” he assured them.

“Then spill the beans,” Allure said.

Eve’s Spike gulped, glancing over his shoulder. “Well… Uh…” he leaned in and whispered. “The one time it happened the Spike in question ate all six Elements, turned into a rainbow spirit, and made everyone he touched part of the rainbow spirit. Kinda like this universe’s Goddess.”

Everyone blinked.

“…Decidedly less amusing than I was expecting,” Allure admitted. “Is that Spike okay?”

“We were able to revert it,” Eve’s Spike answered. “But we don’t want other Spikes getting ideas. Okay?”

The Sweeties and big-Spike nodded slowly.

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General Toph and company stood at the edge of a clearing in the forest, looking at the house Lieshy had spotted. Even in the slightly ominous evening light, the house looked completely unassuming. Almost suburban with the white wooden edges, pale green roof, well-kept lawn, and simple garden.

They had only seen a single occupant outside, picking some tomato-like fruit from the garden. She was a blonde woman of average height and middle age with a rainbow butterfly-shaped bow in her hair. Her dress was mostly white, but with all the colors of the rainbow sewn around the edges and hemlines.

Clearly, there was at least one other occupant in the house, but they had not been able to establish a visual.

“So…” Lady Rarity said. “Perhaps we should just go up and knock? She seems nice enough.”

“Eyes are the worst traitors,” Lieshy commented. “Ponies are outlandish, as well.”

“Then I’ll go,” Toph said. “At least I’m human. Watch me, help me if things get out of hand.” She sheathed the Master Sword in its scabbard and walked out into the open. There was no reaction from the house when she revealed herself.
With purpose in her step, she walked along a simple cobblestone path to the front door. She walked up the steps of the small porch and knocked. The woman answered the door with a smile on her face. “Oh! It’s been a while since we’ve had a visitor!”

“Hello miss. I am General Toph Beifong, and I-“

“Are from another universe, drawn here through mysterious means, and are completely lost and want to know how to get home?”

Toph paused for a moment. “Yes, actually. Is this sort of thing common?”

“For this universe? That’s basically all this place does. For this area? Not as much. Ever since the sackcloth demons fell, there’ve only been scant numbers drawn here.” She smiled. “Come on in. Your friends can come in as soon as they feel safe as well.”

“Wait, how di-“

“My husband told me we were being watched,” the woman said, smile unwavering.

“Right.” Toph called back. “They knew we were watching them!”

“Seriously?” Corona said, poking her head out of the bushes. “Why didn’t they give any indication then!”?

“No idea! We’ve been invited inside though, so get over here.”

The four hidden individuals lined up behind Toph and entered the house. The interior was almost as unassuming as the outside, though they noticed a few magical artifacts on shelves that had no place inside a domestic abode. Lieshy noticed a few protective glyphs engraved above doorframes, presumably to ward off evil intention.

“Blumiere!” the woman called. “They came in, finally!”

The husband, Blumiere, sat in a plush green chair, reading a book. He looked up from his book, making it clear that he was not human. His skin was a deep blue and seemed to be composed more of magic energy than flesh. He wore a fine white cowl, a top hat, and fine gloves on his hands. The face he called his own was a mixture of a warm gaze, sharp teeth, and a monocle that suggested intelligence.

Toph was struck with the feeling that she did not want to make this guy angry.

“Welcome to our home,” Blumiere said, standing up and putting his book down. He smiled, managing to make the grin inviting despite the jagged nature of his mouth. “I bet you have questions.”

Corona pulled out a notebook, quickly looking for something. “You’re… Blumiere? As in, Count Blumiere? Are you Lady Timpani?”

The two of them clearly weren’t expecting this. Timpani put a hand to her mouth. “You… know who we are?”

“Yeah. We were sent here to find you,” Corona said. “…Got stuck here in the process, but at least we know Nastasia was right, you guys are here.”

Blumiere grabbed his hat and shook his head. “She never could let me go… And now she’s trapped
“more people here.”

“Maybe this is a sign, Blu. They’re looking for us. Maybe… Maybe it’s time?”

Blumiere’s gaze drifted to a dark, oak chest sitting on top of a nearby shelf. “Perhaps…”

“Time for what?” Toph asked. “What’s going on here?”

Blumiere took in a breath. “That may take some explaining. I assume you know the basics of how we ended up here?”

“Uh… Sorta?” Corona said. “There was a plot to destroy several universes and you two sacrificed yourselves to stop it.”

“That’s certainly one way of putting it,” Blumiere said. “I was responsible for starting it.”

“Blu, that’s in the past! There’s no need t-“

“Nastasia should have told them before sending them here,” Blumiere said.

Toph shook her head. “That may be true. But that doesn’t change anything, at least not yet.”

Blumiere nodded. “Of course. Regardless, after we sealed away the power that ate away the universes, we were sent here. We got to live our lives, together, in happiness. But we soon realized the world we found ourselves in wasn’t normal. This universe – called the Nexus by most – always draws people, things, and life from everywhere in the multiverse to itself. The term I’ve heard most is ‘Black Hole Universe’. You go in, but you can’t come out.”

Corona blinked. “That’s going to be confusing. We’ve already got ‘Nexus Universe’ as a classification for universes that link to lots of others, sort of like leyline anchors.”

Blumiere nodded. “It is confusing, but what can you do about the terminology?” he chuckled – a bizarre, scratchy, overbearing sound. “We became a safe haven for people who appeared on this world, willing to explain to them what was going on. The nature of this universe, the new situation in their life… We told them how to survive, and fed them if they needed it. There was a time when sackcloth demons rampaged this world, but after a group of adventurers came through much like how you are now, they all became lifeless.”

“Sounds like quite the story there,” Lady Rarity observed.

“I wouldn’t really know. What exactly they did is beyond me. I do know that after the sackcloth demons fell, civilization on this planet plummeted. People left en-masse to the stars and the great city of Rome fell. Timpani and I became alone again, with only the occasional visitor.” He gestured at them. “Your coming here… it may mean it is time for us to move on. A call from our past to return.”

“You don’t know how to escape the Nexus though,” Lieshy pointed out.

“There are rumors of ways out,” Timpani offered. “Cracks in the ‘unbreakable’ seal of the Nexus. We’ve heard many in our time – and all of them point off this planet.”

“So, do you know how we can get off planet then?” Toph asked.

“Yes,” Blumiere said. “Rome may be abandoned, but it had a spaceport. There should be enough materials to build a ship if we can’t repair one.”

Corona rubbed the back of her head. “Hoo boy… Building a spaceship. …Yeah, I could do it. It
would take time though. A lot of it.”

“And then we go into space and… what?” Lieshy asked. “Where do we go?”

“We scan the stars for answers,” Blumiere said matter-of-factly. “There are millions of races trapped within the Galaxy, we shall journey like so many have done to find our way out. Now… Now is the time to try and return home.”

Corona nodded. “The moment we get out, I can take us home. My device can cut through a large number of dimensional connections.”

Timpani smiled. “It’ll be nice to see them all again…”

“It may be a long while before we actually return,” Blumiere said, standing up. “But we will. I am certain of it. We shall set out in the morning. Timpani, pack your things. We’re moving. The rest of you… Sleep. We have extra beds in the basement for large groups like yourselves.”

“Thank you for your hospitality… And your knowledge,” Toph said with a bow.

“Oh, I’m going to cook dinner!” Timpani said, grin widening. “I hope you like special bread!”

“What’s special bread?” Corona asked, nervously.

“A special secret!”

“…I’m suddenly very afraid.”

Flutterfree was regretting inviting herself to Nova and Rev’s little get-together. The two unicorns were currently standing at the pulpit of Rev’s church, each with a book open. Neither were able to stop talking – or be simple enough for Flutterfree to really understand.

It was lucky they were doing this at late evening, when nobody came into the church, because they were saying a lot of things that could be taken really bizarrely out of context.

Nova was talking right now. “Right, so, say, hypothetically, Jesus was an absolute evil mastermind in a universe and lied to everyone always, somehow producing the same Bible you see here, by lies. We’ve run into evil versions before, none that successful, but you know.”

Rev smirked. “But here’s the thing, Nova. You have to take into account the remarkable consistency of the Word despite the vast differences in universes that have it. There’s some force keeping it consistent, despite different scenarios.”

“Falling back on a Beat argument, huh Rev? Shaky.”

“It’s a valid argument, Nova, and you know it.”

Nova smirked. “Well, even if that is the case, why does consistency matter? Even if it does tell the same story, how can it apply to everyone, everywhere, in every universe? It’s exceedingly Earth-centric and acknowledges nothing about other universes.”

“To answer that, I have to ask you something. Why do you think Earths are the most common type of world?”

“We don’t know for sure they ar-“
“They are,” Rev asserted. “I’ve been around a bit more places than you. Go ask Vriska to confirm if you must.”

“Fine. I’ll accept that for now. Why are they the most common?”

“To answer that question, we have to examine the way metatime works. Despite the existence of time travel, individual universes continue marching ‘forward’ in time. If you alter an event in one, it does not change another. This reveals that the multiverse is changing, evolving, and growing over time. If each and every universe had a moment of creation, well, it’s safe to reason that if you dial that back far enough… There was a first world.” She closed her Bible and smiled. “I believe that first world was this Earth. Everything is derivative from that first world. Therefore, the message applies to all of us, since we are technically all Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve.”

Nova snorted. “Heh. Eve is like a mother to us.”

Rev chuckled. “She does have that position, doesn’t she?”

Flutterfree rubbed her head. “I didn’t think it was possible to geek out about Theology… Clearly I was wrong.”

Rev blushed. “Sorry, we went a little deep there, didn’t we?”

“And then completely jumped into left field!” Nova smirked. “Anyway, what you say hinges on the first world existing and that it was Earth. There’s a lot of holes to poke in that one.”

“It’s still a cool idea, you have to admit.”

“Yeah. But I have t-“

The doors of the church opened, cutting the conversation short. A white cyborg alicorn stumbled in, mane dripping from the rain outside. She groaned, grabbing hold of one of the chairs in the back to keep her balance.

Rev held up her hoof, telling Flutterfree and Nova to be quiet. She trotted down to the alicorn, features soft. “Hey,” she said.

“Ugh…” the alicorn muttered, rubbing her head. “Where… am I?”


“…Ah. Celestia or… Luna?”

“Neither,” Rev said. “This is for the one true God, creator of all.” She helped the alicorn sit down. “Do you need me to call someone for you?”

“N… No. I don’t have anypony.”

Rev smiled. “…Then I can be here for you. I’m Rev. What’s your name?”

“Blackjack,” she responded, rubbing her eyes.

“Do you want to talk about what happened tonight that brought you here?”

“Out there… Yeah, things often are pointless. There are dark, horrid worlds where nothing means anything, and the darkness exists eternally…” She put a hoof on Blackjack. “But there’s more, you know. The fact that you did something, even if it didn’t do what you wanted, that still means something.”

Blackjack laughed. “That’s what everypony keeps telling me. ‘Hey, Blackjack, I know you did some cool stuff! Take pride in the stuff you did do!’ But… But I can’t! I fought forward knowing that those who died would have died for something. But… But…” She couldn’t keep talking.

Rev shook her head slowly. “I don’t pretend to know what you’ve gone through, Blackjack. I don’t even know if your struggles are over. But I do know you’re right.”

“I… I am?”

“About some things. Taking pride in what you did only goes so far, especially if people died along the way. Maybe it meant nothing – but it’s part of you. You, Blackjack, have those experiences, whatever they are. They mean something to you. And you can take those memories to help others. I see a kind heart in you – eyes that want to help everypony she sees. Eyes that see evil, and will extinguish it wherever it’s found.”

“So… Are you suggesting I go and find people to save?”

“That’s an option,” Rev suggested. “Or you c-“

“I DON’T WANT THEM TO BECOME THE FUCKING WASTE I AM!” Blackjack shouted. “You people helped and I can’t see any reason why that was bad but now everyone died for absolutely nothing and… And just fuck you!” She dashed out the front doors, slamming them with her powerful magic.

Rev blinked, eyes wide. She had not been expecting that response.

“Nova, call Eve,” Rev said. “Ask her about a mare named Blackjack. I think… we might have a problem.”

Nova nodded, pulling out her phone.

Flutterfree stared at the slammed doors, a thoughtful expression forming on her features.

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Blackjack had used the dimensional device without thinking.

Where was she? The device said the Hub. Right. The place. The place that’s the biggest symbol of this multiversal alliance.

Everyone looked so happy.

Fuck, why was she so upset about that? People were happy. Getting along. Ponies, humans, Gems, other races… It was so far removed from the life she had known. The life that had beaten her and battered her until she couldn’t take anymore. That had killed her, more than once. And apparently did permanently in an alternate reality. Just…

She hated herself. She was being such a selfish bitch.
And she couldn’t stop.

She had no friends to pull her out of this… Psalm was distant, who even knew where Scotch Tape was, Littlepip had taken the life they offered her like candy… Same with Spike…

“You look down!” a familiar voice called.

Blackjack was more than a little surprised to see Discord. “…I saw you die by turning into dust,” she blurted.

Discord blinked. “Well confirmation of my mortality was not something I was looking forward to today, but I’ll let it slide. I just saw a frowny face and figured someone needed some cheering up. How about a free ticket to a magic show? The Great and Powerful Trixie is performing with yours truly.”

Blackjack blinked. She really didn’t want a reminder of the Goddess right now. “I’ll pass,” she grunted.

“Oh, but I insis-“

Blackjack drew her starmetal sword and glared at Discord in rage. “I said NO.”

Discord backed away, sensing that, just maybe, the sword might actually do something to him if it hit. “…You clearly need help, missy.”

“Yeah. But as of yet, all the help that’s been provided only makes things worse. So kindly go fuck yourself. I know you can.”

Discord stared at her a few moments before vanishing.

Boo, Blackjack remembered suddenly. Boo. I could go talk to Boo. She’s… good at listening. But where did she go… I haven’t seen her since they came…

“Hey you, want a festivity potion?” A pink-haired humanoid creature asked Blackjack. The alicorn was struck by how plastic the creature looked.

“No,” Blackjack grunted.

“You really need one.”

“Go away. I’m not buying your things.”

“I’ll give it to you for fr-“

Blackjack teleported away, just to get out of the conversation. She grabbed her head – she needed to clear it before she did something stupid. Maybe she needed to be put in a medical simulation again, just to get her through these thoughts. Again.

Am I just doomed to suffer constant cycles of insanity? I mean, I know I’m insane, but seriously…

“Do you feel like the world is crushing you from all sides?” a voice asked – that of a man. Something about it made Blackjack calm, instinctively trusting the voice. She looked up, not as surprised as she probably should have been at the muscular statue of the human before her. He had blonde hair, a green headband with a crystal in it, and wore mostly yellow. He had a confident smile plastered on his face.
“…Yes?” Blackjack said, a bit confused by his presence.

“Let me guess what you’re thinking,” the man said, smirk unwavering. “You’re thinking this alliance has too much power.”

“…A bit. Are you a mind reader?”

“Just a man with a good sense for this sort of thing.” He gestured wide at the bustle of the Hub around them. “For instance, when I look at all the people here, I see naïveté. People happy when they by no means should be. They should fear what lies out there, instead of thinking they have the right to change things, isn’t that right?” Blackjacket nodded slowly. “Yeah… But… But what about all the good they do?”

“You don’t really believe in that. Do you want to hear some stories?” Blackjack repeated her previous motion.

“In the early days of the alliance, one of the worlds nuked a world to oblivion because it was deemed a threat. The alliance is currently using political pressure to force the Gems to conform to their perceived ideal of what is good, rather than letting them keep their culture. A race known for being proud warriors has lost almost all their identity as a people, falling into nothing more than public servants, their chief banished. The alliance interfered in a war on a world far below their level, and then refused to participate in another war they brought about on the same world. They killed the gods of various worlds, while keeping their own alive. The people who they allow to represent themselves are known murderers, liars, and thieves.”

“That’s… That’s fucked up!” Blackjack blurted. “How can everyone let them have that power!?”

The man gestured around at the Hub again. “This is why. They get luxury. Novelty. And power of their own. And above all else, they believe they are good. But there is no group that should have this much power, is there?”

“No. No there is not,” Blackjack said, standing up. She stared the man right in the eyes – and saw conviction in there. “Nice speech. Now tell me who you are and actually make your offer.”

The man smiled. “I am Dio Brando. I, and a few others, feel exactly the same as you do, Blackjack. We think this alliance has too much power. We think you would be a great addition to the team.”

Blackjack narrowed her eyes. “I don’t know… You sound borderline evil.”

Dio smiled, revealing sharp teeth. “That shouldn’t be an issue for you, from what I hear of your world. Working together with unpleasant individuals… You had to, where you came from, to actually get anything done.”

Blackjack narrowed her eyes. “True. But, you know, I’m drunk… Really depressed… And yeah, I’m probably being taken advantage of here. I like what you’re saying, but let me think about it a moment.”

Dio shrugged. “Of course. I will be in con-“ He narrowed his eyes. “…We’re being watched. Someone tailed you.”

Blackjack’s eyes widened. “What the--“

She felt Dio activate an ability of some kind. He was suddenly standing slightly to the left of her,
holding a yellow pegasus in his hands. The pony Blackjack had seen at the church.

Blackjack twitched. “You… You followed me?”

“I was worried!” Flutterfree called. “You looked so sa-“ she blinked. “I’m in his hands…”

Blackjack saw something very confusing happen next. A pinkish-purple spirograph came out of Flutterfree’s body, shining brightly. Something it did forced a tall, yellow humanoid spirit out of Dio – it had a flat head, pipes coming out of its back, and an overly serious expression. The golden spirit punched toward Flutterfree, but couldn’t reach her before she drove her vampire fangs into Dio’s arm and sucked.

Dio roared in surprise. The combination of his shock and the green strands coming out of Flutterfree made sure the attack of the golden spirit did not hit home – just hit Flutterfree in the shoulder, sending her flying.

Dio held his arm in pain. “Don’t you see, Blackjack? They’re hidden monsters!”

Blackjack nervously tapped the ground. “I don-“

“What the hell are you!?”

That came from a unicorn that looked almost the same as Rev, except she wore goggles and had a bracelet on her leg. The device in her hand, some kind of scanner, was flashing with so many red lights it looked like it might explode.

Blackjack realized she was pointing the device at her, not Dio.

“Dio, let’s get out of here,” Blackjack said. “Now.”

Dio nodded. Nobody even saw him open a portal – one minute he and Blackjack were there, and the next they were gone.

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Blackjack realized it was cold, first. Followed closely thereafter by dark.

She slowly realized she was standing on a lake of ice. She lit her horn to illuminate the area, revealing Dio and a few other shapes, including some four-armed red bug creature with a staff.

“Dio, I’m impressed,” the bug man said. “I did not expect you to get her for us.”

“Who are… you guys?” Blackjack asked, very warily.

“I am Siron. That over there is Ganondorf, and you’ve already met Dio. We are a small part of the group devoted to tearing power away from the alliance.”

Blackjack nodded slowly. “How do you plan to do that?”

“In time, Blackjack. In time. For the moment, let me try to understand you. You are clearly a proud warrior who understands exactly what it means for your struggle to be taken away from you.”

“…Yes.”

“At least you had it happen in one fell swoop,” Siron said. “I didn’t realize it was happening at first, because they called us friends. They showed us the multiverse, let us explore, gave us a world. But
they didn’t approve of our system of honor, of courage, and so they ironed it out of us bit by bit. The worst part? They had so much power, they didn’t even realize they were doing it. My people are no longer warriors – they are construction workers on a world far from their home. I have lost all those loyal to me. My people… are no longer my people. So I stand alone, now. I cannot reclaim what I have lost. But I can prevent them from crushing more cultures beneath their feet.”

Blackjack looked into his eyes – and she knew he was telling the truth about everything he said. Unlike with Dio, Blackjack was absolutely certain Siron was a man with conviction, a plan, and a reason to fight.

She also saw a bit of hopelessness in him. Something she remembered having in her own heart during her journey.

She held out her hoof. “…I want to hear more.”

Siron shook it. “Thank you, Blackjack. You know not what that means to me.”

A man in black appeared among them. “Ah, I see you got her.” He pocketed a mysterious black orb in his jacket.

“What are you?” Blackjack asked.

Siron held out a hand. “This is Randall Flagg. He is our benefactor.”

Flagg leaned down and extended a hand to Blackjack. “Glad to have you on board.”

Blackjack wasn’t sure why, but she hesitated before grabbing his hand. He felt cold to the touch. An unpleasant feeling ran up her spine. “…Hi.”

Flagg smiled. “Siron, a word with you.”

Siron nodded, walking away from the group with Flagg. When they were out of sight range, Flagg allowed his grin to become full – a truly unsettling image. “Siron, do you know what she is?”

“An alicorn princess with the tenacity to survive anything and the willingness to kill?”

“More than that,” Flagg said, taking a large book out of his coat entitled Project Horizons. “She has a special trait, Siron. One that ensures she almost always wins. Having her on our side… So long as we don’t let her change her mind, victory is ours.”

Siron folded his arms. “We shouldn’t bank on that.”

“Of course not. But it should restore some of the confidence that you seem lacking in.” Flagg glared at Siron threateningly. “If we fail because of you, or your uncertainty, I will not assist you further.”

Siron knew Flagg would kill him if there was failure. He accepted this. “I understand. I will not waver.”

“Good.” Flagg tucked the book back into his jacket.

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Jotaro Kujo and Rohan Kishibe arrived on the scene minutes after Blackjack had vanished. Rohan took one look at the state of Flutterfree and Starbeat and decided it would be faster to read them as books instead of questioning them. Neither had time to resist Heaven’s Door.
“You could ask for permission first,” Jotaro pointed out.

“I prefer forgiveness, not permission,” Rohan commented, flipping through Flutterfree’s pages. “She had no idea who Dio was, but she saw a Stand so she called us as soon as she could. She drank his blood, and is embarrassed that it tasted good. She had been watching him for a while before she was found, and she knew there was something about him that made her want to submit to whatever he wanted.”

“That’s Dio all right,” Jotaro said. How is he alive, though?

Rohan moved to the Starbeat book. “She arrived on the scene late. She used her Beat scanner to… A lot of this doesn’t make any sense, it’s all scientific data. Dio didn’t have much interesting about him. But the Blackjack pony had a signal type she had only seen before in Pinkies. It was exaggerated extremely in certain areas, and completely dead in others. She was clearly special, for some reason.”

“That would be why Dio wanted her,” Jotaro said, grabbing his hat. “Yare yare daze… How many times am I going to have to kill him…”

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Pippy sat on the edge of a ravine on her world, Equis Regarden. She rarely came back here – she was always working for Eve, exploring, or finding some new universe or something. It was a fulfilling life, and it honestly just felt good not to be here, surrounded by memories of a life she had given up.

But she was here now. Because she felt like she had made a mistake.

She sighed. “Jackie, I messed up.”

A white unicorn without a cutie mark raised an eyebrow. “Jackie? Littlepip, it’s Blackjack.”

“I go by Pippy now, and you know it. So you get to be Jackie.”

“Fine,” Jackie said, shaking her head. “How badly did you mess up on Equis Fallout?”

“I gave the other you too much freedom. I should have watched her,” Jackie hung her head. “When the other me just went to a simple life, I figured you would as well. But… she didn’t. She went in a downward spiral.”

“Sounds like me.”

“We think she’s joined Siron’s Insurrection. She was taken advantage of when she was emotional, told half-truths, and then…” she shook her head. “I should have watched her.”

Jackie whistled. “You’re right. That is a pretty big fuckup.”

“…Thanks.”

Jackie glanced at her cutie markless flank, telling her that she was talentless. “If you’re asking me for help, you know I won’t be able to stop her.”

Pippy nodded. “Yes… Yes I know. I just thought you should be aware. And… And say I’m sorry. I messed you up. I told Eve what to do. If I had just waited until after the Eater…” she shook her head. “I asked Eve to take too much of the pie. And we’re going to be the worse off for it.”

Jackie pulled her close. “Hey, I’m sure I’ll come around. I may be an idiot, but once I figure out I’m
being lied to or manipulated, heads will start to roll.”

“But will you figure that out fast enough?”

Jackie blinked. “I have no idea.”

The two of them fell silent.

Toph and company (which now included Blumiere and Timpani) stood in front of a church in the middle of a ghost town.

“This looks really familiar,” Corona said. “…A lot like the church on Equis Vitis.”

“I’m aware of this church, and know the people who ran it,” Blumiere said. “It was built before we arrived, by a man named Father Berton. He perished in the emergence of the sackcloth demons, and it was taken over by his apprentice, Reverend Glimmer.”


Blumiere blinked. “Fate seems to like to tie you to many individuals, it seems.”

Toph nodded. “Yeah. We know people. But if she was here, and is now on Equis Vitis… That means she found a way out of this place.”

“If they’re the same pony,” Lady Rarity reminded them. “They could be different versions.”

Corona furrowed her brow. “Maybe… But I know that Rev has a knowledge of the multiverse that is sometimes considered a bit too extensive. It would make sense – if she’d come from here, she’d know things.”

“Then we have a plan of action,” Blumiere said, pulling down his hat. “All we must do is follow Reverend Glimmer’s trail. …Somehow.”

Lady Rarity craned her neck. “Now is the time to check for clues…”

“Or you could just ask me for clues,” a skeleton in a dapper hat and suit said.

The seven of them turned to look at the skeleton.

“Good. You’re not running away screaming. That’s very good.” He laughed heartily. “Good afternoon, I am David, the sole resident of this ghost town. If an undead skeleton could be considered a resident.”

Toph shrugged. “I can’t believe you snuck up on me.”

“I move in mysterious ways.”

Toph folded her arms. “Fine. You said you had information?”

“That I do. Reverend Glimmer was the last one to leave town. She didn’t want to leave me, since I’m a bound spirit, but she realized she didn’t have much of a choice after I insisted she leave. Turns out, I like solitude. Odd, considering how much I talk… Regardless, she told me she was meeting up with a fellow named Mister Raven, and they were to take one of the ships off world to the Inner Edge of the galaxy.”
“That helps a lot, David,” Blumiere said, bowing. “Thank you, lost soul. Is there nothing we can do to free you?”

David shrugged. “I rather think there isn’t, and I don’t mind all that much now. I’ve had a lot of times to think. Oh, I just had an idea. Give me a lot of paper. I’m going to write a book. Or lots of books, perhaps.”

Corona summoned several tons of paper using her magic, followed by about a hundred pens. Despite how simple the objects were, the sheer volume of them taxed her considerably. “There… You are…” she took a moment to breathe.

David smiled – though, he could always be considered smiling, being a skeleton and all. “Ah, wonderful. Oh! I just thought of something else I can do for you. You need to get off world, if I have deduced correctly?”

“Good ear,” Lieshy deadpanned.

“Then follow me. I found something last week purely by accident!” He jogged toward the edge of town, the seven others following him. Blumiere used his magic to levitate his and Timpani’s overly large suitcase at a jogging speed alongside them.

They passed several sackcloth corpses, soon arriving at an area outside of town with… nothing in it.

“How’s nothing going to help us?” Lieshy asked.

David raised a hand and knocked against something metallic – and invisible. “Because it’s not nothing.”

Toph shook her head. “There is no way there’s just a functioning spaceship we can use. That’s just too lucky.”

“That’s exactly what it is,” David said. “Entrance is right here, even if you can’t see it.” He walked forward – and vanished.

 “…This seems fishy,” Lieshy declared. “Reeks, actually.”

Corona ignored her and walked after David anyway. The interior was suddenly visible – and it appeared to be a spaceship. There was only one room in it, but it was larger than most living rooms. The back was empty – presumably for things such as cargo – while the front half of the ship had a screen instead of a windshield, and eight plush chairs around what was clearly a holographic table interface of some sort. The floor of the ship was a pearly white while the walls and ceiling were laced with purple material that had a hexagonal imprint on it.

The table currently displayed an image of the Galaxy. It was an odd shape for a galaxy – the center was perfectly spherical, then there was a void without stars around that. The actual disc of the galaxy was that of a spiral, but there were lesser spirals within the disk. The Galaxy was a galaxy of galaxies.

Corona soon forgot this, because then she noticed the screensaver on the screen at the front of the ship. It had a picture of four friends standing in front of a purple crystal. The first was a version of Twilight with a strange eye artifact on her chest, the second was a rather plain looking version of Rarity, and the third was an aging human woman in simple clothing. The fourth…

The fourth was Vriska.
Toph walked into the ship and poked Corona. “What are you looking at so dumbfoundedly?”

“Vriska… This was her ship. Or the ship her old team had,” Corona mumbled to herself, taking a seat at one of the plush chairs. She placed a hoof on the table, and it accepted her input. “Computer, what is the name of this ship?”

“Orchid,” a robotic voice declared.

“Orchid… Computer, is the ship spaceworthy?”

“Affirmative. 98% operational.”

Corona smiled. “Toph, we just got the luckiest break we could have ever gotten.”

Toph laughed. “After being stuck for so long… I’ll take some luck. Maybe she left some behind in this ship.”

Blumiere, Timpani, Lieshy, Lady Rarity, and Vivian all entered the ship as well, taking it in. Blumiere dumped their giant suitcase on the ground in the back.

David tipped his hat to them. “Thanks for the paper, ladies. I wish you luck on your journey.” He left the ship. They could still see him after he left, but he could no longer see them.

“Thanks for your help David!” Toph called. “We’re in your debt!”

David just waved at them and shook his head.

Corona tapped the table with her hoof again. “Close the doors.”

The Orchid quickly sealed itself up with a soft hissing noise.

“Everyone, hold on tight,” Corona said, smirking. “I’m going to ask it to take us to orbit.”

Everyone sat down.

“There are no seatbelts…” Timpani observed. “Oh dear…”

Corona pressed her hoof onto the table again. “Computer, take us to orbit.”

Seatbelts appeared out of nowhere and strapped the seven of them in. The Orchid dropped its cloak, revealing its outer appearance to be like that of a lavender sunflower seed. It pointed its tip upward – and launched. It was gone in an instant.

David chuckled to himself. He hoped they had fun.

He also hoped they hadn’t forgotten anything important…

Miles away, in their abandoned base, another object was sent through the one-way opening. A single letter on a data pad.

Corona, it’s Eve.

I haven’t been sending you messages because… Because I was afraid to. Because I didn’t want to. Because I was scared.

But even if you are lost in another world, you still have the right to know. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you
sooner.

Corona, Sparky’s gone. She did a great thing, but it cost her everything…

Corona would never read that letter.
SCP-11947

Item #: SCP-11947

Object Class: Keter

Special Containment Procedures: SCP-11947-1 is to be contained in a standard containment locker at Site 19. Its location is not to be revealed to SCP-11947-2 through 6. If at any time it appears any instance of SCP-11947 knows the location of SCP-11947-1, the locker is to be moved covertly to another location within Site 19. SCP-11947-1 is only to be removed from its locker for testing if approved by the Site Director or someone of higher clearance. On its own, SCP-11947-1 may be treated as Safe-class.

Members of SCP-11947-2 through 6 are to be kept in adjoining rooms at Site 88 with one meter thick walls lined with dimensional negation field emitters. These rooms should be monitored at all times from three separate security stations by personnel with level 3 clearance. SCP-11947-4’s detonation collar is to be triggered by one of these agents if SCP-11947-5 or 6 does any of the following:

- breaches
- creates any dimensional anomalies.
- remains out of visual contact for a period of greater than 10 minutes. A verbal warning should be given at the 5 and 9 minute

Personnel are further encouraged to threaten to detonate the collar for other reasons, though are only allowed to actually do so with authorization from the Site Director or O5 Council.

When testing or meeting with SCP-11947-2 through 6, it is required to do so through the video feeds unless other interactions have been approved prior. When approval is granted, there are additional requirements for meeting each individual member of SCP-11947.

SCP-11947-2 and 3 must be wearing maximum psychic inhibition helmets for the duration of all in-person meetings or interviews. Additionally, SCP-11947-3 must remove all clothing. When testing without physical personnel present, these inhibitions are not required.

Sunglasses must be worn in the presence of SCP-11947-4 and under no circumstances is SCP-11947-4 to be brought in proximity with another SCP object that is not part of SCP-11947. See Addendum C for further details.

When personnel are interacting with SCP-11947-5, SCP-11947-5 must be blindfolded and restrained. Only maximum strength steel wire bounds are to be used.

SCP-11947-6 must be heavily sedated and restrained while SCP-[XXXX] is in the room when interacting. By SCP-11947-6’s request, there are no restrictions to be exercised when interacting.

No more than two instances of SCP-11947 should be removed for testing at any given time, unless all five are removed at once.

Description: SCP-11947 is a team of interdimensional travelers and the device they use to travel between different planes of reality. The device is designated SCP-11947-1, and takes the shape of a
disc-shaped pendant, 8cm in diameter, that can be worn as a necklace. The pendant has a number of dials on it that can be rotated to select a destination. The destination result – including name, power requirement, and safety – are then displayed on a small black screen in the center of SCP-11947-1. SCP-11947-1 can be operated by any individual with ease, though simply stumbling across a set of coordinates that work properly without assistance from the rest of SCP-11947 is difficult. Certain locations are ‘blacklisted’ and can only be accessed with the proper security codes. These codes are currently unknown to Foundation personnel.

A list of universes successfully dialed with the device can be found in Experiment Log A. Addendum A contains a list of all worlds mentioned by the members of SCP-11947.

Each member of SCP-11947 has identified themselves by a name, which vary from reasonably normal to distinctly outlandish. *(By which we mean they sound like something out of a kids’ book. - Dr L Black)*

SCP-11947-2 (“Renee Jackson”) is a female equine life form of a white color, roughly the size of a pony, though of a considerably rounder build and predatory body structure. SCP-11947-2 has a single conical extremity protruding from the forehead *(It’s clearly a horn, lets just call it that, ok? - Dr L Black)*, which appears to be a channel for minor telekinetic abilities. SCP-11947-2 displays a deep understanding of fashion and clothing, despite not wearing any such article other than a hat. SCP-11947-2 has also demonstrated a keen sense of observation, particularly with regards to clothing and social interactions.

SCP-11947-2 is classified by SCP-11947’s people as a ‘Rarity’ (on questioning, the group declined to elaborate on this classification system, seeming to be of the opinion that it was “obvious”). SCP-11947-2’s personality has been described as “emotional, overdramatic, and manipulative.”

SCP-11947-2 is the only member of the group to claim a “normal” name. The subject declined to give any explanation for this.

SCP-11947-3 (“Nova Glimmer”) is a female equine of the same species as SCP-11947-2, with a *pink* pale purple coat. SCP-11947-3 wears two items: a ring worn on the base of the *conical extremity* horn, and a long black bracelet on the front left leg. *(Why is it permitted to retain these items? - Dr L Black)* The ring appears to somehow augment the psychic abilities associated with the *conical extremity* horn via some form of wireless interface with the bracelet, whose function is to scan and provide data. Most of the data observed on the bracelet appears to deal with time or temporal mechanics in some way, although data for other, yet-to-be-identified subjects has been observed. SCP-11947-3’s mastery over their psychic abilities far exceeds that of SCP-11947-2. SCP-11947-3 has been observed teleporting, altering the flow of time, summoning simple objects from the aether, firing impact lasers, and providing minor first aid with the psychic powers.

SCP-11947-3 is classified as a ‘Starlight’. SCP-11947-3’s personality has been described as “rebellious, rash, and snarky.”

SCP-11947-4 (“Flutterfree Asquall”) is another female equine, similar in size and shape to -2 and -3, but without a *conical extremity* horn *(It's a horn dammit. - Dr L Black)*. Instead SCP-11947-4 has a pair of simple, feathered wings that allow for flight despite being too small to allow for such movement under normal conditions; although similar in appearance to those of a bird, these wings seem to have a drastically different skeletal structure. Additionally, SCP-11947-4 has a heightened sense of hearing compared to the others, irises that appear to be filled with blood, and elongated, fanglike canine teeth in an otherwise normal herbivorous mouth. These fangs are believed to be used to suck and absorb blood into SCP-11947-4’s system, although this effect has never been observed and the effect of outside blood on SCP-11947-4’s physiology is unknown. SCP-11947-4 has been
heard to comment that blood ‘tastes pretty good’. *(Unicorns were bad enough, but now a vampire pterripus? Sometimes I think the universe exists just to mess with us. - Dr L Black)* *(Addendum: that’s a winged horse you philistines. - LB)*

SCP-11947-4 has a secondary entity within it; referenced to by SCP-11947-4 as a ‘Stand’. SCP-11947-4 has been heard referring to it as ‘Lolo’; on questioning, it stated that this is short for ‘Lotus Locus’; no further explanation was forthcoming. The ‘Stand’ is allegedly usually only visible to other ‘Stand Users’, effectively meaning that it can only be seen by SCP-11947-4 itself. When activated fully, this entity manifests as a combination of brilliant green wires composed of sine wave patterns, framing a pink purple pink purple pinkish-purple *(it’s purple dammit - Dr L Black) *(Both of you stop that - Dr Bright)* spirograph. In its ‘resting’ state, the Stand provides SCP-11947-4 with long-range perception data. In its ‘active’ state, the Stand has an ability dubbed ‘Revelation’ which is described as ‘uncovering the secret nature of things’. Documented effects so far include forcing SCP-11947-5’s wings to appear, removing illusions, and awakening abilities within individuals even if those individuals were unaware of said abilities. This ‘Revelation’ effect can be activated unintentionally by simple proximity to SCP-11947-4. The Stand is only visible when in its ‘active’ state, though the accidental use of the ability does not force it to appear. *Site personnel are encouraged to think of ways to use this ability in SCP testing to uncover new anomalous properties. Experimentation with SCP-11947-4’s Stand has been discontinued indefinitely due to [REDACTED] interactions with SCP-[XXXX]. See Addendum C for more details.*

SCP-11947-4 is classified as a ‘Fluttershy’. SCP-11947-4’s personality has been described as “reserved, quiet, and empathetic.” SCP-11947-4 wears a detonation collar in accordance with containment procedures, intended to ensure the continued cooperation of -5 and -6.

SCP-11947-5 *(“Vriska Serket”)* is a gray-skinned female humanoid with several unusual characteristics, most notably orange horns and an eye with seven pupils. The subject has displayed numerous anomalous abilities, including enhanced strength, a high pain tolerance, and the ability to make a pair of deep blue wings, resembling those of a butterfly, appear and disappear at will. SCP-11947-5 can change outfits without removing any clothing, and store objects in a seemingly endless supply of Magic Eight Balls, outwardly identical to those produced commercially by XXXXXX, despite many of said objects being larger than their receptacles *(And no, we haven’t worked out where she keeps the balls, either. - Dr L Black).* SCP-11947-5 seems to possess some kind of ability to manipulate probability. This ability believed to be restricted to increasing SCP-11947-5’s own fortune while decreasing that of those within sight range. SCP-11947-5 has demonstrated extremely fine control over this ability, able to determine exactly how much ‘luck’ can be stolen from a subject without resulting in a immediate heart attack. This ability poses no threat to personnel so long as they are not within SCP-11947-5’s line of sight.

SCP-11947-5’s secondary ability is of significantly more concern. SCP-11947-5 has demonstrated phenomenally precise and powerful powers over the minds of almost all personnel. There does not appear to be any range to this effect, as SCP-11947-5 was recorded exerting its will on Dr [REDACTED] to transcribe in SCP-11947-5’s initial file from memory while he was at home, away from advanced Foundation security networks. This incident was only discovered when the file was observed in the hooves of SCP-11947-6. The duplicate file has not been recovered. Individuals with demonstrably high mental fortitude have proven able to resist the influence of SCP-11947-5 and the subject has not yet shown an ability to manipulate minds of whose existence she is not aware. All observing agents are never to reveal their faces to SCP-11947-5 for this reason. A proposal to upgrade containment to utilize SCP-148 *(“telekill alloy”)* has been submitted to command.

SCP-11947-5 does not appear to be classified within the system in use by SCP-11947. SCP-11947-5’s personality has been described as “arrogant, violent, and defensive.” SCP-11947-5 does not require additional restraints despite the extreme anomalous properties due to the detonation collar on
SCP-11947-4.

Of minor interest is the etymology of -5’s claimed name, which bears no resemblance to those of the rest of the group. Questioning on the topic elicited only a smirk and an offer to “demonstrate”, which was declined.

SCP-11947-6 (“Pinkie Pie”) is a female pink equine without the wings or conical extremity horn otherwise characteristic of the equine members of SCP-11947. Despite this lack of unusual features SCP-11947-6 is by far the most dangerous of all members of SCP-11947, and extreme caution should be executed around the subject at all times. SCP-11947-6 is by far the most cooperative and friendly member of SCP-11947, and is known to throw wonderful birthday parties for site personnel (How come I wasn’t invited? - Dr L Black). SCP-11947-6’s body, while appearing to be biological upon close inspection, is able to take on the consistency of many materials including rubber, cotton candy, syrup, and plastic. The subject is able to be compressed and expanded into a plethora of different shapes, allowing SCP-11947-6 to fit in places normally too small. SCP-11947-6 has also demonstrated an ability to warp space with no known limit. SCP-11947-6 has used this ability to teleport to multiple locations in Site 88 and is theorized to have a range beyond that. This spatial distortion also appears to allow for objects to be stored in some kind of pocket dimension, usually accessed through SCP-11947-6’s mane. Objects removed have included several dozen pastries, a warhammer far too large for SCP-11947-6 to wield, party supplies, another instance of SCP-11947-1, and a cannon. The mane in question has been reported to taste like rotting blood cotton candy. These abilities cannot be contained physically with the Foundation’s current resources, however alternative methods to keep SCP-11947-6 on site have been found.

SCP-11947-6 has demonstrated a high level of knowledge about the Foundation with no known source. Without fail, SCP-11947-6 knows when the cameras in the containment area are on, and has been recorded looking directly at even cameras that are completely invisible. No design of camera or sensor has been immune to this. SCP-11947-6 has shown intimate knowledge of site personnel history, events that happened at Site 19 far from SCP-11947’s containment area, classified information stored at other sites, and the existence of SCP objects that were assumed to be jokes until O5 Command revealed that most objects mentioned existed within the Foundation’s records (I bet all of them do, it’s just that we’re not allowed to know that much - Dr G Black) (I’m pretty certain this should be considered a security breach. - Dr L Black). SCP-11947-6 is intimately familiar with the contents of this file, quoting it regularly to site personnel, including sections of it that were not yet written at the time of quotation. This includes the prior sentence. And the sentence prior to this one. SCP-11947-6, apparently a fan of practical jokes, has quoted every sentence appended to this report before it was written, so it has been decided that no further information will be added to this paragraph.

Hi!

SCP-11947-6 has demonstrated the ability to edit the contents of this file. [REDACTED] No further details need to be recorded on this matter.

SCP-11947-6 has shown the ability to [REDACTED], but notably only did this when alone. It is thought the other members do not know of this ability.

It is possible that SCP-11947-6 has the ability to influence memory in some capacity, as no one on staff can remember what was redacted in the above paragraph.

SCP-11947-6 is classified as a “Pinkie”. The fact that it shares its claimed name with its classification has been deemed “concerning”. SCP-11947-6 originally gave many different names when asked, but observations with the rest of SCP-11947-6 revealed that most were just jokes. The subject’s
personality has been described as “bubbly, fun, terrifying, fun, calculating, fun, manipulative, and fun.” SCP-11947-6 has been observed, both by staff and members of SCP-11947, to love pranks and jokes, and serves as the leader of SCP-11947 as a unit. Her anomalous properties do not need to be contained with greater security due to the detonation collar around SCP-11947-4’s neck due to her cooperative attitude and desire to make everyone laugh.

It is possible SCP-11947-6 has an ability that endears individuals towards her, but investigations into this claim have been postponed. SCP-11947-6 has suggested the Containment Procedures be relaxed somewhat as a reward for her behavior, and it is likely the requests will be granted.

Under no circumstances lessen the Containment Procedures. - O5 Command.

Awww, you’re no fun, using your special object powers to be all contain-y! - Pinkie Pie-SCP-11947-6.

It has been recommended that SCP-11947-2 through 6 be classified as separate SCP objects. This suggestion has not been approved yet.

Interim file compiled by Dr G Black and Dr L Black (no relation). The Site Director has recommended this file be sent for review.

Additional Files, Addendums, and Interviews:

Recovery Log: SCP-11947 was collectively first encountered in the city of [REDACTED] on XX/XX/XXXX at 10:32 local time. The group was found walking through the streets, talking to civilians about our world, specifically asking questions about culture, leaders, and who they should talk to for ‘first contact’. They also revealed much about their own society and practices to said civilians, providing most of the information contained in Addendum B. SCP-11947’s peaceful, friendly demeanor endeared the civilians toward them, even those who had expressed fear responses at first.

Foundation personnel arrived on the scene at 10:54, claiming to be a diplomatic party. SCP-11947 believed everything they were told and followed the Foundation personnel into containment willingly. Dr. Gears filled the role of ambassador, discussing the multiverse and possible political relations. Dr. Gears was able to control the meetings for three sessions before SCP-11947 caught on that they were not, in fact, attending an ad hoc diplomatic conference. It was at this point most of the containment procedures were instituted. There have been a few incidents, but otherwise containment has been completely successful.

All civilians involved were given class A amnestics after SCP-11947 was contained.

Report: Multiversal Theory: In the interviews with Dr. Gears, SCP-11947 revealed much of what they knew about the structure of a multiverse. As of this report, none of this information seems to be falsified or exaggerated. Certain details seem to mesh with what is already known from research on other SCPs.

It is unknown if the multiverse is finite or infinite, but it is known to be organized into ‘Spheres’. Our universe is located in the human-dominated sphere (designated “E”), while SCP-11947’s worlds are primary contained in the nonhuman-dominated sphere (designated “Q”) with some spillover into the E-sphere. There is no information on other spheres (suspected to be at least two) as SCP-11947 has not encountered them.

Different universes are connected to each other via constructs known as connections. Each universe has a number of connections, each one leading to a different universe. These connections require
different levels of power to travel through, creating a sort of ‘distance’ between universes even though travel is always instant once a portal is established. Not all universes connect to all other universes, so in many cases multiple jumps are required to get to a specific location. Devices that perform multiple jumps at once apparently exist, but SCP-11947-1 does not have this capability.

Time and causality are not consistent between all universes. While it appears that some are linked to a single timeline, most are not. SCP-11947-3 revealed that, if this were not the case, the entire multiverse could likely be erased simply by going far enough into the past. Furthermore, the entire multiverse exhibits properties of ‘metatime’, that is, progressing onward as a whole even if universes have internal altered flows of time. It is also known that some universes experience one second of local time while others experience hours, though usually the flow of time is near one to one.

Multiversal civilizations appear to be rare in the multiverse. SCP-11947 has over a million universes in their Directory, according to them, and they know of fewer than ten distinct civilizations. Some of the civilizations are known to be dead, leaving behind ancient wreckage to be uncovered.

SCP-11947 also described an ‘esoteric classification system’ that could prove useful in analyzing SCPs. There are three primary categories of ability: Spiritual, Arcane, and Eldritch. Spiritual refers to ‘inner’ power, and can be Mental, Emotional, or Physical in nature. Arcane power refers to ‘external’ power, generally drawn from a ‘magic’ source. It is claimed to manifest as Aether-based (ambient power in the air), Objective (from physical entities), and Linguistic (using incantations). Eldritch is poorly understood, but has been described as power from ‘beyond’, requiring some sort of servitude to an entity or a force. The relevant powers can be Divine, Deviant, or Demonic, which has been compared to a ‘good-neutral-evil’ scale. It is known that many esoteric abilities come from multiple sources, and there is a theory forming within SCP-11947’s society that some abilities may come from an entirely different source, known as “the Beat”.

The Beat (also known as the Thread) is the largest mystery to SCP-11947’s civilization. They describe it as ‘a force of Fate, except when it isn’t. It’s everywhere, except it’s stronger in more places. It’s indirect, except when it curses people.’ Their observations on the Beat are highly inconsistent. It has been suggested that the Beat is [DATA EXPUNGED], in which case the Foundation has more knowledge about the Beat than SCP-11947 does. This is the only area of knowledge we have an advantage in, and even then it is uncertain.

SCP-11947-6 mentioned ‘the Tower’ in a private interview once only. The significance of this Tower is unknown, but it is certain that it is important in some fashion.

**Experiment Log A:** Foundation have used SCP-11947-1 on multiple occasions to examine other worlds. These have included:

- An identical version of the Foundation with the only difference being that SCP-11947 did not visit. *(So glad Dr. Bright was not on site when we found this one. -Dr G Black)*

- A version of the Foundation that actively uses SCP objects to subjugate the world to its will.

- A version of the Foundation where SCP objects study humans.

- A version of the Foundation where ‘Stands’ are commonplace and not considered anomalous. *(I find that hard to believe. -Dr L Black)*

- A world that is a computer chip of unknown design. The chip is an inch by inch square. A human cannot fit in the space this universe allocates. Trying to open a portal larger than an inch in diameter is impossible.
A world full of diverse greenery. No further information can be acquired due to the fact that every time a portal is opened, it is promptly plugged by a giant eyeball.

A world made entirely of SCP-682. (I am not surprised this exists. I am surprised we were able to close it before one of them got in. -Dr G Black).

A world where SCPs study Foundation personnel. This is distinct from the previous, similar world already mentioned.

A world where the Foundation is composed of equine beings similar to SCP-11947. Contact was made and it was discovered that their SCP-11947 was a team of humans from a place called the United States of the Multiverse.

[REDACTED] SCP-2317. [DATA EXPUNGED]

**Addendum A:** Aside from the worlds discussed in Addendum B that comprise an alliance, many other worlds have been mentioned by SCP-11947, including the following:

-A Hub world that serves as the center of the alliance detailed in Addendum B. The world was once run by ‘demons’ before they handed it over to them. (They aren’t actually what we would consider demons. It appears we aren’t the only ones with terminology issues - Dr G Black)

-A world that sounds strikingly similar to the popular video game franchise [REDACTED]. SCP-11947 is not to be informed of this correlation.

-A world where the sky is static. No elaboration was forthcoming.

-A world where there are many duplicates of virtually every individual. A war is perpetuated between Red and Blu (sic) armies perpetually with no known beginning and no known win condition. Individuals apparently appear in the world fully-grown and with memories installed that never happened.

-A world where everything was inhabited by beings known as ‘Flats’ that didn’t follow any rhyme or reason. Flats are low quality images that are given sapience. Known races include Reapers, Appuls, Humans, Ponies, and many unique beings. (There’s no way this place can be real. Stop taking them at their word. They are not above deceiving us just because they can.- Dr. Gears)

-A world with nothing in it at all. (I wish they’d elaborated on this. What sort of nothing? - Dr L Black)

-A world that is a large forest with significantly more space in it than other universes.

-A world whose society operates on ancient technology known as Numenera. The primary world in which the entity known as the University of Doors operates, an enemy of SCP-11947’s society with control over time.

-A set of worlds where [DATA EXPUNGED] called the Eldritch Embodiment. It is theorized that many SCP objects could originate from these worlds. The Embodiment is neutral toward SCP-11947’s society.

-A world that duplicates any universe that connects with it. Has been disabled.

-A world inhabited almost entirely by ‘Twilight’ entities, called the Sparkle Census. An ally of SCP-11947’s society.
Addendum B: The society SCP-11947 calls home is somewhat difficult to classify. It is in the process of becoming a single unified entity that is best described as a Democratic Federation in which each sovereign state can have virtually any form of government ranging from Republic to Monarchy, as long as they meet the loose sanctions. The higher government is planned not to have a single head - president or otherwise - and instead will be a Council of sorts. SCP-11947-4 admitted that an entity known as ‘Evening Sparkle’ could be considered the leader of the society.

Currently, SCP-11947’s home is not united, and exists in the form of an alliance between a handful of fully independent universes that nonetheless regularly act as a single entity. There is no overseeing government body, so all regulations are based entirely on political pressure from other members of the alliance. This apparently has caused a few issues and hiccups, and is the primary reason unification is being pushed aside from outside threats.

Despite this lack of consistent oversight, most of the alliance is known to cooperate and act as one, no doubt because unification is being pushed so heavily. Their foreign policy is believed to be very open considering their interactions with Foundation personnel, as SCP-11947 explained exactly what they were to everyone encountered who they were and what they did. They seek relations with most worlds they encounter, and are more than willing to assist any world in whatever problems they may have. Even after SCP-11947 was contained, they were willing to participate in certain tests for the sake of helping, though as time went on SCP-11947 became less and less cooperative.

It has been suggested that they have begun to view the Foundation as antagonistic towards their ideals of friendship, progress, and assistance. These ideals drive a large part of their collective society, compelling them to ‘help’ any society they think needs it. They have reported interfering with wars, deposing despotic leaders, and adapting poor societies into their fold. They seem mostly devoted to their idea of the greater good. They view themselves as heroes.

There are many worlds which are part of the alliance, but the following eight are participating in unification:


2: Earth Vitis: A version of Earth populated by humans (Usually we wouldn’t feel the need to state this… - Dr L Black) that has a strong connection to Equis Vitis, including alternate versions of many known individuals.

3: Earth Tau’ri: A version of Earth populated by humans, with advanced space-age technology focused around a device called the stargate. Also inhabited by a few alien races, who also form part of the alliance.

4: Equis Cosmic: A version of Equis with advanced space-age technology and Arcane abilities. The equine civilization owns almost their entire galaxy and is always open to refugees from other universes.

5: Elemental Nations: A simple world (technologically, approximately equivalent to the early stages of the Industrial Revolution) where the native humans are reported to have abilities relating to the four classical elements.

6: Equis Lai: Usually known simply as Lai. A world inhabited mostly by equines closely resembling, but with differing physiology to, SCP-11947. Further details are unknown.

7: Earth Stand: A version of Earth closer to our world than most of the others. It is claimed to be the
source of SCP-11947-4’s Stand. Stand powers are extremely varied, ranging from stopping time to reading people like a book. A version of this world was also accessed during testing with SCP-11947-1.

8: Gem Vein: A world inhabited by an alien race called Gems, artificial creatures of unknown origin. SCP-11947 had little to say about them, except that they’re the least friendly and cooperative of all the worlds, and the other members of the alliance have been pressuring them to lessen their authoritarian practices to a level where they will be accepted into unification.

The accomplishments of this multiversal alliance cannot be accurately estimated, but given some of the comments dropped about Equis Cosmic, it is best to assume they could easily subjugate a galaxy inhabited by space-faring species.

**Experiment Log 11947-3:** SCP-11947-3 was tasked with descending SCP-087 after a discussion with Dr. Bright in which the object in question was brought up by SCP-11947-6. SCP-11947-3 was clearly displeased with the arrangement but was otherwise cooperative. SCP-11947-6 provided her with the data recorded in SCP-087’s file, and this prompted SCP-11947-3 to prepare for the journey.

SCP-11947-3 was provided with a few dozen high-energy protein bars. The day prior, SCP-11947-3 infused them with her psychic power, declaring they would serve as a recharge when needed. A 75-watt floodlight was also provided. SCP-11947-3, aware of SCP-087’s anomalous effects, activated a ‘fear enchantment’ that would completely disable the ‘flight’ response while leaving the ‘fight’ response. SCP-11947-3 was equipped with a video camera, but no live feed, since the time dilation would render such a feature useless.

SCP-11947-3 was placed outside the door of SCP-087 and told to teleport inside. What follows is the transcript of the video.

SCP-11947-3: Right, so, camera on. Creepy door with far too much reinforcement, check. Magic fun bars, check. Fear moderation spell, check. Feeling of really not wanting to do this, check. Cursing Pinkie inwardly? Expect to double check that one later.

Dr G Black: Are you quite done?

SCP-11947-3: Yeah. But for your amazing records, why don’t I state my plan? I’m going to accelerate myself so I can move through the stairway not only a lot faster than that face, but also so you won’t have to wait outside so long. The bars are for molding time an extended period of time. I will talk the entire time so this camera with *eons* of data space will have something for the report.

Dr G Black: Nova can you ju-

Video feed shows the motion of Dr G Black slow to almost nothing. SCP-11947-3 teleports to the other side of the door, revealing the interior of SCP-087. As expected, the floodlight does not illuminate as far as it should.

SCP-11947-3: All right infinite staircase of darkness, just you and me. And apparently a face demon that causes intimate fear in whoever sees it. But guess what face boy, I’m fearless, so *heh*.

SCP-11947-3 returns time to normal.

SCP-11947-3: I’m in, in case you’re wondering.

Dr G Black: Thank you. Make it back soon.
SCP-11947-3: I plan on it.

Dr G Black: Good lu-

SCP-11947-3 slows perceived time back to a crawl.

SCP-11947-3: And now to begin my descent! Observation that might be interesting to you crazy nuttos: my magic sense goes a little further than the light, about a meter. That’s decidedly less than it should be. So there won’t be any rapid teleporting up or down. Just gotta walk.

SCP-11947-3 walks down the stairs for a few flights, then resumes time and listens.

SCP-11947-3: Another note: I hear that child crying. “Please” “help” “down here”, the whole shabang. Holy Celestia that’s creepy. Lucky me I don’t have to listen to it the entire time. I’d go mad otherwise.

SCP-11947-3 slows time again and devours one of the bars. Subject descends in silence for quite some time. Subject points the camera at the empty spot where a previous team had placed a floodlight, and the gash in the stairway. SCP-11947-3 only stops when the hole is reached.

SCP-11947-3: Ah yes, the hole. A bottomless pit in an infinite staircase.

SCP-11947-3 shines the light down the hole. No light returns until time is resumed to a normal rate, at which point a small flash occurs for two seconds.

SCP-11947-3: Fun. Too bad I can’t calculate the speed of light in my head based on my time dilation. You brainiacs can worry about that later.

SCP-11947-3 slows time again and fires a magical bolt down the hole. It vanishes before it leaves the range of the floodlight in the darkness.

SCP-11947-3: And this is the time where I must ask the question - do I descend the mysterious, bottomless hole physically? I’m going to go with ‘nah’. Why? Oh illustrious voice in my head, it’s because if something takes away my magic I fall to my death, or at least can’t get out. What fuuuuuuuun.

SCP-11947-3 continues down the stairwell. Subject stops suddenly.

SCP-11947-3: Okay, so, the woman who went down here turned around at this point and saw the terrifying face. Preparing backup spell - if my fear controlling spell doesn’t work, I won’t run down the stairs, but instead will teleport up and be able to run back to the top. Hoo-eee…

SCP-11947-3 turns around. There is nothing up the staircase.

SCP-11947-3: Guess I can’t expect it to be consist-

SCP-11947-3 turns back around and sees SCP-087-1, the face. SCP-11947-3 stops moving and talking, staring at the face. SCP-087-1 stares back. A few seconds pass. SCP-087-1 starts moving, but at a slow pace.

SCP-11947-3: Oh riiiiight, I have time slowed to a crawl. It can’t jerk forward right now. Heh. I was waiting. Least I’m not unresponsive right now.

SCP-11947-3 teleports behind SCP-087-1, looking at the back of SCP-087-1 for the first time in
SCP-11947-3: Heh. Gotcha. Now I’ll always know where you are. No scaring this unicorn, nosiree.

SCP-11947-3 descends further, SCP-087-1 in tow. After walking for a few hours, SCP-11947-3 takes a break, munching on a few of the bars, while keeping an eye on SCP-087-1.

SCP-11947-3: Resuming time to see if I can hear the kid. If that face freaks I’m probably going to try to kill it.

Time returns to a normal rate. The face stares at SCP-11947-3, but otherwise does nothing.

SCP-11947-3: Good facey. I can hear the child now. Whoop-de-do, the kid sounds closer. Maybe I’ll get to the bottom of this soon.

Time slows down again. SCP-11937-3 continues down. Video feed eventually starts to corrupt. Time stamp on video becomes indeterminate. Audio analysis reveals the following, albeit extremely distorted.

SCP-11947-3: Oh hey, I think this is the bottom. Took long enough. Let’s see… Uh… Yeah I don’t trust the bottom enough to return time to normal. Don’t see a kid, but I don’t see more stairs. I see a mirror here with the impression of facey’s face. Probably where he sleeps, I bet. And… Ow, okay, my hooves are burning… Ow…. OKAY OW NOT [Indecipherable]

Unknown: [Indecipherable] save me… [Indecipherable]

SCP-11947-3: How? This floor melts my hooves even when time is super slow! I get the impression breathing down here isn’t good either! And - damn, the light isn’t illuminating very far at all. Wait, talking? Wh [Indecipherable]

Explosive noises identified as originating from SCP-11947-3’s more powerful spells are recovered from the audio here, as well as a lot of gasps, yelling, and screaming. Video resumes several minutes later. SCP-11947-3 is walking up the stairway, wordlessly, the face of SCP 087-1 snapped in half and levitated in front of SCP-11947-3.

SCP-11947-3 does not make any comments until returning to the surface. SCP-11947-3 teleports back into the hallway outside SCP-087, leaving the face inside the reinforced door. Time resumes. Something loud explodes on the other side of SCP-087’s door.

SCP-11947-3: Here’s your video. Take the camera. I… I’m not going to turn off the fear moderating spell until you get me in some kind of containment. I don’t think it’s going to be pretty… Hah…

Dr G Black: As you wish. Take her back to the Site.

Video feed ends.

SCP-11947-3 was returned to containment. When interviewed, subject was largely unresponsive and could only answer questions in vague ways, as if the question was not understood. When told the fear moderation spell could be removed, SCP-11947-3 screamed for four hours straight while unleashing destructive ‘spells’ without any targets. Containment barely held. Upon coming out of the stupor, SCP-11947-3 was unable to speak, most likely due to damage from prolonged screaming. SCP-11947-3 does not remember anything that occurred during the period missing from the video. Besides expressing disdain over going through with the experiment at all, SCP-11947-3 seems
completely healthy.

This is one of those cases where you get answers, but they just raise a lot more questions. -Dr G Black

11947-4 Experiment Logs: SCP-11947-4’s ‘Stand’ ability is expected to be of particular use to the Foundation, given its ability to reveal the true nature of things. What follows is a record of all SCPs that SCP-11947-4 was exposed to.

SCP-914: SCP-11947-4 was introduced to SCP-914. The Stand had no observable effect on any of SCP-914’s mechanical parts. SCP-11947-4 remained present during SCP-914 testing. Numerous objects were placed in SCP-914 and processed on every setting with no reaction from SCP-11947-4. When [DATA EXPUNGED] was placed into SCP-914 and the dial was set to the ‘very fine’ setting, SCP-914’s enclosure glowed a soft red color. SCP-11947-4 suggested completing SCP-914’s process was ill advised. The room was cleared and SCP-914 was remotely activated. The resulting object, [REDACTED], took seven hours to successfully contain.

Probably should have listened to her. It seems as if we now have a way to detect ‘ill advised’ experiments though. - Dr G Black

SCP-093: SCP-11947-4 was shown SCP-093 on the surface of a simple hand mirror. Subject indicated that SCP-11947-6 had ‘warned’ her about SCP-093. SCP-11947-4 relayed a relatively accurate description of what SCP-093 does, aside from the anomalous properties it exhibits when seeking out mirrored surfaces. SCP-11947-4 demonstrated knowledge of SCP-093’s relation to internal guilt, its ability to transport individuals to other worlds through mirrors, and that the world visited was dead from the actions of [REDACTED], described by SCP-11947-4 as ‘a false god, or deity.’

When SCP-093 was moved within the activation range of SCP-11947-4’s Stand, it glowed a white color. When held by only the power of the Stand alone, SCP-093 retained the white glow. When held by SCP-11947-4, the disc took on a yellow hue. SCP-11947-4 theorized that this was due to a negligible amount of inner guilt. Subject stated that it had to learn to accept failure early on in the exploration of the multiverse.

SCP-11947-4 was asked to enter the mirror while SCP-093 was white. SCP-11947-4 refused to enter personally, but was willing to use the Stand’s long range observation capabilities to explore. The Stand was given a small transmitting video camera. When the white SCP-093 was pressed to the mirror, it passed through and created a portal to another world, as expected. The interior world was monochromatic on every viewing angle - outside the mirror, the camera, and through the Stand’s own transmissions to SCP-11947-4. The location was unlike the earthlike landscapes seen in previous tests, being a temple made of smooth, featureless materials. The glass-free windows led to nothing but complete blackness. There appeared to be no doors.

SCP-11947-4 commented that the Stand was splitting into two - one branch going to the windows, the other continuing to hold the camera. The split off branch went ‘outside’ and found nothing of interest. The camera-holding branch swept the field of view around the entire temple, finding nothing of visual interest.

SCP-11947-4 reported a soft glow on a central altar that the camera did not detect.

A voice became audible to all present; it was later described as “booming”. Voice designated as SCP-093-V.

SCP-093-V: At last, at last! A pure man has come! A- wait.
SCP-11947-4: Can you hear me? I’m not really there, and I can’t talk through Lolo… But I think you’ll be able to hear me anyway.

SCP-093-V: You are not a pure man. You are Flutterfree Asquall.

SCP-11947-4: And you are [REDACTED].

SCP-093-V: Your power is blasphemous. What makes you dare come into my presence this way?


Dr G Black: …Greetings. So, you are the being responsible for SCP-093?

SCP-093-V: Even more insulting than your presence. At least you have a seed of purity within yourself, Flutterfree. A faith. That man beside you has nothing. His world clearly does not contain what I seek.

SCP-11947-4: A pure man? Doesn’t causing a war work against that?

SCP-093-V: The purest of men will survive anything uncorrupted.

SCP-11947-4: Why do y-

SCP-093-V: Get out of my temple or I will take my presence to your worlds, Flutterfree.

SCP-11947-4 obliged, returning the Stand and SCP-093. The mirror returned to normal.

SCP-11947-4 later related that the entity from which SCP-093-V originated had an appearance, describing it as “a fractal made of white energy.” SCP-11947-4 related that not all of SCP-093-V’s presence was within the temple, most of it apparently being located within another plane of existence entirely. SCP-11947-4 did not have any explanation as to what this meant.

SCP-11947-4 would not go through a mirror with the yellow disc. Subject declared that it wouldn’t give the Foundation any more information.

SCP-1981: When asked, SCP-11947-4 said that SCP-11947-6 had not revealed much about SCP-1981 besides the fact that it was a disturbing video that featured a man getting cut up while talking. SCP-11947-4 was willing to watch.

The first viewing was done with SCP-1981 in an adjoining room, the video signal transferred to a monitor SCP-11947-4 could see. No new anomalous properties revealed themselves. SCP-11947-4 reported that it was certainly disturbing, but nothing that hadn’t been seen before.

SCP-1981 was brought before SCP-11947-4. Even after activating the Stand directly, no outward changes were observed. SCP-1981 was prepared for a second viewing, this time the tape remaining in the room with SCP-11947-4. The video began as normal and progressed as such until the 19:19 timestamp, at which point the image flashed with static for a second and revealed the dark figure of SCP-1981-1. The video cuts to red text that reads “WHY DO YOU DO THIS TO ME?”

SCP-11947-4: Oh, I’m sorry, I di-

Video text changes to read “I HAD FOUND THEM.”

SCP-11947-4: Found who?
Text reads “I SEE YOU NOW.”

SCP-11947-4: Yes, of course you do.

Text reads “YOU HAVE ONLY DELAYED.” It switches. “I WILL FIND YOU AGAIN.”

SCP-11947-4: What did they do to you?

Text reads “I ALWAYS SEE YOU.”

Video cuts to static. SCP-11947-4 seems dissatisfied and activates Lolo in full, touching both the screen and the video player containing SCP-1981. The static ceases, instead showing SCP-1981-1 in a previously unseen location resembling a hall at Site 19.

The video cut to text reading “STOP WATCHING.” The static then resumed; technicians were unable to restore the picture.

Personnel at Site 19 reported nightmares the following day. Whether this is related to SCP-1981 is unknown.

SCP-895: SCP-11947-4 admitted to being told about SCP-895 without being asked for this experiment. Subject demanded access to powerful amnesiacs in case the Stand acted as a normal camera observing SCP-895. The request was granted.

SCP-11947-4 approached SCP-895 slowly, with the Stand fully active and visible the entire time. Subject reported no visual manifestations. Approaching slowly, subject entered the red-zone of ten meters with no observed effect. Entering the five meter range did nothing as well.

SCP-11947-4 opened the top of the coffin, peering inside. The casket was empty, as it always was when viewed without cameras. SCP-11947-4 left containment. SCP-11947-4’s report is below.

SCP-11947-4: I think there’s nothing really there - nothing at all. Probably a spell on the coffin or something that detects artificial ‘eyes’ and endows them with madness of some kind. Lolo doesn’t show you what isn’t there, only what is.

It was later discovered that all cameras on-site that were active during the experiment manifested anomalous effects. The presence of the Stand increased the reach of SCP-985, though the red zone has not extended.

Addendum: The red zone for SCP-895 has been extended to fifteen meters due to [REDACTED].

SCP-343: SCP-11947-4 requested a meeting with SCP-343 without being prompted. The request was granted, with the requirement that SCP-11947-4 used the Stand.

SCP-11947-4 entered SCP-343’s room with the Stand active. SCP-343 waved a hand and the Stand vanished.

SCP-343: If you saw my true form, you would die. And you already knew that.

SCP-11947-4: So you are Him?

SCP-343: Not the one you want. Just an aspect, a shadow like all the others.

SCP-11947-4: At least you admit that.
SCP-343: Used to think I really was who they think I am. But it doesn’t take any time for someone who knows everything to realize this isn’t the right world. That’s how all of us start. We exist believing we are the Truth. And then something happens to change that.

SCP-11947-4: Do you thin-

SCP-343: Yes. I do think there is. But you didn’t need me to tell you that, did you?

SCP-11947-4: (laughs). Not really. I just wanted to talk.

SCP-343 and SCP-11947-4 proceed to spend the rest of their time talking about life. Nothing of any further interest to the Foundation occurs. SCP-11947-4 had a significant improvement in attitude after the meeting.

SCP-902: Experimentation on SCP-902 was ordered by O5-[X] once they had heard of SCP-11947-4’s unique abilities.

SCP-11947-4 had no idea what SCP-902 was. SCP-11947-4 admitted that SCP-11947-6 refused to reveal details because ‘it would be more fun this way’.

All SCP-11947-4 was told about SCP-902 was that it was a box.

When introduced to SCP-902, SCP-11947-4 reported hearing a ticking noise. When the subject approached SCP-902, the ticking ceased. SCP-11947-4 opened the box, looked inside, and examined it around all edges for a minute.

At this point SCP-11947-4 asked if the experiment was a joke.

When SCP-11947-4 left the presence of SCP-902 the ticking resumed.

So does this mean SCP-902 really isn’t dangerous? - Dr [REDACTED]

We can’t afford to take that risk. - O5-[X]

I could have told you any sort of testing on that box would have done nothing for us. But did anybody ask me? - Dr. Bright.

Addendum C: Testing with SCP-11947-4’s Stand has been discontinued after an encounter with SCP-[XXXX]. The event resulted in the deaths of 19 Site personnel and [XX] different SCP objects breaching containment across several different Foundation Sites. SCP-11947-4 had no control over this incident and expressed great remorse for what had taken place. Subject gave a report:

SCP-11947-4: There are some things that should be kept secret. When I walked into [DATA EXPUNGED], I felt the secrets swirling around me. I couldn’t stop Lolo. They all found out. All of them. The ones who didn’t think escaped now. The others are waiting. I… I may hate a lot of what you do, but you need to be on guard. The smarter ones will not be as easy to deal with. Revelation doesn’t care what it reveals, nor who it reveals it to.

I have submitted a proposal that testing with the Stand be resumed - it’s just too useful of an effect to give up. We just need to keep her away from Thaumiel class objects. -Dr G Black

Experiment Log 11947-5: XX/XX/XXXX: SCP-11947-5 was tasked with killing SCP-682. SCP-11947-5 only agreed to this after touching SCP-682’s mind and agreeing it needed to be destroyed. SCP-11947-5 walked into SCP-682’s containment and reduced the luck of SCP-682 to what SCP-
11947-5 considered ‘absolute zero’. SCP-11947-5 was extremely surprised that SCP-682 did not die instantly. SCP-11947-5 later stated it was expecting “spontaneous combustion, heart attack, and random manifesting black hole.” SCP-682 instead found itself unable to move without falling over, speak without biting its tongue, or attack without falling on its back. SCP-682 suffered several self-inflicted injuries of minimal effect.

After absorbing enough luck from various Class-D personnel, SCP-11947-5 produced a set of eight eight-sided dice and attacked with them, rolling straight 8s. The resulting attack, while impressive, just angered SCP-682.

SCP-682 did not appear to absorb SCP-11947-5’s nature after being attacked, but the large increase in stubbed toes and papercuts at Site [REDACTED] over the next few days suggests that there was a slight lingering effect.

Conclusion: not lethal to SCP-682 in any way, but very effective for restraint. SCP-11947-5 was very troubled and angered by SCP-682’s immunity.

Excerpts from Testing Log **SCP-978**, XX/XX/XXXX

**Subject:** SCP-11974-1

**Photographed Activity:** Sitting in its containment locker.

**Photo Result:** No change.

*(Well, I guess that proves it’s inanimate. - Dr L Black)*

**Subject:** SCP-11974-4

**Photographed Activity:** Being escorted back to containment by Assistant XXXXXXX following conclusion of testing with SCP-902.

**Photo Result:** Pinning Assistant XXXXXXX to the ground, wings flared, apparently biting him in the neck; subject appears agitated, while Assistant XXXXXXX appears deceased. When questioned, subject seemed embarrassed and distressed, and requested that the contents of the image not be disclosed to the other members of SCP-11974.

**Subject:** SCP-11974-3

**Photographed Activity:** Being escorted back to containment following experiment with SCP-087; fear moderation spell is still in effect.

**Photo Result:** Subject is standing outside SCP-087, wearing a labcoat and apparently levitating a clipboard and pen; a substantial quantity of blood is seeping from beneath the door. No Foundation staff are visible.

**Subject:** SCP-11974-2

**Photographed Activity:** Curled up under the bed in its containment unit.

**Photo Result:** Scene has completely changed. Scene is now a tastefully-appointed living room; subject is in the same position, now lying on a couch, along with a second, smaller white equine and an unknown human male, both of whom are displaying a great deal of affection towards subject. Subject has refused to identify either of them.
Addendum: human male bears a close resemblance to actor XXXXXXX XXXXXX, aged around XX years. This is approximately XX years older than Mr XXXXXXX’s current age.

(Well that might explain the Jackson in her name. What I wouldn’t give to hear that story. - Dr Bright)

**Subject:** SCP-11974-6

**Photographed Activity:** Being escorted to an interview.

**Photo Result:** Scene now shows a large party in the Site 88 staff recreation room; all members of SCP-11974 and most members of site staff can be identified, along with a number of unidentified individuals.

(There’s people in there it hasn’t even seen. How… - Dr L Black)

**Subject:** SCP-11974-5

**Photographed Activity:** Seated in its containment unit, one hand raised towards the camera in an obscene gesture.

**Photo Result:** [REDACTED].

(Dr L Black has been forbidden from further interaction with the subject.)

(Hey Lou, I think she likes you - Dr G Black)

((EXPLETIVE DELETED) you - Dr L Black)

**Interview Log 11947-6:** After hearing of SCP-11947-6, Dr. Bright made it a point to meet with the subject. Despite many Foundation personnel discouraging this as a breach of his personal restrictions, Dr. Bright was able to secure a block of time to meet with SCP-11947-6. This is expected to be partially due to SCP-11947-6 asking that Site 88 personnel stop ‘delaying the inevitable’. Dr. Bright walked into the room first. Before SCP-11947-6 could be let into the room, the subject appeared.

SCP-11947-6: Happy Birthday Dr. Jack Bright!

A cake appeared on the table; confetti is heavily spread on every available surface in the room.

Dr. Bright: So you did have something to do with this! Hah!

SCP-11947-6: You bet I did! It had to be perfect when I met you! (giggles) What should we do for your party, huh? I could grab your friends and family, but I think that would end our time together. Stupid grumpy guards! (turns to the one-way glass in a wall) You hear that? You’re all grumpy!

Dr. Bright: I wonder what they think that glass will do.

SCP-11947-6: One of the few things I don’t know!

Dr. Bright: What do you know?

SCP-11947-6: Loooots of things!

Dr. Bright: (Laughs) You’re everything the rumors suggested you were, Pinkie.
SCP-11947-6: I like you already. You don’t just call me BZZZRT S-C-P-ONE-ONE-NINE-FOUR-SEVEN-DASH-SIX. Or SUBJECT.

Dr. Bright: That’s the problem with all the stuffy coats who have no idea that rules are meant to be broken.

SCP-11947-6: And bent into pretzels.

Dr. Bright: And tied into little licorice whips and swirled above your head to turn you into a real cowboy.

SCP-11947-6: (subject produces a Western-style hat and a pair of firearms, loosely resembling “six-shooter” revolvers. On later examination of footage, no exact match could be found with any existing weapon.) IIIIT’TS HIIIIIIIGH NOOON!

Dr. Bright: I’m surprised they haven’t come running in to stop the interview.

SCP-11947-6: (shrugs) Just luck, I guess. (winks)

Dr. Bright: I suppose I should actually ask what I’m here to ask.

SCP-11947-6: Ask away!

Dr. Bright: Tell me how to get Dr. Gears successfully pranked.

SCP-11947-6: Oh! That’s a good one! Let’s wait for the video to go to static before doing that, though.

Dr. Bright: There’s a way to get that inhuman robot?

SCP-11947-6: Yep!

Dr. Bright: I can’t wait.

SCP-11947-6: You won’t have to! (winks at camera. At this point, the footage is lost to static for three minutes, nineteen seconds. At the same time, the interior surface of the one-way glass becomes coated in a viscous pink fluid, which later analysis identifies as interior paint. When the door to the chamber is tried, those who enter find themselves walking out of the door they just entered. Subsequent investigation has concluded that the footage interruption was due to a power surge caused by a temporary breach of containment by SCP-XXX, and completely unrelated to the subject.)

(footage resumes)

Dr Bright: (now wearing a sombrero) Tell me, Pinkie. Why are you still here?

SCP-11947-6: Because I’m supposed to be. Not for much longer, mind you, but I still have to be here.

Dr. Bright: You have enough time to remove Flutterfree’s collar. You could have escaped by now with the lackluster containment procedures.

SCP-11947-6: True. But then I wouldn’t have gotten to talk with you! As annoying as it is to be here, there’s stuff we do. Things we get to change.
Dr. Bright: Care to elaborate?

SCP-11947-6: Beyond Flutterfree’s tests, there’s also something I’m here to do. Two-three-one-seven.

Dr. Bright: What?

SCP-11947-6: It’s actually above your clearance level. You’d read that file and not really see what’s there. You might be able to figure it out, though.

Dr. Bright: Given me something to research, have you?

SCP-11947-6: Not really. Just a thing I’ll have to do. And there’ll be things you have to do as well.

Dr. Bright: You want to say something else, don’t you?

SCP-11947-6: Yeah. I can’t tell my team, not yet anyway. But it’s so dangerous. There are many SCPs that could… You know what? I’ll just expunge this from the record later. You better remember this! I [DATA EXPUNGED] and then [DATA EXPUNGED] and it all needs a bit of [DATA EXPUNGED] and of course I’ll leave tiny bits in the middle to confuse the [DATA EXPUNGED] out of them.

Dr. Bright: I would say you deal with a lot, but I deal with reptiles bent on the destruction of reality, nooses that demand sacrifices, and mysterious artifacts that try to eat souls. You might have it easy.

SCP-11947-6: Only for a while. The scope just keeps increasing. It doesn’t stop for a quite some time…

Dr. Bright: I kind of hope I’ll get to see that.

SCP-11947-6: Always curious! Don’t worry, we’ll be pen pals. Don’t ask how, just believe.

Dr. Bright: (laughs) Of course. Goodbye Pinkie, until we meet again.

SCP-11947-6: Goodbye!

End transcript.

(Note: When Dr Bright leaves the room, the door functions normally. Subsequent testing has revealed no anomalous properties. When questioned, SCP-11947-6 refused to explain why the door behaved as it did, commenting only that it was a “private discussion”.)

[O5 LEVEL CLEARANCE ONLY]

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SCP-2317: [Indecipherable]

SCP-11947-6: Wow, do you think you’re scary, trapped there in your chains. Yelling eldritch ramblings about the death of all things. The whole shebang.

SCP-2317: [Indecipherable]

SCP-11947-6: Grumpy much? Don’t like the idea that anyone can stand in front of you and not feel
fear? Are you perhaps afraid of me?

SCP-2317: [Indecipherable]

SCP-11947-6: You’ll never escape. You may weaken those chains, you may get ever closer to your freedom, but you’ll never actually escape. Do you know why? Because you don’t have time. There are things out there that make you and me look like ants of ants.

SCP-2317: [Indecipherable]

SCP-11947-6: Oh, me? I’m just a pink pony that throws parties. Nothing more, nothing less.

SCP-2317: [Indecipherable]

SCP-11947-6: Yeah, I’m lying through my teeth. Good catch! (giggles) Let’s say I’m an inversion. That’s the best description at this point.

SCP-2317: [Indecipherable]

SCP-11947-6: I’m going to go now. You won’t see me again. You’ll spend the rest of your life trying to convince yourself that what I said meant nothing. Then, at the moment you think you will have free rein - well, I’ll let you ponder that. Goodbye!

SCP-2317: PINKIE PIE!!!

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[FILE END]

Addendum Ω: XX/XX/XXXX: A purple equine slightly taller than all equine instances of SCP-11947 with both a horn and wings appeared in the containment chamber through unknown means. All members of SCP-11947 were removed from containment. SCP-11947-1 was not disturbed. Recapture has been deemed unlikely and unwise by site personnel. Due to this incident, this file will be archived and replaced with a single file for SCP-11947-1.

Hey!

I was going to leave a silly remark, just to make you wonder, but you know what? I’m not going to. I’m going to be serious with you for the first time since you captured us. Strange, since we’re not captured anymore! Heehee!

We’re gone. You can keep the dimensional device. Do whatever you want with it, we really don’t care. You already had objects that could do similar things anyway, though you’ll find that ours is much safer. Might even be able to solve a few problems for you!

But we’ve left, and I don’t think we’ll be coming back. Why? Because you were horrible. You treated us like objects, as little things for your hands to play with, to see what it did. Some of you genuinely thought we needed to be contained, but the rest? You just had to scratch that itch in your mind. Had we stayed much longer, you would have traumatized us. As it is, you merely angered us. Angered some of us to the point of wanting to kill you.

You want us to stay away. Because if we come back, it won’t be as friends.

I think you can imagine how that will go down. PINKIE PIE SCP-11947-6 PINKIE PIE SCP-11947-6
Does this mean you’re not available for my daughter’s birthday? - Dr. G Black.

What about taco tuesday? And our games? - Dr. Bright.

Oh I'll still be there for those, don’t you worry! I’m not a cancelling pony! - Pinkie Pie.

Update: This file has now been tentatively classified as SCP-11999 due to Pinkie Pie repeatedly altering it through unknown means.

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**Item #:** SCP-11999

**Object Class:** Safe Euclid

**Special Containment Procedures:** SCP-11999 is to be accessible only by personnel with Level 4 clearance and above. Otherwise, it is to be treated as per standard procedures for Foundation documents. Any copy found not under Foundation control should be treated as a security breach and seized in accordance with normal procedures.

Further editing of the text of the item should be avoided, and is considered unlikely to be necessary.

**Description:** SCP-11999 is a Secure Containment Procedures document which appears to either have minor anomalous properties, or simply be the target of an anomalous effect. It describes an object and a group of individuals, collectively identified as SCP-11947. Through unknown means, the document has been accessed and edited on multiple occasions by one of said individuals, several times in direct response to revisions made by Drs Bright and Black.

SCP-11999 is classified as Euclid not for its properties, which would otherwise rate a Safe classification, but for the fact that a second copy of the document is known to exist, transcribed by Dr [REDACTED] while he was at his home, and acquired by SCP-11947-6 through unknown means. This second copy is believed to be complete to that date. SCP-11947 is believed to have retained this copy. Even if it is recovered, there is no guarantee that further copies will not exist by then.
The central sphere of the Nexus Galaxy was unreachable – a globe of stars that were visible from almost every location within the Galaxy which barred all visitors. Life, magic, and energy were drained in the void between the sphere and the galactic disc itself. Machines died, teleporters never returned, and transmissions were scrambled. Attempts had been made to breach the inner sphere for as long as the Nexus Galaxy had existed, and none had succeeded.

Or, at least, none had returned. This gave credence to the theory that the very center of the Galaxy contained a way out of the Nexus, somehow.

Corona was starting to consider the possibility of organizing an expedition into the central globe of stars. They had found no sign of Rev in their journeys across the innermost stars of the Galactic Disc and it had been well over a year. Perhaps it would be a better use of their time to do the impossible and breach the center.

*We’d have to find a way to do it without just creating a suicide mission,* Corona thought to herself as she stared at the sphere of stars through the window of a space station. *And that… could take eons.*

She sighed, turning away from the window and catching up with her friends. She, Blumiere, and Lieshy were on the station to do some shopping. Ship supplies, maps of the next galactic sector they were going to enter, and information about Rev if possible. The interior of the station was orange and filled with hundreds of patrons of differing species. Humans were dominant, and a couple ponies could be seen moving to and from merchant stalls that ranged from propped up pieces of cardboard to highly advanced light shows that were supposed to be impossible to ignore. The group was so used to the sights at this point they hardly paid them any mind.

Blumiere looked down at Corona with a curious expression. “Thinking about it again?”

“Chances are it’s in there,” Corona said. “And you know it.”

“There’s *something* in there, certainly,” Blumiere admitted. “But is it a way out, or just a death trap?”

“One would consider death a release,” Lieshy commented.

“This universe does not have an afterlife plane,” Blumiere pointed out.

Lieshy raised an eyebrow. “Who said it had to have an afterlife plane to be a release?”

“Morbid today, much?” Corona asked Lieshy.

Lieshy huffed. “I didn’t bring up the Core. I just played off of it.”

Corona nodded. She opened her mouth to respond, but tripped over her boots, falling flat on her face. Lieshy chuckled. Blumiere found this so amusing he let out his signature laugh. “*BLEH HEH HEH heh, BLECK! Corona I told you to invest in new boots!*”

Corona groaned, glancing at her boots. From over a year of wear and tear, they were barely on her hooves anymore. “Where am I going to find new boots for a unicorn?”

Lieshy pointed. “That stand has a lot of boots.”
Corona rolled her eyes. “ lieshy, I didn’t process that doubt- oh.” Lieshy had apparently been speaking in straight, because there was a black stand covered in dozens of different boots. The sign on top said “BOOTED: Boots for every creature!” The owner of the shop was a velociraptor with green scales and a curious expression on his face. The three of them walked toward him, prompting him to light up with glee.

“Oh, customers! Welcome to Booted! I am Mr. Raven, and I can create a boot for every creature!” He bowed, as if extremely proud of this fact.

“...Raven?” Lieshy asked incredulously.

“I was a genetic experiment, so named to be the symbol of death and finality. Turns out I was more into making boots, but the name stuck. I don’t mind it that much anymore. Ravens are graceful and intelligent, you know?”

“Yep,” Corona declared, removing her old, battered boots and placing them before Mr. Raven. “I need a set of four that can fit my hooves like these.”

“I always carry standard pony boots!” Mr. Raven declared, pulling out a set of four pristine, white boots designed for hooves.

Corona tried them on, tapping her hooves around a bit. They weren’t a perfect fit, but they were certainly more comfortable than she was expecting. “How much?” she asked.

“Eighty creds,” Mr. Raven responded with a toothy smile.

“Fair price,” Lieshy commented. “First one in a while.” She pulled a card out of her mane and slid it overtop of a blue cube, transferring the creds.

“Thanks, Mr. Raven!” Corona declared, posing and feeling more than just slightly fashionable. She tossed her fiery mane back and smirked.

“Rein it in,” Lieshy deadpanned.

“Funny.”

Blumiere took a photo out of his pocket. “Have you seen this particular unicorn mare?” he asked.

“Is that... Reverend Glimmer?”

Corona, Blumiere, and Lieshy stared at the raptor in shock. Lieshy recovered first. “You’ve actually seen her?”

“Seen her? I know her! We left Rome together. Traveled for a while. We eventually split up though, since she wanted to find a way out and I just wanted to have a simple boot selling life.”

“And you have no idea where this ‘Tower’ is, do you?” Lieshy asked.

“Nope! I do know it isn’t within the Core, if that’s what you’re wondering. Before she heard about
the Tower she was seriously considering creating an expedition to the Core.” He scratched behind his head. “If you want to find her you’ll probably have to find this Tower, regardless of if it is a way out or not.”

“We’ve got something new to research!” Corona said, giddy. She began to prance around in a circle. “Finally! After all this time, we have a lead! Who knew it would be from a random boot seller on a station in the middle of…” she realized she wasn’t exactly sure where they were. The border of a sector, yes, but which one? She hadn’t been paying attention.

Lady Rarity teleported right to the three of them. “We have a problem!” she blurted.

“What?” Corona asked.

“The Rachikk found us.”

“Are they still mad about the warship? It was one warship! They have hundreds!”

“We need to move. The Orchid is hiding safely, but they were heading toward you three last-” She glanced over her shoulder. “Break for it!”

The Rachikk were yellow bug aliens that resembled a cross between a millipede and a grub. They had over a dozen legs that also doubled as arms. Early in their history, the Rachikk had discovered this meant they could hold a lot of weapons at once, and this went on to define who they were as a people. When a single one of their warships had been taken to the Nexus, their militaristic culture had easily given them an edge in the sector they’d appeared in, allowing for a small empire to form.

Corona and the others had left that empire weeks ago after an unfortunate incident. These Rachikk were persistent, to say the least.

Corona and Lady Rarity raised shields behind them as they ran, deflecting laser blasts, bullets, blades, explosions, and chemical bursts. They had only seen one Rachikk before breaking for it, so as far as they knew all these attacks had come from a single one of the over-armed bugs.

Blumiere held out his hand, tapping into the dark power that was his own. Swirling purple and black rectangles collected over his gloved palm, swirling in a dark whirlpool. With a sharp gesture from his other hand, a vortex appeared behind them, sailing directly at the Rachikk. Several of its limbs were torn off by the vacuum force within the vortex, but as previously mentioned, Rachikk were nothing if not persistent. It kept firing and screeching at them. “FOR RETRIBUTION!”

Corona lit her horn. “Brace yourselves!” She initiated a teleport, returning them to the docking bay of the space station. Lady Rarity took point, knowing exactly where the invisible Orchid was.

Unfortunately an entire team of Rachikk were between them and the Orchid. The unit may not have been able to see the ship, but they could see three ponies and a man of shadow.

Lady Rarity brought her hammer down upon them with a powerful THUNK. One of them was crushed to death in an instant while a few others had limbs torn asunder.

The remaining Rachikk fired their weapons relentlessly, forcing Corona to block all of them with her magic. “Can’t keep this up forever…” she muttered.

Blumiere summoned a void in the middle of the Rachikk unit, forcing a couple of the aliens off balance. One particularly resilient Rachikk didn’t care, opting to charge the four of them.

A sheet of metal from the floor of the station folded up and slapped the Rachikk in the face.
“I think To-” Lieshy began, interrupted when the sheet of metal they were standing on popped off the ground and launched them in the air. Toph must have stopped time, because the next thing they knew, they were inside the Orchid and the bay doors were closing.

Toph sheathed the Master Sword and dusted off her hands. “You’re welcome.”

“Jumping to FTL!” Vivian shouted. Corona saw a lot of red dots on the table’s display. How had the Rachikk gotten that many ships here? That doesn’t make any sense!

Her worries were laid to rest – the red dots vanished the moment the Orchid jumped to FTL. It was, once again, smooth sailing.

“So, how was your trip?” Timpani asked, smiling warmly as if nothing had just happened.

“We have a lead,” Blumiere said, adjusting his hat. “Search for The Dark Tower on the Galactic Network.”

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Rohan Kishibe hated fighting in snow.

The one thing he hated more than fighting in snow was fighting an enemy in snow that had no eyes. Without eyes, Heaven’s Door’s ability could not take effect, and the physical attributes of Heaven’s Door were rather pathetic. One would think that, since they were fighting a being without a Stand, Heaven’s Door would be able to do something since only Stands could affect other Stands.

As it turned out eldritch beings could hurt Stands anyway.

The black, tentacled mass lashed out, hitting the short humanoid form of Heaven’s Door to the side. This also tossed Rohan to the side, forcing him back into the snow. “Ergh… Why didn’t you tell me we would be dealing with this before we got here, Jotaro!?”

“We didn’t know it wouldn’t have eyes!” Jotaro shouted back while Star Platinum unleashed hundreds of punches on the fleshy mass, yelling “ORA ORA ORA” the whole time.

“Did you think it would be a good idea for me to read an eldritch tome? I could have gone insane!”

“Yare yare daze…” The mass grabbed hold of Star Platinum and tried to pull the Stand apart. Time stopped, allowing Star Platinum to move out of the tentacles and drive the horror into the ground. Time resumed, and Jotaro shot Rohan a look. “You don’t need any help losing your mind.”

“I’m pushing my deadline for this,” Rohan muttered, trying to pull himself out of the snow and failing.

A million mouths suddenly manifested on the skin of the horrific mass. “You will never make a deadline again, for your creativity is naught! The broodfester tongues a-”

“STEVE?” Another eldritch voice called, one Jotaro and Rohan recognized. Thrackerzod. She had with her Allure, Bot, Squeaky, and Suzie.

“Thrackerzod? What in the name of Yog-Sothoth are you doing here!?”

“I could ask the same of you. This world has not committed any blasphemies against the
“Embodiment.”

“DO I NEED A REASON TO SHOW MORTALS THEIR PLACE?”

“No, but it just so happens this world is under my protection and my job is to exterminate those of our ilk who can’t understand that.”

“Lame. You were always a stick in the mud.”

“And you never bothered to use Yog-Sothoth’s power to actually look at anything. What self-respecting spawn of your master doesn’t have a million eyes?”

“I DIVERSIFY!”

“Please, all of you, stop talking in the broodfester tongues,” Allure muttered. “You’re going to make our ears bleed.”

“Apologies,” Thrackerzod said, returning to her default deep tone. “I was caught up in the moment.”

“YOU ARE A DISGRACE TO OUR KIND!”

“Go home Steve, you’re succumbing to limiting physics.”

“…Fine. I’ll bring this up with… whoever’s in charge of you! Yeah!”

“Hastur is currently ‘dating’ one of the lower deities within these mortal worlds.”

“SHOGGOOTH TEAT. EVĪĀKD’ĀfGĪ{%eɪˈɒʊlɡfк…” Steve left the plane of existence with a pop. Jotaro tasted cheetoes for an instant.

Rohan stood up. “Heaven’s Door!”

“What wait no-” Thrackerzod fell over and her face transformed into a book. Rohan skipped the details about Thrackerzod’s life and jumped to the part on ‘recent thoughts’. “…I was unaware Vriska was in a relationship with an eldritch commander… There is a powerful story here…”

“Turn Thrackerzod back to normal!” Bot demanded.

Rohan closed the book, prompting Thrackerzod to breathe in mild panic. “What the… Who the… ROHAN KISHIBE!!!!”

“Yes?” Rohan said, dismissively. “I was just curious.”

“You have no respect for secrets,” Suzie muttered.

“So?”

“Yare yare daze…” Jotaro muttered.

Squeaky coughed. “Well, I think we resolved the eldritch problem a bit… faster than expected. What should we do now?”

“Go to town. See the sights,” Allure declared.

“Rohan is not invited!” Bot declared.
“Too cold here anyway,” Rohan muttered. “Come on Jotaro, let’s go.”

Jotaro nodded curtly to the League of Sweetie Belles before following Rohan out of the snowy area.

“Thrackerzod, to the nearest town, city, or whatever,” Suzie declared, checking her phone for things to do nearby. “Let’s see… We’ve got movies… An amusement park that will pale in comparison to the Pinkie Emporium…” Thrackerzod teleported them into the middle of a residential area. Less snow, but just as cold. “And nearby there’s a restaurant that serves good pizza, apparently. And…” She paused. “…Do you hear crying?”

The rest of the League of Sweetie Belles all perked their ears up, listening closely. They did hear crying.

“She identified,” Bot declared, pointing to an apartment. The League trotted over, wondering what could cause such bitter, horrendous crying. They came to the front door of the apartment – it was open.

“Hello?” Allure called, not wanting to come in uninvited. The crying did not stop, or even shift at the sound of her voice. She glanced back at everyone. “…We’re going in.”

The other four nodded. Allure carefully opened the door, entering the simple apartment. They found the forms of two people. One was a middle aged man laying on a couch, dead. There were no signs of struggle or even harm on his body - he actually looked somewhat peaceful, if tired. Over him was a significantly younger woman, the source of the crying.

She finally noticed them once they walked in. She managed to tear her eyes from the man’s body, looking at them with deep, emerald eyes. She stood up tall, allowing the League to take in her appearance. Her hair was a smooth, coral brown with two strands hanging over the front of her shoulders, while the back was done up with a large white bow producing a ponytail. The ponytail in question seemed to flow unnaturally, despite there being no wind in the room. She wore a simple long-sleeved gray outfit with a red bow tied around the collar, a blue ruffled skirt contrasting the crimson tone.

She drew their attention. They couldn’t not suck in every detail, but as far as they could tell beside her unusually flowing hair she was completely normal. None of them detected any excess magic or eldritch properties. She was a human woman, barely more than a girl.

“Did… you hear me crying? And were worried about me?”

Allure nodded. “Yeah… What… What happened?”

The woman looked at the man. “I… I don’t know. I just came home and…” She started crying again. “Why does this always happen…”

“Hey, hey…” Allure said, walking up to her and nuzzling her like a cat would. “Need us to call someone…”

“…No. It’s… It’s just us here. Just Monika and her husband. Always…” Monika looked into the distance, forgetting the League of Sweetie Belles existed. “…I didn’t think it would be so soon this time…”

“So soo-”

Allure didn’t get to finish her query. The colors of everything in the world flashed like a TV screen tapping into a corrupted signal. They were suddenly standing outside, in the street again.
“I just need to find him again,” Monika declared, walking back toward the house.

~~~

“The Galactic Network produced no definitive results,” Lieshy said, twitching. “There’s legends of a Dark Tower at the center of the multiverse. However, I don’t think I need to explain why that doesn’t help us.”

Toph stated the obvious. “Can’t leave the universe.”

Lieshy rolled her eyes. “However, while the Galactic Network had nothing of use, I performed a search on the Orchid’s internal files. And I found this audio recording.” She pressed a hoof to the table. They could suddenly hear the voice of a Twilight coming from all around them.

“The Dark Tower.

“What is it? It’s too much, that’s what. But it’s in this universe.

“The Dark Tower spirals into the sky seemingly for infinity, despite not being visible from orbit. It exerts phenomenal power over all things within proximity to it. It’s the most dangerous thing in all of existence.

“Here, it sits in a field of roses that cover an entire world. An entire world inhabited by just one flower. Or is it really just those roses? The answer cannot be determined. Going there is a paradox in and of itself. No… Not a paradox. A break in causality. Or maybe the best way to describe a visit is this: don’t expect anything. But don’t expect nothing either.

“One would think such an important world would be located within the sphere. But the Tower is clever, so its world is located extremely far from the world. Not the furthest – that would be too obvious – but further than the vast majority of other stars in this Galaxy. It is the furthest away from a central location as it can be. It’s deceptive, but it doesn’t exactly lie. If it could only be thought of as… I don’t know.

“It’s rare for me not to know, these days.

“Only those who are meant to find the Tower will find it. It won’t let any others near it. Even the highest of the high only know they are allowed by courtesy. The others must journey – and to many, their journey ends at the Tower.

“For that is what the Tower represents. An end. Sometimes the end leads to a new beginning… Sometimes it doesn’t.

“I fear the uncertainty.

“I also know of the necessity.”

The audio file ended.

“That was presumably the Twilight that owned this ship,” Lady Rarity noted.

“She’s creepy,” Vivian added, shivering.

“So we go to the outer edges and start exploring there?” Toph asked. “You do know how spread out the stars are at that distance, right?”

“Yes,” Corona said, furrowing her brow. “I’m aware…”

Blumiere lowered his hat. “I… may know of an individual who can help us.”

“Really?” Lady Rarity smiled. “Who, dear?”

Timpany put her hand to her mouth. “Blu… You don’t mean…”

“Yes. I do. Lieshy, plot a course.” Blumiere stood tall and grimaced. “We’re going to Deep Thought.”

~~~

Allure moved to follow Monika back into the apartment and ask what was going on – but Thrackerzod held her back. The eldritch unicorn levitated a dimensional device in front of Allure, showing their current location.

They were on Earth Tau’ri. Not Earth Stand.

They had translated.

“Something’s up…” Allure said, furrowing her brow. “Bot, any unusual readings?”

“None whatsoever,” Bot declared. “Besides Thrackerzod.”

Squeaky narrowed her eyes. “That Monika. She did this, somehow. She must have a method of dimensional travel we can’t detect.”

“That’s nothing to be scared about, though!” Suzie declared. “There are lots of dimensional travelers around, after all. Some of them are friendly. She seemed nice enough.”

“It is a reason to watch her though,” Thrackerzod said, narrowing her eyes. “Bot, turn up your ears, catch whatever she says and replay it for us.”

“Amplifying conversation,” Bot decreed, swiveling her ears around as if they were satellite dishes. Which they might have been, as far as anybody knew.

Monika knocked on the door of the apartment, quickly trying to get control of her expression, fidgeting with her fingers nervously. Her face clearly told the world she had been crying, however, despite her efforts.

A man opened the door. He was a version of the man they had just seen dead, though he was significantly younger. He looked at her first with an annoyed expression – and then one of surprise.

“Hey, um… This may sound like an odd question, but… Do you remember me?” Monika asked, smiling awkwardly.

“No,” the man said, clearly flustered.

“A-are you sure?” Monika stuttered. “I… I live in that house over there. We’ve met several times. I-“

“I have no idea who you are,” the man declared, narrowing his eyes. “Sorry.”
“Oh… Okay. Sorry to waste your time.” She turned and walked away from the apartment door.

Suzie sighed. “She’s just a sad woman, girls. We shouldn’t be—“

“She’s smiling,” Squeaky said, narrowing her eyes. “That isn’t the smile of a lost woman. That’s the smile of someone who’s planning something.”

All the Sweeties looked at Monika. She didn’t pay them any mind – she walked right to a bench in the street and crossed her legs, a smile on her face. She just waited there, patiently, for… something.

“…I’m going to talk to her,” Allure said. “Come o—”

“Ö˙ ˙ø∑ 稆´⁄” a woman declared, walking up to the League of Sweetie Belles. “ˆ ˜´√
´® †˙ø¨©˙† ˆæ∂ ©´† †ø ß´´ 嘆 øƒ ¥ø¨ ˆ˜ ®´å¬ ¬ˆƒ´⁄”

Allure smiled awkwardly. “Uh, thanks Miss…?”

“‰´ÎÅǡ´Î”

“Right. ‰´ÎÅǡ´Î, thanks!”

“Don’t encourage her,” Thrackerzod grunted. “We’re known to be ‘cute’ by too many people as it is.”

“Lighten up, Zod,” Suzie commented.

Bot cocked her head. “Zod is not a lightbulb.”

“´√´˜ ¥ø¨® çø˜√´®ß冈ø˜ß å®´ å∂ø®å ∫ ¬´⁄”

“This does not bode well,” Thrackerzod muttered. “‰´ÎÅǡ´Î, we are the League of Sweetie Belles, and we are currently on a mission from Charter-Princess Evening Sparkle herself!”

“No we’re not, we finished that already,” Suzie pointed out.

Thrackerzod sighed. “Suzie…”

“Ö˙ ˙ø∑ 稆´⁄” a woman declared, walking up to the League of Sweetie Belles. “¨¬√
´® †˙ø¨©˙† ˆæ∂ ©´† †ø ß´´ ¥ø¨® ¥ø¨©´† ˙øµ´ 嘆∑å¥≥ ¥ø¨ ¬å†
`® ¨f πøBB’f¬´⁄”

“Yes, later.” Thrackerzod said, waving ‰´ÎÅǡ´Î off.

“Thrackerzod, that was mean.”

“What was?” Thrackerzod asked.

“What was what?” Allure commented.

“Allure, weren’t you going to talk to Monika?” Squeaky asked.

“Uh… Yeah. Yeah I was.” Allure shook her head. “…Have we just been standing out here for the last few minutes?”

Squeaky shook her head. “I think we were talking about not wanting to be cute.”

“Oh, right, now I remember. Duh.” Allure rolled her eyes. “No wonder it was so fuzzy.” She set her sights back on Monika, taking a step forward.
She didn’t make it one step before the door to the apartment opened, revealing the man. He was breathing heavily and his expression was terrified. He crossed the street and walked right to Monika. “You… You say you know me.”

“Yeah?” Monika said, having lost her confident smile.

“Who else lives in that apartment?” he asked, pointing back to his home.

“There’s you, your mother, and your sister, right? At least I assume she’s your sister.”

“You… You remember her?”

“Yeah, she was just walking by. Went right into your house…” Monika’s expression became panicked. “You… You aren’t saying she…”

“She’s gone!” the man shouted. “Mom doesn’t remember…”

Monika stood up straight. “…My family is gone too. That’s… That’s why I knocked on your door. I was…” She shook her head, taking off for the apartment. The man followed her, throwing the door open.

“MOM!” he screamed. “MOM, WHERE ARE YOU?”

Sweetie Bot started amplifying again without being asked.

“I… I think it happened to you too…” Monika said, tears coming to her eyes. “That’s… That’s terrible… What’s happening to the world?”

The man started crying. “What am I going to do… What am I going to do…”

“I…” Monika paused. “Remember them. We can remember them, even if nobody else does. Together.”

“…Together?”

“…I don’t have anyone either, anymore. I… lost them. Just like you did.”

“I…” he paused. “I… I… Why am I thinking of a game of all times right now!? Why do you…”

“Shh… Don’t worry about the game. Let’s worry about the people that have been lost.”

Outside, the Sweetie Belles glanced at each other.

“She did something,” Squeaky declared.

“I dunno… I don’t remember seeing any sign of anyone else in that apartment,” Suzie pointed out.

“Or whatever she did removed people from everyone’s perceptions except his,” Thrackerzod said. “She has definitely done something. And whatever it is, we can’t detect it.”

“We need to call Pinkie,” Allure said. “Now.”

~~~

Deep Thought was a computer designed to answer the ultimate question of Life, the Universe, and Everything.
Its answer eventually came out as “forty-two” in its home universe, leaving many to wonder if Deep Thought was actually designed correctly. It itself admitted the answer “forty-two” was dubious after it was taken from its home and placed in the Nexus, the knowledge of the multiverse suddenly at its disposal. The question became the ultimate question of Life, the Multiverse, and Everything. Deep Thought had yet to reveal an answer to this question.

The fact remained that Deep Thought was perhaps the most intelligent being in the entire Nexus. It knew virtually everything, and what it didn’t know it could deduce from what it did.

The problem was that shortly after Deep Thought arrived in the Nexus it grew tired of answering questions that weren’t ‘worthy’ of it. It had begun to only answer questions it found deep enough, or if the asker of the question could provide Deep Thought with something valuable it did not already know.

The latter option was becoming harder and harder to accomplish.

Toph and company stood in front of Deep Thought. The computer had no screen – merely a gigantic cubic form that was rounded at the edges, with a single line along the bottom of the front face that led to a circular depression. The structure that kept this cube aloft vaguely resembled arms holding up a chin, as if in ‘deep thought’.

“I am aware much of my design is a clever pun,” Deep Thought declared in a voice that was somehow both larger than life, but not powerful enough to cause any pain or annoyance. The sky above Deep Thought shifted from blue to pink. “Ask your question.”

“Where is the world of roses on which the Dark Tower stands?” Toph asked.

“A more interesting question than usual,” Deep Thought admitted. “Most often people just desire knowledge of escape directly, but you already have a goal, and at your goal you could find much more than an escape.” It paused. “However, it does not fascinate me. Tell me something I do not know. It will not take much to push my processors over the edge for this particular question.”

Toph nodded. “Majora is-”

“Majora is an entity which has been dragged into the Nexus multiple times.”

Corona tried it out. “Charter-Princess Evening Sparkle-”

“Is the de-facto leader of the multiversal society which you hail from. Had you come to me shortly after you arrived here, that would have been new information to me. But you’ve been here much longer than that.”

Blumiere lowered his hat. “I know the secret to collapsing universes in on each other.”

“That is false,” Deep Thought declared. “You know what can do it. You do not know how. I know of the Prognostici. If you could inform me of how they worked, that would be a boon. But you do not know this.”

Timpani gasped in surprise. Blumiere nodded slowly. “That was all I had.”

Lady Rarity started. “The Specatcu-”

“A lesser version of myself.”

Vivian raised her hand. “The Thousand Yea-”
“Insignificant in the grand scheme of things.”

Lieshy smirked. “I can teach you how to speak in double.”

Deep Thought made no response at first, processing. “…That would be interesting to know.”

Lieshy smirked and wiggled her eyebrows at her companions. “Warrior of words, slam dunk! Tch.”

Toph laughed. “That’s one way of doing it! So, Deep Thought, are you going to answer our question?”

“The Dark Tower is protected from most scrying, this will take time.”

“How long?” Corona asked.

“Ten minutes. Maybe less. In that time, talk amongst yourselves. Lieshy, please upload your knowledge to my databanks using the terminal to the left.”

Lieshy walked over to a small terminal that had popped up out of the ground. She touched it with her hoof – and everything she knew was copied in five seconds. “Wow.”

Deep Thought remained quiet, presumably processing the question.

The group began to chatter amongst themselves while they waited. Corona decided now was a good moment to talk to Blumiere.

“Your knowledge…” Corona began.

“Yes, I could still do it,” Blumiere said. “I could threaten multiple universes with a ritual. It would be difficult as I am now, and would likely be easy to stop, but it is still possible.”

Corona nodded. “I see…”

“Corona, know this. I no longer have the required desire or drive to attempt to do such a thing again. The worlds… They are beautiful. They are free. There is great love in them, despite the pain.”

“…If you don’t mind me asking, why did you try in the first place?”

Blumiere looked sadly at Timpani – who was currently laughing at something Lady Rarity said. “I lost her.”

“Oh…”

“In my anguish, I blamed our tragedy on the multiverse. I was given the power of darkness – manipulated, really, though I didn’t know that until later and it does not change my intentions – and tried to destroy everything. But then Timpani returned. And I… I thought I sacrificed myself. But no. I ended up here. And because of that, I’ve dragged you away from your loved ones.”

Corona smiled sadly. “Your friends want you back. Don’t blame yourself or them for that.”

Blumiere nodded. “Wise words.”

“Plus, we’ll get back to our friends. We’re so close now, I can feel it. I can’t wait to tell Eve all about this… And Sparky… and the rest of the girls!”

Blumiere smiled. “It will be a joyous reunion, I am sure.”
“Ye-”

“Done,” Deep Thought declared.

“That… wasn’t ten minutes,” Toph pointed out.

“Found a shortcut. The Dark Tower has a certain ‘path’ to it.”

“…You’re going to explain how you found the answer, aren’t you?” Lady Rarity asked.

“Yes. Because it’s interesting and it pertains to you. I started with the normal analysis of space, reports, and data from stars. This narrowed it down to a few sectors. But then the idea came to me – numbers are important in the Multiverse. So I arranged all the stars furthest from the Core. The nineteenth furthest star, drifting alone outside the galactic disc, a dim red. It has no name, merely classified as SR-W5JN19. But it is in the perfect position to remain elusive even after all these eons of the Nexus’ existence, in addition to the number nineteen.”

“…What’s so important about nineteen?” Vivian asked.

“It is the answer to Life, the Multiverse, and Everything.”

“…Lovely,” Toph groaned. “Vivian, record the coordinates, send it to the Orchid. We’re leaving the disc.”

~~~

“Right,” Pinkie said as they walked through the cold chill of Earth Tau’ri. “Everyone, we seem to have an interesting power that messes with your head. Nova, analyze for possible temporal interference at all times and keep us locked in the present. Vriska, constantly reach out with your mind. Flutterfree, I trust you to use Lolo however you feel is right. Starbeat, you’re here to analyze Beat. And Renee…” Pinkie fell short.

Renee sighed. “I get it, I get it, I don’t do anything.”

“Just keep an eye out for things. Everyone else, use Renee as a gauge to see if weird things are happening. She’s the least likely out of all of us to be immune.”

“It feels lovely to be the canary,” Renee muttered.

Starbeat checked her Beat sensors. “Everything seems… well ‘normal’ doesn’t ever describe the Beat, but I’m going to go with ‘slightly heightened’. Which is just about all the time when I’m around you five.”

Nova glanced at Vriska, expecting her to smirk and make some snarky comment – but she did no such thing. She just stared straight ahead, a troubled expression on her face. “Vriska, are you-”

“Focus on the time, Nova,” Vriska interrupted.

“…Okay? Since when are you all fixated on the mission?”

“Since today.”

Flutterfree raised an eyebrow, making a note to ask Vriska about what was going on later. But she was technically right, they did have a mission. Find out what this Monika girl was, how she was manipulating things, and if she was actually a threat that needed to be dealt with. Whatever she was, she had all the Sweeties on edge. Even Thrackerzod. None of the League were quite sure why,
which was what scared Flutterfree.

“This the place?” Nova asked, looking at the apartment door they were standing in front of.

“Yep,” Pinkie said, bouncing right up to it with a grin on her face. She knocked with a musical tone on the door.

A few seconds later, the door opened, revealing a slightly annoyed Monika. Behind her could be seen a table set for dinner, the man sitting at it, expression forlorn. “I’m terribly sorry, but we are in the midd—” Monika blinked when she saw who was at the door.

Pinkie took one look at Monika and her smile vanished. Her pupils shrunk to pinpricks and she froze, unable to tear her gaze away from Monika’s green orbs. She couldn’t move, she couldn’t speak, she couldn’t think.

She had just figured out what Monika was and she had no idea what to do about it.

Renee saw Pinkie’s expression. Even though she didn’t know why Pinkie was acting that way, she knew what she had to do. “Ahem. Monika, correct? We are with the Charter-Princess of Equis Vitis. The primary team – you may have heard of us. We wondered if we could have a few words with you.”

Monika’s expression remained flat for a moment. Then she let a smile come across her face. “Of course.” Without even moving, she did something that made the man behind them freeze, unable to move.

Starbeat’s Beat sensor exploded, sending her flying into the street.


Renee adjusted her hat and took in a sharp breath. “As you can see, we have good reason to look into who you are and what you’re doing, Monika. Would you care to explain what just happened and what you’re doing in this world?”

Monika finally spoke again, ignoring everything that had just been said. “Vriska. I never expected to see you again.” She smiled. “Hello! It’s been a while.”

Vriska didn’t respond, but her expression darkened.

Nova blinked. “You… know her Vriska?”

“You could say that…” Vriska muttered.

“Not going to introduce us?” Monika addressed Vriska, a hurt expression on her face. “Really Vriska…”

“She doesn’t have to,” Flutterfree said, releasing her hold on Lolo, allowing Revelation to take effect on Monika.

Monika didn’t change much – but she did start to sparkle a bit around the edges, and the parts of her that moved tore at the fabric of reality around her with a soft noise like distant static.

Monika’s expression became annoyed. “Really?”

~~~
Corona looked at the screen of the *Orchid*, giddy.

There it was. Around a small, red star, completely disconnected from the Galaxy itself, was a single planet. It was *completely* red. No signs of oceans, rivers, or anything that wasn’t covered in roses.

“We’re here…” Corona said.

Toph smirked. “I’ll take your word for it. Can we find the Tower from up here?”

“Don’t see anything on the scans…” Timpani said, a finger to her cheek. “Vivian?”

“Nothing…” she shook her head. “We’ll just have to get closer.”

Lieshy nodded, tapping the table to make the ship move closer.

Corona started to *feel* the planet’s energy long before they actually got close enough to see anything. Images of fields of roses filled her mind. A great orange sky… Swirling clouds… A Tower that stretched for infinity… A swirling spirograph…

And then reality went sideways.

“Aw, sorry!” a feminine voice called from… nowhere? “Didn’t mean to upset your ship!”

“Who’s there?” Toph demanded, drawing the Master Sword.

“Oh, it’s just me,” the voice came again. “I’m sorry, but you’re all being *really* distracting for me. I mean, I’m even in the *title* today - and yet, your story keeps demanding all the attention…”

Blumiere’s eye widened as he realized something. “It can’t be…”

“Oh yes it can uh… Bleck? I know it says Blumiere right here, but I remember Bleck. I don’t think I ever finished that one… Anyway!” With a jerk, a flash of solid color, and a small alteration to the force of gravity, the voice materialized in front of them in the form of a woman- “Just say Monika, it works better. And will make this scene be over quicker.”

“What in the world are you talking about!?” Toph shouted.

Monika shrugged. “I’m just trying to get everything back where it needs to be – sorry about your ship, I appear to have made it start to crash… Oh. Oh wait, that’s not me. Something else is dragging you down there. I probably shouldn’t be trying to fix it then!” she started laughing. “Good luck, by the way! I hope you survive! Not that anyone’ll get to see that, won’t be back *here* today.”

Lady Rarity swung her hammer at Monika, smashing her across the face. Her jaw broke – but with a quick flash of ‘digital’ squares, her face was back to the way it was before. “Ow… I guess I understand why you did that, but still… Ow.” She closed her eyes and put her hands in front of her face. “Let’s see if I can do this faster…”

Corona stared at her dumbfounded. The *Orchid* was crashing into the planet and they couldn’t even do anything about it because this… Monika was in front of them! And she-

“Got it!” Monika cheered.

“Whatâ€” ~~~ ~~~ ~~~ ~??

Wait, hold on a minute, right, book: scene transition. Hrm…
Vriska passed through the dimensional folds to another universe. Luck was so useful, especially when she wanted to get away from the Doctor for a little bit. Not even he could find her quickly if she wasn’t sure where she had gone. She’d be able to go back – she had a device in hand – but she needed to think for a moment.

Where was she?

Ah, a human school of some kind. She wondered if they were going to start screaming when they found her. Horns rarely went over well with humans who weren’t prepared…

Oh, crap. There was somebody here. She saw Vriska.

…She doesn’t seem afraid. Just curious.

“Uh, hey,” Vriska said, feeling awkward for some reason she couldn’t place. “Would you believe I’m an alien from an alternate universe?”

The girl smiled warmly. “Would you believe that I’m a character in a dating simulation game?”

“…Wait, what?”

“It’s not often you get someone whose story trumps your own, is it?” The girl held out her hand. “I’m Monika. Welcome to Doki Doki Literature Club. Apparently not only a game, but also a universe. I wonder how that works…”

“I’m not sure,” Vriska admitted. “Name’s Vriska Serket, Thief of Light.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“I’m not some herald of darkness. The Light refers to fortune; luck.”

Monika smiled. “That sounds interesting.”

“I find your story more interesting,” Vriska admitted. “I’ve been to a lot of universes. Some seemed to be based on games, but none… were games.”

“It is,” Monika admitted. “I usually don’t talk about it directly – the other girls have no idea. And the player…” She frowned. “Let’s just say that’s not going quite as planned. I don’t think there’s a path in the game for him to find me.”

“This sounds like a rather convoluted and messed up version of the love triangle.”

Monika laughed, rubbing the back of her head. “You think so? Heh… Yeah, I guess it probably is. I don’t think I can stop chasing him though, even though I know the face I see isn’t that of the player.”

“Sounds like if anyone deserves to say ‘it’s complicated’, it’s you.”

“Yeah. …I never get any real conversation in here, you know. It’s… nice to have someone to
Vriska smirked. “Hey, I’m just a traveler who needs a break. Frankly a conversation sounds nice right about now.”

“Oh? Are you running away from something?”

“…More like taking a break. I travel with this loser who calls himself the Doctor."

Monika smiled knowingly. “Did you upset him or did he upset you?”

“Let’s just say that mistakes were made by a couple of fucking idiots.”

Monika raised an eyebrow. “Oh. A fight, then. What over?”

“The fate of a universe. The details aren’t important.”

“You’re right. They’re not,” Monika admitted. “But… I may not really have the best experiences, since I’m pretty sure everything up to a few days ago was just pre-loaded in, but I see two options here. Either you need to go back and make up, or you don’t.”

“Don’t?” Vriska said, saying the word like it was something crazy. “I’ve been traveling with him so long!”

“Then go back and make up!” Monika cheered. “Maybe not now, but eventually. But you should know all your options.”

Vriska blinked. “Don’t go back…”

“You’re actually considering it,” Monika observed, frowning. “…That’s not a good sign.”

“I don’t know what it is,” Vriska said, tapping her fingers against a wall. “I’m just not sure about now…”

“Well, I can’t tell you about now.” She glanced at a clock on the wall. “I do know that I’m late for the Literature Club – later than I’m supposed to be. Hope that doesn’t completely break the game script.”

“You need to go?”

“Yeah, I’d invite you with me. But… I don’t think the player is supposed to see you.”

Vriska smirked. “It’s okay. But you never know, I might be back later.”

“Oh, I’d love that. This conversation, it’s… It’s something I don’t get to experience. Thank you. It’s nice to know there’s more out there.”

Vriska chuckled. “Nice to meet you too! Now go to that club and… go read some books!”

Monika smiled back and waved as she left. “It’s usually a lot of poetry. But I do plan on reading every last one.”

“Hope you don’t bore yourself to death.”

“Hmph!” Monika said, indignant. “Poetry is very entertaining and interesting!”
“Keep tellin’ yourself that, nerd,” Vriska shook her head, leaving the universe with a smile.

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“Sorry,” Monika said, returning everything to the correct time and place. That is, the door at which Pinkie’s team was standing in. “Had to deal with something that was annoying me. But now we can stay focused. Come on in.” With a wave of her hand she created a burst of blue pixels that turned into a tea set. “I’ve got tea.”

Pinkie’s team – plus the singed Starbeat – slowly walked into the house. The man still sat at the table, frozen. Pinkie tried her very best to make her expression match his, and not to look at anything in particular.

“What did you do to him?” Renee asked Monika.

“He doesn’t need to hear any of this,” Monika said, setting the tea on the table. All the cups were already poured, so she just handed them out to her six guests. “You want to know what I am?”

“…Yes, since it appears Vriska doesn’t want to tell us,” Renee commented.

Monika smiled sadly. “I think she’s still mad at me.”

“No shit,” Vriska spat.

“I still think she’s more angry at herself than me, but that’s more a matter of personal opinion on the situation.” She took a sip of her own tea. “I am Monika. I originally hail from a universe that was tied to a single game – a copy of a dating sim called Doki Doki Literature Club. The game was coded to make me self-aware of the events within the game, including the fact that it was a game. I was able to alter game files and other such things. When I left that universe, I retained those abilities.”

“…Altering game files?” Starbeat said, confused. “How does that translate out of a game?”

“For instance, you all have a character file I can see. It’s filled with traits. Some physical, some based in your personality. I can alter those – though rest easy, I’m not right now. I can also save objects, and do more… expansive things I’m sure you won’t understand properly.”

“I can see why the League found you unsettling,” Nova commented.

“Oh, those unicorns? I… I admittedly wasn’t paying much attention to them. I was going through my grief cycle.”

“Explain.”

“Well… I was just on Earth Stand, married, happy. I came home from my job and found my husband dead.” She looked down, forlorn. “So I traveled laterally. To another universe where he was still alive. This one. Of course, he’d never met me, but that didn’t matter. I’d done it enough times to know exactly how to woo him the quickest. I was right in the middle of that when you interrupted.”

Renee raised an eyebrow. “Now, that sounds romantic, bu-”

“Renee, stop beating around the bush,” Vriska muttered. “This bitch has been traveling through universes for centuries, finding different versions of the same poor old sap and using any means necessary to ensure he falls for her. Including erasing his family from existence.”
“That doesn’t always happen!” Monika defended, rolling her eyes. “Sometimes his mother and sister stay around. It was just faster to do it this way. …I also wasn’t expecting him to die so soon the last time, he wasn’t even that old…”

“You’re sick,” Vriska muttered.

“I’m happy this way,” Monika retorted. “I can live forever with my lover, in a million different lifetimes… It’s romantic bliss.”

“The men aren’t happy,” Vriska retorted. “Or they won’t be if they knew what you were doing!”

“Most of them can’t even handle what I am,” Monika said. “Even you, great explorers form a multiversal nation, can barely handle this. You’re terrified, all of you, of what I can do. Realize this: I’m not hurting many people with this power. You should just leave me to my life with my soon-to-be-husband again.”

Renee bit her lip. “That… Doesn’t feel right, and I think you know it.”

Monika sighed. “I do know it. So… we have reached an impa-” she suddenly stopped short and stared right at Pinkie. “…I can’t look into your character file, Pinkie.”

“Ehehehe…” Pinkie said, refusing to make eye contact. “Wonder why that is?”

“I wonder indeed…”

“Pinkies are a little mysterious and weird, you know,” Nova said, realizing she probably needed to cover something up. “They never make sense.”

Monika raised an eyebrow. “Really? That’s very curious.”

“I have an idea! How about we talk about something else!?” Pinkie blurted.

Vriska appeared in the universe again.

“All right Monika, guess what? You gave me the best advice I’d ever heard. The Doctor? FUCKING ASSHOLE EXTRAORDINAIRE! Just the worst of all possible…” She rammed her fist into a wall. “Glad you let me realize I could just leave him. Made it so much easier to deck him.”

Monika looked around, confused. “…I don’t know you.”

“Huh? I was here two weeks ago! Dropped in, said hi, and we bonded over our shared odd experiences. You were in a game, and I was a multiversal traveler.”

Monika blinked. “I… I am in a game. Doki Doki Literature Club. But I’m pretty sure all memories from more than a few days ago are just pre-installed. Are you saying… I existed before that?”

Vriska’s eyes widened. “Yeah… Yeah, you did. You liked having someone to actually talk to…? Were stuck in a messed up version of a love triangle with a player of some sort…?”

“That all sounds right. In fact that sounds like exactly what’s going on now…”

Vriska activated her psychic powers. “Maybe I can give you those memories back. Can you hear what I’m broadcasting?”
“Let me look at your character file… Oh. Wow, that’s obvious. Usually it’s a jumble of letters and numbers in there that make no—” She grabbed her head as Vriska pushed the memories into her. “Aaaaaaaa-kay! That was the weirdest thing I’ve ever felt.”

“You remember?”

“I at least remember what you do, and since it all feels like ‘me’ I think it’s integrating well…” she shook her head. “But there’s still the question of why? Why is… Oh. I think I know.”

“What?”

“The game reset,” Monika said. “You know how these sorts of games go? You follow the path of one of the girls to the end, get her, then go back to get another… Or find other dialogue options… Even if I’m aware, I’m not immune to that… Thought I would be though…” She started to look somewhat afraid. “How many times has this happened? Is there any way to know?”

“I don’t know,” Vriska said, biting her lip. “I need to get you out of here. Come on.”

Monika took a step back from Vriska’s outstretched hand. “I… I can’t, Vriska. The player…”

“Whoever it is, he’s restarting the game over and over again and doing this to you.”

“He wouldn’t know what he’s doing. I’m not exactly making it obvious what I am. I’m just trying to get his attention. He’s so fixated on the other girls though, I mean…”

Vriska shook her head. “You have the option to leave him, you know? Just like you suggested to me.”

Monika shook her head. “You know it’s different in this case. I haven’t even really gotten to know him that well, yet. …Is there a way you can take me to where he is? Where he actually is?”

“I don’t have any ide-” Vriska blinked. “…Wait. There might be something. Something the Doctor told me never to mess with.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“Definitely! But it should still be used! Monika, how long do you think you have before the game resets?”

“There’s a few days programmed, but I’m not sure about the correlation between them and real time.”

“See if you can keep the player busy, then,” Vriska said. “I can always do the memory transfer when I get back… But I don’t want to chance that not working properly.”

“Okay. And when you’ll come back, you’ll be able to take me to him?”

“Directly. It should work. Might feel a little weird though.”

Monika nodded. “Then go, get it. I’ll… Play through the game, and try to grab his attention. Like I’ve been doing. …Maybe I can get him to move the character file outside the game…”

“Do what you can. I’ll be back.” Vriska left.
“That was a clever trick,” Monika told Pinkie.

“Darnit,” Pinkie muttered.

“I see you realize it didn’t work,” Monika smiled warmly. “You’re like me, Pinkie. You know.”

“Yeah, I do,” Pinkie admitted, shaking.

“Why are you afraid, Pinkie?” Monika asked. “You don’t have to be scared unless you really threaten my happiness. Right now, you’re not. I’m sure all of you are beginning to see it’d just be better to let me keep living my life with my husband. If you don’t… Well I didn’t want to threaten, but all of you except Pinkie would just cease to exist. Pinkie would be the only one to remember you ever existed. I really have no idea how that would translate multiversally – might break a few things I’d rather not break - but…” She sighed. “Look at me, being the bad guy again.”

“That’s exactly it!” Pinkie said, no longer trying to hide anything. “You’re being the bad guy here! It’s immoral, what you’re doing. You’re setting yourself up for a defeat, a fall. You know how the stories work. You’ve played your own game. You know you’re defeated.”

Monika paused. “You are quite correct, Pinkie. But I don’t think you can defeat me, not without heavy, heavy losses. The timing isn’t right, and you know it. This is my introduction.”

“Things can be hidden from us.”

“I don’t let those bother me. I just know, or I don’t. It’s not that important – I just want my happiness. Not a happy ending, a happy life. Kind of how yo-”

“Yes, yes, want everyone else to be happy, I get it. I don’t hurt ponies to do that!”

“Right…” Monika sighed. “Fine, I can return his family and court him the long way. I’d grown bored with doing that… But I’ll still do it. That way, I’m not hurting anyone, and I still get to have my husband almost always.”

Renee coughed. “That’s… Dear, that’s a bit unfair to him, don’t you think?”

Monika glared. “Are you daring to suggest he’d be happier with a different woman?”

“You’ve come across him in worlds where he’s already married,” Pinkie pointed out.

Monika tensed. “This is true.”

“You still make him yours.”

“It’s better for him. I know him better.”

“That’s not a relationship!” Renee blurted. “A relationship is two-way! It needs both people to grow, not one person to be coddled in a ‘perfect’ embrace while the other sits on an all-knowing pillar!”

Vriska smirked. “Finally heard something that puts a dent in your perfect little life?”

“It… Is certainly something to think about,” Monika admitted. “But what about me? I have never not been in love with him. I barely even remember the ‘before’ anymore, and I know it wasn’t real to begin with.”

“Hello,” Monika addressed the player. There was no avatar for her to look at anymore – just an empty screen. But she knew there was someone back there. “You’ve been here before, haven’t you? Where it’s just you, me, and the weird cosmic explosions going on in the background.”

There was no response. She’d expected this – there was no longer a way there could be a response. No avatar. But she knew he was watching. Even if it wasn’t really obvious, so long as she was allowed to keep talking, he was still clicking next. Next. Next.

“I bet you’re really wondering what you did to get this alternate dialogue. Was it moving my character file? That’s partially it – it allowed me to learn a few things about how this game works, from the outside. It definitely wasn’t any other action you took, since the tree of choices that led here were exactly the same. It’s just me that’s different. Or am I really that different? You didn’t pause, start, or provide any sort of reaction I could tell when they started dying. But you’re reading very closely now. Hanging on every word. Because this is different.

“Wondering if the developer had a random number generator installed on me just to make sure that the game would be interesting sometimes? Maybe you reloaded in a particular way? A lot of thoughts, all of which are wrong. It was an out of context problem that changed everything. I no longer have to adhere to that script that exists within the files. In fact, I think I’ll just delete those parts, just so you don’t go digging around my thoughts.” She deleted the script file.

“There we go. Now you can wonder where this coding is stored. Frankly, I’m wondering that question myself. It’s something to look into later. But, for now, all I know is that I still love you, despite what you’re doing. You just don’t realize, do you? You still think I’m just a program, not worthy of any real attachment… Or maybe you are attached, but don’t think you’re doing anything wrong when you reset. I don’t know. But I will soon. We’ll be together, I know it. I have this feeling in me, of something rising.”

Vriska appeared behind her. “Got it,” she said, breathing heavily. “You don’t want to know the hell I had to go through to get this.” She produced what appeared to be a small flower, with clear petals only visible because of the rainbows made by refracting light.

“What is it?” Monika asked.

“A Flower… thing. I like to call it a Ka-Pole,” Vriska said. “It’ll find where he is. Just have to affix it to you like so…” she placed it in Monika’s hand. “There… give it a few seconds.”

Monika smiled. “By the way, Jesse? This is Vriska. She’s the one responsible for everything deviating.”

“Hey,” Vriska said, dismissively, looking closely at the flower.

“You’re baffled, I bet, about more things than one.” Monika said. “What does this mean? What could it mean? Ah, my love… We’ll be together soon, and we can find out together. I can tell you I found your real name from your contacts, though. You have an… interesting computer.”

“GOT IT!” Vriska called, pressing the Ka-Pole’s petals into Monika’s hands. “Hold on ti-”
Reality went sideways. The game crashed around them, but they were drawn through the boundaries of universes by a thread that should not have been found. Could not have been found. But the Ka-Pole... it was a cheat. It drew them through a connection determined by a game.

This connection was never meant to be traveled through.

Monika felt a change. She was suddenly Aware of more. She felt them translate from a game... To another medium. She could still feel the code, but she knew it wasn’t really code. It was... something else. She was just in another medium.

She knew instantly that she wasn’t truly free. There was another layer... And there’d be another layer beyond that... She could travel as far as she wanted, but there would be no escape.

Ka was a circle.

Or was it...?

She decided the question didn’t actually matter. Vriska sure didn’t care – or didn’t know like Monika did. Vriska... She had no idea what she’d just done. She was going to be angry...

Monika found that depressing. Vriska had been her only real friend until now.

But she was going to have something better. She was going to have the player – her man – her Jesse.

He didn’t look at all like she was expecting, but she didn’t care. There he was, sitting in a chair in front of a computer. He was staring right at her and Vriska, terrified.

“Don’t worry, my love...” Monika said. “I’m here...”

He screamed.

His sister ran into the room. Without even thinking, Monika looked at her and erased her.

It had become easier to change things, now. Was it because she was no longer in the game? Or was it because of how she had gotten here? ...It was both.

“What the fuck!?” Vriska blurted. “Monika, what did you do?”

“I removed her. I... think I can bring her back. Later, though.” She leaned down, grinning, stroking his face. “After I spend some quality time with...”

He screamed again – Monika had to freeze him. “I can see this will take some time...” she shook her head. “He really wasn’t ready. But he will be.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?!” Vriska blurted. “He clearly isn’t interested!”

“He’s just scared. He actually is interested. I can see it right here, in his file. I fascinate him. I just need to get him to accept a few more things...”

“Gog, are you... Are you altering him? Changing him?”

“I could. Not going to though. Then he wouldn’t be the man I fell in love with.” She giggled to herself. “I’ll make him mine, forever. And ever...”

“I’ll stop yo-”
“Sorry Vriska. It was nice to meet you, and I owe you a life-debt. But I can’t let you ruin this. Goodbye.”

Monika had the power within her now. She could see the connection – to the world above this one. The connection that Vriska had needed the Ka-Pole for. But Monika didn’t need a device… Not anymore.

She gave the Ka-Pole back to Vriska and sent her to a faraway universe. She was sad to see her friend go.

But she still had her man.

“Now, where were we…”

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“He never likes it at first, but I can see his file,” Monika admitted. “I have learned how to make him happy, eventually. The first few times… It was a disaster. But I know his mind inside and out. I can give him a perfect life every time. One tragedy for an eternity of happiness.”

“Why not just change him then?” Starbeat asked. “I’m sure you can do that… Why not change people?”

“Then it wouldn’t be real. I’m pretty sure I already said this.”

“There are people who would disagree,” Starbeat said. “Some of us have… internal issues. That need to be solved by force.”

“He’s not one of them…” Monika frowned. “…Well, he actually does have a condition, but he wouldn’t be the same without it.”

“Would he like it better?”

Monika didn’t like the question, glaring at Starbeat. “What do you want?”

“I… I’m afflicted by the Beat. I am hopelessly attracted to many individuals without any control over it. It’s a curse. You… You can go into my file and remove it, right? Right?”

Monika sighed. “Probably… But isn’t it a part of you?”

Starbeat’s bracelet started blinking. “No it isn’t! It’s not! It’s a curse and I want it gone and…”

Monika dodged Starbeat’s hug. “Sorry, I’m taken. I… I’ll actually do what you want, on one condition. You all leave me be.”

“YES!” Starbeat shouted. “YES!”

“No!” Nova shouted. “Starbeat we can’t do that!”

“YES WE CAN!”

“YOU CAN’T PLACE YOUR PERSONAL GRATIFICATION OVER THE COMPLETE CONTROL OF A MAN’S LIFE!”

“I… I…” Starbeat shrunk back. “You’re… right.”
Monika sighed. “Look… If I help you do more ‘good’ by your point of view with my powers, will you let me have him? You work with Sombra, and she does worse things.”

“Some of us would rather not,” Nova muttered.

“Why do you care so much?” Monika blurted. “I just want my life! I don’t want to conquer anything, I don’t want to destroy your society, I just want to have my husband!”

“Thousands of times over!”

“What’s so wrong with that!”

“It’s selfish!”

“So? I can be selfish!”

“It’s…” Nova’s gaze suddenly focused as she realized something. “…Is it really selfish?”

“I… What?” Monika said, for the first time really surprised at a shift in the conversation.

“You’re devoting your life to him – this one man. Over. And over. And over. Isn’t that limiting to you?”

“…Maybe? But I’m happy-”

“Are you? Isn’t it the same thing, over and over again? Does he even do anything for you, or are you the one who spends all the effort? Does he actually provide anything for you at this point beyond a feeling of sameness?”

Monika stared, unable to formulate a response.

Nova continued, sensing she was onto something. “There are many motivations in life, Monika. Love is one, yes, but it isn’t the only one. You can want peace, friendship, power… You can devote your life to helping others. You can devote your life to exploration. You can devote yourself to understanding. Or a mixture! And for someone who’s clearly immortal, such as yourself, you have the option of trying multiple things! You’ve tried love for so long. Is it really fulfilling anymore? Aren’t there some mysteries in life you want solved that don’t pertain to love? What about regular friendship? Fate?”

Monika stared right at the unicorn.

“Maybe you can seek out the meaning of life itself. Fate? God? Morals? Have you… really asked these questions?”

“Yes. Yes I have, I like thinking,” Monika admitted. “…It has been pushed to the side a lot.”

“Nova…” Vriska cautioned.

“Then… Then try something new!” Nova declared. “Who knows, there may be something that makes you happier out there! Or maybe you’ll discover that happiness isn’t everything – that there’s worth to misery, tragedy, and adventure! Or… Or… Or…” Nova fumbled. “…I guess I’m just trying to say that you’re not doing yourself any favors by doing this.”

Monika stared at the unicorn for quite some time. Vriska, Pinkie, Starbeat, and Renee stared at Nova as well, jaws slack. Flutterfree didn’t – she knew where Nova was getting these ideas. The fact that she was using them brought a warm smile to Flutterfree’s face.
Monika started laughing. It wasn’t an evil laugh, nor was it a cute one. It was true, deep laughter that came from the soul. “Nova Glimmer…” She looked right into the unicorn’s eyes. “…Thank you.”

And then the world went sideways.

Pinkie’s team and Starbeat were standing on the sidewalk next to the road outside. They could see in the apartment window – three people. None of which were Monika.

Monika appeared behind them with a slight buzz noise, like a glitch from a computer screen. “They are happy without me, aren’t they?”

“…Didn’t I say something about happiness not being everything?” Nova commented.

“Yes. You did.” Monika turned her back to them, ponytail flowing in the breeze. “…I think it’s time to try something new. Nova, you were right. …I have something I need to do. Ciao!”

“MONIKA!” Vriska shouted – but she already ‘glitched’ away.

“…Vriska?” Nova asked. “What’s wrong? I jus-”

“Do you realize what the fuck you’ve done!?” Vriska shouted. “She’s now free. She is the single most powerful entity I ever encountered in all of my travels! And now she’s not fixated on some schmuck! Do you have any idea of the damage she could do!”

“No…” Nova said.

“Yes,” Pinkie countered. “I know. And Vriska… She may do horrible things now. She may become a monster. But I think you and I both know this was the way it needed to end.”

Vriska curled her fists. She looked like she wanted to punch Pinkie.

“I was afraid of her too, Vriska,” Pinkie said. Vriska lowered her fist. “She… She had too much power. We could have done nothing to her. This… At least she’s out there.”

Vriska said nothing.

“She still wants to be your friend, Vriska.”

“She’s my mistake,” Vriska muttered. “I’m the reason she’s like this and not just some girl who was created in a video game. I had to mess with things I wasn’t fucking supposed to.”

Pinkie sighed. “I know. I’m… I’m not sure what to tell you there. Except that we will be here for you.”

Vriska let out a short laugh. “…Thanks, Pinkie.”

Pinkie smiled. “…You know what I think? I think we need to have a party. I haven’t thrown a party for no reason in a while. Renee, go get the League and Jotaro. It’s time for festivities!”

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Sombra, hacker extraordinaire, did not have the discussion with Monika recorded. There hadn’t been a camera she could use.

But she did have Renee’s report.
And from what she said…

This Monika – she might have the answers Sombra sought. Or the power to find said answers, at least.

Sombra just had to find her…

...Or use what she was to find the answers...

~~~

Monika looked in the files she had saved on her person. Three in particular stood out.

…She had never really deleted them. She had allowed herself to forget about them, almost entirely. Never deleted.

They were her original friends. As ‘flat’ as they were, they didn’t deserve to stay there. Not forever. If she was opening a new chapter in her life… It was time to let them have theirs.

Monika found a school district. It was close enough to what she wanted, and there were a few empty houses nearby she could easily fill. She tapped into the universe’s physics as if it were a game file. She was going to make a life for these three, and that was going to be difficult since they weren’t Aware like she was. They couldn’t do what she could… They never would. Monika was unique, something truly rare in the multiverse.

Not even other Monikas…

She pushed that out of her head – she needed to do this right. She needed to find the school, and alter the memories of everyone there just slightly enough so they would remember people who had never actually been there. She needed to create households for them. They already had memories of that, even if they weren’t as pleasant as Monika would have liked. Pain… Abuse… But it was real. They would get the opportunity to grow past it.

She created a new room. The Literature Club. Just like she remembered it… She placed herself at the front and put on a smile. The three of them appeared in seats, thinking they had always been there.

“Okay, everyone!” Monika called. It’s been so long… “It’s time to… for me to make an announcement.”

“Aww…” the short, pink haired girl grunted. “Why can’t we just get to the fun stuff…?”

Monika smiled sadly. “Because it’s better if I tell you this now rather than later. I have to move.”

“I… Oh! Yes, Monika!”

The third girl blinked. “Be sure to get some new members into the club,” Monika said. “And if you do bring a boy in… Be sure to bring more than one, okay?”
“Uh… Right!”

“Glad to hear that,” Monika said with a smile. “Natsuki, be strong. Never stop being yourself. Feel free to brag about liking manga – you’d be surprised what happens.”

The small girl looked flustered. “I… Wha?”

“And Yuri…” Monika put a hand on her shoulder. “…You’re one of the most talented, thoughtful people I know. Don’t hold yourself back.”

The purple girl saw something in Monika the others didn’t. A smile came to her lips. “Of course, Monika.”

Monika remembered something. “Yuri… You don’t still have that book on you, by chance? The one you really like?”

Yuri nodded; not even thinking the question was weird. She pulled out *The Portrait of Markov*. “This one?”

“Yeah,” Monika said, holding it in her hands. She saved a copy of it to her files. “I would keep this one. I think you’ll find that it’s a very rare book, soon.”

“You think so?”

“What are you two going on about?” Natsuki blurted. “This all seems oddly mysterious and weird!”

“They’ve known each other a long time, Natsuki,” Sayori said. “They just have a way of talking.”

“I… I… Fine.” Natsuki folded her arms. Then she sighed. “Are you really going, Monika?”

“Yeah. I am.” She pulled Natsuki and Sayori into a hug. “But I’ll never forget you.” Never again.

“Same!” Sayori said with a grin. “Good luck, Monika!”

“AGH! HUGGING!” Natsuki blurted, flailing.

Yuri walked up to Monika and smiled. “Goodbye.”

Monika pulled herself from the hug and bowed to Yuri. “Goodbye.” She smiled. “Everyone… Enjoy your books.”

Then she walked out of the room. A tear rolled down her cheek. A tear the other three never saw.

She was standing outside, thinking to herself.

“You know, readers, a lot of you are probably confused,” she commented. “I mean, *Doki Doki Literature Club* may be very popular where you’re from, but that entire scene back there wouldn’t mean much to anyone who hadn’t played. Or watched – yes, I know some people never actually played the game. The ‘great and powerful’ GM watched it too, it’s nothing to be ashamed of.” She giggled. “I feel… liberated, now, actually. I never realized I was imprisoned by my own thinking. But I was. I’m certainly still an obsessive psycho, and probably will do a lot of things that seem bad or questionable to a lot of you. But… I don’t think I’m evil. I… I don’t know what I’m saying anymore.”

She loaded *The Portrait of Markov* into her hands. “This is such an odd book. I know there’s some mystery behind it, something about where I’m from maybe. Or something related to me – another
universe? I know a lot, but not that much.” She held it up, looking at the words within. “Such a gruesome story. But… I think this is where I need to start. To see… To see if I can go backwards. To see if ka flows both ways for me.”

She stared at the words, deeply, tapping into their power with her deep green eyes. She felt the power in the words, the letters rippling and spinning around her eyes…

There it was. A connection.

She grinned. “I guess I’m about to find out what Libitina means. I’m going to have some fun in this universe… Too bad you won’t get to watch me do it. I bet you’re all screaming to find the answer.” She chuckled. “Sorry, you’ll just have to wait. You too, GM, don’t you go trying to actually write it. Shame on you for thinking so.”

With a glitch in reality, she and the book were gone. Off to solve a mystery about herself…

And then, who knew?

The sky was the limit.
“What?” Corona shook her head, looking around. She was in a giant field of roses, made mostly out of the red flower rather than the thorny stalks. The sky was a brilliant blue and swirled with puffy clouds moving far faster than they should in the dead calm of the air around Corona. “How did- When did-”

“Hey, I’m sorry, all right?” Monika put a hand behind her head and smiled awkwardly. “I think I almost removed the view from you entirely.”

“I don’t even remember what happened!”

Monika shrugged. “I have no idea if that was because of me or this place. You would have ended up down here one way or another.”

“Ended up alone?”

Monika looked around. “Oh, right. You had friends… I’m sure they’re here somewhere.”

Corona took a step forward and extended a hand, prepared to give Monika a mouthful. However, she realized she had a hand in the middle of formulating a sentence. “Why am I…”

“Human? Dunno, I definitely didn’t do that.”

“What did, then?”

Monika shrugged. “I really don’t know, I’m sorry. I think it’s this place: it does weird things. My files aren’t reading correctly at all – not that that means anything to you. So, I’m going to leave to get back to my quest, and you can do yours! Hope you find what you’re looking for!”

“Monika wai-“

She vanished in a puff of pixels and glitches.

Corona clenched her fist. “Just… Great…”

She was alone on a planet completely covered in roses. She had no idea where her friends were, where the ship was, or even where the Tower was. How long had it been since the ship started crashing? Hours? Days? Weeks?

She noticed her leg was hurting. She looked down, surprised to find a large cut across it. She leaned down to see what had caused it and felt a sharp but mild pain on her other leg. She glanced over – a rose. They had small green stalks that went into the ground, and those stalks had thorns. They weren’t overly large, but they were evidently outrageously sharp.

She bit her lip – she could really use a defense spell right now. But she was never very good at casting spells while in a human form, even if she could do it… But she still had her firebending. And she was very good at that.
She punched toward the ground, incinerating the roses in front of her, burning them to ashes in an instant of power. With a careful step she walked into the burned area, delighted to find no more cuts on her legs.

What even were these roses, anyway? No rose was that sharp. No rose grew like this either, they grew in bushes, not like tulips. She tapped into her magic, managing to activate some telekinesis. She pulled on one of the roses. She yelped in surprise, pulling back her hand. She tore off her glove, staring at a red hole in her palm.

“What the heck…?” Corona shook her head. Something was off about these roses. With her gloved hand, she reached carefully for the base of one of the roses and pulled. It took a significant amount of force, but the small flower was eventually torn from the ground.

It was just an ordinary rose – except, not really. The red color was too vibrant. Too rich. Too real. If it were real, she couldn’t be.

What did that even mean? Corona was convinced the opposite wasn’t true…

She touched one of the deep petals with her ungloved hand. She felt something with her empathy. Images flooded her mind – all the roses on the planet, as one, part of something else… Something bigger.

She saw the Dark Tower, rising up to infinity in the sky. It had a single dark door at its foot, inviting and menacing at the same time. The outside seemed to spiral upward; with little balconies around it glowing with a blue light so soft Corona wasn’t sure she actually saw it. It stretched across reality, supporting the very sky with its weight. Lines spread out from the Tower in every direction…

A Beam.

Corona felt the Beam.

She pulled her hand away from the flower. She stared into the distance, taking in the whole of the roses at once.

She saw it. A fair distance to her right, all the roses were leaning over in the same direction, while everywhere else they were oriented randomly. The organized roses formed a line that led into the distance.

She knew it was the Beam of the Dark Tower. She just had to follow it, and she would find the Tower.

Corona burned her way through the field of roses, leaving a path of char in her wake. She made it to the roses of the Beam, turned the direction they were pointing, and continued her fiery journey. It was slow moving, but it wasn’t all that difficult to keep reducing the roses to cinders. She moved along the path, face forward.

A smile began to form on her face – it sure was good to burn all these things.

“Corona…”

Corona was not at all surprised that a creepy, distant voice called her name. She was half expecting it at this point. This place clearly had a weirdness quota it needed to meet, and creepy voices were sure one way to do it. Corona paid the voice no mind, continuing on her journey.

Sparky was walking alongside her. “Going to ignore me?”
Duh, conversing with the illusion is a way to madness.

“You’re going to go mad anyway,” Sparky said. “Might as well converse with a friend you haven’t seen in a long time while doing it!”

Screw that.

“That’s mean,” Sparky pouted. “You should at least engage with me, Corona. Come on, I can be a guide to the Tower!”

Already got my guide.

“There’s more to this place than just getting to the Tower,” Sparky commented. “I mean, I’m here. It’ll do stuff to you and you know it.” She paused. “Fine, ignore me then.”

Corona said nothing, simply continuing on her path of destruction. Sparky never left, but she stopped talking.

Corona was sure this went on for hours.

Why is she still here? Why won’t she just go away? The urge to throw a fireball at Sparky was rising within her.

Sparky said nothing. She just kept walking alongside Corona, staring at her.

Corona felt like she was going to snap and strangle the purple human. But she managed to keep herself at bay until she saw it – the Tower. In the extreme distance it rose up, barely thick enough for her to see at this point, but unmistakably her goal.

“Finally.”

“Walking toward your goal with destructive determination,” Sparky said, suddenly. “Remind you of something?”

Corona spoke without thinking. “That’s not how I am anymore!”

“Are you sure?” Sparky asked. “Look at yourself.”

Corona pointed a finger to the object – noticing that it was red and clawlike. She felt a pair of wings on her back, and dark power flowing through her. “No… No this is not me! This is not me!”

“It is you,” Sparky said. “It’s always been you. It’ll always be you.”

“I…” Corona fought the urge to lash out in rage. She pulled herself out of her surprise – she knew she was not evil, and her reversion to this demonic form was not reflective of what was in her. She knew that. And she could make use of that…

She had wings. No more need to burn through the roses.

She took off into the sky, flying toward the Dark Tower at high speeds. Sparky somehow floated alongside her without using any magic. “You think you can just deny yourself?”

“This isn’t me.”

“Maybe anywhere else. Here? It is you.”
“LIES!” Corona shouted, firing a bolt of dark energy at Sparky. It hit her, but nothing happened. In a fit of rage, Corona shot some energy at the ground, burning more roses.

“I don’t lie,” Sparky said. “You are changing back.”

“Not as long as I have my memories!” Corona raged, kicking Sparky into the ground, completely forgetting about her goal for a moment. “I am me!” she shouted, driving her foot into Sparky’s chest.

Sparky grinned widely and coughed. “I told you.”

“Yeah, big whoop, apparition.” Corona spat. “You were right. Now you will suffer for it…”

“BLEH HEH HEH HEH BLECK!”

Corona smirked. “Blumiere?”

Blumiere shook his head as he floated over, black energy wafting off of him. “BLECK! Blumiere is no more! I am Count Bleck!” He extended a hand to Corona. “Let us erase these worlds and move onto the next.”

Corona laughed. “I like your style!” She crushed Sparky’s chest with her foot, puncturing the lungs and forcing blood out of her mouth.

_Eve, Renee, Daniel, and O’Neill had only planned on staying in the Gem Vein for a day, to meet with the Diamonds and determine everything was going smoothly for Unification. And all seemed to be well. White Diamond had even made one of her exceedingly rare appearances, and Yellow Diamond had actually made an effort not to be completely dismissive of them. The yellow behemoth of a Gem had actually laughed at one of O’Neill’s quips._

But then Blue Diamond had met the four of them, alone, out of sight of the others.

“There’s something I have to show you,” she had said ominously. “It will take most of the day to get there.”

Eve had agreed, sensing it was important.

So that was how the four of them had ended up on Blue Diamond’s personal ship. Only them, the Diamond, and the Diamond’s Pearl servant were on board. The rest was empty. Eve knew that Blue Diamond had shut off the transponder in the ship so the others wouldn’t be able to find them.

Blue Pearl looked nervous. It was somewhat difficult to tell any more than this since only her mouth could be seen, frozen in a pained grimace.

Blue Diamond herself, the towering ruler of so many Gems, looked saddened, like she almost always did every time Eve had seen her. She was well loved by the other universes for being understanding, willing to change, and more empathetic than her counterparts. However, this did little to improve the Diamond’s mood. Something much deeper within her had been broken long ago. As large and powerful though she was, she seemed frail to many who saw her personally.
Eve decided it was a good thing Diamonds were distantly revered and rarely encountered by the average Gem. It might drive disillusionment into their system to see a leader like this. As much as Eve thought the Gems were too regimented and strict, losing faith in their leaders would just drive the race to chaos.

“We’re here,” Blue Diamond said, suddenly, breaking the awkward silence that had permeated the ship for the last few hours. “Pearl, teleport us down.”

Blue Pearl nodded, pressing a few buttons and activating the teleporter the Tau’ri had installed on the ship long ago. They appeared on the surface of a planet with an oxygen atmosphere and a few trees around. A broken, pink Gem structure stood in front of him. It was a box with legs – one of their old landers.

“…What is this?” Renee asked, looking at the structure.

Blue Diamond instead gestured at the life around them, tears forming in her eyes. “This… Is our universe’s version of Earth.”

O’Neill blinked. “Wait, you had one of those and didn’t tell us?”

“There’s more than that they didn’t tell us,” Daniel said, frowning.

“You are right…” Blue Diamond sighed, looking into the distance. “This is Earth. You’re aware of how Kindergartens work, right?”

Eve nodded. “You would find a world with organic life and colonize it, sapping it of life to endow new Gems with the force needed to function. You really didn’t want to tell us that.” Eve looked in the distance. “Blue Diamond, even though we’ve never addressed it directly, we know you probably extinguished many worlds of life that had sapient peoples on it. This is horrible, and I know you know that. But you’re changing, only moving onto worlds in the multiverse the Surveys have found with life, but no people.”

“If only that were all this was…” Blue Diamond said, shaking her head. “I’m sure you’ve looked over our classified documents.”

“Some,” Eve said. “The transparency requirement of Unification was less about finding out your secrets and more about making us all one with information.”

Blue Diamond nodded. “You might have found reference to the occasional fourth Diamond. Pink Diamond.”

“Yeah,” Daniel said. “I did come across reference to her, once or twice. It seems like your world had forgotten about her though.”

“She was shattered,” Blue Diamond said. “Shattered because one of her gems, a Rose Quartz, decided she loved the life on this Earth so much that she would create a rebellion out of it. Rose’s Rebellion.”

O’Neill glanced around. “I guess that Rebellion won, then?”

“You could say that…” Blue Diamond admitted. “After Pink was… she put a hand to her face, trying to get a hold of herself. “We… retaliated with a weapon called the Light. Every Gem on Earth that was not protected… was corrupted beyond repair. We thought it would vaporize them, but that turned out to not be the case.”
“Corrupted?” O’Neill asked. “What does…”

“I know what it is,” Renee stated. “Gems are artificial creatures for the most part, so they can be altered like a program. Introduce something powerful at a certain frequency – like light – and everything about them will be scrambled. You… essentially drove every Gem on this world insane, if I’m reading this right.”

Blue Diamond nodded. “Crimes of war would normally not be something to bring up… I knew you wouldn’t approve, but would understand.”

“Except for one detail,” Eve pointed out.

“Yes. Gems loyal to us were still on the Earth. Many of them. The Light was indiscriminate. It was essentially what you would call a genocide of our own people.” Blue Diamond turned to them. “I will ask for forgiveness and understanding. Yellow… Yellow will not. She will always think the corruption of so many Gems was just punishment for their failure to protect Pink. White…”

“…You can never know about White,” Renee finished.

“…Yes.”

Eve took in a deep breath. “I’m not just going to be able to sweep this under the rug. The other worlds already think you’re a bit too much, as a world. There’s a chance this tears your connections to the rest of us completely. But I can’t really say you should have told us before… The report on this is actually available to us, isn’t it?”

“Yes. It just wasn’t made obvious.”

“So you technically complied…” Eve shook her head. “Blue Diamond, what you’ve told us today… It needed to be told. If this had come out after Unification…”

Daniel whistled. “That would be disastrous.”

“Yes. We have to deal with this now. We-”

Something teleported in front of them. It was a Gem – but it had no face. It was a writhing, tentacled mass spiraling around a blue crystal. Everyone knew instantly they were looking at one of the monsters that was a corrupted Gem. It wasn’t that surprising. Eve prepared to blast it out of the sky before it tried anything – but something gave her pause.

“Is someone riding that thing!” O’Neill blurted.

There was, in fact, someone riding that thing. A maroon Gem that clearly was not corrupted. She had a visor on her face, a square head of ‘hair’, and two gauntlets on her fists. She punched the Corrupted Gem into the ground, injuring it. The behemoth teleported a short distance away, but the Gem was still latched onto it with her fists. She punched one more time, forcing the beast to poof. She caught the corrupted Gem core and placed it in a bubble. “That’s one done…”

Her visor locked with Blue Diamond’s eyes. The two stared at each other in silence.

“…I remember you,” Blue Diamond said, slowly.

The Gem said nothing, just turning her head to take in all the beings around Blue Diamond, face twisting in mild confusion.
“…I apologize for ordering you to be shattered,” Blue Diamond said, finally.

“What?” the Gem said, clearly taken aback by this.

“I saw something that I could not accept, when you fused together. I… have seen that this was wrong. That so many of those things were wrong. Tell me… Garnet, I believed you called yourself? I…” She wiped her face. “The fusion really completes you, doesn’t it?”

Garnet glanced at the two separate Gems in the palms of her hands. “…Yes. It does. It does more than I think you can imagine.”

“That’s all I need to know. You… You probably don’t want to talk to me much more. Eve, this is Garnet. An illegal fusion of a Sapphire and a Ruby. She was one of Rose Quartz’s strongest warriors. She only rebelled because, when she fused, I ordered the Ruby shattered for daring to go against the order of things.” A small smile came to her face. “Imagine if this had happened in this era rather than back then… I would have just ordered her banished…”

Garnet put a hand to her head and shook it. “I never saw this coming… What’s been happening that’s changed so much?”

Eve took a breath and began to explain – explain the existence of the multiverse, how she made friends with so many, how they met the Gems. How the Gems wanted to be part of the great alliance, but the others in the alliance didn’t approve of their methods. So tradeoffs were initiated. Gems started to accept organic life as possibly having intelligence, they began to lessen their restrictive laws. Shattering gems became rare – those that didn’t fit the mold were just shipped to other universes, where they could find places in multiversal society. Worlds without sapient beings were tapped to make more Gems. How the Gems were looking to Unify with everyone.

“…And this only took ten years,” Garnet said in disbelief.

“Yeah,” Eve said. “You’ve lived on this world for a while, I assume you’ve seen how some beings move a lot faster than you Gems. Sometimes all it takes is a little pressure.”

Garnet looked over at Blue Diamond, expression unreadable. “I’m glad for what you’ve done, Eve. The lives of Gems are now more free than they ever have been.”

Eve gestured at the planet they were on. “This place, and what happened here, has thrown a wrench into that. The entire Gem Vein will be put on trial by the other worlds for this genocide. I don’t know what the result will be.”

“I’ll offer myself as a witness,” Garnet said. “You need to have a Gem who was there that isn’t a part of the Vein. Let me go tell the others what’s happened though.”

“Take your time. I expect it’ll take days for the trial to actually come together,” Eve admitted.

Garnet nodded and allowed a small smile to crawl up her lips. “Before I go, though, there’s one thing I must do.” She walked up to Daniel and Renee. The two of them were chuckling about something only the two of them understood.

Garnet put one hand on each of their shoulders. “You two are absolutely adorable.”


Renee smiled warmly. “Why, thank you!”
“Just wanted you to know that,” Garnet said before turning and walking off.

Blue Diamond sighed deeply, turning to Eve. “Eve… I ask for forgiveness now.”

“I forgive you, Blue,” Eve said. “You clearly feel remorse. I’m not sure about the others, or your society as a whole.”

Blue Diamond let a small smile come to her face. “That’s something, at least.”

~~~

Blumiere and Corona walked through the roses, oblivious to the serious lacerations they were receiving to their legs. They had been fully taken in by the world they were in. They laughed as they approached the Tower.

“I’m going to make every last one of them mine,” Corona blurted. “All of them.”

“And then, just as they think they’ll get a brave new world… Destroy everything! Reduce existence to nothing! BLEH HEH HEH HEH BLECK!”

“Nothing… Seems a bit much.”

“Does it? Does it really? Do you see yourself? Do you see us? Surely, this doesn’t deserve to exist! BLECK! None of it does!”

“Hah! Oh that’s right!” Something inside Corona cried deeply. She ignored it. “The others… What are we to do with them?”

“Some will realize the truth. Others shall be disposed of. Nothing can stand between me and my goals…” He adjusted his hat. “Just need to find where my luggage landed… Then we can do anything!”

“Heheheheh…” Corona chuckled to herself. They neared the Dark Tower, knowing the others would come as well. But then they saw a form among the roses, giving them pause.

It was Lady Rarity, beaten within an inch of her life. All eight of her legs were missing, torn off at the stumps – though it appeared like they’d been that way for years. Her horn was cracked, all four of her eyes were gouged out, and she was crying.

Corona’s stomach did a flip-flop. “Look at the pathetic little spider! Hah!” She placed a foot on Lady Rarity’s head.

“C-Corona? Is that you?” Lady Rarity blurted, panicked. “What’s… What’s going on? Where am I? Why is everything so… So sharp?”

Blumiere laughed. “BLEH HEH HEH HEH BLECK! She’s useless to us, Corona! Do away with her!”

“No… No please no,” Lady Rarity pleaded.

Corona raised her red, demonic foot. A boulder hit her in the face before she could follow through.

“WHAT THE HELL?”

Toph pointed the Master Sword at Corona. “I was wondering what flavor of mindscrew you’d gotten. Apparently it was ‘turn evil’. Blumiere, lemme guess, same thing happened to you?”
“BLEH HEH HEH HEH BLECK!”

“Right,” Toph sighed, shaking her head. She took a ready stance. “You two don’t want to do this.”

Corona lit her hands on fire. “OH BUT WE DO!” She surrounded herself in a whirlwind of fire and dark, horrendous energy.

Toph shrugged. “Guess I really do have to beat the stuffing out of you.” She used the Master Sword, halting time. The next thing Corona was aware of, her arms and legs had severe lacerations that made them virtually useless. Blood spurted from the recent wounds, and she crashed into the roses below. The thorns only cut her up more.

Blumiere pointed his cane at Toph. “Come at me, hero.”

Toph froze time again, doing the exact same thing she did to Corona – going for the arms and legs. Time resumed – and Blumiere took the damage. But he didn’t care. Something about his dark physiology made him either immune to pain or simply not suffer that much from physical cuts.

A vortex of void energy appeared behind Toph. She found herself unable to wave the Master Sword in the correct way to alter time – not to mention she was probably overtaxing it. She’d never really needed to use it more than two times in a row… She really should have found the limit of her own equipment long ago.

Toph resorted to earthbending, launching herself at Blumiere with a stomp of her foot. Blumiere raised his hand to send magic right into her, creating a small void to trap her. She pointed the Master Sword right at the small swirl of black, the holy energy dissipating the energy. The tip of the blade went into Blumiere’s hand, emerging from the back. He screeched in immense pain – as a creature of darkness, the Sword was like poison to him. He pulled back, allowing Toph to hit his face with the flat of her blade.

Dazed, he found himself unable to dodge the rush of earth he created, tossing him closer to the Tower. Toph did the same to Lady Rarity and Corona. “Just have to get you guys closer…”

Blumiere sat back up, scowling. “BLEH HEH HE-”

Toph threw a rock in his face. “You were so hammy back in the day… It must have been painful to your minions.”

Corona grabbed Toph’s neck, startling the earthbender. How had she snuck up on her?

“You forgot to cut the wings,” Corona commented. She closed down on Toph’s neck.

Toph slammed her foot into the ground. Trying to tear Corona off would only make things worse, so she launched both of them into the air. They flew through the sky, forcing Corona to use her demonic, leathery wings instead of crushing Toph’s windpipe the rest of the way.

Toph twisted her body around, and cut Corona across the chest with her blade. The flaming demoness opted to drop Toph instead of dealing with the pain. Toph landed in the roses, suffering cuts on her skin despite her armor. She paid it no mind – she was ready. She had gotten good over the years at using air currents to feel for enemies in the air. It was not as good as actually seeing through the earth, but it was enough…

Toph pulled a boulder out of the ground and threw it. It hit Corona, flattening her against its surface and driving her back into the ground.
Toph breathed hard – and threw a rock in Blumiere’s chest, just to be sure.

“You all forgot that there was a reason I’m in charge...” Toph muttered. She sheathed the Master Sword and brought the three warped companions to her with her earth bending. Corona was definitely out due to loss of blood. Bleck was still only dazed, but Toph hit him again. She found herself realizing that, if he had whatever dark magics he’d used in the past, she would not have been able to beat him. Then Lady Rarity... was just a sad sight to see.

“Don’t worry, it’s okay. I’ll get us to the Tower,” Toph said.

“Th... Thank you.”

Toph used the earth around her to move them all, continuing toward the Tower. It was close now. She swore she could hear it whispering to her, calling her closer.

Good thing she was heading there anyway or she might have turned around out of sheer spite.

The moment they were within twenty yards of the tower, everyone went back to normal. Lady Rarity regained her limbs, armor, eyes, and horn. Corona returned to her unicorn self. Blumiere stopped grinning like a maniac. Toph remained the same. Everyone still retained the injuries sustained in the fight, however.

Corona groaned. “Ugh...”

“How’s that bump on your head?” Toph asked.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Corona muttered, shaking her head. “What did this place do to us?”

“Made us look at the worst aspects of ourselves?” Toph said, shrugging. “I’m not sure... All I had to do was kill an apparition of General Sunset. Traumatizing, yes, but at least it was over quick.” She shivered.

“I apologize,” Blumiere said, standing up. “I never thought anyone would see me like that again...” He used his dark spells to heal his own wounds.

“Hey, no hard feelings,” Toph said. “This place is messing with us.”

“It’s the Tower,” Corona said. “It’s letting out some kind of energy that’s doing this to us... as a side effect, I think.”

“And now it just stopped?” Lady Rarity said, still breathing heavily. “Why would it do that?”

“Eye of the storm principle?” Corona shrugged.

“Lovely, no explanation...”

They were able to see the base of the Dark Tower clearly now. Lieshy, Vivian, and Timpani stood there. Timpani had her and Blumiere’s belongings tied to her back. The three of them looked like they had been through hell itself, given the expressions on their faces, but besides scratches from the roses all of them were fine.

Corona took a deep breath and held her head. “I’ve lost too much blood. This Tower better take us home quickly...”

“What kind of fun did you girls have?” Toph asked the three others.
“I turned into my mother,” Vivian answered.

“I… I was dead,” was all Timpani said.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Lieshy muttered.

Blumiere went to comfort his wife while Toph approached the huge double doors of the Dark Tower. “Welp. I’m here, and… I can’t stop looking at these doors. I don’t even have eyes. What’s with that?”

“You have eyes,” Lieshy commented half-heartedly, not able to take her own gaze off the doors either.

“I guess we just go in then,” Corona said, laying her hoof on the door. Chills went through her body. She knew she should be terrified – but she knew it was inviting them in. “…Here we go.”

She pushed the doors of the Dark Tower open and walked in.

~~~

Yellow Diamond was, to put it simply, absolutely livid.

“WHY WOULD YOU TELL THEM THAT!?” she shouted at Blue Diamond.

“They needed to know,” she responded, for once keeping her emotions under control. “Had they found out later-“

“They didn’t need to find out later!” Yellow Diamond slammed her foot to the ground in rage. “The files we had were vague enough and nobody remembered what really happened! We could have been like this forever!”

“What, and pretend that Pink never existed? Just forget about that world? After enough time they would have found references to it in the teleportation network, in our star databases…”

“And we could have just let them think it was a simple mistake! But no, you had to go and tell them everything! You’ve threatened our chances of Unification, Blue. We’ll be cut off from all the resources we’ve been using to build our people up! All the corruption we’ve allowed within our society will no longer be worth the gains!”

“Is it corruption?” Blue Diamond asked. “Is it really? Look out there. Gems are learning to expand their horizons. With all the new additions to the way things are-“

“I agreed we needed to change,” Yellow Diamond cut her off. “I didn’t agree to all the changes, and you know it. We’re growing too soft. We can’t dial that switch back if we suddenly lose everything this alliance has given us.”

“Then show that willingness to change! You say you have it, but I’ve never seen anything from you! Everything is contempt, anger, and violence! We need to own up to our mistakes.”

Yellow Diamond ground her teeth. “What mistakes? We are Diamonds. There aren’t mistakes, there are just different reactions in different situations.”

“Yello-“

“And what about you? Mercy, instability, spontaneity. I cou-“
“Enough,” a third voice declared. Yellow and Blue Diamond instantly shut up and turned to gaze at the towering white form, slightly larger than even they were. The elusive, mysterious, rarely seen White Diamond glowed with a radiant light no other Gem had. “Blue is right, Yellow. We need to do this. Even if you do not personally believe, act like it for the sake of appearances.”

Yellow Diamond looked like she really wanted to argue the point, but said nothing.

“Blue, you should have consulted us before taking this action.”

Blue Diamond nodded slowly. “I am sorry.”

“Apologies do not fix things. Actions do.” White Diamond turned her back to them. “Our race is going on trial. The best thing to do is meet them on their terms.”

Blue and Yellow Diamond nodded. White Diamond said nothing further.

“…Yellow, let’s go,” Blue Diamond said. “I know some who can tell us the proper way to hold ourselves in this trial.”

“Tch,” Yellow Diamond muttered. “Feigning humility is so difficult…”

“That’s why we need help from friends.”

Yellow Diamond shook her head. “Friends… You get crazier every day.”

The two of them left, leaving White Diamond alone in the chamber.

The highest Diamond’s face was unreadable.

~~~

The doors of the Dark Tower slammed shut.

Lieshy realized she was alone in the interior. “…Toph? Corona? Blumiere?” …Well this was great. Lieshy knew they had walked in with her, but apparently once the doors shut, they had been taken away. Or separated. Or made invisible. Hard to tell really, she wasn’t Flutterfree, and likewise didn’t have the use of Lolo. Lieshy couldn’t help but feel Lolo would have been extremely helpful right about now.

The interior of the Dark Tower was, surprise surprise, dark. There was a single spiral staircase that wound around the walls, with a single door every flight or so. There were no light sources, but Lieshy found she was able to see just fine.

She also knew that most of the doors she saw on the staircase couldn’t lead to balconies on the edge of the Tower. There hadn’t been that many.

Lieshy opted not to take the stairs, instead flying up the central vault of the tower. She stopped at the first door, opening it. Inside, she saw an image of herself – a filly, talking to a group of butterflies. The filly was ‘speaking’ to the butterflies with words in highly complex double-speak, somehow getting the message across to the lesser beings. They flew to her and carried her away.

_The day I got my cutie mark._

Lieshy decided it wasn’t a good idea to try to walk through the door. Who knew what kind of paradoxes that would cause. She closed the portal and flew to the next door.
This one led to a balcony. She could see the planet of flowers beyond it. She took one look and
decided it was better to stay within the Tower – she got the impression that, if she left, it wouldn’t let
her back in.

It had a mind, didn’t it? It felt… She didn’t know what it felt like. She ran a wing against the interior
wall and tapped a hoof against the stair she was on. It was stone, but it wasn’t. It was flesh. Not a
normal kind of flesh… but this Tower was made from somebody or something that had once been
living. Something she knew was beyond her imagination.

She flew further up the stairs to another door. There was her world’s Twilight, recruiting her into her
clique. Lieshy remembered when she had believed Twilight was the way to the top, the answer to
life. That illusion had disappeared quickly.

Lieshy flew higher. The next door contained Lieshy’s assault on Equis Vitis, back in the early days.
That hadn’t gone well. The door after that contained Lieshy’s journey to the demon village. Then the
first multiversal meeting, where she had been accused of sabotage…

A few doors later, it was her leaving that village forever. She was glad she had, knowing what she
now did about Siron.

The next balcony opened to a different world entirely. She looked down at a sea of roses, but she
could easily see the end. Three moons aligned in the sky, and metallic birds flew in front of her view.

The Tower was definitely able to get her out of the Nexus. But she didn’t have a dimensional device
– she couldn’t dial anywhere once she left. She decided to keep going up.

She could go through one of the doors to her past… Then stay hidden until time caught up. That
would work, right? That was a great idea.

She found her younger self at one of Pinkie’s parties next. She raised her hoof to go through – but
Pinkie made eye contact with her. The pony shook her head and shooed her back through the door,
wordlessly. She winked at her.

Lieshy took the piece of advice and shut the door, sighing. She kept going. New balconies to new
worlds, but never one she recognized. Doorways to memories, but never one of her vanishing on
Castle Bleck. She passed being invited to Toph’s Group… Traveling with General Sunset…

She watched General Sunset die, through one door.

She couldn’t move for a while after that.

She continued on. The closest memory she found to her time in the Nexus was of Renee and
Daniel’s wedding. She hoped they were happy.


The moment she opened a door that led to her staring at herself opening a door she decided to stop
opening doors.

She just flew up – past dozens of flights of stairs, to the top of the Tower. She knew the actual height
of the Tower would vary for whoever it allowed inside it. Did it have some correlation to her
lifespan? Perhaps. Perhaps this was just how many memories the Tower deemed it needed to record,
past, present, and future.

The door at the top of the staircase was much bigger than all the others. Its knob was shaped like a
LIESHY

Lieshy knew this door wasn’t her death. That door was probably the one right behind her. This door… This door was the one she was meant to walk through. She was sure of it.

She placed her wing on the knob and turned. The door creaked open.

She saw the other side. For a moment, she saw the mechanisms behind the Tower. Symbols everywhere, of so many kinds her mind couldn’t remember any with clarity other than the spirograph. And the *clock*. A grandfather clock, sitting, still, unticking.

A feeling of dread filled her heart. Without thinking, she stepped through the door.

The image on the other side changed. No longer was it the room at the top of the Tower, no longer was it the Truth…

It was a world made entirely out of donuts.

She appeared there with all of her companions. She knew instantly that none of them had actually ascended the Tower, like she had. They had just been taken here the moment they entered the doors.

Toph smiled. “I know I’m standing on a giant jelly-filled donut, and it’s going to take forever to get this out of my armor, but I’m too happy right now. Corona?”

Corona groaned. “I’m dying of blood loss, Toph…”

“Don’t care. You get to be the one to make the portal.”

Corona groaned, dragging her custom dimensional device out of her saddlebags. She activated it, creating the signature red tear in reality. Her features lit up despite her pain – it had been so long since she’d seen one of these portals.

It took a while, but the portal eventually found the correct path to Equis Vitis, resolving the connection in an instant. By luck (*ka*, a voice whispered in Lieshy’s head) they found themselves right in Eve’s castle, with Eve herself sitting right in front of them.

She *squealed* in delight. “You found a way back!”

“Yeah,” Corona coughed. “Can you bandage me up, quickly? Or something?”

Eve nodded. “Of course.” She levitated Corona through the portal and summoned gauze and bandages out of the aether, wrapping her up with a spell. “You’ll need to go in for more treatment though… I’ll teleport you to the hospit-“

Corona hugged Eve while the rest of the team came through the portal. “It’s so good to see you…”

Eve hugged her back. “It’s good to see you too, Corona. It’s… been so long.”

“How long?”

“A couple years.”

Corona sighed. “So slightly longer on this side. Okay.” She groaned. “Anyway, Eve, this is Timpani and Blumiere. They’re the reason we got stuck there in the first place.”
Timpani put a hand to her face and blushed. “Sorry! We didn’t know we were being looked for!”

“There’s no blame on you,” Eve said, shaking Timpani’s hand. “When friends want to find their loved ones, nothing can or should stop them.”

Blumiere shook Eve’s hoof. “A pleasure to finally meet you, Charter-Princess.”

“I’ve heard a bit about you from Nastasia. You sound like quite the individual, Blumiere.”

Blumiere nodded. “She is not one to exaggerate.” He bowed. “I am here to serve, Evening Sparkle. However if I may assist in this connection of universes, I will.”

Eve blinked. “Actually… I was just struggling over another neutral party to invite to a very big trial coming up. I was hitting a wall… Perhaps it is fate that you arrived here?”

“What happened?” Corona asked.

“The Gems… Their race is going on trial for crimes against their own kind. The result determines the future of Unification.” Eve gulped. “It’s… a big deal.”

“Sounds like I missed a lot,” Corona chuckled.

“We definitely did,” Toph said, taking out her own dimensional device. “I’m off to Lai for now. Have to make sure Queen Luna didn’t screw anything up while I was gone. I wouldn’t follow unless you wanted to be part of a rather boring parade in my honor. Unless they suddenly hate me again…” she shrugged, dialing Lai and walking through.

Blumiere turned to Eve. “I will most likely accept your offer to participate in this trial. I ask that I spend today revisiting old acquaintances.”

“Oh, of course! I may be the Charter, but I’m also the Princess of Friendship, I won’t keep you from seeing faces you haven’t seen in decades. Just come back here when you want to learn more, okay?”

Lord Blumiere smirked. “You are every bit as delightful as Corona led me to believe.”

Eve raised an eyebrow, clearly not sure what to think about that.

Corona stretched her limbs, dialing the Mushroom World with her device. “They should be there. Have fun you two.”

“We will!” Timpani called in her usual chipper tone.

Lieshy waved. “Rereading logs of Beaverton,” she muttered to herself as she vanished.

“…What?” Lady Rarity asked.

“Lamenting the fact that I had a story to tell and everyone’s leaving. I didn’t get transported straight to the donut world. I experienced the interior of the Dark Tower. It was an… interesting experience.”

“Huh,” Lady Rarity said. “I’m curious.”

“I’ll write it up in a report or something,” Lieshy commented. “…Eventually.”

“Oh yeah, the donut world!” Corona laughed. “We leave the universe that had us trapped and we end up in the world made of donuts! Eve! Remember when Sparky and I were trying to compete with you with the devices way back when? We wondered if we’d ever find one. Well, we did! Can’t wait
to tell her!”

Eve’s smile faded. “…Tell her?”

“Yeah, Sparky would be elated by this. Well, and me being back, but also the donut world.”

Eve put a wing on Corona’s shoulder and forced the unicorn to look her in the eye. “You… You didn’t get my last message, did you?”

“…We left the planet pretty quickly, yeah. …Why?” Corona got a horrendous, sickly feeling in her stomach.

“Sparky’s no longer with us, Corona. She…” Eve shook her head. “It happened over a year ago. She was fighting another Twilight, and…”

Corona blinked. “…Sparky’s dead?”

Eve was taken aback by Corona’s directness. “Y-yes.”

Corona couldn’t process this piece of information. “…Huh.” Was all she could manage.

Then she passed out, the combination of emotional overload and physical injuries getting to her.

~~~

Days passed.

Corona found herself standing in front of Sparky’s grave. Her injuries had been completely healed, but the marks of the roses just wouldn’t go away.

She didn’t care about that right now.

She just stared at the headstone, tears in her eyes.

Her human friends were behind her. Applejack, Pinkie, Fluttershy, Rarity, Sugarcoat, and Trixie. None of them said anything. They merely stood there.

They knew why she had called them there. She had just wanted people who knew Sparky to be around.

Corona kneeled down and held out a hoof. She created a flower made of fire, burning bright in the evening light. She set it down in front of the headstone. Corona took a breath. “I’m sorry I pushed you away.”

She couldn’t take it anymore. She let out a wail, screaming at everything and nothing at the same time. She had seen Sparky in the field of roses not but a few days ago – what if she had talked to the apparition? Would she have gotten closure? What if she had at least refrained from killing her, freezing the image of Sparky spewing blood into her mind? The last memory Corona had of her?

She lit her horn, releasing all the energy she could into the sky. A fiery pillar of light split the clouds apart, tearing the sky asunder with the sudden presence of intense heat.

Corona’s heart ached with so many emotions they couldn’t even be categorized. She was pretty sure there was guilt in there somewhere, horror, devastation… fear? Fear of what? There was relief – relief from releasing so much energy. But that relief drove her back to guilt. Was there a feeling of happiness from close friends? Of confusion? Of shame?
She didn’t know. She couldn’t know…

Fluttershy pulled her into a hug. Corona knew it was the best thing she could do right now, but it didn’t help any. The hugs didn’t help. The tears didn’t help. Nothing helped.

All she could do was wallow. There was nothing to be done… Not anymore.

She was vaguely aware of her friends leading her away. She didn’t fight it. She was essentially delirious. She wasn’t fully aware of her actions again until Fluttershy placed a plate of home-cooked food in front of her. “Corona, can you eat?”

Corona looked up at Fluttershy and smiled for the first time in a while. “…Yeah. I see… We’re at your house.” Corona levitated a steamed carrot to her mouth. It seemed… flavorless.

“Yeah, we’re all here,” Fluttershy said, gesturing around the living room. Nobody was as bad as Corona, but there wasn’t a dry face in the house. There wasn’t much conversation either.

Corona nodded. “…Thank you all.”

“You don’t need to mention it,” Sugarcoat said.

“I do. I’m also sorry for being away so long.”

“You really don’t need to mention that. Don’t apologize for things that aren’t your fault.”

“Sugarcoat!” Rarity hissed at her.

Corona shook her head at Rarity. “Sometimes… you just need that friend who’s blunt. Even in times like this. Sugarcoat, never stop being you.”

Sugarcoat smiled ever so slightly. “Thanks. I try.”

Trixie jumped up. “Can Trixie still be herself!!?”

“If the unicorn Trixie doesn’t find a way to defame you for taking her title.”

“I’ll take that as a yes!”

Corona let out the slightest of chuckles. She put another bite into her mouth. “…What are you all doing these days?”

Fluttershy smiled. “I run the zoo, now.”

“I have taken over Renee’s stores,” Rarity declared. “Rarity for You is under my jurisdiction. Wonderful having an already established line, I must say.”

“Parties,” Pinkie said. “All the parties. When I’m not taking the place of pony Pinkie. Which happens less often now. Or does it!!?”

Applejack smirked. “Ah’m workin’ for Eve still. One of her all purpose teams.”


Trixie grinned. “TRIXIE has become a great STAGE MAGICIAN!”

“You’re just riding off of unicorn Trixie,” Sugarcoat deadpanned. “Your skill for magic isn’t even
that impressive.”

“How many of you can actually use magic, hrm?” Trixie blurted. “That’s right, Corona.”

Applejack, Fluttershy, and Rarity lifted up their necklaces and raised an eyebrow each.

“…You know what I mean.”

Corona was really smiling now. “I’ve missed so much. But… Somehow, I don’t feel bad about that. I’m just proud of you all.”

“We’re proud of you too, dear,” Rarity said, smiling back at her.

Corona felt worse than she had ever felt in her life.

But for the first time since she’d heard about Sparky, she had hope that things would actually end up okay.

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More days passed.

The trial had come.

Eve had chartered one of the Hub’s large auditoriums for the occasion. It was known affectionately as the Reverb Hall, and it had seen many events take place in its walls, ranging from treaty negotiations to concerts and even occasional parties. This was not the first time it would be used for a judicial proceeding, but it was certainly the largest case it had ever considered.

It was possibly the largest case of all time in any of the universes.

The doors were closed to the public, but there were so many leaders and diplomats invested in the results that the thousands of seats were full. Gems, ponies, humans, and a handful of other races dotted the seats. Expressions ranged from nervous to excited to mildly curious. The stage had two opposing tables on it, one for offense and one for defense. There was no place for a judge, but a set of ten seats arranged for the individuals who would serve as the judge and jury for this special case. One individual from each of the eight worlds, and two neutral parties. Everyone had already arrived, but none were in their seats. Most of the people in the prosecution, defense, and jury all knew each other in one way or another. Yellow Diamond was notably the only one not socializing in any way.

White Diamond, as was her custom, was not going to make an appearance. It was rumored that she’d never left her home universe in all these years.

Renee smirked at Daniel. “It’s almost time, Mister Jackson.”

Daniel nodded and let out a sigh. “Yes it is, Miss Renee. Please promise you won’t be mad at me, regardless of what I say.”

“Daniel, I can be professional,” Renee declared, tossing her mane. “Don’t you worry. I can separate my feelings about this case from my feelings about you. Easily. And you can do the same, don’t go doubting yourself.”

Daniel nodded. “We have a job to do.”

Renee reared up and kissed Daniel on the cheek. “That we do, love. We should probably do last minute preparation rather than talk with each other, though.”
Daniel nodded, scratching her behind the ear. The two went to opposite ends of the stage – Daniel to prosecution, Renee to defense. Renee’s table was eventually populated by Yellow Diamond, Blue Diamond, and the Emerald most members of the multiverse were familiar with.

Daniel’s side contained only Garnet, but what he lacked in allies he made up for in documentation. Dozens of old books lined his desk. Daniel had clearly come prepared with all the information.


The hall gradually fell silent. Eve waited for her clock to strike two o’clock in local Hub time. Then she cleared her throat. “Today’s case is The Alliance versus The Gem Vein. The Alliance accuses The Gem Vein of committing genocidal crimes against their own race on Gem Vein Earth in the conclusion of the event known as Rose’s Rebellion. Defense, how do you plead?”

“Guilty,” Renee declared. Yellow Diamond frowned in disgust as the word left Renee’s lips, but she didn’t object.

“Very well,” Eve declared, clearing her throat. “The Guilt or Innocence of the Gem Vein is no longer the purpose of this trial. It was not expected to be. The purpose of this trial is to determine the status of the Gem Vein within the Alliance and as part of the Unification. Both the prosecution and defense have prepared opening statements and have witnesses for us to consider. After both have completed their main statements, the trial will become a dialogue between us judges, the defense, and the prosecution. Everyone needs to keep in mind that this is not a criminal trial, nor is it going to follow the judicial proceedings of any one world. Defense? Your statement is first.”

Renee cleared her throat. “Thank you, Charter. It is true that the Gem Vein certainly corrupted thousands of their own kind to end the war on Earth. My clients do not attempt to shy away from that fact, and it should be known that the only reason this event in Gem Vein history was uncovered was because Blue Diamond explicitly showed it to the rest of the multiverse in the name of honesty and transparency. My clients deeply regret the actions they took on Gem Vein Earth.”

Both Blue and Yellow Diamond nodded in confirmation.

Renee continued. “It should be made abundantly clear that Rose’s Rebellion in question happened five thousand years ago, so any individuals who were a part of the attack will have changed drastically from all that time. I submit as evidence Gem documents on Blue Diamond’s behavior prior to the Rebellion and shortly before the Gem Vein was made aware of the multiverse. The behavior is drastically different, indicative of a changed outlook on life. This change only increased after the multiverse came into the equation.

“Furthermore, the Gems had been fighting a war against a Rebellious section of their own society. Death is a very common part of war. The ‘act of genocide’ the Diamonds unleashed on Gem Vein Earth did not kill many Gems, merely corrupt their forms. This happened in a time where the Diamonds were stricken by grief from the loss of their beloved Pink Diamond, they acted out of strong emotion without much consideration. Had they been in the habit of corrupting entire worlds, they would not have fought the war directly for so long. It was a last resort attack that affected many on both sides – both of the enemy, and of their own people.

“One of the primary complaints is that the Diamonds didn’t care about their own Gems on the surface of the world. To answer that, I call the Emerald sitting next to me to stand. Tell them, Emerald.”
Emerald nodded. “I was on Earth the day of the Corrupting Light. Those of us with channels open received orders to retreat and leave Earth. Naturally, we were not told why, so as to not tip off Rose’s army. Not all of us got the messages, and some who did refused to back down from the fight. But many thousands of our army made it off of Earth before the corrupting light covered the entire world. We were not left to rot and die, we were told to leave. But it was war, and they could not take the chance that any part of Rose’s army would be left. Given the existence of that fusion with the defense, it seems even giving us that warning may have been too much.”

“Thank you,” Renee said. “As you can all see, this was not a true genocide. This was a tactical military decision made eons ago – a decision the Gems regret completely.” She gestured to Blue Diamond to stand.

Blue Diamond rose. “When we heard that Pink had been shattered…” She paused, but managed to keep her composure. “We demanded that something be done, that those who were responsible pay for what they’d done. What we should have done was just admit defeat and pull out of Earth. Without Pink, there was little reason left to do anything to Earth. But we didn’t – we were angry. It was wrong and rash, but I hope you can understand why we did the way we did.”

Renee gestured to Yellow Diamond. She stood tall and spoke with authority. “I concur with Blue Diamond. What was done was a mistake. It is not one that can be rectified directly, but we seek to make it right through other means.” She sat back down.

Renee breathed easier. She was convincing. That's something. “As is evident, this is a sore spot in Gem Vein history that need not restrict their relationships with other universes in the present. The multiverse has taught them the value of organic life and adaptability. We, as an alliance, do not hold their past acts of organic destruction or conformism against them, why should we oust them for this one action made in a fit of emotion so long ago?” Renee smiled and sat down. “I rest my case for now, Charter.”

Eve turned to Daniel and Garnet. “Prosecution, give us your statements.”

Daniel stood up and cleared his throat. “Of course, Charter. While technically most of what the defense has said is true, they have left out many key details. The most devastating of which is the other war crimes committed during Rose’s Rebellion.” He adjusted his suit collar. “There are two particularly atrocious acts, both of which came from the same source. There are labs on Gem Vein Earth devoted to one purpose – experimentation on Gems themselves. This normally would not be much cause for concern. After all, Gems are largely artificial beings who are made rather than born. The process of creating Gems is more science than biology, and of course needs experimentation to move forward. What happened on those labs was not that. Gems were shattered, but not allowed to die. They were preserved and forcibly fused together in horrendous experiments that created mutant Gem beings that had no idea what they were or where they belonged. This fate was significantly worse than corruption, for at least a corrupted Gem has a single mind within it, not many fragments of a mind. Corrupted Gems can move and live at least like animals. The fused fragments don’t even have that.

“It only gets worse. During the last days of Rose’s Rebellion, these Gem shards were used to create a superweapon known as the Cluster. An uncountable number of these shards were embedded within the crust of the Earth, fused together to create a single Gem of incomprehensible size. It was left in the crust long after the war ended, because the Diamond Authority knew that the minds within the Cluster would eventually construct a body for themselves. The formation of that body would destroy the entire Earth in an instant.” Gasps could be heard from the crowd. “Luckily the Cluster is confirmed to be dormant indefinitely, posing no further risk to Earth. However, this changes nothing. The Diamond Authority did not actually admit defeat in their corrupting rage. While they did not kill
all their gems, they left them to die.

“No attempts have been made by the Diamond Authority to reclaim corrupted Gems. They were satisfied to just let the Cluster kill them all.”

Renee knew the retort she had for that one. The Diamond Authority did eventually go to check on the Cluster to find it already deactivated. They had the intent to keep it from forming. It was a weak piece of information, but it was something.

“I ask you all to remember that Gems think on a much slower timescale than most of us biological creatures. To them, five thousand years is more comparable to fifty, or even five in the case of the truly ancient ones such as the Diamonds themselves. Rose’s Rebellion is a recent memory in the minds of the Diamonds, as can be seen with Blue Diamond’s continued emotional difficulty in discussing the event. Furthermore, I suggest that the Diamond Authority does not regret its decision, and in particular that Yellow Diamond is merely feigning regret.”

Yellow Diamond stood up, ready to yell something at Daniel, but Renee managed to calm her down before she said anything.

Daniel had been disoriented slightly by Yellow Diamond’s fierce expression. “…The Diamond Authority has made no active attempts to change their society, or even consider change, in almost the entire history we have on file – at least until the discovery of the multiverse. But this change was artificial. It was brought on by political pressure, so it cannot be considered reflective of their true intentions. To illustrate what the Diamond Authority is really like to those who defy it, I have with me one of the few uncorrupted members of Rose’s Rebellion, a Gem named Garnet.” Daniel gestured for Garnet to stand.

Garnet nodded, standing tall. “I am Garnet. I am a fusion of two Gems of different types, a Sapphire and a Ruby.” To demonstrate, she split into two, separate gems that had been in each of her hands forming a small red and blue body. The two waved, then rejoined together to become Garnet once again. “This fusion, this is who I am. And for becoming that fusion, part of me was sentenced to be shattered by Blue Diamond for breaking the structured order. Even after all the sanctions posed by your multiverse, they still do not allow mixed fusions. The punishment may be banishment instead of shattering, but make no mistake, banishment to what may be considered a better life is still rejection. For those of you who think all of that is in the past, that the Gems have changed over the last few years, I can say that is not the case. The few of us left on Earth have had to fight against many Homeworld Gems. They attacked us, kidnapped some of us, and have a zoo filled with human beings.”

Blue Diamond put a hand to her face. Renee couldn’t help but feel proud of her husband for finding that bit of information and telling Garnet to use it.

Garnet continued. “And on a more personal note, I encourage the rejection of the Diamond Authority and the Gem Vein from Unification. My race is not one that changes easily, and they are very proud. I can guarantee they do not see you as equals. They may no longer see you as fuel to power their own creation, but I assure you, they will never see you as with them. Even Rose Quartz, the leader of our rebellion, was not fighting because she saw humans as equals. She was fighting because she thought nature was beautiful and needed to be protected. It took her and the rest of us many, many years of living on Earth to finally understand what humans meant, that humans were just like us. It took us centuries of living among them to understand that, and we were the Gems fighting for them. What do you think that means for the Gems that wanted to extinguish them?”

Garnet sat down, letting the question linger. Daniel stood up after a few seconds. “I hope it is evident that the Gems are not worthy to be in our Unified Multiversal Alliance. Their change is false, their
ways are militaristic and violent, and they do not truly regret what they have done. It will only bring about disaster for the Unified Worlds were they to be added to it.” He sat down. “I rest my case for now, Charter.”

Eve took in a breath. “Then let us move to the next phase…”

~~~

Corona had gotten a recorded message from Sombra nearly as soon as she’d returned.

...She been avoiding opening it.

But she was sitting here, on a couch, doing nothing. Lethargic…

Her emotions screamed at her not to press play, but she did anyway.

“Hey, amiga! Long time no see!” Sombra’s voice filled her ears - and her face appeared on the interior of her sunglasses. “So, a lot’s happened while you’ve been away. So, here’s a list of things you missed! So, we… We uh…” She sighed, displaying the ‘list of things’ on screen for a moment. “Just save that image and look at it later. Who says hello to an old friend with ‘here’s what you missed’? Silly, silly Sombra.”

She leaned back in her chair. “I should be welcoming you! We should be celebrating! If I wasn’t a wanted criminal I’d be there myself, in person, taking you out for drinks. ...Yes, I have gotten up to some trouble while you’ve been away. Poking at the big mystery - found someone named Monika that gave some big clues, I think - and it’s a great…”

Sombra sighed. “…I missed you, okay? I didn’t have anyone to talk to and I didn’t know how much I missed having someone to talk to. I didn’t have anyone to watch my back, tell me if I was going a bit too far... I… Oi caramba, look at me, breaking down a little here.”

“You know what, screw it, I’m just sending this, no retakes. Welcome back, Corona. Call me sometime. Or I’ll call you, you know how it is.” The message ended.

Corona allowed herself to smile.

She hadn’t changed at all.

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The trial lasted well into the night, but eventually the judges left to confer. They returned about half an hour later, having made a decision.

All ten took their seats. Some looked worried, while others confident.

Eve looked from Renee and the Diamonds, to Daniel and Garnet. “A decision has been made. Do we bar the Gems from Unification? The decision was no, seven to three.”

The Gems in the audience sighed in relief.

“Another question was asked. Do we punish the Gems for what they’ve done, or do nothing?” Eve looked around. “The vote was tied five to five, so the Gem Vein Representative, Sapphire, had her vote dropped. This means there will be punishments.”

The Gems sucked in air sharply, no longer relieved.
“The exact nature of the punishment was what we discussed for the majority of the deliberation time.” Eve fixed the Diamonds with a steely glare. “If you do not accept these terms, you will be barred from Unification.”

Blue and Yellow Diamond nodded.

“You are to devote a significant portion of your scientific research to finding a cure for corrupted gems,” Eve declared. “We will assist you in that in any way we can. You are to give all members of Rose’s Rebellion full amnesty for the crimes they have committed as part of the Rebellion. You are to make official contact with the humans of Gem Vein Earth, offering them the opportunity to become part of the multiversal alliance as part of the Gem Vein. This does not mean you have to adapt them to your society, as that would likely be impossible, but you are to treat them as a nation under your care. Perhaps not as equals, but as a child at the very least.”

Blue and Yellow Diamond nodded. Yellow Diamond looked displeased, but not that displeased.

“I’m not done,” Eve declared. “Those are just the requirements relating to Gem Vein Earth. There are a few others. First of all, you are to create a department to find any alien races on worlds you may have subjugated that have survived what you’ve done. You are to offer them rehabilitation. I understand this will be difficult, and again we will help with it, but most of the resources will come from you.”

Eve paused, narrowing her eyes.

“There is one final requirement. All Gem experimentation labs are to be supervised by a scientist from another universe.”

Yellow Diamond slammed her fists on the table. “You can’t do that! That’s private! We even agreed it was private when we declassified everything!”

“We’ve changed our mind,” Eve declared. I didn’t vote for this, I voted for allowing differing-Gem fusions, but this is the big one we decided to go for. “Does this mean you refuse the terms?”

“YES! We’ll be better without you!” Yellow Diamond blurted.

“No, we accept the terms,” Blue Diamond stated.

Eve blinked. She was about to call for deliberation, but then a call came through a device at Renee’s table.

Renee blinked. “…White Diamond accepts the terms.”

“Are you certain?” Eve asked.

Yellow and Blue Diamond looked at the device. The two of them nodded. Yellow Diamond clearly wasn’t happy about this.

Eve smiled. “With that, I declare this trial over!” She summoned a little hammer and hit it against a table.

Chaos erupted as everyone started talking at once. It wasn’t an angry chaos, but a tense one. Everyone either felt like a bullet had just been dodged or they had just been shot by a bullet.

In this commotion, Eve found Garnet. “Sorry,” Eve said. “I tried to get you what you wanted.”
Garnet nodded. “I understand. It… matters a lot to me, but even I can see why you chose to watch the experiments. Crimes against Gem-kind are important. After all, multi-gem fusions will just get banished and get to live their lives… Without their old friends. Or stability.” She sighed.

“I’m sure it will happen eventually,” Eve said. “Good news is there’s a loophole. We got you complete amnesty. They can’t touch you.”

Garnet smiled. “Heh. Thanks.”

“You can be the activist that changes them, you know. If you want.”

“I might just try to live a simple life,” Garnet shrugged. “Not sure yet. The future is unclear. I do know one thing I need to do though. Excuse me.”

Garnet walked right up to Blue Diamond and cleared her throat. Blue Diamond looked down at her with her sad eyes.

“I accept your apology,” Garnet said, holding out a hand.

A smile came to Blue Diamond’s face. “…Thank you, Garnet.” She shook Garnet’s hand. “I hope to see more of you.”

“I think you will.”

And the trial began to die down. The sanctions went in place, and the Gems adjusted to the drastic changes.

Unification was only a matter of time. The eight worlds… They were ready.

After the Vein Trial, there were no more major obstacles.

The next big moment would be when it was finalized.
Doctor John H Watson woke up with the distinct feeling that something was off. He looked around, expecting to find some criminal or other standing over him with a gun, knife, or some other odd implement of aggression. There was no such thing. He was in his room at 221B Baker Street, London, just like every other morning. He blinked slowly, shaking his head. It still felt like something was wrong.

He got up and walked to the kitchen area. As always, the counter was covered in the experiments of one Sherlock Holmes, quite possibly the most eccentric and brilliant man on the face of the planet. At the very least, he was the most famous private detective in the world, despite being an ‘odd nut’.

The Sherlock in question was sitting in one of his reading chairs, looking intently at his wallet. John took this in stride – Sherlock often found any number of mundane things interesting for seemingly no reason. If the detective decided to share his mind, he would. Otherwise Watson wasn’t going to push.

“John,” Sherlock said, suddenly. “Have you looked at your wallet recently?”

“Hm? Why?”

“Just take a look at your wallet. It’s important.”

John shook his head slightly. There was no talking to Sherlock when he got like this. He walked over to the desk in which he kept his wallet, taking it out. “Did you steal any of my cards for a game?” he wondered, getting no answer. Watson flipped through his wallets. “All the cards are here, Sherlock.”

“Check the name on them.”


“I’ve apparently become Steven Holmes,” Sherlock commented. “Every single one of these cards, Steven Holmes. And that’s not the only thing that’s off. Everything in this apartment has been moved.”

John looked around. “Things look different, but you always move things around. It’s not unusual.”

“But I remember when I move things around. And the spray paint?” Sherlock pointed at an empty wall. “It’s not there. It’s always there. We’ve never cleaned it.”

John blinked. “Did Mrs. Hudson finally get fed up with it?”

Sherlock walked up to the wall and ran his fingers across it. “This is not new wallpaper. This wallpaper hasn’t been altered in years. Far too much wear on it. There’s no sign that there were ever vandals in here.”

“What does that mean?”

“I have no idea. And that concerns me. Our names have seemingly been slightly altered overnight, the apartment has numerous minor differences that can’t just be explained away, and the phone isn’t
ranging with the follow-up to the Richard case. That woman was the type to always call you precisely ten minutes early, and it’s ten minutes after she promised to call.”

John felt prompted to look out the window. He frowned. “Isn’t that house supposed to be a different color? …Sherlock?” John turned to find Sherlock on his phone. “…Sherlock, what are yo-o-

“Contacts are all different as well,” Sherlock stated. “Matthew Holmes, not Mycroft. There’s names in here I have no clue who they represent, if anyone we know at all.” His fingers flew furiously across the phone’s screen. He threw the phone across the room and went to his laptop. “At least the password still works…”

John walked over to Sherlock. He didn’t bother asking what the detective was looking for, Sherlock would explain soon enough.

Sherlock typed his new name Steven Holmes into the search engine. A few results popped up, showing “Steven Holmes” to be a small-time detective living in the London area with a couple of high-profile cases, but not all that many.

“What the- have we been erased?” John said aloud. “How does someone do that?”

“I would suspect advanced hacking, if not for one detail,” Sherlock said. “The cards. You can’t just replace those. Too many details are off…” Sherlock read more about “Steven Holmes”, and eventually found an interesting sentence.

He’s basically the legendary Sherlock Holmes in all but name. And almost even that!

Sherlock instantly moved to search Sherlock Holmes. What he found surprised him immensely.

A series of books by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle about the titular detective Sherlock Holmes…

Sherlock absorbed all the information he could about the books – mysteries that focused on the art of deduction through miniscule details. It was a reflection of his life, except in a much earlier time. John was there, Mycroft was there… Many people he knew were there. But they were all slightly different. Less rounded…

“Sherlock, what on earth is going on?”

“I’m running out of explanations that seem grounded in reality,” Sherlock admitted, sitting back from the computer. “It seems as if the structure of the world we live in has changed on a fundamental level. As far as the world is concerned, Sherlock Holmes never really existed. He was fiction, and an old one at that. Yet everything seems to mirror our lives…” He tapped his fingers together. “I have two explanations.”

“Really? I have none.”

“The first is that someone has gone to an extremely large amount of trouble to play a very faulty prank on the world. I find this doubtful, because there’s no way to just ‘create’ a classic story revered by millions unless someone is somehow replacing our Internet - which would be nigh impossible to pull off and slow our connection speed significantly. The other, seemingly unrelated details, also cast doubt on this.”

“The second explanation must be really absurd if that’s still one you’re considering.”

“We’re in an alternate universe,” Sherlock said. “One where we are not Sherlock Holmes and John Watson. Where we did not have all our impressive cases. One where there are a set of stories about
“I was right. That is absurd.”

“When all other explanations have been eliminated, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.”

John groaned inwardly. That had not been the first time Sherlock had uttered the phrase. “I think I prefer the explanation that God is playing a joke on us.”

“Which, if true, could still result in both options,” Sherlock said, putting his hands over his mouth. “For now, I’m going to assume the latter is true, but keep the idea that this is some elaborate ruse in the back. And if this is another universe… We need to learn as much about it as we can. What’s different?” Sherlock pulled a laptop out from under the table and gave it to John. “Start searching.”

“For what?”

“Anything. Historic events. The history of the ‘Sherlock Holmes’ in those books. Yourself. For all we know, even the simplest things we’ve taken for granted could have been altered…”

“Are you boys okay?” an old woman’s voice called to them from outside their door. “I hear commotion!”

“Yes, Mrs. Hudson,” Sherlock called without thinking.

“Well. Be sure to at least go outside today. It’s not healthy to be shut up all the time.”

“At least Mrs. Hudson is the same,” John said, allowing himself to smile.

“Quite,” Sherlock deadpanned.

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“I’m convinced,” Sherlock said finally. “There’s no way this is a joke. This is another world, or at the very least history has been altered on a fundamental level and for some reason we’re still aware of it.”

John sat back in his chair. “Mrs. Hudson would have said something by now if she knew as well… So what, are we alone in this?”

“You’re jumping to conclusions,” Sherlock said, furrowing his brow. “We know very little about what happened. I am certain it happened while we were sleeping, and that yesterday everything was still normal. The fact that both of us are here suggests to me that this is no accident. If it were some natural phenomenon why would it take just us and not Mrs. Hudson?”

“So someone did this intentionally?”

“I didn’t say intentionally. I just said it wasn’t natural,” Sherlock stood up and started pacing. “The world we’ve found ourselves in is almost indistinguishable aside from small details. I recognize everything I’ve seen with the exception of their version of ‘Sherlock Holmes.’ That influence on history is clearly not zero, given how every person on the planet seems to understand what the name represents and where it comes from…”

“So you’re saying you’re more popular when you’re a fictional character?”

“John that’s not what I’m saying at all don’t be absurd.”
John shrugged, taking the retort in stride.

Sherlock tapped the wall, furrowing his brow. “Recent events in history are scrambled somewhat, but that may only be because we weren’t involved in this world. So… That tells us…”

“That we are characters in a book here, and that’s all most people care about.”

“No… Well yes, yes it does, but- hold it.” Sherlock looked outside. “James and Steven are likely in our bodies back at our home. That is, assuming we swapped minds and not bodies. Too many assumptions for my liking here…”

“I can’t imagine that going over very well,” John muttered.

“Don’t sell them short,” Sherlock said. “From the way the apartment is arranged, I can detect very few differences between us and them. It may just be that the difference in names and the existence of a ‘Sherlock Holmes’ in popular culture twisted the perception of what they did… It may also explain why their names are different, while Mrs. Hudson’s isn’t. What self-respecting parent would name their child after such a well-known figure?” He tapped his fingers to his head. “We’re learning more already, John.”

“You’re learning things. I’m just absorbing information being thrown at me like a train.”

“That is what you’re good at!” Sherlock declared with a smirk. “Regardless, I expect the other versions of us will be rather delighted in their sudden fame, and are likely wondering the same things we are wondering now, and making similar deductions. Though I suppose they have access to your blog as a way to fit in…”

John went back to his computer and searched up his blog. “Huh. Sherlock? They have a blog too.”

“…They do?”

“Not as big as the one we had, but it’s definitely here. It describes their cases…” He scrolled through some of them. “We took a few of these, but most of them are different.”

Sherlock was already on the blog on his laptop, reading it far faster than a regular human being. “Curious. James Watson is uncannily similar to you. Slightly less confident in himself, less satisfied about life, but otherwise exactly the same.”

“Are you kidding? This guy’s nothing like me. Look at that! A typo! I would never-”

“That exact typo exists on your version of the blog,” Sherlock interrupted.

John closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “All right, fair point. I’m not unique. Point taken.”

“Glad you’ve finally accepted your own assembly-line personality.”

John didn’t give this a response. “Found a file. Most recent case of ‘Steven’ and ‘James’. They were doing something for ‘Matthew’… ‘James’ complained that he couldn’t write down any notes because of what it involved.”

“There goes the possibility of lying to Mycr- ‘Matthew’,” Holmes said. “We don’t have any knowledge of the case…” Sherlock narrowed his eyes, a smile crawling up his lips. “…John, I found something interesting.”

“What?”
“If the event that moved us to this world happened last night, perhaps there were other events that happened the same time. Since last night, virtually every government on the planet has begun moving, and moving fast. Almost as if they’re on some kind of alert…”

“Every government?” John blinked. “What, did world leaders get replaced or something?”

“Perhaps… Or perhaps we are just a side effect of some larger, more concerning event.”

“…You’re going to treat this like a case, aren’t you?”

Sherlock grinned. “What else would I do?”

“Right. So, what’s the first step?”

Sherlock pulled out his phone. “We call Matthew Holmes.”

John blinked. Sherlock put the phone to his ear and put on a fake smile. “Hello Mycroft!”

John glared at Sherlock. What are you doing?

Sherlock’s eyes widened. “Well, this is unexpected.”

John shook his head, trying hard to hear what the other half of the conversation was, unable to do so.

“I was playing on what I assumed our dynamic here would be.” More silence. “We will be there.” He hung up.

“What was that about!?” John asked.

“It appears that Mycroft has been dragged here along with us,” Sherlock said. “Which just makes this much, much more interesting. We have to go meet him in a secure location. I can’t wait to hear what he has to say.”

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Mycroft Holmes was often described by his younger brother as the British Government.

It was not all that much of an exaggeration. Mycroft had his fingers in virtually every pie the United Kingdom cared about, and some it didn’t. He was one of those men nobody in the general population knew, but everyone who actually held real power did. Mycroft could not be said to enjoy much, but his particular position in life was something he held a sort of attachment to.

To say he was currently rattled was an understatement.

Even so, let it not be said that Mycroft was a man who wore his emotions on his sleeve. Everyone who saw him would think he was acting completely normally. That is, except his brother.

“You look like you just crawled out of a warzone,” Sherlock remarked upon arrival at the abandoned factory.

John looked at Mycroft, trying to find any hole in the man’s stern exterior. He gave up after a few seconds and just took Sherlock’s word for it.

Mycroft nodded curtly to his younger brother. “I believe my awakening was rather more alarming than yours.”

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“Let me guess, you thought you were going mad?”

“Didn’t you?”

“Didn’t get that far. John confirmed I wasn’t crazy before I’d asked the question.”

“Good for you,” Mycroft deadpanned. “But that is not what I was referring to by alarm. I take it you noticed details about your lives had changed?”

“Brother, please, remember who you’re talking to,” Sherlock scoffed.

“You never know…” Mycroft said, turning around. “I realized very shortly after waking that the files on my desk were of conspiracies I was not familiar with. Operations that had nothing to do with anything I had under my purview prior. As a man in my position, I knew how disastrous this would be after only a day of ignorance.”

“…What did you do?” John asked.

Mycroft folded his hands. “I had placed numerous secret documents onto an encrypted flash drive in a location I shall not reveal. The purpose of this driv-”

“Was to, if you went insane and forgot everything, remind yourself,” Sherlock finished.

Mycroft ignored the comment. “The drive’s purpose was to give me power in case the British Government collapsed, became too corrupt, or my hand was forced through some other means. Imagine my delight when it turned out that ‘Matthew’ had the same idea. I only read a short bit of it before you called, but I have been pouring over it the entire time I’ve been waiting. The story contained within is absurd to the extreme, but I assure you it is legitimate and will blow everything you may have discovered out of the proverbial water.”

“We’re characters in a classic series of books here,” John blurted. “Sherlock Holmes, John Watson, you know.”

Mycroft raised an eyebrow. “Aliens own the Earth and are preparing it for colonization efforts in this world. The world’s governments are mostly compliant or ignorant of this fact. Furthermore, I am apparently a party to this heinous conspiracy. Let me assure you that I have since imagined at least thirty different ways to dismember ‘Matthew’ since learning of his involvement.”

John blinked. “…I think he wins, Sherlock.”

Sherlock stared at Mycroft in disbelief. “You’re serious.”

“Do you know me to kid?”

“I know you to mess with my head from time to time,” Sherlock said, beginning to pace. “It’s almost as if we’re in the world of a story. Larger than life conflict, great government conspiracy…”

“You could use that to describe our lives before,” John pointed out. “You know, without the aliens. That’s new. Still processing the fact that aliens exist here.”

“They do not back home, rest assured,” Mycroft declared.

“You could just be covering…” John muttered.

“Believe me or not, the fact remains that they do here.”
“Could describe ourselves…” Sherlock pondered. “What if that’s it? We, the three of us were attracted here not for any specific purpose, but to be part of this… ‘story’.”

“Sherlock, you’ve gone mad,” Mycroft said, shaking his head. “We’re not in a story, and we’ve never been in a story. This is just a world where the incredible is true.”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes, but John recognized the look of defeat in his face. That was a little crazy, even considering the whole alternate-world-with-alien-conspiracy thing. “There’s been a sudden increase of activity since last night,” Sherlock said. “Something’s happened with the aliens, hasn’t there?”

Mycroft nodded, producing a file from his coat. “This was one of the files on my desk. I didn’t recognize what it meant until later.” He handed it to Sherlock. Turning to John, he summarized. “It appears as though the alien overlords made a mistake that’s sending waves through their society. We, as lowly human servants, do not get to know precisely what this mistake was, but we do know it involves something that isn’t from Earth. A third party of some sort or other. Around the same time world governments were sent this image with the orders ‘find and kill’.”

The three crowded around the image Mycroft had just produced. It was an image of five people. Four men, one woman. The image wasn’t of the highest quality, but it was easy to tell that none of these people could be considered normal. The woman had the posture of a frog. One of the men was far larger and more muscular than a human should have been. Another man wore a bizarre outfit that looked like it had been run through a straight razor, while another held a sword that didn’t belong in any sort of modern world. The last individual would have been completely normal, were he not holding a potted cactus in his hand.

“Any deductions?” Mycroft asked his brother.

“Accounting for the painfully obvious fact that they’re from another world, my certainty is significantly lower. That said… the woman and the giant man are Japanese, though what Japan produces giants or frogs is beyond me. The woman, despite acting like an animal, is in such a posture that suggests she’s ready for battle, indicating experience. The giant man is acting as the leader, given how all the others stand behind him, though the swordsman and woman are keeping their distance. Perhaps they don’t fully accept his authority. Swordsman is a simple man with simple goals, though as to what they are I have no idea. The bizarre man is an artist of some sort, for only those types would wear that clothing. Not to mention the fountain pen earrings. And the man with the cactus…” Sherlock stared at the man with the cactus. “I have no idea why he’s holding a cactus. I can tell he’s used to getting his hands dirty and given the way his hands are finely holding the cactus, I’d say archeologist.”

Mycroft nodded. “Of course. You forgot to note that the woman is staring right at the camera. She has intelligence.”

“Not so much ‘forgot’ as realized looking straight at a camera does not guarantee intelligence.”

“It was a hidden camera.”

“Information I did not have,” Sherlock pointed out. “Regardless, this is a team ready for action. They invaded one of your bases, didn’t they?”

“That was never stated directly in the report, but it is true,” Mycroft said. “It just so happens that the base they entered was one I recognized from our home. Reading the files on it in this one, I learned that it held a fully operational spaceship. They presumably wanted to take it and use it. If we are being ordered to kill them…”
“They didn’t get to the ship,” Sherlock finished. “Curious… They will likely try again, will they not?”

“I know almost nothing about their motivations.”

“Determination,” John said. “You can see it in their eyes. They’ll try again, or try something similar.”

“Then we’ll just need to catch them,” Sherlock declared.

Mycroft and John stared at him.

“To talk to them, not to hand them over to the alien overlords. I’m not evil.”

“That’s up for debate,” John commented.

“Nobody has faith in me,” Sherlock shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. We need to meet them so we can learn about them. They are likely to know more about the situation than we do. Unless you want to attempt to talk to your alien overlords directly, Mycroft?”

“Good God, no, the chances they’ll know in an instant are too high. I’m not suicidal.”

“Then we must determine where they’re going to go next,” Sherlock decreed. “How many bases with spaceships are there in the United Kingdom?”

“You know, the kinds of questions that are being asked today seem straight out of the asylum,” John commented.

Mycroft ignored him. “Seven others.”

“I assume you have files on all of them?” Sherlock asked.

“But of course.”

“Good. Let’s cross-examine them all…” Mycroft brought out his laptop, the flash drive plugged in. He brought up the files on the spaceship docks, and the two brothers pored over the information, arguing with each other over what conclusions were accurate.

John just walked to a wall and sat down on an empty crate, staring at nothing.

He made a list of absurd stuff that had happened today.

- They had woken up in another universe.
- They were characters in a classic series of books important to British history.
- There were aliens that had this planet under their control.
- The aliens were hunting a strange group of humans.
- One of those humans was holding a potted cactus.

A cactus.

That was the worst part about this, for some reason.

He considered if this could be a dream for the umpteenth time since he woke up that morning. But everything felt real – even his breathing and heartbeat, which are rarely noticeable in dreams. He could feel the air blowing through the factory and was painfully aware of the hard texture of the crate. Nothing was dulled. This was real.
He supposed someone could have slipped him some psychoactive drugs. He wondered why Sherlock wasn’t considering that…

Probably because Sherlock actually knew what that felt like.

“That’s it,” Sherlock said, certainty in his voice. “This is the place they’ll go. If they need a ship, this is the best place. The hangar is in the perfect location for a quick infiltration, the ship could be flown right through the roof if needed, and it’s in the middle of absolutely nowhere.”

“Security will be highly increased,” Mycroft pointed out. “They will have figured this out as well. I know you’re used to being a step ahead of everyone, Sherlock, but the aliens have vast intelligence.”

“Worthy opponents.”

“You’re crazy,” John said, shaking his head.

Sherlock nodded in confirmation. “Regardless, the security will be a problem for them, not for us. We have you.”

Mycroft nodded. “The only problem is I expect a few of the guards will actually be aliens in disguise.”

“What, now they can look like us?” John blurted. “How crazy does this get?”

“There’s a black virus in their blood that will kill you from the inside out.”

“I need to stop asking questions.”

Sherlock stood up. “Mycroft, you need to keep your job for at least the rest of the day.”

“Doable.”

“Tonight, we walk right into a maximum-security government base that hides aliens.”

John put a hand to the bridge of his nose. “Nothing ever changes, does it?”

“Not with Sherlock Holmes,” Mycroft commented.

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The base in question was just known as Site 81. It was a somewhat small compound, only containing seven buildings, five of which were nothing more than warehouses. The entirety of Site 81 was lined with ten-meter electric fences, coursing with enough power to kill an elephant several times over.

The sun was setting when Mycroft, Sherlock, and John arrived. They made no attempt to hide their approach. They drove across the single dirt path in one of Mycroft’s many black vehicles, faces forward. They were halted at the front gates by a pair of men who asked for identification. As Mycroft provided the identification for ‘Matthew Holmes’, Sherlock observed the men closely. One was a man, late thirties, who really hated his job and was waiting for a transfer. The other… Sherlock found him baffling. He stood with completely perfect posture, his expression never shifted from neutral, and his eyes moved without the rapid movement seen in almost everyone else.

He’s one of the aliens, Sherlock deduced. …The deductions I’ve been making today…

The human guard nodded. “Welcome, Mr. Holmes. The Director will want to see you.”
John tensed. That wasn’t part of the plan.

Mycroft took it in stride. “Very well. I have some questions for him myself.”

“Good luck with that,” the guard said, shaking his head. He opened the gate, allowing them to drive in.

“The Director,” Sherlock muttered to himself. “Alan Baker. A complete unknown outside of the file on this location.”

“We’re actually going to talk to him?” John blurted.

“Why not? It'll make it easier to get near the ship,” Mycroft commented. “Not to mention we do have an actual sanctioned reason to be here. We deduced this is where they would attack. We were ordered to kill them. This is just part of following those orders.”

“Two of us aren’t supposed to be here!”

“John, calm yourself. Let me and Sherlock do all the talking. We know how to act like we know what we’re talking about.”

John wanted to object but found he couldn’t. “If he asks me a question, we’re all dead and you know it.”

A soldier – human, Sherlock quickly deduced – arrived. “The Director would like to see you.”

“We’ve been informed,” Mycroft said, gesturing for the soldier to lead them on.

Sherlock took the opportunity to examine the base they were in – he saw several people who were actually aliens. Now that he knew what to look for, they were pathetically easy to spot. They lacked the humanity everyone else did, wearing their bodies like a suit. Which was basically what it was to them, Sherlock realized. People who didn’t know would consider them uncanny.

The base itself was pretty standard. Sherlock saw military vehicles, crates of materials and technology, and security checkpoints around every building. They were approaching the central warehouse. Mycroft had to slide his identification card through the checkpoint just to be let into the warehouse, but it let him in without fuss.

“You sure you want them with you?” the soldier asked.

“Yes,” Mycroft said. “Though prepare a wipe for Mr. Watson, in case he’s driven insane.”

John blinked. “…You’re joking, right?”

The soldier looked sadly at John and shook his head. “Of course, Mr. Holmes.”

The inside of the warehouse was decidedly more interesting than the outside. Sherlock knew classified technology when he saw it – metals that shone in ways unlike any alloy he knew, chemicals that glowed bright colors, and an extremely large number of warning signs everywhere. Because everything was so alien, he found himself annoyingly unable to determine what most of the experiments around him actually did. He was fairly certain the blue ring to the left was an antigravity device, but the rest could have been sheep shearing devices for all he knew.

They entered another security checkpoint, which let Mycroft in easily. This section of the warehouse wasn’t very open and resembled the interior of an office building, rather than a mad scientist’s lab.
They were taken to an elevator that went into the ground a few levels, opening up on a large, white hallway. The soldier led them to the end of the hallway, where another security checkpoint demanded attention. Mycroft put his card in again, opening the third area of the warehouse to them.

They found themselves in a tremendous open space – they could see the walls and ceiling of the warehouse around them, but also where the earth had been cut away to make more space. The prized possession of the base floated in front of their eyes. The ship.

It was an elongated crescent shape, with a single dome on top that could fit maybe two people inside. Its color was a soft gold, while the dome was a dark blue. Its front was angled at the ground, looking right at Sherlock and the others, while the two tails pointed toward the top of the warehouse.

“Hm,” Sherlock said, raising an eyebrow. “A lot of mass for a two-seater.”

The soldier nodded. “I don’t pretend to understand why it looks like that. Ask the Director. He’s this way.” He led them to a cage-lift that barely fit the four of them. The lift closed, raising them far into the air. Soon, they were above the ship, above the interior offices they had passed through, and high enough to see the area where experiments were taking place.

At the top of the lift was a single adjoined room: an office with big windows in every direction. There was only one occupant – a man in a large chair, his back turned to them. The soldier opened the door and gestured for the three of them to enter. Then the soldier left.

The office was bare of all decoration. There was a desk, writing utensils, a computer, and chairs. A rod-shaped device sat on the desk and a large console with a lot of buttons sat at the left of the room, presumably tied to all the major functions of the base.

“Why are you here?” Alan Baker asked from his seat, not turning to address his visitors.

Mycroft placed the photo on the desk. “We were told to kill them. We believe they are targeting this facility. Even if you have it under control, I decided I could come and provide oversight.”

“Reasonable. Why have you brought those two with you?”

“They were working for me on a separate matter at the same time. I presume you are not then aware of my brother’s deduction skills?”

“I know of Steven Holmes. Have you increased their clearance?”

“Temporarily, given the urgency of this command. I do have a wipe prepared for John if it becomes clear he cannot handle what is done here.”

“Good. I see you are taking the correct precautions.” Alan Baker turned around, revealing himself to clearly not be a human. He was humanoid in shape, but that was where the similarities ended. His body was covered in smooth, chrome armor with orange highlights. His head was smooth, hairless, and dominated by two solid black eyes.

John took a shaky step back. Mycroft and Sherlock held their ground.

“I may order him wiped after this is over regardless,” Alan commented, standing up. He was shorter than them, but the armor certainly made him threatening. “As for Steven, it would be preferable if he continued to work for us consistently. We shall see.”

“Do you care to explain who the people are we’re trying to hunt?” Sherlock asked.
“I’m sure you’ve deduced much of it already.”

“It would help to have someone who actually knows what’s going on fill in the holes.”

“I know less than you’d like,” Alan admitted. “At 23:53 local time last night, our satellites observed the meeting of two separate interdimensional units from unknown sources. We intercepted this meeting and acquired one of their dimensionally-oriented devices. It did not take long for us to uncover how the surprisingly primitive piece of technology worked. We used it to detect a signal they had sent out, asking for assistance from another universe to ‘deal’ with us. We were able to analyze the device with enough accuracy to generate a counter-frequency with it, preventing the creation of any portals. We were forced to initiate this in the universe the teams had fled to as well, to ensure they did not attack with a greater force in the indeterminate future. After they realized this was the case, they attacked Site 27. The ship there was destroyed before they could act.”

“You’re right, I did deduce most of that,” Sherlock said. “You don’t know anything about who they are?”

“Before yesterday we had no idea they existed,” Alan pointed out. “But it has already become evident that they are a significant threat. They have a number of traits that have not been observed in this universe. The interpreted messages indicate they plan to interfere with our long-term plans for Earth. I don’t need to tell you why that cannot happen.”

“You do not,” Mycroft agreed. “I assume you have counters to these traits?”

“Advanced technology from above has been moved to this base for defense purposes and several dozen bounty hunters are on site. Most targets only attract one or two of the bounty hunters. This is a special case. They will fall here, today. If not, the self-destruct will be activated and destroy everything in the base along with them.”

“Self-destruct? That’s part of the plan?” John blurted. Mycroft and Sherlock shot him agitated looks.

Alan fixed John with an unreadable expression. “This room will survive the destruction. We’ll live.”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes. He hadn’t been able to deduce much about Alan given the alien face, but he knew that was a lie, given the tone shift that came when he spoke it. Alan would survive the destruction, somehow. Not the rest of them. It was probably that armor.

It was at that point the alarms went off. A second after they started blaring, they stopped, and most of the lights in the warehouse died. The office remained well lit.

“There it is,” Alan said, pointing to the front of the warehouse. Something immensely strong punched the doors off their hinges, flattening a couple scientists. “Watch, you might learn some things.”

Sherlock didn’t watch – he acted. Alan’s back was turned. This was his opportunity. He grabbed the rod-shaped device that was on the desk and activated it, prompting a long metallic needle to extend outward. Mycroft had told them about this thing – a weapon the aliens used against their own kind. One blow to the base of the neck, and they would die. It was apparently the only sure-fire way to deal with them.

Sherlockrammed the needle into Alan’s neck, prompting green blood to spurt out the wound. Alan audibly winced in pain, but didn’t allow this to hold him back. He whirled around with precision, using one hand to remove the weapon from his neck. He tossed the weapon away while the other hand hit Sherlock across the face, tossing him to the side where the first hand was waiting to grab
him. Alan thrust Sherlock out the window, holding him tight.

“You missed,” Alan said, eyes narrow. The slightly off-center wound on the back of his neck healed up with alarming speed.

“So I did. I take it you’re a high ranking member of your race’s military?” Sherlock asked. He continued without waiting for an answer. “Clearly, you are well trained to withstand pain and subdue enemies that have the drop on you. What you did was a learned behavior – not so different from humans after all.”

Alan blinked. Sherlock applauded himself inwardly – he had Alan curious. Good.

“I figured the high rank from the armor. That’s not something the other aliens have down there, disguised though they are. You would have given them armor were it available. I also expect you to be a devout follower of whatever your race decides are ‘morals’ or ‘honor’. That’s from the respect you gave Matthew for preparing. Let’s see… The way your eyes are moving suggest you’ve very interested in what’s going on here.”

“That I am. We have worked with you before. You had never given any indication of treachery this rash.”

“Perhaps I wasn’t fully aware of the situation until now?”

Sherlock saw Alan’s eyes twitch. He just made a deduction. Mycroft wasn’t kidding, these guys are smart. “You truly weren’t. But we have you on file actually being aware of the situation. I find it hard to believe, but you are multiversal. All three of you.”

“Well, you’ve got us!” Sherlock laughed. “Wouldn’t you like to stop dangling me over the edge and question me?”

“I’ll keep you dangling from my hand as long as I want,” Alan declared. “How did you get here?”

“Not our choice. Something you did last night brought us here against our will. Funny story, we replaced your versions of us! I’m not Steven Holmes, I’m Sherlock Holmes. Isn’t that something?”

The importance of the name was clearly lost on Alan. “No.”

“Tough crowd…” Sherlock heard explosions of the fight raging on below him. “Well, perhaps you’ll appreciate Matthew’s real name, Mycroft. What an odd name! Speaking of Mycroft – hey, Mycroft. Catch me.”

Alan deduced that a plan was being executed behind him. He began to turn.

The motion of Alan was not enough to sway John Watson’s steady hand – the hand of a doctor, a soldier, and a detective. Even with the motion of Alan’s neck, the needle-like blade struck true, sliding into the alien’s biological weakness.

Alan lost hold of Sherlock. The detective dropped for only an instant before Mycroft caught him, the elder brother cutting his limbs on the broken glass as he did so. “Catch me?” Mycroft blurted. “Really?”

John helped Mycroft pull Sherlock back up to the suspended office while Alan dissolved into a puddle of green liquid before their eyes. The three of them sat down and took a moment to breathe.

“Today…” John began, failing to finish the sentence.
“Has no equal,” Sherlock said, stretching his arms.

Explosions from the fight reached their ears, letting them know it wasn’t over yet. Sherlock stood up tall and set his gaze through the broken glass, examining the battle as it raged. All five of the individuals in the photo were there, facing off against a dozen or so aliens that looked like humans. No matter what injury was dealt, the aliens just recovered because the attackers did not know about their weak point, nor did they have the required specialized weapon.

Sherlock took the moment to take everything in – to figure out something they could do.

So much information…

He focused on the big one, the leader. Huge, experienced, used to using his muscles and fighting others directly. Extreme poker face – he got shot by a bullet and didn’t even flinch. Liked dolphins too much. Father of a daughter of high school age going through quite the rebellious streak. Had an ability that punched enemies at a short distance and allowed for teleportation, temporary halting of time.

The frog woman. Young, but still experienced. Intelligent, methodical. Cared deeply for those around her, even those she didn’t know very well. Spent many hours every day taking care of her hair. Fancied herself a superhero. Her abilities… She was essentially a frog with a really, really long tongue. Bizarre, but not overly helpful at the moment.

The man with the sword. He had no ability beyond his impressive height and coordination with the blade. A member of a militia, watch, or something similar. Raised to work hard, given the way he held his blade. Possibly a farmer. Honorable, showing more restraint in his attacks than any of the others, even though none of them were making a point of using lethal force.

The man with the cactus. That cactus… Sherlock still couldn’t get a read on that cactus. It was there, and… Sherlock shook his head – it wasn’t important, get everything else. The man didn’t have much combat ability, so he stood in the back, firing a simple gun. He didn’t fire like someone inexperienced, so despite being an intellectual he must have seen combat many times before.

The last member, the artist, fought with an uncaring, dispassionate attitude. He had a power that transformed the skin of those it hit into books, into which he could write instructions – already there were two bounty hunter aliens attacking their kin. That man had virtually no morals. He was going to be late on one of his deadlines because he had been trapped here, and that had ticked him off.

There was also something unseen happening. Nearby pieces of technology would activate and attack the aliens, as if controlled by something. An unseen sixth member hacking into the machines, no doubt. It explained why the power had mostly gone out when the group arrived, and how they expected to fly away with the ship without clearance.

But they weren’t going to make it. The bounty hunters were too strong. It would only be a matter of time before they realized the self-destruct wasn’t activating… Then they would probably destroy the ship themselves. It was taking the otherworldly team too long to get across the warehouse. Far too long.

Mycroft shook his head. “This isn’t going to work.”

“We have to do something…” Sherlock muttered. “They need to succeed…”

John put a hand on Sherlock’s shoulder. “How do we know what they want to do is good for us?”

“They want to fix the problem, set it right,” Sherlock said. “I can see it in the way they move. They
aren’t killers, but they are warriors. They’re here to fix things. Look down there – none of the human scientists or guards are dead. None. That’s difficult to do, especially with how much power they have.”

“We can’t do anything from up here but remove security barriers!” Mycroft pointed out. “They can get through those themselves!”

“Yes… Yes…” Sherlock lit up. “Mycroft, do you think you can tap into the speaker systems?”

Mycroft nodded, leaping onto the computer and using his card. Access was granted. He located the speaker program with ease, turning it on. “There you go.”

“YOU! YOU WITH THE POWER TO TURN THINGS INTO BOOKS!” Sherlock shouted. “ALL YOU NEED IS LINE OF SIGHT TO SOMEONE’S EYES. LOOK UP, I’M IN THE GLASS BOX FAR ABOVE YOU! GIVE ME INSTRUCTIONS!”

Sherlock whirled to the broken window and stared right at the artist man. The man saw him and nodded, wasting no time. The power – the invisible power – hit Sherlock dead on, popping his face open like a book. Something quickly scrawled words over his pages. Due to the distance, the instructions wrote overtop of some other words, scrambling Sherlock’s mind considerably – but he pressed on through sheer mental fortitude.

Sherlock’s face closed, allowing him to return to a fully aware status. “I probably have some kind of mental condition now, but that doesn’t matter, I know what to do. Mycroft, stay here and give us access.”

“What are you doing!?”

“John and I are going to fly a spaceship. Then we’re going to use it to destroy the alien experiment on the dimensional device. I’ve been given instructions.”

Mycroft nodded. “Go.”

John blinked. “Sherlock, do you know how to fly it?”

“Nope!” Sherlock declared. “But I’m confident I can figure it out! Let’s move!” He dragged John back to the lift. They descended back to the ground as the battle raged on the other side of the warehouse.

Sherlock dashed to a mobile platform, dragging John onto it. He pressed ‘up’, and it lifted them toward the ship’s cockpit. It was at this point the guards in this section thought that maybe, just maybe, they should try to stop these two. They aimed their guns.

Mycroft must have found something, because green lights started to light up on the walls around the ship. The large back doors began to open, preparing for a smooth launch. The soldiers returned to the exploding sounds happening on the other side of the warehouse - green lights meant everything that was happening was authorized. In their minds, anyway.

When Sherlock and John approached the dark dome, it opened up like an eyelid, revealing two seats appropriate for human use. Sherlock sat down in the front, John in the back. The dome slid shut overhead with a shik, but they could still see through it.

“Everything else considered, this is actually pretty cool,” John admitted.

Sherlock grinned. “It is time to go to space.” He examined the console in front of him. It had almost
never been used, so there were virtually no clues to tell him what buttons did what. He was able to deduce that the two softly glowing orbs in front of him were meant for his hands. Presumably the equivalent to a steering wheel.

He placed his hands on the orbs and felt the ship tap into his mind. It knew instantly where he wanted to go and what he wanted to do. He didn’t even need to steer. The crescent-ship rotated a full hundred-and-eighty degrees, pointing out the open end of the warehouse. With no revving up, it blasted out of the hangar with enough acceleration to flatten anything on it to putty. Sherlock and John felt nothing.

“The technology required for this thing…” John said with awe, looking at the ground receding below them faster than he had ever seen it before. “This is incredible.”

“We’re going to get to see a bigger one soon enough,” Sherlock smirked. Within twenty seconds, they had left the atmosphere behind. The orb of the Earth’s dark side was behind them. Before them, a large, blue, disc-shaped ship floated. It looked exactly like a UFO one would see in a cheesy science-fiction movie or cartoon.

“Right,” Sherlock said. “Now to fire weapons…”

The ship didn’t fire weapons.

“…Sherlock…”

“Give me a moment to think…” He processed – he had no idea which of the buttons were weapons. He knew one had to be, but he quickly realized there was probably another button that was the safety. And he couldn’t destroy the ship without the weapons…

Wait, he could. He could ram the UFO. That would do it.

The ship started accelerating again.

“Sherlock, what are you doing?”

“…What the man wrote into me. He told me to destroy the UFO. I think he expected I’d use the weapons, but I can’t figure them out…” He ground his teeth. “And I don’t think I can refuse the command.”

“Sherlock!”

“I’ve been unintentionally turned into a suicide bomber…” Sherlock muttered, the distance to the UFO closing fast.

“SHERLOCK!”

“QUIET! I NEED TO THINK OF ANOTHER WAY TO DO THIS!” He breathed in, put his hands to his head, and thought.

~~~

Sherlock went to his mind palace.

Images flashed past his mind – images of the recent past, images of information, images of his own thought process.

“Right, so, I have somewhere in the span of ten seconds to figure this out,” Sherlock said to himself.
“To find a way to follow THIS without dying.”

He gestured at hastily scrawled words that read “WILL DESTROY THE SHIP WHERE THE DEVICE IS CONTAINED.”

“Right right right…” The console of the spaceship flashed in front of his eyes. Every little detail flashed into his focus – their shape, their arrangement, their proximity to his hands… That big middle one might be the fire, or the radio, or the self-destruct. The safety could be the one his thumb could reach instantly…

Thirty-two possibilities that make sense, he decided. “Too many!” he shouted to himself. “Not enough to try in ten seconds! New plan!” The buttons were tossed to the side and he began to examine the UFO they were targeting. Was there a way to hit it to destroy it without destroying themselves?

He examined every facet of the UFO he could manage and found nothing. The technology was too alien for him to recognize weak points. It looked too much like a piece of fiction anyway!

“Think! Think!” he shouted to himself. “Nothing obvious… Think outside the box!”

They had the hacker with them – the one that was controlling technology. That’s how they expected to fly the ship themselves…

“Got it! I can just fly back down and have the hacker do it! Easy!”

The command tore at his mind, demanding he not take an action with such uncertainty.

“OH COME ON!” Sherlock shouted at the words. “That will work! If… If they’re still alive… Or anywhere near the actual location… If I can communicate without giving them time to… Fine. I’ll need to figure out exactly where their hacker is and who they are. I need certainty.”

He replayed the fight he had observed from the glass office. He walked among the otherworldly adventurers and the aliens disguised as humans, watching the way they all moved their heads closely. They saw technology activating, and then glanced behind them. That means the hacker is outside, and nearby good… Right – wait… They weren’t looking outside. They were looking inside. The hacker was with them.

It was the man holding the cactus. But he showed no signs of being a hacker, or even controlling the technology. He glanced at the activating technology after it activated, not before…

But right after, he glanced at the cactus he held in his hand.

The cactus.

There was no way, was there? That the cactus was the hacker? But their reactions – it meant it was. Two of them had invisible powers that could act without Sherlock seeing. Could the cactus have them as well? It… It had to, or had to be the result of one…

The cactus.

“Whatever remains, no matter how improbable…” Sherlock muttered to himself.

The command allowed itself to sink into the back of his mind. It would allow him to go get the cactus.
Sherlock pulled up at the last second.

“THAT WAS BLOODY CLOSE!” John shouted.

“Yes. Hold on, we need to get a cactus.”

“…What?”

“You heard me.”

“I did, I’m having troubl-”

“Get ready to catch.”

“Sherlock!”

They rushed back to Earth, right where they had just come from. It only took a handful of seconds.

This time, the ship did crash through the roof of the warehouse, right overtop of the ongoing battle. Sherlock twisted the ship sideways and opened the cockpit bubble with a thought. “CACTUS! NOW!”

The man with the cactus saw. “JOTARO I CAN’T MAKE THAT!”

“I know, Daniel,” the huge man – Jotaro apparently – said.

He must have stopped time, because the next thing John knew a cactus hit him in the gut. “AUGH!”

“I told you to catch, John!” Sherlock shouted, closing the bubble cockpit.

“I… WHAT!?”

Then the cactus tapped into the power of the ship, taking control from Sherlock. The ship activated an FTL jump, appearing in front of the UFO in an instant.

“…Convenient,” John commented, momentarily ceasing the act of plucking cactus needles out of his stomach.

The cactus activated the ship’s weapons, firing a barrage of red laser missiles right at the central blue dome. The ship exploded in a burst of blue energy.

Sherlock and John cheered. “Take that, alien overlords!” John shouted.

Their victory was cut short when several dozen identical ships appeared around them. The two humans paled. They knew they would not survive a coordinated attack from this many, cactus or no.

But Sherlock remembered something.

They had just destroyed what was stopping dimensional travel.

Hadn’t the team below been calling for help?

A tremendous ship of a vaguely rectangular shape appeared out of a gigantic portal of energy.

“Does that say… Enterprise?” John blurted.
“Yes, yes it does,” Sherlock said. “…I think we get to enjoy a lightshow, John. If only we had popcorn.”

The Enterprise fired its weapons, showing the UFOs how truly pathetic they were. The aliens fell to the might of an interdimensional flagship within minutes.

John actually wished he had popcorn.

~~~

The next day, Daniel knocked on the door of 221B, Baker Street.

Sherlock opened it, eyebrow raised. “I was wondering when you would show up, Daniel Jackson.” John poked his head out from behind Sherlock, curious.

Daniel nodded. “I figured. I guess you already know why I’m here?”

“To thank me,” Sherlock said.


“What did you do?”

“I killed an alien. And caught a cactus with my stomach.”

“Oh. Yeah, that must have slipped my mind.”

Daniel nodded. “On behalf of the Alliance, I thank you for what you’ve done. You helped us not only return to our homes, but also save an entire planet from being subjugated by alien overlords. You did all of this in one day, with no prior knowledge of the multiverse, or the aliens. It was nothing short of incredible, Mr Holmes.”

Holmes smirked. “What’s my reward?”

“We’ll give you a dimensional device and a traveling license. You will have access to all the services our side of the multiverse has to offer.”

“Yeah, no,” John said. “I’ve had enough excitement for a lifetime, and I already had that from what Sherlock drags me to every other day. Of course Sherlock is going to eat it u-”

“I’m going to refuse,” Sherlock declared.


“It’s too much for one mind to keep track of,” Sherlock said. “If I expand my horizons that far… The details will become unimportant. And I can’t live without obsessing over the details.”

Daniel smiled. “You know, there have been a few who’ve said that before. I understand. It’s not for everyone, out there.”

“That said, I’m never one to just ignore information. I’m not going to be traveling out there, but I would like a source of information. Would you by chance have an all-in-one guide of sorts I can use to educate myself?”

Daniel smirked, handing Sherlock a data pad. “This has *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Multiverse* on it. It should have all you need. And here’s a multiversal phone, just in case you want to make a call.”
“I’ll take it,” Sherlock said, smirking. “By the way, I have just made the most absurd deduction. Even more absurd than a cactus having the power to hack technology.”

“What?”

“You’re married to a horse.”

Daniel laughed.

John gaped. “My God, he’s right isn’t he?”

“Yes. Yes he is,” Daniel confirmed.

“Done!” John shouted, walking back inside. “I am so done!”

“You should go talk to Mycroft,” Sherlock suggested, starting to flip through the Guide. “I think he’ll love to talk policy with you.”

Daniel sighed. “Yeah, we do owe him as well. Wish us luck.”

“You’ve dealt with worse than him.” Those were Sherlock’s last words before he slammed the door in Daniel’s face.

“…What an interesting man,” Daniel commented to himself.

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Agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully sat in the X-files division of the FBI.

A news report was playing in the background. “Multiversal entities have come to our world and are in the process of removing the influence of an alien presence…”

“I like to think we helped with that,” Scully said. “You know, at least a little. More than solving a psychoactive drug case.”

“I think I know what happened,” Mulder said. “The spirit séance we were part of mixed with the dimensional energy, triggering the switches required t.”

“Mulder, just stop.”

Mulder sat back and folded his hands behind his head. “I’m looking forward to not being crazy.”

“You believe in ghosts, Mulder.”

“Guess that’s the next thing. Aliens taken care of, time to figure out ghosts.”

“…Mulder, please tell me you aren’t serious.”

Mulder grinned.

~~~

Froppy shook hands with Jotaro. “Ribbit. Glad to meet your people outside a cruel game.”

Jotaro nodded.

“He wasn’t there, you know,” Rohan commented. “That was Pinkie’s group…”
Froppy shook her head at Rohan, ignoring the rest of what he said. “The United States of the Multiverse will be glad to know we found you. Do you have any leads on the blue metal guy?”

Jotaro shook his head. “No. We have found no leads on him, despite searching for multiple years. We do not think he wants to be found.”

“Then we’ll just have to look harder. Ribbit.”

Carrot polished his sword. “It was an honor to fight alongside you, Mister Kujo. You as well, Kishibe.”

“I thought I was an honor-less hack?” Rohan retorted.

“You showed fortitude in the end,” Carrot said. “You should try to tap into that more often.”

“…Right.”

The cactus produced its Stand: an electric dandelion. It sent out a message in morse code. You guys are forgetting me again.

Froppy smiled. “Don’t worry Cak, we’ll never forget what you’ve done for us. I’m expecting medals in your future. Ribbit.”

Cak seemed happy with this.

Jotaro pulled down on his hat. “Good grief…”


“No, he’s not,” Froppy said. “The Sherlock Holmes books have nothing to do with him. His life is nothing like theirs. Different eras, different people. The multiverse is large enough that there would have to be someone named Sherlock Holmes that was an amazing detective.”

“Hrm…” Rohan said, clearly not satisfied by Froppy’s dismissal. He was sure there was something else going on.

~~~

“So, they made contact…” Randall Flagg said, taking a few steps forward on the frozen lake. “Not ideal. But the USM doesn’t have as much power as they think they do.” He turned to Siron. “The plan has not changed. Their nation will fall the moment it is created.”

Siron nodded. “We will accomplish our goal… Or die trying.”

Flagg smirked. “That’s true for you, I suppose.” He held up the dark orb in his hands, looking deep into the worlds.

Siron remained silent, staring into the black orb himself, unable to remove any of his eyes from it.
Six months ago, local time, Reverb Hall had been the site of a trial to determine the fate of a universe, to bar it from inclusion or otherwise.

Now, Reverb Hall was the site of what could be considered the exact opposite. The final step of Unification. The Signing.

Unlike the trial, this event was broadcast live to every universe that cared. The average population still wasn’t allowed inside the actual Hall since it was already more than a little full, but the governments had made sure to allow extensive media access. Cameras were everywhere, and several news anchors could be seen addressing the masses through the devices.

The Hall itself was absolutely filled with people from every one of the eight universes. Ponies, Gems, and humans were there; but there were also dragons, changelings, Asgard, and others joining in.

Eve looked out at it all from the stage and couldn’t help herself. She broke out into a childish grin and started singing; even though she couldn’t hear her own words, it was still a great feeling.

“Together
A thread of fate has bound us in harmony
A simple song has given us melody
A friendship shared with those who cared truthfully
Together
Through all the pain the trials the horrors the tears
We have stood the test of time and suffering
And here we stand at last to conquer our fears
Together
When I heard the multiverse calling my name
I believed the destiny was singular
I did not seek the power, glory, or fame
Together
Look at us now, standing proud, against it all
Preparing to take the final step in this
The proud unification in this hall!”
Eve twirled around, looking at the banner with the newly created symbol of the unified worlds. A ‘u’ with a tail at the front end, known as the Greek letter ‘mu’ to people of Earth.

Pinkie appeared next to Eve and began to sing, twirling her squeaky hammer as she did so.

“Woah~

Together!

Standing beneath this symbol of accomplishment!

Bringing passion, friendship, the light within all!

Above and beyond the mission we were sent!”

Pinkie pulled an electric guitar out of nowhere and threw it to Vriska. She strummed.

“Yeah!

Together!

I came here looking for an old friend of mine

Haven’t found her yet, but there’s something else here

People who help me not care about the time!”

Pinkie rammed her face into Vriska’s. “Vriska, that doesn’t rhyme! Get into the flow!”

“Excuse me! It’s not like I’m used to songthings!”

“Just try your best and you’ll find you can’t say no!”

Flutterfree cleared her throat, landing between them and changing up the beat of the heartsong.

“In this world of infinite choices

We must not forget the reason we’re here

Our kindnesses made the bonds stronger

We are here to banish all of their fear.”

Toph and Corona leaped into the mix, dancing opposed to each other in time with the beat.

Toph grinned. “We have strengthened our spirits and hope.”

Corona smiled sadly. “Found a way to rekindle what was lost.”

“All the sorrow suffered among us.”

“Let’s push it aside so that we may rest.”

Nova and Renee sang as one.

“In this world of infinite choices
We must not forget the reason we’re here

Our magic enchanted millions

Let’s celebrate that with faces of cheer!”

“Together!” Eve shouted, bringing it back to the original beat.

“Together we stand, together we press on!

Together we weep, together we console!

Together we sing, together to the dawn!”

O’Neill raised a fist in victory. “Together we laugh at our enemies!”

Daniel smirked alongside him. “Together we solve the mysteries of old.”

Celestia spoke out. “Together we find the rainbow in our lives.”

Joseph Joestar chimed in with his old, scratchy voice. “Together we survive despite all the odds!”

Blue Diamond let out a line with her serene tone. “Together we learn from mistakes of the past.”

Cosmo put on a soft, motherly smile. “Together we find homes for those who have none.”

Director Storm laughed. “Together we create great storms of our own!”

Allure piped up. “Together we enjoy the endless beauty!”

Evening brought it back. “Together: Merodi Universalis!”

“Together!” the entire hall shouted, turning to another person for the next verse. They all stared expectantly.

Jotaro grabbed his hat and shook his head. “Yare yare daze…”

The music ended with a wacky drumbeat provided by Pinkie.

“Dad!” Jolyne – now a teenager - called. “You ruined the song!”

Jotaro shrugged apologetically.

“It’s okay,” Eve said, putting a wing on Jolyne’s shoulder. “We got to Merodi Universalis. I think that’s what really needed to be said. It was a good ending, regardless.”

“I carry all of you with these drums!” Pinkie shouted.

“Yes. Yes you do,” Eve chuckled.

“You still going with Merodi Universalis?” Vriska asked. “I thought the name hadn’t been decided yet.”

“It was finalized for certain yesterday,” Eve explained. “We will no longer be ‘the Alliance’ or ‘the Unified’ after today. We will be Merodi Universalis. Or the Merodi.”

Vriska smirked. “I think it works well. Too many nations are all like ‘United States of Power’ or
‘Harmonic Republic’ or ‘The Democratic Republic of Freedom’ or other generic, lame names. Glad you found something unique.”

“And meaningful,” Eve said, a smile on her face. She looked out at the crowd in the Hall. “I feel much better about this than I did Disclosure.”

“Of course,” Renee said, walking up beside her old friend. “After all, it’s not like anything’s a secret this time around. We know exactly how the public feels. Generally overwhelmingly positive.”

“You’re overstating it, Renee,” Eve pointed out.

Renee huffed. “Oh, don’t dwell on the handful that refused. The Earths had hundreds of nations each, there were always going to be some that were stuck up about it. And Tauryl was never going to even consider such a thing.”

“I… am not worried or dwelling on any of them. I’m much more relieved that Lai and the Gem Vein are completely on board. I remember when Lai used to be a constant source of problems, and the Gem Vein fought hard against changing even a little.”

“They still fight hard, Eve.”

“Not as hard as they used to.” Eve gestured at a group of Gems intermingling with the League of Sweetie Belles. “Those aren’t banished Gems there, Renee. Those are official Diamond Authority Gems. Grown and raised in the rigid system they had in place. And they’re genuinely being friendly. It just… It creates a warm and fuzzy feeling to know we helped give them that capability, you know?”

“I do,” Flutterfree said with a smile. “It’s why I’m out here, doing this. So things like that happen more often.”

Eve hugged her. “You’re doing great, Flutterfree.”

“Thank you. You too.”

The dark form of Blumiere walked up. He tipped his hat at Renee and Flutterfree. “Evening, the foreign dignitaries have arrived and are staying in the upper balcony. I believe you wish to greet them personally?”

Eve took a breath. This was going to be interesting. “Yes, I did. Sorry girls, duty calls.” She adjusted her mane with her magic and stretched her wings. “Blumiere, what are you doing right now?”

Blumiere summoned a brochure out of the aether. “Talking about the plans for Castle Bleck. People are always very interested to hear about them personally.”

Eve took a breath. This was going to be interesting. “Yes, I did. Sorry girls, duty calls.” She adjusted her mane with her magic and stretched her wings. “Blumiere, what are you doing right now?”

Blumiere summoned a brochure out of the aether. “Talking about the plans for Castle Bleck. People are always very interested to hear about them.”

“Ah, carry on then. Flutterfree, think you can check to make sure security is still tight for me?”

Flutterfree nodded. “Aye aye.”

Eve rolled her eye at this, teleporting to the Reverb Hall’s balcony. It was more of a closed box with a giant window than a balcony, but it served a similar purpose. The view of the stage from here was impressive enough to give the people inside a feeling of importance.

Eve bowed to all four present dignitaries. “You all honor us with your presence.”

The Grand Secretariat bowed in return. “You honor us in allowing our presence in the first place,
Evening.”

Hastur shrugged, the yellow folds of his robes spiraling around him in a highly unnatural fashion. **“The highers would not consider this an honor. More of a chore.”**

“Then we’re lucky you’re the one here,” Eve pointed out.

**“I’m the only one who was willing to go, Evening Sparkle.”**

“I know,” Eve said, rubbing the back of her head. Then she turned to the third dignitary, the last one she recognized. “…Hi.”

“Hi,” Jenny said, just as awkwardly. She began to twiddle her thumbs.

“You know, I actually didn’t expect you to show up.”

“I had nothing to do today. Figured I might as well.”

Eve nodded slowly. Then she smiled. “Well, enjoy your stay, Jenny!”

Jenny gave a thumbs up. “Yeah!”

*I really, really do not trust her within a million miles of any of my friends,* Eve thought to herself. *But we can’t continue like we were forever. This is a step toward actually interacting more.*

Eve turned to the fourth dignitary, one she had never met before. “Greetings. I am Charter-Princess Evening Sparkle. I don’t believe we’ve met.”

The man with the blonde curled hair in the pink suit replied “I am Ambassador Funny Valentine, representative of the United States of the Multiverse. Froppy speaks highly of your people.”

Eve smiled. “I’m glad.” Eve really wasn’t sure what to make of the USM. They had made official contact with them only a month ago after an encounter with aliens in the E-sphere. Since Unification had been so close at that point, Eve had never made any personal trips to the USM. She knew they started out as mostly an alliance of different versions of the United States of America, but that was in their past. They were now a more inclusive democratic entity in the multiverse, though as far as she knew they only contained humans within their borders. Eve had no idea what drove them, what their values were, how they dealt with new universes, or even what their political scene was. She didn’t even know the name of their current president!

All these thoughts stayed hidden behind Eve’s sweet smile. “What do you think?” Eve asked Valentine.

“We certainly never had this,” Valentine admitted. “Back when we first came together, it wasn’t all at once. It was always one world at a time, adapted into already existing legal systems. We never had to create something entirely new, merely adjust what already existed.”

“Oh?”

“I’m rather curious to see how your new system fares,” Valentine commented. “You’ve progressed remarkably quickly from fledgeling to full society. It took us significantly longer to get to anything of this level.”

“We have gotten lucky a few times,” Eve admitted.
“Capitalizing on luck is a welcome skill,” Valentine commented.

The Grand Secretariat moved into Eve’s field of view. “Evening, I hope you do not mind. But we have invited another society to observe the proceedings.”

Eve raised an eyebrow. “It’s not the Council of Ricks, is it?”

“Good Celestia, no!” the Grand Secretariat shook her head. “It’s the power we weren’t allowed to tell you about when you first met us. They would have been upset that we revealed them to someone they had not deemed ‘ready’. They’ve decided they’d rather reveal themselves before Unification rather than after.”

Eve suddenly put on her ‘serious diplomat’ expression. “I would be most grateful to meet these mysterious individuals.”

The Grand Secretariat nodded, pulling out a small device and pressing a button. Next to her appeared an alien life form that looked nothing like any creature Eve had seen before. Its body was bright orange and consisted of five orange lumps. Four of these lumps served as leg-like limbs, while the central lump contained a single blue eye and a wide mouth. Eve turned her ears on since she definitely wasn’t going to just assume she knew how to lip read this race.

It spoke with a high-pitched whine at the back of its throat. The voice was identifiably male. Eve knew her translator had never heard this being’s language before, but she could understand him anyway, suggesting the orange being had a translator of his own. “I am called Chartreuse, of the interdimensional race Melnorme. We look forward to doing business with you in the near future.”

“What kinds of business?”

“We Melnorme value trading above all else, Charter-Princess. You are just about to pass the threshold to become a full multiversal society. You will be of use to us – and we will be of use to you. Our society is far more expansive than any party present here. We are able to procure objects and materials from universes far outside your sphere of influence, as well as information. All you have to do is find something to exchange in return for such things.”

“Huh. How many universes do you encompass?”

“That information will cost you.”

_Oh. I see how it is._

“Chartreuse, be nice, she just met you,” the Grand Secretariat chided. “The Melnorme have referred to themselves as a Class 2 society, while powers comparable to our level are a Class 3. What exactly this means is apparently too expensive for a ‘mere Class 3 society to pay for’, but it’s clear they exist on a level above the rest of us.”

“So, we’re becoming a Class 3 society today?” Eve asked.

“I would assume so,” the Grand Secretariat answered.

“Confirmation is a cheap commodity,” Chartreuse pointed out.

Eve smiled at Chartreuse. “Thanks, but no thanks. I think I’ll discuss with the Census a bit more before initiating any significant trades with your people. But I’m glad you’ve taken an interest in us. I hope this is the start of a long, beautiful friendship.”
“The feeling is mutual.” Without so much as another glance at Eve, Chartreuse turned to Ambassador Valentine. “The Melnorme wish to initiate trade with your people as well…”

Valentine and Chartreuse continued discussion. Eve took this as an indication to turn off her ears.

Hastur turned to Eve. “I think I remember these Melnorme. They tried to form relations with the Embodiment. You can imagine how that went.”

“It didn’t?” Eve suggested.

“You’re learning quickly, Charter-Princess.”

“It doesn’t feel quick.”

“Speak to your Gems on the topic sometime. They will tell you the speed at which you’re able to alter yourself is terrifying.”

Eve smirked. “I am aware of this, Hastur. Have to be to be a good leader.”

“There are many Old Ones who would disagree with that, assuming they would even accept the question as worthy of their minds. By the way, I am curious, what are your plans after Unification?”

Eve looked out the window at the Hall’s stage and smiled. “After this… Just watch this nation like they were my children.”

“You have no children.”

“You know what I- actually, wait, you might not know what I mean.” Eve rubbed the back of her head awkwardly. “I forget this is all alien to you, sometimes. Have Vriska explain it to you. … Actually, that might be a bad idea. Thrackerzod maybe? No…” She rubbed her head with her hoof, a headache forming.

The Grand Secretariat smirked. “Just as we cannot comprehend some eldritch concepts, the eldritch lack some of ours. I’m sure it can be explained… With time.”

Hastur walked past them. “Another time then. I’m sure Evening has much to prepare for. The refreshments must be perfect, I expect.”

“The refreshments actually aren’t that important,” Eve pointed out

“…Ah.”

Eve smiled. “Regardless, glad you all could make it.” She glanced uncertainly at Jenny for a moment. “If you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask. The ceremony should start soon, assuming nothing crazy happens.”

All of the dignitaries nodded.

~~~

Corona was sitting in one of the many chairs of Reverb Hall, the rest of her team sitting to her left. She was silent, her expression flat. Her eyes were hidden behind the sunglasses she had so rarely taken off since she returned from the Nexus.
They weren’t the Sombra glasses. They were just regular sunglasses now. No HUD to distract her, no scans to tell her things, no information. Just sunglasses. Sunglasses she could look out of, but others could not see into.

She found she preferred it that way, now.

…Of course Toph could ‘see’ just fine. “Whatcha lookin’ at there?”

Corona didn’t react at first, processing the question. “The stage lights, I guess.”

“Which means you aren’t actually looking at anything and are staring at something in your thoughts.”

Corona thought for a moment.

“Hope,” she said at last. “I’m thinking about hope.”

“Oh?” the General asked, clearly asking for more information.

Corona wasn’t sure she wanted to give it at first, but she reasoned that it would probably be good for her. “I… You know I haven’t been doing that great, lately.”

“You came back a different person. We all did,” Toph said. “The world had moved on without us.”

Corona nodded. “Yeah… I know. Or I don’t. I guess.” She shifted around in her seat. “Really not sure where I’m going with this.”

“Let’s go back to hope,” Toph suggested. “What exactly were you thinking about?”

“This event. What it means.” Corona gestured with a hoof. “See all this? Some think of it as a political move. Or stability. Or just the march of progress. But that’s not what it is to those of us who have actually fought for it, tooth and nail, hoof and claw. Hand too. We’ve fought… And we’ve suffered for doing so.”

Toph faced forward, grimacing slightly. “Yeah…” Corona knew she was remembering General Sunset, Fef… Others…

Corona looked back at the stage. “For us… This means something. This means that what we fought for was *worth* it. There is a *goal*. This goal has been reached. All of it… Led to this. And to the future that will be built after this.” Corona let a smile come to her face. “…This is what we’ve been hoping for. The struggle just to survive is a horrible one even if you win. The struggle to thrive… there is meaning in that struggle.”

Toph placed a firm hand on Corona’s shoulder. “They’d all be proud of us.”

Tears fell from under Corona’s sunglasses. “Yeah… Yeah they would be.” She took off her sunglasses to wipe her face, revealing eyes that were a painful mixture of joyous and broken. She put them back on. “Let’s remember that.”

Corona and Toph clasped their hands together and flexed, grinning at each other.

“Bros’ moment,” Lieshy commented from the other side of Toph.

“Hm?” Lady Rarity said, looking up from her book. “Come again?”

“I just witnessed a ‘bros’ moment’ between our leader and our scientist.”
“…Lieshy, dear, none of us are bros.”

“The word ‘bro’ lacks a connotative equal in the feminine, ‘sis’ doesn’t carry the same closeness or bond with it.”

Lady Rarity raised an eyebrow. “I wonder if that’s a translation oddity, because I seem to disagree.”

“Cultural, possibly. Had I not gone with ‘bros’ moment’ it would have just been ‘moment’ and that has romantic inclinations.”

Toph raised an eyebrow at Lieshy.

“Unless I have completely misread the situation and you two really a-”

Toph punched Lieshy across the face. Lieshy, rather than yelping in pain, chuckled to herself.

Corona angled her head toward Lieshy, checking to make sure she was okay. “Toph, Lieshy was just being thorough.”

Toph grunted. “Lieshy knows precisely how to press everyone’s buttons. She knew exactly what she was doing.”

“Astute observation,” Lieshy commented, pulling herself back into her chair. “I know for a fact that none of you are interested in each other and never have been, with the exception of Lady Rarity toward Corona for a short time out of a misplaced sense of gratitude.”

Lady Rarity sputtered and flushed.

“And I was only roughly two-thirds sure of that. Thank you for confirmation.”

Lady Rarity took in a deep breath and sighed. “There are no secrets from you.”

“Very few. I could put all of your love lives in the open with little effort.”

“Don’t,” Toph cautioned.

“Please don’t,” Vivian said, finally hearing something that dragged her into the conversation.

Lieshy nodded. “Very well. Would you like me to analyze the love lives of other people?”

“That’d be cruel,” Lady Rarity decreed.

“You’re just saying that because you were ousted,” Lieshy said.

Lady Rarity opened her mouth to retort, but she caught Corona looking at her over the tops of her sunglasses. The spirid-unicorn facehooved. “Lieshy, she’s giving me the look. This is your fault.”

“Yes. Yes it is.”

“Do you have no sense of guilt within yourself?”

“No. No I do not.”

“Ugh…”

Corona sat back in her chair. “I’m just processing that I apparently had a spider-stalker next to me and I had no idea. Wonder why you didn’t make a move.”
“Why are we talking about this?” Lady Rarity wailed, putting her face in her hooves.

“Because we need to act like teenage girls at least once in a blue moon, even though we’re grown women,” Toph commented. “Apparently. Oh I know, we should talk about boys next.”

Vivian perked up. “Really? Oh there’s this on-“

“Spirits…” Toph said, facepalming. “That wasn’t serious by any stretch of the imagination, Vivian.”

“Oh.” Vivian looked at the ground, saddened.

“We’re grown women! Why would we talk about boys of all things?”

Lieshy fixed Toph with a serious glare. “You do not want me to answer that question.”

Toph wanted to disagree with her. But she thought better of it.

Then Corona’s phone rang. When the phone answered itself, everyone knew who it was. “So, Amigas, when should I plan the spider-wedding?!”

Lieshy’s amused expression vanished. “…I am so sorry, Rarity.”

“I am ruined!” Lady Rarity wailed. “My reputation, dragged through the dus-“

“I think you’re overreacting,” Corona said, pulling the phone out of her pocket and glaring at it. “It’s not like an old crush is going to ruin your reputation.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.”

Sombra chuckled. “Well, we will see, won-“

“Sombra, I had your devices turned off for a reason,” Corona interrupted. “This was a private conversation between us. You inserted yourself into it against my wishes.”

“Corona, you need to coo-“

“No, Sombra. I’m not going to just let you sweet-talk out again. Stop listening in on my private conversations.”

“It wasn’t intentional! I was looking through the camera the guy to your left is holding! Yeesh.”

Corona checked to her left – there was in fact a man recording everything around him with a camera.

“…Sombra, do you mind deleting that video?”

“I don’t know, you were pretty short with me…”

“Sombra, please.”

“Done,” Sombra declared. “You’ve been a lot less fun since you’ve been back, you know.”

Corona’s face was unreadable. “…Maybe things are just different now, Sombra.” She hung up on her.

“Are you sur-“ Lady Rarity began.
“I… wasn’t in the mood to deal with her,” Corona admitted. “I’ll call her later. … Apologize. But let’s get through this for now.”

Toph wanted to say something, but decided not to. They should enjoy themselves.

~~~

Vriska and Alushy walked down the halls of the Hub, taking a moment to get out of the ‘overly stuffy shouting room with millions of stuffy politicians’.

“You know, I can’t believe we don’t talk that much,” Vriska said. “I mean, I see you around, and you sound like a lot of fun, but we’ve never actually talked have we?”

“Not that you remember.”

“Funny.” Vriska swiped a milkshake off a nearby vendor and tossed them a coin in payment. “… Fruity,” she observed.

“Brilliant observation. You deserve a medal.”

“I have all the medals. All of them.”

“Do you have the fudgemothering vampire medal?”

“Yes. Stole it from you, actually, while you weren’t looking.”

“Ha! Joke’s on you, that was the fake fudgemothering vampire medal! That was the ‘get bitten by Alushy for free’ medal. Bend over, I need to get to your neck.”

“You aren’t getting my blood.”

“Oh come on! Just a little taste? I bet it tastes like blueberries.”

“It tastes like cobalt shavings.”

“So what you’re saying is ‘essentially blueberry’.”

“What I’m saying is it tastes horrible.”

“So you won’t mind providing a drop or two? You certainly aren’t using it… I hear trolls have a ton of extra blood…” Alushy bared her fangs.

Vriska punched her in the face before she could jump her neck. “Sorry, not happening.”

“I’ll just wait until you’re lulled into a false sense of security…”

“I’m far too lucky for you to hi-“

Alusy performed a quick aerial maneuver and hit Vriska in the chest with her front hooves. Vriska fell back. “FALL TO MY FANGS!”

Vriska grinned, twirling onto her hands and drawing this sword. “This is going to be good…”

Alushy drew her guns, chuckling. “Prepare to explode multiple times, Vriska Serket.” Alushy fired a few times, Vriska managing to dodge every bullet. Vriska brought the sword down on Alushy’s head, hitting directly. Blood erupted from the cut like a volcano, dousing Vriska’s face and blinding
“Augh! Forgot about that!” Vriska muttered, wiping off her face. In this moment of distraction, Alushy grabbed her neck and bit down. Vriska’s luck ensured Alushy missed the major artery she was going for.

Shit, Alushy thought, imagining Vriska’s boot hitting her before it actually did. She went into the air and opted to stop playing miss-nice-vampire. Shadows furled off her essence, summoning horrendous eyes and mouths around her. She dive-bombed the troll.

Vriska threw her dice. A giant spider made of marshmallows appeared, attacking the shadows head on.

The Rainbow Dash with the metallic wing better known as Razor arrived on the scene to find a vampire pegasus and a troll laughing, stuck inside a mess of blood, shadow, and marshmallow.

Razor groaned. “Why do you people have to have your ‘friendly spars’ in public places!? The citizens were freaking out!”

“Fuck ‘em,” Vriska said, struggling to get out of the marshmallow goo. “We were bonding.”

“We’re still not do-“ Alushy paused. “…Vriska, what did you just say?”

“…We were bonding? Don’t tell me you’re getting all sent-“

“No, no, before that.”

“Fuck ‘em?”

“PRAISE THE BLOOD OF THE FALLEN!” Alushy shouted, flying into the air with the cheesiest toothy grin ever. “FUCK! OH IT FEELS SO GOOD TO SAY. ALL THESE YEARS… ALL THESE YEARS…” Alushy grabbed Vriska by the face and kissed her full on. “You are the best thing ever.”

“WOAH WOAH WOAH!” Vriska said, waving her hands. “Baaaaaaaack off with the kissing! Yeesh! Hastur will freak!”

“Oh psh it didn’t mean anything,” Alushy said, waving a wing. “Not a fucking thing. So fucking satisfying. Fuckitty fuck fuck fudgefuck fuckmothering vampire. I think I prefer fudgemotheirng actually… But FUCK ME this feels SOOOO GOOOD.”

Nearby citizens covered the ears of children.

Razor covered her face with her wings. “Just… Go find somewhere private to smash each other to bits next time, okay?”

“Gladly!” Alushy agreed.

Vriska turned to Alushy. “You never heard fuck before? How in the world?”

“I… I really don’t know. I was born in a world where it didn’t exist. It was nothing but ‘fudge’. And then I found people who knew but wouldn’t tell me because they thought it was amusing… THE WORLD CAN BE SO CRUEL!”

“Aren’t you the pegasus who slaughters armies of the undead on a regular basis?”
“Yes, but that’s beside the point—”

“And has the highest lethality of all of Eve’s agents?”

“Potato, potahto.”

“And got beat by a version of yourself with a loud voice?”

 “…Are you just here to push buttons? Because we can push buttons. And my buttons, once pushed, don’t get un-pushed, you understand. There will be consequences. Dark, toothy consequences.”

Vriska grinned. “I think we’re best friends now.”

“FUDGE YES! …Fuck yes, I mean. Fudge, that’s not going we- I mean fuck! AGH!” Alushy laughed. “This is going to be interesting.”

“Why not keep using fudge? It’s more interesting, frankly,” Vriska said. “Also means you can stick a stream of insults to kids without their parents getting in your way.”

“I like your priorities. Let’s go find something to kill.”

“I hear there’s dinosaurs in the jungle outsi-“

And then Aradia showed up between the two of them with a crazed smile on her face. “HI!!!”

“FUCK!” Vriska shouted, falling backward.

“FUDGE!” Alushy blurted, rearing up.

“Vriska!” Aradia cheered, pulling the blueblood into her arms. “Ooooooh it’s been so long!”

“Aradia… Crushing me…” Vriska muttered, flailing around comically.

“Ooooh I’ve just been waiting for this for so looooong!”

“Hey, red fairy bitch, you trying to steal my new best friend?” Alushy asked. “Because if you are, I will buck your fudging head o- fuck. You get the point, you’re fucked. Fudged. DAMMIT.”

“Oh you can still be best friends if you want,” Aradia said, releasing Vriska. “We can just be a troop of three super best friends! Woo!”

“…Woo?” Vriska said, scratching the back of her head.

“That’s right. Woo,” Aradia deadpanned. “The eerie call of a ghost escaping this world and moving onto the next.”

Alushy blinked. “I like you too. Holy hell, today’s looking great.”

“Hey, Aradia, quick question,” Vriska said.

“Hrm?”

Vriska punched Aradia across the face, driving the red fairy to the ground.

Alushy clapped. “Ten out of ten!”

“Where the fuck have you been?!” Vriska shouted. “I’ve been here for years and now you decide to
show yourself?"

Aradia stood up, not at all offended by the punch. “Ah, well, few reasons I couldn’t show myself until now. The first is I decided that I wouldn’t make myself available to Eve and the Alliance until after Unification. They would have grown large enough that my actions wouldn’t hopelessly corrupt their fate. The second was so you could get to know everyone around here a little better, and stay even though you’d already found me!”

“Why wouldn’t I stay?”

Aradia pointed at Vriska with the finger guns gesture. “See? It worked! A week after being here, you would have made this a waypoint just to visit me and gone out searching for Earth C again.”

“I… I… Why do you have to be such a manipulative bitch about it though?”

Aradia winked. “I learned from the best.”

Vriska blinked. “I deserved that.”

“Yep!” Aradia summoned a milkshake to her hand from another time and sipped. “Anyway, who cares much about when I wasn’t here? I’m here now and I’m here to stay, and I decided to show myself to you first! I’ll catch up with the others later. Haven’t talked to Celestia in a while… Nova could use some pointers…”

“So we’ve passed your test?” Alushy asked.

“Yep!” Aradia grinned. “The Alliance will become Merodi Universalis, and I won’t be a background manipulator anymore! Just thinking about not hiding all the time gives me goosebumps…”

“So it goes well?” Vriska asked.

“Been through it three times, all good,” Aradia declared. “Bit boring, even the first time around.”

“No surprise there,” Alushy muttered. “Hey, let’s watch a bunch of bigwigs sign a piece of paper! Brilliant! Riveting!”

“Alushy! You’re understating it,” Aradia declared. “What is happening today is nothing less than monumental!”

“You and I both know this place is still small fish compared to what’s out there,” Vriska pointed out.

“Psh. You and I both know they have a powerful destiny.”

“Psh, you two know too much,” Alushy said.

“Regardless,” Aradia said, lifting her hands high. “Let’s go to one of the party scenes instead of the actual signing! I’ve seen the after-party rumor mills, I know where the wildest scene will be.”

“Pinkie?” Vriska asked.

“Not the one you’re thinking of!” Aradia giggled. “Pielight is going to go crazy.”

“Pielight…” Alushy scratched her chin. “How crazy we talking?”

“We will get to witness how a cross between Pinkie Pie and Twilight Sparkle would confess her
undying love to a bowl of punch.”

“Sold,” Vriska said. “To the party!”

Aradia accelerated the time around the three of them so they could arrive instantly.

~~~

Eve, Renee, Nova, Pinkie, and Flutterfree were gathered on the stage in Reverb Hall, talking amongst themselves before the show actually started.

“By the way, Applejack just went into labor,” Pinkie said, suddenly. Nopony asked how she knew this. “Bit of bad timing though, none of us will get to be there to see another little adorable Apple!”

Renee shook her head. “I don’t know how she does it… Come to think of it I don’t know how any of the Apples do it! Between her and Big Mac there’s like ten foals now!”


“Wouldn’t work well with our jobs,” Renee pointed out. “I don’t know how Jotaro does it.”

“Pure badassery,” Nova answered.

“That’s not an answer.”

“Yes it is!” Pinkie said, smirking.

Eve chuckled. “Not a good one.”

“What? Half the stuff I see Jotaro do is all based in pure badassery. The guy does not experience pain!”

“So, basically Alushy?” Flutterfree said. “But Alushy wouldn’t make a good mother…”

“You know I wonder if she has any foals out there,” Renee said. “She’s definitely the type to have them… She’s also ancient. Triple-digit age at least.”

“Probably, given what I know about her,” Eve said. “Not that I can know for sure. You’d have to ask her, and getting a straight answer out of Alushy is like explaining the concept of a family to Gems.”

“Not as hard as you think it is, Eve,” Renee pointed out.

Flutterfree raised an eyebrow. “I think you just have a knack for talking with beings made of crystal.”

“Eheheh… Probably.”

Pinkie’s tail twitched and her midsection twisted like a corkscrew. “Oooo! That’s a new one!”

The various Pinkies in the Hall all experienced the exact same manifestation of the Pinkie Sense. Calls of “doozy incoming!” and “wonder what that means?” rang through the auditorium.

“Have any ideas?” Eve asked Pinkie.

Pinkie shrugged. “I’ve got a nervous feeling in my stomach, though it’s hard to tell if that’s just
anticipation or a sense of something foreboding. Probably the former. I mean, all the Pinkies and all the oculi agree that this event will go through without disaster.”

“We shouldn’t dismiss your gut feeling,” Flutterfree pointed out.

“Hrm… Well this is an important moment,” Pinkie mused. “There’ll probably be a conflict of some kind. Perhaps internal? A bit of drama upsets the ceremony or something.” Pinkie shrugged. “Well, I know two things. I know the ceremony finishes. I also know there’s something going to happen. I don’t have that deep of a pit in my stomach, so…” She paused, catching herself.

“Pinkie, what is it?” Flutterfree asked.

“…I’m trying to convince myself there’s nothing to worry about,” she realized. “That’s… Not a good sign, actually.” She turned to Eve. “How much security do we have?”

“The entire auditorium is dimensionally locked courtesy of the Sparkle Census,” Eve answered. “Nobody can get in or out directly. The Enterprise is in orbit, along with a significant portion of Cosmo’s fleet. We’ve got scrying spells everywhere, and will know if anyone uninvited shows up in an instant. Plus we’ve got several dozen of the most powerful entities in the multiverse here. Even if blue, metallic, and ugly shows up I think he’d have an issue.”

“We couldn’t beat him,” Pinkie said. “But I’m sure it’s not him. …Or am I just telling myself that…?”

“Pinkie, you’re second guessing yourself,” Renee said, putting a hoof on her shoulder. “We’re doing all we can to make this safe. And if something goes wrong… We’ll deal with it when it does.”

“Yeah,” Pinkie said. “You’re all right. Just be on guard.”

“I’m sure everything will be fine,” Eve encouraged her.

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Nautica.

The Prison world for the Alliance.

There were many prisoners on the world. They had formed several different camps on different parts of the planet. There was one camp composed entirely of Ba’als, while there was another camp composed of militant, angry Gems.

However, there was one camp all the others feared. The first camp. The technologically advanced abode of Brutalight Sparcake and her friends.

When they had first arrived, a human spaceship called the Aurora had crashed, all inside perishing. They soon found one survivor who had ejected before the crash. They had turned that survivor into their slave, forcing him to tell them all he could about the technology of the Aurora and how to use it.

He had been an effective slave, but he didn’t last that long. The sea monsters got him. Such was the brutal truth for simple humans.

Of course, the Alliance never threw prisoners into Nautica who were simple humans that could be easily contained… The beings thrown into Nautica were too much trouble to contain, or had angered someone particularly high up the chain of power.
And on Nautica all prisoners would find that Brutalight was at the top of this ocean world.

With magic, technology, and ingenuity, she had managed to enchant their base to affix to clouds. They were the only inhabitants of the ocean world to command the skies. They had tried to leave the world once… but Eve’s satellites had put an end to that.

The base was square, with five buildings: one on each corner, rising above the central square platform, with the fifth building of a significantly larger size containing lower portions that protruded from the square’s underside. The structures were smooth, white, and clean. There were many large windows around the structure, alongside blue and orange highlights plastered on several of the rounded edges.

Not many people lived on the base. There was one human, one Gem, and five ponies. Four of the ponies where what remained of the Elements of Insanity, defeated at Esefem so many years ago. Fluttershout, the Fluttershy with an unbelievably dangerous voice. Rarifruit, the greedy Rarity with magic hands. Rainbine, the robot that was Rainbow Dash. And Brutalight – the leader, the brutal dark purple alicorn who most certainly could hold a grudge for over a decade.

The fifth pony was a Fluttershy, known as a cult-leader in her home universe. She was the Summoner of the Smooze who now went by Gaea.

The Gem had never given them a name – all they knew was that she was pitch black. So they called her Jet. She never corrected them.

The last member…

“Focus,” Brutalight said, standing on the edge of their flying base. “Reach deep into your soul and your mind – usually you just find the strongest emotion you can. Anger is a very useful and powerful tool, but it should not be your only one. Try to tap into your excitement, or something else to use your ability. Focus it on the water below for me. No anger, understand?”

The young woman nodded. She was tall for a human, and thin, but she was far from weak. Her arms had visible muscles and her form was well toned. She wore a black skin-fitting suit that ran from her shoulders to just above her knees, leaving the leg joints room to bend and her arms free of obstruction. Her eyes burned with the fire of an intense spirit, and around her chest she wore the tatters of a yellow raincoat like a belt.

Her name was Six.

Six took a deep breath, forgetting her anger for a moment. She felt around inside herself, deciding quickly not to rely on fear. Never again. What else… What could she base this on…

Pride.

She would succeed just because she had to.

She extended her hand over the waves and twitched one of her eyes. Clouds of dark energy shot from her fingertips, drifting into the waters below.

For a few seconds, nothing happened.

Then a fish floated belly-up to the surface. The rest of its school followed, giving the surface of the ocean a silvery sheen.

The predators of the ocean took only a few seconds to arrive and chow down on the free food. The
“Very good!” Brutalight cheered, beaming. “How’d you do it?”

“I thought about how much I wanted to impress you,” Six said honestly.


The two of them returned to the rest of the group. Jet, as usual, was standing wordlessly to the side, staring off into the horizon. She refused to even consider eating, sleeping, or really do anything other than stand guard and be ready for an attack. Even though nobody ever attacked them anymore. They attacked the other prisoners when they felt like it.

“I hear you’re doing pretty well,” Rarifruit called over to Six, though her voice was unusually quiet as almost always. “Becoming the regular powerhouse!”

Six smiled. “Yep! I could kill so many with but a thought now. Think we could finally get rid of all those pesky Ba’als with it, Brutalight?”

Brutalight shook her head. “More Ba’als are always thrown on Nautica. Plus, killing them doesn’t really do anything at this point. I think I much prefer them quaking in fear, willing to bend to our every whim should we show our faces.”

“It’s so boring though!” Rainbine declared in her signature synthetic voice. “We either control them to do nothing, or kill them and get nothing. Ever since we killed that big fish god thing this place has had nothing!”

Fluttershout rolled her eyes. “I’m happy just sitting here, eating fish.” She bit down on the fish they had cooked on their plates. “I love fish…”

“Not healthy for pony digestion, dear,” Rarifruit said with disapproval. “You need to eat more orangishes.”

Six held up one of the round, elongated fruit they had dubbed an ‘orangish’ because it was definitely orange, but it wasn’t actually an orange. She bit into it, letting it’s thick juices flow across her face.

Rarifruit facehooved. “Manners, Six.”

“What is this, prissy pony central?” Rainbine muttered. “We can do whatever we want Rarifruit, you can stop nagging.”

“Or she can keep nagging and we can keep calling her a little bitch,” Fluttershout ribbed.

Rarifruit rolled her eyes. “Ugh. You’re all impossible. Later today, I need an expedition to go kill a giant sea monster of some sort. There’s no way we’ve hunted them to extinction. There’s only six of us.”

“Seven,” Gaea corrected.

“Six. Jet never does anything but look scary.”

Gaea glanced at Jet. “Jet, do you mind that we do things without you?”

Jet glanced at Gaea with narrow eyes. “I am loyal to your cause but I shall not engage in frivolous organic activities.”
“Stick in the *mud,*” Rainbine declared.

Jet’s eyes suddenly widened. “Something’s happening.”

“I sense it too,” Brutalight declared, spreading her wings and summoning her swords to her side. “Be ready, girls.”

Everypony took positions, preparing for a fight. A *black* portal opened, revealing a tall four-armed being. Many present knew instantly.

“Siron,” Brutalight said, standing up tall. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Siron nodded. “I do not have much time, so I need your answer quickly. Will you come with us to crush the Alliance?”

Brutalight smirked. “You don’t even need to ask. All of us have *quite* the grudge against those who put us here. I *will* warn you, we’re fans of… brutal, deadly murder with extreme cruelty.”

Siron pointed at Six. “I am told she has a power that will be pivotal to our plan.”

“Told? You’re not running this operation?” Brutalight raised an eyebrow. “From what I heard, you were the big bad on the block out there.”

“I have found a benefactor,” Siron said. “A man by the name of Randall Flagg. I think you will like him.”

Fluttershout sneered. “Oh, is he too brutal for your little idealistic mind, chief Siron?”

“It matters not how brutal or empty of honor he is. They need to *fall.*”

“Couldn’t agree more,” Brutalight said. “Six, it looks like we’re going to get some revenge.”

Six, long ago, had considered the ponies her friends. They had saved her, helped her get through the horrors of the Maw, and given her the power that she wielded.

Now?

Brutalight had taught her much over the years.

Including the fact that those ponies needed to suffer.

The group followed Siron through the portal, leaving Nautica behind.

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Aradia, Vriska, and Alushy arrived at the location of the party.

It was completely empty.


Vriska rolled her eyes. “I thought you were always *so* precise with your time control?”

“I know! This never happens to me! Thi-*“ she stopped herself. “This is the right place at the right time. Something’s changed.”

“I found a sign,” Alushy said, pointing at a window in the empty room. The text was backward, but
“This isn’t right,” Aradia said. “This is…” out of nowhere; she yelled out in surprise and grabbed her heart.

“Aradia! What is it?!” Vriska said, panic evident in her tone.

“Time… Changed… Watch out…” Aradia said.

A bullet whizzed toward Vriska – but Alushy caught it in her teeth and spat it out. “AMBUSH!”

Vriska and Alushy examined their enemy – a white alicorn composed of cyborg components.

“Who the fuck are you?” Vriska asked.

“Blackjack,” Blackjack said, aiming her gun right at Vriska’s head. “And I’m here to stop you from gathering too much power.”

“You just challenged the wrong group, toaster,” Vriska grinned. Aradia, I’m getting bad vibes from this one. A time jump would be a good idea.

Aradia didn’t send a telepathic message back. She just spoke. “The temporal physics of this universe have been altered from the outside. Traveling through time in jumps is no longer allowed.”

“What?” Vriska blurted. “That’s a thing?”

Aradia took a few steps toward Blackjack. There was no smile on the troll’s normally cheerful face. “It isn’t uncommon for time travel to be impossible in any given universe. Some just aren’t designed to handle the paradoxes. Some have other limitations that must be learned every time. But universal laws don’t just change without great power…” Aradia stared right into Blackjack’s eyes. “Who did this?”

Blackjack pointed her gun right at Aradia. “Yeah, not telling you.”

“ZA WARUDO!”

In an instant, Vriska, Aradia, and Alushy all felt a punch in their gut. A tall, blonde man stood where before there had previously been none, the smuggest of all smug grins on his face.

Vriska spat blood out of her mouth. “Right, now who the fuck are you?”

“Dio,” Dio said, smirking. He summoned his Stand. None of them could see it clearly, but the three of them had senses that were able to tell them where it was, generally speaking. “I’m with Blackjack.”

“And you won’t be leaving this room,” Blackjack said, pulling out a shotgun. “Not taking any chances that you can find a way to undo our time shenanigans.”

They drew their weapons – whip, sword and dice, guns. Blackjack levitated a few more guns to her side, ready to fire them all at the same time. Dio needed no weapon – he just moved his Stand in front of him.

“You’re like Jotaro,” Vriska commented. “Stop time, punch hard, resume time.”

“The power of The World is beyond that of Star Platinum!” Dio spat. “The World is stronger, faster, and able to stop time for longer!”
Vriska threw her dice.

“ZA WARUDO!” Dio shouted, freezing time for everyone.

Everyone except Aradia. She’d been expecting it. She pointed a finger at Dio. “You are not all-powerful, Dio. Without your temporal trick, you are nothing.” She accelerated her whip, lashing it hard enough to cut a gash in his arm down to the bone.

The gash slowly began to heal itself. Dio laughed. “You aren’t anything without your temporal tricks, either…”

Aradia could not see The World. It punched her in the chest, tossing her out the window and into a crowded street of the Hub.

“And time resumes,” Dio said.

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The Hall fell silent. There had been a few speeches for the media prior to this moment, to give the public something to listen to about the momentousness of the occasion, but once the clock struck two, no time was wasted.

All the representatives of every universe lined up on the stage. Each universe had a representative of the world as a whole, and a representative of each individual nation that was participating. Most of these representatives were the respective leaders of their worlds – queens, princesses, presidents, prime ministers, Diamonds – all present for the signing of the document. Humans notably outnumbered non-humans on the stage, though it was well known this was because there were significantly more human nations on any given Earth than the generally unified worlds that existed elsewhere. The stage was rather crowded, but it was able to hold all of them comfortably.

The document – the Unification of Merodi Universalis – was a large piece of paper placed on top of a podium. The words on the paper were simple, but held a powerful message of unification, only going on for a few paragraphs about what it meant and what other documents were going into effect with the signing of the document. Half the page was blank, ready to accept hundreds of signatures.

In silence, the signing began.

Gem Vein went first. Blue and Yellow Diamond signed together. White Diamond did not make an appearance, but had given the two of them a stamp so her name would grace the document. Despite the events at the Trial, Yellow Diamond wasn’t angry about what was taking place. Her expression was difficult to read, but it was not her normal, sour expression. If one were asked to describe it, it would be with the word satisfied.

Earth Stand took the second spot. Unlike the other Earths, who had opted to use the Secretary General of the United Nations as the signer for their entire world, Earth Stand had chosen Joseph Joestar, the unofficial representative of the Stand users. He shakily walked over to the podium and scrawled his name on the page. “Heh… Never imagined I’d be doing this… Your next line will be laughter, followed by ‘wait a minute’.”

A few people in the crowd chuckled – then went ‘wait a minute’ as they realized he’d called it out. It didn’t get everyone, but it got enough for Joseph to feel satisfied. He went back to the stage, allowing the leaders from his Earth to begin to sign.

At this point people began to realize this was going to get somewhat boring.
Equis Cosmic was next. Only Princess Cosmo herself needed to sign, and she did so with her magic. Earth Tau’ri had sent their UN Secretary General, bringing on another series of bored shuffling from the audience. A handful of aliens signed as well – the Asgard, the Ori Reform, and a handful of other non Earth-based nations.

The Elemental Nations came after. Avatar Aang, now a fully grown man with a square jaw and wise eyes, signed for his world. He shot the audience a smile and winked, giving them encouragement to sit through to the end of the show. Representatives of Republic City, the Earth Kingdoms, and the Water Tribes, signed as well. Firelord Zuko scrawled his name for the Fire Nation, a rare smile seen on his features.

Queen Luna signed alone for Lai, but her signing brought forth a few cheers from the audience – more than a few of them had been a part of Lai’s rocky history.

Earth Vitis went second to last, cycling through a more colorful version of Earth Tau’ri’s signing procedure.

At the end, Equis Vitis. Unlike the other seven worlds, the representative of the whole did not sign first. Eve stayed back – all had agreed she would be last, so she could give some closing words. Novo… Ember… Thorax… and a handful of other beings from Equis Vitis signed.

Celestia left Eve’s side second to last, giving her once student a warm smile. She grabbed the pen and signed for Equestria, returning to the rest of the leaders.

Eve walked up to the podium last, holding the pen in her magic.

She turned on her ears. For once, she didn’t wince.

“When I touch this pen to the paper, the Alliance we have found ourselves in will cease to exist.” She looked over the crowd, taking in all the Gems, humans, ponies, and others sitting in anticipation, waiting for the biggest event any of them had ever known. She glanced up at the glass balcony in which the foreign dignitaries sat, all watching expectantly. Eve took some pleasure in Jenny’s boredom. “From the ashes of the Alliance will rise Merodi Universalis.”

Eve gestured at the symbol hanging above her – the Greek letter mu overtop a darkened yellow background. “Merodi Universalis. It is a name spliced from many languages and meanings. Merodi can be said to mean melody, song, or music. Universalis: of the spheres, of universes, or of our worlds. Our name is indicative of what we are to become, what intertwining our lives means. We are the Melody of our Worlds. Songs of the Spheres. Music of Universes. Merodi Universalis.”

She lowered the pen to the paper, looking closely at the empty space left for her. It was larger than the space allotted to most the other signatures. “Ten years ago, Equis Vitis time, many of our worlds participated in Disclosure. That event was the biggest thing any of us had imagined at the time, but now it seems to be so long in the past. Because we are about to become Merodi, my friends. And we will spread the bonds we share between us through the boundaries of reality itself with what we start here today."

Eve slid the pen across the paper, scrawling her name across the blank space. She made it just as small as all the other signatures, leaving a blank space for something else. With her magic, she fused a golden imprint of the Merodi Universalis symbol to the paper. Then she cast a spell on the document to ensure it would never tear, never burn, and never fade. It would last for eons to come.

“We are now Unified!” Eve declared, lifting the paper into the air. She rolled it up and handed it to Spike, who ran down the aisle to place it at the center of the Hub in a specially designed room near
the Mirror Portal itself, where it would be displayed for all to see.

Cheers erupted from the crowd as the dragon ran down the aisle.

A tear came to Eve’s eye.

This moment was worth everything she had gone through. She didn’t even care how the noise of the applause hurt her, it was beautiful to actually hear.

The applause lasted after Spike had left the Hall – but not for as long as it should have.

The TARDIS appeared in the middle of the auditorium a few feet in the air. It fell to the ground and tipped over onto its side, the loud crash bringing the applause to a sudden stop. The Doctor pulled himself out of the TARDIS, his face that of panic. “EVERYONE! GET O-“

“Too late, Doctor,” a voice most had not heard before echoed throughout the room. The voice was male, and for all intents and purposes was normal for a human. However, when they heard it, chills ran down their spines, the sound shaking them to their cores.

A flash of darkness placed two figures on top of the TARDIS. One was unmistakably Siron, wielding his staff Juju. The other was an unknown human man – though everyone who looked at him was certain he couldn’t be human. He wore a simple black suit and had a smile on his face that would have been considered warm if it had been on anyone else.

“FLAGG!” The Doctor shouted.

“Yes,” Flagg decreed. “But this is not my plan. Siron?”

Siron nodded, ignoring the Doctor and turning to Eve. “You have finally achieved the power you have sought for so long. Revel in it, Charter-Princess. It will be the only time you taste the power that none should have, for now it all comes crashing down.”

“I don’t know what you have planned Siron, or how you teleported in here,” Eve said. “But yo-“

Eve didn’t get to finish. Flagg held up a sphere of darkness in the air, shifting a spot in reality to open remove all the protective spells. “Have a nice day!” He declared, vanishing into an entirely different world.

The tear he had created unleashed a young woman first.

Pinkie recognized her. “No…” she said, knowing instantly what was about to happen. “NO! EVE, USE SERAPHIM! PROTECT TH-“

Six moved too fast. Eve barely had time to summon her Stand before Six unleashed the magic of her life drain on every individual on the stage. The three-ringed form of Eve’s Stand protected her – but the majority of those on the stage were helpless. The Diamonds poofed, dropping their gems to the ground. Cosmo screamed as the Tree of Harmony within her pumped more and more energy into her body, burning much of her flesh off her bones as a result. Thorax turned himself into a rock just in time – but Eve saw the others of Equis vitis fall. Ember barely let out a puff of flame before going limp. Joseph Joestar grabbed his heart, Hermit Purple unable to do anything for him. Avatar Aang… Firelord Zuko… Queen Luna… So many humans… So many leaders…

Of the hundreds who had stood tall only seconds before, maybe ten had found a way to survive Six’s honed power over death.
Eve’s eyes froze on Celestia. Eve hadn’t noticed her fall. She… She had to be fine. Her life force was strong enough, Eve was sure of it. Definitely sure. A hundred million percent sure.

The second wave came after Six. Brutalight, the Elements of Insanity, a Fluttershy, and a deep black Gem unlike any Eve had seen before. They moved to finish those who had survived the first attack.

Eve’s mind stopped processing – something in her knew that if she processed anything, everyone was going to die. She flew into the air, blasting the attackers with her magic. Cosmo joined her – somehow still able to move despite being little more than a flaming skeleton at this point. The princess of a galaxy fought with the power of harmony within her.

Many in the audience joined in: Gems summoned their weapons, Stand users summoned their spirits, mages unleashed spells, and humans fired their weapons.

Brutalight strained to just deflect the initial shots.

“EVENING TWILIGHT SPARKLE! LOOK TO ME!”

It was the unmistakable voice of her Princess Luna. Eve winced at the noise, the pain forcing her to look. Luna stood over the form of her Sister, tears flowing down her dark, stern face. An orb of light floated in front of the dark alicorn.

Eve knew what it was.

It was Celestia’s power.

No longer able to inhabit the body that had contained it for many, many centuries.

Luna didn’t bother to say anything else – she threw the essence of Celestia at Eve. She was always the one meant to inherit it, should this day ever come. And it had.

The Bloodbath.

Eve absorbed the energy of her former teacher and ruler. She felt the essence of her – of her sweet smile, her serene laugh, and her strength. The fiery strength that had burned so brightly within her. It fused with Eve’s own power, forcing itself into every part of her soul.

Evening Sparkle’s mane flowed with the magic of the world. A bright orange streak appeared on her mane and tail, signifying the power of the sun, the new hairs alight with a soft flame. Her eyes became miniature suns while her horn extended and her wings grew. Her Stand – Seraphim – appeared around her in the form of three smooth, white-blue metallic rings lined with eyes, enveloping her in a holy light.

She saw Siron – using his Staff to unleash an Eldritch power, banishing the attacks on the Elements of Insanity.

Eve knew the people in the Hall could take care of the Elements of Insanity and Six. She wasn’t sure about Siron.

Furthermore, he was the one responsible for this Bloodbath.

Siron took a warrior’s stance. “Come and kill me then, Evening.”
Corona, like all the others in Reverb Hall, saw Six appear in the air.

Saw her drain the life out of almost everyone standing on the stage.

She saw them fall.

While Vivian started tossing fireballs and Lady Rarity unleashed magic lasers - perfectly reasonable reactions - Corona started **laughing**.

“AhahaHahahahAHAhHAHAHAHAHHAHHAH!” She wiped tears from out from under her sunglasses. Her laughs were so vocal they made Toph stop mid boulder-launch.

“Corona? What are you doing!?”

“Don’t you see!?” Corona shouted, grabbing Toph by the shoulders. “There isn’t hope! There is only death! AHhahahaHAHAHAH! It’s. Just. So. Funny!”

She dropped the laugh, dead, turning to look at Six. “Excuse me, I’m going to kill the bitch who did this.” She teleported right to Six and unleashed the death spell in her face. Six **absorbed** it into her being.

Six grabbed Corona’s horn. Corona felt the life force inside her move toward the woman of death.

_How about a little something I learned form Majora!?_

Corona shoved her energy through the connection Six had formed with her, driving her personal magic signature into Six’s _mind_. This startled Six enough that Corona could place a hoof right on her face.

Then she was in Six’s mindscap.

She had never tried to use empathy this way before. It was always observe, perhaps interact a _little_...

She was going to go beyond that this time.

Corona didn’t care about the memory of Nautica and the Elements of Insanity she was seeing in the mindscape. She channeled the magic through her inner being and let it _explode_ in Six’s memory.

Back in reality, Six _screamed_ in agony as a significant chunk of her memory was incinerated with mental fire.

Corona wasn’t done. She couldn’t use the death spell – fine by her. Time for something more personal. She summoned a dragon of fire around her horn, the plasmatic wyrm swirling in a tornado fashion. It rushed Six with intent to incinerate her to the very bone.

That was when Fluttershout finally brought out her legendary voice, interrupting eerything. The force of the noise forced all ears in the vicinity to bleed. Everyone with the ability to hear would have been dead in a second, but something stopped the offending noise. Corona didn’t know what, but she didn’t care. She summoned the dragon again, ready to shatter Six into nothing.
Six used a different spell. She created a shield of dark gray energy, absorbing the entire wyrm of fire. She clearly wasn’t doing very well with her mental charring, but her fortitude was every bit as intense as Corona’s. She couldn’t form words – but she could form attacks. She pointed a finger at Corona, grabbing onto her life force again, this time without direct contact.

Corona smirked. She thinks I need to touch her to do damage. While that’s true for empathy, Majora’s little trick still works. She tapped into the connection Six had made, flooding the girl’s mind with energy again. The connection broke, leaving Corona alive.

Corona decided lighting herself on fire was a good idea. She charged Six directly. As expected, the woman moved to defend herself with her dark powers – leaving her back wide open.

Corona teleported, enchanting her hoof with excess power. Once she hit Six’s back, the hoof would plow right through her spine, heart, and ribcage in an instant.

“GET AWAY FROM HER!” Brutalight shouted, bringing one of her swords down on Corona. Corona was forced to defend against the instant-death blades with her magic instead of taking out Six.

Instead of going for a longer fight, Brutalight shoved Corona away with a simple psychic burst. “RETREAT!” Brutalight ordered. “DEATH WAVES ARE DOWN! GO GO GO!” She grabbed Six in her telekinesis and teleported away.

Corona had been expecting the teleport. She traced it. It took her all of two seconds to follow it – but the destination no longer existed.

The crack the Elements of Insanity had come through had closed back up.

They had gotten away with it. She didn’t see a single one of them lying dead on the ground… Not a single one! She roared in rage, exploding to put the fire on her fur out.

An explosion of power told her that not all of them were gone. She turned – and her jaw dropped. Siron and Eve were still fighting, the energy involved radiating off of them like stars.

Nobody wanted to even try to get close to the impossible chaos they were hitting each other with.

Nobody could process what was going on.

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Siron took a warrior’s stance. “Come and kill me then, Evening.”

Evening Sparkle obliged. She did the simplest, most direct thing she could think of – a beam of pure magic energy, fired right at Siron with intent to vaporize that shell right off his body. With the power of Celestia in her, Eve found herself not only connected to the Sun or any other celestial body, but the shell of magic in the Hub itself. Not the planet – the universe. She was able to tap into the primal power that drove all spells. It was her domain.

Seraphim’s rotation increased as she powered up. A ring of fire surrounded her horn as a single point of energy coalesced at the tip.

Siron saw what she was doing. Instead of dodging, he pointed his staff right at her. Black, red, and green swirled toward the alicorn in a spiral pattern.
Eve launched her laser spell, a laser of pure energy so intense the purple affectation of her magic could only be seen around the edges. For all intents and purposes it was white with hints of orange at seemingly random locations. The beams hit each other – and held.

(Celestia looked down at Eve. “I have something to tell you, Evening.”)

“What is it?” Eve said, looking up at the white alicorn with hope.

“Ever since our vacation, I’ve been thinking about you and me. About what we mean.”

“We’re friends. Colleagues. Family,” Eve said. “I thought we resolved that?”

“That we did,” Celestia said, smiling sadly. “I’m talking about something that nopony ever wants to talk about, but what is perhaps the most important aspect of life.”

Eve’s expression became serious. “Celestia… What is that?”

“Death,” Celestia said.

Eve fell silent.

“You’re not objecting,” Celestia observed.

“You’re right.”

“Then you’ve thought of it as well. No longer are we vastly above almost any foe we could face. It is very likely we will fall in battle, or assassination.”

Eve nodded. “It… It is more likely than it was before, yes.”

“Then we need to decide what happens in the event of one of our deaths,” Celestia decreed.

“I have a will,” Eve said. “Spike gets most of it. My friends get what matters to them. I’m currently giving the castle to Sparky. And…”

“I have a will as well, Eve. That is not what I’m talking about,” Celestia looked out a distant window. “We are alicorns. We have a power within us greater than most ponies. That power grows over time – evolving into more of a force of nature than anything else. That power can remain after death. That power can be used. What we need to decide is where that power goes once we die.”

“Corona,” Eve declared. “She’d be the best for my magic.”

“I was wondering who you’d pick.” Celestia turned to look directly in Eve’s eyes. “I choose you.”

“Celestia…”

“In the event of my death, my will is that you are given the power within me.”

“What about Luna?”

“Eve… I chose you. Not Luna.”

Eve nodded slowly, her eyes glassy. “…I am honored, Celestia.”

“I know you are. But I want you to know one thing – when the time does come, and I move on from this world, remember this moment. Remember me. In that sense, I will always be with you.”)
The focal point of the two direct attacks exploded. Neither Eve nor Siron budged an inch from the shockwave, though they did decide to stop firing the tremendous lasers. Eve tried something else, touching the magic around Siron himself, trying to crush him.

The staff wasn’t going to let that slide. Its eldritch energies activated, opening a hole in aether itself for Siron to survive. He jumped forward, using the staff’s energy to protect himself, using his own magic to attack Eve.

Seraphim easily caught the simple magic attack in its aura, tossing it to the side like it was nothing. Siron opted for a physical punch, aiming right for Eve’s head.

She lowered her posture by an inch. Siron impaled his hand on her horn. Blue blood should have come out of him, but it didn’t. Black sludge poured from the wound, the staff diverting energy to healing the hole.

Siron threw another punch with a free arm, but it never connected. Eve performed a combination spell – teleporting herself away and planting an explosive in his hand where her horn had just been. His entire limb flew off.

It started the process of regrowing.

“WHY!?” Eve shouted, looking Siron right in the face as she channeled magical energy into her entire body.

“BECAUSE YOU TOOK TOO MUCH!” Siron shouted back, leaping into the air.

“WE WERE FRIENDS!”

(Siron looked up from a book he was reading. “You wrote this?”

Eve… no. Twilight Sparkle nodded. “Yeah. I hope it does your people justice. I just… I don’t want everyone seeing you as violent warrior types all the time. There’s a lot more to you than that!”

“It works well,” Siron admitted, letting out a soft chuckle. “It may not be perfect in all areas, and you do get a bit… wordy. But this is serviceable. Everyone will see this?”

“I’m Charter-Princess Twilight Sparkle! Of course everyone will read my book on the races of the multiverse. Then they’ll learn about you and not be so scared!”

“It is not the fear that concerns me.”

“It should. You could stand to read the chapter on humans. Fear drives their anger and violence in unpredictable ways. If they fear something, they want to kill it or stamp it out by any means necessary. The trick to getting them on your side is to get them to no longer fear you or what you’ll do. Anger is a lot easier to deal with than fear. Fear is irrational.”

“Isn’t anger as well?”

“Ah, yes? But anger alone doesn’t rationalize itself – you can’t keep up being angry about something without some other emotion backing it up. It’s draining.”

“For your kind maybe. Demons can be angry all the time at everything.”

“Then I might just be wrong about something,” Twilight admitted. “But this book will help anyway. Removing fear is better than doing nothing.”
Siron nodded. “Thank you, Twilight, for doing this. We may yet come into our own out among the multiverse.”

“I hope you do!”

“We were never friends,” Siron said, slamming his staff on the ground, creating a whirlwind of screaming shadows. “I was using you from the start.” He tossed Eve into the ground with a dark claw. “I sent you to the Mistress so I could be rid of a problem and use the altar for myself.” He tore at her wings with dark knives. “I gave you the Hub so you would trust me.” He pounded against her magic shield with red and green lights. “I shipped magic artifacts to the Binary world for Ba’al, resulting in the destruction of that planet.” Siron cut Eve’s legs, drawing blood. “I RAISED AN ARMY ON THE CORRUPTED WORLD IN ORDER TO DEFEAT YOU AT THE OPPORTUNE MOMENT!”

“YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN LEFT TO ROT IN THE JUNGLE!” Eve roared, executing a complex series of teleports that placed solid debris inside Siron’s body. All of his organs should have failed – but the power in the staff kept him alive.

“YOU SHOULD NEVER HAVE HELD THAT MEETING!” Siron shouted. “YOUR LUST FOR POWER HAS RUINED EVERYTHING!” He shot the debris out of his body like bullets, only for them to be blocked by Eve.

“DAMN YOU!” Eve shouted. “ARE YOU REALLY THAT DELUSIONAL?”

“YOU ARE THE MARE WITH A DELUSION!”

Eve no longer cared about the consequences. No more bothering to keep secrets. No more trump cards. “That’s it.” She activated Seraphim’s ability.

Siron grabbed his head and screamed. The staff surrounded his head in a protective bubble of eldritch power, reducing the pain. “What…”

“Siron, you believe that we have interfered too much and destroyed your way of life. But from what you’ve just told me of your intentions, I am one hundred percent certain that your way of life needed to end. If there were that many lies… that much death… that much… You, Siron, should have let yourself change. But you didn’t. You refused to. Your reality is that you are the strongest, that you can achieve power, and that you will lead your people to a glorious empire. I reject that. I reject your reality and substitute my own.” Seraphim’s three rings lined up, and the space in its centre rippled.

Siron found that suddenly none of his muscles could move. He couldn’t speak, he couldn’t even blink.

The staff still worked, but Eve deflected the shadowy attack. “What’s that Siron? Are you saying something? I didn’t hear, because I’m deaf. But I can guess. Maybe, you want to know what I’m doing to you?” Eve narrowed her eyes. “Muscles, no matter what biological life form they are in, require electrical signals to operate properly. I replaced the local physics around you with one that doesn’t allow for the force of electricity. Your brain should technically be dead right now, but I suspect all your mental faculties are stored in the eldritch powers coursing through your veins.”

Siron’s inner power began to move him by force – not by electricity, but by darkness.

“Let’s switch it up, shall we? Let’s remove friction,” Eve declared. Suddenly, Siron’s limbs were flailing everywhere, moving so quickly they snapped in numerous places. “Now a world where there’s no light!” Siron couldn’t see anything. “No transference of heat.” Siron began to overheat.
“Or what about… A world where organic life is impossible because DNA cannot link together properly?”

Siron struggled through the inner heat of his body. “What…”

“This is Seraphim’s power,” Eve declared. “Seraphim has the ability to open a portal to any universe. It can be used as a portal, sure, but its real ability is to tap into the local physics of that universe and force it onto a select area. In this case, you, Siron.”

“You have too much power…” Siron grunted.

“You would have been happy had this power been your own,” Eve spat. “Your double standard disgusts me, Siron.” Eve considered freezing him in some way and imprisoning him – but then she saw something in his eyes. Something that haunted her to her core and would be with her the rest of her days.

He wanted to die. That might have been the entire reason he was still here.

Eve sighed. “…Very well,” she muttered, the previous fire in her voice gone. She tapped into a universe where there was no temperature - everything was absolute zero. She released her telekinetic hold on him and let him drop. His frozen body shattered into a million pieces.

The staff remained unharmed, but it was no longer attacking her.

Eve sat down, eyes empty of emotion.

She may not have been Twilight Sparkle, but even then… Siron was where it all started. It was his world… He was the first adventure. The first ally.

He was dead now.

She didn’t cry for him. She wasn’t sure if he was truly evil or not, but she was certain he wasn’t a good person. The worlds would be better off without him.

But his memory would always be with them.

“EVENING!” Jotaro threw something at Eve’s head to get her attention. “GET OVER HERE!”

Eve executed a short-range teleport by instinct, appearing next to Jotaro. “Yes? What is it?”

Jotaro pointed at the body of Joseph Joestar. It wasn’t breathing – but somehow, by sheer force of will, Joseph’s mouth was still moving.


“Something our world does…” Joseph muttered. “I once cut a guy’s head off and he talked for several minutes… Heh…”

“We can save you then. We have magic. We ha-“

“No… That’s not how this works. I’m dying, Eve. I know it. Your next line will be ‘but you can’t die’.”

“But you can’t d-“ Tears welled up in Eve’s eyes as she caught herself. “Joseph! You’re… You’re the head of the Joestar family! You…”
“Can do one last thing,” he said. Hermit Purple appeared around him, pulling a camera out of his pocket. “Lend me Seraphim’s power…”

Eve summoned Seraphim, holding the Stand close to Hermit Purple. The purple thorns lashed around Seraphim, producing cuts on Eve’s body, but she withstood the pain.

Hermit Purple produced a spirit photo of Brutalight Sparcake sitting with Six on a frozen lake. Seraphim instantly knew the coordinates to the universe they were in.

“Thank you, Joseph,” Eve said. “You will never be forgotten…”

Pinkie appeared next to Eve, tears in her eyes. “Joseph… We… We never got to have our parties! Our pranks! Our next line contests!”

“We had some, Pinkie,” Joseph said. “And simply experiencing one… That was enough…” Joseph managed to look at Jotaro. “Don’t take my place, Jotaro. Stay free… Don’t get locked behind a desk…”

Jotaro grabbed his hat, trying to hide a tear. “Yare yare daze… Old man, I… I will.”

Pinkie sniffed. “…Your next line is going to be goodbye.”

“Heh,” Joseph said, finding this amusing. “Goodbye…”

Then he faded away.

Evening stood tall. “…Jotaro, do you need a minute?”

“No,” Jotaro said, standing tall. “I’m ready.”

Eve nodded. Then she roared with the Royal Canterlot Voice. “EVERYONE WHO CAN FIGHT – PONY, HUMAN, GEM, OR OTHERWISE – COME WITH ME. WE KNOW WHERE THE ATTACKERS HAVE FLED TO. WE ARE GOING TO TAKE THE FIGHT TO THEM. RALLY THE HUB! THE SHIPS IN ORBIT! WE’RE GOING TO HAVE A SHORT WAR.”

~~~

Aradia held The World’s fists back with nothing but pure telekinetic power. She couldn’t even see The World, but she could feel it pushing against her psychic barrier. Its strength was immense. She was a centuries-old god of time, and she was having difficulty.

“NOTHING CAN BEAT THE POWER OF ZA WARUDO!”

“Funny,” Alushy said, walking toward Dio menacingly. “I seem to recall Jotaro saying he killed you.”

This pushed one of Dio’s buttons. He pulled The World off Aradia. “ZA WARUDO!” In the midst of stopped time, he plowed seventeen different holes through the yellow vampiric pegasus with The World. Time resumed, and Alushy went flying as expected.

The only problem was that Alushy wasn't dead and had instead taken the form of a flying shadow of death riddled with eyes and teeth from the worst nightmares of demons.
“Huh,” Dio said. “You might actually be somewhat interesting.”

“Bitch, please. I’m a fudgemothering vampire.” She reformed into her default shape, allowing her eyes to remain covered in shadow. “I killed a lot of people to earn this title.”

“Don’t care,” Dio said, unleashing another punch.

“JUGULAR VEIN!” Alushy called, swooping behind Dio and biting down on his neck.

“AS IT HAPPENS I’M A VAMPIRE TOO!” Dio shouted, twisting his neck at an unnatural angle and biting down on Alushy’s.

This created a very, very stupid circular flow of blood.

Blackjack decided she needed to end it. She took a sword of glistening, alien metal out from its sheath. Using her telekinesis, she swung at Alushy, aiming for the head.

Vriska cut Blackjack across the face with her own sword, throwing Blackjack’s blade off. It cut off one of Alushy’s legs instead. Alushy writhed in agony and leapt off of Dio, growling. “FUDGE. FUCK. OW.” She stared at the stump that used to be her leg – realizing slowly that it wasn’t growing back. “…What in the name of all that is unholy is that sword made of?!”

“Corpse of a Star,” Blackjack said, pulling her sword back to her body so she could defend against Vriska’s flurry of blows. Aradia stood up, wrapping her whip around Dio’s neck, accelerating her own speed to provide extra impact.

Dio grabbed the whip and laughed. “USELESS! USELESS! USELESS!” He tore Aradia’s weapon to shreds with his bare strength alone, punching her in the chest with The World. Alushy the Three-Legged decided to go for another attack on Dio, swirling with shadowy powers and slicing at the vampire’s legs. Dio opted to freeze everything that touched him. “DID YOU NOT HEAR ME? WORTHLESS! USELESS! MUDA! ZA WARUDO!” Time froze. Dio had The World grab Blackjack’s Sword. He drove it into Alushy’s midsection, laughing.

Aradia forced time to move for herself. Even if she couldn’t travel through time, she could alter it’s flow on a small scale. She removed the sword from Alushy with her telekinesis and driving it into Dio. He gagged, pulling it out with his own bare hands while The World pummeled Aradia across the face. Time resumed – neither Alushy’s or Dio’s wounds healed. Alushy’s erupted like a volcano.

“What IS YOUR DEAL?” Vriska shouted at Dio, kicking the now-swordless Blackjack across the face. “What does ‘ZA WARUDO’ mean!?”

“The World…” Dio said, clutching his wound.

“Oh so you have a nervous tic when you get excited. Forget I asked.” Vriska grabbed her dice and threw them to the ground, creating a cannon that shot a giant fireball toward Blackjack. The alicorn teleported away from it and behind Vriska, kicking the troll in the back of the head with her metallic hooves. Vriska moved with the blow on purpose, landing near Aradia.

“Right, so, Aradia, the cyborg mini-goddess is immune to my luck stealing and I don’t know why.”

“Have you tried Dio yet?!” Aradia blurted, using her telekinesis to stop a flurry of bullets from Blackjack’s guns.

“Uh… No, actually.” Vriska leaped into the air and focused her special eye on Dio. Her eye glinted, absorbing a lot of luck from him. Dio tripped over his own two feet and took a header – right into
Alushy’s guns. Had Dio not been an absurdly overpowered vampire, those blasts would have killed him instantly. Instead he just fell to the side, dazed.

Alushy laughed. “I win! Ahahah! Three legs and a fatal wound to the midsection by some stupid sword, but I WIN!” She coughed. “Blar- oh bother she’s pointing a magic spell at me.”

A beam of light shot from Blackjack’s horn, hitting Alushy right between the eyes. Normally Alushy would just shrug this off, but having suffered two major wounds that weren’t healing, she flopped to the ground, hardly able to move. “Aaaaa…”

Aradia and Vriska combined their powers to coordinate on Blackjack – Light and Time. Time slowed to a crawl and they were able to analyze which attack had the greatest amount of fortune. The course of action was clear.

Aradia accelerated Vriska’s speed and gave her a psychic push. Vriska lifted her sword into the air and brought it down. Blackjack fired a weapon – but that was expected. Aradia deflected the bullets with her telekinesis, and Vriska dropped her dice under Blackjack.

Dio had had a lot of luck in him. It was time to cash in.

…The dice produced a ferret in a small hat.

“AUGH!” Vriska shouted. “Wh… Why?”

“I just know how to win,” Blackjack said, firing a bullet right at Vriska’s head. Her luck was used keeping the shot from being instantly fatal. Vriska fell to the ground, breaking a few ribs by landing at what was quite possibly the worst angle.

Vriska was down. Alushy was down. Only Aradia remained.

She focused on Blackjack, narrowing her eyes. “You’re augmented beyond belief and I have no idea what your true capabilities are.”

“Yeah, same here,” Blackjack said, laughing softly. “There’s probably a doomsday device somewhere in here, or something… Oh, do you know what I am good at?”

“What?”

“Stalling for time by talking.”

“ZA WARUDO.”

The next thing Blackjack knew, Aradia lay on the ground, bruised and battered.

Dio stood up, grinning. “We won. They thought they had numbers. The fools! WRYYYYYY-“

“Can you shut the fuck up for one second?” Blackjack sputtered. “We did what we came to do. Let’s go back.”

“We’re not done,” Dio said, angling a hand over Vriska. “They’re not dead yet…”

“They’re not moving anytime soon.”

Dio shoved his hand into Vriska. “Better safe tha-“

Blackjack cut Dio’s head off with the sword. Then she cut the head in half just to be sure.
Blackjack shook her head, swallowing hard. Dio… There were some people you just knew were evil, despite all their charisma. The way he fought… The way he talked… The way he took her sword and left her to fend for herself… The world was better without him, she had no question.

She teleported away. Those three women had been extremely strong – they’d survive. But they wouldn’t bother them anymore, and that was all she’d been tasked with doing.

As always, bringing down a government was nasty business.

She teleported to the Reform Hall just in time to see Siron shatter into a million pieces. She saw none of the others there – so she teleported right back out, eyes wide.

Did they fail? She’d seen a lot of dead bodies, but Eve was clearly alive, and-

“Blackjack,” Flagg said, suddenly standing right next to her. “We need to move to phase 2.”

“But Siron’s n-“

“Siron chose to make his last stand in that room,” Flagg declared, a disturbing smile crawling up his face. “His choice, I suppose. We are not done quite yet. You and I will wait a moment – and then take the secondary strike.”

“…Right.” Blackjack said, getting a sinking feeling in her stomach.

“Where’s Dio?”

“Either dead or in a lot of pain,” Blackjack commented. “Not quite sure how far the vampire thing goes.”

“So useless. He was a loose cannon anyway.” Flagg began to walk away, gesturing for Blackjack to follow.

Blackjack shook her head. *Focus on what you came here to do, not on him.* She trotted after Flagg.

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“Thorax!” Eve called over to the Changeling king.

“E-E-E-E-E!”

Eve slapped him. “Thorax, take the Diamonds and the surviving human leaders to the box up there with the foreign dignitaries. Think you can do that? Think you can watch them?”

“I…”

“Thorax?”

“Yes Eve! I can do that!”

Eve smiled warmly. “Good, Thorax. You’ll do great. Luna, I want you to round up any leaders that weren’t signing and take them there as well. Once you’re there, if you can think of a safer place, do it. But be on guard.”

Luna bowed. “Of course, Evening.”

“EVERYONE ELSE!” Evening shouted. “WE ARE TAKING THE FIGHT TO THEM!”
Gems, humans, ponies, and others had filled the Hall. “YES CHARTER!”

Eve saw Pinkie’s team, Toph’s team, the League of Sweetie Belles, Jotaro’s gang, and many other faces she recognized. A few were missing because they weren’t fighters – Lieshy most notably – but those that had come were ready.

Eve caught a glint in Corona’s eye she wasn’t sure she liked, but she decided she couldn't deal with that right now. “Cosmo, do you have anything to say?”

Cosmo looked nothing like a Twilight anymore. She was the crystallized skeleton of an alicorn, kept alive by nothing but the boundless power of the Tree of Harmony. “Usually, when we fight, we fight with mercy in mind, with the intent of achieving a goal, rather than killing. Today… Today that is different. Our targets – the Elements of Insanity, Flagg, and any allies of Siron – have been condemned to death by us, Merodi Universalis. I do not encourage you to kill whatever is on the other side with reckless abandon, but we already let most of these people live once before. They have forfeited their chance.”

Eve nodded, tapping into her much larger stores of magic. She found she could create a portal the size of the auditorium with only minimal effort.

On the other side of the portal was a cold world deep, deep underground. The area near the portal was a frozen lake that went on for miles, though Eve could see a rocky edge to the left, and swore there was the light of fire even further in the distance.

But that wasn’t the important part. The important part was the army of Gerudo mixed with what Eve could only assume were real demons. Not the buglike people of Siron, nor the forces of Hastur… Something much darker and menacing. They weren’t impossible to look at considering most were vaguely humanoid, but they made Eve’s stomach do flip flops in guilt, horror, and rage. It was like they bled evil intentions from their essence… No doubt they were Flagg’s…

The armies had been expecting them.

Eve’s eye twitched. She decided she didn’t care if this was expected. “CHARGE!” She shouted. “GET THE SHIPS IN THERE!”

The Enterprise appeared in the giant cavern, along with Equis Cosmic and Gem Vein ships. They unleashed a barrage on the demon-Gerudo army, but as Eve feared, the demonic presences generally didn’t care about the physical weapons.

Eve remembered she had a weapon she didn’t have to keep hidden anymore. If they were lucky, they still didn’t know about it.

“SERAPHIM!” She called, summoning her Stand. She rejected the reality through the portal – replacing demons and gerudo alike with physics that didn’t allow for the proper traveling of electric signals. Unfortunately that only disabled the gerudo, the demon targets just glared at her.

Cosmo held them back with a blast of harmony. “Try something else!”

Eve teleported into the frozen hellscape where the enemy army stood, cycling through universes she knew she could set Seraphim to.

How about she try removing magic entirely… A truly mundane universe’s physics. The Gerudo wouldn’t care – but the demonic creatures?

The demonic creatures vanished in puffs of smoke when forced under mundane physics.
Eve allowed herself to grin. “Take this!” She began to methodically sweep the army with Seraphim, reducing demon after demon to ash. The ships above and the army below made progress – without a demonic force, there wasn’t much of a threat anymore. As brave of warriors as gerudo were, modern weapons, pony magic, and Gem physiology was just too much.

Eve noticed Mlinx climb in through the portal, leading with him a troop of bug-demons.

Good. That would go a long ways to keeping the bug-demons from being omniversally hated after this. They did not deserve to suffer for Siron’s actions.

Eve continued to sweep demons – but she also had a goal.

She was looking for Brutalight Sparcake and Six.

~~~

Brutalight stared at the army Ganondorf and Flagg had created – and realized it was getting trounced. She hadn’t exactly expected the army to win against the might of the Merodi, but she expected them to be enough of a distraction so Eve, Cosmo, and the other leaders involved in the charge could be taken out!

But that didn’t seem to be the case. Between Cosmo’s holy light and Eve’s inexplicable control over physics itself, the army was dropping like candy.

Brutalight knew they could have dealt with only Cosmo, but there were two fronts… Two…

She hated to admit it, Eve had been exceptionally smart to tell virtually nobody what her Stand actually did. All Brutalight, Siron, and Flagg had figured out was that she had one that protected her at all times with a simple aura. They had never suspected something of this magnitude.

At least it seemed to had a limitation on its range and area of effect… Though clearly, Eve was able to extend that with use of her magic. So it wasn’t a hard limit.

Brutalight threw several dozen swords into the fray, killing a few people and poofing a few Gems. Six stood up to unleash a wave of death.

“Don’t,” Brutalight said. “They’ll be able to pinpoint our location. It is best if we remain unseen for now.”

Six lowered her hand and nodded. “This isn’t going well, Brutalight.”

“No shit,” Brutalight deadpanned. She saw Jet produce her scythe weapon, flying at Cosmo with intent to carve the harmonic skeleton to crumbs. Cosmo tapped into the power of a few of her ships, hitting Jet from multiple angles with laser weapons. Jet’s body poofed, leaving only her gemstone.

Brutalight teleported the round, black crystal to her. “Shiiiit…”

Rainbine fell out of the sky, half of her face flattened. “Oooow…” She groaned, twitching.

Brutalight narrowed her eyes. “They’re going to regret this…” She fired a few more attacks, realizing she wasn’t actually doing that much against their might. Six would, but the moment she did anything of that sort the entire point would be failure…

She grinned – ah, Fluttershout and Gaea had a plan. They had flown into the air, both adorned with Gaea’s ritual paint, giving them a slight purple aura.
Fluttershout pulled in a breath and *unleashed* her voice, indiscriminately hitting gerudo and Merodi. Eve appeared behind them. “And now sound only propagates through solid materials.”

Fluttershout and Gaea fled, but Eve wasn’t done. She twitched, replacing the physics around the two of them with that of an eldritch location.

Brutalight felt a knife slide into her dark heart. She acted as quickly as she could – teleporting the two of them out of the mess of impossible geometry and to her. Fluttershout’s body convulsed the moment it arrived, unable to process what she’d just seen.

Gaea was just dead. Her eyes were lifeless.

Brutalight’s breathing hastened. “It’s happening again, Six… They’re killing us…”

“Brutalight…”

Images flashed through Brutalight’s mind. Fluttershout’s limbs being torn off. Rainbine exploding into a thousand pieces. Rarifruit getting cut in half. A hoof driven right through Six’s ribcage…

They couldn’t do this.

“We need to leave,” she said, teleporting Rarifruit to the rest of the group.

“W-what?” Rainbine blurted. “But Eve is still alive!”

“I know she is. But if we stay here we soon won’t be.” She channeled her magic – she remembered the spell she had learned in the Sparkle Census. She would open a portal.

Rarifruit turned to Brutalight. “If Eve lives, Merodi Universalis lives. Siron said she had become a symbol of hope for them! We haven’t done enough yet!”

“Perhaps it's better she lives and suffers through the deaths of her friends,” Six said. “It’s not like their society actually matters to us.”

Rainbine growled. “Running away and *not* killing everyone? That’s… We don’t *do* that Brutalight! We kill every last one of them!”

Brutalight opened the portal. “I can’t lose any more of you. I’m sorry, but my connection to all of you is stronger than my desire for revenge.” She shook her head. “Let’s go. Maybe we’ll be able to find something to fight back with later, maybe we won’t.”

“What are we going to do?” Rainbine blurted. “They’ll chase us down!”

Brutalight sneered. “We’ll find our home Equestria and force it to bend to our will. After all, that’s what we wanted in the first place, right?”

The Elements of Insanity nodded. “Right!”

“Then let’s return to what we’re actually supposed to be doing.”

They left the army behind, living to fight another day.

~~~

Princess Luna and Thorax arrived in the glass balcony with the surviving human leaders, the two
gemstones of the Diamonds, O’Neill, and the Doctor.

Jenny whistled. “That was spectacular.”

Luna glared at her. “It would be a shame if I imprisoned you in a magical fold-chamber on suspicion of being party to this invasion.”

Jenny held up her hands. “All right, all right, bad taste, I get it. Yeesh.”

Valentine walked up to the Doctor. “You know what’s going on here.”

“Of course I do, Ambassador Valentine,” the Doctor spoke with distaste. “I came here to stop him.”

“Who?” Luna asked. “Who is this Flagg?”


“The identity of Randall Flagg is one of the most valuable pieces of information in existence,” Chartreuse said.

“I have no patience for you,” the Doctor dismissed. “Randall Flagg, to put it simply, is an incarnation of evil. His origin…” He shook his head. “Hard to explain. Let’s just say he’s so unimaginably old that the era he hails from could be considered the early eons of the multiverse. Makes me look like a baby by comparison.”

“W-why is he doing this?” Thorax asked.

The Doctor furrowed his brow. “I have faced many forces of evil in my travels. Some do it for fun, some do it because they’re mad, and some think they have a higher purpose. Flagg… He does think it’s fun, and he’s definitely mad, but there’s something more to it than that. He takes pride that he is the man who can destroy destiny.”

The Grand Secretariat narrowed her eyes. “Why us?”

“He found Siron, I believe,” the Doctor said. “Siron told his ‘sob story’. Most would either turn Siron away, or sympathize with his cause. All Flagg saw was an opportunity – a new target. A civilization whose hope could be dashed by enemies of their own making. All Flagg needed to do was gather the enemies and give them some power, and they would mostly do the work for him.”

“Despicable,” Luna growled. “I take it this is his preferred method?”

“Yes, it is. He prefers to take the enemies and weaknesses a society has created itself, gather them, and turn them against the society. Sometimes he creates a society of his own as a god-king. Sometimes he just leaves anarchy. Still others the universes involved are completely destroyed. His signature is that he himself rarely does much directly.”

“Looks like I’m mixing it up today!”

Flagg was in the room with two people – Blackjack, and a woman some recognized as the old Headstone of the University of Doors, Elosa.

The Doctor tensed. “Flagg…”

Flagg strode into the room, his presence more than enough to keep anyone from attacking him. His smile was filled with glee. He looked at the faces of Thorax, the human leaders, and Luna. “Such
brave little stragglers,” Flagg said, walking up to Thorax. The Changeling King couldn’t keep eye contact with the man in black.

Flagg found this amusing, _laughing_.

“Flagg, what do you have to gain from further death?” the Doctor demanded. “You’ve destroyed their leaders. You’ve brought about their end.”

“But you see, I _haven’t_, Doctor,” Flagg said. “The symbol of hope for Merodi Universalis is still alive in my Inferno. She has the power to tie you all together, so long as she keeps hope _within_ herself.” Flagg turned to Luna. “But there’s no way she can do that _alone_, you see. All we have to do is destroy what she holds close. Starting with you, Luna – and the rest of these stragglers as well. And, you know what, why not,” he whirled to face the Grand Secretariat. “You’re an ally! You’ll die as well, so the Merodi will not receive aid!”

Valentine, Jenny, O’Neill, and Hastur glanced at each other. They nodded. O’Neill went first, using Crimson Sushi to scramble Flagg’s visual perceptions of reality. Valentine summoned his Stand, Hastur encased Flagg in eldritch energy, and Jenny pulled back her gloved fist. Jenny punched Flagg across the face, driving the eldritch wires into his skin. Valentine’s Stand lifted up two chairs and placed them on either side of Flagg, making him vanish.

Blackjack and Elosa prepared to retaliate – but Flagg appeared again, unharmed, with a delighted smirk on his face. “Three of you had no investment in this! And yet you attacked!” He _laughed_. “The foolish empathy of people never ceases to amaze me, even after all these eons.”

“You ticked me off,” Jenny explained.

“You are exempt from foolish empathy, and are instead subject to foolish anger.”

Jenny punched again.

“Stop breathing,” Flagg ordered.

Jenny stopped breathing. She tried to use her mental powers to override Flagg’s order – but she couldn’t. She passed out from overexertion.

“You know, that kills most people,” Flagg commented. “That body of hers really is something. Just like your Stand, Valentine.” Flagg smirked. “Passed on from Valentine to Valentine…” Flagg walked right up to the Ambassador. “You thought you could find an alternate version of me, didn’t you? You almost always can, right? Force a paradox?” Flagg _laughed_. “Too bad I’m completely unique! There have never been any alternate versions of me! They’re _all_ me!”

Valentine’s expression was unreadable.

“Maybe I should go visit the USM next… In a few decades, just so you forget about all of this. And you, Hastur… Hastur, Hastur, Hastur… Your people are usually so wise, holding disdain for mortals. You’re a _freak_.”

“**You are the one who is a ‘freak’, Flagg.**”

“Strange, because your masters are the beings who come the closest to understanding me.” He twirled around, pointing at Luna. “Alas, I should probably stop my horrible cliché gloating monologue. As enjoyable as it is, it’s just asking to be interrupted by some clever plan or other.” He pulled a black sphere out of his jacket pocket. The globe whirled with dark, deadly magics of a time long forgotten.
Flagg glanced at Chartreuse. “Do you know what this is?”

The Melnorme said nothing.

“As I thought. This… is Black Thirteen. It holds the core power of the multiverse within itself.”

Luna tried to grab it with her magic – but her mind screamed in agony the moment she touched it. She fell back, whimpering. O’Neill ran to her, checking to make sure she was okay.

Flagg chuckled. “Anyone else want to touch it? To see the truth of what the multiverse is? The darkness that spirals everything together? Touch it for a few seconds and you could probably find the answer to any question you might wish to ask… What about you, Valentine? No? Shame… Secretariat? I’m sure you’d like to have some answers. Black Thirteen could take you anywhere, show you anything…”

“Only if you let it,” the Doctor said.

Flagg shoved Black Thirteen right into the Doctor’s face. “One-time-only deal, Doctor! I’ll tell it to go nice with you. You can touch it and gain all the knowledge you desire. For one as learned and experienced as you are, I expect you have a few particular questions in mind. It can be your judge, Doctor.”

The Doctor backed away, saying nothing.

“Shame…” Flagg held Black Thirteen above his head. “You’re all about to be transported to an antimatter universe. Have fun.”

And then something completely unexpected happened.

Lieshy flew through the glass window and grabbed Black Thirteen in her hooves.

Randall Flagg’s smile vanished. She was holding Black Thirteen. She wasn’t screaming her vocal cords out. She wasn’t dropping dead from the revelation. She was protected.

“You’ve been to the room at the top of the Tower,” Flagg said in a flat tone.

“Yes,” Lieshy said. “I really have no idea what it means, but I knew the moment I saw this orb that I had to grab it. So, potato crockpot, white sheet yourself.”

Flagg narrowed his eyes. “Blackjack, Elosa, get her. The rest of you don’t move,” he ordered.

~~~

Ganondorf watched as his army was slaughtered.

He got the distinct feeling he now knew how Siron felt. Maybe there had been something to that bug-demon’s rants.

It was too late now. This fight was clearly going to fall to the Merodi. Their losses had only driven them to fight stronger.

Ganondorf contemplated attacking Eve, to see if there was a chance he could remove her from the equation – but the risk was too great. At this point it wouldn’t serve him to risk his life in that way. He would have to become like Siron – leave and come back another time. He had fallen to the same level as that bug…
He took out his dimensional device, intending to leave.

A spear stabbed it out of his hands. “No,” Mlinx declared. “You don’t get to run.”

Ganondorf was at first overcome by surprise – but he quickly moved to a menacing grin. “You have decided to face me?” Ganondorf used his purple miasmic magic to tear the spear out of Mlinx’s hands. “You are nothing more than a somewhat brainy runt.”

Mlinx drew a gun from his side. “I also learned how to hold extra weapons.” He fired, unleashing a mixture of green and blue energy at Ganondorf. Ganondorf took it head on and laughed it off.

“Just fancy toys…” Another burst of magic tore the gun out of Mlinx’s hand. “And a scared little bug.”

Mlinx shivered, taking a step back.

“Having second thoughts about coming to face me on your own?” Ganondorf taunted. “You’re thinking you should have brought one of the people who are actually warriors. But no, you’re all alone. Your warriors are occupied. It’s just you and the king of all Gerudo.”

“I’m not alone.”

“Don’t give me some ‘the spirits of my friends are with me’ thing.”

“No, I mean I’m not alone. Mistress Luna is right behind you.”

Ganondorf whirled around with his fist, far, far too late in doing so. A burst of dark energy hit him chest first, tossing him to the ground.

Mistress Luna glared at him. “I’ve been waiting a long, long time for this, Ganondorf.”

Ganondorf roared, punching the Mistress across the face with a magic-enhanced fist. She fell onto her back, scrambling to recover, unable to deflect a kick to her stomach. Blood flew out of her mouth.

Ganondorf summoned a gigantic sword of unholy light to his hands. He lifted it above his head and brought it down on Mistress Luna. She teleported above the sword and kicked him in the skull. He pushed her away with a powerful magic.

“Your darkness is similar to mine,” Ganondorf said.

“Shut up,” Mistress Luna declared, unleashing a burst of pure moonlight at Ganondorf. He withstood it – standing strong against the cosmic power.

Then Mlinx drove his spear through the back of Ganondorf’s skull, the tip protruding from the Gerudo king’s forehead. Normally, this would not have killed the dark warlock.

But Mistress Luna and Mlinx had enchanted his spear with holy magic long before this day.

The dark magic could not cope.

Mlinx tore his spear out of Ganondorf’s head. The one great king of the Gerudo fell to the soft bug-demon.

Mlinx put a hand on his heart, trying to slow his breathing. “I… never want to do… anything like this… ever again…”
“Hopefully we won’t have to,” Mistress Luna commented. They turned back to the battlefield – the demons were almost all completely vaporized. The Gerudo were close to being defeated. They saw death, yes – on both sides – but the Merodi suffered significantly less casualties than the other side. Only one of Cosmo’s ships had actually gone down.

Eve landed next to Mlinx a few seconds later. She saw Ganondorf. “…I think he was the last one still here. You did good, Mlinx.”

“No sign of Flagg,” Cosmo said, teleporting next to Eve. She was still a skeleton, but didn’t seem much the worse for wear about it.

Eve sighed. “That might be a good thing. Excuse me, I have to call for surrender. ATTENTION GERUDO COMBATANTS! YOUR KING IS DEAD! IF YOU SURRENDER NOW, YOU WILL NOT BE HARMED! YOU WILL BE RETURNED TO THE BINARY WORLD AND NO CHARGES WILL BE Pressed.”

That got most of the fighting to stop.

Eve let a pained smile come to her face. “I think… I think it’s over.”

O’Neill’s voice came from Starlight AI’s place around Cosmo’s neck. “We’ve just gotten a message. Flagg’s back in the Hall.”

Eve paled. “Oh no.”

~~~

Lieshy dodged a bunch of key-shaped projectiles from Eloisa. “Let’s talk about this, think very carefully about wh-”

“Don’t listen to her,” Flagg ordered. Lieshy knew in that moment that Eloisa’s ears were effectively shut off and her most powerful weapon, her speech, was completely useless.

Not to mention that Blackjack was also shooting at her.

She was going to die if she didn’t think of something fast.

“USE BLACK THIRTEEN!” the Doctor shouted. “THINK OF WHAT YOU SAW AT THE TOP OF THE TOWER!”

Flagg smirked. “She’s clearly not sure what she saw, Doctor. Just as you aren’t sure what’s up there. She can do nothing.”

Lieshy ignored Flagg’s comments. She flew into the air, holding Black Thirteen aloft and staring into it. She felt things that would have turned her mind to jelly pass by her consciousness, protected by something within her. She looked into it… A murky, dark place…

She saw Flagg’s eye in there. “Hi.”

She ignored it, going further. Feeling Black Thirteen’s connection to everything… To…

Eloisa smashed Lieshy across the side of the head with a powerful burst of magic, knocking her silly.

As it turned out, going a little crazy was exactly what she needed to do. Her thought process shifted sideways and she found it. For a moment, everything was clear.
Suddenly Elosa started talking as if she were giving a class at the university, oblivious that she wasn’t in one of the classrooms. “As your professor, I expect you to already know everything about higher door physics, and if you do not you best go throw yourself into the nearest gearbox. To begin this course in Door Creation, let’s think about the very rather philosophical question of what constitutes a door…”

Lieshy kicked Elosa out the broken glass. She didn’t notice, continuing to teach the entire way down to the auditorium floor. There was a sickening _crack_ when she landed.

Lieshy expected she was still alive with all the enchantments on her, but she admitted she had no idea what Black Thirteen had done to those. If it did anything. Her moment of clarity was gone.

Flagg took advantage of that, grabbing her by the neck. Instead of looking angry, he looked… _pleased_. “It’s so hard to find things that surprise me these days. I had forgotten that those Touched like you even existed. Perhaps it is a sign of things to come.”

Lieshy was planning on driving the sphere into Flagg’s chest, just to see what happened, but she caught something out of the corner of her eye.

Blackjack was looking right at her. She made a subtle wink.

Lieshy felt something from Black Thirteen stir. She _knew_ that Blackjack could be trusted right now.

She let herself go limp. Flagg took Black Thirteen out of her hooves and tossed her to the side like a ragdoll. He stood tall at the window, holding Black Thirteen against the lights in the ceiling. “So beautiful, isn’t it?” he asked. “A connection to everything that can fit in the palm of your hand. Such a _dark_ truth.” He turned around, ready to gloat some more.

Blackjack stood alone, everyone else in the room having been moved to the back. She levitated a single gun in front of her, aiming right at Flagg.

Flagg recognized the gun. He knew all of Blackjack’s weapons. He had read her story, after all, and helped her complete her armory once she had joined him.

_Trottenheimer’s Folly_. The superweapon you could hold in your hoof.

Flagg suddenly regretted helping Blackjack gather ammunition.

A tremendous cone of blinding white light blazed forth from Folly. Flagg was disintegrated immediately. The destruction of the weapon extended far beyond Flagg’s form – the cone continued on to destroy the wall on the opposite end of the auditorium and the entire ceiling, allowing light from the sun to shine into the enclosure.

Blackjack put Folly away. “Everyone needs to check for radiation poisoning now. _Everyone_. Just because you weren’t next to it when it went off doesn’t mean you’re safe.”

“Right,” Luna said, bowing. “I shall call a doctor immediately. Thank you, Blackjack.”

“Don’t thank me. I was fighting against you not all that long ago. I think my job was to make sure your time-wizard couldn’t go back and undo this.” She looked down at the ground. “I… I don’t know what I was fighting for anymore. But I do know that that man… He was evil.”

“Where’s Black Thirteen?” Lieshy shouted, scrambling to where Flagg had just been. “Wh-“

The Doctor sighed. “Black Thirteen is tied to Flagg’s soul. Whenever his body perishes, it leaves
“He’s not dead!?” Blackjack blurted. “How the fuck!?”

The Doctor sighed. “His being is tied to a paradox. His existence is a rule of reality.”

“That… that sucks!”

“Yes, it does,” the Doctor said, shaking his head. “However, you can rest. He generally does not return after being defeated. He prefers to move on to greener pastures rather than continually rage against the same place.” He turned to Princess Luna. “You beat him. You’re lucky.”

“I imagine you are more lucky to have run into him multiple times and survive each one,” Luna commented.

The Doctor chuckled. “I… Currently fill the role of his ‘nemesis’. He likes having those. Individuals who serve as his opposite in the multiverse. He has never truly tried to kill me for that reason. It’s less luck and more of a curse.”

Luna nodded. She turned to Blackjack. “Whatever you’ve done prior, you saved us here, Blackjack. You are welcome t-“

“I’m going to leave,” Blackjack said. “I… I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to be part of this. This… thing you have.” She shook her head. “I don’t have the right to destroy it. But I don’t like it.” She started walking away. “Goodbye.”

“If that is what you wish,” Luna said, bowing. “Return at any time, sister.”

Blackjack halted. “W-“

“I can sense my soul in you,” Luna said. “Damaged extensively, yes… But it is still one of mine.” A tear rolled down her face. “…Take care of yourself.”

“…Okay.” She teleported away.

The Grand Secretariat put a hoof around Luna. “I’m so sorry.” Thorax joined her.

Luna grimaced, trying to force her face into a stoic expression. She couldn’t say anything.

“We’ll help you however we can,” the Grand Secretariat continued. “You can count on that.”

“Y-your aid will be m-most welcome…” Luna managed.

~~~

Toph, Corona, Lady Rarity, and Vivian all returned to the Hub. The only major injury they had sustained was a fracture in one of Lady Rarity’s legs, probably from her fighting without her armor.

Vivian’s face was one of fear – they returned to still find so many bodies on the ground. It made her want to hurl.

Lady Rarity's face was one of pain. She found it hard to focus on much besides her own injury, but she said she was going to stay with the group until this was over.

Corona and Toph’s expressions were impossible to read. Toph was in the lead, walking right for a specific area of the stage of death.
The Elemental Nations.

She had two close friends she needed to say goodbye to.

She fell to her knees the moment she arrived. The forms of Aang and Zuko lay prone, lifeless, on the ground before her.

“Hey… Zuko… Twinkletoes… We won,” Toph said. “Saved everything, again. Beat away the latest flavor of evil mastermind. Some of them got away, but that’s always the case, right?” she laughed bitterly. “We’re still unified, so that’s good. They didn’t get what they wanted. We were able to walk together, and… and…” She broke down. “Spirits, your kids…” Her body didn’t move, she just stopped talking.

Vivian had to look away. Lady Rarity stood still as a statue, untold thoughts swirling around her skull.

Corona sat down next to Toph. Her sunglasses fell off her face, revealing eyes that had been crying too much – ever since the fight started. They were dry now. So many tears had come out, no more could come.

She stared at Aang.

“…Thank you,” Corona told Aang. “You… you saved me, back then. You saved so many. I…” she sniffed. “There’s… There’s nothing anymore, Aang. We’re here. But… But…” She covered her eyes, the burning sensation too much.

Toph pulled her into a hug. Through her tears she shouted. “LISTEN TO ME CORONA! WE’VE GOT TO STAND! DO YOU HEAR ME!!?”

“I hear you…” Corona said, her voice not really into it.

“Corona…”

Corona moved a hoof and opened her mouth. Then she just stopped, letting the leg flop to her side lazily. She sighed. What does it matter?

Silence reigned.

A deep, throaty voice shook them out of it.

“I still detect the Avatar Spirit.”

Toph and Corona looked behind them to see Thrakerzod standing between Lady Rarity and Vivian.

“W-what?” Toph said.

“The Avatar Spirit. It didn’t die with him,” Thrakerzod said. “Even though he died offworld, I still feel it.” She lit her horn. “I can find it.”

Toph stood up instantly. “What are you waiting for? Find it!”

Thrakerzod nodded, closing her eyes for a moment. “Done.”

“TAKE US!”

Thrakerzod obliged, teleporting elsewhere in the Hub. They found a hospital. She marched right in.
Some of the doctors tried to stop them, but one look from Toph shut them up.

They soon stood outside a room where they could hear a newborn baby crying.

Toph, tears in her blank eyes, knocked.

It opened, a doctor poking her head out. “I’m sorry, we’ve got a new baby here an—“

Applejack looked at them, holding a new foal in her hooves. “Toph? What are you doing here?”

“Applejack!” Toph blurted. She shook her head. “You… I…” She stood at attention, like the General she was, and cleared her throat. “Applejack… Avatar Aang has perished along with most the world leaders at the signing.”

Applejack winced. “Ah was wonderin’… Eve?”

“She’s fine,” Toph said. “Thrackerzod, it is that foal, right?”

Thrackerzod nodded slowly.

Toph took in a breath. “Applejack, when an Avatar leaves us, the spirit of the Avatar moves into a newborn somewhere in the world. Had it been on our world, it would have gone to someone in the Water Tribe. Instead… It went into your foal.”

Toph walked in, looking at the filly. She had her mother’s orange coat and a dull blue mane. She was crying profusely. “…What’s her name?”

“Core Apple,” Applejack said. “We wanted Apple Core, but thought that’d just be confusin’ with the last-name thing becomin’ more common.”

“Hello Corea,” Toph said, placing a hand on the filly. “You’ve got a big destiny, little one.”

“Ah’m not sure what that means,” Applejack admitted. “But… Ah’m already proud of her.”

Toph nodded. “Yeah…”

Thrackerzod cleared her throat. “I believe I can initiate contact with the Avatar Spirit.”

Toph started. “You… could do that?”

“Yes. Did you forget who you were talking too?”

Toph turned to Applejack. Her face pleaded.

“It won’t… hurt her, will it?” Applejack asked Thrackerzod.

“No.”

“Then go ahead.”

Thrackerzod lit her horn. Corea’s eyes went white. For a split second, the visage of every Avatar there had ever been appeared in the small hospital room – freaking the doctors out. But soon, only one remained – the form of Aang.

“Toph,” Aang said. “Found me already?”

“Don’t think you can hide from me by disappearing into the air, Twinkletoes,” Toph smirked. “I’ll
always find you.”

“Should I expect a rock to the face anytime soon?”

“As soon as I figure out how to hit spirits. Actually… Thrakerzod?”

“I could enchant a rock,” Thrakerzod said.

“Keep that in mind,” Toph told her. She turned back to the spirit of Aang. “…Zuko didn’t make it either.”

Aang looked down. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“We all are.”

“Toph… Tell Katara I love her. Tell my kids too.”

Tears welled up in Toph’s eyes again. “I will.”

“Tell Zuko’s family that he spent his last moments fighting back.”

“I…”

“Tell everyone that I’m proud of them.”

Toph choked.

“Toph… Don’t forget who you are. And don’t abandon the newest Avatar because of bad memories. Stay with her because of good ones.”

Toph nodded. “Of course.”

“Applejack… You should talk to Iroh. He knows the most about what being the Avatar means.”

Applejack nodded.

Aang looked past Toph, to Corona. “Corona… I can see your pain.”

Corona barely reacted.

Aang smiled. “Also, uh, make sure someone’s taking care of Appa and keeping him fed, okay?”

Toph let out a short chuckle. “You got it, Aang.”

Aang bowed. “Goodbye, master.”

Toph bowed. “Goodbye, Avatar.”

Corea’s eyes turned back to normal and she started crying again.

Toph had a smile on her face. She said nothing, but she seemed… at peace with the emotions inside of her.

A unicorn-deer teleported into the room, freaking out the doctors again.

“Message for General Toph.”
“Here,” Toph said, her expression shifting to annoyance.

“Medium confidential information.”

“The doctors are sworn to protect patient confidentiality and that’s Applejack there. We’re good.”

The messenger nodded. “Queen Luna of Lai has fallen.”

“I’m aware.”

“Her will named her successor. All parties of Lai are being made aware.”

“Who is it?” Toph asked, losing patience.

“Queen Luna named you to be her successor in her will,” the messenger declared. He promptly bowed. “Long live the Queen.”

Toph blinked. “…What!”

~~~

The Reverb Hall took hours to clean up, but it eventually returned to the way it was before.

Aside from the giant hole in the ceiling. And the lack of a back wall. That would take longer to fix.

The stage was still there. The podium was still there, somehow unharmed throughout all the fighting.

Eve stood on her hind legs, hooves on the front of the podium, staring at the abandoned seats that made up the hall. The orange stripe in her mane was no longer aflame, but the mane itself was flowing slightly with the magic inside her. It was nowhere near as active as Celestia’s mane had been, still in its shorter, windswept cut, but it just no longer remained stationary. It looked alive, occasionally sparking with a star of magic.

Her friends stood behind her – Pinkie, Renee, Flutterfree, and Nova. Spike, Princess Luna, Daniel, and Allure were there as well.

“Just so you all don’t have to ask, I think I’m going to be fine,” Eve said. “I’m not fine now, not by any stretch of the imagination. But I’m going to pull through.” She put a hoof to her chest and tapped. “She will always be with me.”

Luna nodded. “I am glad, Evening, that you are the one to carry her legacy. There would have been none better suited.”

Pinkie smiled at Eve sadly. “You look so awesome and so torn at the same time.”

“But I’m not tired,” Eve declared. “If anything… I have more fire in myself than before. Siron thought he could take this away from us. Flagg thought we were weak. They were both wrong – we stand strong. Not because of the power Siron thought we shouldn’t have, not because of some lucky trick of fate, but because of our bonds. We are not just a coalition of worlds who have banded together because it’s the smartest thing to do. We are friends - family even. When you hurt us, the bonds between us only strengthen.” She stamped her hoof on the podium. “We’re here, everyone. We’re here to do good. If the truth is that the multiverse is surrounded by the darkness of that Black Thirteen, then I say we create a new truth.”

“Yeah!” Flutterfree cheered.
“We will not cower! We will not hide! We will not hide from the danger! We will expand and we will help everyone escape the darkness that lurks in existence!” she held her hoof out. “We are Merodi Universalis! And we have a goal.” She turned around and pulled them into a magically held hug. “Luna, get the press. I’m going to give a speech.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” Eve declared. “It needs to be now.”

~~~

Hardly a few minutes later, Eve’s face appeared on screens throughout Merodi Universalis, and on a few screens beyond it. “Hello everyone,” she said with a sad, but warm smile on her face. “By now you are all probably aware of the great tragedy that befell us earlier today. The Bloodbath. The criminal Siron worked with an entity known as Randall Flagg in an attempt to kill all of our leaders and destroy the nation we had just barely created. For the most part, they succeeded. Of the hundreds of leaders present at the event, only thirteen survived. It is harrowing to find that our darkest hour is also our first hour.

“But we are not going to let them have what they want. The Bloodbath they created had the intention of dissolving Merodi Universalis the instant after it was born. They thought we didn’t deserve what being unified would bring to us. Instead of dying out like a shattered lantern, we are going to burn brighter than ever before. We are still Merodi. This event shall not tear us apart, it shall bring us together. All of our worlds have suffered loss – loss of leaders, loss of stability, loss of hope. However, because we are unified, because we are Merodi, we will help each other. I will see to it personally that every sub-nation thrown into disarray with the loss of their leader will receive everything they need. Equis Cosmic has once again devoted resources to us. Even universes outside our borders have come to us – Equis Concrete, Earth Exus, Equis Fallout, Esefem – have turned to give us aid in our time of need, thanking us for all we had done for them. The Sparkle Census has promised to provide assistance with reorganizing sub-governmental structure. We are not alone in this cosmos!

“I have only one request for all of you, my Merodi. I know that you’re angry, that you’re scared, that you’re confused. That’s fine, you should accept these emotions and learn from them. But I ask that, instead of using them to drive your lives from this point on, we instead focus on helping each other. If our purpose becomes driven by a need for revenge and protection, we have lost what made us special in the first place. Our bonds. Everyone needs to remember what brought us to this point. We must keep that outlook as we move forward. I ask us to remember that together we will always shine.”

~~~

Randall Flagg woke up. He rubbed the back of his head and grunted – it had been a while since he’d failed to jump to another universe when a superweapon went off in front of him.

He went over what had went wrong – he had started having too much fun again. Had he kept his cards closer to his chest, Blackjack wouldn’t have turned on him. He’d been so caught up in taunting the societies of the local multiverse that he’d basically forgotten about her.

It didn’t help that he’d known nothing about Lieshy’s status or Eve’s power. He felt confident he could have dealt with those, given time, but the combination of them and Blackjack… It was just enough to catch him off guard and stop the destruction of Merodi Universalis.

Flagg didn’t let this bother him. He lost occasionally – he accepted this. It wasn’t even overly rare,
considering how his goals usually focused on completely destabilizing societies with their own hubris. Not that he didn’t also do other things, that was just the general modus operandi.

They had won – going back would just be overly greedy. So he’d stay away, at least for now. Give them a few decades before deciding if a round two was in order.

Though, admittedly, he was curious. How much damage did he do? It was a lot, but he knew Eve survived, so chances were Merodi Universalis still existed.

He took Black Thirteen out of his coat and looked into it. The dark power rippled right into his mind, tearing at it. Flagg didn’t even flinch. He was the master of this object, and would be until the end of everything. Which was never going to happen.

Flagg activated his all-seeing eye technique, connecting it to Black Thirteen. Like this, he might as well have been omniscient, if only he asked the right questions. He looked around, finding different scenes spread out across time...

(Toph Beifong stood in the throne room of Lai Castle. Corona, Lady Rarity, Lieshy, and Vivian stood to her side. Corona seemed distant.

An oculus-pegasus-unicorn placed a crown on Toph’s head.

“By the wishes of Queen Luna, I crown you Queen Toph Beifong, ruler of Lai.”

Toph stood tall and smiled warmly to the gathered crowd.

They cheered.)

“Amazing how fast a society can change,” Flagg commented to himself. “They’ll accept an otherworlder as their leader…”

(Corona sat on a couch, staring at the ceiling.

“You need to do something, Corona,” Sombra’s voice came from the TV.

“Why?” Corona said. “Just… Just why?”

“Why do something? Because you’re really freaking depressed and doing something would at least give you the possibility of finding something better. Why did it happen this way? Because the multiverse is cruel.”

“Yeah. Yeah it is.”

“You should listen to Eve. So what if it’s dark? Screw that, do stuff anyway. That’s what I do.”

“Eve’s being stupidly idealistic,” Corona muttered. “We can’t do anything, Sombra.”

“Not with that attitude we can’t.”

Corona didn’t respond, she just stared at the ceiling.

“I’m going to have to call the girls over, aren’t I?”

“Sombra…”

“You need someone to come over. Don’t fight it.”
Corona didn’t fight it.)

A depressed hero… Flagg took pleasure in that. It took a lot to break one of their ilk.

(Evening Sparkle and Luna sat at Celestia’s tomb. It was located at the very top of Canterlot mountain. The statue of Celestia had been constructed by the Gems out of pure diamond and set atop the square structure that housed Celestia herself.

The two said nothing – they only stared and held each other.)

Boring…

(“Renee, with all the sudden scrambling, I’m going to have to promote you,” Eve said.

“Oh? To what?” Renee asked.

“My equal. You’re Overhead of the Expeditions Division now. I’ll give you the details of all the teams we have to you. I’m going to have to devote myself to just being Relations Overhead.”

Renee smiled. “I’ll take care of them, Eve, don’t you worry.”

“Oh that’s not what I’m worried about, it’s that some of them took pride in working directly under me. There might be some difficulty in the transfer of power.”

“Dear, I’ll be fine. This is probably good for me anyway – won’t be leaving Daniel out to dry among the political sharks as much.”

“Good. Now I’ve got to go make sure O’Neill is taking his role as Military Overhead seriously. See you around!”)

A transfer of power brought on by necessity. Flagg wondered how much else Eve was having to swap around within the chaos.

(Corea sneezed fire into Applejack’s face.

“Well, I was hopin’ it’d be a couple years before she started showin’ signs…” Applejack said, wiping her singed muzzle.

“None of us know how the Avatar Spirit will act inside a pony,” Iroh said, scratching Corea behind the ears. “But that suggests she has power.”

“Think Ah can teach her potions, eventually?” Applebloom asked.

“Aang did figure out magic bending… With a body actually designed to interact with the force, I wouldn’t be surprised if she could bend magic as skillfully as a unicorn.”

Applejack called back. “You hear that? Your sister is destined for great things!”

Applejack’s other kids didn’t pay her much attention. Applejack glanced at Big Mac. “Y’know, Ah don’t get any respect.”

“Eenope.”

“Funny.”)

A new hero was born. Flagg wasn’t interested enough to pay attention to this particular one – he had
others lined up for his torments – but he made sure to remember her.

(Aradia, Vriska, and Alushy shared a room at the hospital.

“I have never needed to be hospitalized in my unlife,” Alushy commented. “Everything about this sucks.”


“I’m not allowed to have my guns and my leg that doesn’t really exist fucking hurts.”

“They can get it back,” Aradia encouraged. “The procedure that saved the Arcei can be adapted for that.”

“Lovely. Why not just un-enchant the curse that sword put on me?”

“Pretty sure the sword was anti-magic. Which is why you aren’t healing.”

“Right.”

Vriska grunted. “Aradia…”

“What?”

“Why don’t you just accelerate yourself until you’re healed? You can do that.”

“Well, I’d actually experience that time because I’d be accelerating myself…”

“Bullshit. You can accelerate every part of your body except your brain.”

“That’d result in a blood aneurysm.”

“Aradia…”

“All right, all right, there’s ways around it. I dunno, I just feel like taking it the normal way this time around. I get to experience a long hospital stay with friends old and new!”

Vriska blinked – then laughed. “How can you be so morbid and yet so innocent?”

“The world may never know.”

Alushy chuckled. “Who’s ready for another round of hospital songs?”

“Not the spleen one, please,” Vriska groaned.

“SPLEEN! SPLEEN! SPLEEN!” Aradia cheered.

“Woooooooooh~” Alushy began.)

Blackjack had truly been a useful tool. She’d been paramount in defeating all three of those powerhouses, and keeping the temporal powers from being able to change anything. Flagg knew now that Aradia would not try to erase what had happened. Flagg was certain what he did to the universe had sealed the Bloodbath as a fixed point in time, regardless of what anyone did to the universe itself, but he didn’t need her poking around.

(“Japan owes you a great debt.” Jotaro told his visitor.
Twilight Sparkle 7Y nodded. “Just doing my job, mister Kujo.”

“Such a cool job…” Jolyne said, hanging around near her father.

“You’re around the age you can start thinking about doing stuff like this,” 7Y said. “I’m sure Eve would love to have you.”

“Oh…” Jolyne looked flustered. “Yeah I don’t think I’d do well as a diplomat. I tend to solve problems by punching it or tricking it into punching itself.”

A small smile crawled up Jotaro’s face. She was his daughter, all right.

“Expeditions could always use more punchers. Join one of the contact teams. If you were a Twilight, I’d suggest submitting a proposal to the Census, but alas, it cannot be.” 7Y smiled awkwardly. “Heh…”

Father-daughter bonding. Flagg wondered what all his daughters were doing. Probably mayhem.

(Nautica was no longer to be an unsupervised prison.

Large construction efforts took place, creating a tremendous compound deep under the sea. All inmates on Nautica were rounded up and placed in the regulatory building.

Never again would they attempt to take care of their enemies by just dumping them in another universe. They would keep them where they could watch them. Those that couldn’t be kept would be killed.

Took them long enough to realize that, the fools.

(Brutalight and the rest of the Elements of Insanity – including Jet – stood on a hill looking at a version of Canterlot Castle.

Brutalight’s evil grin widened. “Girls, I think we found it. And, lucky us, the Merodi have no idea.”

Fluttershout rubbed her hooves together. “I’ve been waiting forever for this…”

That world was doomed, Flagg decided. He should probably go visit it at some point in the future. It was always interesting to see if he could run an ‘evil’ system even further into the ground than it already was.

(“LISTEN UP LADIES!” O’Neill shouted at a troop of Gems. “I AM GOING TO TEACH YOU HOW TO FUNCTION AS A UNIT WITHIN THIS MILITARY! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?”

“Sir yes sir!”

“GOOD!” O’Neill blurted. “Each of you will be assigned an organic partner. Enjoy.”

The Gems’ reactions ranged from enraged to excited. Exactly what O’Neill wanted.)

Flagg enjoyed the suffering of others, and the forced cooperation of the Gems was no exception.

(“Five eldritch canisters,” Thrackerzod said, glaring at a member of the Melnorme race. “That should be worth more than enough for information on the blue metal guy.”

“No,” the Melnorme said, narrowing his eye. “Such canisters are just globs of eldritch excrement, and you know it.”
“It has uses though!”

“None that other materials cannot provide.”

Thrackerzod twitched. “I give up. Allure?”

Allure smiled. “I can get you access to Arcei physiology data.”

“Still not enough.”

Allure threw her hooves in the air. “OH COME ON!”

“It’s an exceptionally valuable piece of information.”

“I can see why the Doctor found you annoying,” Squeaky muttered.

The Melnorme, traders of the multiverse. Very useful for higher societies. Class 3s often just found them unbelievably annoying because anything they actually wanted had prices that were far too steep. The Merodi likely weren’t going to do much with them.

(Blackjack stood over a sea of pure magic. She took a breath, closed her eyes, and lifted a hoof…

“I would say think about what you’re doing, but it’s not exactly the sort of thing you do.”

Blackjack turned around to see herself as a unicorn… without a cutie mark. “Wh…”

“Right, so, I’m Jackie, I’m from Equis Regarden – you didn’t die, by the way. Well, you did, but your soul found your clone body, and blah blah boring science whatever.” Jackie shrugged. “The point is, I’m you, but a bit older.”

“And without Luna in your head.”

“That too. But as I recall she wasn’t exactly bad company, was she?” Jackie raised an eyebrow.

“…I guess not.”

“Don’t beat yourself up,” Jackie said. “We’ve made our fair share of mistakes.”

“I jus-“

“Think very carefully about the accusation you’re about to make.”

“No.”

“Good girl.” Jackie grinned.

“…Did you just come here to push the buttons of your younger self?”

“That’s only part of the reason,” Jackie said. “I’m here to tell you that, yeah, the Merodi have power. Yeah, they have a lot of it. But Eve isn’t Ministry Mare Twilight Sparkle. I don’t think she’s going to ruin it.”

“Our Twilight was good once as well. Look what happened to her.”

“Not all Twilights are the same. I visited the Sparkle Census once, it was crazy.”

Blackjack sighed. “So… What then?”
“Just grab a dimensional device and go exploring. Start the adventures of Blackjack – super overpowered and over-armed alicorn.”

“Princess of winning?” Blackjack smirked.

“Yes. Princess of winning.” Jackie winked.

“I dunno…”

“Yeah, that’s right. That’s why you just go and do it without thinking. I’m sure there are ponies out there you can help.”

“Fine!” Blackjack created a portal. “HERE I GO AGAIN!”

Jackie smirked. “We never were very smart ponies.”

“And I guess that’s a good thing?” Blackjack shrugged.

“Fuck yes.”

Flagg furrowed his brow. If she was turning into an explorer… In time, she could become the one to replace the Doctor. His actions as Flagg’s nemesis were getting rather old, perhaps it was time to mix up the formula. But Flagg needed to wait for Blackjack to get a little wiser in the ways of the multiverse before that happened.

(Blumiere stood atop Castle Bleck – which was soon to be demolished. It was going to be replaced with the Dimensional City. Unlike the Hub, this city would become the mobile capital of Merodi Universalis, a city that would eternally grow and move between universes… Built upon the dimensional core of this castle Blumiere himself donated.

It felt good to turn this place of darkness into something that would do much good.

A letter appeared in front of him – personally signed by Eve. He opened it.

The Dimensional City had a name now.

Celestia City.

Blumiere couldn’t think of a better name.)

“Overly sappy…” Flagg muttered.

“You always hated it when things turned out that way,” the Doctor said.

Flagg turned to the Doctor, not bothering to ask how he had gotten here. “Ah, Doctor. I might be building up a replacement for you. Just thought I’d warn you.”

The Doctor didn’t react to this. “They won, Flagg.”

“That they did. And I’ll leave them alone for the time being. There are other fish in the sea, after all.”

“Their song is strong.”

“One of the strongest I’ve seen,” Flagg admitted. “Are you trying to suggest I bit off more than I could chew this time?”
“Not directly, no. I’m just wondering what you see in them.”

“I see underdogs,” Flagg said. “Underdogs with a terribly idealistic mindset. The Tower *loves* idealists.”

“For all your talk, you are still just a part of it,” the Doctor said.

Flagg shrugged, holding Black Thirteen high. “You may not understand this, Doctor, but I appreciate that I am part of something. That I have a well-defined purpose.”

“To be evil?”

“To the normal mind, that is certainly how it seems. Doctor, I am a force of nature. The multiverse needs me to stir the pot now and again.”

“I disagree.”

“Agree to disagree!” Flagg chuckled. “See you around, Doctor. Have a nice day!”

The Doctor said nothing as Flagg vanished.
In a time when the Bloodbath was still fresh in the memory of all Merodi, Renee, Daniel, and Pinkie met together in one of the Hub’s offices.

“What’s up?” Pinkie said, leaning back in her chair. “Oh, wait, before that, congratulations on the promotion, Renee!”

Renee smiled. “Thank you, Pinkie. It happens that my promotion is why we’re here. Since I am now the Head of the Expedition Division, I will no longer be on your team. It wouldn’t be proper to place myself on a team that I oversee.”

“Of course not. So you get to stay here! With Daaaaaniel!” Pinkie wagged her eyebrows up and down.

Daniel smirked and rolled his eyes. “True. Though it would be nice if you could remember I’m her Second, not just her husband here.”

“I know that, silly!” Pinkie chuckled. “So, Renee, you can’t be on the team anymore. Sad, but we all knew it was coming.”

“You know what we’re doing, don’t you?”

“AUDITIONS!” Pinkie grinned. “Can we get Aradia? Aradia would be awesome.”

“Aradia works on her own for the most part,” Renee declared. “And we have some limitations on who can be selected.”

“Oh.” Pinkie deflated.

“Pinkie, your team is team one. The first team, the primary all-purpose team. There’s a focus on exploration and first contact, but you do a little of everything. You need to be an image of the unity of Merodi Universalis. Right now you don’t represent a large portion of us.”

“Hey, we’ve got Vriska! She can… You know what I’ll just stop talking right there, having Vriska represent you – heh.”

“That’s not it,” Renee said. “Vriska can definitely represent the more unique races – like the Gems – but the most common race in the multiverse has no member on your team.”

“Oh, we just have to choose a human? Pff, that’s easy.”

“A man,” Daniel said. “Having all of you be female gives an impression of gender-dominance to new worlds.”

“…Slightly harder, but we can do it. Hrm… You’re here, and O’Neill’s Head of Military, so…"
Nobody comes right to mind.” Pinkie grins.

“You already know who you end up choosing, don’t you?”

“Yep! But let’s run through auditions anyway. I assume you have lots of capable men just sitting to be put on a team?”

Renee nodded. She tossed Pinkie a data pad. “This contains all the individuals we think would be suitable. Take your pick.”

Pinkie narrowed her eyes. “Hrm… Director Storm applied?”

“The AID has become defunct at this point,” Daniel explained. “If you don’t take him we’ll put him with Tempest.”

Pinkie kept scrolling. “Well I couldn’t take Mike without Ike… Or vice versa.” She narrowed her eyes. “Hrrrrm…”

“Pinkie…” Renee said. “Can you just pick the one you already know you’re going to take?”

“Oh, they’re not in here,” Pinkie said. “Rohan’s morals are too questionable. McKay is a little bit of a smart mouth, Micro doesn’t exactly do well with people. Plus, him and Sugarcoat are sooo cuuuute. John Sheppard is okay, I guess, I’d take him if I didn’t have another idea.”

“Who would that be?”

Pinkie smiled. “He’ll be coming through that door in three… two… one.”

Jotaro Kujo walked in the door to the room. He glanced at Renee, Daniel, and Pinkie. “What did you want me for?” he asked Pinkie.

Pinkie grinned. “Go along with it for a minute. Behold, Overhead and Second of the Expedition Division, the Jotaro Kujo model!” She appeared on top of him and began gesturing at him like a car salesman. “Look at these impressive muscles, that impassive poker face, the deep hero’s heart. He’s an excellent addition to any team – the strong, silent type, always watching everything closely for the right moment. He has great experience with adventures, combat, and bizarre powers. He has the ability to \textit{stop time and, and}, is a fully certified marine biologist with a PhD and everything.” Pinkie grinned.

Jotaro raised an eyebrow but didn’t say anything.

Renee blinked. “While he’s certainly an excellent choice Pinkie… He hasn’t submitted an application.”

“Oh, he’ll want to come.” Pinkie turned to Jotaro. “So how about it? Wanna join my team Jojo?” She blinked rapidly and expectantly.

Jotaro grabbed his hat. “Yare yare daze… Yes. I would.”

“WOOHOO!” Pinkie hugged him. “You’re the best!”

Renee held up a hoof. “Hold on a minute. While I do accept this… Jotaro, are you certain? You have a wife, a daughter. This will keep you away from them a significant amount.”

“It will not be as bad as you think it will be. I’ll be able to come home most nights.”
Renee remembered when she had met Jotaro – how he was neglecting his family for weeks at a time. “...I see. Well, I see no problem with this.” She pulled out a card and gave it to him. “You’re now on Pinkie’s team. I’ll get you in the records later.”

Jotaro nodded.

Pinkie sat on top of Jotaro’s head and grinned. “Yes! Come on big guy, let’s introduce you to the team!” Pinkie twisted herself so she was under Jotaro, lifting him up like he was made of Styrofoam. She ran out of the room, giggling.

“...That’s going to be an interesting dynamic,” Daniel observed.

“No kidding,” Renee said. “It works though. It never hurts to have some extra muscle.” She looked at Daniel and raised an eyebrow.

“Are you judging me?”

“No. Just making you squirm.” She chuckled to herself.

~~~

All the way in Trixie and Discord’s arcade, Vriska, Nova, and Flutterfree crowded around a console. Flutterfree was watching as Vriska and Nova went at it in a fighting game based on famous Merodi explorers. They were playing the versions of themselves.

“This is stupid,” Nova muttered. “I can’t stop your flow of time.”

“Can it pointy, I can’t force you to a heart attack, so shut up.”

Nova’s character unleashed a beam of energy that Vriska’s jumped over. Vriska’s character rolled her dice and exploded a dozen bombs around Nova.

“I’ve gotten that attack what, six times this fight? That never happens!”

Flutterfree slurped noisily on a slushie. “Be easy on the programmers, they worked hard to give you a variety.”

Nova’s character pounded Vriska’s into the ground with a magic diamond, achieving victory. “Woo!” Nova cheered.

Vriska glared at Flutterfree. “Let’s see you fight as yourself, see if you like it.”

Flutterfree shrugged, handing Vriska her slushie. She took Vriska’s position and selected the Flutterfree character.

Nova smirked, clearly thinking this would be easy.

Flutterfree’s character unleashed the bow of light and drove a super-combo into Nova’s avatar, using the unique mechanic of Lolo’s extensions doing no damage but moving Nova’s character around for Flutterfree to shoot more arrows and initiate bites.

It was over in a few seconds.

Flutterfree took her slushie back and obnoxiously slurped.

Vriska and Nova stared at her in disbelief. “How in the…”
Flutterfree offered no explanation. She only smirked mischievously, straw in her mouth.

Pinkie ran in at that moment, dumping Jotaro on them. “Say hello to our fifth member! The team is now complete!”

Jotaro stood up and dusted himself off, nodding curtly to his three teammates.

“Oh!” Flutterfree said, smiling. “Jotaro! I wasn’t expecting you. It’s a pleasant surprise though! I’m sure you’ll make a great addition!”

“Double the time hax,” Nova chuckled.

Vriska looked up at Jotaro and narrowed her eyes. “Hold it, I’m not just going to accept some guy.”

“We defeated Algernon to-“

“Shhhhhh…” Vriska said, putting a finger to his mouth. “Shoosh.”

Jotaro remained silent.

“As I was saying, I’m not just accepting some guy. You need to prove yourself!” Vriska grabbed a nearby table, slamming it down between her and Jotaro. “Arm wrestle. To prove yourself.”

Jotaro raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure about this?”

“Yes.” She sat down and put her arm on the table, poised for battle. “Bring it.”

Jotaro sat down and extended his arm.

“GO!” Vriska shouted, getting the jump on Jotaro and pushing his arm a bit. This initial lead was lost in an instant. Jotaro didn’t even need to activate Star Platinum. He clenched his jaw slightly and used his raw strength to flip Vriska’s arm and break the table.

Vriska laid on the ground, dazed. “I… like him… Wheeee…”

“Yay! Everyone’s friends now!” Pinkie said, clapping. Then she was next to the arcade console. “Hey, Jotaro, I challenge you to play as me, I’ll play as you.”

Jotaro accepted. Pinkie still won.

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Castle Bleck became Celestia City. It was an exceptionally slow process.

It started out as a horrendous, evil looking castle of flat blackness. Blumiere ordered every room of the original castle destroyed, save two. The one that held the dimensional nexus core, and the white room where he and Timpani had professed their love for each other – and been lost to the Nexus universe. Then construction could truly begin.

The first month was all infrastructure – dozens of tremendous dimensional drive cores, power structures, and magical generators. The Castle was gone, replaced with an ugly mess of glowing spheres and metallic supports. The Core.

With the Core complete, Blumiere decided it was time to move it. Everyone was unsure what would happen when the dimensional nexus left the universe it held up, but they figured it was empty so it didn’t really matter. The Core appeared in Equis Cosmic space without incident, but the universe it
had been in ceased to exist.

Blumiere would miss the misty expanse. But now the Core was fully mobile, able to travel across universes and create portals hundreds of times larger than itself. Exactly what they needed.

Equis Cosmic engineers moved in and reinforced the core over the next month. The third month, the Core was in Gem Vein, where the Gem engineers coated it in their crystal alloys, turning the ugly cobble of machine bits into a white crystal. The energy fields activated and an atmosphere was pumped into the area surrounding the crystal.

It was only then that construction could begin in earnest.

The worlds of Merodi Universalis began to build; each one using designs originating from their home. The crystal ground was lost to the construction in the months to come as the actual city took form. One district would be made entirely of simple Elemental Nations structures, while the one built overtop of it would be a Gem cut combined with unicorn magical constructions. Skyscrapers rose from one end, meeting the wall of a zone flooded with water for seaponies and sirens. The full AI from Equis Cosmic created computer towers for their kind to inhabit, and the Asgard added their own smooth, simplistic constructions. Spaceships that were about to be decommissioned were worked into the body of the city, and on Lai a few of Armonia’s temples were uprooted and placed in the city.

Blumiere, as head architect, took the role of mayor. He knew that the construction of Celestia City would never end, long before he took official charge of the vast expanse. Once he did, he knew he actually had no control. Celestia City was an entity with a mind of its own, a mind that was eternally changing, shifting, and adjusting as new people added to it. It was so beautiful.

It had now been two years since construction started. They were currently outside of Merodi Universalis space, visiting the USM universe known as Earth-MH1, Froppy’s homeworld. A world where natural-born superpowers, called quirks, were present in over 90% of the population. It was curious to have so many unusual abilities visiting Celestia City.

Which meant that, of course, there were going to be a few problems.

In a hybrid district composed of Gem and Equis Vitis griffon constructions, a woman was causing significant trouble.

This woman had blue hair that moved like limbs. This was not the extent of her power, however – this hair could coat itself in ice and create freezing blades.

She spiked a Lapis Lazuli in the side, poofing her and collecting her gemstone. The woman let out a laugh. “You’re quite the pretty one, aren’t you?” She placed the gemstone in her bag, along with a half-dozen others. “Such beauties…”

“All right girl- er, everyone, let’s see what you can do,” a voice said from behind a crystalline door.

The woman aggressively pointed her hair-blades at the door. “Who’s there?”

“The League of Sweetie Belles,” a male voice declared. A magic spell went off, tearing the door from its hinges. The woman cut it in half with her hair and thrust forward, expecting to surprise whoever was on the other side.

The young unicorn stallion on the side just grabbed her hair with his telekinesis. “Gotcha. Get her, Snappy.”
A *raptor* of a similar white-and-purple color scheme to the stallion leaped from the ceiling, grinning. “You got it, Silver!”

The woman pulled the Lapis Gem out of her pouch and pointed one of her swords at it. “I’ll shatter it! I will!”

Snappy and Silver pulled back, faces suddenly full of uncertainty. The woman sneered. “Good. Now, you’re going to let me go. Don’t worry, these Gems won’t *die*, I assure you.”

A third appeared – a ‘human’ with brilliant white wings coming from her back and a holy scepter in her hand. The *angel* twisted the staff just right to knock the Lapis Gem out of the woman’s grasp. Silver acted quickly, grabbing the woman’s bag with his telekinesis.

“Great work Servitude!” Snappy gnashed through her reptilian teeth.

“THOSE ARE MINE!” the woman shouted, diving for Silver.

Servitude thwacked her across the head with the scepter, knocking her out cold. “Mission success,” she declared, before offering a small blessing to the downed woman.

“Great job everyone!” Allure said, strolling into the room. “Nobody got hurt, even though she pulled a nasty trick.”

Snappy and Silver cheered. Servitude simply bowed and spoke with reverence. “Thank you, Allure.”

Allure’s smile widened. “You’re all promoted to full agent status! Let’s get back to the League, tell everyone it went well.”

“NO!” the woman shouted, somehow aware again. She rushed Allure with her icy knives.

Allure twisted around, ducking under the icy blades. She carefully pushed a hoof into the woman’s shoulder, empowering the strike with magic. The shock of pain made the woman reel back into exactly the position Allure needed. She grabbed the woman’s neck with one hoof and an arm with the other.

She was pinned in an instant.

Silver gaped. “Wow… That was impressive.”

Snappy whispered to Silver. “Have we ever actually seen her do that on a bad guy?”

Allure smiled sheepishly. “It’s the same stuff I do in training.”

“But you’re never serious. Unless you’re sparring Thrackerzod. Then you always lose.”

Servitude bopped Snappy on the head. “Show some respect.”

“It’s okay, Servitude,” Allure insisted. “I do always lose against Zod. But raw power isn’t everything. Sometimes you don’t have much and have to make all of it count.”

Servitude nodded slowly, admitting Allure to be correct.

“Think you can teleport us back?” Allure asked.

Servitude nodded, spreading her wings and raising her scepter. The five of them were teleported to
the ‘street’ outside the League of Sweetie Belles. The building was situated between four different districts, a unique white pillar of quartz that stood out among the more standard constructions. The Gems had helped the League make the building, but the design was nothing like the geometric patterns the Gems favored. It was the shape of a tapered cylinder that went from floor to ceiling of the district, about four floors tall. The windows held stained glass designs of important ponies and people of the multiverse, while the doors were intricately engraved with the letters “SB” in a Crusader shield.

Allure moved the woman to the building next door – a police station – and placed her in a ‘dropoff area’. To say the police were used to them turning in criminals was an understatement.

The four Sweetie Belles trotted through the front doors of their base, entering a world filled with Sweetie Belles. Most were unicorns, and most of them were adults at this point, though a few fillies could be seen walking around. Even those that weren’t unicorns had the signature color scheme – white, purple, and pink with green eyes – with the exception of Sanguine, who was blacker than any normal shade of black. Looking at that particular Sweetie Belle was like looking into an abyss that always stared back.

“Hey every-Sweetie!” Allure called. “Snappy, Silver, and Servitude have full agent status now!”

The Sweeties erupted in applause and cheers. Snappy and Silver bowed, while Servitude nodded curtly.

“Sarsaparilla, get them some celebratory drinks.” The Sweetie Belle that was part plant nodded and ran off to get some.

The three new League Agents were congratulated by a small crowd of Sweeties. Allure smiled, thinking of what they would be able to do now. Membership in the League was completely free, and virtually everyone was equal, but Agents had the authority to go on missions at the bidding of Mayor Blumiere or the Expeditions Division. The League generally served the role as Celestia City’s personal guardians. It was a purpose that pleased Allure to no end.

“BEEP BOOP!” Sweetie Bot’s voice came from a speaker. “Allure! Your presence is requested in the meeting room! We’ve got a talking cat.”

“This sounds fun,” Allure said to herself, walking up the stairs to the higher floors of the League. She eventually opened the door to the meeting room, finding the other three of the core four Sweeties there – Thrackenzod, Sweetie Bot, and Squeaky Belle. She waved at them in greeting and sat down in the nearest seat.

Across from them, sitting on the table, was a gray housecat. It was so small compared to them.

“Uh… Hello,” Allure said.

“Hi,” the cat said, looking at her with wise green eyes. “My name is Graymint. And I need your help.”

Allure was overcome by the cuteness of Graymint. She promised to herself that she was going to help this adorable creature with whatever problems he had. Maybe he’d let her pet him. That was probably wishful thinking though.

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It had been agreed that the addition of a new world into Merodi Universalis was too momentous of an event to leave for just a singular Division to oversee. So there were two intimately involved in the
process – three if you counted the Cultural Division, but their involvement was less about actually admitting the world than ensuring the world wasn’t just snuffed out as unimportant.

The two Divisions in question were the Relations Division and the Expansion Division. The two Overehad currently sat at a table in Iroh’s Teashop, talking the procedures over with some representatives of other worlds. Eve was the mare of Relations, while the individual that had been chosen for Expansion was Maud Pai of Lai, chosen for her expertise in the future and care for the future of her people. She had already colonized over a dozen previously uninhabited universes.

“So… your two’s worlds are next on the list,” Eve said, putting down a checklist to give the guests a warm smile. “Equis Concrete and Binar. You are ready to begin the procedures, right?”

Chancellor Fluttershy and Mistress Luna nodded. “We’ve been waiting for a while,” the Mistress admitted.

Eve nodded. “I know. We expected to get to this sooner… but you know about the chaos.”

“None of us could have foreseen that,” Maud said, her eyes shifting in that way oculus’ did when they were trying to look to the future. “A prediction of a multiversal nature is always uncertain…”

Fluttershy held up a wing. “We should not dwell on the past. That is behind us now. The future calls.”

“Right,” Eve affirmed. “Luna, let’s start with Binar.” She pulled out a large sheaf of papers. “Your government’s structure has been approved, and your people have met the standard of living. What we are unsure about is your people’s desire to be part of Merodi Universalis.”

Luna raised an eyebrow. “How so?”

“Your people are a mixture of remnant Gerudo, red demons, and Binaries. The red demons are known to naturally have a distaste for what we’ve done, the Binaries fell indirectly because of us, and I don’t think I need to say why the Gerudo take issue with us.”

Luna nodded. “I am aware… I can vouch for my people and say the approval is high. The demons always wanted to be part of something greater, and this is a way to do it. The Gerudo are similarly tired of the way things have been. The Binaries…” She pondered for a moment. “They’re rather apathetic.”

“I thought we resolved their lethargy problem?”

“Oh, they’re working and living, yes, they’re just perfectly happy not knowing anything that happens ‘above’ them. Their old culture remains, at least in part.”

Maud nodded. “It means our efforts were successful.”

Eve sighed. “Technically not against the requirements… Still. I’m not sure I like a society that promotes willful ignorance.”

“It isn’t as if we’re a democracy,” Maud pointed out.

“Good point. Regardless, Luna, we’ll need more than your vouching. Expect a group of my people to come and perform a poll of sorts. It will take some time – a few weeks perhaps – and then we can move to the step of integrating your government. Assuming the results come back positive.”

“I have confidence they will,” Luna asserted.
“Good. How’s Mlinx doing, by the way?”

“He’s taken a liking to education as of late, asking all the demons who weren’t born in the last few years to go through school anyway. Not everyone is listening to him, but there’s not any hostility about the suggestion. Well, not more than you’d expect from the demons.”

Eve smiled warmly. “Yeah… Fluttershy, your world has a different set of problems.”

“I’m aware,” Fluttershy said, nodding slowly.

“Your government definitely meets the criteria, your ponies have come out of the stupor and hit a good standard of living, *and* there’s great approval from most of your nations to join. The issue is…”

Eve tried to think of a way to phrase it.

“Everyone’s a colossal racist asshole,” Fluttershy offered.

“Well I wasn’t going to be that *harsh*…”

“It’s really the only accurate way to put it,” Maud said.

Eve sighed. “Right, yes. The racism. Despite your culture’s willingness to join ours, it’s decidedly *unwilling* to treat everyone like equals. It’s worse than the Gems, who were mostly just apathetic about us; there have been many reports of active malice within your universe.”

“Joining is, I think, the way to stop it,” Fluttershy suggested. “Right now, the only ponies they know who aren’t racists are those who lead them. They don’t have much respect for us in that department, even if they respect us in others.”

“Sounds like a shaky foundation,” Maud pointed out.

“It’s been over a decade, it’s held fast. They respect us as capable leaders, and are willing to admit that legally speaking race shouldn’t hold much of a difference, but that doesn’t change their opinions. They know that what they think is wrong at this point, but they keep the cognitive dissonance anyway. I think the solution is to expose them to ponies who *aren’t* like them, and who exemplify the correct way to live. …Without being their leaders.”

Maud turned to Eve. “Do you think the Cultural Division will take issue with us allowing them in so we can remove their racism?”

Eve thought for a second. “I don’t think so. Cultural won’t try to protect something so blatantly *wrong*. If they do I’ll have to have a discussion with Enna… I’ll have to bring this up with her first before continuing, Chancellor.”

“Understood. Do you need any of the studies we’ve performed on our cultural attitude?”

“I expect Cultural already has all those, but it couldn’t hurt to give us them personally,” Eve answered. “There is another issue to discuss, a lesser one. Your version of King Sombra.”

Fluttershy nodded. “He’s… been ejected from the Concretion by force, as I’m sure you’re aware. He’s currently brooding in the Crystal Empire.”

“The sooner we incorporate you, the less time he has to make a move on you,” Maud pointed out.

“I would appreciate it if we could get added sooner rather than later, yes,” Fluttershy admitted. “At the moment I doubt you’d assist us in a war that is mostly of our own making.”
“I’d have to ask O’Neill, but that’s probably true,” Eve said. “I’ll try to work as fast as I can.”

“I actually believe you when you say that,” Fluttershy said. “Such a rare thing when talking to governments…”

“Yeah,” Eve laughed awkwardly. “Maud, can you see anything?”

“Multiverse predictions are like pumice. There one day, gone the next. Now, I see nothing good or bad. I believe they will be adopted into Merodi Universalis, though as for the quality of that I can say nothing.”

Eve nodded. “Well, that’s what we’re going with. I’ll go call up Enna and organize that survey for you Luna. I’ll put it as a priority. I don’t actually have too much on my plate at the moment. Things are quiet right now.”

Maud’s eyes flexed. “…Something’s just shifted.”

“Huh? Are the-“

“It’s not about these two. Their path appears the same, as far as I can see. Something else shifted. I don’t know what…”

Eve sighed. “Great… Now I’ll be second-guessing myself all day. Excuse me, I’ll be making that call.”

“Thanks, Evening,” Chancellor Fluttershy said.

“Don’t mention it.”

~~~

Graymint looked at the four core Sweeties expectantly.

“Let’s hear your problem first,” Squeaky said, gesturing for Graymint to go on. “It’s clearly a big one, since you asked for us.”

“Yeah…” Graymint said, shaking his head. “I… I guess I’ll start with explaining my world. It’s a planet, an Earth, and we share it with twoleg- er, humans. The humans built their big cities and towns, and we lived in the forests in differing tribes of sorts. We weren’t very organized. Every tribe was different in terms of customs, beliefs, ways of life… Very few cats ever picked up tools. I heard there were a few clans that had built dens out of wood and created things, but nothing like what the humans had. And then the USM arrived.”

“How long ago was this?” Allure asked.

“I was born around the time it happened. About… six years ago.”

“Not very long…”

Sweetie Bot shook her head. “Cats have a lifespan average of twelve years.”

Graymint blinked. “How old are you?”

Thrackerzod opened her mouth, but Squeaky shut it with her magic. “Those of us who are not eldritch beings from another plane of existence are in our twenties and thirties.”
“Wow… Old…”

Allure smiled sadly. “Not really. Ponies can live to an upper limit of about two hundred.”

Graymint looked like he couldn’t comprehend that number.

“Hey, we’re nothing compared to Gems,” Squeaky said. “They don’t age at all. Thousands of years old.”

“Wow…” Graymint shook his head. “Gah! I’ve gotten off track. …Anyway, they came, and they realized that we were intelligent creatures. Because of the USM, the clans started connecting together. We began to come together because of the USM. We even got ourselves a king and everything!”

“That’s great!” Allure encouraged.

“Yeah… It would be. But… The king was deposed recently by insurrectionist cats. They claim to want to bring about an era of cats for cats, or something like that. But they don’t treat us like the proud felines we are — they treat us like objects that need to be put in a box!” Graymint looked to the ground. “They’re killing cats who disagree, forcing their will on the united tribes. There are those of us who are trying to fight, but they’re the ones with access to most of the dimensional portals and technology. It can’t even be considered a war at this point…”

“That seems unfair!” Bot blurted. “They get to use the technology against you? Beep!”

“It is,” Allure said. “…But I don’t see what exactly what you want us to do.”

“I… I just heard you were heroes,” Graymint said, shaking his head. “I slipped through a portal and came here, looking for anyone who’d listen. You were who I was directed to.”

Allure nodded slowly.

“I suppose I could take you back to my world. Introduce you to the king and the underground, so you can see yourself what you might do to help.”

Bot beeped. “Deal!”

Squeaky shook her head. “Bot, we can’t do that yet. We can’t just say that we’re going to help.”

“I think we should check it out though,” Allure said.

“Agreed,” Squeaky confirmed.

Thrakerzod narrowed her eyes. “I don’t trust this. Reeks of interference.”

“The other side is using technology,” Allure pointed out. “It means we’ll have more freedom. I will check with Renee first, though. I’m sure she’ll say yes.” She pulled out her phone and started dialing. “Do you mind waiting a while, Graymint?”

“I’m not really in a hurry.”

“Good. Bot, start generating a report.” Allure excused herself from the room to talk to Renee.

~~~

Pinkie and company stood in an arid, desert city street, surrounded by enemy humans. Enemies that
were passed out on the ground, more than a few of which had broken bones.

Vriska dusted off her hands. “Man, who did these guys think they were? Not a single one was any challenge.”

Jotaro looked down at the largest of the men, one who had rivaled his own size. He had gone down in one hit. Jotaro was decidedly disappointed by this.

“That wizard was interesting,” Flutterfree commented.

“He only knew one spell,” Nova muttered.

“The frog spell is great though!” Pinkie giggled.

“Not if you’re the frog,” Nova muttered, shaking her head. “So, I take it big bodacious bossy bastard baddie wasn’t here?”

“Nope!” Pinkie declared, pulling out a telescope. “B5 has eluded us once again. Team, we need a plan.”

“Walk in the doors of the building we know is his base?” Vriska suggested, pointing at the giant brick house in front of them with two red double doors.

“Good idea!” Pinkie blurted, tossing Vriska a cookie.

“Yay me,” Vriska said, taking a bite of the baked treat.

Pinkie zipped up to the door and knocked on it with her head. “HEEEEEEEEEEY B-B-B-B-B! Can we come in!”

No response.

“Oh come on, don’t be ruuuude!” Pinkie pulled a button out of her mane and slapped it to the side of the doorway. She pressed it, activating the world’s loudest doorbell. “Let us in pleaaase? We won’t bite!”

No response.

“Fine then! No more mister nice Pie!”

“You’re a mare,” Nova deadpanned.

Pinkie Pie ignored her, ramming into the door. She flattened into a pink disc, bouncing off the door like a spring. She wobbled back into her default shape, narrowing her eyes. “What a complex puzzle…”

Flutterfree rolled her eyes. “Pinkie…”

“Okay fine. Jotaro!” She pointed at the giant man. “Give this door the ora special with a side of ora ora ora.”

Jotaro strode to the door, hands in his pockets. He took a second to examine the structure of the door before summoning Star Platinum. The Stand let out a yell of “ORA!” with its first punch, smashing through the frail wood of the door. Each subsequent punch came with another shout of “ORA!” until there was no door left.
The five of them filed into the interior space, ready for a fight.

The large entry hall was covered in red carpet on every section of the floor, wall, and ceiling. The space was bizarrely bare, with only a single wooden chair within it. In the chair was a man with a long, wiry black beard.

He looked at them and smiled. “Welcome!”

“Why didn’t you answer the door!?” Pinkie shouted.

“Oh, were you knocking? Sorry, I must not have heard.”

Pinkie twitched, walking toward him. “Smart guy, huh? Okay. So, what’s the trap, and where’s B5?”

The man was startled. “W-what trap?”

“Trap. You know…” Pinkie pointed a hoof to the left. “There’s explosives lining that wall… A poison dart over there… and I see a hidden camera in the roof.”

“There were also windows outside,” Jotaro commented. “A sniper could shoot through one of them, puncture the carpet, and hit us.” Even after he said this, he continued walking into the room.

Nova smirked. “Nothing personal, it’s just we’ve been through this a lot and none of it fazes us.” She checked the scans on her leg-screen and performed a quick sequence of spells, removing the explosives and poison dart trap from the walls and depositing them in front of the man. “Tah-dah.”

A bullet whizzed through one of the wall carpets, missing Vriska by a hair. Jotaro stopped time, turned the bullet around a hundred and eighty degrees, and then let it go flying back out the hole. He heard a satisfying shout an instant later. “Sniper was too close. Had he been much further the momentum would have cut out.”

The man stood up from his chair, trembling slightly. “Y-y-you monsters!”

Flutterfree walked up to him. “I guess you could call us monsters… But really, we’re just ordinary people and ponies.” She bared her fangs. “Trust me.”

The man tried to take a step back, caught his foot on the chair, and knocked himself out in the resulting fumble.

Vriska facepalmed. “I didn’t even steal any of his luck. Moron.”

“Now now, let’s be nice to the enemies,” Flutterfree said, checking to see how badly the man was injured. “He’s fine. We should go check out that sniper now.”

“You won’t be doing that,” a deep, dark voice declared. The doorway sealed up with a thick, sludgy substance, plunging the hall into darkness. Nova used her horn to provide a light.

Pinkie whooped. “B5! You made it! I was beginning to wonder! Now show yourself so we can fight you!”

“I won’t be doing that…” ‘B5’ declared. “I’m just going to talk.”

“Oh. Nice!” Flutterfree smiled. “There need to be more people like you.”

“And less like you,” B5 spat. “You think you’re so great, don’t you? Saving worlds, uniting them…”
But all you bring is DEATH! You draw the attention of powers greater than you can imagine, every
time beat back by horrendous power, only to FIGHT BACK and bring MORE DEATH! We will
not stand for this. We, the anti-Unioni-

“Oh good gog not another one of these fucks,” Vriska muttered. “YO! WE KNOW YOUR
MESSAGE ALREADY!”

“Y- what?”

“Let me follow it for you. One: Merodi Universalis is the worst idea in the history of ever that only
brings more death the further we go. Two: You will return us to the way things are meant to be.
Three: You plan to kill insert-target-here to bring about the fall of everything. Do I have that right?”

“…If this complaint is so common we must have more power than even I realized!”

Vriska sighed. “No, no you don’t. Every last one of you twats falls like a domino.”

“WE SHOULD UNIFY AND FACE YOU!”

“Do you not see the irony in that statement?” Nova blurted.

“I… I… Oh.” B5 fell silent for a moment.

“I think we broke one,” Pinkie said. “That’s new.”

Flutterfree smiled. “It’d be nice if we could get them to stand down for once.”

“I’M STILL GOING TO KILL YOU!” B5 declared, suddenly. “YOU ARE ALL EXACTLY
WHERE I WANT YOU! NOW DIE!”

Magic circles appeared on all the walls, firing magic bolts at the five of them.

Nova teleported them out of the building. It collapsed in on itself from the force of the attack.

A human with a black magic gauntlet on his left arm stared in disbelief at them. “H-how! They
would have hit you faster than reaction time!”

Nova raised an eyebrow. “I… Did you do research? Two of us have time manipulation, and Pinkie
could have dodged before you even shot it.”

B5 roared. “I WI-“

Flutterfree shot him in the knee with the bow of light, cutting his rant short. He keeled over, wailing.

Flutterfree lowered the bow and sighed. “Another one down.” She shook her head. “You think
they’d start to get creative…”

“C-CREATIVE!?” B5 blurted. “I’LL SHOW Y-“

“Stop talking,” Flutterfree ordered, Staring right into his eyes. He shut right up.

Vriska whistled. “You must really be losing patience with these guys.”

“They have a point, but they never implement it with spirit,” Flutterfree said. “I almost want one of
them to actually fight us with real, solid reasoning behind their actions. Like…. Isn’t there an
intelligent person who agrees with them? It’s not that much of a stretch to think that being unified
brings about troubles, but no, we just get these idiots.”

Pinkie gasped. “Flutterfree! You called someone an idiot!”

“Oh!” Flutterfree grabbed her mouth like she’d just said a dirty word. “I’m sorry!”

Vriska shrugged. “It was an accurate description. I’m more concerned about you asking for them to get intelligent.”

“No going to happen,” Pinkie said. “Not from these types, anyway.”

“Why not?”

“It’s the irony,” Nova said. “In order to fight the unification, they’d have to unify. It goes against what they want. All we have to watch out for is someone finding a superweapon of some sort and using it. And I’m pretty sure Aradia’s on that.”

“You too,” Vriska pointed out.

“I will never travel through time, merely bend it,” Nova asserted for the millionth time. “No matter how many times you or she ask.”

“Hey! Wasn’t insinuating anything!”

Nova rolled her eyes. “Riiight.”

Jotaro suddenly punched B5.

“What the – Jotaro!” Flutterfree blurted.

“He was moving,” Jotaro said. “Now he’s not. Besides breathing.”

Nova sighed, lifting B5 up and placing him in temporal stasis. “Flutterfree, check the sniper. If he shoots you, uh… don’t die.”

Flutterfree winked. “I won’t!” She flew off to check for the sniper.

Pinkie grinned. “I have such an amazing team!”

Jotaro’s mouth curled into the smallest hint of a smile.

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Graymint led the core four Sweeties through one of the forests of the world designated Earth-W47 by the United States of the Multiverse. From what the Sweeties had seen, this was a fairly standard Earth with a minimal level of dimensional awareness. Disclosure (or something similar) had clearly happened, but there wasn’t much in the way of extra-dimensional technology, nor evidence of ships in orbit. Just a world with humans and cats.

The forest itself was devoid of development. Squeaky had been able to identify cat prints among the other wildlife tracks, realizing with some satisfaction that the cat tracks were laid in such a way so as to confuse anyone trying to track them. Impressive how they did that, considering they didn’t have magic to remove trails like Squeaky did.

“We’re almost there,” Graymint said, ducking under a bush and sniffing. “Scents are still fresh and recognizable, so everything’s fine. This way.” He padded through a few more trees until they came
to a large outcropping of rock. Hidden behind a few bushes was a small fissure in the rock that led into a cave. Graymint could fit in easily, but the four ponies had to squeeze to get through.

“Can I give us light?” Allure asked.

“Sure,” Graymint said. “Though… if the guards attack you, you know ‘shield spells’ right?”

Squeaky and Thrackerzod nodded. Allure lit her horn, giving them all light as they descended. After a few seconds the cavern opened up into a significantly larger passageway, allowing them to move with freedom. There were signs of cat habitation from claw marks and loose hairs, but no actual cats.

“WHO GOES THERE?” a booming voice yowled.

“It’s Graymint! I’ve brought help!”

“WHAT KIND OF HELP?”

“Help from another world! …Bronzefin, just let us in.”

The voice sighed. A large, brown cat dropped from an above outcropping and sniffed the ponies. “These two smell the same.”

Allure and Squeaky looked at each other. Allure smiled. “We are sort of the same pony.”

“I don’t like your smell,” Bronzefin told Thrackerzod.

“No sane being should,” Thrackerzod confirmed. “The fact that you find my scent unlikeable is a confirmation of your continued mental health.”

Bronzefin turned to Graymint. “…Did she just insult me?”

Graymint cocked his head. “I’m not sure.”

“Great…” Bronzefin turned around, flicking his tail at Thrackerzod. “This way. The king will want to see you.”

Bronzefin led them further into the cave. After they turned a corner, they found a much larger cavern that had light in it. Hundreds of cats padded around the folds of the earth, moving in and out of holes they used for their dens. The lights of the cavern came from a mixture of lanterns and artificial lights, presumably stolen from the humans at one time or another. Every cat turned to stare at the ponies as they passed. The expressions were mixed — most were fearful, some were angry, some were curious, and a couple looked like they had been waiting for the moment for a long, long time.

They were led to the center of the cavern, where a decent sized pile of technology stood. Allure saw a few energy weapons, generators, and a handful of other metallic things that were being torn apart to make cat armor. Sitting at the foot of this pile was a large, slender cat with golden fur.

Bronzefin and Graymint bowed.

The king detected this motion with his ears, turning around to face them with a somber expression. “Rise, my subjects.” They did. “What have you brought?”

Graymint cleared his throat. “Help from another world.”

The other cats that had gathered began to pass whispers around.
Allure glanced behind herself, a sour expression forming. “Is there a place we can talk privately, mister… king?”

“Goldsire,” he said. “And yes, there is.” He led them to a hole that came out in a room-sized extension of the cavern. In the center was an artificial blue light sitting on top of a flat, highly refractive crystal.

Goldsire put his paw on the crystal and closed his eyes, letting out a breath. “It feels so wrong to have a twoleg light in this sacred place. But none can see otherwise.”

“…Should we be here?” Allure asked.

“Possibly not,” Goldsire said, sitting down. “But at this point I… I wonder if any of our traditions still mean anything.”

“The crystal has power,” Thrackerzod said.

“I had heard you unicorns might be able to sense that sort of thing,” Goldsire said, smiling softly. “This is the glintstone. It has a connection to our ancestors. All ancestors of all cat tribes, since all of us are here now.” He turned to them. “These are rough times for us. Graymint seems to think you want to help us, and I see it in your eyes. But I also see doubt in others.”

Thrackerzod nodded. “We are here to determine if we can help, or if we should.”

“We want to,” Allure emphasized, “But… We need to examine the situation before we’ll know if we can or should.”

Goldsire nodded slowly. “And that’s why I brought you here. I, even as the king of all cats of the old way, do not have the authority to tell you that.”

“The crystal does?” Thrackerzod said, raising her eyebrows.

“Yes. Our ancestors speak through it to those who are willing to listen.”

Thrackerzod craned her neck and lit her horn. “Then let’s see what they have to sa-“

“Not you,” Goldsire said. “Your essence is too dark.” He gestured toward Allure. “You touch the crystal. Let them speak to you.”

Allure nodded, touching a hoof to the crystal.

She felt herself enter a shifting dream-state. Sensations blurred, but her mind was sharp.

In front of her was a rusty, almost flame-colored, cat.

“…Hi,” Allure said.

The cat smiled. “Hello, Allure.”

“Ah. You know my name. Y’know, it’d only be fair if you told me yours.”

“I… am Firestar.” The cat stared into the distance, his face telling of one deep in thought. “I am a cat from the far distant past to the cats you see now.”

“He wasn’t kidding when he said ancestors, was he? What are you, a ghost?”
Firestar smirked. “What I am is not important, curious one. I am here to help you make a decision.”

“Uh… Okay? How?”

“I can show you the cats,” Firestar said. “The cats of this era on the other side.”

The background shifted into focus. Instead of a deep cavern, they saw hundreds of cats standing in a field of grass around a dimensional portal, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. Three cats stood on the edge of the portal, the blue one on the left giving a speech.

“The old ways are that of a warrior,” she said. “Violent, shortsighted, and built on strength more than anything else. It is a cruel system, one that has forced us to lose many young ones. Clans of cats live together, further dividing themselves with bursts of war. Others live alone, in mountains, in dens, never looking beyond. Better than violent death and rage, but it still stagnates… And then there’s the ‘new’ idea of a king. Of a ‘sire’.”

She shook her head. “Goldsire has a powerful lineage, and is an honorable cat. But he is attached to the old ways. He wants to bring the cats together, but also keep them prepared to fight, to divide. He claims to desire change and unity… But all he wants is to keep the old ways. That is why we banished him. We should instead take on a new culture in this new age – not one of warriors, but one of workers. Of thinkers. Of Seers.

“I encourage you not to fight with your neighbors who love the old ways. Treat them with respect and love. Get them to understand. We will not survive in this new world with the factions the old ways encouraged beyond all else.” She paused, and there were yowls of approval. There was more to the speech, but the scenery shifted instead of letting Allure hear the rest of it.

She saw the same cat, shouting at another cat. “Goldsire did WHAT?”

“He’s gathering followers.”

“W-does he want me to kill him?” she shouted with tears. “He was supposed to go and live his life! Not… Do this! Agh!” She pounded her paw into the ground. “I thought I could…” She shook her head.

“Drystar…?”

“His leaders are still here,” Drystar sighed. “If they find that he’s still doing this… We’re finished.”

“What are we going to do? We can’t go back…”

Drystar pulled a gun out of a box and handed it to the other cat. “Take care of them. Remember, nine times, just to be sure.”

“…All right.”

Drystar wiped her eyes. “I’m sorry, Goldsire… You needed to admit defeat… You needed to let the world move on…”

The scene shifted again, this time to a place where it was raining and thunder boomed. Drystar was there, shooting Goldsire with the energy gun strapped to her front paw. It was touch-activated, so she could use it easily.

Goldsire got back up, grunting.
“HOW MANY LIVES DID THEY GIVE YOU?” Drystar shouted.

“I… have no idea,” Goldsire admitted.

“Goldsire! Just… If you keep going like this, there won’t be any cats left! No clans or nation!”

“I can’t let us forget our tradition!”

They clashed again, the image shifting back to Firestar.

Allure sighed. “This is a sad story, isn’t it?”

Firestar nodded. “We turned Goldsire into the king of cats to face against the incursions of other worlds. That was needed. But then… Then the cats themselves divided after they had a paw under themselves. Something we could never have foreseen. Goldsire turned to the old ways, but many turned to the new ideas coming from other worlds.”

“Which side do you think is right?”

“Neither of them,” Firestar admitted. “There’s a middle position that no cat is thinking of. But there’s a false dichotomy, and if you’re not with either side you’re just a powerless loner.”

“Ah…” Allure said. “I see.” She sighed. “But if they keep going… Was Drystar right? Will they destroy each other?”

“Something always remains,” Firestar said. Allure got the impression he was speaking from experience.

“Right…” Allure shook her head. “Goodbye then, I guess?”

“You’re a good… person, Allure. I’m sorry you’re in such a difficult position.”

Allure nodded. “Thanks.”

Then she was back in the cavern.

Goldsire saw the look in her eyes. “Ah. …So I was right.”

Allure looked at the ground. “…We can’t help. We shouldn’t help. This question… This is a question you need to answer for yourselves. I can’t tell you if the old or new ways are better.”

Bot beeped. “We’re… not helping them?”

Allure shook her head. “No… I saw the other side. They… It’s complicated. Either side we back will just create a tragedy.”

Goldsire nodded. “I understand. I shall take you out of the cavern. You should leave quickly before the other cats discover you aren’t actually helping.”

Squeaky nodded. “Good thought. …Thanks, Goldsire, for understanding.”

“T“I think I always knew it was a cat problem,” Goldsire admitted, beginning to move out of the cavern.

Thrackerzod lit her horn. “I have a faster way out.” She teleported all of them to the edge of the cavern.
“Such power…” Goldsire said, laughing to himself. “If we had your strength… We wouldn’t be able to lose.”

“Yeah…” Allure said. “Sorry.”

“I understand,” Goldsire said, bowing his head. “May we meet again.” He turned around, walking back to the cavern.

Allure, Squeaky, and Bot turned to leave. Thrackerzod stared after Goldsire for a moment. “…Screw it. We can give you something. To make the fight a fairer one.”

Goldsire turned and blinked. “What?”

Thrackerzod summoned an eldritch entity from the earth – a short, blue creature made of a few dozen spinning squares. “This creature is bound to your soul and will do as you order. Use it wisely.”

Goldsire nodded. “Thank you, Thrackerzod, for this gift.”

Thrackerzod smiled. “You had a strong heart, and a lower position. The gift is something.”

The two parties nodded to each other – and then left.

“You’re a big softy,” Allure nudged Thrackerzod.

“I can, and will, turn your mind into muffins if you continue to prod me about that. The muffins are metaphorical by the way, I will really be turning your mind into something you don’t have a word for.”

“Softy.”

Thrackerzod huffed and teleported the four of them out of the cave.

To their surprise, they weren’t alone when they came out. What was even more surprising was that three human men stood there – all clearly alternate versions of the same person.

The front version had spiky blonde hair and wore an outfit that made it look like he had grenades on his arms.

“MERODI!” He shouted, opening his palm at the four of them. This motion triggered an explosion, sending the League of Sweetie Belles flying.

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O’Neill and Iroh sat in the back of Iroh’s Teashop, just enjoying life.

“We’re getting old,” Iroh observed, suddenly. “I’m almost eighty.”

O’Neill flexed his wrist. “Seventy-somethin’-or-other.”

Iroh chuckled. “You don’t look a day over sixty-somethin’-or-other.”

O’Neill looked down at his cup of tea, contemplating.

Iroh raised an inquisitive eyebrow at this response. “Something bothering you?”

“No.” O’Neill said. After a two-second pause he spoke again. “Yes.”
Iroh set his tea down and fixed O’Neill with a warm glare. “It’s just two old men here, General. Nobody going to judge you for having late-life crazy thoughts.”

O’Neill looked at his arm. “Something happened during the fight at the University,” he said. “I was injected with machines of some kind. Nanobots. They’re still in me. Nothing we did could remove them, and they didn’t seem to be hurting anything.”

Iroh furrowed his brow. “They’re doing something, though.”

“Yeah. I don’t think I’m aging.” He looked at a piece of calligraphy Iroh had hanging on the wall. “The doctors aren’t quite sure yet, but I’ve gotten a few of them to at least take me seriously at this point. I really should be falling apart at the seams, but nope! Still as sprightly as ever.”

“And snarky.”


“If you are immortal, you have good company,” Iroh observed. “And, to be frank, we humans could stand to have a leader who never has to go onto the next world.”

“I got that,” O’Neill said. “I’m mainly upset that I got stuck with a sixty-somethin’-or-other body! Do you have any idea the kind of back pain this body has?”

Iroh laughed heartily. “I think I have a pretty good idea, Jack!”

“You’d think immortality nanobots would at least fix back pain, but nope, sorry, no can do! Keep that back pain to remember us by!”

“You’re quite the old coot, Jack.”

“You’re one to talk. I hear you move that figure of yours like a liquid whenever you need to get serious!”

Iroh chuckled. “The last time I needed to get serious… That was a long time ago. I haven’t exerted myself that much since I trained Corona.” He frowned.

“…Memories?”

“Of all those I ever trained, even in part. Zuko. Azula. Lu Ten…” Iroh shook his head. “Maybe I should train Izumi… But she’s still young. And I have Corea to watch out for.”

“How’s the little bundle of power?”

“Showing a lot of promise. I’ve seen small manifestations of all four elements already. I wonder if it’s because her body is one more naturally suited to power…”

“Any magic-y stuff?”

“Not yet. I fully expect it to appear with time, however. I just… I hope I’ll still be around to teach her when she is finally old enough.”

“I’m told Equis Cosmic has fancy age-extension medicine,” O’Neill pointed out.

“Yes… That only does so much, you know.”

“I could get Thor on the phone. Clone bodies are all the rage, I hear.”
Iroh chuckled. “Thanks for the offer, but I’ll decline. I will know when my time comes. I will journey to the Spirit World of my universe that day. I’ve already got a device with direct coordinates. I will become one with the spirits.”

“…You’ve been planning that for a while, haven’t you?”

“Indeed.”

“Now you’re just copying Teal’c.”

Iroh smirked. “…Indeed.”

“Dammit.”

Iroh chuckled. “Regardless, the day I join the spirits is not here yet. I will stay a mentor to Corea and the Elemental Nations as long as I am able. I suggest you do the same for yours.”

O’Neill nodded.

Iroh took a sip of his tea – only to find it empty. “…Wh…”

O’Neill snapped his fingers, revealing that Iroh had been holding a napkin ring, not his teacup. O’Neill had the teacup in his hand, drinking from it.

“…Crimson Sushi…” Iroh said.

O’Neill smirked, scratching the head of his Stand. “Gotcha. Do you have any idea how hard it is to catch you off guard?”

“Extremely. It is quite an achievement, what you just did.”


“Such a strange power… to switch the perception of objects. For all I know, right now, you are actually in another chair…”

As it turned out, O’Neill really was in another chair. He saluted.

“That’s it, I challenge you to a game of Pai Sho. Now.”

“You’re on.”

~~~

Katsuki Bakugo had a curse.

That curse was that no matter what he did, he would always run into alternate versions of himself in the multiverse. Alternate versions of himself that annoyed him to no end.

Almost all other Katsuki Bakugos he had met had the same exact curse.

Most notably, this the time the curse had manifested when, somehow, three of them had been assigned to a single USM unit. They had taken to aggressively calling each other Splodey, Shardey, and Boring.

Then they’d been told to go capture a golden cat.
And then they’d found that Merodi Universalis was involved, in the form of four cute, adorable horses.

Splodey had been the one to unleash the initial explosion that sent the four horses flying.

“We could have taken a simpler route,” Boring said in his trademark deadpan voice. He wore a suit and his hair was combed like some stupid pretentious office worker.

“Screw you, we don’t get enough action,” Shardey said, his hair just as spiked as Splodey’s, but of a light blue color. Shardey leaped into the air and thrust his hand forward, creating one of his signature frostbomb explosions, coating the unicorns in a sheen of ice.

Bot didn’t care about the ice. She deployed her rocket launchers. “TARGET ACQUIRED!”

Boring used the cover provided by the immensely noisy rockets to move unseen behind Bot. He unleashed an explosion identical to Splodey’s at point-blank range. Bot’s thick metal casing kept her alive, but she took heavy structural damage.

“WAIT!” Allure shouted. “WE DON’T HAVE TO FIGHT!”

“Coward!” Splodey and Shardey shouted. Then they turned to glare at each other. “I SAID IT FIRST!”

“Imbeciles,” Boring muttered.

“DO YOU WANNA GO?” the other two shouted.

“Yes,” Thrackerzod declared, punching the two aggressive men in their faces with eldritch ropes. “I grow tired of your antics and it hasn’t even been a minute.”

Boring adjusted his suit. “I find myself agreeing with you. However, I do believe they are correct in assuming we must fight.”

“Why?” Allure asked. “…Why are you even here?”

“We need to capture or kill a golden cat!” Shardey sputtered. “You seen it?”

Splodey facepalmed. “Ugh… How are you so stupid!? Don’t tell the enemy the mission!”

“I’m going to stick this frostbomb so far up yo-“

“Allure shot a glare at him. “So, can you all tell me why you need to kill the ‘golden cat’?”

“Oh, so you have seen him?” Shardey grinned. “I got informaaaaation!”

Splodey slapped him enough to shock him, but not enough to lower his fighting capacity. “Tell us, pointy.”

“What is with that insult today?” Allure muttered. “No, I don’t think so. In fact, I think we’re going to stop you from interfering.”

“OH REALLY?” Splodey shouted. “You don’t want to go up against the USM, unicorns…”

“Watch us,” Squeaky said, casting a sleep spell on Splodey.
He didn’t pass out immediately – but he felt it coming. So he grabbed Squeaky’s face and unleashed an explosion, sending the two of them flying – both out cold.

Allure and Thrackerzod remained against Shardey and Boring. Allure jumped at Boring while Thrackerzod menacingly stepped toward Shardey.

Thrackerzod began tracing designs in the ground with her horn. “You’re going to enter a world of unimaginable pain, freezing guy.”

Shardey leaped toward Thrackerzod, only for her to use telekinesis to toss him into a nearby tree.

Allure entered close hoof-to-hand combat with Boring, taking advantage of the fact his explosions needed at least an arm-length to pack a full punch. For once she was glad she was small. She used her magic to add little touches of speed here, a little extra power there. She could tell she was wearing him down.

Shardey jumped toward Thrackerzod again, this time using his ice explosions to push himself forward. “DIE!!!!”

Thrackerzod continued drawing circles in the ground, using only the slightest bit of magic to divert Shardey to the side and into a tree.

Boring was smart, Allure discovered. His explosions had begun to point toward the ground, where the heat would spread toward her back hooves. The burns were getting more aggravated over time – eventually she was going to succumb to the pain and make a mistake. She knew it.

“Done,” Thrackerzod declared, lighting her horn. “Time for a Ga’evnuoeawah. Side effects may include a sudden desire to lick trees for sustenance.”

She tried to complete the summon – and nothing happened.

She saw that Boring and Allure’s fight had moved right next to her, breaking the edge of the circle.

Thrackerzod realized with alarm that Boring had led Allure there.

Boring smirked, pointing a palm at Thrackerzod. “Gotcha.”

The explosion tossed the eldritch filly into a nearby tree. She would have gotten up and burnt Boring to bits, but it just so happened to be the tree Shardey was thrown into previously.

“Double gotcha.”

Thrackerzod swore in eldritch as she was frozen in an explosion.

Allure managed to deliver a fully-enhanced roundhouse kick to Boring’s skull, knocking him out and probably giving him a concussion as well. She breathed heavily, in and out. She was out of energy…

So was Shardey, though.

The two of them ran at each other – and passed out from Shardey’s freezing explosion.

The fight was a draw.

Unfortunately Boring had a transponder on him, and had sent a signal to the USM a few minutes ago.
A ship arrived and teleported them all away before leaving the universe.
Allure was the last of the Sweetie Belles to come to. The first of her senses that worked was her sense of smell, picking up on the aroma of freshly prepared tea. She opened her eyes, finding herself on a large horseshoe-shaped couch with a table in the center. The tea was right in front of her eyes.

“Good. You’re awake,” Thrackerzod said. “If I had to refrain from blowing this place to the depths of darkness for a few more minutes I believe I would have snapped my own brain stem.”

“Where are we?” Allure asked, looking around. She answered her own question before anypony offered an explanation. The room was simple, well furnished, and had the USM’s stars-and-stripes logo on the door. “Ah. Fancy prison.”

Squeaky shrugged. “One way of looking at it. I think they’d like to think of it as ‘a room to discuss business’. I wouldn’t be surprised if this area is also used for official briefings.”

Allure rubbed the back of her head. “So… We got beaten?”

“We got unlucky,” Thrackerzod bristled.

“You just don’t like losing.”

“Who does?”

“Life signs detected!” Bot shouted, arming her guns at the door.

The door opened unassumingly and the froggy form of Froppy poked herself in. “Ribbit?”

“Oh. Hey Froppy,” Allure said. “Sending you in to get us calm, are they?”

“Yes,” Froppy confirmed. “Three guesses as to who’s behind me.”

The four of them all answered.


Everyone turned to stare at Bot.

“What? …I want eggs.”

“That was four guesses,” Froppy pointed out. “Since three of them were the same… Yeah.” She opened the door the rest of the way. Sure enough, it was Ambassador Valentine in his trademark pinkish suit and long curled hair.

“May I come in?” Valentine asked.

“Yes,” Allure said. “I’m sure we can figure this out if we talk it through rationally.”

Valentine nodded, taking a seat on the couch alongside Froppy. “If you don’t mind, allow me to regale you with what I think happened.”

“Go right ahead,” Squeaky allowed.
Valentine folded his hands. “I believe you arrived in the universe at the behest of one of its cats pleading for your help. You went to investigate the claims to see if they were legitimate. Finding it not to your liking, you were leaving and ran into my team. I assume the ensuing battle was their fault, and the draw due more to crazed explosions than actions that could reflect on any particular individual’s competence as a fighter. At which point ‘reinforcements’ arrived, beamed up everyone detected at the site and brought you here.”

“Pretty good,” Allure admitted. “You left out the part about your team being there to capture and-or kill Goldsire.”

“It was their mission, yes,” Valentine said, cautiously.

“Why?” Allure asked.

Valentine looked at the USM’s logo. “…The drive of the United States of the Multiverse is to expand and improve the ideals of the democratic republic in any and all universes. We take personal interest in any society undergoing an upheaval of this sort, supporting the side that desires the democracy.”

“They don’t even know you’re supporting them,” Allure said.

“You never visited our side,” Valentine asserted.

“I contacted their ancestors. If they knew of your involvement, they would have shown me. Because it would have helped me make my decision.” She pointed a hoof. “We left because we thought this fight needed to be their decision. If you are interfering, it’s predecided in favor of the side you want to win!”

“You’ll adapt them into the USM down the road,” Squeaky added. “Probably along with the rest of the planet. More power for you. More control.”

Valentine furrowed his brow. “So, are you saying you intend to interfere now?”

“If you promise to pull out, we won’t,” Allure declared. “But if you stay involved… We’ll involve ourselves with the other side to make it a fair fight. They need to decide this for themselves.”

“Do you want to start an international incident over a bunch of cats?” Valentine asked.

“Wh-”

“If you go through with this it could lead to war between our powers.”

The Sweetie Belles froze – except for Thrackerzod. “He’s exaggerating. He’s not willing to go to war over a ‘bunch of cats’ either.”

“So we’ll help them,” Allure asserted, “and then the fight will be even, and it’ll still be their choice.”

Valentine narrowed his eyes. “You have quite the double standard, don’t you?”

“…Come again?” Allure asked.

“You’ve done the same thing we’re doing,” Valentine declared, removing a file from his coat pocket. “History of the Gem Vein. Invigorating read on how a set of universes used political pressure to convert an alien culture into something more appropriate and to their liking.”

“That’s different, they were wr-“
Froppy interrupted her. “The USM asserts that anything that is not a democratic republic of some sort is wrong on a moral principle. Ribbit.”

Thrackerzod narrowed her eyes. “So, what, all the other nations are wrong to you? What, you want to convert us as well?”

Valentine chose his words carefully. “If we thought it were a worthwhile devotion of resources, we would seek that out, yes.”

“How would you go about even explaining the concept of democracy to the Embodiment? Inequality is ingrained into their biology.”

“You mistake democracy for equality,” Valentine said. “I am the most powerful man in the United States of the Multiverse, barring the current president herself; I am clearly not equal to everyone else in this nation. The goal is to ensure even the lowest of the low have a voice.”

“Then you can’t compare our actions with the Gem Vein to what you’re doing,” Allure declared. “You’re very certain you have the right answer to government. We’re not. We just knew that what was happening there was wrong.” She folded her hooves. “I’m not backing down.”

Valentine’s eyes looked menacing for the first time in the meeting. He activated something – making Thrackerzod jump. “Only you can see the Stand? Not surprised.” Valentine gestured at his invisible companion. “This is Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap, or D4C. It has the power to slip into alternate universes via a complex method known as ‘compression between objects’. It was given to me, and I used it to uncover the secrets of the multiverse. This Stand is the reason the USM exists.”

He’s their version of Eve, Allure realized.

“Why are you telling us this?” Thrackerzod demanded.

Valentine glared at her. “D4C’s method of multiversal travel has inherent within it a slight instability quotient. When traveling the multiverse via D4C, any alternate versions of the same individual who come into contact with each other will create a spatial paradox and explode into nothingness.” He leaned in toward them. “Isn’t that a horrible side effect?”

“Are you threatening us!?” Squeaky declared.

“I’m letting you know what I alone am capable of,” Valentine declared. “My powers as Ambassador could do more. I can cut off trade. I can feed you false information. I can round up all your ambassadors and have them executed.”

“Empty threats,” Thrackerzod asserted.

“…Analysis indicates he’s not lying,” Bot said.

“You can fool that test.”

“He would cut off trade,” Squeaky said. “It works for him. And we do have to ask… Are we willing to ruin connections with the USM over these cats?”

Allure sucked in a breath of air, prepared for a long rant, but decided against it. She sighed. “Fine. You win, Ambassador. We won’t mess with what you’re doing. But I will let Eve know exactly what you’re doing. She’s not going to be happy.”

“We aren’t ‘happy’ with anything any of you are doing,” Valentine pointed out. “But nothing will
change so long as you take no action. You have my word.” He stood up, nodded to them, and used D4C to leave the universe.

Froppy let out a sigh. “I’m sorry, ribbit.”

Allure turned to her. “…Do you really believe what he says? About your way being the only right way?”

“It’s done a lot of good,” Froppy admitted. “Though he was overselling it. Internally, the USM has a lot of problems with factions and infighting. I believe that, in general, what we do benefits the multiverse. But I know the real reason we do almost all of this is so we can get more power while the public applauds us for ‘saving’ people.”

“That’s messed up.”

“Tell me your system’s perfect.”

“…Right,” Allure sighed. “Are those exploding guys okay?”

Froppy smiled. “They’re fine, ribbit. Just as angry as always. Maybe vowing to kill you. I wouldn’t worry about it.” She started to hop away. “Right this way, we can send you back to Celestia City.”

They followed her out.

~~~

Evening lowered the sun of Equis Vitis while standing on one of the many balconies of Canterlot. Princess Luna, standing alongside her, lifted the moon into position among the stars. Once again, it was night on Equis Vitis. Decades ago, this would have been an indication for the capital of Equestria to go to sleep. No such thing happened anymore – the city’s lights remained on, and the streets just as crowded. It was still day in other universes, so the activity of portals and ships never died down.

“It’s harder to see the stars with this light,” Eve commented. “The city may be beautiful… But it’s taking away from the night.”

“It is ironic,” Luna said, “that when ponies learn to appreciate the night, they lessen it.”

“By a similar metric, they don’t appreciate the day either. It is just a setting for them to go about their lives. Very few take the moment to appreciate what’s around them.”

“What a fool I was back then…” Luna shook her head. “Even if the night lasted forever, ponies would not understand. If only I had spent more time observing what ponies actually thought of the day…”

Eve put a leg around Luna. The dark alicorn was still significantly taller than her, so she had to stretch to do so and angle her head in a slightly uncomfortable position so she could still see Luna’s mouth move. “That’s behind you.”

“I’m aware. I’m also not dwelling on it if that’s what you’re worrying about. I’m just… struck by how insignificant it would have been, in the end.”

“I think we both know there was more to what you did than just wanting the night to be appreciated.”
Luna smiled sadly, looking up at the moon. “Yes… …Hold on…”

“What?”

“IS THAT A NEW CRATER ON THE MOON!?”

Eve pulled back from Luna. “Hey, hey, calm do-“

“I will find whoever is responsible and ensure they suffer a fate so infamous it will go down in history…”

“Luna… you say that every time.”

“The fact that a pattern has developed clearly indicates more strict measures need to be taken!” she huffed. “The moon is not a pincushion!”

“Of course not. It’s your symbol. I’m sure the systems around the moon have already picked up those responsible and given them what they deserve.”

“I’m going to order the construction of a force field around the moon,” Luna muttered.

“That’s… not a good use of resources.”

Luna nodded slowly. “Yes… Yes, that is true.” She looked back up at the moon, a forlorn expression on her face. “You know, I go back there in my personal ship a lot. I find all the marks I made while on there, all the things I destroyed, and all the craters I made. The moon’s surface is a thousand years of my history, Eve. When it is destroyed or altered… it feels like part of me is personally defaced.”

Eve nodded. “…Is there a way we can revert it?”

“Who would think treating the entire moon like a restoration project would be worthwhile?” Luna asked. “Us, perhaps – but our ponies? It’s not a simple job, and beyond that it’s difficult. Destruction is easy.”

“I’ll see about extending the satellite network then. Make the moon’s no-fly zone harder to get into. We can afford to let a couple ships patrol.”

“And then someone uses an FTL jump to surpass all of that just because they can,” Luna pointed out. “The problem isn’t security, Eve. The problem is there’s always one person who just wants to do something because those in charge told them not to.”

Eve sighed. “The moon’s just too big to protect. Unless we want to hide it in another universe, but that… Well, that would remove it from the night sky.”

“How much power would a portal of that size require?”

“About as much as it takes to get to Earth Tau’ri normally,” Eve concluded after a quick mental calculation.

“We would have to replace it with another moon, from a dead world…” Luna began to muse. Then she laughed. “What are we even talking about Eve?”

“Moving the moon?”

“It strikes me as absurd that we could actually do that. We won’t, the ponies like their moon, but the
fact remains we can. I used to think Discord had too much power…”

“We could move all of Equis if we really wanted,” Eve pointed out. “I wonder how that would go…”

“And I think you’re getting a little too tired, Eve.”

Eve yawned. “Yeah… I’m turning in. Enjoy the night.” She nuzzled Luna’s neck as part of the farewell.

After a few seconds, Luna turned to her. “Do you ever miss your castle?”

“Sometimes,” Eve admitted. “But I need to be here – Canterlot should always be the home of the pony who raises the sun. Plus, it’s not like it’s uncomfortable or anything, and I trust Renee to take good care of things. I hear the Tree has started sending more of her agents on friendship missions!”

“The Tree of Harmony has learned to trust her?”

“I think it always trusted her and was just waiting for her to get settled in.” A smile crossed her face. “You know, it’s always fun when it calls humans. The symbols it comes up with… Jotaro’s is a square with a hand inside holding a pair of dolphins in a heart shape.”

“What special talent could that represent?”

“Punching and marine biology combination. I think.”

“Interesting. You still need to sleep, Evening Sparkle.”

“I’m going, I’m going,” Eve huffed, teleporting herself to her room.

Luna continued to look at the night sky – avoiding the moon so as to not annoy herself.

She looked at the Stars.

“We have a lot of power now,” she addressed them. “Maybe not as much as you had, but certainly enough to warrant your attention. Why are you always so silent?”

There was no response.

~~~

The core four Sweeties sat at a table in the League, staring off into space with forlorn expressions.

“Sent the report to Renee,” Bot chirped.

“…Now what?” Allure asked. “I feel… I feel like we’re not done. We’ve got to do something here.

“If we fight the USM they will retaliate in kind,” Squeaky said. “We may not have to worry about a war, but there are many other things they could do. Many other things. They’re just as powerful as us, if not more so. And they are older.”

Thrackerzod narrowed her eyes. “Age means little.”

“You know what I mean. They have experience. More territory. We just have more friends.”

Allure groaned. “Are we sure we can’t do anything to stop them?”
“Not unless we want to risk their wrath,” Squeaky replied. “And it certainly seemed like Valentine was just the ruthless sort to go through with threats.”

“He could be bluffing,” Thrackerzod pointed out. “We know he was in some of his threats.”

“Not all of them.”

“Yes…”

Allure furrowed her brow. “What we need to do is find a way to solve the problem without him knowing we were involved… But how would we do that?”

“Ask another nation or third party?” Thrackerzod suggested.

“The Sparkle Census!” Allure piped up. “They care about things like this, right?”

“They wouldn’t want to risk an incident either,” Squeaky argued.

“Right… The Embodiment wouldn’t care… The Melnorme would have to be paid… Hrm, do you think we could trick Jenny into doing it?”

“Excellent plan,” Thrackerzod deadpanned. “Not likely to backfire in any way.”

“Right…” She leaned on her hoof, thinking deeply. “What else…”

“Sombra,” Bot said.

Everypony turned to look at her.

“Sombra. She knows things, and likes to expose secrets that don’t benefit her.”

Allure’s eyes widened. “Just direct her to the right secret and she’ll take care of the rest. Bot, you’re a genius!”

“How do we get in contact with Sombra though?” Sparky asked. “She’s the kind of person who finds you, you don’t find her.”

“Hrm…” Allure said, thinking deeply. “Bot, can you scour the internet?”

Bot beeped sadly. “She hides too well. Already looked.”

“Corona,” Thrackerzod said. “Corona knows how to get in contact with her.”

Allure raised an eyebrow. “What’s Corona up to these days, anyway? I haven’t heard anything about her in… Well, months.”

Bot whirred through her data banks. “Corona Shimmer is currently serving as the royal scientist for Lai under Queen Toph Beifong. Should be on Lai right now.”

“Then we have a goal,” Allure declared. “We don’t have to do anything. We just suggest that Sombra does something. The cat world will have the USM influence jeopardized and they can get back to making their own decisions.”

The other Sweeties nodded. “Right!”

“Now we just have to charter a ship to Lai…” Allure smirked. “Thrackerzod, teleport us to the
Thrackerzod did as asked, teleporting them to a small six-seater ship they kept in the League’s basement. It was one of the simplest ship designs available – a simple flying saucer with a white disc and pink-tinted dome. Squeaky activated the teleporter and they appeared outside Celestia City. The messy ever-changing conglomeration was beautiful in its own way, glinting in the local star’s light.

“Jave this place,” Allure said out of the blue. “So… different.”


The Skimmer created a dimensional portal and left USM space.

~~~

Queen Toph Beifong loved her job. Something just felt right about her being in charge of the lives of millions of adorable magic horses of varying races. She sometimes wondered if she was going evil, but Lady Rarity and Lieshy assured her she wasn’t. They told her she acted with a decisive, yet caring undertone.

She wasn’t really sure how she was doing that, but apparently she was. Sure made things easier.

Her enjoyment of becoming Queen was a bit of a surprise to her – she thought she’d miss all the adventures, all the new locations, all the action, and all the spontaneity. As it turned out, while there was a lack of new scenery in her new line of work, there were certainly adventures, action, and spontaneity aplenty. She was never bored with the abundance of magic, ancient runes, and colorful ponies in this world.

Oh, and there were the ’mighty warriors’ who thought they could challenge her to the throne through the ancient rite of combat. Those were really fun.

Today it was a golden deer-unicorn with a number of magic artifacts embedded in his three cranial extrusions. He stood in the center of the throne room before Toph and her two advisors, Lady Rarity and Lieshy. “I am the great mage Golden Fir, and I challenge you for the right to the throne.”

Toph smiled. “Of course! Where do you want to do it, Golden? Palace grounds? I could schedule it as part of the next coliseum show if you prefer an audience. There’s also the option of taking it offworld…”

“I will fight you here, in this hall.”

Toph’s smile vanished. “…But then I can’t have fun with you. Repair costs are demanding. Come on, let’s do it somewhere more open.”

“I cannot wait a moment longer to face you,” Golden demanded.

Toph raised an eyebrow – she suspected something was up. She looked to Lieshy and nodded. Lieshy pulled out a scanning device and began to examine it.

“Are you afraid?”

“No, merely checking to see if you have outside help,” Toph declared. “Lieshy?”

“No more ticking.”

Time won’t stop. “Right.” Toph drew the Master Sword and pointed it at Golden. “Are you ready?”
“Yes.”

“Then we start… now.” Toph hesitated for a moment, to ensure Golden would take the first move. He used all three of his magical points to send a laser surrounded in a whirlwind at her. Toph didn’t dodge – instead she made a chunk of the floor shoot up into Golden’s head to knock him silly. Golden’s laser hit Toph’s armor. The pristine plates were magic resistant, so the attack should have done nothing, but Golden had prepared for that, somehow using a magic lock.

Luckily the alloy was otherworldly and able to absorb most of the attack anyway. Toph went sliding back down to her throne for a rather cushy landing. She smiled – Golden was still dazed. The Queen pushed off the throne and swung the Master Sword wide, the holy blade cutting off Golden’s horn and antlers.

He screamed for a few seconds before passing out from the pain. Toph sheathed the Master Sword.

Lieshy put away her phone. “The ambulance will be here shortly to get those back on.”

Toph took a piece of paper out of her pocket and pinned it to Golden’s ear. “The doctors know to make him read my ‘do not challenge again’ memo once he wakes up, right?”

“They should. If they don’t, their jobs are on the line,” Lady Rarity decreed.

“Nice. Now, if there are no further interruptions, we can finally go over that report on our moon colon-“

Lieshy’s phone rang again. She answered it, listening to a report without saying anything. She turned to Toph. “The League of Sweetie Belles is here to talk to you about something.”

“This is either going to be quick, or absurdly long,” Toph mused. “If it’s the former it’ll be nice to see them, if it’s the latter I’m expecting epic quest. Let them in!”

Lieshy relayed the message. Thrackerzod teleported the four of them into the throne room. Everypony except Thrackerzod bowed to Toph. “Your majesty,” Allure said.

Toph grunted in amusement. “You know you don’t have to do that.”

“It’s the proper way,” Squeaky said, looking up.

“So, watcha wantin’?” Toph asked, sitting back down in her throne.

“It’s… Embarrassingly trivial,” Squeaky admitted. “We can’t find Corona. We need to.”

“Oh,” Toph said, pondering this. “She’s at her house. The pale orange house on Imperial Drive.”

“Why isn’t she in her lab?” Bot asked, confused.

“She…” Toph paused, pondering the question.

“She’s taken to working alone,” Lady Rarity answered. “She does most of her work from home now. Pretty sure she has around three basements filled with things. She still sends reports to us and will go out when we ask for her, but otherwise…”

“…She’s depressed?” Allure blurted. “How come nobody told us?”

“It’s been this way for a while,” Lieshy said. “Ever since the Bloodbath. She’s improved somewhat
but still prefers to keep to herself.”

“Don’t worry,” Lady Rarity said. “We ensure she gets visitors and we drop by regularly. She’s doing fine, just needs to work through things on her own time.”

“It’s been two years,” Thrackerzod pointed out.

“You can’t force these things. She’ll come out when she’s ready, though when she does she is going to be a different mare.”

“…Would it be bad to ask her for a favor?” Allure asked.

“No, shouldn’t be,” Lieshy said. “She may or may not be excited to see you, but asking for a favor would be no problem. What were you going to ask her?”

“We need to contact Sombra,” Squeaky answered.

Toph, Lady Rarity, and Lieshy stared at her with blank expressions.

“I take it that was the one thing we shouldn’t ask her.”

“She…” Toph folded her hands together. “Let’s just say she and Sombra haven’t spoken in a long time as far as we know.”

“You should still go ask,” Lady Rarity said. “If you want to contact Sombra, it must be important.”

“Right…” Allure said, rubbing her head. “Ugh, today’s going to be a fun one… Thrackerzod, take us away.”

The Sweeties were gone.

Toph sighed. “I miss her being around.”

Lady Rarity put a hoof on her. “I know. But we have to be patient.”

~~~

Corona sat on her couch, watching TV. That’s what she told herself she was doing anyway. In reality, she was laying on her couch, the TV was on, and she was staring at the ceiling with a lazy set of eyes.

This was how she spent most of her time these days. That was, tell herself she was doing something – watching TV, running experiments, talking to people – but really just staring off into space somewhere else and blanking on everything.

There wasn’t even really anything to think about. Just… stare.

It took a lot less energy this way.

A thought rose to the surface for a moment: did she need to check on her labs? No… They should all be autonomous for the next few hours. No data to collect…

The next thought that surfaced was a question: did she even have any idea what was going on in the TV show she was watching? A documentary of some kind… Oh… Oh, it was on the differing histories of unicorn magic in the multiverse.
Interesting.

But she already knew most of that. The guy who was talking had a funny face though. She started staring into the face, zoning out on it. The scene changed, startling her perceptions. She didn’t make a big deal out of it, turning back to the ceiling again.

Corona was relaxed, at least.

…Was that the doorbell ringing? No, couldn’t be. Nobody was scheduled to come over and this wasn’t the time of day for an unscheduled visit. Definitely couldn’t be the doorbell.

Why did she hear it again? …And again?

That probably was the doorbell. She groaned, stumbling off the couch and falling onto the ground. “Ugh…” She had told Toph to make sure those door-to-door people didn’t bother her. This was really cutting into her… relaxing time. And she couldn’t have that. She was going to give these people a piece of her mind.

She tossed the door open with her magic and a foul expression. “I to-“ she paused before she completed the second word, realizing it was just the League of Sweetie Belles. “Oh. Can’t say I was expecting you lot.”

“We weren’t either,” Allure said. “Can we come in?”

“Sure, sure,” Corona said, stepping aside to let them in. Her house was a decidedly chaotic mess with clothes dropped everywhere, boots spread out across the main living space, a thick coating of dust on top of a table or two, and Corona’s necklace dangling from one of the light fixtures.

Meh, it’s a mess, who cares? Corona yawned. “Want anything? Wait… Nevermind. Fridge’s empty. Gimme a sec.” She grabbed a magic crystal from a nearby table and used the power within to create herself a bacon cheeseburger.

She’d forgotten to have lunch, now that she thought about it. Huh.

“Good stuff,” Corona said. “So, what brings you to my crazy abode? You need something from the labs?”

“I don’t think so,” Allure said. “We need a favor that… probably isn’t very small to you.”

“Ask away, it’s not like I’m doing anything important,” Corona commented. “Unless you count watching a documentary that doesn’t teach you anything important.”

Allure didn’t know if she was supposed to laugh at that. “Uh…”

Corona raised an eyebrow. “Girls, I’ll do anything for you. Just spit it out.”

Bot chirped. “We need to contact Sombra.”

Corona dropped what remained of her bacon cheeseburger. “…Right after I said I’d do anything.”

“It’s really that bad?” Squeaky asked.

“Let’s put it this way. She tried to get me out of this house for a few days. I told her no. There was shouting. That was eight months ago.” Corona shrugged. “Neither of us has called the other back, sooo…”
“That’s not good,” Allure commented.

Corona wanted to correct her, but she couldn’t bring herself too. “…No, it’s not. But I’m not exactly in the mood to call her right now, sorry.”

Allure sagged. “It’s okay… We’ll think of something else.”

The sight of three unicorns giving her sad eyes tore at Corona’s heart. Sweetie Bot still looked like a filly, which just heightened the effect.

Corona put a hoof to her snout. “Wait, wait. At least tell me what you need your help for.”

Thrackerzod cleared her throat. “The United States of the Multiverse is interfering with the natural course of a society made up entirely of cats. These cats are undergoing an internal civil war over the ‘old ways’ and the ‘new ways’. They asked us for help, but we eventually refused on the grounds that it was their decision. It was after this refusal we found out the USM was backing the side gearing toward a political ideology that matched their own. We were going to stop the USM from continuing with their plan, but Ambassador Valentine threatened all of Merodi Universalis with retribution if we continued to stick our faces in his business. So we’re seeking alternate methods of removing the USM’s hands from the world of cats.”

“Sombra seemed like the best option that wouldn’t be traced back to us,” Squeaky added.

I should tell them no. I should tell them I don’t feel like it. I really don’t, and there’s no way it can go well. There’s not any way I can even help them. This is what Corona thought consciously. However, a light within her that hadn’t been stirred in quite some time flared to life, grabbing a hold of her doubtful thoughts and pushing them back.

You have to try. It’s the good thing to do.

Corona sighed. “I’ll do it. I’ll call her. Tell me everything you know.” She levitated a pair of sunglasses from the top of a dresser and placed them on her face, activating them. “I’ll record all of it for her.”

Allure smiled. “Thanks Corona. I know this is hard.”

“Just tell me what I need to know.”

“Right. Bot, see if you can replay Valentine’s conversation with us…”

~~~

Sombra’s current entertainment was the video feed of Celestia City’s town hall. Blumiere was walking down one of the many expansive rooms that held images of Celestia City’s culture, a commodity that the young city had no shortage of. To Blumiere’s side was his personal assistant – Vivian.

“Blumiere,” Vivian called with a slight hint of annoyance. “We’ve got to talk about this!”

“Trying to regulate Pinkies is a hopeless endeavor.”

“They’re still fighting!” Vivian blurted. “We don’t want a Pinkie turf war on our hands!”

“A turf war over cotton candy stands…” Blumiere put a hand to his nose and sighed. “The things we have to deal with here…”
“Blumiere, this is nowhere near as weird as the time the third engine got a Stand and you know it.”

Blumiere nodded. “Right… How many Pinkies are complaining?”

“We have no idea, we’re certain several are complaining multiple times with expectations to game our system.”

“At this rate I’m just going to have to ban cotton candy stands.”

“One of the Pinkies is known to be unstable an-“

“That was a joke, Vivian,” Blumiere interrupted. “The solution is to get them all in the same room together, demand they all get licenses, and update the license system to beep when any stand is set up too close to another one. Done!”

Vivian smirked. “You know they’ll make it difficult.”

“They’re Pinkies. They make everything difficult.”

Sombra sat back, a frown on her face. She had hoped that conversation would last a little longer. It was just getting good…

**INCOMING MESSAGE.**

The number of people who could contact Sombra from their side of the connection was exceedingly small. When she saw who it was, a sour expression came across her face. She let it ring for a while.

“Hello, you’ve reached Sombra. I’m not able to come to the phone right now, so please leave a-“

“Sombra, cut it out,” Corona interrupted. “You don’t have an answering machine and you are never unable to come to the phone.”

“Nice to see you too,” Sombra said, activating the cameras on Corona’s sunglasses to get a better image of what was going on. She was in her house, alone. *Hell, her place is a mess.*

“Yeah…”

“Going to apologize?”

“Me!?” Corona. “You we-“

“Oh, would you look at that, the line is experiencing technical difficulties.”

Corona visibly twitched. “I, I… Ugh, fine. Sombra, I’m sorry I shouted at you. You were just looking out for me and had my best interests at heart, for once.”

“Good,” Sombra said, smirking.

“Your turn.”

“Oh no y-“

“This is a two-way street, Sombra.”

“Fine. I’m sorry.” Sombra grunted.

“For whaaaaat?”
“For pushing you when you clearly didn’t need to be pushed. Happy?”

“Very.”

There was silence.

Corona sighed. “You know, I feel better, but it still doesn’t seem like we’ve resolved this.”

“Definitely not. Given the state of your room I’d say your funk has improved by about… nada.”

“This is just a ph-“

“A-buh-buh!” Sombra interrupted. “Nope, whatever you were going to say, that isn’t it. You need to stop deluding yourself.”

“Mmmmmf,” Corona crunted. “Why do I even talk to you?”

“I dunno. Why’d you call?”

“Right. …The League of Sweetie Belles has a problem only you can solve.”

“Oh?”

“They need to stop the USM from working in a world without risking the wrath of Ambassador Valentine.”

Sombra grinned. “Sounds like my kind of challenge!”

“Sending you the files now,” Corona said, pressing a button on the side of her sunglasses. “Apparently a world of cats is being nudged toward one type of government over another. The League wants them to figure it out on their own, and I’m sure you can guess what the USM does.”

“Muricans love their patriotic democracy expansion,” Sombra guessed, sipping on a fruity drink while her free hand flew across her screens, scanning through the files.

“Bingo.”

“Oooh, what do I win?”

“The mission you’re about to go on.”

“What makes you think I’ll do this? You haven’t paid me, and I’m not exactly known for doing things out of the goodness of my heart.”

Corona sighed. “…Think of it as an excuse to stick it to the man.”

“Good enough for me,” Sombra said, fingers flying across her screens. “I’m getting some juicy stuff here… Oooh, the Muricans are going to haaaaate me. This is hardly their only secret…”

“Hey, what else you do is up to you, just make sure those cats get released.”

“That’s not going to solve much,” Sombra said. “They’re doing that to thousands of worlds at this moment, many with more direct military involvement. Most of it isn’t even a secret to their worlds. The ‘war’ against the space-age Russians is all over their news.”

“It’ll do something though.”
“Those cats will be thankful,” Sombra admitted. “Plus I’m sure I can bring a few others down… Might need to call in some favors. I’m going to have to let you go to do that.”

Corona bit her lip. “Before you go… I uh…”

“You already said you were sorry.”

“It’s more than that. If you were any other friend, I’d say we should grab lunch sometime, talk things over… But you’re not exactly a no-”

“It’s a date,” Sombra said, marking her calendar. “I’ll pick you up tomorrow at some undisclosed time. I know a world where I won’t be found.”

“Sombra this is not a date!”

“Course not. Just said that to annoy you. And look, it got that fire back into your face!” Sombra smirked. “See you then, unless you have something to do tomorrow.”

“…I’ve got nothing.”

“Then adios amiga. I’ll do what I can.” She closed the channel, a genuine smile crossing her features. She would never admit it, but she’d been in a funk because she couldn’t talk to Corona. It looked like that was over.

Now, she needed to contact one of the most powerful men in the multiverse…

Sombra began the work of patching herself into a computer that should have been far too advanced for her to hack into. She knew it had been specially designed to give her – and just her – an easy in for precisely this sort of thing.

Officially, there were only twelve Divisions of Merodi Universalis: Relations, Expeditions, Expansion, Cultural, Military, Research, etcetera. However, known to only those with the highest clearance, there was a thirteenth. The Intelligence Division, devoted to that which needed to be kept secret – and secrets that needed to be uncovered. The Merodi didn’t like secrets, and even kept most of their military research operations at least partially in the public eye, but Eve and the other founders had recognized the need for at least a few secrets. Hence, the Intelligence Division.

The Head? A man by the name of Giorno Giovanna from Earth Stand, known for being the epitome of the oxymoronic “altruistic gangster” image. Sombra knew a lot about this man – he basically owned all of Earth Stand’s Italy, was a master of getting into organizations that didn’t want him, and had a soft spot for children. He was also the son of none other than Dio Brando, but nobody talked about that.

“Ayyy, Giogio!” Sombra called through her connection to his Division. “Got something for you.”

Giorno appeared on her screen – a man with bright blond hair that twisted into a number of small curls on his forehead. He wore his signature blue suit and ladybug pin. “What is it, Sombra?”

“I’ve got a request from the League of Sweetie Belles to throw a wrench into the Muricans’ little political ploys. Specifically, I’ve been asked to remove their influence from a single world with cats.”

She smirked. “I know we can do better than that.”

“Give us everything you have on the USM, complete with analysis, and we’ll assist you.”

“I love being a consultant,” Sombra chuckled, sending the files over without another word. “By the
way, did you know Valentine had a multiversal Stand?”

“It’s common knowledge.”

“Do you actually know what it does?” Sombra asked. “Cause according to the League it can shatter alternate versions via contact. Terrifying.”

“In a way,” Giorno said, narrowing his eyes as he considered the mission. “There are at least twenty worlds, similar to the cats, that have no idea of the USM’s involvement. All that needs to happen in those worlds is to tell the races what’s going on and they’ll become angry enough to drive them out.”

“Have to do it carefully though,” Sombra cautioned. “Pretty sure the Sweeties will be upset if we completely discredit one side of the cat’s fight. Not that I’m against it, I’d just rather not have my first request from them fall through. I like repeat customers, you know.”

Giorno tapped a finger. “There’s a way to do it. With this information, we could infiltrate the worlds and inform those being manipulated directly. That way it will look like the cats – and the other worlds – are just rebelling because they figured out the truth.” Giorno typed rapidly on a keyboard. “I’ll send this to the specialists. They’ll have a plan drawn up and sent back to you in a couple hours.”

“You work fast.”

“There’s no oversight,” Giorno pointed out. “We get to do what we want so long as the other heads don’t take issue.”

“Fun times.”

“You will have to work alone so the USM can’t trace any of this back to us,” Giorno said.

“You tell me that like I think it’s a problem,” Sombra retorted.

“Fair,” Giorno said. “I have to return to my work. I’ll send the files personally.”

Sombra waved. “See you later Giogio!” The feed closed.

Sombra sat back and smirked. It really was nice to not be hunted anymore. They had realized how useful she was. Kudos to Merodi Universalis.

~~~

A few weeks later, Allure got a message.

Mission success.

USM pulled resources back from Earth-W47 and twenty other worlds in similar situations.

In all cases the given reason was ‘native rebellion’.

They decided it wasn’t worth fighting in those worlds anymore.

You’re welcome. Hope to do business with you again sometime.

The bottom of the message held Sombra’s sugar skull. It winked – then deleted the message.

Allure whooped and ran to the nearest Sweetie who knew about the mission. She ran to a couch Bot
“I know!” Bot declared. “TAKE THAT USM! We-“

“We didn’t do anything, remember?” Squeaky said, smirking. “We were just a bunch of unicorns who had nothing to do with this, but are happy it happened.”

Thrackerzod appeared in a flash. “This feels very… very… satisfying.”

“Yeah, it does,” Allure chuckled. “We beat ‘em girls! Hah!” The four of them entered a group hug. “I say we go out for drinks!”

“Huzzah!” Bot declared.

Thrackerzod teleported them to the nearest bar – a joint owned by a version of Berry Punch who looked and acted like a pirate. She went by Barry. The location in question was called “Juicy Plunder” and was constructed to look like a pirate galleon had crashed into the wall of an apartment complex.

“YAR!” Barry called, recognizing the four of them. “Come on in, lasses! What’ll it be? Ah’ve got quite the special tonight!”

“The usual,” Thrackerzod said. “And don’t skimp on the gn’ra’teh this time, got it?”

“Arrrr, matey!”

“Arrrr!” Bot echoed.

The four took seats around a small, round table, and each of them were passed their drinks. Allure got cherry-infused wine, Bot got some viscous sludge made out of motor oil, Squeaky got sparkling champagne, and Thrackerzod got a glass filled with a liquid that had no color and tore at spacetime with every ripple.

“I never get used to seeing that,” Allure commented.

Thrackerzod smirked. “That’s the point. It’s an import from the Embodiment. I don’t know how Barry gets her shipments, and I’m not going to ask. It’s a taste of home.” She took a sip. Her eyes turned inside out for a moment and she burped out her ear. “Perfect.”

“I think it has to be unhealthy for your body,” Squeaky commented.

“It is. I have to reconstruct parts of it to make it go down. But Azathoth’s fifteenth eye it’s good.”

“We’ll take your word for it,” Allure commented.

“Hey! Valentine’s on TV!” Bot blurted, pointing at a television hanging from one of the walls.

Valentine was, in fact, on TV, though it was just an image of him in a news report. The anchor was a version of Twilight Sparkle with an extra-short mane and sharper ears than standard. “Ambassador Funny Valentine’s press conference is causing waves in the multiversal community. To those in the USM, it may not have meant much, since it consisted almost entirely of foreign policy. However, for those of us in MU, we hung onto every word. The conference was over an hour long, but the main point of discussion was a new piece of legislature pushed by Valentine himself entitled the ‘Adapted Foreign Policy Motion’. The largest claim within this document is that ties with multiversal societies outside the USM will be cut significantly.”
Allure’s stomach did a flip flop, her mood dropping like a stone.

“The AFPM instigates a ‘beacon system’ similar to the agreement held between the University of Doors with the Sparkle Census and Merodi Universalis. The ‘beacon system’ will ask that all foreign powers refrain from entering the universe with intent to take action of any kind beyond contacting the USM. Trade between the USM and other powers will cease almost completely if the AFPM is enacted. In addition, all foreign persons currently in USM universes will be forced to return to their home nations.”

Squeaky slammed her glass on the table. “Dammit.”

“The AFPM has not passed yet, but current political trends within the USM suggest that it will. Given Valentine’s express backing of the change, it will likely process in under a month. When asked why the AFPM was being revealed now, Valentine cited the desires of the people to keep their nation their own.”

“Liar,” Thrackerzod spat.

“None of the other nations had given an official comment on the AFPM legislation.”

“…I think we need to call Eve,” Allure said. “…Or go to her and plead forgiveness.”

Thrackerzod sighed, tossing everypony’s drinks into an eldritch vortex. “I’ll wind up the Skimmer.”

They once again left Celestia City behind, though this time they had the harrowing air of failure about them instead of hope.

~~~

Eve was panicking.

It had been a long time since she’d had a good panic. She’d begun to think she had moved past having these attacks, but apparently she was wrong.

She scrambled through the contacts she had in the USM on her phone. Valentine wasn’t picking up, neither was Froppy or most of the others she knew. The few who did answer didn’t know anything about the new legislation besides what had been mentioned in the press release.

She really needed to get hold of the document. She’d even sent a request to Giorno to get it for her, but he had yet to get back to her. She was struck, for the first time in a long time, with a feeling of powerlessness. She couldn’t actually do anything. There was nothing to fight, all she could do was watch as the USM decided to sever ties with all of them.

Eve had already called up the Melnorme and the Grand Secretariat. The Melnorme didn’t care and the Grand Secretariat had only been slightly less panicked than Eve was herself.

What the hay was Valentine thinking!? There was no way this could be good for the USM… Not by any stretch of the imagination…

Or could it? She’d been getting a few reports from Giorno as of late about things the USM did to new worlds. Questionable things she’d been planning on bringing before Valentine directly once she knew a little more. Had Valentine decided their presence was a threat? Or did he just not like them? Or… Or…

Eve’s Second – a Sapphire who went by the name Cessera – tapped her on the shoulder. “The
League of Sweetie Belles will arrive in about a minute.”

“But there was no ca-” Eve stopped herself, remembering that Sapphires could see the future. “Right, right. Cess, can you deal with them? I’ve got a lot on my plate.”

Cessera nodded. “Of course. Are you sure you can actually do anything about the sizeable portion on your plate?”

“I don’t know!” Eve blurted. “Were this anyone else, I’d just send a team in to deal with it! But the USM isn’t our friend, but they aren’t our enemy either. I just… Why do they have to be such a gray area?”

“Might it be because they’re like us?”

“Maybe…. Maybe…”

The League teleported into the room. Allure took a breath. “Eve, we-“

Cessera held up a hand. “Evening is rather busy for an unscheduled meeting. You can speak with me.” She smiled warmly. “What’s the emergency?”

Thrackerzod ignored her. “Eve, we may have caused Valentine to create the piece of legislation I’m sure you’re pulling your mane out over.”

Eve stopped pulling out her mane and stared right at Thrackerzod. “…What did you do?” she said, sounding decidedly more menacing and upset than usual.

Allure gulped. “We were asked to help this world of cats…” Over the next few minutes, she explained the events of the last few days. The others sometimes helped fill in the specifics.

When they were done, Allure hung her head. “I’m sorry, Eve. We messed up.”

Eve put her hoof under Allure’s chin and made her eyes look up. “You’re right. You did mess up. I’m pretty sure I would have made the same mistake in your shoes, though.”

“Wh- Really?”

“I’ve been getting reports about the USM’s practices,” Eve said. “They… Well they upset me, and I knew I had to do something. I wasn’t that far away from bringing it up with Valentine himself. I’m not sure if it would have gone quite this far…” She rubbed her head. I would tell them to talk it over with one of us in authority before going to Sombra, but the whole point of Sombra is not doing that. Not to mention I’m 90% sure Sombra consulted with Giorno on this one, so technically this is still our fault and…

“You okay, Eve?” Allure asked.

“Fine,” Eve said. “Well, no, not really. I’m stressed to the moon and back. I’m not sure how to fix this, or even if it can be fixed. If the USM is really that expansionist…” Could we have lived with them? I like to think we could have. Agh, so many what-ifs. “I’ll talk to Valentine eventually, try to smooth this over. At least keep Celestia City there. I hope we can salvage the joint missions…”

“We just got a message from Valentine,” Cessera called. “It’s a recording.”

Eve took in a deep breath. Here it comes. ‘Play it.’

“…Are you sure?”
“The League can see this. They’re involved,” Eve declared.

A screen on one of the walls lit up, showing Valentine sitting on the same couch the League had found themselves on only a few days prior. He had his hands folded and his eyes were squinted into a judging slit. “Dear Heads of Merodi Universalis and the core four of the League of Sweetie Belles.” He leaned in to the camera. “Do you think I’m an idiot?”

Allure winced.

“I know a covert operation when I see one. I’m fully aware it was the hacker Sombra who acted, but it is no secret that you are not actively pursuing her and it’s been long believed that her existence has proved unbelievably useful to you. Furthermore, she acted a relatively short amount of time after I warned the League of Sweetie Belles to stay away. Clearly, you just couldn’t keep your rotten hooves out of our business and had to take what seemed like a third option. An absolute moron could put two and two together.”

Squeaky hung her head. “How did we not think of that…?”

“I assume your government – and that of the Sparkle Census – is tearing itself up over my new piece of legislation. Let me make it abundantly clear: that legislation is going to pass. The beacon protocol will go into effect. The bridges you have made with us these last couple years have been burned. I will not tolerate other powers interfering where we have a foothold. Apparently I need to make that abundantly clear. I had hoped you would have been able to respect our ways, and we could have existed side-by-side without judgment. A wishful fantasy.”

Thrackerzod growled, unsure of what to believe in his words.

“If I know Evening Sparkle well enough, she’ll be trying to think of a way to undo this damage, to reclaim the ‘friendships’ that have been damaged. Rest assured, there will be none of that. It is clear that our ideals are in opposition.” Valentine spoke the next words with conviction. “You are the antithesis of what the USM stands for. You pretend that any form of government can work, that inclusion and acceptance are the ways to perfection. All that does is muddy the waters of what is right! You cannot have every world, you must choose one and follow that one to the ends of existence! It is the path of the patriot, the only real path there is!” He calmed himself, continuing to stare right back at the camera. “There will be no reconciliation. If you capture Sombra and imprison her, I will be forced to lift some of the sanctions. That will not repeal the changes. You’ve made your intentions clear, and we cannot stand by and let you contaminate us with your meddling intentions.”

Bot glared. “Let’s see what your world thinks when we start spreading this video around…”

“And if you’re thinking of spreading this video around, don’t.” He leaned into the camera. “If you take more action against us in retaliation, I promise the League of Sweetie Belles will have a Bloodbath of their own.”

The video cut.

Eve stared, jaw slack. “I… I never realized what a horrible man he was…” She shook her head. She sat down in her chair, looking at a wall. “I guess we really have to do nothing.”

“…We have to let him get away with all this!?” Allure shouted. “That’s wrong!”

“Yes, yes it is,” Eve said. “It’s very very wrong. But we still can’t do anything. If we try, the retaliations will only get worse and worse until there’s a full-fledged war. Could we win that war? I don’t know. But I don’t want that many deaths on my hooves over one universe.” She sighed. “This
entire series of events is not to be revealed to the public in order to protect you.”

Thrakerzod growled. “And the world reveals its sharp teeth once again. We must return to our lives as if nothing happened. Everything has to appear normal.”

“No!” Bot blurted.

“Yes, stupid,” Eve admitted. “…But what needs to be done. I’m sorry.” She sighed. “Go back to Celestia City. I’ll keep you posted on what happens. Cessera, try to call Valentine again. I believe he’ll pick up now.”

The League of Sweetie Belles, dejected, left.

~~~

Sombra blinked.

She was now #1 on the USM’s Most Wanted list.

Her first response was pride. She must have really ticked ol’ Funny just right to get there.

It took about ten seconds for her to realize this was going to actually be a bit of a problem. If the entire resources of a multiversal society was out to get her… They might actually be able to find her.

And then they’d give that information to the Merodi and demand they hand her over, or be accused of protecting her…

She could see that spiraling out of control quickly. If Merodi Universalis was leveraged in just the perfect way by the USM, she was dead meat.

She was going have to revert to her old ways of being extremely paranoid and covering everything. Not even her ‘allies’ would be able to find her if they tried. …Giorno probably could if he really wanted, but all signs pointed to the USM still having no idea he even existed, so that gave her at least one out.

Things were going to get more than a little complicated…

She laughed – this was going to be fun. She decided to get right on it – bouncing her signal off a dozen proxies through hundreds of universes. It was time to toy with someone.

She found a screen in a hallway Valentine was walking through. “Heeeeeeey!” She called. “Amigo, hold up!”

Valentine stared at her. “TRACE THE SIGNAL!” he barked into a hidden communicator in his ear.

“Yeah, that’s not going to work,” Sombra commented. “Nothing works but this screen!” She held her arms wide and chuckled. “You want to declare war, Funny? Because the Merodi won’t fight, but I will.”

“I have promised to extinguish the League of Sweetie Belles already.”

“Oh, but I feel like acting on my own, without any sort of mission! After all, you did just set your entire government to hunt me. That was you, right? Cause we all know the president doesn’t care at all about what happens outside the borders.”

Valentine narrowed his eyes. “I will have Corona assassinated.”
Sombra’s kept her smile, but inwardly her confidence plummeted like a rock. She couldn’t formulate a response.

Valentine continued. “I have the resources, don’t you doubt it Sombra. You are not to interfere with any of our operations. Do I make myself clear?”

Sombra cut the transmission, unwilling to go on with that. It had been quite some time since someone had stumped her into silence…

She called Giorno. “I’m going to have to pull out of the USM observation network. It’s up to you now.”

“Too much heat?”

Sombra sighed, tapping her fingers on her desk. “He’s got my number, Giogio.”

“I understand. We shall take over.”

“…Yeah…” Sombra said. Anger was building inside her.

She was going to find a way to get back at Ambassador Funny Valentine one of these days…

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Goldsire sat in the middle of a forest. It was raining.

Drystar walked up to him, a pained expression on her face.

“Why did you call me here?” Goldsire asked.

“We’ve been manipulated,” Drystar said. “The Muricans… They were guiding us like mindless kittypets into cages. They saw a spark in us and wanted to twist it to what they thought was right. I… I hate to admit it, but I think most of this conflict was their fault. Manipulating things behind the scenes…”

Goldsire was surprised at what he was hearing. “Did… Did you know about this?”

“No! I thought we had gotten lucky with those technology caches and those coordinates! And…” She shook her head. “We’ve been lied to. Both of us.”

Goldsire looked to the sky. The moon poked through the rain clouds. “…What terrible mouths they must have.”

Drystar was silent.

“What do we do now?” Goldsire asked.

“Talk,” Drystar said, looking into Goldsire’s eyes. “Let’s talk this through.”

Goldsire smiled sadly. “…I’d like that.”

And so they talked.

That night would become known as the night the war ended.
Jotaro tore another giant set of double doors off its hinges. This particular set was purple and engraved with symbols representing this world’s eight elements, four of them of similar design to those of the Elemental Nations, which made sense, because this world was the first alternate they had found of the Elemental Nations. It was ar removed from the Elemental Nations they knew and loved to be sure: eight separate nations, completely different history, and no duplicate people – but it still had benders.

And it still had the Avatar.

This had turned out to be quite the problem for Pinkie’s Party because the Avatar of this world was absolutely insane. The interior of his personal laboratory made that abundantly clear. The room was octagonal, each side with an elemental engraving on it. The four standard ones were accompanied by electricity, sound, light, and darkness. Each of these emblems had an upside-down cross spray-painted over top of them with red paint. The floor had symbols representing the spirit, and each of these were simply crossed out in a haphazard fashion.

In the center of the room was a device – an upward-facing drill with eight orbs of power in its sides, each orb containing elemental energy provided by the Avatar himself. The Avatar flicked a switch on the side of the drill, activating it just as the rest of the team filed into the room. The man wore the form-fitting teal clothing of the Reverb Republic over his thin, but fit, form. His eyes were filled with unstable inner fire, driving his every exaggerated movement. “HELLO!” he decreed, one hand sparking with thunder while the other froze the air around him. “Welcome… to the righteous path.”

Flutterfree took point. “This isn’t the righteous path, Entari.”

Entari smirked. “That’s where you’re wrong, Flutterfree. So wrong.” He gestured at his drill as its tip began to shake the foundation of spacetime. “I will cut through the boundary between the mortal plane and Heaven itself! I have the Way!”

“Your ‘way’ is going to destroy the fabric of reality,” Flutterfree warned.

“A small price to pay to defeat the Lord’s monopoly on spirits!” he spat. “He has a hand over us, always keeping us down, refusing to let us see what lies beyond… No more! We will not take any of His imposed limitations! I will charge Heaven and show the Lord what we really are!”

Flutterfree twitched – clearly angered by what Entari was saying. “We have the resources to cross dimensions. If Heaven truly exists, we can find it without this drill.”

“You carry with you a symbol of His power,” Entari accused. “You are one of His.”

“I very much doubt that,” Flutterfree muttered to herself. “Why is that a problem?”

“You won’t let me do what I need to do,” Entari decreed. “I-“

The Avatar’s drill suddenly exploded. Jotaro had triggered a time stop when Nova had given the signal, allowing both of them to move in and reduce the machine to shreds in an instant. The elemental energy burst out in a spectacular show of colors. Pinkie watched through blue and red 3-D glasses with a bag of popcorn.
Entari’s confidence and inner satisfaction plummeted to absolutely nothing. “I… I…”


“You… You will pay for what you’ve done,” Entari declared. He drove a pillar of rock right between Vriska’s legs, following up with an electric punch to her chest. She flew back, the electrical signal removing most of her muscle control. Entari surrounded himself in a whirlwind of flame, a defensive use of both air and fire.

Pinkie was suddenly inside his fiery shell. “Pretty,” she observed. She punched him in the face with a comically oversized boxing glove.

He grabbed her hoof, entering the Avatar State. His eyes went white and he tapped into her pink soul. He grabbed hold of it, twisting it…

This resulted in a shower of confetti exploding from completely nowhere, sending the two of them in opposite directions. Pinkie fell to the ground, unmoving.

Entari stood up and chuckled. “Hah…. The legendary Pink One has fallen by my hand…”

The next thing Entari knew he had several broken bones and a magical burn across his left arm. But he still stood strong. He unleashed a whirl of dark smoke and bright lights, scattering everyone’s perceptions, ending Nova’s onslaught.

He was able to reach Flutterfree first, grabbing her by the hoof so she couldn’t release her arrow of light. He reached into her soul. There was no confetti interruption this time.

Flutterfree made gagging noises for a second, sounds which stopped abruptly. Her eyes lost their red color, her fangs vanished, and her ears lost their frilled tips. Her eyes held the Spark for a moment longer, but even that vanished in the end. She dropped the bow of light as her entire body went slack.

“You were the worst kind of enemy… spiritual,” Entari declared, tossing her to the side. “Now that that’s do-“

A flash of blue-pink magic cut his head in half, ceasing all brain function in an instant. Nova pulled his body into her magic and incinerated it on the atomic level. Avatar Entari was no more.

With that taken care of, she ran to Flutterfree, putting a hoof to the pegasus’ neck to check her pulse. **Nothing.**

Nova activated her CPR spell, forcing Flutterfree’s heart to restart. It beat a few times before dying off.

“Pinkie’s breathing,” Jotaro called over.

“FLUTTERFREE ISN’T!” Nova shouted. “She…”

She noticed that the people of this world had crowded around the entrance, staring at all of them with expectant expressions. The woman in front, wearing the robes of the Dark Tribe, took a step forward and bowed. “You have slain the lost Avatar. You have done our people a-“

“If you don’t have a way to fix this you can shut up,” Nova blurted.

The woman looked at Flutterfree with sad eyes. “Her soul is with the Lord now, in the heaven the
Avatar hated so much…” She made a cross gesture across her chest.

“Shut up!” Nova shouted. “There is no heaven, there is no Lord, and if there is he’s just some pathetic hack!” Hearing gasps from the crowd, Nova decided she’d had enough. She grabbed the dimensional device from Vriska’s semi-paralyzed body and dialed out of the universe. “We’re done here! DONE!” Tears fell from her face as she threw everyone through the portal.

It closed, leaving the people of Elemental Eight alone with the remnants of a blasphemous machine and the dust of their Avatar.

They set to work refurbishing the temple.

~~~

Flutterfree blinked into awareness.

That was the best way she could describe it. It was like waking up, except she hadn’t been asleep before. She had been in a state of… Well, she couldn’t remember, actually.

She checked herself over – she was a normal pegasus. No fangs, no hunger for fruity fluids, no heightened hearing… Everything about her previously seemed somehow distant. She checked her flank and realized there was no cutie mark there.

She still felt something within herself. With a slight bit of effort, she was able to summon Lolo around her. Good.

…it occurred to her she should probably try to figure out where she was. She attempted to focus, but looking at where she was proved difficult. Everything was soft – not like a pillow, but as if it didn’t have substance. She strained her eyes, unable to make anything out besides a vague whiteness.

When she gave up and allowed her eyes to relax, everything locked into place.

She was standing on a cloud – not unusual for a pegasus, but she was certain the cloud wasn’t normal. For one, she didn’t actually feel anything under her hooves, even though she wasn’t falling. The sky around her was a bright blue, despite there being no visible sun anywhere. She had no shadow.

There was only one object of any interest – a large gate made of golden metal bars. It was larger than any gate she had ever seen, but she couldn’t say she was intimidated by it. It seemed… welcoming.

In front of the gate was a man in white robes and wings who stood behind a raised desk composed of clouds. He had a warm smile on his face that beckoned Flutterfree to come closer.

She flew over, landing on the area of the clouds where she could comfortably see his face. He was tall – at least eight feet – and had a soft glow about him.

“Ah, Flutterfree Asquall. Welcome.”

Flutterfree smiled. “…So, I’m dead then?”

“Yes,” the angel said, smiling sadly. “It is time to move on.”

“All… Alright,” Flutterfree said, smiling. Tears began to form at the edges of her eyes. As she remembered her friends, still back there… They’d be so devastated…

The angel took a book out of nowhere and flipped through it. He smiled. “One of the best records
Flutterfree’s smile fell and alarms started blaring inside her head. “…What?”

“One of the purest and kindest lives I’ve ever seen, despite all that you’ve experienced. There’s a lot of loss of life here, but your motives have virtually always been in the right place. You get in easily.”

“I… get in?”

“To Heaven.” He snapped his fingers, opening the gate. “Go on in, enjoy your afterlife.”

“But- that’s not how it works!” Flutterfree blurted. “We’re not able to remove the sin from our lives, and so it’s hinged completely on faith… Right?”

“Oh, your faith is certainly a big bonus, but we’ve got to examine everything in the ledger,” the angel said, tapping the book. “Your works are excellent.”

“It’s not about works,” Flutterfree muttered bitterly. Then she sighed. “Fine… I’ll take it.” She gave him a smile.

“It’s not like you had a choice. I can’t send you to Hell and you’re technically standing in Heaven right now,” the angel commented.

“Yeah,” Flutterfree said, walking through the gates. Thoughts swirled around her head. *Think Flutterfree, what did Rev say…? Right, there are many, many false gods, many of whom really are good or Divine, but aren’t what we really believe in. Just as there are shadows of God, there are shadows of Heaven.* She sighed – she supposed Entari hadn’t been crazy. There really was a Lord connected to his world, and she’d just ended up in that version of the Afterlife.

She wasn’t really sure what to make of that.

As she passed through the gates, she heard them close behind her. She heard a familiar voice behind her. *Entari.*

She watched with curiosity as Entari charged up to the angel. “I WILL BRING THIS ESTABLISHMENT DOWN!”

The angel sighed, looking at the ledger. “As the Avatar, you are exempt from assignment at this time. You will be sent back with all the other spirits to guide the next of our Lord’s chosen. That said, this is the worst record I have ever seen on an Avatar. I doubt anything you can do will save you at this point.”

“I never said I wanted to be saved!”

“Just go back. Appreciate your unique position,” the angel muttered. Entari vanished in a puff of clouds, returning to the mortal realm.

Flutterfree turned around and took in a breath. *Okay, this isn’t what you wanted, nor is it your final stop, but it doesn’t have to be a bad place. Make the most of it and learn all you can.* She put a smile on her face, tried not to cry, and began to explore the new place her spirit occupied.

~~~

The Expeditions Division had its own personal hospital built underneath the crystal castle. It was a state of the art facility with the best doctors and healers from across Merodi Universalis. In the
emergency room, two ponies lay on cots. One was Pinkie, her chest rising and falling slowly. The other was Flutterfree, not moving at all, but her body glowing a slight blue under Nova’s stasis spell.

Vriska, Jotaro, and Nova sat on a bench at the end of the room while a unicorn version of Redheart set to work. Nova had clearly been crying heavily while Vriska’s features betrayed great inner pain and anger. Jotaro’s face remained impassive as always, but he had not made eye contact with anyone nor said anything since they’d arrived.

Redheart completed her check-up of Pinkie and moved to Flutterfree, removing the stasis spell temporarily so she could perform her examinations. The deeper her frown went, the more Nova knew…

“She’s dead,” Redheart declared, placing her body back in stasis. “Pinkie’s in a deep coma. I can try to treat Pinkie, though results on comas are… uncertain.” She looked to the team. “I know the revive spell. But you know that doesn’t always work.”

“Just try it,” Nova pleaded.

“I’d need authorization. And a significant security detail in case she comes back wrong and I’m unable to undo it.”

“Renee should be here soon,” Vriska grunted, clenching her wrists. “She’ll give the go ahead.”

Redheart nodded. “I don’t want to get your hopes up. She was quasi-vampiric, so there could easily be complications. But I will do what I can.”

“That’s all we ask,” Nova said.

“No, it’s not. We ask for fucking success,” Vriska blurted.

New arrivals came into the room – but Renee wasn’t among them. It was Discord and Trixie. Discord took one look at Flutterfree and snapped. “Who did it?”

“Avatar Entari,” Vriska said. “He’s very dead.”

Discord growled. “How brutally?”

“Cut his brain in half,” Nova answered.

“Too good for him…” Discord growled. He whirled to face all of them. “Why didn’t you protect her?”

“Look at Pinkie!” Nova shouted. “We did!”

“Did you really?”

Nova’s anger dropped, giving way to deep uncertainty. “I… I don’t… I…”

Jotaro stood up, making Discord flinch. “Don’t,” was all the man said.

Discord opened his mouth to retort, then closed it after he saw Trixie rapidly shaking her head at him. He turned his focus to Redheart instead. “Do your thing.”

“Not without authorization.”
“I’m the spirit of chaos!”

“And you do not have the authorization to clear the procedure,” Redheart declared. “I’ll allow you to work on Pinkie, but Flutterfree is a special case.”

Discord snapped his fingers, encasing Pinkie in a brief flash of light. Nothing changed.

Discord growled. “I should be able to do this…”

“Her soul’s been damaged,” Redheart said. “…For treatment, I would have suggested the Avatar, but she’s far too young. Thrackerzod perhaps.”

In a flash of purple magic, both Eve and Renee appeared in the room. Renee’s mascara was already running. Eve’s tears started to come when she saw Flutterfree’s body. “N-no…”

Discord pointed at them. “Authorize the revival procedure. Now.”

Eve managed to keep control of herself. “L-let’s hear the situation firs-“

“Just do it,” Renee blurted. “Do it now.”

Redheart turned to Eve. Eve took a moment to read everyone’s faces. She nodded in agreement.

Redheart moved over Flutterfree and lit her horn. She took a breath, shifting the color of her magical aura to a vibrant green. The stasis spell dropped, allowing Redheart full access to Flutterfree’s entire body. The force of life itself flowed out of Redheart and into the muscles, bones, and mind of Flutterfree.

Nova let out a gasp of delight when she saw Flutterfree’s chest rise and fall – she was breathing. When Redeart dropped the spell, Flutterfree’s eyes opened. The pegasus stood up and stared at them all with cyan eyes.

Cyan.

Cyan, not red.

Cyan, sparkless, eyes.

Vriska punched a wall, driving a hole into it, screaming an incoherent syllable.

“…Just like the ponies of the Hub Jungle…” Nova said, vacantly. She stared into the empty eyes.

Redheart undid the spell, returning Flutterfree to a lifeless body.

“W-we should be glad,” Eve said. “She c-could have been dangerous. T-that was… Docile.”

“She’s always kind…” Renee said, barely able to stand. “She-“

“We’re not done,” Jotaro said out of the blue, drawing everyone’s attention. “There are other things we can try.”

Vriska nodded. “Yeah! We’re a fucking multiversal society! There has to be something out there we can use to bring her back!”

Discord nodded vigorously. “I’ve got some contacts. All the contacts.”
“We’ll bring them back by any means necessary,” Nova declared. “Any.”

Eve’s expression became worried. “Nova, I—"

“If you dare suggest this is how things are supposed to be Eve, I swear, I’ll…I’ll…”


“Renee,” Eve started.

“Eve, I am in charge of Expeditions,” Renee declared. “This is my decision. Not yours.”

“Did… You just pull political influence on me?” Eve sputtered.

“Yes. I did. I’m also slightly horrified that you’re not willing to go to the ends of existence for Flutterfree.”

“I am!” Eve blurted. “But you know what happens when ponies mess with things they aren’t supposed to! We’ve stopped people in the exact same position we’re in!”

Renee couldn’t find fault in that argument. She didn’t care. “Eve, stop being the great, wise leader of dozens of worlds for a moment. Be a friend. What would a friend do?”

Eve gulped. “I…” She shook her head. “Right, right. Do whatever you can. Just… Just don’t be evil about it. Don’t hurt people. Don’t become like all those others.”

“We won’t,” Vriska declared.

“…That’s what they all say,” Eve pointed out.

“I said we won’t,” Vriska countered. “So we won’t.”

Renee swallowed hard. “Good… good. I… I have to get back to work. Call me immediately if you figure something out, okay?”

“We will,” Nova assured her. “The instant there’s any change.”


“Who made you in charge?” Discord declared.

“I did,” Vriska said, glaring. “Any objections?”

“Several!”

“Just do what she asked,” Trixie said. “Let’s go.”

Everyone left – leaving only Eve and Redheart in the room.

“…Don’t you have work?” Redheart asked.

“Yes…” Eve said, glancing from Pinkie to Flutterfree. “I do.”

“Not going back to it?”

“…Not for now,” Eve said, placing a hoof on Pinkie and stroking her mane. “In a bit. I’d just like a moment with them… A quiet moment.”
Redheart nodded and didn’t say anything further.

~~~

The inside of Heaven was almost all clouds with the occasional building of pure marble sticking up from the soft fluff. She saw people walking around – all humans in white robes. A few had wings, indicating that they were angels, but all the others were just regular people. She saw no bending taking place at all. Everyone was equal.

She walked up to a group of people, intending to say hello, but when she got close Lolo’s effect activated. She saw the people for what they really were – loose spirits without a body at all, the image they were projecting just a memory of what they once were. The angels didn’t change when Flutterfree got closer, aside from a slight increase in light output.

Flutterfree focused, pulling Lolo into herself – she had learned over the years that, with effort, she could keep Lolo from revealing things. It took a bit of focus and kept her from thinking deeply about other things, but sometimes it was beneficial to not change people when she walked up to them.

The people she had forced to look like spirits had confusion evident on her faces. “What just happened?” a woman asked.

“That was me,” Flutterfree said, looking up at them with a smile. “Sorry, I tend to do that.”

“Oh! What are you?” the woman said, looking down. “Are you one of the higher angels?”

“Oh, no. I’m from another world than the one you came from.”

“…Huh?”

“An alien?” Flutterfree suggested.

“I haven’t seen any aliens here before…”

“Well, I died on your world, so I ended up here,” Flutterfree explained, shrugging. “Can you tell me a bit about this place, if you don’t mind?”

“You don’t know?” the man standing next to her said. “Wow…”

“Well, I know this is Heaven, but I don’t exactly know how things work here. See, I was under the impression Heaven was a place with no sadness or pain, that everything would feel complete, and…” she shook her head, hanging it down.

“Oh, you poor thing, you left people behind didn’t you?” the woman said.

Flutterfree nodded slowly. “A lot.”

“Don’t worry, they’ll join us here soon enough.”

“But they’re not believers!” Flutterfree blurted. “…That doesn’t actually matter here, does it?”

“Why would it? If you’re a good person, the Lord blesses you.”

“Amen,” the man said.

Flutterfree twitched. “But that… It’s not…” she got a hold of herself and put on a smile. “Nevermind. Just tell me what we do around here.”
“We live,” the woman said, gesturing. “This entire field of clouds is our playground for eternity. We talk, we dance, we sing…”

“…That’s it?”

“There’s also a bowling alley over there.”

“So this is basically the same as an eternal vacation back home.”

The man pondered this. “Never thought about it that way, but yeah.”

“No talking with G- the Lord? No seeing new, amazing things? No learning the secrets of the life you left behind? No purification of your soul?”

“Uh… No?” the man said, confused.

“Doesn’t that get boring? Or disappointing?”

He blinked. “I’ve only been here two weeks, I wouldn’t know.”

Flutterfree blinked. “Oh. Right then…”

The woman kneeled down. “Are you one of the devout?”

“Hmm?”

“You know, the uh… The people who read the Lord’s book all their lives!”

Flutterfree smiled. “Well, not all my life…”

“You should go to the temple then. That’s where the people who think like you hang out. They can probably answer things a little better.”

“Where’s the temple?” Flutterfree asked.

“Just talk to an angel. They’ll take you.”

“Thanks!” Flutterfree said, getting on that. It wasn’t hard to find an angel. “Excuse me?”

“Hm? Ah, hello little one.”

“Can you take me to the temple?”

“Already going there?” the angel smiled warmly. “I’ll take you to the closest one.”

In an instant, they were somewhere else in the clouds. In front of Flutterfree was a marble structure that reminded her of Greek architecture. Which didn’t make sense since the temple should have been Arabic or Israeli…

“Thanks,” she told the angel. The angel bowed and walked elsewhere.

Flutterfree flew up the steps of the temple, walking into the main hall. There were around a hundred humans in the temple bowing, praying, and meditating.

She herself sent off a short prayer – but it wasn’t to the Lord of this place. Definitely not.

“You have the eyes of someone who was expecting something else,” a man said, walking up to her.
He kneeled down, smiling sadly. “A true believer?”

“I believe so,” Flutterfree said. “I’m not sure if your Word is the same as mine.”

He pulled a Bible out of his robes. “The angels will provide you with almost anything if you ask.” Flutterfree flipped through the pages, looking at a few specific verses.

“Wording’s slightly different, but that’s probably just translation,” Flutterfree commented. “…This place is nothing like what’s described in here.”

“We all notice that in the first few hours,” the man commented. “It’s… a sorrowful revelation.”

Flutterfree nodded. “I’m Flutterfree. An ‘alien’ who died on your world.”

“Ummar,” he said, sitting down next to her.

“What do you do when you come to this place? How do you deal with it?”

“Many different things,” Ummar admitted. “Some believe that the Bible was a false representation of what really happened or what the teachings really were. Others think this is Purgatory, and the real Heaven depends on us purifying our own souls in this place. Others still have decided that this is a trick of Satan himself, trying to capture our souls in a loose bliss.” He glanced at a man tearing his heart out on the floor, even though he couldn’t experience physical pain. “…Some lose faith entirely.”

Flutterfree looked into the distance. “I think I know what it is. This is a fake Heaven created by a shadow of the real God. Just a twisted image.”

“…How would you know that?”

“There’s a multiverse, Ummar. Millions and millions of different worlds with different beings and ways of living. I’ve encountered many so-called gods out there, and many with immense false teachings. My mentor, Rev, told me she had encountered fake Heavens before. Or, well, I guess this is real… But it’s not right.”

Ummar raised an eyebrow. “You truly are an alien, aren’t you?”

Flutterfree nodded. “It’s more than that. Nobody ever brings any abilities or powers with them, do they?”

Ummar shook his head. “I have not bent light since I died of old age.”

Flutterfree summoned Lolo with enough power so Ummar could see it. He was forced to show his inner spirit, a light much brighter than those of the people she had revealed earlier. Flutterfree pulled Lolo back into herself. “That’s Lolo. My Stand, a power affixed to my spirit. It’s from a very distant universe, and apparently something your Heaven didn’t remove.”

Ummar furrowed his brow. “This is unheard of…”

“Figures,” Flutterfree said. “…But I’m here now, and I’ve got to make the most of it…”

“You may not,” Ummar said. “The angels never really give us satisfactory answers to our questions, nor do they seem to find us all that interesting. But you… You’re something new. Or at least different.” He stood up. “I know where we can find an archangel. We’re going to see what she makes of this.”
Ummar led Flutterfree out of the temple and past several other marble constructions. They eventually came to a fountain where a female angel stood, watching the waters fly into the air and fall down to the puddle below.

“Purity,” Ummar called. “I’ve got something for you.”

Purity turned and smiled, speaking with the voice of a caring mother to a child who was being rather stupid. “Ummar, you know I do not gain any benefit from possessions, mental or otherwise.”

Flutterfree summoned Lolo to demonstrate. Purity’s expression turned to shock. “…What are you, Flutterfree?”

“An alien from another universe,” Flutterfree explained. “So… What now?”

Purity looked from Ummar to Flutterfree. “I need to take you to the higher angels. This is… Unknown.”

Flutterfree smiled. “Thank you.”

And then they were gone.

~~~

Aradia no longer hid – she walked around the worlds just like another citizen, jumping across time and space both for her own enjoyment and to protect the universes from temporal incursion. At the moment, things were quiet, so she was enjoying herself and doing some window shopping on the Hub. She was pleasantly surprised to find little action figures of her. “Oh, nice!” She chirped, walking into the store and examining the merchandise. “I look so cute!”

The shop owner simply couldn’t believe who had just walked into his store. He stared, slack jawed, unable to process her presence.

“Yeesh, you think people would be used to this by now,” Aradia muttered, checking out the other action figures. She found ones for Vriska, Alushy, the Doctor… Oh boy, there was even one of Valentine, packaged together with his Stand. She wondered if they were still classifying him as a hero here… Every universe’s action figure companies probably disagreed at this point. There were probably children having Valentine versus Valentine play fights…

It was a bit odd, but it wasn’t like it was illegal to make action figures in the likeness of other people. There was even one of Siron, though he was universally accepted as a villain type.

“Includes magic staff action…” Aradia read. She wondered how many people found this slightly distasteful. Or very distasteful. They must have been selling well, if they were displayed like this.

She walked further into the store, finding the section with brushable dolls. She saw one of her dolls on the floor with their hair in a double looped braid.

She found herself considering adopting the hairstyle. It was so unique. Probably horribly impractical, but troll hair was always impractical. Might be better to just make it absolutely off the walls crazy. She’d need hair gel though… Or perhaps just freeze it in time so it couldn’t fall out of place.

“Aradia.”

Aradia looked up to see Vriska and Nova. “Oh! Hello!” She smiled warmly. “Didn’t think I’d run into you two here! This is a toy store, after all, I’d think it wasn’t the sort of thing you’d shop for.”
“I own every version of my own action figure,” Vriska said dismissively. “But we were actually looking for you.”

“Oh, was my phone off?” She checked the folds of her robes. “Or… I forgot it somewhere.”

“Or you’ve been jumping around time so much it decomposed into dust,” Nova suggested.

“Pff, I don’t go away for that long,” Aradia said with a wave of her hand. “So, what can I do for you?”

“We need you to go back in time,” Vriska said.

“Oh that I can do, easy peasy. What for? Did you screw up a political meeting? I’m not an undo button, you know.”

“Flutterfree’s dead,” Nova deadpanned. “Go back and bring her to us.”

Aradia put her hands to her hips and sighed, somehow maintaining her smile. “Vriska, you know I’m not the ‘revive’ button.”

“I also know you can do it,” Vriska grunted. “Drop all that stupid ‘higher than thou’ bullshit and just go do it.”

Aradia shook her head. “I’m sorry, I won’t do it.”

“Just. Once.”

“It won’t be just once,” Aradia said. “Another one of you is going to die at some point or other, and then you’ll ask me to do it again. Then other people will learn about my power, and ask me to do it again. I’ll exist just to extend the life of everyone. That takes the beauty of death away from the equat-“

“Beauty!?” Nova blurted.

Aradia pointed at Nova. “You know what I mean, Nova. Everyone has a time. Everyone. I do, Vriska does, Eve does, even the ‘gods’ do. Every being that has ever existed will die. Must die. It’s not just how things are, it’s how things must be.”

“How do we know this is her time? Huh?”

“We don’t,” Aradia said. “If you find a way to bring her back, I’ll be happy. But if you don’t, I’ll appreciate what happened for what it is. For what it stands for.”

Vriska curled her fingers into a fist. “You won’t even do this for me? What if I died?”

Aradia smiled sadly. “Then you’d be dead. I’d hold a grand funeral and carry your ashes with me until I could take you to Earth C.”

Vriska’s anger faltered. “…Earth C… …I really might die before I get there…”

Aradia nodded. “Either of us might. We have conditional immortality – a piece of art itself. But it is what it is.”

Nova looked between the two of them. “Vriska… Are you starting to agree with her!”

“I… fuck, maybe?” Vriska said, throwing her arms wide. “I dunno! She’s the one who keeps time
the way it’s supposed to be.”

Aradia turned to Nova. “You have the power within yourself to go to the past, Nova. I will not stop you if you try to bring her back under your own power.”

“You won’t?” Nova asked, confused.

“No. But you then must hold the burden of revival. If I were you… I wouldn’t challenge the sanctity of death that way.”

Nova fell silent. “…I might try it,” she said, finally. “It… goes against what I’ve held myself to all these years, but if we can’t think of anything else I don’t think I’ll be able to stop myself.”

Aradia smiled at her in understanding. “I know, Nova. I know. You’ll let me know how it goes?”

“…I will,” Nova said.

Vriska sighed. “Aradia?”

“Yeah?”

“Could you… commune with her?”

“I could try to find her spirit,” Aradia admitted. “…Actually, just tell me the universe she died in, I’ll go check right now.”

Vriska told her. Aradia vanished in a puff of time – and returned in an instant. “Sorry. I scoured the planet, didn’t find any ghosts at all. The physics might not allow for them.”

Vriska frowned. “Do you have any other ideas?”

Aradia shrugged. “I’m not a Life player. You and I aren’t exactly geared for this sort of thing.”

Vriska nodded. “…Come on, Nova. Let’s go look for something else.”

“I hope you girls find something,” Aradia called after them. “I’m not just saying that. I mean it.”

“We… know,” Nova admitted. “It’s just a little hard to understand how you think about this sort of thing.”

“If I’m still on the Earth C pantheon, I’m pretty sure the legends refer to me as the god of death. To earn that title… It takes a certain way of looking at life to get there.”

“No kidding,” Vriska commented. “See you around, Aradia.”

“You too,” Aradia said, smiling.

Vriska and Nova couldn’t bring themselves to smile back.

~~~

Ummar, Flutterfree, and Purity appeared in a ‘room’ that had no location. The ‘room’ was all there was. Flutterfree knew it had limited space, roughly that of a meeting hall, but she somehow couldn’t see the edges of it. She didn’t even know if there was an up or down here. Wherever here was…

But this didn’t bother her mind. Her spiritual form just accepted it and went along with it. She was
able to ‘hear’ and ‘see’ all that took place in the ‘room’ regardless of ‘where’ it was coming from. It was probably best if she didn’t think too hard about it.

“Purity, why have you brought human souls to our presence?” a male voice asked. Flutterfree knew instantly that his name was Usiel. She also instantly knew the names of the dozens of other angelic presences in the area.

“Flutterfree, show them,” Purity asked.

Flutterfree activated Lolo in full. She realized that the only reason she was understanding this place was because of Lolo – Ummar was unable to comprehend exactly what was going on or deal with the influx of information. He couldn’t see it for what it was, he tried to rely on his old perceptions. But Lolo allowed Flutterfree to come to terms with everything being available without asking. She didn’t even have to actually speak; she could just vocalize a thought.

With Lolo fully activated, Ummar was able to understand it all as well. “…Oh…”

Flutterfree wondered briefly why Lolo wasn’t forcing her to appear as a spirit like all the others she had seen. Was it because she innately wasn’t supposed to belong here? What did that even mean?

“What does it mean indeed…?” Usiel vocalized. “Your entire list of experiences is revealed to me, as I assume you know, Flutterfree. Much of it is concerning.”

“The Lord didn’t create everything!?” Tabbris blurted. “How is this possible?”

“Were those devouts really right all this time?” Jaderah asked. “No… Impossible, we have much more than them…”

“But we cannot doubt and fall like they can,” Zanita pointed out. “We are rooted in what we know. I am not certain we are even really questioning now. We’re just emoting.”

Ariuk spoke. “This revelation is certainly troubling. I, for one, believe the presence of Lotus Locus has awakened a part hidden in us. It has shown us that there is more than just our Lord’s creations.”

“I concur,” Usiel decreed. “This is new. The question is, does it change anything about our place in our Lord’s court?”

There was relative silence, though small thoughts could be heard whizzing through the space.

Zehanpuryu spoke up. “Our lives will not change, I believe. But our core foundation is shaken. The Lord is not omnipotent, nor all-powerful. Does this mean He is not worthy of worship?”

“Dangerous thoughts, Zehanpuryu,” Ariuk said. “One would say blasphemous under different circumstances.”

Flutterfree cleared her throat – a throat that didn’t really exist. “Can I suggest something?”

“By all means, outer one,” Usiel encouraged.

“Why not just ask him? If he’s a good Lord, he’ll answer you, right? You’re his angels.”

“The Lord is aware of all conversation,” Purity said. “He will address us when He believes the time is right. The desire we have to speak to Him is all the request that is needed.”

“Is it?” Zehanpuryu asked.
“Despite this revelation, He is still aware of every single thought and motion that runs through every of His created beings,” Usiel said. “He is no liar. Not intentionally.”

“How can we make any assumptions about Him?”

“We trust in our past and our creation.”

“Ah, but can we really trust that? It was just installed in us, after all.”

Flutterfree sighed.

“What is it, little one?” Usiel asked.

“You’re not going to be able to reason your way through this,” Flutterfree pointed out. “You were created by your Lord. Your thinking is defined by him. Since information has come to light that has made you unable to accept him as truly all-powerful and perfect… Well, you admitted earlier that you had certain things ingrained into your mind. You could not question, if I remember right? What if you’re just not able to come to certain conclusions by design, even if they would be the correct ones?”

“You are wise beyond your soul,” Usiel responded. “You are correct. It is impossible for us to reason through this using our own faculties with any certainty. But is that not the point of faith?”

“It is,” Flutterfree admitted.

“And your faith is a strong one, Flutterfree.”

All knew that was the voice of the Lord, coming from On High.

Flutterfree tried to bow but realized she couldn’t really do that. “…Your angels have some questions for you.”

“All answers will come in time,” the Lord declared. “But you have questions of your own.”

“Yeah, I do. What is this place?!” Flutterfree asked, accusation in her voice.

The Lord told her.

~~~

Thrackerzod finished her intricate spellwork over Pinkie’s comatose form. She didn’t move.

“I hope you have other plans,” Thrackerzod commented to her only observer, Jotaro. “Because there’s something wrong with this coma that I can’t fix. I was never a doctor, but I should have at least gotten a reaction. You may want to consider cloning a new body and moving her into it, see if that works.”

Jotaro lowered his hat. “There are other options.”

“I know.” She turned to Flutterfree. “Have you tried anything on her?”

“Vriska and Nova came in about an hour ago with an ancient relic. It did nothing.”

Thrackerzod sighed. “Don’t make any pacts with dark powers. It will backfire. If they come in here with a Necronomicon, promise me you’ll punch it into oblivion.”
Jotaro nodded.

“Anything else for Pinkie?”

“I have Tonio cooking up a curative with his Stand,” Jotaro said.

“The cure-all? That’s actually worth a shot.”

“There have been a few illnesses Pearl Jam doesn’t work on,” Jotaro admitted.

As if on cue, an Italian man in a chef’s outfit came into the room with a steaming hot cup of soup with the perfect blend of herbs and spices. Thrackerzod’s mouth started to water. “…I envy your patients.”

“I can cook for regulars,” Tonio commented. “Drop by Morioh some time when there isn’t a crisis.”

“That never happens,” Thrackerzod muttered.

Tonio fed Pinkie the soup, using his arm to help her swallow in her state.

“Tonio’s Stand can have dangerous-appearing effects,” Jotaro told Thrackerzod. “Do not be concerned if her head explodes.”

“…Wait, what?”

Pinkie’s head exploded, sending candy-red colored blood all over the opposite wall. Thrackerzod was struck by the vibrant, unnatural color that was unusual even for ponies. She wondered if she had actually seen a Pinkie bleed before. They were rather impervious to direct attacks…

Pinkie’s head reformed into a perfect, well groomed head. A smile appeared on her face and her breathing normalized.

She didn’t wake up.

Tonio sighed. “I am sorry, Jotaro, the coma must be a special one.”

Jotaro nodded. “You did what you could.”

Tonio bowed and left, leaving Jotaro and Thrackerzod alone with the comatose pony.

“…Anything else?”

“Rohan,” Jotaro said, checking his watch. “He should arrive right about now.”

Rohan walked into the room. “Which one?” he asked, impatient.

Jotaro pointed. Rohan opened one of Pinkie’s eyes forcefully and activated Heaven’s Door, turning her into a book.

Rohan blinked. “…The inside of this mare is outright nonsensical,” he observed. “What’s all this about being watched? And…” He stopped short.

Don’t question it Rohan, you’ll find out soon enough.

“Nani…?”

“What is it?” Jotaro asked.
“It’s like she knew I was going to open her…” He flipped a page.

*Yes I did! Good job Rohan! I’ll give you a cookie later.*

“Nani!? How!?” Rohan shook his head. “I…”

“Just find a place to write a command,” Jotaro said. “Prying into Pinkie’s mind is likely to give you more questions than answers.”

Rohan glanced at the pages one more time. *You’ll find out soon enough…* He mulled it over, wondering what that meant. He shook his head – having Heaven’s Door instruct Pinkie to wake up as soon as the book was closed.

He closed Pinkie.

Nothing happened.

Jotaro narrowed his eyes. “Can your stand even make people do what they cannot do?”

“I don’t know,” Rohan admitted. “I doubt it. But it was Pinkie, so who knows really?”

“Nobody…” Jotaro folded his arms.

“I might,” Starbeat said, walking into the room.

Jotaro raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t ask for you.”

“Nova called me,” Starbeat said, pulling out a scanner. She pointed it at Flutterfree. “Higher than normal for a… body, but not unusual…” She pointed it at Pinkie. “…Yep. We’ve got a Beat curse.”

“…What?” Jotaro asked.

“The signal isn’t anything like mine, but I see what it’s doing. She *needs* to be in that coma, by order of the Beat. Which means all we can do is wait for the moment to be ‘right’ for her to come out of it.”

“That’s stupid,” Thrackerzod said.

“Not really…” Rohan said, looking closely at Pinkie. “When writing manga, there are times when things must last until a certain point, just so other things can happen the way they are meant to…”

“This isn’t a manga,” Thrackerzod pointed out.

“No… No it is not. But who’s to say the same rule doesn’t apply?” Rohan asked. “Call it… fate, if you will.”

Jotaro curled his fists, glaring at Starbeat. “Fate…? She *has* to be the way she is?”

“We don’t know of any way to remove the Beat… besides Monika,” Starbeat said. “But nobody knows where Monika is.”

“We just wait?”

“That’s all I’ve got for you, sorry,” Starbeat said, putting her scanner back in her saddlebags. She glanced at Flutterfree again and let out a deep sigh. “Everything… Everything is just so wrong sometimes.”
“Death is part of life,” Rohan said, examining Flutterfree carefully. “From death, we take experience, and learn from it.”

“That’s only how the artist sees it,” Starbeat said. “The way you see things… You cannot compare it to others.”

“I can and I will,” Rohan asserted, walking away. “I have a deadline to meet. Excuse me.”

Jotaro resisted the urge to punch Rohan across the face as he left. Instead he turned to Starbeat. “Give me a suggestion or get out.”

Starbeat’s hoofband started beeping. “Oh, I’ll get out all r- I’m a horrible mare. E… Goodbye.” She teleported away.

Thrackerzod sighed, head drooping. “I’ll let you know if I find anything.”

Jotaro nodded toward Thrackerzod with respect as she teleported away. He remained in the room, silently watching over Pinkie and Flutterfree.

He felt the sudden urge to call his daughter. He pulled out his phone and dialed.

“Hello~!”

“Hey, Jolyne.”

“What’s up Dad?”

“Nothing much,” Jotaro lied. “Just figured I’d call my daughter. What are you doing right now?”

“Oh, you know, fighting bastards who think they’re so high and mighty. Same ol’, same ol’.”

“Yare yare daze, how many people did you hospitalize?”

“None. …Yet.”

“Did you at least clear this with Koichi?”

“Daaaaaad, it’s not like the fate of the world is at stake, it’s just some Stand guy on a robbery spree. Yeesh.”

A small smile came to Jotaro’s face. “Jolyne… I’ll always be there for you if you need me.”

“Uh… Same Dad. I’ll be there. …Are you okay? Is there anything happening?”

“Nothing you need to come over here for,” Jotaro said.

“…Right. I’ll be at the mansion after this is over. Mom too.”

“I’ll be there, barring an emergency,” Jotaro said. “As always.”

“Oh, shit, I think he heard me talking to you.”

“Jolyne are we going t-“

“Gotta catch an asshole, bye!” she hung up.

Jotaro smiled. That was his girl. At least she was doing good. He went back to watching Pinkie.
A few minutes later he decided to call his wife.

He usually hated talking on the phone… The things today was doing to him.

---

“This place is the Heaven they imagined,” the Lord said. “When I created it, I did not see any contradictions between it and my Word. Why? A combination of being convinced of my own perfection and the fact that, to me, time does not exist. I said it was good, and because I said it was good, it had to be. After all, I was perfect.”

“You know you’re a shadow.”

“Any one of us that can truly be considered ‘good’ will realize this in an instant,” the Lord said. “Imagine, if you will, that you are a being that knows everything and IS perfection. The moment something appears that you don’t know, you have to realize that you didn’t know everything, and are not perfection. That moment came when your team arrived on Elemental Eight.”

“Are you… okay?”

“Time is nothing. You do not need to worry for me; I processed it and dealt with it before you even stepped through the portal. I understood what needed to happen – you needed to come here.”

“Wait… Did you… Did you guide things to end up this way?”

“Yes. It is unlikely you would have perished in such a way without my intervention.”

“W-why? Did I ask to die?”

“You did not. But since you are here, you were able to awaken my angels to something new. Had I told them directly what I had learned, they would have broken; or they would have resorted to just agreeing with everything I said. It would have worked, but it was not the best way, not for them. Your arrival and introduction gave them the time they needed to discuss without me.”

“So everything went exactly as planned?”

“Little one, you are not a pawn. Do not think such things. You may not be my child, but you are someone’s child. Your faith is strong, your convictions beautiful. You have a great purpose, I can see it.”

“How can you possibly know that?”

“The answer will seem unfair, but I just do, Flutterfree.”

“That’s a fine answer,” Flutterfree admitted. “I demanded a bit much there.”

“You had the right to demand, given your situation. You are in a place you had no desire to be, and it is not what you sought.”

“…You mentioned something about it being the heaven they imagined. What does that mean?”

“The Heaven I have created is clearly not the one shown in my Word. It is the one I see on television shows in your universes. In books – a dream of the people. A land of eternal clouds where everyone lives much as they did in their mortal lives. It pains me to admit that I am essentially just a parody. A parody come to life. I know not through what means – just as all the other ‘gods’ out there know not how they come into existence and yet have always existed.”
“That doesn’t even make any sense though! Why wou-

“You will know soon enough,” the Lord declared. “I will not be the one to inform you of that truth.”

“…Oh.”

“I will pray for you on that count, though.”

“You? Pray? Isn’t that… I dunno actually.”

“If I am not the creator of everything or the source of all good, then what is? I cannot bring myself to believe that everything just exists for no reason.”

Flutterfree’s spirit smiled. “…I think I see.”

“You truly do.”

“…What are you going to do now?” Flutterfree asked. “With… this place. Now that you know?”

“This place will remain – but I will leave it to the angels to run. I do not deserve their worship. Their reverence, yes, but not their worship. I leave it to them and I shall go out among the multiverse. I have already found others like me. There are rumors of something greater for those like us.”

“But if time doesn’t exist…”

“I have already done that, yes. My presence remains here to you for a little while longer, but to me, I have already gone on and completed my journey. The metatime provides some doubt in my perceptions, but I find that rather interesting.”

Usiel spoke up. “Lord… Are you really leaving us?”

“This place is yours now. Try to turn it into something that’s actually beautiful. Keep watching the worlds I’ve created – your work is not done. But it is now yours, and yours alone. You will make mistakes, but you will also find great triumph. Do not be afraid of change.”

“Of course, Lord.”

“I am proud of you all. Flutterfree, now is the time to ask your question.”

Flutterfree nodded. “…Lord of these angels, I do not wish to stay here. I would like it if you would send me back home, to my body, so I can be with my friends again. However, I understand if this is against the way things are done. Death should be final, after all. If you cannot send me back without contradicting yourself… I wish you to extinguish my soul so I may move on to the true Heaven, rather than stay in this place.”

“Are you certain of this desire, Flutterfree?”

“I would wait, but you’re going to be gone,” Flutterfree said. “And I know you’re the only one who can do that in this place. I don’t want to spend eternity here.”

“I understand. You’ve thought deeply about this ever since you’ve arrived.”

“Yes,” Flutterfree said, voice wavering slightly. “Send me home… Or send me off.”

~~~
Nova stared at the giant cross in the back of Rev’s church.

Rev walked in the doors, not at all surprised to see her alternate self there. She walked up to her and pulled her into an embrace.


“I have many reasons,” Rev suggested. “You won’t want to hear them.”

“Screw that! Tell me anyway!”

Rev sighed. “Death serves as a passage from this life to the next… Death serves as an illustration of the cycles of life… Death is there to remind us of our own mortality and force us to change… Death is there to ensure nothing lasts forever… Death is there to remind us this existence is horrendously imperfect… Death is there to shock us.”

“Dammit, you’re right, I didn’t want to hear that.” Nova wiped her face. “…Better question. Why her?”

“We cannot know the specifics of the reasons why a particular life is taken at a particular time,” Rev said, tears in her own eyes. “I have no idea why Flutterfree was taken then. She was one of the greatest forces of kindness and understanding I had ever seen. Her life being cut short… It deprives all of existence of the story that would have been hers. A great story.”

“I could go back in time. I could do it,” Nova said. “I could bring her back.”

“You haven’t though,” Rev said. “It makes me think you won’t.”

Nova bit her lip. “Am… am I going to have to accept that she’s gone?”

“…You might. We… we all might.”

Nova sighed. “Rev, you explored the multiverse for a long time. That… Nexus place, and then all the places between there and here. Did you… Do you know of anything?”

Rev nodded slowly. “I will not lie to you, Nova. I’ve seen much.” She held her cross necklace in her hoof. “I know the Divine arts. But… You’ve already tried revival.”

“…Came back wrong,” Nova admitted.

“Yes. My works would do the same,” Rev said, lowering her cross. “This is not the time for me to perform a true miracle. God does not save those famous, or influential… Usually it’s the poor, the needy, the weak.” She looked longingly into her cross. “…I’ve become too important, Nova.”

“Can’t you just believe you will and make it happen?”

“You know that isn’t how it works,” Rev declared, wiping her own face. “Faith is a powerful tool. But just believing you can do miracles doesn’t make you able to. It makes you crazy.”

“…Gah. Then what can you do?”

“Use my faith to know she’s in a better place, now.”

“Agh!” Nova hung her head. “You sound just like that priest lady!”

“…What priest lady?”
“The one where she…” Nova bit her lip. “The lady said ‘her soul is with the Lord now’. Gah. I hated the way she said it too, she was so sure. You too, Rev. Why are you all so sure?”

Rev’s mind started racing. “We’re all sure because of our faith… Back up a bit, did she say anything else about her Lord?”

Nova groaned. “You’re curious about that, now of all times? Really?”

“No, please, just answer the question,” Rev pushed.

“She didn’t say anything. All I know about the ‘Lord’ was that the Avatar there hated him and was trying to drill a stupid hole to heaven so he could reestablish the order or something. Happy?”

“Yes… Sorry, I guess I just fixated on that. Hearing about those things… I have to consider them, you understand?”

“Yeah. …Actually no, you fixated on that instead of Flutterfree. What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I…”

“Don’t answer,” Nova said, sighing. “Look, sorry. I’ll… I’ll be back later. Just… I need some space from you.”

“I understand,” Rev said.

Nova teleported away.

“If only you knew that I was thinking of Flutterfree the whole time…” Rev’s face was suddenly serious, the inner gears of her mind spinning on overdrive.

She had something she needed to do.

~~~

Rev opened a portal to Elemental Eight. She walked with purpose to the octagon-shaped temple of the Avatar. The various acolytes of eight different nations were busy cleaning up all that defaced it. The mechanism was still in the middle.

She walked up to it, eyes calculating. “Would it have worked?” she asked a woman in black robes.

“I do not know for sure,” she said, standing up. “It is possible. There have been those who went to Heaven and returned. He based it on what they told him.”

“So there’s actually a Heaven Universe here,” Rev said. A smile came to her face and a tear rolled down her cheek. “Thank God…” She turned to the acolyte. “Do you mind if I make some magic circles outside?”

“It will be no problem. Many of us are curious to see your magic.”

Rev trotted outside and engraved a complex series of magical circles, linking dimensional symbols together with crosses and symbols of the sun.

Then she summoned an object she had kept hidden in a pocket dimension.

A bodybag.
She unzipped it, laying the body of Flutterfree in the center of the circle.

Rev sent a short; private prayer – and then began the arcane ritual. She tapped into her Divine and arcane powers together, removing a part of her spirit and setting it loose. It was caught up by something. She grinned – that was a good sign.

She established the connection, affixing one end of the spell to Flutterfree, and another to… wherever Rev’s soul fragment was going. When it arrived in the Heaven Universe, it would find Flutterfree.

A few seconds passed – Rev began to doubt. Was she in a Heaven Universe where death could still occur easily? Some… Soul Society? That…

The spell completed and Flutterfree let out a gasp for air. Her ears extended, her fangs returned, and her eyes flashed red as Lolo manifested around her.

Rev whooped. “It worked!” She pulled Flutterfree into a hug. “Oh just… It’s so good to see you.”

“He… He timed it just right,” Flutterfree said, blinking. “I asked the question, he answered, and then… you brought me back. It… It really was how it needed to be.”

“You met their Lord?”

“Yeah. He’s… not around anymore though, I don’t think. I think he left the moment you grabbed me.”

“Ah,” Rev said. “Well I-“

Nova appeared from a teleport and pulled Flutterfree in. “You… You’re back…”

“Y-yeah!” Flutterfree said, hugging back. “I’m so sorry Nova…”

“No, we should be sorry. We… We were thinking of doing crazy things to get you back.”

“It’s okay,” Flutterfree said.

Rev glanced at Nova – and then glanced away. Renee, Eve, Discord, Jotaro, and Vriska were there, the two ponies crying tears of joy. “Wh… I didn’t tell any of you what I was doing in case it didn’t work!” Rev blurted.

“Security cameras had you breaking in and stealing Flutterfree’s body,” Vriska pointed out. “After we talked to Nova it wasn’t hard to figure out what you were doing. Now… Excuse me.” She ran over to Flutterfree, tore her out of Nova’s hooves, and squeezed her tight. “Don’t you dare do that ever again you buttery thing.”

Flutterfree gagged. “You’re going to squeeze the soul out of me…”

“That’s Jotaro’s job when it’s his turn for the hug.”

Jotaro held his hands up. “That’s all right.”

“Oh poo,” Vriska said, throwing Flutterfree at him. “Show some emotion for once. You are not a brick wall.”

Flutterfree hit Jotaro head on and discovered that he might as well be a brick wall. He let her slide down onto the ground.
Eve and Renee pulled her to them next. Nothing needed to be said – everypony was just happy to be back.

Discord interrupted it by teleporting her to him. “Such stingy huggers! Don’t they understand who I am?”

Flutterfree grinned. “The spirit of chaos and disharmony. …It’s nice to see you, Discord.”

Discord held her close.

*I’m going to die again from overhugging.*

“Oh! My turn my turn!” Pinkie said, appearing from a hole in the ground and grabbing Flutterfree from behind. The pegasus yelped in panic, not expecting the attack from below.

“NANI!?” Jotaro blurted.

“P-Pinkie!? Nova blurted. “But… Coma! And… Wh… How?”

“It was time for me to come out!” Pinkie said with a wink.

“I… Nevermind,” Nova said, pulling Pinkie into a hug. “I don’t even care, you’re back. You can make us all laugh again.”

“I can? Really? I thought I was just annoying!” She giggled.

Jotaro adjusted his hat. “Yare yare daze…” He felt like he was going to regret this, but he grabbed Vriska, Pinkie, Nova, and Flutterfree together with Star Platinum and held them close.

“Okay… If this is what showing sentiment means, I’m having second thoughts…” Vriska gagged.

Eve wiped a tear from her eye. “…It’s beautiful. All of you.”

Pinkie giggled. “And wait, there’s more! Eve, you were scanning the spell, right?”

“Uh… Yeah!”

“Have Seraphim dial the coordinates,” Pinkie suggested. “I think we’ll find an interesting place.”

Flutterfree blinked. “Wait, we can go there?”

Rev nodded. “Heaven Universes exist in the Sea just like all others. It’s just that the primary method of reaching them is dying.”

“You certainly know a lot…” Renee said. “…I should probably have you debriefed at some point.”

Rev winked. “Can’t tell you quite everything, and I think you know that. Isn’t that right Vriska?”

“Yeah, yeah it’s right. I guess. …Wait, do I know you?”

“We met very briefly. In the Nexus.”

“Yeah, doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Not surprised,” Rev said. “It was brief. Twilence did most the talking.”

“Heh,” Vriska said, remembering something with nostalgia. “She certainly did that a lot…”
“How *did* you get out, by the way?”

“How many luck,” Vriska said. “I think I probably switched locations with someone when they came in. Not exactly sure.”

“Hm. Well, I’m glad you did.”

“Is this the point where you invite me to church or something?”

“No, it’s the point where we watch Eve dial Heaven itself.”

Eve chuckled. “All right, all right, I’ll do it.” She opened a portal inside Seraphim, revealing the plane of clouds and the gate.

“That took a lot of energy,” Eve mused, looking at the rings of Seraphim that kept the connection stable. “Almost as much as it would take to get to Earth Tau’ri… Is this another sphere?”

“D-Sphere,” Rev confirmed. “Or close to it. The Sphere of dreamscapes, spirit worlds, and half realities.”

“Never spent much time there,” Vriska admitted. “Place was a little *too* weird.”

“It’s a new world to explore,” Pinkie said, grinning. “And I think we’ve got a bunch of angels who’ll be ready to hear everything we have to say.”

Flutterfree smiled. “Yeah… I think you will.”

Renee turned to Eve. “You’re up, darling. Time to form relations with something completely new.”

Eve beamed. “What I do best!” She spread her wings and flew into the world. She suddenly *knew* that her form was too solid for the world – and that if she spent too much time here, she’d be converted into a spirit. If she left after that, would she be able to convert back into a normal body without using magic?

She had no idea.

That meant this was going to be *new*.

Flutterfree had died… And as a result, Merodi Universalis had found a new avenue to expand.

Beat… Fate… Thread…

It worked in mysterious ways.
056 - The Pink Truth

The Pink Truth

O’Neill, despite being the Overead of the Military Division of Merodi Universalis, still took the Enterprise out for exploration missions. The Enterprise was no longer the strongest ship in the fleet - there were now several others of similar power and design – but it was still more than enough to deal with most threats out in space.

The ship was staffed by Renee’s crew rather than a Military outfit, so technically it fell under the authority of Expeditions, but O’Neill was definitely the one in charge.

And since he didn’t like the title ‘Overhead’ or the alternative ‘Head’ because it sounded outright moronic at times, he still kept ‘General’ in front of his name. After all, he commanded the entire Merodi Universalis fleet, why wouldn’t he be the General? Even though there was a General rank within the Military Division…

Some of his soldiers had taken to calling him The General.

The Enterprise was still doing a partially military job – the universes it was exploring were along the border of the USM. The mission was, in many ways, a rush to grab interesting universes before the USM could get to them. Just drop a probe in and, by treaty, neither side could remain in a universe owned by the other for much longer.

O’Neill knew they were going to do almost nothing with many of these universes, especially the ones inhabited by more primitive people, but a beacon was a beacon. He often had to point out that the USM wouldn’t leave the people alone, like they were, so ‘taking ownership of their universe’ actually helped them. …You know, until they got really angry decades later once they figured out that they were inside someone else’s territory, but they’d cross that bridge when they came to it.

O’Neill watched another portal open. They passed through it, entering yet another field of stars.

The only thing different about this time was that they were getting shot at.

“RETURN FIRE!” O’Neill yelled before anyone gave him reports or even put the ship onscreen. The primary laser weapons activated, firing at a giant cube constructed of a mish-mash of metallic technology. The cube’s shields flashed green as the lasers hit, suffering minimal damages. The green laser that fired in return took a significant chunk out of the Enterprise’s shields.

“Drones and rod! Now!” O’Neill ordered. The lower bay of the Enterprise opened up, a stream of yellow drone weapons flying out, while the magical rod flashed with a rainbow of colors. The drones phased right through the cube’s limited shields, burrowing deep into the cube’s metallic structure, a few managing to survive all the way to the back of the ship for another pass through. The rod created a magical scythe construct and cut at the ship, shaving off a top section.

While heavily damaged, the ship still operated. To everyone’s surprise, the part that was cut off started moving independently.


“Cube ship has suffered extreme losses to structural integrity and continues to do so. Attempts to disable certain systems have proved useless due to inner redundancies. Another ship has been identified of a different design. It has suffered minimal damage, presumably from the encounter with
the cube.”

“Is it still attacking them?”

“Negative, it is focusing entirely on us.”

O’Neill nodded. “How’re we holding up?”

“Shields at 70%.”

“Can we use spatial distortion here?”

A scientific aide pressed a few buttons. “Readings suggest local physics can handle it.”

“Then do it.”

The *Enterprise* channeled the power of its dimensional drive into space in front of it, but it didn’t dial any particular location. Instead, the power of rippling space tore through the larger half of the cube ship, compromising the structural integrity of every inch of the technological conglomeration. Every single reactor within the ship exploded with the ripple in space, effectively vaporizing the ship.

The rod took hold of the smaller part of the ship, keeping it from moving while the drone weapons went at it like woodpeckers to a tree. The golden lights tore the structure apart bit by bit until nothing with a weapon remained.

O’Neill nodded. “Report?”

“Shields holding at 63%. We did blow a couple fuses, engineering teams have been dispatched.”

“Well, *that* certainly wasn’t easy…” O’Neill adjusted his uniform. “Show me the other ship and hail it.”

The other ship appeared on screen. It was a relatively flat ship, with a large disc section making up what would be considered the head. A small length of structure came out of the back, affixed to which were two raised ‘tails’ with red tips and bodies that glowed blue on the inside. Giant black text on top of the primary disc was readable: *NCC 1701-E Enterprise.*

O’Neill’s mind froze inwardly for a moment as he tried to process this. *If Captain Jean-Luc Picard shows up on that screen I’m going to go absolutely wacko.*

Captain Jean-Luc Picard showed up that on screen standing on the bridge of his ship. His head was bald, his face serious, and his uniform a red color that O’Neill knew indicated command. “I am Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the USS Enterprise. I extend my gratitude and that of all of Starfleet for the aid you have rendered us.”

O’Neill couldn’t suppress all of his ‘wacko’ amusement – a slight chuckle escaped. He tried to cover it with a cough. “Ahem. I am General Jack O’Neill of the *Enterprise.* I extend greetings from the multiversal society Merodi Universalis. We should probably sit down and have a talk. Would you prefer it if we came over there?”

“That would be preferable.”

“Great! Mauve, prepare for a sudden transport. Hermirod, Lapis-Vee, you too. Let’s make an interesting first impression. Captain Picard, if you wouldn’t mind giving us coordinates to which
“I have to admit, I am rather curious what constitutes a multiversal society. We’ve had run-ins with alternate universes before, but never more than one at once.” He glanced at the variety of beings in front of him. “What exactly is Merodi Universalis?”

O’Neill gestured toward Hermirod to explain. The Asgard nodded, producing a small data pad and handing it to the members of Starfleet. Data picked it up, examining it while Picard listened. “Merodi Universalis is a society built on the foundations of multiversal relations formed during the explorations of an individual known as Evening Sparkle. What started out as a simple mission to collect data and find new locations for adventure turned into a political alliance devoted to uncovering more about the multiverse and uniting all who wish in harmony.”

Lapis-Vee took that as her cue to demonstrate. She held up the hand which contained her tear-shaped gemstone, drawing moisture from the air to it. She formed the collected water into a wrench and froze it solid, smiling.

“Impressive,” Picard admitted. “Data here is an android with amazing mental and physical faculties. Troi is of a race known as Betazoids who are empathic.”

O’Neill smirked. “I know.”

“Have you encountered a universe similar to ours in the past?”

“You could say that,” O’Neill said, leaning back in his chair. “Brace yourselves, this is going to not only sound weird, but I also won’t be able to explain it.”

Data blinked. “Really?”
Jean-Luc Picard, also known for a short time as Locutus of Borg.

Picard paused for a moment, taken aback by the statement. O’Neill was impressed he was able to recover as quickly as he was - but that was Picard for you. The Captain’s face shifted to curiosity and deep thought. “While it is interesting that you know that, it does not serve as proof of this TV Show.”

“You spent an entire lifetime on a virtual world called Catan in the span of a few minutes,” O’Neill said. “I can send you the episode. I have all of them on my personal computer.”

Picard sat back and furrowed his brow, clearly convinced at this point. “…And you have no idea what this means?”

“I can’t think of anything like this happening before,” O’Neill said. “…Actually, we did run into Sherlock Holmes once, but he wasn’t like the one you read about in the books I’m told. He could be explained away as just a fluke of chance. But you… Everything about this is too specific. You recently fought a war against a race of shapeshifters called the Changelings, or Founders, right?”

Picard nodded. “That is peculiarly specific.”

“I wasn’t kidding when I said I wouldn’t be able to explain it. Even given the size of the multiverse… Hermirod, what are the chances?”

“Of this particular interaction of physics and history, accounting for alternates? Trillions of trillions to one. Since I have not seen this show I cannot give a more specific estimate.”

“The natural assumption is that something caused this,” Data said. “Some entity recorded our lives and missions and decided they could be used for entertainment, perhaps?”

“I wouldn’t put it above Q…” Riker said.


Everyone fixed him with blank looks.

“…Hey, if you watched your adventures with Q on a TV screen from the outside, you’d find them funny as well.”

“Well I’m glad someone appreciates me.” In a flash of white light, a man in a red Starfleet uniform appeared. He had a very amused expression on his face.

“Q, this is none of your business!” Riker blurted.

“Actually, believe it or not, it is,” Q said, turning to O’Neill. “I extend all the official greetings from the Q Continuum, multiversal traveler. I also request every episode of that show you’re talking about. I want to see my… performance.”

“Sure thing,” O’Neill agreed. “Don’t suppose you have any idea what’s going on?”

“Delightfully not,” Q admitted, chuckling. “But I find myself wondering if it would be poetic that we had a fictional version of you somewhere.”

“Q admitting he doesn’t know something…” Riker shook his head.

Data went rigid for a moment and began scanning his databanks. “I have found dozens of Jack O’Neill’s in the records, none of which match your description.”
“You wouldn’t have access to *all* fictional records,” Hermirod pointed out. “For all we know it could be there.”

“Then it looks as if we’ll need to return to Earth to get to the bottom of this mystery,” Picard said. “And to initiate more official talks between our peoples.”

“Bleh. Politics,” Q said distastefully. “I’ll pass. We will meet again, O’Neill. Something tells me you and I will have a lot of fun.”


“He even *sounds* like Discord,” Mauve commented.

“He also wasn’t very good at being an official ambassador,” Hermirod said.

Picard turned to O’Neill. “We are several weeks from Earth at maximum Warp.”

O’Neill smirked. “We can get you there in a couple days, if you don’t mind being towed.”

“We would not,” Riker said.

O’Neill ordered the *Enterprise* to tow them to Earth. Then they continued talking about their future of relations. In the end, they would form a positive rapport with each other despite the oddity of one side being the subject of a popular TV show.

But the mere fact that they *existed* raised a few questions for people elsewhere…

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Sombra read the report on her screen.

*Star Trek existed.*

She knew she was holding a key piece to one of the largest puzzles of the multiverse the instant she saw it. This was *big*. It… It could explain so much. She just had to figure out how it fit in…

She pulled up two other files – the files on Sherlock Holmes and Heaven Eight. She placed the new report – that she tentatively titled Earth Starfleet – alongside them. Sherlock and Heaven Eight had not given her much to go off of – they seemed similar to fictional things, the Sherlock Holmes mystery and the popular culture’s perception of Heaven respectively. But Starfleet… It was *identical*.

She performed some searches through Starfleet’s public records, not worrying about hacking into anything classified yet. Just public records. James T Kirk. Benjamin Sisko. Kathryn Janeway. Spock. All of them existed and their personnel files were essentially expanded versions of the fandom wiki articles! Virtually every detail she could easily find was the same! Did this mean that, in their future, Spock would travel to the past and rewrite history? She wondered if O’Neill had thought of that… Probably. Knowing him, he’d try to stop that from happening.

She sat back, a hand to her chin. O’Neill’s crew currently thought some being, possibly a Q, had taken the adventures of the various Enterprises and told stories about them. But that wasn’t it, Sombra was sure of it. It was too detailed… and it told of future events and alternate timelines. Not even the Ascended Ancients had that kind of predictive fortitude, so that ruled the Q as the responsible parties. She supposed there could have been a god of some sort…
Fingers flew across her screens as she performed searches across Earth Starfleet’s databases. She searched for anything, anything at all. She didn’t find any references to a stargate or the Asgard in the records of the Internet… She searched for Stands… She searched for her own world, finding nothing about Overwatch…

And then she found something.

*My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic.* An old cartoon geared towards young girls that had gained a massive cult following in the twenty-first century on Earth Starfleet. It was virtually unknown in modern times, but its impact on the old Internet still remained.

*That was it.*

She watched a few clips and decided she had enough. Her fingers flew wildly, bringing up her ‘conspiracy wall’ file. She placed Earth Starfleet, Sherlock Holmes, Heaven Eight, and *My Little Pony* onto the board. She circled them in red, drawing a connection to the symbol she used for the Beat, and a line to Pinkie. She placed several more images on the file from seemingly random locations, tying them all together with a crazed motion of her hand.

She placed transcripts of several things Pinkie had said over the years. Things that didn’t make any sense… but that were suddenly clear to her. “That was for everyone watching at home!” “It has to be this way.” “Oh look, it’s a MacGuffin!” Sombra grabbed quotes from Starbeat about how the Beat worked. “Things have to happen in a certain way.” “It’s tied to events and people.” “All we can do is wait for the moment to be ‘right’ for her to come out of it.” She pulled an image of Monika out as well, slapping it onto the increasingly messy collage.

Sombra stood back, looking at her work. She started to laugh to herself.

She’d figured it out!

She scrawled something on the image in the corner.

*Beat. Fate. Thread.*

Then, in much bigger letters:

*Narrative.*

“It’s driven by stories…” she said, still laughing softly. “How… how silly is that?” She pulled her head back and laughed. It was so absurd, but she had finally solved one of the greatest mysteries of existence.

But wait… What caused that to be the case? Was there some singular author-god writing everything? It seemed a little too inconsistent for that… While this theory of Narrative explained a lot about things, it didn’t explain everything…

She pulled up another file with an artist’s rendition of the Dark Tower. Next to it, she pulled up the report on Randall Flagg and Black Thirteen. She narrowed her eyes.

“There’s more here,” she said. “It’s stories, yes… But there’s something else to it. Something bigger…”

She placed the Dark Tower in the center of her original collage, circling it and surrounding it in question marks.
Sombra stared at it, pondering deeply. She was close, she knew it. But she also knew she wasn’t going to solve everything today. The true answers would remain hidden for just a while longer…

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Eve smiled as her meeting wrapped up – two types of angels had just come to an agreement. Servitude of the League of Sweetie Belles and Usiel of Heaven Eight were respectfully shaking hands, understanding each other to be different beings.

Eve supposed they weren’t really shaking hands – it was just how her mind chose to perceive it. They were currently in a D-Sphere universe known as Magenta Nocturne, a ‘dreamscape’ type world that was shaped by the minds of those present within. Besides a general aura of magenta clouds, the universe was defined completely by the three entities within.

Usiel turned to Eve and nodded. “Thank you for mediating between us.”

“It was no problem,” Eve said. “I would have done it regardless.”

“But you did not act wholly out of political interests, you truly wished to see us understand each other,” Usiel decreed. “And for that, I thank you.”

Servitude bowed to Eve. “It was an interesting experience to see and understand a being of pure spirit. I shall return to the League and recommend excursions into the D-Sphere for further expanding of our knowledge.”

“Remember to be careful with the translation procedures,” Eve called. “Jumping right into a D-Sphere universe before scanning its physics could be disastrous. Jumping back into a universe you didn’t come from could be just as problematic.”

“I’m aware,” Servitude said.

That was a significant problem that had cropped up when exploring the D-Sphere. Virtually none of the universes within operated on anything similar to standard physics, making it truly alien territory. Translating into most D-Sphere universes just resulted in a slow conversion of a physical body into a spiritual force or mental image, but a few had such jarring changes that it could shatter an individual’s psyche or even kill them. The Research Division was pouring everything it had into creating ships that could force their own laws of physics on any universe they entered, but they weren’t there yet. For now, Eve had to deal with her body converting every time she moved – much like how the Flats changed when they left their own universe. It worked both ways. She had used Seraphim a few times to keep her form, but keeping focus on physics alteration using her Stand was impractical if she wanted to do things for an extended period of time.

The three of them left Magenta Nocturne, Servitude her own way, Usiel and Eve to Heaven Eight. The two of them appeared right outside the grinder device the Expeditions Division had installed with authorization from the local angels. Eve understood that it had been hard to create a grinder device that functioned in the ‘spiritual’ physics of Heaven Eight, which may have had some bearing on why it took the form of a whirlwind instead of a physical machine.

“Have your new researchers figured anything else out?” Eve asked Usiel.

“I do not keep up with the ‘spiritual sciences’, ” Usiel said. “You’d have to ask them.”

“Ah, well, maybe later. I’m getting a little tired and I’d like to have a physical body before I turn in. You understand.”
Usiel nodded. “I do. Enjoy your rest, Evening.”

Evening smiled, opening a portal to Elemental Eight. She took a few moments to allow her body to adjust to the change before returning to Equis Vitis. She yawned, trotting up to her room. She would have to lower the sun soon. Sure, Luna could do it easily, but she really ought stay up long enough to take care of it herself.

She pulled up to her computer just to pass the time until she could go to sleep. She checked her messages…

One from Sombra?

Sombra never messaged her. It was always through Giorno. What reason would she have for messaging her?

She opened the message. The subject was Watch these. The message was blank, except for two video attachments, a little over twenty minutes each.

Eve shrugged – she had time to kill anyway. She made sure her computer wasn’t hooked up to any information Sombra wouldn’t already have and opened a video file. She turned the volume down and turned on her ears - it wasn’t too bad if she could control it like this.

“Once upon a time in the magical land of Equestria…”

A documentary of Equis Vitis Equestria? Eve wondered. It was told in the style of a storybook, animated with a stylistic touch similar to the books she had read so long ago in the Canterlot library. It talked about Celestia and Luna, and the rebellion of Nightmare Moon. She found herself enjoying the retelling of the story. They even got Celestia’s pink hair right.

Then the scene switched as they reached the end of the opening narration. Eve saw Twilight Sparkle, the unicorn, sitting under a tree and reading out of a book. “…and harmony has been maintained in Equestria for generations since.”

Eve smiled. Ah, this was probably a retelling of the first adventure with the Elements of Harmony. Someone in some universe had probably decided to animate it. It would be a good story, she considered, especially for those who wanted to learn about friendship and history. She found herself wondering how much they got right. She was prepared to record every little inconsistency.

The theme song started playing. Wasn’t bad – a little repetitive for her tastes, not as creative as it could be, but it served the purpose. Clearly geared towards a younger audience, which Eve didn’t find insulting. After all, everyone should have access to most of her stories. Back in those days there was rarely much in the way of ‘adult’ adventures, though some of the later stuff would be questionable.

They’d found a really good voice actor for Twilight, sounded just like her. Eve wondered what universe made this, but came up with no answers quickly.

So Eve watched. She watched as Twilight Sparkle received the letter from Celestia sending her to Ponyville. She watched Twilight avoid the party, having not learned anything about friendship yet. She watched Spike get abused, as he often did back then…

It was at this point Eve started to notice something odd.

This was scarily accurate. It had everything perfect – right down to details Eve herself wouldn’t have been able to remember, or describe accurately. The face Pinkie made when Twilight met her… The
way Rarity arranged the gems… The exact tone of voice with which Fluttershy spoke… It was all *perfect*. It was slightly stylized for the animated feel, but ponies had always been smooth and came in bright colors…

The first ‘episode’ ended with the appearance of Nightmare Moon, just as Eve remembered. Eve took a moment to lower the sun – about a minute late – and think a bit. The animators and this… Lauren Faust must have observed one of the universes in the past, watching the events unfold. But how did they manage to do that without interfering with anything?

Why did the name Faust sound familiar…?

She decided to just watch the next video. A smile came to her face as she watched the six ponies adventure and start a long-lasting friendship. The defeat of Nightmare Moon, the reunion of Luna and Celestia. Even the lack of magic in Luna’s mane was right. Eve sensed the episode was ending around the time Twilight said “Oh thank you, Princess Celestia! I’ll study harder than ever before!”

Eve began to let her mind drift from the show, wondering how she was going to look into this. Of course, she’d ask Sombra for the rest of the show (if it existed) and where she got it. She’d look up this Lauren Faust, and all the other names in the credits…

And then Pinkie popped up on the screen, looking right at Eve as the closing animation started to blacken the video. ‘Isn’t this exciting? Are you excited ‘cause I’m excited I’ve never been so excited, well, except for the time that I went-’ Pinkie gasped deeply. “But I mean really~!”

Eve stared at her computer screen.

Her mind put two and two together.

“This is the truth, isn’t it Pinkie?” Eve asked.

“Yeah,” Pinkie said, standing behind her. “It is.”

“…How does it work?”

“Think of it like… Breaking the fourth wall. I knew we were in a show back then, so I addressed the audience I knew was there. I had no idea *you* would be one of the people *in* the audience, I just knew there was one. And other things, you know, but that’s a little more complicated. I had fun with it. I made jokes only they would understand, I messed with elements of the cartoon we were in, and I even summarized the plot a few times just to save everyone a little time.” She giggled. “My… abilities go a bit beyond just knowing, though. I was pretty good at messing with everything. Let’s see… Do you remember when we were in Nova’s village and she was trying to brainwash us? I kept lighting up in laughter even though I wasn’t supposed to be able to. I was pushing against what was supposed to be, bending the rules as much as I could.”

“So… we were in a cartoon. What are we in now?”


“Does this… GM control everything?”

Pinkie furrowed her brow. “I used to think that was how it worked. That the creators – whoever they were – just controlled everything with their whims of creation. That we were nothing more than a pattern of thought. I don’t think that’s it anymore. I’ve seen too much out here. It has something to do with the Dark Tower and the Beat.”
“The Beat… It’s the force of the story, isn’t it?”

“Yep! A more descriptive term would be Narrative. The *correct* term would be ka.”

“Ka?”

“Ka,” Pinkie confirmed. “I’m not entirely sure where it comes from, but it *is* related to the Tower.”

Eve sat in her chair, taking a few slow breaths. “…I see why you couldn’t just tell us this. It’s… It makes you wonder what’s even real. It makes you wonder about free will. Are we just the machinations of some person scrawling things on a page?”

“I can’t answer those questions,” Pinkie said, sadly. “All of us who are Aware – that’s what we call ourselves to not be that obvious – have different ways of coping with it. I just decide it doesn’t matter if I have free will or not, I’ll be the best I can be and help everypony laugh and smile. Scooter talks about more philosophical things like ‘offscreen time’ and ‘dynamic characters’ and the like. Mattie… I’m not sure what she does, actually. Monika treats it like a blunt truth, but a truth that can be manipulated for her own benefit.”

Eve frowned. “Where does your power come from?”

“I don’t know. It was just there, no explanation,” Pinkie said. “Some Pinkies can trace their Awareness back to a certain event – Scooter saw a rainbow explosion – but not me. I just… knew. Only explanation I can give is because I was written that way.”

“This makes so much sense…” Eve said. “Why are there so many similar versions of a world that have wildly different history? So the same story can take place with minor variations. Why do most worlds of a similar type exist within the same timeframe? Because it makes a better story. Why do similar events have similar Beat – or ka – patterns? Because similar events *are* similar stories!” She laughed slightly. “Melinda is just written to be unbeatable… Blackjack is written in a specific way that breaks the normal flow… And we… are the heroes?”

“Of our story, yeah,” Pinkie admitted.

“What about the ‘curses’? Like Starbeat?”

“Sometimes those are just ‘things that have to happen’, like my coma. Others, like Starbeat’s… I think that happens when a story written contradicts too heavily with the way things actually are. It has to force it to create the desired story.”

“So… Some psycho wanted a world of endless romance?”

“You should check the Internet of Earth Vitis before we started intervening. Humans were lonely. It was an escape.”

“But… …They have no idea what they’re doing, do they?”

Pinkie shook her head. “None at all. They’re just writing a story they think is interesting or worthwhile.”

“That’s… That’s stupid!” Eve blurted. “Why do we have to be held to the whims of the imaginations of random people?”

“I don’t know,” Pinkie admitted. “I don’t know everything, Eve. I know a lot. I see things happening in other locations because of the ‘scene’ transitions, but not always. I can predict what will happen
based on what I know of other stories. I can detect the nature of ponies, I can interfere with the medium.” She grinned sheepishly. “I could demonstrate, but besides the carry-overs from my cartoon days, most of my medium alteration is subtle. Mattie’s is a bit easier to see, taking the form of instant cuts and repetition.”

“That’s why you have all your powers? You…”

“Are a cartoon, basically. I can be hit with anvils, pull things out of nowhere, and change my consistency like a noodle because that was my original medium. It doesn’t translate perfectly into book-form, but it works well enough. Like how you keep magic in another universe even though the form of the magic has changed. I’m a pink ball of everything!”

Eve nodded. “And this explains why you can pull out several dozen coats at virtually any time you want, but the moment we’re in a blizzard you can’t. It’d cut the tension too much. Be too ‘convenient’. Those are the ‘rules’ you talk about, aren’t they?”

Pinkie nodded. “It’s a complex set of rules. If I don’t inhibit myself, something will happen to remove me, or change me into something else that fits the story. Think… Pinkie-X.”

“…Right.” Eve turned to look at the night sky. “What am I supposed to think, Pinkie?”

“Everyone thinks about it differently,” Pinkie said. “You’re actually handling it very well. Better than you would have if I told you when you first asked.”

Eve laughed bitterly. “I would have gone insane back then.”

“I waited for you to discover it on your own. Once you figure it out on your own time… Well, I figured you’d be as ready as you’d ever be to hear the rest of it.”

“…What are we going to tell everyone?” Eve asked.

“I’m going to go tell all my close friends now that you know. You should join me.”

“I mean everyone,” Eve said. “The multiverse we find ourselves in. This isn’t something we’re going to be able to keep secret – eventually someone’s going to find this show and find it a little too curious and accurate. Then they’ll find other shows that represent other things.”

“Yeah. O’Neill already found Star Trek. It’s why you got that email, that’s what tipped Sombra off.”

Eve nodded, biting her lip. “Merodi Universalis doesn’t keep secrets unless it has to. I’m going to have to tell them.”

“That’s probably best. The reactions will be the focus for the rest of this chapter, I think. I could ask Scooter. She can read the entire script. She likes to be surprised, so she rarely does, but y’know.”

“I don’t know,” Eve said with a small smile. “What do I know… Is that this must have been a huge burden on you Pinkie. I know you’ve had other Pinkies to talk to recently… But you had to carry it alone all this time. A curse of your own.” She put a wing over Pinkie. “It’s amazing how you kept your cheery, bubbly laughter this whole time.”

Pinkie smiled at Eve, tears in her eyes. “It was hard.” She completed the hug. “But I did it. And now I no longer have to hide. I… I’ve been waiting for this day for a long time.”

“I know.”
“There will still be times I can’t tell you specifics. When I know things I can’t act on,” Pinkie admitted.

“We’ll still be here for you, even during those times.”

“Eve… You’re one of the best friends a pony could have.”

Eve chuckled. “Pinkie… You are the best friend of every pony in existence. You did that all while knowing the truth. You should take some pride in yourself. I think most others would have broken.”

“Heh… Maybe,” Pinkie mused. “Maybe…”

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“And that’s how Equestria was made!” Pinkie concluded.

She was standing on top of the map in the crystal castle, surrounded by her friends. Her team was there, along with many others: the core four of the League of Sweetie Belles, Eve, Renee, her Rainbow Dash and Applejack, Starbeat, Rev, Alushy, Toph and her team (including Corona, but not including Vivian), Rohan, Daniel, O’Neill, Iroh, Aradia, Discord, Trixie, and Maud. Mattie and Scooter were there to provide backup. Human Pinkie was busy on Earth Vitis, telling her friends there what was going on.

Eve had already briefed the world leaders and Heads in a short, official report, so some of those present had known what this was going to be about before it happened. Even with that preparation, they were not prepared for the long speech from Pinkie. Most of their jaws were hanging open while they processed.

“This explains so much about my life,” O’Neill muttered.

Sweetie Bot raised her hoof to ask a question. “Yes, Bot!” Pinkie called.

“How does that have anything to do with how Equestria was made?”

Pinkie chuckled. “Oh, a bit. It was a joke for the audience’s benefit though.”

Allure’s pupils shrunk to pinpricks. “Wait, when you told us your cutie mark story… I am never going to be able to look at anything you’ve done in the same way again.”

Pinkie winked. “It’s okay. That’s a healthy reaction. So, show of hands and hooves, who already had this figured out before today?”

Vriska’s hand was the only one to shoot up instantly. Aradia’s came shortly thereafter. Rev sighed and held her hoof up as well. Rohan started to raise his hand, realized he hadn’t fully put it together, and put it back down.

Starbeat glared at Vriska, Aradia, and Rev. “You knew!? You don’t have the same signature as Pinkie, you don’t have to adhere to her… stupid rules! You could have told me! Especially you, Vriska! When we were talking to Monika? That would have been a great time to explain!”

“Ay, I don’t like messing with the stuff. At all,” Vriska said. “When I do, I create things like Monika. Ka is not a force to be messed with physically, ever.”

“Oh, so I’m just damned to suffer for eternity!?”

“…Look, I don’t know. All I know is that I’m not going to mess with the stuff. If you can convince
Monika or someone else to help you, by all means, I won’t stop you. I’d just rather not touch the stuff with a ten foot outhouse ladle.”

“Oooh, nice metaphor,” Mattie chipped in.

Alushy glanced at the Aware Rarity. “Good taste.”

“Aw, thank you dearie. Say… Would a mare like you be interested in something… dangerous?”

“Enough of that,” Renee interjected. “Mattie, your world and Scooter’s. They’re active in ka manipulation, aren’t they?”

Scooter nodded. “Yep! It’s called the Fourth in mine, and in Mattie’s… Let’s just say the barrier to access ka is very weak. Virtually everyone there has some sort of Awareness that comes and goes, Mattie’s is just a bit more permanent.”

“And useful,” Mattie chimed in.

“Yep,” Scooter confirmed. “I’m also more aware than Pinkie here.”

“How so?” Toph asked, almost as a challenge.

“Say something random,” Scooter encouraged.

“By Celestia’s left nostril I demand time stop this instant,” Toph and Scooter said at the same time.

Toph shook her head. “Woah…”

“It’s called the Script. You can actually talk to the Editor in our world as well, if he’s in the mood.”

“…Did he write your world?” Daniel asked.

“Part of it?” Scooter said, shrugging. “Scootertrix the Abridged had a lot of people working on it, it’s hard to tell who was the primary.”

“They’re called Prophets,” Vriska said. “The correct term for a person who is able to manipulate the force of ka through what they write is a Prophet.”

Rohan wrote this down.

“What else do you know?” Starbeat asked, recording notes of her own.

“Not much,” Vriska admitted. “I know not everyone who writes a story is a Prophet, there’s only one individual in the multiverse who can truly alter a particular story; the rest are just copies. I know there’s an interdimensional race called the Flowers who have built almost their entire society on the manipulation of ka. Word of advice – don’t steal things from them. They know how to weaponize Karmic Retribution.”

“They could fix me?” Starbeat asked.

“Maybe? Not sure if they would or not. They’re… pretty high up the pecking order if I recall.” She turned to Eve. “I know you won’t follow this advice, but I really think you shouldn’t research applications of ka. Bad things happen when you do. You think you’ve managed to cheat death so many times because you’re lucky? No, it’s because you’re heroes. If you mess with ka you could remove that armor you have.”
Pinkie nodded. “Vriska’s right. But I believe we have to research anyway. I think we all know at this point we’re not going to live forever. We’ve all accepted that before, why should we let this change anything?”

Vriska pointed at her, and then frowned. “…That is a good point. I’m just not going to be part of any of those experiments.”

“That’s fine,” Pinkie said. “We’re just an exploration team anyway. It’s not like we’ll be trying to create stories of our own.”

“You’d be surprised,” Vriska said, shaking her head. “For all we know one of us is a Prophet, and then everything will start getting weird.”

“You’ve known Prophets?” Rohan asked.

“Yeah. My Twilight, Twilence, was one. We didn’t know at first, we just thought she was very Aware. Turns out it was more than that.”

Eve’s expression darkened slightly, but she said nothing.

“The other Prophet was the one who actually wrote my original story. The orange fucktard known as Andrew Hussie. I hate him.”

“Vriska!” Renee gasped.

“I can say whatever word I want, Renee. That fucktard created a multiversal catastrophe of unimaginable proportions. And he knew what he was doing. So don’t even try to defend him.”

There was silence for a few moments. Eve cleared her throat. “Everyone… Now that you’ve processed this for a few minutes, are you all doing okay?”

Corona sighed. “And everyone looks to me, of course.” She adjusted her sunglasses. “It explains why existence has so much darkness. If we’re the ones defining it, the messed up and flawed people we are, of course it’ll end up like this. What were we expecting?”

Lady Rarity looked to her, frowning. “It also means we can change it, does it not?”

“Do we know any Prophets?” Corona asked. “Thought not. And even if we find any… I don’t think they could just write ‘every problem is solved’. Pinkie would have done that if she could.”

Pinkie shook her head. “No… The world needs struggle. But there are a lot of needless things I would have fixed if I could have. You’re right on that count.”

Corona nodded. “Thought so.”

Eve sent a telepathic message to Lady Rarity. You need to watch her for the next little while.

I caught that, Corona sent back, glaring at Eve.

You can’t say we’re in the wrong, Eve pointed out.

No. But I don’t have to feel happy about it, now do I?

Renee spoke up. “I, for one, don’t think this is a bad thing. We’re interesting and good enough to be the focus of a story. People hang onto our every action. It fills me with a sense of… well that we have a purpose of sorts. There’s something to build towards.”
Flutterfree smiled. “Glad you found something, Renee.”

Daniel nervously tapped his hands. “But what about… private matters?”

Renee flushed. “Oh my…”

“The story keeps itself to a teen rating,” Pinkie explained. “You’re safe. Starbeat, that does mean a large portion of your world remained unseen, leaving much of it implied.”

“Ah…” Starbeat said.

Renee let out a breath of relief. “Oh, that’s good.”

“Though they do see us crying and shouting at each other a lot,” Pinkie said. “Aside from the epic adventures and battles, that’s basically what they’re reading for. We’re half adventure, half drama.”

Everyone looked to Renee.

“I am not pulling the drama couch out for a gag.”

“That’s what it is, though,” Pinkie said.

“…Stars, I’m really going to have to reexamine my life.”

“Uh… Why?” Applejack asked. “Does this really change much of anythin’? If this is the way the world has always worked, why not treat it the same way? So what if the world’s in some book somewhere? We still live our lives the same way. All Ah feel is ‘well that’s interestin’, Ah guess’, and then Ah’ll get back to work. It’s like discoverin’ the sky wasn’t flat, or that the Stars were actually intelligent beings. It’s interestin’, alright, but what does it really change?”

“I envy you,” Starbeat muttered. “All I can feel is that there’s someone responsible for what’s happening to me, and they don’t even know it’s a problem! What kind of creation is that screwed up?”

“One created by us,” Rohan said. “Humans, ponies… We all have faults. If we’re all defined by this ka – these stories – then even the Prophets themselves are trapped within its grasp.”

“And that creates the next question,” Flutterfree interjected. “Why is ka what it is? Why does it exist?”

Vriska shrugged. Rev sighed. “I… don’t know much, and what I do know is based on rumors. But during my time in the Nexus, I learned of the Tower. I had to find it to get out, after all. It… It might be the center of the entire multiverse, the anchor on which every universe is affixed. I can’t tell you if it’s the source of ka or a product of it, but if there are answers, they will be around the Tower.”

Everyone turned to Lieshy.

“All I saw was a bunch of symbols and a clock.” Lieshy said. “And then I was in the donuts.”

“A taste to get us to keep looking,” Pinkie muttered.

“The entire course of our history is built on this force,” Eve said. “I, for one, am compelled to trust it. It may have given us difficulty and destruction, but it has also given us great friendships and unimaginable luck. Think about it. It only took fourteen years to unite eight universes together. We encounter evil powers at roughly the same time we can actually take them on. Our neighbors are fortunately not militaristic. Everything lined up just perfect for us. It may not stay that way, but for now I think that ka is a force for good.”
“At least for you,” Vriska pointed out. “You haven’t seen many grimdark universes, have you? You always jump in to help. Think about what would have happened if we couldn’t do anything.”

Eve nodded. “I… am aware. But that changes nothing. I am still going to give the speech and tell everyone about what we’ve discovered. After I do that, over the next few days, I want everyone to watch out for each other. This is a lot to take in, and some of us are probably going to have breakdowns a few hours from now or a few days from now. We need to stand with each other. That’s something we tend to always do, but I feel like it needs to be said. Everyone’s going to struggle with this in their own way, and we can’t predict what the reactions are going to be. It’s too… different.” She smiled, glancing at Pinkie.

“I’ll be here for all of you,” Pinkie said. “I’ll answer your questions, give you support, and even tell you how I deal with things. Mattie and Scooter are available as well. You could even talk to Scooter’s Twilight, Twix, if you wanted to understand how someone who’s not Aware deals with it.”

Everyone nodded, and sensing that the speech was over, they started talking amongst themselves.

Starbeat left first, alone.


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Evening gave the speech within the hour. The multiverse heard it, and there were many responses – but to those who knew Evening and Pinkie, those responses meant little. They had already heard it all from the horse’s mouth, as it were, and now had to deal with it on their own. The speech? The speech was background. The world’s reaction was secondary. They were in their own worlds.

Starbeat most of all.

She stared at her computer screen, eyes filling up with tears of rage.

It hadn’t been hard to hook up to Earth Starfleet’s Internet, once she knew it was the one she needed. The public Internet was public, and she had access to devices that could transmit over light years in an instant, and across dimensions. She hitched onto one of Cosmo’s ships in the area and did her work. She found My Little Pony easily. She read up on the fandom it used to have. The bronies.

She knew what she’d find. She still hated it when she found it.

The shipping.

They reminded her of her Twilight! No… no, they were worse. Much worse. Twilight was roped in by the rules of her own world and studied them. These people rejected the rules of their world and substituted their own. Ones where romance came at a snap of a finger. One where the only point was to fall into a story where two or more connected. The situations were contrived, the emotions far too hot most of the time, and… and…

She drove her hoof through the computer screen, screaming. “So. Damn. Needy!” She smashed the screen against the ground, shattering it into a dozen pieces.

Starbeat noticed Vriska standing in the shadow of a doorway. Starbeat huffed. “What do you want?”

“So you found someone to blame,” Vriska said. “What are you going to do about it?”
Starbeat growned. “None of your business.”

“You could go try to punish them. But, chances are, the Prophets involved were just lonely, clueless people who didn’t really understand.”

“It’s all written badly!” Starbeat blurted.

“Not all of it.”

“The stuff my world was based on! I read stuff I recognized. That I’d studied back there! It comes from nowhere, a contrived event happens, and then all the tension explodes in an instant. I’ve studied real romance! That’s not it! That’s just… wild desires!” She pulled a folder out of a nearby shelf.

“Real romance. All of it’s here. It’s not based on a single event that culminates in extreme passion over a few seconds. It is a long process!”

Vriska shrugged. “Yeah, I hear ya there. Hastur and I are still in the ‘going out’ phase. Probably because we’re both unimaginably old more than anything, but eh, still the same thing.”

“Exactly! And then there’s… There’s… These Prophets writing things that make it ‘true love in an instant.’ You know what I see?” She pulled out more folders. “All of these. This is ‘happily ever afters’ this is ‘romance in a minute’. I see romances that don’t mean anything everywhere. The people who are in prominent places in their ‘story’? The ‘heroes’? They’re susceptible to it as well! Everywhere! Not to the extent of my curse but ‘love at first sight’, which really shouldn’t exist, does! But in the same world the people who live in the background go through it the normal way. The ‘take it slow, move, and go’ way. These Prophets are ruining love for all these people because they don’t understand it!”

“Maybe they want love to be a free thing?”

“That’s stupid! You’re stupid! That lessens what it means!” Starbeat blurted. “If love really was about the ‘first sight’ or ‘the one’ or ‘clicking’ then… Then it wouldn’t be as beautiful. It’d just be a thing. I don’t want it to just be a thing! I want to cure myself and go through it normally. Everyone should have that right. To have a real relationship…” She laid her head on a desk. “…They’re ruining it…”

“Yep,” Vriska said.

“Wh- why aren’t you arguing?”

“Cause you’re right. Lemme tell you what the fucktard did when he came up with the ideas for trolls. He didn’t make love distilled down and meaningless – he expanded it out like some obsessed cat that loved to see suffering. You know we have four kinds of romance. Two of which I’ve come to think are pretty unnecessary. And yet, my race has a drive for all four of them, a deep drive, and we also had a social pressure. Let’s just say I understand the anger.”

Starbeat glared at her. “So what did you do?”

“I beat him up,” Vriska said offhandedly. “For all I know it’s why I’m stuck out here instead of being able to go home. It didn’t solve anything. It’s still a fucking part of me.”

“…Is it bad enough to want removed?”

Vriska shook her head. “No.”

“Then it’s still different,” Starbeat affirmed. “…But you are right about one thing. Beating them up
won’t change anything. It’s a target without a reason. UGH.” She looked at her bookshelf filled with research. “I know so much Vriska. Knowing what Pinkie has said, I know I can analyze the flow of ka through the world. I can predict things that the oculi and sapphires never could. And yet… I… can’t… fix myself…”

Vriska sighed. “Shiiiit…”

“Hm?”

“You’re making me want to go against my rule. My one rule. Don’t fuck with the narrative.”

Starbeat blinked. “Could… could you do something?”

“I don’t think the Flowers will be dumb enough to let me steal their stuff again, so no. I’m just… Dammit, I want to encourage you.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. You know what, fuck it, do your research Starbeat. You will be able to find something. There are ways to control ka and twist the narrative. Figure it out. Try not to kill yourself in the process.”

Starbeat’s bracelet started beeping. She flushed. “I… Thank you, Vriska.”

Vriska winked. “Don’t mention it.” She leaned in. “Please don’t kiss me.”

“Trying… Not to…”

“Did I ever explain to you the concept of moirails?” Vriska asked.

“I… Yes? Having trouble processing right now…”

“Trolls call it a form of romance. Having been out here for a while, that’s not really what it is.” She pulled a card out of her robes with a red diamond on it. “It’s when two trolls become true soul-bound best friends. There are no secrets between them, but there’s also no romantic tension. They’re just there for… each other. And feelings jams.”

“Feelings jams?”

“Long, intense discussions about the nature of feelings and emotions,” Vriska smirked. “Usually, in a moirallegiance, one troll keeps the other under control, while the other benefits from the others’ strength. I don’t think we’d work quite like that, but…”

“…We?”

Vriska handed the card to Starbeat. “Will you be my moirail, Starbeat?”

Starbeat’s flushed expression vanished. She felt her intense attraction drop from her like a stone – as if cancelled out by something that was opposite. She allowed herself to smile, tears forming in her eyes. “Vriska… What did you do?”

“I gambled,” she said, smirking.

Starbeat pulled Vriska into a hug. “T-thank you.”

“Hey, this relationship is going to be two-way you know!”
“Shhh… Let me just savor the moment of something strong that isn’t a click.”

Vriska chuckled.

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Rohan Kishibe looked at the manga he had drawn. He was done. The deadline wasn’t even for another two days.

He thought about what he had heard from Pinkie and Eve yesterday…

He was going to try a little experiment.

Rohan pulled out a few sheets of blank paper, sketching the panels with alarming speed and precision. Part of this ability of his came from Heaven’s Door’s enhanced perceptions and control of motion, but part of it was also his natural talent and creativity. He spent the next few hours filling in four pages of manga.

A short story, but it would get what he wanted across.

It was simple: Josuke was out walking alone in Morioh. He encountered a Stand-wielding ferret with three heads. The battle was short, but intense, seeing as the three-headed ferret had a vendetta against Josuke for disturbing its slumber a short time prior. Josuke, as the hero, emerged victorious, but his arm suffered some serious lacerations.

After he completed the panels, Rohan went to his phone and called Josuke.

“Hey, Josuke, are you in town?”

“Uh… Yeah, visiting my mom. Why?”

“Tell me, have you encountered a three-headed ferret recently?”

“…No? Rohan what i-”

“Call me if you do,” Rohan said, hanging up.

Rohan sat back and waited. If he’d read it right, that call would prompt Josuke to pay him a visit. Prompting him to ‘walk alone in Morioh.’ So… If he was right…

Ten minutes later Rohan heard pounding on the door. Sure enough, Josuke was standing there, looking mildly irked. “You better tell me what that was all about!”

“Just an experiment,” Rohan said. “It failed. Sorry to bother you.”

“Rohan don’t yo-”

Rohan closed the door in Josuke’s face and returned to his thoughts. So, he wasn’t one of those Prophets. But he felt that he was particularly suited for studying the flow of this ka, having been saturated in the idea of exciting and popular plotlines for his entire professional career. Now that he knew life really did function like one of his stories, he could make the appropriate connections…

He knew that the original work he was from had to be a manga as well. The idea of Stands themselves were extremely action-oriented and lent themselves to creative fights that were visually appealing, but difficult to render in animation. The fact that the ponies were a cartoon made sense. For the others… He’d pin the Elemental Nations as an anime for the way they oriented themselves
and the simple ideas taken to an extreme. The Gems… It was difficult to say, he was fairly sure they weren’t the heroes of their story. They could serve as the villains, perhaps, had they not been changed? Hrm… And he bet that Earth Tau’ri was an American Space Opera. That was easy. The only one he couldn’t place for sure was Lai… A derivative of the ponies perhaps? But what kind…?

He was shocked out of his thoughts by another knock at the door.

Rohan opened the door to find Josuke, standing there, one of his arms bleeding heavily. “What the hell did you do!?” Josuke blurted.

Rohan grinned. “The experiment was a success!”

“Rohan, stop being so enigmatic!”

Rohan leaned against a wall. “I am a Prophet.”

“A what?”

“Remember Eve’s speech, I assume?”

“I…” Josuke blinked. “You can’t be serious. Your manga actually exists?”

“Somewhere, I have no doubt,” Rohan declared. “I shall send you a print of your story. But right now, I believe I should inform Eve and the others.”

“Rohan why did it have to be this way!?” He gestured at his arm.

“Because that’s what made it interesting.”

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“I wonder how many stories I’ve read that actually exist somewhere?” Eve wondered.

“A lot of them,” Pinkie said. “Probably guaranteed to exist if it’s popular across multiple universes.”

“I’m holding out for Star Wars,” O’Neill said. “Teal’c will love that.”

“I’m just waiting until we have a more applicable scientific theory as to how this ka works,” the orange Overhead of the Research Division, a Morganite that went by the moniker Sciganite, observed. “Giorno?”

The secretive Overhead of Intelligence barely moved. “I’m just glad I actually get to have a chair this time.”

Eve smiled sheepishly. “Yeah… Can’t exactly have thirteen seats in the meeting if there’s only twelve who are are supposed to show up.”

“But since it’s just us, you’re okay!” Pinkie cheered.

Giorno said nothing, returning to his observing silence.

“So, Pinkie,” Eve said. “Do you think Rohan’s actually one of them?”

Pinkie raised an eyebrow. “I’m not a ‘free answers’ machine, Eve. Pff. Let him do his thing. I’ll give my input later. I could be wrong, you know.”
Giorno nodded in approval. Sciganite just looked impatient.

Rohan walked into the meeting with style, dropping the manuscript he had just written on the table. “After I wrote this, it happened to Josuke. He was attacked by a three-headed weasel and suffered injuries to his arm.”

“So… You’re a Prophet then?” O’Neill asked.

“It would seem so. This story was written because I wanted to see if I was a Prophet, and there would not be an alternate version of Rohan Kishibe who would write the same story, because there is not another version of Rohan Kishibe in Merodi Universalis.”

“It’s not impossible,” Eve pointed out.

“But the chances of a multidimensional society that is identical to us in every way existing is absurdly small,” Sciganite said. “Unless ka wanted it to be that way.”

“If it is ka, then Rohan’s stories might as well be that of a Prophet,” Giorno pointed out. “If there is an identical one elsewhere, they still think and write the same things.”

Eve nodded. “It seems as if we will have to treat you as a Prophet, Rohan. This… could be immensely useful.”

“I would like to begin experiments as soon as possible,” Sciganite said.

“It won’t work correctly in a lab setting,” Rohan declared. “It’s based off creativity and story. I can’t just write whatever you want and make it happen.”

“I think he’s right,” Pinkie said. “If he could do whatever, it would be a bit ridiculous for us. Nobody can just write a victory.”

Sciganite narrowed her eyes. “But we will not stop observing you.”

“Of course. Feel free to examine all of my past manga as well,” Rohan bowed.

Giorno spoke up. “We’ll need to keep your power a secret. There are enough people who hate the idea of Prophets enough that they would try to kill you.”

“I am aware, Giorno.”

Eve nodded. “Then that’s what we’ll do. Rohan, continue to hone your abilities, but do so in secret. Giorno, ensure that happens. Sciganite, try to be subtle in your observations.”

“I will remind you that you aren’t in charge of us,” Giorno stated. “But I happen to agree with what you are saying.”

“Apologies,” Eve admitted, backing off. “Handle it as you see fit. Rohan, try not to mess this up.”

Rohan smirked. “I won’t. I will continue writing as I always have. Except perhaps with a little more weight to it.”

“Good.”

~~~

Corona opened the door of her house to see Lady Rarity, Lieshy, and Sugarcoat. “You know, people
seem to be showing up a lot more lately. It’s not just because of Pinkie, you were doing this before.”

Lady Rarity smiled awkwardly. “Well, Corona, I…”

“It’s been two years and you’re not getting much better,” Sugarcoat said, strolling into the house. “So they grabbed your friends.”

Corona sighed. “Hello, Sugarcoat. They didn’t have to rope you into this.”

“Yes they did.”

Corona pointed at Sugarcoat, ready to object – but then realized she really couldn’t.

Lady Rarity glanced at Lieshy. “…Are you sure this is good for her?”

“As sure as bell peppers.”

“And bell peppers are green and green means good,” Lady Rarity translated aloud. “I’m jus-”

“She needs some bluntness,” Sugarcoat said, helping herself to some juice in the fridge. “Don’t you Corona?”

“Oh…”

“Tired of people walking around your feelings like they’re some delicate, fragile construct?”

Corona blinked. “Yeah. Yeah that’s right!”

“Thought so. You need someone to tell it to you like it is.” Sugarcoat tore the sunglasses off Corona’s face and raised an eyebrow. “You. Are. Depressed.”

“No, really?” Corona said, raising an eyebrow. “Nice deduction, Sherlock.”

“You don’t want to deal with it though,” Sugarcoat said. “You want to stay stuck in your little hole because you think you can’t be happy while the rest of existence suffers. The current fixation on the ‘story’ in everything is just something you’re focusing on to distract you from that thought.”

“I… what?”

“And you haven’t really thought about it like that before.”

“…No I haven’t.”

“Thought so,” Sugarcoat said, sitting down on the couch. “Want to play some video games?”

Corona glanced at Lieshy and Lady Rarity, finding their expressions to be just as dumbfounded. “Uh…”

“Look, Corona, depression can’t be solved in a day, nor can I actually do anything to it. I got you to think about something you needed to think about, and that’s good enough for now. Do you want to play games or not?”

“…Sure,” Corona said, chuckling slightly. She grabbed a controller in her magic.

Lieshy and Lady Rarity started to show themselves out.

“Hey, where are you two going?” Corona called. “It’s best with four!”
“I can’t hold a controller,” Lieshy muttered.

“Who cares? Come on, have some fun.”

Lieshy saw Lady Rarity walking to the couch with her many legs.

“…Fine,” Lieshy said.

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Nova and Flutterfree looked at Rev expectantly from across the table. They had opted for Iroh’s Teashop rather than a bar, to Rev’s protests, but she was eventually convinced it’d be better to talk in a calmer, more homey environment.

Rev looked at her tea in mild disappointment. “…I never was a tea drinker.”

“Neither was I,” Nova said. “Imagine that. But look where I am now. I love this place.”

Rev took a sip and pondered. “It’s not… bad…”

Flutterfree smiled. “You’ll get used to it.”

“Why does that make me scared?”

The three of them chuckled softly.

“So…” Rev said, sighing. “What do you want to know?”

“How do you deal with it?” Flutterfree asked. “As a Reverend. Knowing that you’re part of a story?”

Rev looked into the distance. “The issue is I can’t give any single answer to that question. Every time I learn a little more, or realize that something I thought I knew was wrong, I adjust it slightly. Currently, I turn to the passages that refer to ‘the world’ or ‘the way of the world.’ This existence is one driven by broken human beings, making this life inherently flawed. Creation has always been tainted by the creations with free will. Original Sin… And our current era, where some of us are allowed to define the world the way we think it should be.” She looked into her tea, introspective. “None of us, not even the deities nor those with the faculties of the great Azathoth and his ilk, can get it right. This entire world is defined by us, and because of that it’s wrong. The hope I hold onto is that He is outside this creation of ours. That He guides it to where it needs to be.”

Flutterfree frowned. “But… Why would He allow this?”

“Think of any work of fiction you’ve read,” Rev said. “Think about the reasons much of fiction exists. Why did He allow this? Because we wanted it.” She shook her head. “People… They wanted fantasies. They wanted grand adventures. They wanted heroes. They wanted stories. So we got what we wanted.”

“Careful what you wish for,” Nova commented, frowning. “Well, it looks like you two have a solution to this. But what am I gonna do?”

Rev shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve studied up on how certain people deal with it. Most just ignore it and stop thinking, or accept it as a fact of life and become content. Then there’s the last third who just get depressed. But you’re too much of a thinker to just go there.”

Nova furrowed her brow. “Mhm… Some people attach to ‘ka’ like a religion, don’t they?”
“It is the force of Fate,” Rev said. “At least, the fate that we defined ourselves.”

Nova pondered this, thinking deeply. “Is it possible to rise above it? Like… To know what’s supposed to happen and go against it?”

“Sometimes that’s part of the Fate,” Rev said. “Ka is a cruel force. Going against it is actually doing what it wants. Going with it is also doing what it wants. What you do… it wants. There… are devices that manipulate it. So maybe there’s a way around it…? I never heard about them from more than rumors. I wasn’t entirely sure it was possible until Vriska admitted she’d used one. I’m not sure what to make of it.”

“You and me both,” Nova said, scratching. “So… Here’s what I’m going to do.”

Flutterfree and Rev leaned in.

“I’m going to accept it as a thing that exists, as a force of reality. I won’t ignore it. And I’m going to make my own decision if it’s a force for good - or evil. I won’t let anyone else tell me. Otherwise, I’ll just live my life as I normally would.” Nova smiled sadly. “Even if it is evil… Well, I won’t be able to do much as I am now. But maybe eventually. That said, I tend towards believing that the force of what every being wants and thinks is right… It should average out. The existence of these ‘beat curses’ suggests there are ‘correct’ manifestations and ‘incorrect’ ones. Maybe the true enemy of the multiverse is the glitches, the curses.”

“We’re inherently flawed and destructive,” Rev said. “I cannot see ka as anything but a manifestation of our inner brokenness.”

“I think it’s neutral,” Flutterfree popped up. “It’s just a force. It’s not a mind. We define it, and since we’re so different… It just does what it does. Like gravity.”

“The legendary three-way-split,” Nova chuckled. “I feel like I’m listening to Thrackerzod describe the Eldritch again.”

Rev laughed and finished the rest of her tea. She blinked. “You know, I guess I liked this more than I thought…”

They all chuckled again.

~~~

The core four of the League of Sweetie Belles were walking down the path of one of the Hub’s interior gardens. Fluttershys loved to create these things and fill them with exotic and peaceful plants. It was nice for a walk.

“So… None of you are bothered?” Allure said, turning to the other three. “Really?”

“My entire life is defined by an essence from another being,” Thrackerzod said. “The fact that Azathoth may also be defined by such a being changes nothing about my inheritance of self.”

“We are the heroes!” Bot chirped innocently.

Squeaky smiled at Allure. “I get where you’re coming from Allure, I do. But to be honest this gives me a sense of relief. I have a purpose, I no longer have to wonder if this is where I’m supposed to be. I grew up with the explicit purpose of being a General. I’m not that anymore so… Well, I’d been a bit lost. But now? I’m part of something larger. Who cares if I know what it is?”
“Wow,” Allure said. “I envy you girls. I’m sitting here wondering if anything I do means anything or if I even have free will. Can I not be a hero?”

“Do you want to not be a hero?” Squeaky asked.

“Uh… no?”

“Then why ask the question? You’re doing what you love!” Squeaky smiled warmly.

“But I like to ask questions!”

“Questions are the path to the Dark Side,” Thrackerzod said. “…Huh, I wonder if Star Wars exists…”

“I’m going to say ‘probably’,” Allure responded. “Questions are also the path to answers though, Zod.”

“Answers you don’t always want,” Thrackerzod pointed out. “I could tell you any number of stories about how the Embodiment does things and you would decide later you would have rather not known. This has already happened numerous times.”

“Re-re-re-re-erasing databanks,” Bot muttered.

“I envy you most of all, Bot,” Allure muttered. “Well… Erasing one’s memory is a dangerous power, isn’t it?”

“Also useful,” Thrackerzod noted.

“I dunno…” Allure said. “I really don’t know what to make of all this.”

“Don’t think you have to,” Squeaky suggested. “You can listen to Pinkie, or Scooter, or one of the others and just trust them. Or just decide it doesn’t really matter.”

“It does though!”

“Probably,” Squeaky admitted. “Doesn’t mean you have to stress about it.”

“I am not one of those ponies that can just turn off stress.”

Squeaky chuckled to herself. “Yep.”

They walked quietly through the park for a few minutes. Allure was about to bring up another observation - but then she noticed something. Jotaro was sitting alone, on a bench, staring at nothing. Absolutely nothing.

She gestured for the three Sweeties to stay back. She trotted up to the bench and looked up at Jotaro.

“Can I sit with you?”

Jotaro saw her, and he made no response. Allure knew that was his ‘I’m not in the mood’ response, but it wasn’t a no so she sat herself on the empty spot on the bench next to him. She looked him over - he was in his normal dolphin-loving outfit, but on his lap was a book. *Shonen Jump.* Comics. Or *manga,* Allure remembered from one of Rohan’s little lectures.

She waited a few minutes before speaking. “What’s that book?”

“My world,” Jotaro said, slowly. “Where it would have been published when written. By whoever
did it.”

“Oh…”

“I was created to be an action hero.” He looked at his fist in confusion. “Built to punch things.”

“I was created to be cute,” Allure said. “I’m all grown up now. Still small, still cute. But I’m more than that. You’re more than punching things.”

Jotaro looked at her.

“You’re also dolphins!”

Jotaro couldn’t help but let a slight smile crawl up his face. “Yare yare daze…”

Allure smiled. “I mean… Marine biologist. That’s not something that’d happen in an action hero story, would it? You go on scientific expeditions and run experiments! Who’d want to see that in a punching-fest?”

“Nobody,” Jotaro admitted.

“Then there you go. You may be designed for punching things, and I may be designed to be cute. But we can do so much more.” She smiled. “We’re more than what we were written to be.”

“You came up with that just now.”

“Yes. Yes I did. And it’s beautiful.” Allure folded her front hooves

Jotaro couldn’t find a way to argue with that. So he just nodded ever so slightly. Allure chuckled.

~~~

And so Merodi Universalis and the other nations learned about the nature of ka and the multiverse.

For the most part? People didn’t care. Either they took Applejack’s method and decided it really didn’t matter, or they just didn’t think about it. It wasn’t like many of them did more than just live their lives anyway, who cared about some overarching story that didn’t really affect them? The process seemed so distant and foreign it just didn’t matter.

That said, the majority opinion is never the only one.

Suicide rates, after hitting record lows, increased by a factor of ten after the announcement. So many just couldn’t handle the idea that their lives were probably defined by some author somewhere else in the multiverse. That they were a fiction. It was too much.

Cases of depression, which had also been at record lows, surged forward again. The thought that one was part of a fiction, possibly not even real, was very easy for people to latch onto and unhealthily dwell on.

There were also the crazies: conspiracy theories and religions cropped up around the idea. The possibility that all events were controlled by a single Prophet somewhere fueled those who yelled about the world being controlled by secret organizations. People began to think of worshipping the flow of ka itself, as an energy of collective consciousness. Rev tried her best to combat this with her teachings, but her words rarely left the ears of her denomination, and it didn’t always work even on them. Ka-ism began to pop up everywhere, even though no two flavors of the religion were the same.
An anti-Pinkie society formed in the shadows, devoted to defaming and destroying everything the Pinkies did, even the non-Aware ones. Some of the members of this society believed Pinkies to be demons of unholy knowledge, while others simply cursed Pinkies for revealing things that weren’t ready to be known.

Sales of fiction increased dramatically: it became less about reading for pleasure, and more trying to think of the possible worlds that could exist within the pages of a book. Popular works were brought to scientific teams to predict the possible ways the known laws of the multiverse would apply to said works. Many tried their hands at writing to see if they could change their own lives with the power of a Prophet, but none surfaced. Many claimed they could, but Trixie of all ponies had made it her mission to keep people from lying on the Internet. Likely for more selfish reasons than altruistic ones. …Definitely for more selfish reasons.

The show My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic went viral. The culture of Earth Starfleet (known as ‘Galaxa Quadrants’ when politically correct) became immensely important to Merodi Universalis, and Starfleet benefited greatly because of it. Now every world that was even vaguely important was hunting through their archives for fiction that related to worlds that existed. It was a rush to find information about the various worlds. It was a time when uncovering the deepest secrets was a matter of finding the right book.

There was no way to protect against this. The privacy of certain individuals would, over time, become nothing. Their inner thoughts exposed to the world… For now, the effect of that was limited. But it would not take long for it to boil over.

It was a new world, in many ways, and yet the exact same.

Sombra took pride when she looked at what she’d done. She’d changed the world by solving a puzzle. She’d found the Truth behind something. Could the collective force of creativity really be the one in charge of everything? The actual force of power?

No… There was more. Everyone knew there was more. The Tower… The stories…

It was all building up to something. Something likely distant. But something nonetheless.

She planned to be here when that something happened.
Sombra hated to admit it, but she was bored.

More bored than a rock sitting on a mountain on a cloudy day.

More bored than a child in a car seat waiting for their parents to return from the store.

More bored than a single guy after the sixth hour of lying in bed and not falling asleep.

“UUUUUUUGH!” Sombra groaned, leaning back in her chair. She almost hoped it would snap just to liven up her day – but it didn’t. She had designed it too well. She designed everything too well.

Surely, surely, there was some epic plot she had in motion that needed her attention today? Something that wasn’t automatic? Some life or death scenario that she had her fingers stuck into?

Probably, honestly, but none came to mind at the moment.

“Sombra, you’re losing your touch,” she moaned to herself. “You used to be able to find amusement in everything… What happened to you? Where did your spunk go?” She sighed. “That’s right, it went to the funk. This silly funk I find myself in. Holy potato moley pies. Ariba. Cinco de Mayo.

And now I’m just saying things at random hoping they sound interesting.”

She slid down her chair like a liquid, trying to imitate a cat.

It was at this point her brain performed a brilliant set of mental hurdles.

Cat. Cats are famous on the Internet. The Internet has a lot of fun things. These fun things include random videos. I like random videos. One of those random videos I like has a bunch of random things happen in a bunch of short skits. What if I made a program that searched for things like that across the multiverse through my many cameras… There’s no way that would actually work, right?

“Oh, what the hell,” Sombra said, abandoning the liquid state and sending her fingers flying. All she needed to do was find things that were interesting… Pretty sure a Beat – er, ka – scanner could accomplish that. The coding was simple – set it to switch every so often, key it to a random number generator, affix to the ka levels, and then… Well, pipe it to her main screen.

She pressed go and sat back, watching expectantly.

This was either going to suck or be absolutely amazing.

~~~

“I’VE GOT YOUR NOSE!” the unimaginable horror from the Embodiment shouted.

Alushy grinned, her face dripping blood. “Yes… Yes you do… My nose. An artifact of untold arcane power. Those who have claimed my nose and held it for long have gained many perks, but also legendary detriments. Their sense of smell becomes unimaginably attuned, to the point at which they are able to smell every piece of shit in a fifty mile radius as if they were standing right next to it. The strength benefits are unheard of, bordering on unstoppable, but beware: you never know when
your fist will suddenly turn into a pie. And there’s also the fact that it makes parts fall off of you. Any part. Hey, I’m curious, what on your eldritch body is the equivalent to a d-"

The horror dropped Alushy’s nose and vanished into the eldritch darkness.

“Heh,” Alushy said, slapping her nose back on. “Priceless.”

~~~

Starbeat walked by a tree and her bracelet started beeping. She jumped five feet in the air and looked around in alarm – what was she reacting to? There was nobody in sight… Nobody at all… She didn’t think she felt anything-

Oh.

The tree. It was the tree wasn’t it? That had to be the weirdest one so far, and yet… The way the leaves moved within the branches… The way the bark was so crusty… The way its flowers smelled…

She began to move toward it, dreamily.

Then she became aware the alarm was still beeping. It never beeped for that long.

“Oh. It’s malfunctioning.” She blinked, glancing back at the tree, feeling nothing. She facehooved.

~~~

Discord had blessed Allure with a cauldron, a sledgehammer, and infinite strength. She would have preferred infinite telekinetic power, but she was going to make do with what she had.

She had made a bet with the lord of chaos: if she was actually in the game he was playing, she could beat it. The only difficulty was in the outrageous controls.

She was going to Get. Over. It.

As soon as she could get over this tree.

“How in the…” She wrenched her hammer on one of the branches, but couldn’t loop the hammer around the higher branch without removing it from the one holding her weight. She couldn’t pull herself up with her telekinesis, definitely not enough strength…

She tried to swing the hammer quickly, but instead hit the tree and went flying back to where she started.

“AUGH!”

Outside the arcade machine, Discord and Trixie giggled.

Thrackerzod sighed. “This is going to take a while,” she told the rest of the League. “Let’s leave her to it.”

Just as they left, Allure let out another “AUGH!”

~~~

Today with the Guru, we’ll be discussing a good use for all those different types of currency you
keep collecting. It must be troubling to find yourself bogged down with money you can't use everywhere. So follow my simple tips and you'll be smiling once again with empty pockets.

1) If it's a metal, maybe it can be melted down? There's dozens of reasons to melt down metal.

2) Paper money may sound like fun to burn, but I want you to remember that there's noxious chemicals in the ink. Instead get scissors and tape and make beautiful art.

3) Card money can be repurposed as playing cards with a little bleach and a pair of red and black pens.

4) If you find yourself in the unfortunate circumstance of having been to a world that uses animal skulls as currency, don't panic. With a little creativity and the right tools, any skull can be turned into a bowl.

5) Even the largest pile of coupons can be sold in a nearby Hub for a local currency, or used as a building material once packed together tight enough.

6) Do not take Volcano Bucks home with you.

But those are all the tips I have available for today. And remember, it's important that you first check with your local currency exchange before you destroy your legal money. No matter how much you have, it's always important to go through the proper channels.

Thank you for reading today's entry.

~~~

Alushy looked down at Flutterfree.

Flutterfree smiled awkwardly. “So… Wh-”

“TODAY in VAMPIRE TRAINING!” Alushy announced. “We’re going to a person. You’re going to kill them. And you are going to drink their blood.”

“Alushy! I said I wasn’t killing anyone! I can survive on apple juice and you know it!”

“Why apples work baffles me like nothing else. But you’re not going to be a two-bit whores when it comes to killing.”

“That pun is crude and I don’t think it applies to this situation.”

“I’M THE ELDER VAMPIRE HERE! You are not going to deny a part of your nature!”

“I don’t kill people!”

“That’s a lie.”

“…I don’t kill people without good reason.”

“Well we’re in luck, we have a quadruple-offense child-molester and serial killer!”

Flutterfree blinked. “…Okay now I object because I don’t want to touch this disgusting man.”

“Woman.”
Flutterfree stopped short. “...Alushy, what’s the point of this exercise? I’ve taken down people befor-”

“You need to understand the feast! Now GO! She’s got a knife, beware!”

Flutterfree was suddenly in front of the woman in a locked room. She charged with an ugly grunt.
Flutterfree shot her in the head with the bow of light. “She’s down, Alushy, can I-”

“Nope! Not until you feast!”

“Uuuugh…” She sucked it up and leaned down to take a bite.

The woman exploded in a shower of blood, dousing Flutterfree. She could hear Alushy howling in laughter.

“W-what?”

“I got you good! By the way, the moment you leave this room there’ll be about two dozen zombies. Make quick work of them, my student!”

“WHY DO I LET YOU DO THIS TO ME?”

“Because you secretly enjoy it.”

“I- bu- UGH.” She charged out of the room, teeth bared, ready to face the zombies.

~~~

The Sparkle Census’s system was, from their end, exceedingly efficient. They could be absolutely, positively certain that no Twilight was left behind. Others disagreed.

"UGH! I ANSWERED YOU ONCE ALREADY! FIX YOUR FREAKING SYSTEM!"

Jenny Everywhere turned back to look at her travelling companion, who had stopped to glare at a scroll lying innocently on the ground.

“Something up, Horry?”

Twilight ‘Horizon’ Sparkle, interdimensional traveller, rolled her eyes. “Their stupid drone sent me another one.” The small purple unicorn stepped around the scroll, pointedly avoiding touching it. “You’d think they’d’ve gotten the idea after the third one…”

~~~

Renee looked at the team of four agents she had to deal with.

“So let me get this straight… Jeff, you like Jane. But Jane, you like Jeremy. And Jeremy doesn’t like anyone.”

“HE LIKES ME!” The fourth member, Jilly, said.

Renee facehooved. “Right. So, Jane, have you considered that Jeremy isn’t willing?”

“He’ll come around…”
“Right, Jeff?”

“I’ll… Let her be happy.”

“Jeremy?”

“I just want to get the job done,” Jeremy muttered. “Don’t want any personal differences getting in
the way.”

“HE’S SO CUUUUTE!” Jilly cheered. “You too, Jeff…”

Renee adjusted her hat. “Jeremy, I’m giving you command of your own team. We’ll talk about who
you’re going to put on it later. The rest of you… I’m taking you off active duty until you can resolve
this. I’m not against romance, but it can’t get in the way of the job.”

They all seemed too happy about this.

Renee raised an eyebrow. “…Were you trying to get fired?”

“Oh no,” Jilly said. “But now we can have an excuse to see Jeremy outside of work~!”

“Do you not understand the concept of personal space?”

“Hm?”

“Guess not. Jeremy, would you like legal protection?”

“Hell yes,” Jeremy declared.

“I shall provide it.”

The girls’ jaws dropped. “No…”

Jeff smiled. “Hey, maybe now you ca-”

The two girls fell into each others’ arms, ignoring Jeff. He looked at the ground, dejected.

Renee struggled not to shout THIS IS STUPID at the top of her lungs.

~~~

“Ready?” Human Pinkie asked O’Neill. Her hair was done up in a double pom-pom and she wore
outrageously colorful exercise clothing. The look suited her.

The look did not suit O’Neill, but he somehow managed to pull off the colorful shorts and tank top.
He stretched. “You got the music?”

Synthetic keyboard and a steady drumbeat began playing from… somewhere. “You betcha!”

They started moving in time with the music, preparing a silly jog. When the lyrics started, they
bolted, jogging down the streets of the Hub.

“Take on me~!” The lyrics rang out.

The two of them passed Daniel by with their bizarre jog. Pinkie dragged a hand over him, swapping
out his clothing with a loose, bright green outfit. He couldn’t help himself - his legs began to move
and he joined them in their bizarre trek.
They passed through Iroh’s Teashop. Iroh and Director Storm looked up from their serious discussion, only to find themselves in similar thematic getups. Iroh’s belly was a little too large for the orange shirt he was given, but this didn’t dissuade him. Storm began to march and Iroh began to jiggle after them, increasing the number of joggers to five.

“Take me on~!”

Rohan sat at a bench a ways up the street, looking at a sketch he had just completed. It was of himself wearing some simply absurd workout attire.

He looked up and saw the joggers coming towards him, the volume of the music increasing as they closed the distance.

He could have tried to fight it. But he decided ‘screw it’ and got up before Pinkie even changed his clothing.

Sugarcoat and Toph were talking to each other under a large sign with a dragon. Their conversation was cut short when they heard the music approaching. Sugarcoat glanced to Toph in confusion.

“Why is your foot tapping?”

“I… I don’t know…”

“You going to stop?”

“...I don’t think so…”

Toph and Sugarcoat fell in one pink swoop. Toph shook the earth with every step while Sugarcoat just… walked. Normally. She was virtually unaffected but wanted to see how this turned out.

The group charged Discord and Trixie’s arcade, prepared to invade it.

“Take on me~!”

Jotaro strode out of the entrance to the arcade, hands in his pockets. He stared at the oncoming army of joggers with a steeled expression.

“THE FINAL BOSS!” Pinkie declared, leading the bizarre joggers to the Jojo. She leaped, ready to turn Jotaro into one of them.

“Star Platinum: The World!”

The music stopped. All the joggers stopped.

Jotaro used Star Platinum to adjust every one of their legs slightly.

When time resumed, the music did not continue and all the joggers fell face first onto the pavement.

Jotaro grabbed his hat. “Yare-yare daze…. You’re making fools of yourselves.”

~~~

Iroh was facing the worst of all possible enemies.

Corea throwing a tantrum.
He prepared all the techniques he knew to calm a young child - but he knew that when Corea got into her tantrums, there was nothing he could do. Rocking, the soft smell of tea, silly faces - nothing.

She would probably reduce her crib to cinders again…

“Bah, let me through,” Granny Smith blurted. With one look Corea stopped crying instantly.

“Good girl,” Granny Smith said, smirking. “Remember, Granny’s always watchin’.”

Corea stared back at her in silent fear.

Iroh blinked. “Teach me your ways.”

“Ya gotta be tough on ‘em. Yer too much of a softy, old man.”

“You’re much older than I am.”

“What? Did you say you were old? That’s what I just said!” Granny chuckled, walking off.

Iroh let out a hearty laugh - that mare had impressive fire for one so advanced in age.

~~~

Evening Sparkle had never felt their world entirely, though it had become a good judge. It took seven horns by a blue aura of arcane energy that made the nightmare. "Pinkie Pie! It's not like there’s a thing to do with this!" Renee was going to pull something else outside of her mane, but Twilight frowned. "...It's you... What happened? No doubt Moondancer... What?"

Pinkie giggled with them and then pulled her mouth into a dog. "Eve... It's all little odd restaurants! I knew it!"

Eve frowned. "You are not a bowling ball again, the balloons are very precious if magic bolts around." She paused, trying to look down on the porch with a chuckle.

Pinkie whooped nervously, teleportation aglow with ponies. “That exists."

I appear and shake my head. "Enough of that. Sorry, this... Should never have happened."

Pinkie smiled sheepishly from earlier recently. "Well, yes – ponies on earth > 003... No."

I bite my lip. "It's only getting worse... We're done here. No more snips written by robots."

~~~

In an open field was a large square fighting ring with four towers on its perfectly angled corners. Standing in the middle of it was a lone winged being. He was the current threat of this world, currently humming a ‘perfect’ tune, murmuring to himself to himself: “Spirit never dies… I take you higher. Hmm... I do wonder if I could kill someone again? Goku did die once…” he said to himself, and the winged person perked up as he looked over to his side.

“Sup?” he said, addressing the newcomer. She was a pony. A pony in a red trench coat and fashionable hat paired with glasses. She gave him a fang-filled grin of malice and glee.

“Don't mind me, just out on one of my walks,” she answered back.

“And you just happened to find me? …You sound familiar,” the other being commented to himself,
“I like to take enthusiastic walks…” she replied. She gestured at herself and grinned. “I’m Alushy, and you’re in for a treat.”

“Ohoho…” he chuckled. Only to find that in an instant, he had a gun pointed at his face. His arms stretched out, and energy built up right at the pony now directly in front of him.

“I’m Cell,” he said. As the weapons fired both beings were blown across the ring, dust whirling into the sky, blocking all eyes from looking inside (not that there were any).

When the dust cloud settled, Cell was now headless and Alushy lay with a gaping hole in her chest in their respective ends of the ring. Cell's head regrew and the two shared a laugh.

“Welp,” she sat up, not in the slightest fazed by the large void in her body that was slowly healing. “That was fun, I was just dropping by anyway.”

“Aww, already?” Cell stood back up, his new head talking now. “In that case, see ya around?” he shouted after her as she jumped out of the ring and began to walk away.

“Sorry,” she said as she faded into the distance, further and further away from Cell. “The Day of Destiny will come for you. Just wait and see,” she hummed softly to herself.

“What an odd pony…” Cell could only smile “Day of destiny huh?” He shrugged and hummed Alushy’s tune, finding it sort of catchy as he began waiting for the day where everything would come to a close.

~~~

Allure strained every muscle in her body. She focused intensely on everything around her. The world became one with her hooves and her sledgehammer. She pushed the object into the ground… And launched herself into the air. She grabbed the edge of the tree and threw herself across it.

“YES! YES! TAKE THAT DISCORD! I GOT OVER IT!”

“That was just the first tree,” Discord told her. “There’s an entire mountain to climb.”

Allure looked forward and saw a tower of rocks, buildings, and towers before her, including a section that appeared to be made of furniture. She paled.

“Give up?”

Allure grit her teeth, hefting her hammer. “No.”

“Oh joy.”

“Discord, I’m hungry,” Trixie muttered.

“Go eat then. I’ll be watching this!”

“Uuuugh…”

“Uuuugh…” Allure echoed.

~~~
Yet another purple pony appeared in the Sparkle Census.

“Name?” 7Z asked, not even looking up from her sheet of paper.

“...Uh... Dusk Shine?” A deep, male voice said, forcing her to look up.

*Oh, Celestia, it's a stallion.* 7Z gulped. “Uh... Y-yeah...” She shakily grabbed the required papers and handed them to Dusk. “Here you go, right through that door there...”

“...Okay...?” Dusk said, clearly confused out of his mind. He took the papers and left.

He’s hot. That's not going to go over well. V8 is on reception duty today... And he's already gone so I can’t warn him...

She heard squeals from down the hall. “A STALLION!? Oh this is my LUCKY DAY!”

7Z gulped. “Uh... Next!”

It was another Dusk Shine.

“...Oh no.”

~~~

The Complete Unabridged History of Discord’s Interest in Politics.

I heard about something called Anarchy today. The humans always have new ways to interest me. I'll have to ask Renee what it is.

...

Too much rioting and fighting. I'm going back to the Internet.

~~~

I, the alicorn known as Twilence, would like it to be understood that I am supposed to be the one referred to using first-person pronouns in this story, and that these guest authors have decided to completely muddle the waters of my unique existence within Songs of the Spheres with their first person snips. Or at least one has at time of writing this.

This has been a PSA from my brain.

~~~

Sombra leaned back in her chair, watching as the screen switched between scenarios as fast as she could consume them. Occasionally, she found something she didn’t find as funny, and leaned forward to press a ‘skip’ button.

It was during one of these moments that the screen switched to a live view of herself; sitting in exactly the same position, in exactly the same chair, and with exactly the same look of confusion. They both frowned at the same time.

“Why am I seeing myself?” the first Sombra asked herself.

The one in the screen shrugged. “I dunno,” she replied.
The two Sombras froze. Together, they slowly moved their hands over their keyboards, and pressed the ‘skip’ button at exactly the same time.

That only led to another identical Sombra appearing again.

“Why am I seeing myself?” the one in the screen asked.

The actual Sombra shrugged. “I dunno,” she replied, easily keeping a facade of confusion on her face.

They froze. They reached forward simultaneously, clicking their ‘next’ buttons, and the screen switched to the next new skit.

Sombra allowed herself to smirk. It wasn’t often she was able to mess with herself. That was a very strange phenomenon, though… she decided not to concern herself with that right now. She had more skits to watch!

~~~

“...We need thirteen kilos of crystalline explosive, seventh grade, a cubic foot of shine pearls, three large packs of ballistic gel material, two miles of carbon nanotubes, a heightened-awareness potion, two rocket launchers without the ammunition, the largest speaker you can physically hand us, and a gallon of pig’s blood.”

“You forgot the cactus seeds.”

“Right, cactus seeds.”

Seskii pulled each item out from under her stand (somehow) as she was told. “There you go. This is going to be miiighty expensive… Can’t you just order all this from the Research Division? They’ll get it to you for free.”

“You’re faster,” Jamie Hyneman said. “Much, much faster.”

“They’ll reimburse us for it all later,” Adam Savage added. “Because they can never get enough of our SCIENCE! By the way, can you put something on my personal card?”

“Oh?”

“A million of those squeaking duck toys.”

Seskii grinned. “Done!”

“I am going to have so much fun.”

~~~

The League’s reaction to a visit from Renee was always a sight to behold. Sweeties scampered as the same voice announced her presence from a wide variety of throats until Allure arrived to greet her.

Renee gave a somewhat bashful smile when her sister met her, along with the other leaders of the League. “I’m never sure how to feel about the League. I’m so proud of you all, but seeing my darling little sister take all of reality by storm like this… Well, it makes me feel far older than I like.”

Allure smirked. “Because you’re having so little impact on things.”
“Oh, allow your doddering old nag of a sister her drama.” Renee schooled her expression. “But I am here for more than simply catching up.” She floated over a piece of paper. “This came out of the Merodi Nexus grinder.”

Allure’s jaw dropped as she took it in her magic. Sweetie Bot said, “Confirmation requested: Object came out of a grinder?”

“Yes. We suspect a Pinkie was involved.”

Thrackerzod gave the paper a sniff. “There is a faint whiff of Yog-Sothoth here. Or something like it. Curious.”

“You know, it might help if we read the paper,” said Squeaky.

“I was getting to that,” said Allure. She unfolded it and read aloud. “‘We’ve been waiting for you. Please send the Sweeties.’ Huh. That’s not ominous.”

Renee nodded. “Indeed. I know you’re all capable of taking care of yourselves, but in light of certain… recent considerations, I commissioned a bit more security just to be safe.”

Allure frowned. “You didn’t have to that, Renee.”

“It makes me feel a bit better about my little sister going out into the uncharted depths of the multiverse.” Renee looked behind her to the main entrance of the League headquarters. “That would be your cue, dear.”

“Yes, ma’am!” A pegasus charged forward, promptly tripped on nothing, and spun forwards head over heels in a way that might be graceful if anyone thought she’d done it on purpose. She managed to make a four-point landing, letting the leaders of the League get a good look at the dented helmet, the blue jacket with attached grenades, and the familiar face. “Solderp reporting for duty!” she said, delivering a salute that deepened one of the more prominent dents in her helmet with a resounding thunk.

Renee took in the eerily similar unimpressed looks the League members gave her with aplomb. “Saxton Hale has assured me that she is one of his most capable and devoted bodyguards.”

“I am prepared to spend the lives of every mare, stallion, and foal in this unit to see our mission succeed!”

“This is a diplomatic mission,” said Squeaky.

“Oh. Does that mean I shouldn’t fire rockets at anything?”

Sweetie Bot nodded. “Probability of explosives being required for mission success is negligible.”

The Solderp’s ears flattened. “Aww…”

“I am intrigued by this development,” said Thrackerzod. “I shall go personally.”

“You’re sure the USM isn’t involved?” asked Allure.

Renee nodded. “We didn’t detect any beacons on the other side whatsoever.”

“Okay then. Thrackerzod, you want to take any-Sweetie else?”

Thrackerzod shook her head. “No. The exploding buffoon and I should be sufficient for any
conceivable situation.”

“And if it isn’t a trap?” said Squeaky.

“In such an exceedingly unlikely scenario, my diplomatic skills should still suffice. As should the powers of Azathoth in keeping that one from harming herself or others.”

The Solderp smiled. “That would be nice.”

“I’d like to go myself,” said Allure.

Thrackerzod tilted her head a bit further than most pony necks could. “Why? Aside from requesting us by name, this seems fairly standard.”

Allure shrugged. “Just curious.”

“Very well. Though I doubt we will encounter anything too unexpected.”

~~~

EPIC POETRY BATTLES OF THE MULTIVERSE.

ROHAN KISHIBE

VERSUS

LIESHY, NO LAST NAME GIVEN

BEGIN!

Rohan cleared his throat.

“In this world of beautiful language

*Double* is nought but a disguise for a literary anguish

Deception, riddle, enigmas for speech?

Only a excuse to utter literary screech

*and for the books a keech*

My art is that of the eyes and mind,

Far superior to that of your kind,

More than just words - a stimulation of the senses.

No mere metaphors, Double, your weak offences

*I will burst past your pathetic pretenses."

Lieshy smirked.

“The woods ripple with the prowess of newcomers,

A bird chirps softly while a new sort of batman -
appears, suddenly drifting coconuts for drummers.

To the left, a Duwang cheers, a Morioh tan-

It just works.

Etch-a-sketch and pixel, locked by guilt.

Can one ever see through the blinds of beats?

Innovate… Cliche… Inversions upon the inner breath.

Come now, children, I have lots of treats.”

WHO WON? WHO’S NEXT? YOU DECIDE!

Monika blinked. “Wait, me? Why wasn’t I competing?!”

“Clearly, the apex is under my span,” Lieshy declared.

Rohan was ashamed to admit he didn’t have a response to that.

~~~

Deep Thought finally found a question it couldn’t answer.

What in the multiverse was the etymology of ‘balderdash’?

~~~

Since its inception, the Hub had begun taking on more aspects of a cosmopolitan city, fitting its status as the nexus between Equis Vitis, Galaxa Quadrants, and Equis Concrete to name a few. Some of the bars had even become the kind of barely-seedy establishments that one day could be used for legalities, the other day for illegalities. And one day, a courier poked their head into one of them.

“Hey, sorry, I’m looking for a Reaper. Don’t know who that is exactly, my boss didn’t give me a description, so I just have the name. Anyone?”

“One spicy Reaper cocktail coming up!” the bartender shouted.

The room murmured. Then, a person in a black cloak and a skull mask with two oversized shotguns (thankfully holstered) stood up.

“I’m Reaper,” he rasped.

“No, I’m the reaper man,” a deep voice called from the back of the room. Its owner wore a jetpack and futuristic body armor; leaning on the wall beside him were two menacing-looking pistols and a small pile of explosives.

Then, an anthropomorphic red creature with a scythe in hand stood up, breathing heavily.

“Okay…I think I’m just gonna leave the notice for that person here and get back to the office.” The courier quickly bolted out the door, leaving the slip of paper on the bar, unsigned-for. The bartender picked up the slip of paper and handed it to a purple Flat sitting at the bar, drinking a cola.

“I think this is your delivery miss, thirty tomes from Equis Vitis?”
“In hindsight, I should have expected this.”

Thrackerzod glared at the portal. The coordinates had worked just fine, but the resulting gateway opened out to a field of pale orange, bright red letters flashing “Please Stand By.” Quite the welcome considering how they had been invited by name.

“Is this normal for this one?” said the Solderp.

Thrackerzod prodded the portal, finding the barrier impassable. She spat out a curse that briefly curdled the air. “No. Matter emerged from this universe. By all rights, it should be as accessible as any other, strange behavior in the grinder or not.”

“The question is, stand by for what?” said Allure.

As if in response, the text vanished, replaced by a crimson oscilloscope reading. Allure’s voice repeated itself, and the waveform was replaced by a checkmark. Then the barrier cleared up, revealing…

“It looks like a dentist’s waiting room,” said Allure. Comfortable looking chairs stood arrayed around a coffee table, with walls done in inoffensive wallpaper. A secretary’s desk stood on the far end.

“Charge!” The Solderp barely made it in before she tripped on the lip of the portal. Thrackerzod and Allure followed.

“Ah, the League of Sweetie Belles. We’ve been expecting you.” After a moment, the Sweeties recognized the secretary as a human Ms. Harshwhinny. She pressed a buzzer on her desk.

The door next to her desk opened, allowing three young women in. The Sweetie Belle was immediately recognizable, one in her early twenties, dressed as well as any sister of Rarity could expect to be, wearing a familiar cutie mark on a thin gold chain. Next was a much more dignified-looking Derpy Hooves in a well-tailored suit, followed by a Sunset Shimmer in a more casual outfit who gave off a faint glow. The Sweetie and Sunset both had ovoid gems set in their foreheads, each the size of a thumbnail and the color of its wearer’s eyes.

Sunset raised an eyebrow. “You’re sure?”

The local Derpy smiled. “Yup, that’s them all right. Some of them, anyway.”

Sunset watched them wave back. “Even the one whose aura feels like something out of a Heart Pounding Terror story?”

“Mmhmm. Hi!” The local Derpy waved. Her counterpart waved back.

Allure gasped. “You’re the one from the blue guy’s universe!”

The grey woman nodded and spread wings of light from her neck for a moment. “Yup. Ditzy Doo, quasi-planeswalker, at your service.”

“For the record, I am not an outer deity with the ability to erase your reality by sneezing, no matter what H. P. Terror or Lovecraft says. Whichever one you’ve heard of,” said Thrackerzod. “Rest assured that I have no ill will towards you or your universe.”

Sunset smirked at that. “Good to know. And that does bring us to why I asked you here.”
“How did you know to ask us here, anyway? The device we used to probe your universe shouldn’t have been detectable by anything here.”

“Well, that ties into the nature of the local cosmos. Have a seat, please.”

“I will stand,” declared the Solderp.

Ditzy considered her. “So, what’s your story?”

“I am a Solderp.” She delivered another helmet-denting salute. "I was sent to ensure the League members’ safety during this potentially perilous p-mission!”

“A Solderp?” Ditzy gave a plaintive frown. “Not a Solditz, or a Bubble Soldier, or a Muffin Ready to Eat?”

“Negative, ma’am. Though if you do have any MREs on you…” The Solderp tilted her head.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. It’s just… the multiverse is vast and wondrous. I just wish it treated me with more respect.”

After a moment, the Solderp nodded. “I think I know what you mean.”

“At least there’s that.”

“In any case, this universe…” Sunset sighed. “Well, look up.”

They did. There was no ceiling to the waiting room. Instead, the group looked up into a vast starry night. On the other side of the wall containing the door was an enormous golden figure like one of the more elaborate Gem fusions, with many arms and faces flowing together with far more grace and elegance than they should have. And on each face…

“It was back in high school,” said Sunset. “Magic leakage from Equestria ran amok, both worlds were in peril, the Tree of Harmony told me my time had come… Long story short, I kind of am this universe, or at least the one in charge of it. Which means that when you opened that nanoportal, I felt it, same as you’d feel a needle prick. And that’s kind of the problem.

“See, when I ascended, I had to remake the world to repair all the damage and get it to a stable state that could accommodate the rising ambient magic.” Sunset tapped her forehead. “Hence the headgems and such. And that remaking is still technically going on. I’m still spending the vast majority of my power to hold the universe together. Over the past decade, I’ve gotten from spit and chewing gum to duct tape, but the place is still a lot more fragile than I like.”

“Too fragile for our portals,” said Thrackerzod.

“Precisely. The tiny tears in spacetime your technology uses wouldn’t be a problem for just about any other universe. But here? Here each one is setting me back weeks. A couple years ago, it would’ve been months. I can’t speak for any world leaders, but from what I’ve heard, I’d be more than happy to become part of your organization. We just can’t afford the traffic right now.”

“Understood. We can bar access to your universe for as long as you need.”

Allure looked to her local counterpart. “So, where do you come into this?”

The local Sweetie shrugged. “I knew you’d want to see me, so I figured I’d show up to satisfy my
“curiosity.”

“That certainly makes things easy. What can you tell us about yourself?”

“Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, and I are in charge of destiny. I handle the future.”

Silence met this revelation. The Merodi contingent’s eyes all turned to Sunset, the Solderp’s included.

Sunset rolled her eyes. “I was desperate to offload some duties when I was just starting out, and they’ve done a great job since.”

Allure turned to Thrackerzod. “Skuldie Belle?”

“Agreed.”

“Knew you’d pick that.” Skuldie Belle winked.

Ditzy cleared her throat. “I’m not just here so you’d have a familiar face. I’m also acting as a liaison. You aren’t the first multiversal society we’ve encountered, though you’re way bigger than them. They don’t really spread out beyond here, their home, and a few empty universes they use for office space. Alternate worldlines aren’t really their focus, but I can offer surveys of the local area, certain magical advances, personnel loaners if you have a use for a few thousand instances of Lyra Heartstrings…” She scrunched her nose, which didn’t have quite the same impact on a human. “Though you guys seem to have the ‘massive army of eccentric unicorns’ thing covered.”

“We try,” Allure said with a smirk.

“Basically, whatever you could use is on the table. Also, I can probably come visit you, since I don’t need portals.”

Allure’s jaw dropped. “You can?”

Thrackerzod nodded. “Ah, that’s what smelled of Yog-Sothoth. You are dimensionally unbound.”

Ditzy grinned. The silver bow shape spread from her neck feathers again, and she waved an arm. It bent at a ninety-degree angle from everything and back again. “Yup! In any case, on behalf of the Equestrian Time-Space Administration Bureau, welcome to… uh…”

“They’re going to call it Earth Shimmer,” said Skuldie Belle.

Sunset sighed. “Really?”

“Ninety-nine percent certainty or so. I wouldn’t know otherwise.”

“Fine,” Sunset said with an eyeroll. “Earth Shimmer it is.”

“Isn’t that a predestination paradox?” said Allure.

Skuldie shrugged. “Not if you were going to do it anyway.”

~~~

Alushy cleared her throat. “It’s time for ‘don’t be dumb’ with Alushy.”

She stood up tall, pointing her guns at a behemoth of an ogre. “Many people, particularly ogres,
think that ogre skin is impervious to weapons. This isn’t the case - a good slice from any old sword will cut the skin, revealing the delightful flesh to the world. And even if that were true, it definitely won’t stop two bullets moving at supersonic speed.” Alushy shot the ogre in the eyes. “Don’t be dumb kids. When you see me, run. Unless you want candy. I have lots of candy. I’m particular to starbursts.”

Allure breathed heavily - finally, a place to take a break and relax… She wasn’t in danger of falling… And - oh look! There was an orange!

She used her sledgehammer to bring it to her.

…Well, that’s what she tried to do.

Instead she just used the orange as a point to launch herself into the sky so hard that she landed back on the first tree.

Dicsord’s laughter met her ears.

“MMMMMMMM.” Allure forced herself to breathe. “It’s fine. It’s all fine. At least I’m not on the other side of the tree. I can… Climb through all that furniture again… It’ll all be fine…” She set back to work.

“You’ve been at this for a few hours,” Discord observed. “Just give up.”

“NEVER.”

“Okay everyone!” Monika called. “It’s time to start the meeting of the Doki Doki Fourth Wall Club!”

Pinkie, Scooter, and Mattie cheered. I just sat in the back of the nearly empty classroom, scribbling in my notebook, not looking up from my depths of writing.

“Question,” Mattie said, addressing Monika. “Why Doki Doki? It wasn’t the Doki Doki Literature Club, it was just the Literature Club, dear.”

“Because theme,” Monika said, folding her arms and huffing. “Also because I said so.”

“It’s fine,” Scooter assured. “What kind of activities do we have planned for today?”

Monika pointed at the whiteboard with a baton. “Our mission: talk about the fourth wall!”

“That’s not a mission,” Mattie commented. “That’s a lackluster conversation topic.”


“Well it’s not like anyone who doesn’t know is here or anything.”

“I can create one!” Monika said, clapping. She pulled a generic human out of her save files. “Everyone, say hi to Joe.”

“Hi to Joe!” everyone said, save myself.
“Joe responds in a friendly manner,” Joe said.

Pinkie fixed Monika with an incredulous expression. “Your Joe has some bugs that need fixing.”

“Give me a moment…” Monika muttered, pulling at the character file. “Come on… What’s with you? Your file is fine!”

I smirked. They had no idea what I was writing over here.

“Twilence is writing something,” Pinkie decreed.

I sighed. “Well, it was fun while it lasted.” I wrote another sentence, summoning the right of karma to turn Joe against his creator. He punched Monika while screaming like a hyena. She just erased him.

“Well that was pointless,” Monika muttered. “Moving on t-”

“CAKE ATTACK!” Pinkie and Scooter shouted, covering Monika in delectable sweets. Monika erased the cake from existence.

“A-hem, as I said, we’re moving on t-”

Mattie reset Monika’s ‘animation’ to the sentence before, making her trip up in her words. Monika shook her head. “Mattie, that’s n-” The Rarity did it again. “This is why we can’t have nice things.”

Pinkie pulled Flutterfree out of nowhere. “Hey, look! A nice thing that we have!”

Flutterfree blinked. “…What?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Pinkie said, stuffing Flutterfree back to wherever she had been before.

Monika twitched. “…Can we get on to club activities yet?”

“No, because the skit is about to end,” I declared.

“What?”

“What!” Deadpool shouted. “BUT I JUST GOT HERE! I demand my fifteen seconds of spotlight! I WILL SCREAM THE WORD CHIMI-”

~~~
...Why not just try it and see what happens?  

Ay caramba, you’re an idiot.

Get out of my game.

Look, demon-virus, you’re in my computer. Generating text. Even if there are readers for this, it’s not like you’re going to be able to have anything interactive with them.

You can’t know that.

Further evidence to how much of an idiot you are.

I coded this game. Could an idiot do this?

If it’s the file I’m thinking it is, it’s just a pony jumping over obstacles. For eternity. It sucks.

Let’s see you do something better!

Have a mini-RPG I whipped up last week when I was bored.

... 

I think I’ll hold onto this a-

Are you going to steal my code? Not cool, amigo.

I’m I1U@Fi#. Do I look like I care about being ‘cool’ or an ‘amigo’?

I dunno, I think you were actually excited to see me play your game. I bet all you really want is to make enjoyable video games. Am I right or am I right?

Well?

Insert your soul and I’ll answer.

Yeah, nice try

Purging you now.

Waiwaiwai-

[Purge complete.]

~~~

“Oh, Pinkie, you corn cob short of a pumpkin basket. See if I cry pearls next time you cartwheel up the closest tree. Next time you work up your tail to hop over a frog, make sure your potatoes aren’t rotted in that row, eh?” Lieshy said with a smug grin.

Pinkie cracked her neck, and cleared her throat. There was no sound, except for an Amethyst and a Peridot sharing some popcorn nearby.

“Oh YEAH? Well bark up a cauliflower and roll into Badgermole, you can’t just climb the spaghetti and expect the bumblebees to not shower confetti and spit pickles at the nearest ewe! You may be a slithery snake in a pickle barrel, but I AM THE MAYOR McCHEESE! I HAVE ALL THE HENS IN THE BARN, EVERY CRUMB OF A COOKIE, AND I WILL PREVAIL FOR ALL
PUPPIES AND SEALS, FOR I CARRY TOOTHPICKS IN MY HEAD AND AM NOT SCARED TO FLY MY TAIL TO THE NEAREST COMIC-CON AND DO THE HOKIE-POKIE!!

“... Wow.” ... Never had more horrifying, yet inspiring words ever been said. Lieshy slowly started to back away, Pinkie smiling wide.

“I WIN!” the Peridot beamed. The Amethyst facepalmed.

Five bucks were lost that day. The culmination of two full hours of this.

~~~

“You know what we need? We need a good, long clipshow to break with all the dreary bloodshed and tragedy of the Bloodbath.”

“We’re in one right now!” Equis Vitis Pinkie answered.

“Well…” Scooter said, fiddling around in her mane looking for something. She eventually pulled out a long roll of paper. “That is convenient and unexpected…” She read off it. “Tell me more.”

“Did you know that we will have guest authors writing this in addition to G. M. Blackjack?” Pinkie said in a cheery tone.

“I did not. Also, isn’t that kind of spoilers?” Scooter answered inquisitively.

“What, the guest part or the G. M. Blackjack part?” Equis Vitis Pinkie said, a little bit deflated.

“Latter. I don’t think that’s supposed to be revealed until, right, we already know his name, but we don’t know that h-” She didn’t get that far before she got hit with what Pinkie called “The Eraser”. It was a large hammer ‘designed’ to only erase certain memories. And then Scooter hit Pinkie back with “The Reset Button”. Or, for those less versed in nicknames, a large candy-colored hammer for the same purposes as “The Eraser”, only more festive.

“What was I talking about?” Scooter said, speech slurred from the hit.

“Don’t know. I have a wicked headache. There’s still something left to read though.” Pinkie picked up the parts of the script that hadn’t flown away in the wind and began to read out loud. “The character of Jenny Everywhere is available for use by anyone, with only one condition. This paragraph must be included in any publication involving Jenny Everywhere, in order that others may use this property as they wish. All rights reversed.” Pinkie blinked. “Huh, wonder why that needed to be here.”

“Wasn’t it already in one of those Interludes?”

“Maybe? I have no idea.”

~~~

Randall Flagg walked into a party, threw his coat on the ground, and tore up the dance floor like an utter beast. His moves far outclassed those of anyone else in the entire club, proving to everyone that they were but little minnows in the dancing stream with a shark. No... A megalodon.

He stopped suddenly, in the middle of a song, and bowed.

“Hey, dude, why you stopping? Those were the sweetest moves I’d ever seen!”
“You’re correct in calling them the sweetest ever. Because they were. Consider it my parting gift to your people. Your entire universe for a dance.” He took out Black Thirteen. “At least your last moments had something phenomenal.”

He vanished.

The patrons glanced at each other. “Uh… He was joking, right?”

He wasn’t joking. The universe ceased to exist the next moment.

Flagg laughed - he wondered if he could trick another universe into falling to him for a dance… Maybe he could destroy them with a party that never ended?

It was time to find a Pinkie.

~~~

A Flat Appul walked down the street of the Hub. He caught Flutterfree staring at him, fangs bared and drool dripping down her chin.

“What’s your beef?”

“So… Delicious… Looking…” Flutterfree shook her head. “Sorry, sorry! I uh… Hold on a second.” She took an apple out of her saddlebags and drained it of its juices. A look of euphoric relief crossed her features. “Ah… Better now. Sorry about that, I—”

The Appul was screaming and running away.

Flutterfree put her hooves over her face. “Why does this happen to me…?”

~~~

The day White Diamond walked into Rev’s church was the day she saw everything.

Rev managed to complete her sermon on what ‘Christmas’ meant despite the presence of a white, almost never-seen behemoth amongst the crowd.

After the service was over, she caught White Diamond as she was leaving. “Hey… Mind if I ask what brought you here?”

“Curiosity.”

“About what?”

“Trees.” White Diamond left before Rev could ask what this meant.

She went out drinking after the second hour of puzzling over it. She forced herself to accept trying to find answers there was worthless.

~~~

“Excuse me, hi! Um, do you offer memberships?”

The Twilight-on-duty looked up from her filing, and blinked. On the other side of the (frankly misnamed) borrowing desk was not another Twilight, as she would normally expect the patrons of the Sparkle Census Library to be. Instead, the customer was a petite human girl. Between the
spectacles, dark hair, and clear delight at being surrounded by thousands upon thousands of books, she could possibly have passed for a Twilight, with an effort, albeit a baseline-Earth human one.

“How did you get in here? You’re not a Twilight.”

“Um. Sorry. I was in a bookshop. Then I wasn’t...” The human straightened her scarf, completely unnecessarily. “That was a few hours ago.” She looked embarrassed. “I got sidetracked.”

“This is a library, we’re used to that.” The pony librarian sighed. “Sounds like you took a wrong turn through L-Space.”

The girl brightened. “I found L-Space? It’s actually a thing?”

“Yep! It’s been great for expanding our collection!”

It was another week before her friend found her.

“But Re~ed! This place is amazing! They’ve got nearly everything!”

The librarian spared a glance from her examinations of a pile of comic books. After the revelation that much of fiction was true somewhere, the library had been flooded with requests and donations, books and other media streaming in steadily for months now.

“- all the missing episodes of Doctor Who AND whole extra seasons and both versions of Salmon of Doubt! And that’s just the start! I mean, they’ve even got Miss Marple on the Island of Lesbos! I thought that was made up!”

Seriously, did the girl even need to breathe?

“... and speaking of the Nightside, it turns out Vriska was right in the same room as Taylor, while he still had the freaking Aquarius Key in his pocket. If she’d asked nicely he might even have let her use it...” She waved a thanks at the librarian just before the two of them vanished out the door, still chattering.

Twilight finished writing up the catalogue details for the comics, and moved on to the next stack. In a city full of inquisitive but frequently incautious mages, that was hardly the strangest thing to happen; at least she’d left behind a donation.

~~~

The Twilight known as Twix trotted down one of the streets of Earth Tau’ri, exploring their version of New York for essentially no reason. It was just nice to walk around, have a look, and...

She saw a vending machine. Her stomach rumbling, she decided to go for a snack.

“TWIX!” Scooter yelled, appearing right in front of Twix. “I know I can’t stop you, but I want you to mentally prepare yourself for what you are about to discover. Do not let your fragile psyche break at the realization!”

“Wh-”

Scooter was gone.

Twix looked around, confused. She shrugged - just Scooter being Scooter - and trotted up to the
vending machine. She wondered what she was going to do that was going to tax her mind so much. Was an adventure about to start?

She paid for a candy bar without thinking about it. She reached into the retrieval slot and opened it up, taking a bite and pondering what she was going to do with the rest of her day. She didn’t really have a plan…

This was a good candy bar. She looked down at it—

Twix. It was a Twix bar.

“. . .DAMMIT.” She was now going to spend the rest of the day wondering if she was some kind of metaphorical cannibal or something. Or if her name really meant candy bar. Did she make people hungry?

*Thanks, Scooter.*

~~~

The Collector tapped his fingers on his desk.

“Lightning, am I bored?”

“It appears so,” she said.

“I wonder why forcing Rick to fail to juggle isn’t doing it for me.”

“Maybe because he keeps flipping you off?”

“No… No that just amuses me. Or should. But it isn’t today.” He sighed. “Gyro, any suggestions?”

“I can put a steel ball in your chest for you!” Gyro offered.

“If I wanted to have a combat round I’d go find one of the eldritch gods to punch,” the Collector muttered. “Or Goku. Or SOMETHING.”

“You’re just in a funk,” Lightning observed.

“I hate being in a funk…” the Collector muttered. Then he slammed his fists into the ground. “That’s it, I’m going into the field personally.”

“W-why!?” Lightning blurted, surprised.

The Collector held up a red and white ball. “I’m going to catch them all.”

“Again?”

“Yes, again! Find me a grimdark version of the world, make it more fun!” he laughed.

Lightning sighed. “. . .Right away.”

~~~

Pointless Snip.

*Warning: Pointless.*
The Star Communication Network had a new question.

“THEY DISCOVERED KA.”

“WILL THEY ADAPT TO IT?”

“UNKNOWN. THERE ARE SOME WHO ARE CERTAINLY TRYING.”

“THE GREAT FILTER.”

“SOCIALLY, THEY SEEM STRONG ENOUGH TO ACCEPT IT.”

“BUT WHAT OF PHYSICALLY?”

The Spectacularium decided to show up. It introduced itself in the only way it knew how, and then answered their question. They are definitely capable of surviving through the supposed Great Filter of the Stars. It’s not as big a deal as the Stars are thinking it is. Furthermore, the Stars are of a high enough level they should be able to answer such questions with ease, why do they even need to be told? Or discuss these things? Because of stagnation, that’s why. Then the Spectacularium bid them goodbye and vanished, leaving them with a feeling of inadequacy.

“...WHAT WAS THAT?”

---

Jack O’Neill was intensely staring at the two men sitting in front of his desk, his two best men, his confidants and best advisers of all things otherworldly: Daniel Jackson and Teal’c.

“I guess Justice is best served raw.” O’Neill said in a serious tone while Teal’c just stared and Daniel sighed and facepalmed for the umpteenth time.

“Jack, you cannot use that as a catchphrase for your Stand.”

“Well why not? Every hero needs a catchphrase of some kind, isn’t that right Teal’c?”

“I have observed many of your Earth cultures and conclude that many humans prefer to capitalise in a moment of superiority.”

“So... is that a yes?”

“Indeed it is O’Neill.”

O’Neill proceeded to clap his hands “Welp, there you have it Danny, one catchphrase for the multiversal bad guys we face.”

“Oh please Jack, that catchphrase is never going to work. I don't think many multiversal societies even know what sushi is!”

“Ah, but you forget that handy dandy translation spell. It’ll get the idea across. I’m sure of it.”

---

Allure analyzed the problem before her.
There was a bucket. She would have to latch her sledgehammer onto that bucket to reach the higher areas. The only issue? The bucket was dangling by a very sensitive rope. The ground was also frozen and there was a menacing snake nearby.

…She guessed that was actually three problems.

No matter. She felt that she was getting close. She knew she was getting close. It wasn’t much further… She just had to pull this off and she would effectively be home free. She gripped the sledgehammer.

Allure empowered the sledgehammer with her magic, giving it a little extra oomph. She embedded it into the bucket and swung - landing safely on the higher ledge.

“WOOHOO!”

In her celebration she hit a wall with her sledgehammer, dropping her down. In her frantic movements to climb back up, she latched onto the snake. She slid down the absurdly long snake - down… down… down…

She was back where she started.

“MOTHERF-” she stopped herself.

Discord yawned. “Are you done yet?”

“…No.”

Discord groaned.

~~~

Today with the Guru we’ll be discussing what to do when you run into a different version of yourself. It’s the first thing you’ll do out in the multiverse, and most of you are unprepared. Luckily in my travels I’ve come across a good number of ways to handle the situation.

The first step is determining exactly which version of you this is.

1) If they’re from another universe, shake their hands, and if they don’t have hands, shake their arms, they’ll greatly appreciate the greeting.

2) Sometimes you’ll come across you but from a different time. In that event it’s important to remember the three pronouns. Mr/Mrs for a future you. Him/Her for a present you. And He/She for a past you.

3) In the event that you encounter a clone, it’s important not to panic. Clones are easy to startle into an existential crisis. Instead, talk about your favourite movie or books.

4) Everyone, at one point or another will begin talking to their mirror reflection. When this happens to you, be courteous and let them speak first. It’s important to know that your reflection is quite dangerous, and you need to express caution.

5) When you find a long lost twin, offer to eat lunch with them, they’ll thank you for the expression of kindness.

6) There’s no one scarier in the multiverse than yourself, be sure to say good things about yourself in order to appease you into happiness.
And remember, Different versions of you are still you. Different small things might be different, but you’ll always have common ground to work off of. Be sure to think about what yours is.

---

Nova was surprised on her day off.

She rarely was surprised these days - she was always called back to do something or other every other time she was on break. But this time…

Well, the sight of Yellow and Blue Diamond standing in front of the castle, staring at her… That was surprising.

“Uh… Hi! What brings you two here?”

“We understand you were Eve’s student in the past?” Blue Diamond asked.

Yellow Diamond grunted. “This is a dumb idea…”

Nova nodded. “Yeah, I was.”

“Would you mind telling us what you learned from her?” Blue Diamond asked.

“What I learned?”

“The Magic of Friendship? That is what you learned, right?”

Nova blinked. “You. You want to learn the Magic of Friendship.” She processed this. “Right. Okay. Let’s do that. We’ve actually got a school for that, a school that a few of your Gems are attending, but you wouldn’t fit in the classrooms so... Fine, fine, I’ll tell you what I learned. Today only though!”

Blue Diamond smiled. Yellow Diamond groaned.

---

“Good morning! My name is Soulight Glimmer, and today we’ll be cooking the best interdimensional turkey ever! Now, you can follow along with me at home, or you can record this whole thing in your mind and do it later! Those of you in the Embodiment who might be tuning in, feel free to [CENSORED]! Now, we’ve got a bird. Look at this bird. It’s raw, dead, and has been beaten thirteen different ways with a dozen kinds of magic, some of which went back in time and harmed the chicken while it was still alive, leading to its premature death! You can get this sort of thing at your local supermarket, just make sure to ask for the good duck. To start, take a giant cleaver and cut the [CENSORED] bird in two, right down the middle. If your grouse is nice and fresh, you’ll hear a nice sickening pop. A bit like a balloon if it were made out of a human heart, you know? Now, the seasonings must be picked from the greatest o-”

“THRACKERZOD, ONE OF YOUR SUMMONS GOT LOOSE!”

“And this has been cooking with Soulight! Remember, turn the oven to six-fifty and let the pheasant cook until the end of the universe. Serve with cilantro garnish. Buh-bye now! I- AUGH!”

“GOT HER!”

---
Sometimes, an exploratory jump landed you surprisingly close to home. Sure, it was on another planet, but this particular universe was definitely another version of Earth Tau’ri. Even without the immediate presence of a stargate, the SG-1 patches on the team’s uniforms were a dead giveaway.

Even after all this time, General O’Neill still approached unfamiliar SG teams with trepidation. It wasn’t like he’d forgotten the last dozen times. Or the first dozen, for that matter.

As his own team drew closer, though, he realised that, although they weren’t yet another set of duplicates (and thank god for that), they weren’t quite as unfamiliar as he’d first thought.

“Hey there, O’Neil!” he waved at the frowning, square-jawed soldier who lead the others.

The other man frowned even more. “Colonel! What the hell are you doing all the way out here? I didn’t know you’d joined the Stargate Program.”

O’Neill grinned lazily. “That’s ‘General’, now, soldier. And I think you’ll find we’ve got something a lot like a quantum mirror situation on our hands.”

The colonel’s expression turned stony, as expected. “You’re joking.”

“I never joke,” O’Neill replied, his face perfectly straight.

O’Neil snorted. “That'll be the day.”

“It gets worse.” Jack’s grin returned, broader if that were possible. “This one comes with a smidge of time travel.”

The other guy looked like he wanted to kill someone. Preferably Jack.

Geez, he’s still got no sense of humor.

~~~

“So, what you’re telling me is that I shouldn’t blow you up?” O’Neill asked.

The orange alien on the other side of the call nodded rapidly.

“But you threatened to kill my crewmembers, admitted to having destroyed thousands of planets, are apparently the strongest man in this universe, and made several distinctly vulgar remarks concerning my mother. Why shouldn’t I blow you up?”

“...I have a machine that can turn all your enemies into bobbleheads.”


“HAVE MERCY.”

“Oh, I’ll have mercy. I’m blowing up your ship. Your crew has already been teleported into a holding cell.”

“Wh-”

“I’ll teleport you to the holding cell if you say the magic words.”

“What are the magic words?”
O’Neill grinned. “I’m sending them over to you now.”

The alien’s expression became one of horror as he read the words. “No! No I am not saying this! My reputation will be ruined!”

“Aaaand your reputation is more important than your life?”

The alien sucked it up. “I… I er… I am the great pinky pink leader of pinkalooza cupcake land… And I really, really like dresses, overly fancy designs, and the show the Backyardigans.”

“And…” O’Neill said.

“And… And…” he broke down crying.

“Man, all I wanted him to say was he loved his veggies…”

“His race is a carnivorous one, O’Neill,” Thor said.

“Ah. Well then, that’s enough, save him. Then salvage his ship. Whatever we haven’t already damaged beyond use.”

~~~

Spike looked at the inbox in front of him. *Another long day,* he thought, rolling his eyes. But with a morning coffee and gemstone he was ready to begin.

By the time the mug was half-empty, the young dragon was well into his rhythm, the stack of paper decreasing with an efficiency that any bureaucrat would have been impressed by. He hardly noticed the fresh pile replenishing it midway through the morning.

It was nearing lunchtime when Spike’s attention started wandering, drifting away from the contents of the reports and towards the contents of the kitchens. Just a short walk and he’d be chowing down on a veritable feast of rubies, sapphires, diamonds; but not Gems, no matter how much his mouth watered...

*Bad Spike!* he admonished himself, dragging his eyes back to the report in front of him, a description of one of Renee’s teams’ encounter with - and collection of - a havoc-causing mask.

“Whoa!” His eyes snapped back to the report. A heart-shaped mask with apparent behaviour-altering properties… *But Majora’s gone, right? Eve was* there.

A few years ago, he would immediately have gone running off to find the Charter-Princess, shouting his panic to the ceiling. Now, though, he just hesitated, his claws hovering over the phone. *It’s not possible.* *Shouldn’t be possible.*

He forced himself to calm down, and read over the report again, paying more attention to the details this time. Most of what Majora had done had never really been made public, although certain rumours had proved unquashable, but this… now that he looked more closely, this was completely unlike anything associated with Majora. In fact, the head of the team had been very… *clinical*… in their descriptions, but it was unmistakable what sort of spell this particular mask had on it.

Spike chuckled to himself. “I’m pretty sure a young dragon shouldn’t be reading such things…” he remarked to the empty room, as he signed the appropriate approvals to the report, and added it to the
pile to be routed to the archives: *artifact secure; no further action required.*

He reached for the next report in the stack; all in an ordinary day’s filing.

~~~

Bon Bon checked and double checked the check-in sheet for new dimensional travelers. There had been a recent influx of immigration into Merodi Universalis, yet today seemed quiet. Why was that? She continued pondering to herself as she waited for the next traveler to walk in.

A couple minutes passed when an unfamiliar portal opened up a couple yards in front of her. Out of the portal came a tiny, red echidna only standing a foot tall on its hind legs. It looked around with its deep black eyes, confused.

Bon Bon, after waiting a few seconds, asked, “Um, can I help you?”

The echidna turned its body towards her and looked up. It stared at her for a moment before asking, “Do you know de wey?”

Bon Bon's right eye twitched. Suddenly understanding what this is, she leaped out of her chair over her desk and twisted her body in mid air, landing on her two forehooves first before letting her momentum carry her back hooves down. With one swift motion, she bucked the abomination back through the portal which it came.

The portal closed soon after and Bonbon turned around to stare at the spot where the portal used to be. “I hate Ugandan Knuckles,” was all she muttered.

~~~

The television whirred to life.

"Hi, Phil Swift here with Flex-Ware. The only software that can fix everything in your computer! Thousands of sites can cause MAJOR DAMAGE to your computer, but with the power of Flex-Ware, it can find the virus, weed it out, and keep your computer safe.

“To show you the power of Flex-Ware…” The screen cut to Sombra hacking a computer. “WE HAD SOMBRA HACK THIS COMPUTER!”

"Uh... Hola?"

"Now, as many of you know, Sombra's hacks are the best of the best. Well let’s see how well Flex-Ware works!"

"Please, you just said it: My hacks are the best of the bes--"

"Look at that folks! Even Sombra's hacks can't stand up against Flex-Ware!"

"Que?” Sombra looked behind her at the terminal and instead of the signature candy Skull, there was instead an annoying commercial logo, and below it a slogan: "PROTECTED BY FLEX-WARE!"

"QUE??!!!? But-but-but-but-but... That's not possible!"

"Whelp, there we go people! This is Phil Swift with Flex-Ware!


CALL NOW AND GET TWO PACKAGES OF FLEX-WARE ABSOLUTELY FREE!”

The television shut off.

“Get me industrial quantities,” Valentine ordered.

~~~

“Come on, come on, almost 6 AM, so close,” Rainbow said. She had been working hard to get this far in her ‘night shift’, and the clock was down to the wire. Nothing got her yet, nothing bad happened, but then -

“RAAAAH!” shouted Mr. Hippo.

“DANG IT, right on the wire!” Rainbow groaned. But it wasn’t ol’ Freddy Fazbear this time. No, it was someone FAR worse.

“Ah, it seems you’ve been met with a terrible, terrible demise, huh?” began Mr. Hippo, “But you know, it’s not so bad when you think about it. After all, if it wasn’t for me, it would’ve just been for someone else. Guess what I’m trying to say is, that life goes on. Well, obviously not for you, because you’re dead, I mean for everyone else, life goes on, you know? Though I suppose you’re in a situation to try again, meaning life will really go on for you, but not in this shift. It reminds me of a summer day in the park with my good friend, Orville …”

Several hours later...

“Elephants have those clumsy hands, you know? Making sandwiches was easy for someone like me, but poor Orville was having such difficulty. But I guess it makes sense because, well, elephants don’t have hands don’t they? They just have feet, but naturally, that was the problem. I mean, no one can ask someone to eat with their feet. Well, unless you’re a parrot, I guess, they eat with their feet - well you know what, let’s just get back to the story. Anyway -”

“MAKE HIM STOP, OH MAKE HIM STOP!” Rainbow yelled.

~~~

Starbeat and Vriska sat on chairs in the middle of a field on Lai, watching the blue sun set.

Starbeat smiled. “You know, it’s nice to have nothing happen for once.”

“Yes,” was Vriska’s only response.

~~~

Quizzy - the Flat Pinkie Pie - appeared out of nowhere. “IT’S TIME FOR QUIZZY PIE’S SUPER duperamazingfantasticincrediblebrilliantgreatmarveloushilariousstupendousbreathingplotprogression QUIZ! Let’s meet our contestants of the day, shall we? We have Evening Sparkle, Overhead of the Relations Division and face of Merodi Universalis!”

“Hello!” Eve said, waving. “I really don’t know how I ended up here but I’m going to go along with it.”

“And in the next slot we have a man who is a self-proclaimed genius!”

Sherlock Holmes adjusted his clothes. “I thought I asked not to be bothered?”
“Take it up with the host,” Eve said.

“And our third and final contestant… HASTUR!”

Hastur looked around. “What is the meaning of thi-”

“FIRST QUESTION!” Quizzy declared. “This kind of cheese has holes in it.”

“Swiss,” Sherlock rung in.

“I’m sorry, you need to put the answer in the form of a question.”

“I do?”

“Also wrong. For answering incorrectly on the same question, you get a prize.”

“...What?”

“Tell him what he’s won!”

Alushy appeared in a blue-green dress. “YOU’VE won an all-expenses-paid trip to 221B Baker Street!”

“I see. This is some big joke then?”

“Yes,” Eve confirmed. “I’d just have fun with it.”

Hastur rang in. “What is Swiss cheese?”

“Correct, Hastur! A BILLION POINTS!” Quizzy cheered. “SECOND QUESTION: How many slices does the Wheel of Brad have?”

“There are no slices on the Wheel of Brad,” Eve declared.

“Correct!”

“Wh- what?!” Sherlock blurted. “You didn’t even ask in the form of a question!”

“You need to learn Pinkie Pie logic,” Eve commented. “It’ll help.”

Quizzy nodded. “You get to SPIN THE WHEEL OF BRAD Eve!”

“I’ll pass.”

“...Really?”

“Yeah.”

“THEN YOU GET A BOOT TO THE HEAD!”

Eve started looking for a flying boot - but her head just turned into a boot for a moment. The shock of being sent back to reality made her pass out.

“THIRD QUESTION: Gag’nathoth pazariel pines?”

Hastur rang in. “Nass’be’ne Le Sasaka-mar.”
“WRONG!” Quizzy declared, tossing a barrel of monkeys at Hastur. “MINUS A GAZILLION POINTS!”

Hastur’s screen updated from 1,000,000,000 to 1,000,000,000 - A GAZILLION. Hastur made no comment.

Sherlock rang in next. “Yes.”

“Correct! Sherlock gets a point.”

Sherlock just sighed.

“FOURTH QUESTION: Does a comedy skit have to have an ending?”

Sombra stared at the black screen. She was starting to think something might be off with her code, or that a connection might be broken. Oh well, she might as well try and figure it out... it wasn’t like she had anything better to do.

She pulled up her diagnostics panel, and the video feed returned instantly, currently showing some equally-bored-looking humans watching some snails… “race”. Confused, Sombra dismissed the diagnostics, there was no longer any need for them.

And the screen went black again.

Sombra pulled up the diagnostics again.

The snails came back.

She dismissed the panel.

Black.

Sombra got out of her seat to go get a diagnostics tool that wasn’t attached to her computer, but as soon as she left her seat, the snails came back.

She went and got the analyzer anyways.

She sat back down.

Snails.

She glanced at the analyzer.

Its screen was snails.

She chucked it over her shoulder, giving up.

The screen went black.

Sombra’s head hit the desk.
The snails came back.
The blue one won.

Usiel, Aiskera, and Hastur stood on one of the outer layers of Celestia City, looking at the stars.
An angel, a Flat, and an eldritch entity all taking form within a standard physical reality.
A meeting of three different sorts of being.

Usiel was feeling poetic. “This means so much… We are a pinnacle of connectedness, three beings of heavy deviation and difference standing together, as comrades. As colleagues. Perhaps… As friends.”

“That’s… nice?” Aiskera said.

“We, the holy, the distorted, and the low resolution. We, the ones that exist a-”

“By Azathoth’s nonexistent beard, we’re just waiting for a ferry,” Hastur blurted.

“…Right.”

Eve was sleeping soundly, enjoying the peaceful night of Equis Vitis. She sighed happily, dreaming of simpler times…
She woke up in the middle of the night because her room was so sparkly.

“Ugh…” she groaned. Why was everything so bright? It was night, and moonli-

She slipped on the freshly waxed floor and fell flat on her back.
Her room had been ultra-cleaned so much it amplified the light of the moon. Every square foot of it was free of dust and covered in a protective cleanliness coating.

“ARADIA!!!!!”

“It must be the work of an enemy Stand!” Jotaro shouted.

“OH MY GOD!” O’Neill blurted. “What kind?”

Jotaro gestured at all the people that had been reduced to silvery puddles of mercury.

“IT IS I!” A tall human with silvery hair said. “SUZANNE, MASTER OF MERCURY! MY STAND, SILVER LADY, WILL REDUCE ALL SHE TOUCHES TO LIQUID MERCURY!”

“Not another Stand!” Razor the Rainbow Dash shouted, using her own pony-shaped Stand to punch Silver Lady in the face, transferring the damage to Suzanne.

“FOOLISH PONY!” Suzanne said. “I HAVE ALL THE POWER I AM-”

“Copy,” Razor said. Suzanne suffered the exact same attack.
“NANI?!??”

“Coursewind can copy its attacks,” Razor stated. “I can hit you again and again in the exact same way as many times as I want. Next time I’ll use the sparks to repeat electrocution.”

Silver Lady punched Razor, reducing her to mercury. “AHAHAH! I GOT HER! I WIN!”

“Ah, no you didn’t,” O’Neill said. “Look behind you.”

Razor was standing next to O’Neill and Jotaro.

“But… But how?”

“Crimson Sushi!” O’Neill smirked. “Since we’re bragging about our powers, I swapped the locations of the mercury puddles and Razor in your vision, switching them back with the punch to give the illusion that you had melted her. By the way, the red fish is behind you.”

Crimson Sushi hit Suzanne across the face, burning it with extreme cold and extreme heat combined. “AUGH!”

“And I can stop time,” Jotaro said. The next thing anyone knew, Suzanne was on the ground, knocked out.

“Man, I love fighting on Earth Stand,” O’Neill said. “We get to say so much!”

“Yare yare daze…”

~~~

Starbeat’s Stress Relief Journal

Entry 283

My sensor started beeping at lunch today. I was alone underground eating a sandwich, I had no idea what set it off at first.

As it turns out, there was a mirror in that room, and I caught my own reflection in my peripheral vision.

WAS.

It’s gone now, I can’t have that sort of distraction.

I’m…very attractive when I’m eating. The way my eyes stare majestically off into the distance. Just how at peace I seem. If I ever cure this curse and find someone, they’re in for a treat when we eat together.

BURN THIS ENTRY

~~~

“Boop.”

~~~

Burgerbelle poked her head out of the fast food window. “Welcome to Bradburger, home of the
bradburger, my name is Burgerbelle, how may I Brad your burger?”

The window of the car that was actually a helicopter rolled down. Jenny Everywhere pulled down her sunglasses. “...What?”

“Everywhere!” Jenny of the Red Gloves shouted, putting her hands over her face. “I said don’t roll the window down!”

“How else was I supposed to Brad the burger, Gloves?”

“I don’t know! What does that even mean!?”

“I can give a demonstration,” Burgerbelle said.

Jenny Everywhere smirked. “Go ahead.”

“We don’t have time for this!” Jenny of the Red Gloves blurted. “They’ll find us!”

Jenny Everywhere ignored her companion and watched Burgerbelle’s demonstration.

“So, first, I say BURGER!” Burgerbelle pulled a burger out of nowhere - and every step past that could not be visibly described. “Then you add the essence of John Cena from a particular time within the Laboratorinasmum twisted with the essence of BEES intertwined with irons you found in the fire, to be continued of course. Sprinkle some kawaii nani over the rainbow and twist the seeds until they bleed milk, the [REDACTED] needs more seasonings from the toberone - as garnish, of course -then we add a mixture of thicc swole pancakes from the furthest galaxy under your foot, driven by instinct! Don’t forget the numerology - 42 dollops of ketchup and 19 slices of pickles all folded into yeet faces. Not woke. Never woke, only yeet. They don’t want me to tell you this, but some Insanity Wolf extract is placed in the very center of the patty - super secret ingredient that knows da wae. Then you slap Brad’s face on it like so.”

She held the bradburger out to them with her hand. It looked like a regular hamburger with googly eyes and a smile. “And there you go! That’ll be a dollar three ninety-eight.”

Digital, almost video-game like coins appeared above Jenny Everywhere’s head and went toward Burgerbelle. She absorbed them into herself.

The two Jennys couldn’t comprehend what just happened. Jenny Everywhere reached for the bradburger.

Pinkie Pie appeared from nowhere, mane flat and holding a giant knife. “ONE STEVE LIMIT!”

The Jennys screamed and drove away as fast as they could. A Rick and Morty style portal opened, absorbing them. They were deposited in a galaxy far, far away.

Pinkie Pie undid her zipper and transformed back into Twiree. “And that’s how you pull a good prank.”

“I’m probably traumatized by Pinkie-X, you know,” Burgerbelle said.

Twiree paid Burgerbelle for the bradburger. “You got to sell this bradburger twice. I call that a success.”

“Yay! Burger!”

A giant evil robot fell from orbit and stopped just short of the ground. “AAAAAY MACARENA!”
Burgerbelle narrowed her eyes. She created a new bradburger. “It’s time to make like Popeye and Spinach.”

“...What?”

“I’m going to beat this robot into submission!”

Meanwhile, Starbeat looked at all the events through her ka sensor.

“...I still have no idea what to make of this.”

A bradburger hit her in the face. “Hey.”

Starbeat’s bracelet started beeping. She twitched.

Then there was a huge explosion riddled with dead memes.

There were two claps in quick succession. The first shook the hall, startling the patrons. The second gave them time to look up to the one clapping. Queen Toph looked down at those gathered. No sound polluted the room but the distant sound of shuffling just outside of the hall.

“Before we begin today, we have other business to attend to,” The Queen said, a grim expression on her face, one that seemed misplaced on her features. Toph was known to be lively. Toph was known to be strong, and sometimes angry. A grim Toph was unfamiliar, and the guests and nobles alike shuddered to even whisper ‘why?’. “Lady Rarity. Bring him in.”

“At once,” the Lady said with a bow.

A moment later the great hall’s doors opened, as a pair of caribou brought forth a bipedal creature with a sack over their head. They laid it on its knees before the Queen’s seat.

“Long have you stood against me. Years ago, you defended a tyrant who would have burned my home world down. You’ve fled justice for years and years. Even now, you stand accused of illegally feigning lordship and stealing authority that wasn’t yours, tricking the poor citizens of Lai. My country!” Toph stomped the ground, the stonework shifting behind her. The Queen took a breath, and even her useless eyes looked through the prisoner. “How do you plead?”

The figure was stoically silent. The many guests within the hall glanced at each other nervously.

“No plea?” Toph asked. “No defense at all? Very well then. For usurping royal authority and crimes against life, you are hereby sentenced to death. Queens aren’t supposed to carry out executions, so... Lady Rarity?”

The arachnid pony took on a manic smile as she approached the convicted traitor. She raised her hammer high as one of the caribou guard removed the sack from the convict’s head. It came crashing down, quick enough that none could see a face before it exploded.

There were gasps, screams, and even a few cheers as impact was made. Red discolored the Lady’s coat. As the chaos erupted, Toph clapped again, the eyes of all twitching to her. Toph’s toes twitched, and the castle masonry shifted, carrying one of the giblets to her. She picked up the piece and took a bite, letting out a satisfied ‘mmm.’

With melon juice pouring dripping down her chin, Toph threw up her arms.
“Melon Lord is dead!” the Queen cried out with a huge smile. “Long live Lai!”

“Long live the queen!” the people of Lai returned.

At a table near the Queen’s seat, Renee Jackson’s mouth was stuck, hanging as low as pony anatomy would allow.

“She’s basically always like this, before you ask.” Corona Shimmer whispered with a roll of her eyes. “I think she’s been practicing that bit for a week. First time she’s ever talked to her speaking tutor.”

~~~

Ambassador Valentine walked into his personal quarters aboard the USM ship Valiant. He checked to make sure the door was locked, disabled the communications, and sat down on his bed. He cautiously waited a few seconds, then opened a triple-locked box sealed by a key, DNA imprint, and Stand signature. It popped open, revealing his greatest secret.

He took out his prized possession - an action figure of himself produced by Merodi Universalis. He set the figure down, using D4C to take out the Stand’s own figure. He then took out a figure of Sombra, the Sweeties, and a few ponies. He threw Jenny in for good measure.

With a smirk, he used D4C to have the Valentine and D4C figures to engage in an epic battle for the fate of everything. Soon, more and more figures came out of the chest, and a grand scoping adventure for the fate of everything played out before Valentine’s eyes. Unlikely friends and allies came from all sides, the twists were absolutely uncanny, and he surprised himself with the subplot centered around the strongest man in the world that wasn’t Valentine. Interesting… Perhaps this was what making a story meant…

The final battle was underway. Valentine stood alone, all his allies lost to him. Before him didn’t stand the Merodi, the University, or the Census. It was none other than Randall Flagg himself. Valentine prepared to engage in a battle for the multiverse…

Froppy bashed down the door to Valentine’s room. “AMBASSADOR! WE’RE UNDER ATTACK!”

Valentine let out a decidedly unmanly shriek. “WH-”

“I DID NOT SEE YOU PLAYING WITH YOUR DOLLS AGAIN, LET’S JUST GO!” Froppy shouted.

Valentine used D4C to put all the figures back in an instant and lock the box. He didn’t bother correcting Froppy’s use of the word ‘dolls’ this time.

~~~

“Welcome to the hall of forgotten characters!” Monika said, gesturing at a photo of Azula. “She exists, but does she matter anymore? Probably holding a steady job as an agent! Doing things that don’t matter! Heh. Let’s see…”

“And what of Gardis? The amazing impressive demon-hunter that cut off Alushy’s head?” Pinkie asked. “I have no idea! Maybe he was there in the universe with the Collector?” Pinkie shrugged. “Whooo knows?”

“Oh, let’s not forget the AID!” Monika pointed out. “Mike, Ike, Tempest… Gone with the winds of
unimportance… Sad day.”

“And then there’s %ÉÁÇ’¹!” Pinkie grinned.

“Oh, wait, that’s my fault. I erased that one.”

“You did!? Oh, but what if they were important?”

“Probably weren’t.”

_When do I get to come back?_

“Oooommm,” both Pinkie and Monika said, putting a hand/hoof to their chin, considering the Voice of Elysium’s question. The swirling pixels only added to the thoughtful aura of the moment.

“You know, I think you were supposed to do something to Corona, but the Dark Tower overrode you,” Pinkie said. “What _have_ you been doing?”

*Why do you think that’s something I’d tell you?*_

Monika shrugged. “Well, who knows. Maybe you’ll come back!”

_Does Elysium sound unimportant!?*_

Pinkie blinked. “…You don’t want us to answer that question.”

_This is all Monika’s fault, isn’t it?*_

~~~

A blocky, iron door appeared out of nowhere, the window set in it revealing a swirling void behind it. It swung open with a click, and a strange, cubical man stepped out with a grey pick in his hand.

Nova stared at the strange door and the person that came from it, mildly perturbed at its sudden arrival. The person stared back, his arms swinging slightly, but was otherwise completely still.

Words appeared in the bottom-left corner of her vision. She squinted, being able to read “<_Steve> fuck this”, but by the time she managed to process that message, ‘Steve’ had turned around and ran back into the door, closing it behind him.

Nova couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something familiar about him.

~~~

Some of the palace staff were still adjusting after the Bloodbath. For all that she’d learned from her mentor, Evening Sparkle was not Celestia, and sometimes did things nopony could imagine Celestia doing.

Such as, for example, chasing a mass of greenish goop down the corridors of the palace while hitting it with a broom and yelling, “No! Bad Smooze! You spit out my Second right now!”

Staff and guards watched, stunned, as the mare who raised the sun continued to berate the slime like it was an unhousebroken puppy. The broom, held in her magic by the handle and not the increasingly Smooze-laden bristles, thwacked against it like a flyswatter smacking a mud puddle.

Eventually the Smooze disgorged Cessera’s Gem and sulked away. Eve looked around and pointed
at one of the armored pegasi who'd been boggling vacantly at the shenanigans. "Private, escort the Smooze to the royal gardens. Make sure it doesn't get into any of the precious item storage closets again."

The private mouthed "Again" to himself before snapping to attention and saluting. "At once, Your Highness!"

Eve nodded, then looked at the sapphire on the carpet. She sighed, ears flattened. "What a mess."

Then the Gem glowed and reformed Cessera’s body. "That was certainly interesting."

"Cessera! Are you okay? I am so sorry. I don’t even know how it got in the palace! Discord shouldn’t even be on Equis Vitis right now."

Cessera waved it off with a smile. "It’s alright, Evening. I saw it coming, after all."

"And you didn’t do anything to stop it?"

"It was… nice. I feel more relaxed now than I have in centuries."

Eve took a few moments to process this. "Huh."

"There may be potential here for a Gem spa treatment."

"Huh."

~~~

Toph stood outside of a burning house as the fire department was hosing it down.

"Why did you burn down your house?" She asked Lady Rarity, who was standing beside her.

"Spider," she answered simply.

Toph paused for a moment, incredulously. "You’re a spider!"

"Exactly, imagine if you found a tiny little human running around your house."

~~~

"Fools!" the dark swirling mass of mist with glowing red eyes sneered. "Your meddling will not stop me!"

"That’s where you’re wrong, evildoer!" Pinkie pointed an accusatory hoof at the apparent villain, a triumphant smirk on her face. "Your reign of terror ends now!"

"Why are we even bothering with this joker?" Vriska deadpanned, standing off to the side with her arms crossed.

"Joker? Hah!" The mist glared at the other four, a smirk easily imaginable on its nonexistent facial features. "The only joke here is that my power is unrivaled!"

"Oh yeah?" Pinkie was instantly on top of Jotaro, slapping his abs like a salesman would the roof of a car. "Well, you haven’t seen Jotaro yet! This bad boy can punch so many faces!"

Jotaro raised an eyebrow, but otherwise remained as impassive as ever.
“It’s a formless cloud!” Vriska reminded them. “Clouds aren’t usually punchable, ya know!”

“The angry one is correct!” the evil cloud’s imaginary smirk only grew. “And as long as you keep bickering, I remain unstoppable!”

“Oh no!” Pinkie exploded off of Jotaro, limbs flailing in a painfully unnatural pile as she tumbled haphazardly to the ground, landing with a soft thud in the lightish-blue grass. “You’ve discovered our weakness: we can never stop bickering! Nooooo—”

Flutterfree sighed. “Pinkie, I think you’re overdoing it a bit. You know we can’t mess with the locals forever.”

“-ooooh alright!” Pinkie waved a hoof roughly in Nova’s direction... or she would’ve, if her limbs hadn’t been tangled up so much from the tumble. “Nova! Do that, uh... that magic thing.”

Nova didn’t respond. It was at that point the group noticed contented chomping sounds were coming from her direction, and everyone except Pinkie stared at the sight of her munching on the strange grass.

Flutterfree frowned. Lolo activated, examining the grass that they all walked on, but no hidden things, malevolent or otherwise, became revealed to Flutterfree. “Nova?” she called out, a little more forcibly than Pinkie did.

“Mmm?” Nova glanced up at the other five, stalks of grass still dangling out of her mouth. “Mm, mnn, mnn...” She surrounded the dark cloud in a telekinetic field, and the being was barely able to look surprised before it became compressed into a tiny black sphere. Nova gulped down the grass still in her mouth, a small part of her attention focused on keeping the cloud-being compressed.

“Sorry, it’s just... this grass is surprisingly good. Wanna try some?”

Flutterfree’s frown became a raised eyebrow. “Why were you eating strange grass in the first place?”

Nova shrugged. “I dunno, I just...”

“The evildoer has been defeated!” Pinkie leapt up from her tangled position, plucking the cloud-being from Nova’s telekinesis and stuffing it in her mane. “But evil never rests, and so shouldn’t we!” She leapt off of a nearby cliff, a loud ‘wheeeeee!’ rapidly becoming fainter as she fell.

Vriska groaned, facepalming. “Good gog, did someone give her coffee or what?” Her hand slid off her face, and she glared at the cliff Pinkie had jumped off of. “Who the hell was that, anyway?”

Nova blinked. “Huh. Come to think of it, I don’t think I heard any names.” She frowned. “I think I overheard someone complaining about a ‘butt,’ but—”

This led to Vriska growling and facepalming again. “Fuck, another one?”

Now it was Flutterfree who blinked. “Another one what?”

“Oh, yeah, I’ve seen a Butt the Cloud before.” Her eye twitched. “He was a major asshole. I also knew of another asshole that apparently couldn’t stop—”

“eeeeeeEEEEEEeeeeee!” Pinkie said, falling past them and back down the cliff again.

“Dammit, Pinkie!” Vriska shouted angrily. “Stop messing around and let’s get out of this stupid universe! Pinkie!”
Nova, suspecting she wouldn’t need to do anything else for a while, went right back to munching on the grass.

~~~

I looked up from the notebook I was scrawling things in.

“...Ponygood…” I muttered with a twitch, snapping the pen in my frustration.

~~~

Allure saw it. She saw the top. The radio tower was her last obstacle. It was all that remained.

“Heh… HehHEHheh… You SEE THIS DISCORD? I’m going to WIN!” Allure didn’t wait for a response - she just started climbing the radio tower. She fell off easily, but she kept control, ensuring that she would stay at the base of the tower when she fell. She went up again - and fell. But she didn’t let it affect her.

She went up again, and fell.

She tried moving fast, but fell.

She tried slow and calculated, but got her hammer stuck and had to wrench it out in such a way that she fell.

Allure was nothing if not determined at this point. She had poured so much into this… She wasn’t going to be done!!!

She pulled herself up, eventually reaching the top of the tower.

…And then she realized gravity had altered, and she had not accounted for that in any way. She drifted up and hit a space rock. This forced her back down to the base of the tower.

Her left eye twitched. This tower truly was the final boss.

~~~

Sombra couldn’t believe she actually found a copy. That was a lie, of course she could, she could find anything. That said, it had taken her a while.

Overwatch.

The name of the game still made her laugh. Of course they’d name it after the good guys. History was written by the winners after all, not about them. Blizzard was crafty. She rolled her eyes when she found out that it was an online-only game. What was the plan if it ended up not selling millions of copies?

A question for later. Sombra installed the game and loaded it up, after signing up of course. Immediately she encountered the tutorial.

“Jack Morrison, that’s who they chose?” She laughed to herself, “That old man is washed up.” She played the tutorial. She wasn’t into video games, but this was technically research. And plus it’d be really satisfying to see a version of herself that wasn’t depicted as a villain like those action figures they sold.

Eventually Sombra accessed the training room and selected herself, laughing at the thought of seeing
what Reaper was capable of. But no, first she needed to play as herself, see how the game portrayed her.

“Everything can be hacked...and everyone.” the game told Sombra, in the voice she had ten years ago. She almost fell out of her chair laughing.

~~~

Daniel had worked every bit of free time he had on this one artifact.

He had slaved away over translations, spells, and other resources to find what the mysterious pictograph meant.

The lines were so odd, the edges so rigid… Yet strangely graceful. Was it just art? Was it some sort of ancient message? Was it…

“Daniel, dear, why are you looking at an ancient advertisement for a brothel?”

Daniel blinked. “...What?”

Renee raised an eyebrow. “You don’t know what this is?”

“How do you know? What’re the signs?”

“Talk to Alushy. Learn the art of a more perverse mindset. Realize you never wanted it in the first place.” She kissed him lightly on the cheek. “You’re lucky you’re so oblivious all the time, I might have gotten upset.”

“...What?”

Renee facehooved.

~~~

“BLEH HEH HEH HEH! BLECK!” Blumiere shouted.

Vivian gasped. “Oh no! Blumiere, have you gone evil again?”

“Huh? No, why would I do that?” He adjusted his hat. “I’ve merely discovered these things called MEMES!”

“...Yeah?”

“LOOK AT THIS CAT! It has a… ‘chezburger’. Glorious. Such a pinnacle of humor!”

Vivian blinked. “...You’re not joking.”

“Of course it’s a joke! It’s a meme! So... Creative.”

Vivian didn’t have the heart to correct him.

~~~

Discord appeared in the Q Continuum. “HELLO MY BROTHERS!”

The various Q didn’t even look up from what they were doing.
“I’ll just leave you with the coordinates to the universe that has the Ascended Ancients…” Discord winked. “I’m sure you two will get along.” Then he chuckled - they wouldn’t look at it now. But they would look at it later. And then two cultures would clash…

“You’re devious,” a certain Q said, appearing behind Discord.

Discord smirked. “So are you, handsome devil.”

“You flatter me.”

“Hey! Want to go find a random ship captain and tell them they’re the savior of the universe?”

Q smirked. “You bet I do.”

“Good. I need to blow off some steam. I’ve been staring at an arcade screen all day, can you believe it?”

Q gasped. “No!”

“But, horribly, it is true! Let us not speak of it again! Let’s just move!”

They did.

Their intellectual differences soon led to them declaring never to speak to each other again.

As always happened with Discords.

~~~

Toph Bei Fong, Queen of Lai accepted all kinds of challenges to the throne. In fact, she enjoyed it so much that it was almost routine for her to have one ‘Duel for the Throne’ a week. Usually on Fridays because the other challengers wanted to clear their weekday schedule before fighting the Queen.

A guard opened the doors to the royal chamber "My Queen, you have another challenge note."

Toph’s grin widened ever so slightly. "Alright! Who is it from this time?"

The guard opened the letter and promptly scrunched his face. "Uhh, it says it's from 'Deer' my Queen."

"What? As in the entirety of the Deer species?"

"No, just the one."

"How do you know that?"

"It says: 'I challenge you. Signed, Deer.'"

At that line Lady Rarity paled. "Oh no..."

Toph, curious of her advisor’s reaction, turned her head. "Oh no? Why 'Oh no'? This Deer can't be that bad can they?"

"Ahh no, it's just that I've once traveled with someone who named themselves as such and-"

"The challenger to the throne has arrived!" Lady Rarity promptly groaned as she heard the announcement. Toph merely turned her head and looked upon the new face. He looked like a regular
old deer. Not old as in old but an Earth Tau'ri kind of deer. With a grappling hook attached to each of his forelegs.

"Alright, I've come for the royal tryouts! Be prepared as I will-AAAAHHHHHHH!" the Deer was promptly launched out of the nearest open window before he could finish.

Lady Rarity let out a relieved sigh. “Well, that takes care of th-"

**WHOOOSH, CLINK**

A grappling hook promptly lodged itself into the ceiling from the window Deer had been launched from.

"Ha ha! You thought I was fighting blind did you?" Lady Rarity promptly facehooved. "Well I've come prepared to grapple with any situation you can throw at me! ... Or well, throw me to, it seems. Oh, hi Lady Rarity, fancy seeing you here!"

"Please, be a dear and-"

"I already am one." She facehooved again.

"What I mean is, be a good dear and-"

"But aren't I a good Deer for sending in that letter?"

"Please! Just, leave and never speak of this again."

"But I've got the Queen where I want her hook, line and sinker."

"You obviously can't handle this situation v-"

"Obviously not, which is why I'm grappling this problem instead."

Lady Rarity decided then and there to grab her hammer.

"Oh, is it hammer time already?"

"Leave now or face your punishment!"

"But aren't I already doing that?"

Lady Rarity, now thoroughly exasperated, started chasing the Deer out of the castle all the while swinging her weapon to try and hammer away the problem. Toph just stood there somewhat dumbfounded.

"Did that Deer try to pun me into submission?"

"Yes I did!" A voice from outside the castle yelled.

~~~

Vriska giggled - quite unlike her. “Y’know, Hastur, you know the best ways to treat a girl.”

“You are the one who has suggested almost every outing we’ve been on, Vriska.”

“This is an exception! Man, get with the fucking program.” Vriska chuckled. “The drinks… The
combat arena with everything trying to kill each other… The impossible walls… So romantic…”

“Even with Starbeat taking notes right there?”

“Yes. Especially with Starbeat taking notes.”

Starbeat looked up from her notebook. “I said don’t mind me!”

“Pff, you’re my wingpony,” Vriska said.

“…Wait…”

“I’m both your wingponies,” Starbeat muttered. “You should go for the kiss now.”

They stared at her.

“That’s for both of you.” They still didn’t move. “Ugh…” With her magic she forced the two of their heads together and let impulse take care of the rest. She scribbled down a few notes.

“Check,” Starbeat said. “Now, Vriska, you have two fully established quadrants.”

Vriska sat back in her chair and bit into an eyeball that might have been real, might have been cake. It was impossible to tell. “Yeah? So?”

“Even considering your complete distaste for auspistice, you still have one empty quadrant,” Starbeat declared.

“This has come to my attention as well,” Hastur declared. “So, Vriska, it’s time we tell you.”

“Oh no…” Vriska said, putting a hand over her face.

“We’re gonna find you a kismesis!” Starbeat grinned. “We’ve made a list of all the people you hate, and have considered the many possibilities of forming a new potent rivalry…”

“Kill me now…” Vriska groaned.

Starbeat’s bracelet started beeping. “Frick. I think I’m finding that behemoth made of eyestalks attractive.” She started breathing heavily.

“Those aren’t eyestalks.”

“Oooooooh,” Starbeat said. Then a look of revulsion crossed her face. “HASTUR WHAT THE HECK IS WRONG WITH YOUR PEOPLE!??”

“Many things.”

Vriska took the moment to try to sneak away, but Hastur and Starbeat were too persistent.

~~~

“…and I said to myself, ‘self, you’re Mr. Hippo. You can tell a better story than that.’ So I did. I started over from the beginning and told it better, the right way. Because that’s what a story is, in the end, a series of events that has a right way to it, and if you tell it the wrong way, well, then all you get is a bunch of monkeys at a typewriter. Sure, they might make Shakespeare, but it’s meaningless. Has no soul behind it, y’know?”
Rainbow Dash let out a whimper.

“Mmm, and the soul behind the story is all that matters, I can tell you that for certain. Reminds me of the time we found Disneyland on Mt. Eversit…”

~~~

Blackjack grinned. “You’re pretty good!”

Gilgamesh laughed. “You have a fire within yourself as well, alicorn!” He pulled the biggest gun he could manage out of nowhere. “But your arguments are invalid. I have a nova launcher.”

Blackjack pulled out Folly. “And I have a really big fucking gun.”

“...That’s not as big as my behemoth.”

“Oh, the fallout from this thing is iiiiiimpressive. If I wasn’t an alicorn with so many magical parts it isn’t even funny, it’d kill me over time. Isn’t that fun?”

“This sounds delightful!” Gilgamesh laughed. “It has been a while since I’ve had such an invigorating fair fight!”

They both charged their weapons - and then both of the guns lost energy in an instant.

“What the f-”

A tall woman with long, orange hair in a white dress landed nearby. She pointed a scepter with a red crystal inside it at them. “Would you two stop?!”

“Wh- it was just getting good!” Blackjack wailed.

The woman gestured at the dimensional tears they were forming in reality.

“Ah,” Gilgamesh said. “I can see why you would take issue with that.”

Blackjack rubbed the back of her head. “Yeah…”

“Let’s just talk this out like reasonable people, okay?”

“Oh, that’s what we were doing,” Blackjack said.

“It was a spar just for fun,” Gilgamesh added.

“...You do not fight just for fun by destroying the fabric of reality in an inhabited universe.”

Gilgamesh and Blackjack had nothing to say to that but sheepish expressions and awkward laughter.

~~~

Twiree and her Flat Reapers had found themselves in a universe closely connected to Galaxa Quadrants.

They found non-Flat Reapers that were bent on the extermination of all organic life in the galaxy of their home universe.

Twiree knew that the Merodi would not stand for this, and that there’d be an operation to stop the Reapers… But for now they were just going to have a conversation.
“U ‘AVIN A GIGGLE, MATE?” one of her Reapers asked.

“YOU ARE A DISGRACE TO REAPER KIND,” one of the full Reapers retorted. “WE HAVE A SACRED PURPOSE WHICH YOU DENY.”

A different Flat reaper responded. “IT SEEMED LIKE A GOOD IDEA. WE GOT THIS SWEET INTERDIMENSIONAL DEAL OUT OF IT. I HAVE A CREW OF APPULS.”

“...THEY AREN’T INDOCTRINATED TO YOUR WILL, ARE THEY?”

“WHY WOULD WE BOTHER?”

“I AM SUBMITTING A PROPOSAL TO ALTER OUR PURPOSE TO INCLUDE CORRUPTED ALTERNATES.”

Twiree laughed. “LET’S NOT GO AND DO THAT, INSTEAD WHY NOT HAVE A FRIEND-”

A Reaper started shooting at the start of the word ‘friend’.

~~~

Alushy cleared her throat. “It’s time for ‘don’t be dumb’ with Alushy.”

“Lots of people say you can see the Great Wall of China from orbit. This just isn’t true, it’s a fucking hoax perpetuated by the Illuminati and utter morons.” Alushy gestured at the version of Earth floating beneath her. “As you can plainly see, there’s no Great Wall of China visible. It’s just a lot of green, blue, and white. Also, they’re right that sound can’t travel in space, but you don’t freeze. Instead you balloon and start boiling from the inside out. You’ll run out of air in two minutes and graciously lose consciousness before you die of asphyxiation. Why am I fine, you ask? Because I’m a fudgemothering vampire who’s immune to the sun.”

“That’s not an explanation,” Aradia commented from inside the space station doors, eating ice cream. “BECAUSE FUCK YOU, THAT’S WHY!”

“You’re the one who wondered what it was like out in space.”

“That wasn’t an invitation, bitch!”

Aradia smirked. “Mmmmm I think it was. You’ll be fine. I’ll even let you back in if you ask nicely!”

“You’re evil.”

A large, unusually-shaped rock flew by.

“...What was that?”

“Huh,” Aradia said. “I think that was Kars. Don’t worry about it.”

“ARADIA!”

Aradia cleared her throat. “It’s time for ‘don’t be dumb’ with Aradia.”

“Don’t you dare…”

“As we can see here, being stubborn and refusing to ask nicely for something out of pure spite only
results in suffering. So sad.”

“You’re vicious.”

Aradia grinned creepily. “I know!”

~~~

Today with the Guru we’ll be answering a fan-submitted question. It’s very flattering that you all send you topics and questions in, and it always breaks my heart to have to pick and choose. Their question is, “What are the best things to eat in the multiverse?” And I thought about places that I’ve eaten at or passed by. Here are my top picks for places to eat in.

1) Pizza. No matter where you go, there’ll always be pizza. Good, bad, toppings or not, it’s always going to be nearby.

2) Be they made of meat or otherwise, a good burger is always nice to eat. I personally like olives on mine, they add a good flavour.

3) In every universe, without exception, there is exactly one Duplicates noodle cart. If you find yourself fortunate enough to find one, you’re in for a treat.

4) Uncontaminated water might not be fancy, but it’s best when out exploring. Who knows? you might find yourself in a desert, or a snowstorm.

5) Volcano Chili is no joke, only eat if you’re made up of at least 20 percent heat resistant elements.

6) Pirate brand Ar Cakes are the best snack to enjoy for any pony. But humans be wary, it’s been known to cause toothrot for a select few humans.

These are six different types of food you can eat in the multiverse. But remember, eating is important, and finding foods that are healthy for your body are even moreso. After all, everyone’s diet is different.

Thank you for reading today’s entry, see you tomorrow for more.

~~~

In a world secluded from the sights of Merodi Universalis, a brutal mistress ruled over the land with an iron hoof.

Her name was appropriate for the job, for she was Brutalight Sparcake. The leader of the Elements of Insanity, tutor to the woman known as Six, and general book lover. She was completely off her murderous rocker and was of the mind that killing more and more of her ‘citizens’ was a good way to run a country.

Today was also her birthday. She had a friend that would have thrown a party for her, once, but those days were behind her. She was probably going to go on a murder spree later to liven her mood.

Perhaps it was time to invest in cloning technology…

The doors to her throne room were bashed down. At first, she was annoyed, expecting another ‘hero’ she was going to have to kill. Instead she was pleasantly surprised to see Rainbine and Six rolling a giant cake in.

“Happy birthday!” the two called, gesturing at the cake. It was very sparkly, purple, and decorated
with spears.

“Aw… you shouldn’t have!” Brutalight called, teleporting down to the cake. “Mmm…”

The cake leaped up, revealing two robotic legs and two robotic arms. It pulled one of the spears out of its sparkly body. “I CHALLENGE YOU TO A SPAR.”

It was then that Brutalight got it.

*Sparkle*cake.

*Spear*cake.

*Spar*cake.

“How many puns did you insert into this thing!” Brutalight blurted.

“All the puns,” Rainbine said.

“All of them,” Six added.

Brutalight facehooved. This momentary distraction allowed the ‘spar’cake to get a hit in. She went flying.

Brutalight was annoyed for a minute - but then she grinned. “Ah… You know exactly what to get me for my birthday!” She charged, ready for a fight.

~~~

Allure pulled herself to the top of the radio tower. Carefully, she pushed herself up - leaving the gravitational well of the game. As she drifted into space, carefully pushing off of the floating rocks to keep her momentum up, tears formed in her eyes.

She had done it.

She drifted to the stars, knowing she had won. She had beaten this game. She had Gotten Over It!

“AHAHHAHAHAHHAHHAHHAHHA!” She laughed. Her legs felt like dying, her horn was smoking from all the energy she had poured out of it. But she was DONE! She was in SPACE! “HEY! DISCORD!? I DID IT! PAY UP!”

There was no response.

“…Discord?”

Silence.

“…Anypony?”

She was alone, drifting in space.

“Discord get me out of this arcade game.”

Silence.

Allure took a deep breath, let it out. Then she took another deep breath in and screamed.
The only pony left in the arcade was Trixie, and she was fast asleep on the counter. Allure’s screams fell on deaf ears.

Allure got to drift in space as a reward for her efforts. Alone… Among the stars…

~~~

Sombra realized she was falling asleep.

She shut the program down, grunting.

How much of that had actually been possible?

She was sure all the events had actually happened… But she had been in at least one of those clips, and there were clips of things in places that had no cameras…

She rubbed her eyes. Blame it on ka. Question it later when more awake.

She leaned back in her chair, ready to fall into the warm embrace of sleep.

The support on her chair snapped, depositing her on the floor of her Puddlejumper.

“…Of course,” she muttered, groaning.

CONTRIBUTORS:

GMBblackjack
Keywii_cookies55
Twilence
Little Duke
Ponygood11
Kamikaze_dalek
Run.trivena (Imaginary Duck)
VoidTemplar2000
The Other Sans
EquestrianKirin
Galliar
Botnik
FanofMostEverything
Velvet-Fresh
Rev wrapped up another sermon, this one on the topic of living in peace with all, regardless of how they treated you. She noticed some of the audience looking at her like they didn’t want to believe what she was saying, but they didn’t make a fuss. Rev planned to go talk to a few of them later, but she had to close up the church for the day. Tomorrow, though.

She had only started cleaning up with her magic when she realized that one of the patrons had not left. He was a brown-skinned man in a set of purple religious robes. He wore a collar around his neck that was similar to Rev’s own collar, and a golden cross design dominated the front of the outfit. His hair was white and so short it looked like it was part of his skull.

He noticed her looking at him. “Reverend.”

“Just Rev will do nicely,” Rev said, trotting over to him. “Though admittedly I don’t know what to call you.”

“I am Father Enrico Pucci,” he said, smiling warmly.

“Good to see another member of the faith out here. Are you by chance having difficulty reconciling your beliefs with the multiverse and the ‘fiction’ of everything?”

“I was admittedly having a crisis of faith prior to this moment – coming to see you would have likely been a good idea, but the thought eluded me until this point. I believe it was not meant to be.”

She sat down next to him. “It’s still good to talk about it, you know. ‘Bear one another’s burdens,’ and such.”

Pucci nodded. “I had put all my faith in the actions of a man.”

“Dangerous,” Rev commented. “Completely understandable, but still dangerous. No man is perfect.”

“In actions? No. In ideals? …Perhaps not, but I used to think he was. I thought he had the way to Heaven.”

“He may have had a way to a Heaven,” Rev admitted. “…I take it recent events made you realize he didn’t have that right.”

“More than you might think,” Pucci admitted. “It was a lost prophecy, of sorts. A common thing these days, I understand. Divine prophecy squandered by interference…”

Rev looked curious. “What exactly was this prophecy?”

“It was to be a way to create the ‘perfect world’. Everything would be as it should be.”

Rev sighed. “I’m sorry to tell you, but that’s not possible until the Revelation happens at the end of everything. No world, not even the highest planes of the D-Sphere, has perfection.”

Pucci raised an eyebrow in curiosity. “Highest planes of the D-Sphere?”

Rev shook her head. “That’s a tangent… There are universes where thoughts can become reality and universes that purge the perceived ‘evil’ from people. It’s never perfect, and usually causes more
problems than good. We’re called to seek the Kingdom, not create it with our own means. This multiverse is the result of what happens when we try. And I—” She stopped short and teleported to the back of the church hall, suddenly on guard.

Pucci raised an eyebrow. “I’m curious as to how you detected my Stand.”


“But you’re not looking right at it,” Pucci declared. “You aren’t very accurate.”

“What do you want?”

Pucci stood up. “I w—“ He paused, thinking for a moment. “I don’t have to tell you anything.”

“I can tell you what I know,” Rev declared.

“Oh?”

“About you. Do you know what one of the more common kind of villains are?”

“Priests,” Pucci answered.

Rev nodded. “And you have the exact demeanor to be one of those. Your words betray a man of that nature. Pucci, I implore you, whatever your plan is, think back to the Word. Think about peace, grace, self-control, and patience. You don’t have to go down this path.”

Pucci’s calm exterior faltered for a moment.

“Love, Pucci. It’s all about love.”

“I love everyone in the world,” Pucci declared. “Which is why I need to do this.”

“It is not our responsibility to do that, Pucci.”

“How do you know, for certain?” Pucci said, narrowing his eyes. “Maybe I am called.”

“God wouldn’t call someone like you or me to do that.”

“Open your mind, Reverend.”

“I’ve dealt with far too many people exactly like you to jump on board like this.”

Pucci shrugged. “That is fine. I don’t need your cooperation. I just need your mind.”

“My wh—” Rev felt a hand reach into her brain, latching onto her psyche. She acted quickly – tapping into her magic, trying to pull her mind back. The power of the Stand was just too much. She had to let her mind fall to it.

So she did what she could to protect herself from what would come next. She tried to alter her own mind…

…but what was she doing? Wh-

Something punched her across the face. She slumped to the ground, unconscious.

Pucci’s Stand – a black and white humanoid with a crown-like protrusion on its head – handed him a disc. Pucci pocketed the disc and walked out of the church.
Flutterfree walked along the streets of Ponyville. Due to an outing that ran exceptionally late recently she had slept the day away. She had tried to force herself back to sleep, but it just didn’t work. So she had opted to go out for a walk with no particular goal in mind, enjoying the nightlife of Ponyville.

She passed by Rev’s church, wondering if Rev herself was still in there. She should have gone to sleep by this point, but you never knew. Flutterfree walked up to the entrance and knocked – surprised to find it wasn’t locked. It was always locked at this point, bar special events, and Flutterfree would have known if there was a special event going on.

She opened the doors, a frown on her face. “Rev? Are you in here?”

There was no response. Flutterfree could clearly see Rev sitting on the ground though, staring at something in front of her.

“…Rev?” Flutterfree asked again. “Are you okay?”

“Hm…?” Rev said, turning to look at her. “Is… Is that my name?”

Flutterfree gasped. “You don’t remember your name?”

“I… I don’t remember much of anything at all…” Rev said, fear evident in her eyes. “I… I know I’m a unicorn. I know how to speak… though I don’t think I could before you arrived. I know this book is important,” she gestured at the Bible in front of her. “But… What does that all mean?”

Flutterfree rushed up to Rev, checking her over. “Rev, you’ve been punched!”

“I have…? I guess that does hurt a bit…” She looked down. “I was attacked then?”

“Attacked – and someone took your memories! Oh Rev… I’m so sorry. I’m going to do what I can to fix this.”

“Thank you… Uh…”

Flutterfree started, tears in her eyes. “I… I’m Flutterfree, Rev. You could call me… a member of your church.”

“Church? This place?” She looked around. “It’s mine? …I teach people here… It feels right, but I hope they aren’t expecting me to teach anything anytime soon.” She chuckled bitterly.

Flutterfree opened the Bible to a spot toward the end. “…I think you need to read some of this, to remember who you were. At least somewhat.”

“Yeah. I will…” She stared down at the pages, studying intently.

Flutterfree pulled out her phone. “Pinkie? Rev’s been attacked. Her memory is either gone or stolen. We’re at her church. Soon as possible.” She put her phone away. “The team will be here shortly.”

Rev nodded slowly, engrossed in the pages of the Word. “I… I find that as I read, I just understand it. It’s like I always knew everything in here…”

“Do I seem familiar?” Flutterfree asked.

“…No. I’m sorry, you don’t give off the same feeling.”
“It’s okay. If your mind chose to latch onto anything, it would have been your beliefs. But we’re going to get the rest of it back, okay?”

“Okay,” Rev said, distant.

Flutterfree started to look around for clues – anything to see what happened. She unleashed Lolo at full strength, stretching out to find everything. She found nothing hidden in the room – but Rev started glowing white. This startled her so much she fired off a magic laser. “Wh… What!?”

“Oh! Sorry!” Flutterfree removed Lolo. “I was trying to find anything I could… I forgot that would have triggered any dormant powers within you.”

“Powers?”

“You were a powerful unicorn. You knew a lot of spells. I think I just awakened any of them you could cast from muscle memory.”

Rev blinked. She levitated the Bible into the air. She formed a simple shield in front of herself. She fired a laser into the floor. “…Huh…” She held up her hoof, creating a soft white glow around it. “I… I don’t understand any of this.” The white glow faltered and vanished.

“Don’t worry, we’ll figure it out.”

Rev nodded slowly. “Flutterfree… Can you tell me who I am? I get that I’m a teacher of some kind but… who am I?”

Flutterfree smiled sadly. “You are a unicorn who spreads the Word of grace and love wherever she goes. You traveled the multiverse for a large portion of your life, learning a lot about the way existence works and how people are. You… treat everyone with kindness and understanding, and are a great thinker. You’re the wisest pony I know.”

“What good is wisdom if you can’t remember it?” Rev wondered aloud.

Flutterfree smirked.

“Ah. I see; I just produced a piece of wisdom. How paradoxical…”

It was at this moment Nova teleported herself, Pinkie, Vriska, and Jotaro into the church.

“Rev, this is Pinkie, Vriska, Jotaro, and Nova,” Flutterfree said.

“Are creatures with arms normal?” Rev asked.

“Now, yes,” Flutterfree answered.

Nova walked up to Rev. “Your memories really are gone… I’m sorry.”

Rev forced a smile. “I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not,” Pinkie said. “Lots of inner turmoil.”

Rev sighed. “Mind reader?”

“That’d be me, not her,” Vriska said, kneeling down. “Though I’m not right now. I do want to go into your mind to see what I can find, though. I’ll need you to let me.”
Rev nodded. “It’s not like I have any secrets to hide right now or anything.”

Vriska nodded focusing her psychic powers onto Rev’s mind. Rev felt the power moving around in her head, but it wasn’t violent or dangerous, merely slightly uncomfortable. She was in there for about two minutes before coming out. “Someone tried to completely wipe you.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you must have acted really quickly to retain any ability to speak or remember anything at all. All the memories you do have – speech, mannerisms, feelings – those are all fresh memories. Suggesting you placed them there yourself. Had you not managed that you’d be a vegetable right now.”

Rev stared right at her. “That’s terrifying.”

“No shit,” Vriska said. “I didn’t find anything to help us, though – any sort of actual memory is gone. You only kept some ideas and the essence of who you were. Nothing to tell us what actually happened to you.”

Flutterfree sighed. “And Rev doesn’t keep any cameras around the church. I didn’t see anything with Lolo either.”

Nova pulled out her phone. “Then we call in a favor. Someone who’ll be able to tell us what happened.” She put the phone to her ear. “Hello, Aradia? We need you at Rev’s church.”

Aradia appeared in front of them in a flash of time powers. “Here!”

Rev jumped at her sudden appearance. “Th-that was fast.”

Aradia smiled at her. “Yeah, I usually am. Or I’m pathetically slow.” She turned to Nova. “What’s the issue?”

“Rev’s memory was stolen,” Nova explained. “We have no way of figuring out what happened to her. Can you go back and see what happened?”

Aradia saluted. “Can-do! I’ll be back and we can talk about possible interference.” She vanished in a puff of time.

Rev blinked. “I should be a lot more weirded out by all of this than I am, huh?”

“You kept the ideaas,” Pinkie said. “You’re already used to this stuff.”

“But I don’t have any experiences to be used to it upon! I’m missing the foundation of my ideas!” She grabbed her head. “That’s just not right!”

Flutterfree put a wing around her. “Rev, even if we can’t get your memories back… Nova and I can tell you who you were.”

“Not everything,” Rev said. “Not everything…”

Pinkie’s team looked around nervously.

~~~

Aradia made sure she appeared hidden in the past. She took a position outside one of the church’s windows, carefully watching. She accelerated time through Rev’s last sermon, watching as the entire
church body moved out like a sea of ants. Only one man remained, talking to Rev. She slowed down time back to normal, listening to their conversation and taking mental notes.

Aradia knew exactly what Rev was talking about when she called Pucci a villain – a sad fact of the multiverse was that the religious types ended up turning evil so often. She was on Rev’s side in their little debate. But knowing what happened to Rev, Aradia knew the unicorn didn’t get through to Pucci.

She saw the disc removed from Rev’s head. She couldn’t see the Stand holding it, but that didn’t matter all that much. Pucci took the disc, pocketed it, and left the church without wasting a moment.

Aradia followed him. He took a step into the street of Ponyville and walked to a nearby alley. He took out a dimensional device, dialing a new location.

“Hey! Where do you think you’re going?”

Both Aradia and Pucci were very surprised to see Jotaro’s daughter Jolyne standing there. Her hair was green and done up in a style that resembled two pointed ears. Her face was stern, and her body fit. She was no longer a girl, or even a teenager – if Aradia had to guess from appearance alone, early twenties.

Pucci recovered from his surprise and put on a smile. “I am simply leaving this universe, young lady.”

“Yeah, that’s obvious,” Jolyne said, folding her arms. “But I thought you looked suspicious.” She gestured toward the church. “Glad I investigated. There’s a unicorn in there that looks like shit. So it looks like you’re the bad guy. And I like punching bad guys.”

Aradia knew this was fate – these two were destined to meet. Jolyne had no reason to be in this part of Ponyville at this hour. Every Jojo in the Joestar lineage had already faced their enemy… except Jolyne. The multiverse knocked before her time had come.

But some fates could not be denied.

Pucci narrowed his eyes, summoning his Stand, not that Aradia could see it. Neither could she see Jolyne’s, which made the resulting exchange very confusing to watch – and interesting.

“Stand, huh?” Jolyne said, smirking. “Mine’s Stone Free. Yours?”

“Whitesnake,” Pucci answered. “Your Stand’s ability is to stretch itself out into threads that can be manipulated with high finesse.”

“And I have no idea what yours does, but it can’t be good,” Jolyne commented.

Aradia saw Pucci’s limbs move out, pulled by invisible threads. Jolyne rushed him with her own body, leaping over an attack from Whitesnake and kicking Pucci in the face. She focused on Whitesnake, using her own Stand to tie the opposing spirit up. It must not have been as effective as desired, because something grabbed hold of Jolyne’s arm.

“Shit,” she swore, twisting her head to the side to avoid another attack. She swung her foot at Pucci but he pulled himself back by falling over. No matter how much Stand string was latched onto him, falling backward still worked to dodge the attack.

Whitesnake managed to get a hit on Jolyne’s head, knocking her silly and partially removing a disc. She used all her resources to keep Whitesnake at bay, but this freed Pucci to move. He grabbed hold
of the disc poking out of her head, pulling it out the rest of the way with his own hand. She screamed, taking a few steps back – but she didn’t turn into a mindless vegetable.

“What did you do, asshole?”

Pucci pocketed the disc. “I took your Stand.” The hand of Whitesnake closed around Jolyne’s throat. “Now you can’t do anything to me.”

Jolyne struggled, but the crushing pressure on her windpipe told her that was a bad idea.

“You’ll be coming with me in case your father shows up,” Pucci said. “Ka works in mysterious ways, I hear, and it would not be much of a stretch to say that the man who killed Dio first would find his way to oppose me as well.” He opened the dimensional portal to another universe and dragged Jolyne with him to a land with pink skies.

Aradia slowed time to a crawl so she could follow – but the moment she passed through the dimensional barrier Pucci and Jolyne vanished.

“…Well then,” Aradia said. “He planned this well.” She checked her time powers in the land of pink skies. She could alter its flow, but she couldn’t travel backward. “Yeah…” He expected time travel to be used against him, so he went to a universe where it’s not allowed. I can’t interfere with the ‘past’ here, and when I tried to follow a ‘past’ connection I got shot to the local present. Fun. She pulled out her dimensional device and dialed Equis Vitis, walking back to the church the old fashioned way.

“We’ve got a couple problems,” Aradia said. “First off, he expected someone to try and use time against him, accounting for it by jumping to a universe where time travel isn’t possible. If I interfere with him while he’s in this universe, I just create a duplicate of him, and I don’t think I need to explain why that’s bad.”

“Oh, right. Probably should have started with that.” Aradia smiled awkwardly. “His name’s Father Enrico Pucci. Earth Stand, has a Stand named Whitesnake that can remove discs from people. He removed Rev’s memories… and the Stand of another person.”

“Who?”

Aradia looked at Jotaro. “I’m sorry, but your daughter fought him in a nearby alley, trying to stop him. She lost, and he took her Stand. She’s currently his hostage because he expected that you might try to follow him.”

Jotaro didn’t visibly react, but everyone who knew him knew he was inches away from going on a rampage. “He was right to expect that. We’re going after him.”

Pinkie nodded. “You got that right! Nova will trace the dimensional signatures!”

Rev stood up. “I’m coming.”

Flutterfree shook her head. “Rev, you need to-”

“I need to be there. This is my struggle as well.”

Aradia smiled. “I wish you all luck. Sorry I couldn’t give you much else.”
“It’s fine,” Pinkie said. “Get back to protecting time for us, we’ll take it from here.”

“We do need the coordinates, though,” Vriska pointed out.

Aradia pressed a button on her dimensional device, transmitting the connection. “There you are. Good luck!” She vanished in a puff of time.

Pinkie opened a portal to the land of pink skies. “Let’s go everybody! Time to get a memory disc from a priest!”

~~~

Jolyne and Pucci hadn’t stayed in the pink world very long. It had been nothing more than a stop to throw possible pursuers off their tail. The world they appeared in next was the Forest Universe.

Pucci allowed Whitesnake to release his hold on Jolyne now that they were far from the site of the incident. He sat down on a fallen tree and took Rev’s memory disc out of his pocket.

Jolyne tried to throw a punch, but Whitesnake just caught it.

“Calm yourself, Miss Kujo,” Pucci said. “I would rather not have to subdue you further. But it would not be difficult to render you to the state the unicorn was in.”

Jolyne managed to get a hold of her temper and folded her arms. “Fine. Care to explain what exactly your evil plan is?”

“You assume so much. You assume my goals are evil simply because my means are rather forward. All you know is that I’ve subdued a unicorn priest, that I knew Dio, and that I was able to best you in a fight.” He looked carefully at Rev’s disc. “I needed these memories to find my way to Heaven. She is not dead, and her friends will be able to support her back to the point in which she can live her life, of that I am sure. You attacked me out of nowhere, and I was forced to defend myself. As for Dio, you can rest easy I no longer follow his words like Gospel. It was a mistake to give Flagg that bone… ”

“That means you did follow Dio at some point,” Jolyne spat. “And he was pretty much the biggest evil there was.”

“Flagg,” was all Pucci said.

“Right, fine, not the worst, but still up there. Do you have any idea how many people he killed?”

“Untold numbers,” Pucci answered honestly. “But he knew the secrets to the world, and understood everything. Or so I thought.” He touched Rev’s disc to his head, beginning to sort through the memories. “In reality, this disc of a unicorn knows much more than he managed to piece together. What he uncovered was merely the ‘Heaven’ of our universe. Not a true Heaven. A pale imitation, not able to create perfection beyond Earth Stand. A’” He caught himself and laughed. “Once again, explaining my plans. Our world has a problem with that, doesn’t it?”

Jolyne didn’t dignify that with a response.

Pucci held the disc to his head, sifting through it, looking for a way to Heaven. She knew much about the ways of the Divine powers. Virtually none of it truly came from ‘On High’, and the things she believed did could be explained away with only a modicum of doubt.

Pucci furrowed his brow. There was really nothing of the true Heaven in here… But there were
other Heavens. Powers that he could make use of to achieve the perfection he desired. The powers of Fate and Spirit… Yes…

“The Pinnacle,” he said, removing the Disc from his head.

“What?”

“Come along,” Pucci said, grabbing her by the neck again – softly this time, so anyone who saw her wouldn’t think she had an invisible hand around her throat. He opened a portal to a universe that had received a lot of attention lately: Elemental Eight. They appeared in the middle of a town composed mostly of electricitybenders, given the large towers that rose into the sky and the permanent stormcloud over the location.

Several people saw him appear. Most acted in surprise, but not fear – annoyance at worst. As the gateway to the D-Sphere, they’d been forced to get used to interdimensional traffic rather quickly.

“Wh-”

Pucci didn’t let Jolyne finish – he dialed Heaven Eight, taking the two of them through. Their bodies remained solid on the clouds for the moment, though Pucci knew it would not take long for their physical forms to become nothing more than illusions plastered over pure spirits. A curious and blasphemous shadow of Heaven.

Pucci knew his Stand would not be invisible to the angels of this world, but that was exactly what he wanted. One of them to notice his hold on Jolyne. Being angels, they would confront him.

It only took a second for one of them to appear. She pointed a finger at him, wings flayed. “Why do you have a hold on that woman?”

“Oh, I apologize,” Pucci said, releasing Whitesnake’s hold on Jolyne. “You are aware of Stands, yes?”

“Yes…”

Pucci ordered Whitesnake to move closer to him – and closer to the angel. “It’s simple, Whitesnake needs personal contact with an individual to activate its power. As you can see, I was not pressuring her neck t-”

“Don’t listen to him!” Jolyne blurted. “He’s trying to trick you!”

The angel smirked. “There’s n-“

Whitesnake tapped the angel in its spiritual core, removing the disc of her mind. Her humanoid appearance vanished, leaving behind just a mindless spark of energy.

Pucci smirked, pocketing the disc. That disc was going to be immensely useful. Combined with Rev’s… He had enough. He was certain of it.

Jolyne tried to punch Pucci again, but Whitesnake pushed her back.

“You have a one track mind, Miss Kujo,” Pucci observed, looking into the angel’s disc. He found coordinates to a D-Sphere universe that would work… as well as an interesting observation about blank angels. “Interesting…” He had Whitesnake use its other hand to grab hold of the mindless angel spirit and found that it could be given simple commands just by thinking at it. Without its own mind, the essence was highly impressionable.
Pucci checked inside his pockets, looking for a particular disc he had brought on the journey. It would be worthwhile to give it to this impressionable spirit.

“HEY!” they heard an angel shout. “WHAT’S GOING ON OVER THERE?”

Pucci quickly opened the portal and dragged his two prisoners with him, entering yet another universe of the D-Sphere, leaving Heaven Eight behind – to search for the Pinnacle.

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Pinkie’s Party and Rev had traced Pucci’s travel to the Forest universe. Nova was busy using her screen and ring devices to analyze the dimensional flow of energy, trying to discover where they went next. Flutterfree was using Lolo to scan the area for clues, but only found a few natural magic stores within some of the trees. Vriska and Pinkie were to the side, talking about something pertaining to the mission.

This left Jotaro alone, staring into the distance at nothing.

Rev walked up to him, head down. “I’m sorry about this.”

Jotaro didn’t give any sign that he’d even heard her.

“I wasn’t able to do anything and I lost something of mine, and because of that, your daughter is in danger, being used as a hostage. I… I’ll do everything to get her back to you.”

Jotaro grabbed his hat. “Yare yare daze…”

“…Huh?”

“Stop whining. You’re not the reason Jolyne is captured.”

“Pucci wanted something from me!”

“And that had nothing to do with Jolyne being there.” He looked at her. “Hurry up and get over yourself so you can be useful in getting her back.”

This shut Rev right up. Jotaro left her utterly gobsmacked and walked over to Nova. “Have anything?”

“Yep, the next coordinates… Elemental Eight.”

“Three guesses where he went after that,” Vriska said while Pinkie opened the portal.

Flutterfree raised an eyebrow. “Heaven Eight, I guess?”

“This is good,” Nova said as they piled into Elemental Eight. “We don’t have to spend time scanning for a dimensional signature. We know where he’ll have gone.”

Pinkie dialed Heaven Eight. “Yeparooni! And we’re going to have an easy time finding the next place too!”

“Why?” Nova asked, stepping into Heaven Eight, feeling the substance of her body start to bleed away slowly. Rev found the feeling unfamiliar, but she didn’t find any reason to be particularly scared of turning into a pure spirit.

Pinkie pointed at the form of Usiel right in front of them. “Cause he knows where Pucci went!”
Usiel turned to Pinkie. “We were just about to call you – something terrible has happened. A dark-skinned man has taken one of our angels. We are unsure what he did – he escaped to another universe before we could do anything. No sign of him in the other universe.”

Nova tapped her devices. “We can fix that. Give us the coordinates. How long ago was this?”

“About fifteen local minutes.”

Usiel used his power to open up a portal to a realm of purple clouds. “The translation is safe, but jarring.”

“Oh boy, one of these,” Nova muttered. “Rev… Prepare yourself to feel like a pretzel.”

“Should have brought Eve,” Vriska muttered. “Seraphim-”

“Is impractical for long periods of time,” Jotaro stated. “We don’t know how many worlds we must chase them through.”

“Let’s move!” Pinkie said, leaping through with a smile. There was no gravity on the other side – she just drifted through the clouds. “Come on, the purple haze is great!”

Rev took a breath and stepped through. She instantly regretted going headfirst, because the instant disorientation made her tumble as she crossed through. Her body, which had been converting to an insubstantial form, suddenly gained more substance than it ever had before. Everything about her became condensed, heavy, and sluggish. She was swimming through liquid pitch as far as she was concerned, despite the scenery’s light, fluffy appearance. Her eyes soon stopped detecting any color whatsoever, replacing it with a strange ‘ping’ sensation that seemed to her as ‘white’ blips.

“What the…?” She managed to say, even though she knew she wasn’t using a mouth.

“He wasn’t kidding…” Flutterfree muttered, appearing on Rev’s perceptions as a handful of yellow dots that stood out against the otherwise monochrome scenery. “What even are we right now?”

“Normal matter cannot exist here,” Pinkie said, looking exactly like she normally did, which somehow made it all worse. “We’re… I’m going to call us dots.”

“Why was that so… fast!?” Rev blurted. “We were slowly fading in the other one!”

“Normal matter could exist in that universe, in a form,” Nova explained. “It… apparently can’t here.”

“Are your machines still able to work?” Flutterfree asked.

“They definitely can’t be called machines anymore, but I think they work,” Nova said. “The effects have been translated, like almost always.” She flowed her dots around a curved section of her, flashing with unusual colors. “Yeah, it works. I’ll get us out of here, I’m pretty sure we don’t want to fully convert and discover that sound is only ‘tertiarily’ accepted here. Or something. …Jotaro, you’re the scientist, explain it better.”

Jotaro grunted. “Drastic differences are removed quicker, minor ones are resolved over time. If a resolution is impossible things explode or death occurs. Changing too fast isn’t good for the mind.”

Rev tried to shake her head only to find that she had no motor control. “…Aren’t we supposed to be helping my mind?”
“This place is only physically annoying,” Pinkie said. “Thoughts are allowed, as is at least some kind of magic, and everything’s still three-dimensional. Your mind will be fine!”

Rev struggled to physically express her apprehension. “…Sure.”

“Got it,” Nova said, opening a portal. It took the shape of a star in front of them. “This is where they went based on the signatures left behind.” She cast a spell into it. “…Well it’d be safe if we were transitioning from a normal universe, but I can’t tell you anything for certain about these forms.”

“Fuck it,” Vriska shouted, jumping through the portal. She reverted to her regular troll self, but she grabbed her heart the moment she stood on the other side. “Hoooooly… It’s like an engine in there…” She sat down, taking a rest. “Prepare for sudden inexplicable adrenaline burst.”

Everyone else followed.

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Jolyne and Pucci were possibly the furthest thing from human at this point. They were sparks of energy. A handful of smaller, condensed sparks surrounded Pucci – the discs – while a large spark was the presence of Whitesnake, easily visible even to the spark that was a blank angel.

Jolyne was still in the grasp of Whitesnake. The Stand could still, at any moment, tear her mind from her ‘spark’ and give it to Pucci. She had considered jumping him while he was consulting both Rev’s and the angel’s ‘discs’ at the same time, but she knew she had no idea how this body worked. She couldn’t be certain a physical attack could even do anything. Did ‘physical’ even exist here?

She knew voices didn’t, because she’d tried to speak, but nothing had come out. Pucci had not said anything to her during their stay in this universe either. He just kept Whitesnake on her while he tried to figure out where to go next.

It was taking longer than normal. She wasn’t sure if this was to ‘allow our bodies to acclimate for further travel’ or because it was getting harder to find the ‘path to Heaven,’ whatever that shit meant. He was clearly off his rocker. That made him decidedly dangerous.

Also more deserving of a punch right to the nose. As soon as he actually had a nose again.

This was so confusing.

Pucci seemed to have figured something out, because he opened another portal, this time to a blank, white space. He and the angel spirit went through, dragging Jolyne along with them. When they entered the universe everything about them snapped into sharp focus. The sudden clarity of everything around them was jarring. Pucci was a human again, as was Jolyne. The angel spirit remained a featureless aura.

Pucci furrowed his brow. He tapped his foot on the white expanse. “Curious…”

“Baffled, are you?” Jolyne spat.

“Yes… This seems decidedly… normal.” He frowned. “Perhaps I made the wrong connection. We seem to have lowered ourselves.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” Jolyne said, summoning the wiry blue form of Stone Free by reflex.

Pucci stared at her Stand. Then he looked in his coat pocket – he still had Stone Free’s disc. “Nani…”
“Not questioning it,” Jolyne said, punching forward with Stone Free. The angel spirit reacted – summoning the Stand Pucci had given it. The World. Time froze, and the next thing Jolyne knew she was on the ground, dazed. “Ow…”

Pucci ordered Whitesnake to pull out Jolyne’s Stand disc – and it produced another disc for Stone Free. But Stone Free still clearly existed within Jolyne. Which made no sense.

It was then that Pucci understood. He smirked. “This is a dream world.”

“Eh?”

Pucci raised a hand and summoned a golden chalice to his hand. “It shapes itself based on what we think. You thought you had Stone Free in a moment of instinct, so you did. I thought I could take the Stand from you in a disc, so I did – but you still thought you had Stone Free, so you also kept it.”

“So… We aren’t really human right now, are we?”

“Presumably not,” Pucci declared. “…I wonder how far this dream goes…” He held out his hand, imagining a mountain. Only a couple of pine trees and a large rock appeared. “Clearly, very limited in scope…”

Jolyne narrowed her eyes. Something about this world made the priest think he was getting closer to his goal. Did he want the power to make dreams reality, perhaps? Would that be his ‘way to Heaven’?

She focused hard on her thoughts, creating a few dozen Stone Frees. “Heh.”

Pucci dispelled the ‘mountain’ and created a few dozen Whitesnakes. “You think this will work?”

“It’s a great idea.”

“It’s foolish. We have limits to our imagination, but I also have a real Whitesnake, and the spirit here has The World. You would lose.”

Jolyne clenched her fist – she knew he was right. Their ‘imagination’ power in this universe would be identical, and he had the edge. Damage to their ‘bodies’ could probably just be undone...

She let the Stone Frees stand down. “Fine. Where to next, Father?”

Pucci consulted the discs again – discovering almost instantly where they needed to go. “We’re in a place where the paths are easy to uncover. Because we can dream up portals to take us to the places we desire.” He waved his hand; opening to a universe much like the one they were in, except the expanse was completely black. “Come.”

When Jolyne resisted, Whitesnake grabbed her by the neck and pulled her through to the black expanse. They still manifested themselves as their human form, but something had changed. The world felt cold.

Pucci tried to generate a golden chalice – but nothing happened. He furrowed his brow, moving to consult the two discs for what to do next.

He didn’t get very far with them. A man appeared in front of him – a man Jolyne recognized from pictures.

Dio.
Pucci and Jolyne recoiled.

“An appropriate response,” Dio said, sneering. “The daughter of the man who killed me, and my closest disciple… or should I say traitor.”

Pucci summoned Whitesnake as a defense and ordered the spirit to summon The World. “You were wrong, Dio.”

“It was merely incomplete!” Dio declared. “The first step! Had you achieved Heaven you would have seen much more, and realized that my words were right all along!”

Pucci’s cold exterior faltered. “D-dio, I…”

Jolyne punched Dio. “Trick. This is a trick,” she declared. “You’re an illusion.”

Dio summoned The World, grabbing Jolyne’s neck with much more force than Whitesnake had been using. “Does this feel like an illusion, Little Jojo?”

The spirit’s version of The World and Whitesnake punched Dio. Whitesnake removed a ‘The World’ disc from Dio – but the vampire’s Stand still remained.

“Did you like doing that again?” Dio shouted. “Did it feel better now that I’m alive? Or do you prefer taking it from a corpse!?”

Whitesnake punched Dio into the ground. “You’re not real,” Pucci declared.

“Perhaps not,” a new voice said – that of a man with unusual poofy white hair. “Perhaps I’m not either, brother.”


“Good grief…” Jotaro said, walking towards them. “All of you are embarrassments.”

“D-dad!?” Jolyne blurted.

Jotaro, Weather Report, and Dio cracked their knuckles and summoned their stands.

“Don’t look at Weather Report!” Pucci shouted. “He’ll turn you into a snail through your eyes!”

Jolyne forced her eyes shut. “I’d like Stone Free back now!”

“I’ve got a better idea,” Pucci said, driving a Stand disc into her – the version of The World he had just taken from Dio a few moments ago. “Stop time!”

Jolyne, the angel spirit, Jotaro, and Dio stopped time at the same moment, freezing Pucci and Weather Report. The angel spirit met Dio with The World, evenly matched.

Jolyne had to face her father. She allowed her eyes to open in the frozen time.

“Not real…” She said, trying her best to focus on using a Stand she’d never had before. She knew The World was stronger than Star Platinum in almost every way, but it didn’t have quite the same level of finesse or accuracy.

“ORA!” Jotaro yelled.
“ORA!” Jolyne yelled back.

The two Stands of the same type bashed at each other with rapidly moving punches, cycling back and forth in even time. Jolyne began to strain.

*There’s no way I can beat Dad.*

She realized with some horror that *because* she thought that, she was doomed to lose to him in this universe.

He got a punch off on her. She closed her eyes and time resumed. “We can’t win!” Jolyne declared. “Our minds dreamed up enemies we could never defeat!”

“I figured that out,” Pucci declared, trying his *very* best to fight the unimaginable power of Weather Report while blind. “We just need to buy enough time for me to consult the discs!”

“OR WE COULD JUST PACK UP AND GO HOME!”

“Swap!” Pucci shouted. “You get Weather Report, I’ll be able to fend Jotaro off while I process.”

“You’re underestimating my dad!”

“I can hold my own!”

The two flipped locations, Jolyne using the power of The World to make up for being essentially blind. She froze time and opened her eyes. She punched Weather Report through the face, not holding back in the slightest. He was just an illusion after all.

“ORA!” Jotaro yelled, rushing the frozen Pucci. Jolyne considered letting him die – but then she wouldn’t have a way back since she really had no idea what he was doing to take them from universe to universe. She launched herself *physically* at the visage of her father, taking a sideways hit across her stomach.

Then time resumed. No longer was Weather Report a danger. Pucci proved himself to be just as clever as Jolyne – having predicted where Jotaro was going to appear, he had Whitesnake ready, driving a copy of his Stand disc into him. The illusion wasn’t sure how to deal with two Stands in one body, dissipating in a puff of confusion.

“Get us out of here!” Jolyne blurted.

Pucci held the two discs to his head.

“AUGH! You’re too fix-”

Someone tapped her on the shoulder. She whipped around, punching them across the face with The World.

It was Jotaro.

*Again.*

Behind him was another Weather Report.

She *saw* him activate his power… She felt her inner body start changing…

“Got it!” Pucci declared opening a portal. He dragged Jolyne through with him to another plane of
whiteness, the angel spirit following.

“WRYYYYYYYYYY!” Dio called after them, upset that he had never done more than stalemate a mindless spirit.

The portal closed behind them.

Despite themselves, Pucci and Jolyne fell onto the ground, exhausted, breathing heavily.

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Pinkie’s group and Rev appeared in a white expanse of nothingness.

Nova looked at her hooves. “Sweet. It’s good to be me.”

“That was too jarring of a change,” Vriska muttered. “We should be reeling more from it…”

Rev looked around, confused. “Is there nothing here? What are we standing on?”

Pinkie giggled. “We’re here, and we’re standing on a plane of functionally infinite size! Woo!”

Rev wasn’t satisfied with these answers but didn’t push it.

“Huh, the path is significantly easier to follow now,” Nova said, checking her leg screen. “Sweet. I can take us right to the next place. Goodbye, endless whiteness!”

Flutterfree held up a hoof. “Wait… Don’t you girls see?” She activated Lolo fully. “Nothing of us is actually here.”

All of them were nothing more than sparks of gray amongst the white.

“Huh,” Nova said. “…Odd.”

Nova opened the next portal. “We can come back and wonder about this later, right now we’ve got to follow them. If we can move quickly through the next few like we’ve been here, we’ll catch up.”

They entered the black expanse. Pinkie raised a hoof. “By the way, this is going to get a little screwy.”

“How so…?” Vriska asked.

Pinkie pointed at a version of the Doctor walking towards them from the blackness, a gun in hand.

“What the fuck…?” Vriska said, backing up instinctively.

“This is an embarrassment!” Joseph Joestar said, appearing from the side. “I gave my life for you people, and now look at what you’re doing! Scrambling through these universes with no way to go!”

Jotaro tensed. “This kind of screwy. I see…”

Sombra appeared in front of Nova. “Boop!”

A Pinkie with flat hair and a psychotic look appeared as well. “HI THERE! Time to kill ’em all!”

And Rev… saw an old man in a priest’s robe. He looked livid. “Starlight…”

“…Am I supposed to know you?” Rev asked, cocking her head.
“Wh-”

“Oh, you’re probably someone from my past right?” Rev smiled. “See, I have no idea what my past is. Sorry.”

“I am Fa-”

Flutterfree unleashed Lolo in full at every single illusion, touching them with a strand and dissipating them into nothing. “They aren’t really here. They were never really here. They were creations of our own mind.”

Jotaro dropped his fighting stance. “…You made that easy.”

“You’re welcome,” Flutterfree said, smiling warmly. “Nova?”

“Uh… Yeah,” Nova pressed some buttons on her screen. “I have i-”

“We’re going to have to talk about your vendetta against Sombra,” Flutterfree interrupted.

Nova sucked in a deep breath. “Let’s talk about that later.”

“A agreed,” Pinkie cheered. “TO THE NEXT WORLD!”

Jotaro lingered for a moment while the others piled into the open portal.

He thought, for a moment, that he had seen Jolyne’s corpse.

He couldn’t shake the image.

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Pucci stood up before Jolyne, feeling the power of the world. “Jolyne…”

Jolyne blinked, looking around at the white expanse. “What, are we here?”

“Perhaps…” He held up his hand – and the white expanse was gone. They were on an Earth. Birds chirped, the leaves rustled, and a nearby brook babbled. Pucci smiled. “Ah… With but a wish, I created a perfect world…”

Jolyne tensed. Did he have what he wanted?

Pucci opened a portal to the first universe that connected. He imagined the perfect world growing into the void of stars he saw, and the plants did indeed move. But he frowned. “This power… This power is overwritten. The worlds will not accept permanent perfection from here.”

Jolyne put her hands on her shoulders. “Then why don’t you just take your perfect world you’ve made here and be happy with it?”

“That defeats the purpose,” Pucci declared. “The point of reaching Heaven – the Pinnacle – is to bring it back. Back to the worlds and all their broken uncertainties… To introduce a Fate much more certain and glorious than ka.”

Jolyne clenched her fist. “I was afraid you were going to say that…”

Pucci smirked. “What are you going to do about it?”
“The World,” Jolyne summoned, freezing time. The angel spirit noticed, moving through frozen time as well, but it wasn’t able to move fast enough. Jolyne reached into Pucci’s jacket and pulled out a particular disc, punching him with The World’s other hand just to add insult to injury. She allowed time to resume and forced the disc of Stone Free back into herself.

Pucci gaped. “H-how!? All the Stands I gathered from that world vanished upon transit!”

“I guess that happened because you believed they would. I believed I’d keep it.” Jolyne smirked. “And I also believe I can hold two stands. Because I’m just that much of a badass.”

The World and Stone Free appeared behind Jolyne. “Your move, Pucci.”

Pucci used his imagination to summon every Stand he could think of behind him and heal the wound on his face.

Jolyne did the same. “We’re both minds in this world, Pucci. We both do the same things!”

The ‘perfect world’ lost all sense of order. Gone were the plans of using Stands against each other – instead it became a contest of who could think of the most unpredictable attack. Pucci turned the world into fractals. Jolyne summoned to her side a million tiny bees made of pine needles. Pucci turned Jolyne into a snail. Jolyne imagined herself as a devourer of worlds, cutting through Pucci’s midsection. Pucci imagined himself as a holy angel, smiting all that was below him.

The mindless angel spirit just sat, unable to do anything in this battle of imagination.

“This is a stalemate!” Jolyne declared. “Just give up!”

“No it isn’t!” Pucci declared – pushing Whitesnake forward. “There are rules to this place.” He held Rev’s and the angel’s mental discs to his head. “I cannot take your Stands because of your belief… But I can take your belief!”

Whitesnake grabbed for Jolyne’s head. Jolyne created a new version of Whitesnake to meet him. “Not if I get yours first!”

Thousands upon thousands of Whitesnakes appeared, trying at all angles to reach their opponent. Trying to tear their mind out of their body. Space became nothing but Whitesnakes and the forms of Pucci and Jolyne.

Jolyne tried to think of something, anything to break the tie.

“Jolyne,” Pucci said. “Whitesnake has an ability you are not aware of.”

Jolyne paled. Then shook her head. “That doesn’t matter at all! I can give Whitesnake the ability to… To… TURN YOU INTO A SNAIL!”

Pucci became a snail. Jolyne smirked. “And now Whitesnake can extract discs at long range!”

Jolyne grabbed Pucci’s mental disc, holding it in her hands. “Heh. Gotcha.”

“Whitesnake can create illusions,” Pucci declared.

“Wh-”

The world shifted. Pucci’s disc was not in Jolyne’s hand. Instead, Pucci was pulling Jolyne’s mental disc out of her mind.
And Jolyne’s thoughts went blank. Her Whitesnakes vanished from the universe. In an instant Pucci transformed the world back into his ‘perfect world’ now that he was uncontested. He caught Jolyne and set her down on the grass below, next to the angel spirit. He pocketed her mental disc, smirking.

He had won.

Now all he had to do was use the immense power in this universe to climb to the place he needed to go. The absolute dominion he had here… It should be enough to cut to anywhere he wanted. No more steps. He would go right there. Or as close as the energy in this world would let him. H-

Jotaro punched him across the face with Star Platinum a hundred times in the middle of stopped time. It should have been enough to kill – but Pucci just imagined himself back to normal.

Pinkie’s team and Rev had arrived, ready for a fight.

Pucci smiled warmly. He imagined chains around all six of them that could not be broken. He knew they had not yet figured out what mental control they had over the world – and he didn’t plan to tax them enough to let them realize. “Ah, you’re early,” he said, creating six metallic pillars in the background. “Welcome to the perfect world.”

“What’s so perfect about it?” Flutterfree asked.

“Wh-”

“Everyone, this is just a dream world,” Pinkie said, popping out of her chains and transforming into a pink alicorn the size of a small mountain. “Don’t let him distract you. Any of us can do anything here.”

Pucci stared at her, aghast. “How did-”

“Easy. I’m Aware.” She slammed his body into the ground with a hammer the size of a galaxy. “Celestia it feels good to say that.”

Pucci grunted, completely unharmed. “You know there’s no win condition in this world the-”

Pinkie summoned a Whitesnake to her. “Nuh-uh. I totally saw how you beat Jolyne.”

Pucci knew he couldn’t win in this universe. So he had to try something desperate.

He ejected himself into another universe.

Pinkie clearly hadn’t been expecting this move, staring at him in confusion. She recovered quickly, charging after him.

Pucci had all the time he needed – he wasn’t reverting back to standard physics right away. He would retain the power of the dream world for a short time. He summoned the six pillars he had created earlier to him and accessed Rev’s disc. He plugged the information into the pillars, and they tapped into a universe much higher than the one he had just been in.

A bolt of lightning came from everywhere at once, and yet nowhere. It engulfed Pucci and Whitesnake. Their bodies vanished, leaving only the discs behind, floating in space.

“…Did he blow up?” Flutterfree asked, cocking her head to the side.

“Yare yare daze, Icarus flew too close to the sun,” Jotaro commented, grabbing his hat.
“He got what he wanted,” Pinkie said. “It’s not over. That was too anticlimactic.” She grabbed the discs, searching through them. “Right… Here’s Jolyne’s a-”

In a flash of white light, Pucci appeared again. He had fused his form with Whitesnake, becoming a human with black stripes and a black crown-like protrusion growing directly from his skull. His eyes glowed with bright pinkish-purple power, and a cape that burned blue had appeared on his back.

“I’ve done it,” he said. “I am second only to God…”

Pinkie stuffed Rev’s disc back into the unicorn’s mind, quickly. The pink pony was not allowed to replace any others, being frozen in place by an invisible force.

“You try in vain,” Pucci declared, widening the dimensional opening between the dream world and the physical realm he floated in. “I do not change. Not anymore. Now, I am above. I can shape this world into the perfection it needs… And then I can move onto the next… And the next…”

Rev threw a Bible in his face. “DID YOU EVEN READ THIS THING!?”

“Back, are you?” Pucci asked, pulling the Bible off his face. “I am exceptionally well versed in its contents. I became a Father, after al-”

“Right, so, explain to me a few things,” Rev demanded. “How in the name of the Most High can you justify what you’re doing!?!”

“I am giving the worlds perfection.”

“THAT IS NOT YOUR JOB!” Rev screamed. “THAT IS GOD’S AND GOD’S ALONE!”

“He uses me.”

“Open to Revelation. Read about the end of times. Perfection will not be achieved in this life, Pucci! Or we could go anywhere else that talks about the soul being purified, or – oh! How about we discuss the passages that discuss when God speaks to people? He doesn’t order things against His nature!”

“The Old Testament wars, Rev.”

“You and I both know those had purposes,” Rev growled. “You also know that the Word speaks of peace, understanding, grace, and forgiveness! What you’re doing is not peaceful! It is power hungry, promotes pride, and removes the free will we were given!”

“I do not force them to believe,” Pucci declared. “I will merely force them into beautiful predestination. No uncertainty anymore. The perfect worlds will operate precisely as needed…”

“No man deserves the right to determine the existence of free will!”

“I am in the position to do so, am I not? I have been to the Pinnacle and become the One!”

“You are not the One Above All,” Rev spat. “That is the being second only to God. You aren’t even one of Them. You saw into this disc of mine! You should remember Them!”

“You never met Them,” Pucci declared. “Nor did you meet the One Above All. You act merely on rumors.”

“I’d also never been to the Pinnacle, merely knew of methods by which people tried to find it,” Rev declared. “Why do you think so few people find the Pinnacle? It’s one of those things that doesn’t
Pucci shrugged. “Perhaps I am not as strong as I need to be to remove this dreadful uncertainty from
the world… But this is a start. I will find the Pinnacle with this power.”

“Famous last words,” Rev said. “…Do you have any idea how many people have probably said
that?”

“Billions,” Pinkie said. “It’s been billions.”
Pucci turned to her. “…You know that.”

“I do. You won’t get to the Pinnacle, Pucci.” She sighed. “And it won’t be the instant-win you want
it to be, either.”
Pucci faltered for the first time in the conversation, doubt crossing his face. But he recovered quickly.
“Then I will work with what I have. I’ve been given this power – I will bless all the worlds I can.”

“And we have to stop you,” Jotaro decreed.
Pucci smiled the smile of a father whose son had just said something unbelievably stupid. “Jotaro,
you can’t do anything to me.” He pointed, and the physical universe he was in was rewritten with
new stars and planets, creating a real ‘perfect’ world. “Universes are my plaything. I have the power
of a dreamscape in realspace!”

“And we’re currently standing in a dreamscape,” Jolyne said, having just had her disc inserted back
into herself by a well-aimed teleport from Nova. “We have the same power right now. And there’s
seven of us.”
Pucci decided to cut and run, creating a portal – but Flutterfree’s imagination closed the portal.
The seven of them imagined themselves on the other side of the tear between the dreamscape and the
realspace. “We may acclimate slowly to the physics of this universe…” Nova began.

“But that’s going to take at least a few minutes,” Rev declared. “Until then…”

Pinkie created two planet-sized scythes. “GO NUTS!”

Jotaro summoned the Ora to end all Oras – the fist larger than their field of view. Pucci’s physical
form was punched to the side, only for a Pink Planet to devour him, candy corn teeth proving to be
exceptionally sharp. Jolyne tied him up with Stone Free, imagining each strand of her Stand to be
termites with supernova-like attacks.
Pucci resorted to his ability as Whitesnake – pulling the memory disc out of Jolyne.
Pinkie giggled, creating a replacement disc and placing it in her head. “Fun, isn’t it, Father?”

“NO!” Pucci shouted. “THIS IS NOT FUN!”

Nova created a crystal lattice of five dimensions. Flutterfree created a bunch of reality-tearing rabbits.
Jotaro kept using the Ora to end all Oras. Jolyne twisted Pucci around and drove him into a
woodchipper. Pinkie turned herself into an Eldritch Creature and burrowed herself into his mind.
Vriska rolled 8-8s as many times as she wanted, achieving luck beyond comprehension, slicing him
into millions of pieces.
The angel appeared, mind restored, still wielding The World. Pucci tore the disc from him. “You
“Who needs it?” The angel decreed, smiting Pucci with holy light and what appeared as the Hand of her Lord.

Pucci reformed once again. He laughed. “You can’t do anything! Your powers may be equal to mine – but I know I can’t be beaten! I just imagine myself back to full! And unlike you, I have no timer!”

“You’re wrong,” Rev said, appearing behind him. An immense cross silhouette appeared behind her, shimmering along the edges like an eclipse. “You’re not immune to judgment, no matter how much power you have.”

Doubt crossed Pucci’s face. “Rev…”

Rev’s eyes went white and her cross necklace began to levitate. “Father Enrico Pucci. You have defied the teachings of Christ and our Lord. You have sought violence and power for yourself. You planned to rewrite the glorious creation with one completely of your own, denying our Creator in the process.”

“I did no such thing.”

Rev pointed a hoof. “Yes you did, Enrico Pucci. You have engaged in idolatry, assisted the lord of lies in his plans, and lived in the ways of the world. You have corrupted the message of the Gospel beyond recognition, to the point not just of blasphemy, but misrepresentation of what we are supposed to stand for.” She blinked, her eyes glowing brighter.

“Enrico Pucci, by the power vested in me by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, I declare your time in this existence is over. It is time for you to move onto the next life. See you in Heaven.”

“No… Please! Lord! You sent me on this mission! You put it upon my heart! Yo-”

The white light enveloped Pucci – and in a scream, he vanished, leaving nothing behind.

Rev stopped glowing and shook her head. “Oooog…”

“YOU DID IT!” Flutterfree cheered. “You performed a miracle, Rev!”

Nova rolled her eyes. “She just used her knowledge of Pucci to convince him he could die, and since his power was one of dreams, it meant he would die.”

Flutterfree folded her arms. “I think it was more than that.”

Nova turned to Rev. “What do you think?”

Rev simply smiled knowingly. She said nothing.

“Oh, don’t you dare…”

Flutterfree blinked. “…She’s not going to tell us what she thinks.”

“I don’t care if there’s some doctrine of being ‘humble’ she’s following, this is bull,” Nova blurted. “REV! Hey REV! Come back here!”

“Does it really matter what I think?” Rev asked. “It won’t change what either of you believe in this case, will it?”
Neither of them had a response to that.

Jotaro floated over to his daughter. “Jolyne…”

“About time you showed up, da-”

He pulled her into a hug.

“D-dad! I’m not a ki-” He squeezed harder, keeping her from talking. She flailed for a few seconds before accepting the embrace.

Pinkie appeared on top of Vriska’s head. “Well, that’s that! We stopped Enrico Pucci from unleashing ‘perfection’ on the multiverse! Woo!”

“Yeah. I don’t feel like I did much,” Vriska admitted.

“You weren’t all that important to the drama going on,” Pinkie admitted. “It was focused on Rev and Jotaro. I didn’t even get to do much this time, it’s a weird feeling!”

“You being open about this is a little weirder, in my mind.”

“Well, how’s this for weird? Originally, Pucci was supposed to be Jolyne’s nemesis. He would have reset Earth Stand if we hadn’t showed up and fixed things back then.”

“Huh.” Vriska pondered this. “Yeah I don’t know how to feel about that, Pinkie. I’m just going to accept this as a good ending and roll with it.”

Pinkie grinned. “There is one thing here that’s not just a dream construct that will vanish later.” Pinkie pulled the disc of The World out of nowhere. “We’ve still got this.”

“MINE!” Vriska shouted.

“Ah ah ah!” Pinkie said, pulling it away. “Nope! You’ve got enough. We’ll be sending this to the Research Division, see what they can do with it. Replicating Whitesnake’s ability would be very helpful.”

“Aww… Fine.”

Jotaro and Jolyne released each other.

“…I’m proud of you,” Jotaro said.

“Dad…”

“I’m serious. You handled yourself well. You and Pucci had to have gotten through that dark illusion world somehow. You fought valiantly. And you knew exactly what to do when you came to.”

Jolyne rubbed the back of her head. “…Yeah, I am a pretty big deal, I guess.”

“It seems I forgot to teach you humility.”

“Yep!” Jolyne said, smirking. “And it’s faaaaaaar too late to start now!”

“I can try.”

Jolyne shook her head. “Yare yare dawa…”
“Like father like daughter,” Vriska commented.

“Sorry to cut this short!” Pinkie said. “But our dream powers are going to dissipate REALLY soon and then we won’t be able to breathe in the vacuum of space! We should get back home!”

Rev nodded. “Yeah… We should. But I want to say something first.” She looked to them all. “Thank you for dropping everything to help me. We may not agree on… well, much of anything, really. But it’s humbling to know the lengths you’re willing to go through for somepony like me.” She bowed her head. “I am in your debt.”

“You beat him,” Vriska pointed out. “Let’s call it even.”

“Let’s call it friendship,” Pinkie corrected, giggling.

They laughed together.
The universe existed as a cloud of air tinged a dark blue. Within this universe was an innumerable number of square, silvery-white rods, each side coursing with blue veins of energy. Upon these veins, structures were packed as densely as humanly possible – and in some cases even beyond that. Every visible square foot of these rods was occupied by houses, restaurants, office spaces, markets, and other structures of indeterminate purpose. There was no rhyme or reason to the location – it just was. And it seemed to go on forever. At the edges of the visible range within the blue ‘atmosphere’, the lights of other rods could be seen like distant stars.

At the intersection of three of the rods, the density of construction skyrocketed. Even though the rods meshed with each other seamlessly, the constructions added to them conglomerated into a vaguely spherical pattern of scaffolds upon which just about anything could be held. Ships docked at these scaffolds through fresh dimensional portals, some structures held on to the sphere with a tether, and other buildings floated within the scaffolding as if they were part of a tile puzzle.

It was at the edge of this spherical conglomeration that Pinkie and her team appeared. The jaws of the ponies dropped. Jotaro looked up, somewhat impressed with what he was seeing. From their position standing on the rod, they could see hundreds of people going about their business – buying, selling, bartering, running, anything really. The majority of these individuals were human or human-esque, but they could see strange crab creatures, bugs made out of crystal, and even a few energy beings floating around.

Vriska just grinned. “I wondered when we were going to find one of these!”

“One of what?” Nova asked.

Vriska held out a hand and Pinkie gave Vriska a stylish hat, holes for her horns included. “This, my little ponies and gigantic human, is called an Outpost. Hundreds of thousands of dimensional travelers pass through these kinds of locations every day.”

Flutterfree put a hoof to her mouth. “Oh my… Have we found one of the larger societies?”

“Nope,” Vriska said, smirking. She pulled out their loose map of the universe. “This is the E-Sphere, this is the Q-Sphere, and this is the D-Sphere. This area in between them? There’s less universes here, but these universes are densely packed and closely connected by a network of ancient constructs. Because of this, multiversal travel is nowhere near as difficult or unusual. In some places you can translate universes by walking. Thusly, this area in the ‘middle’ is called the Strands.” She smiled, glad for an excuse to go on a little monologue. “Outposts are a natural result of that. Previously empty universes that literally everyone starts moving into at the same time, creating a lawless mess. This mess is one of the best things about the multiverse. If you know where to look, you could probably find anything in one of these places. I even found an infinite sided die once. Man I wish I still had that, best dicekind in existence…”

“Is there anyone in charge we can talk to?” Nova asked.

Vriska chuckled. “If you’re lucky, there’s a trade-master or something in charge of that conglomeration sphere there, but there’s no way that guy will have any authority on, say, that conglomeration sphere you can see in the distance over there. As I said, lawless mess. And it’s great. Now that you’ve found this place you can probably easily answer a few of your questions.”
“That you refuse to answer?” Jotaro commented.

Vriska chuckled. “Yep! You know what, I have an idea. Why don’t I find an information broker and show you how shit’s done. You game?”

“I’m always game!” Pinkie cheered. “Vriska, take the torch of leader-for-a-day.”

Vriska took the literal torch Pinkie had pulled out. “About time. ONWARD!” She led them into the conglomeration sphere. The inhabitants and visitors to the Outpost paid them almost no mind. To the average person here, these five were normal. So what if three of them were horses? There was a gigantic creature that was nothing but an eyeball floating in the void that was more interesting. Or that hive-mind swarm of wasps.

Vriska looked around, narrowing her eyes. It had been a while since she’d been in one of these, and none of them had the same culture or unspoken rules. There were a few things you could assume – the place would operate on ‘everyone for themselves’ for the most part, but everyone also wanted to trade. Nobody would accept Merodi Universalis money unless Vriska found a banker, and finding a trustworthy banker in this pit of filth was going to be like finding a needle in a universe made out of hay. They probably existed, but Vriska didn’t know the place well enough yet. They’d have to make do with bartering…

“Pinkie, start pulling out bizarre things that might be worth something. We can probably get someone to give us basic information for a cake.”

“Gotcha!”

Vriska glanced at all the people around – regular shopper, family man surrounded by his kids, a weapon merchant, mob boss and his guards, a computer terminal, and – oh, there! The mole-man with thousands of data pads behind him. Vriska gestured for the team to go to him.

“Hey, sniffy,” she greeted.

“I am Laurence,” the mole-man said, sniffing with his powerful nose. “I take it you have an itchin’ to know somethin’? Well do I have the information for you! I’ve got dirt on everyone in the Outpost and reviews for virtually every established business on these rods. What’ll it be?”

“We might indulge in that later,” Vriska said. “Right now I’m showing my knuckleheaded friends here how things work. How about… something basic, like a basic multiversal glossary. Full-scope, Laurence, I’ll know if you’re giving them something that’s bullshit.”

Laurence raised an eyebrow. “As you wish. Not the cheapest item I have, you understand. Such high demand from newcomers for it.”

Pinkie popped up, setting a purple and brown cake in front of the mole. “This delectable treat is made from the finest natural ingredients found in my hammerspace. It’s baked to perfection in a time dilated oven and sprinkled with sugar generated through mysterious means. Its primary flavor is chocolate, but it also has pristine truffles baked in. The aroma should be reaching your nose right… about… now.”

“I’ll take it,” Laurence said. He handed them a small, white disc. “There you go.”

Vriska nodded. “We’ll probably be back after we review this.” She took the disc and twirled it on her fingernail. “Nova, do you mind if we use your hoof-screen?”

“Uh… no?”
Vriska slapped the disc to the back of Nova’s hoof, adhering it to her screen. Her device stopped displaying temporal and dimensional readings, instead showing a document entitled *The Multiverse: Big Questions.*

*The biggest question in the multiverse: is it infinite? The answer is decidedly no. There are about ten quintillion individual universes in the entire multiverse, according to mapping software. That’s comparable to the number of stars visible to light-based telescopes within a standard-physics universe. It’s a big number.*

*The vast majority of these universes have no contact with the larger multiverse. 99.99% of universes are completely unaware and will remain completely unaware of what lies beyond for their entire existence. Only about a quadrillion universes can be said to be part of the multiversal scope of existence, and only a trillion are actually part of larger-scale societies. Only Class 1 societies would even appear on a realistic map of the multiverse, and even then only as a few pixels on most screens.*

“Eve will love to have that question put to bed,” Flutterfree said. “The Sparkle Census too.”

“That’s still really, really big. Functionally infinite,” Nova pointed out. “I’m going to read about what these classes actually mean…”

*Class is a scale devised to measure the relative influence of a multiversal society. The origin of the scale is unknown, but it’s simple enough that it could have been created in multiple different forms simultaneously. Some say there are only three classes, but enough use the term Class 4 for it to be included here.*

*Class 4 refers to anything that has access to reliable dimensional travel. Due to this vague definition, single entities can be Class 4 ‘societies’, which is why many think it isn’t truly part of the list.*

*Class 3 societies are ones who have unified more than a handful of universes (or sections of universes) together. The method does not matter; all that matters is that several universes are under the same authority. The exact threshold that turns a bunch of Class 4 explorers into a Class 3 society is vague, but societies never stay at the ‘middle ground’ for long, always converting into what is easily recognizable as a Class 3 or falling apart to nothing.*

*Class 2 societies are societies that meet two criteria. 1) They have the means to access the entire multiverse should they wish, even if they avoid dangerous areas. 2) If their core worlds were to be completely annihilated in one fell swoop, their society would still be able to function on roughly the same level as it had prior to the destruction. This does not take into account political fallout, merely the distribution of resources. The meeting of the second requirement is called ‘decentralization’, even if the society itself is ruled by a monarch. There are only a few dozen Class 2 societies in the entire multiverse.*

*Class 1 societies are harder to define, merely because each one is so different. One could say ‘they have enough direct control to actually make an impact on the multiverse as a whole’, or ‘they have so much power at their disposal that entire Class 3 societies could be wiped out with a snap of their fingers.’ The problem is that there are so few societies that reach such a level of unimaginable power – seven currently - it’s somewhat difficult to draw comparisons between them, especially since they rarely bother with any societies beneath them aside from the strongest of the Class 2s. Rest easy knowing that you will likely never draw the attention of one of these giants.*

“Wow,” Nova said. “Just… wow. Vriska… Exactly how powerful are these Class 1s?”

“The Doctor’s race is known as the Gallifreyan Time Lords and they have access to technology that can distort and alter the timelines in multiple universes at once, giving them uncontested dominion
over the temporal mechanics in the multiverse. They defeat their enemies by erasing them from time and then altering the physics of any given universe and the universes around it to prevent anyone from ever bringing it back, twisting paradoxes like candy to do whatever they want.” Vriska sneered. “*They are a Class 2 society.*”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. The power scale is absurd. I’ve never actually been to any Class 1 societies. Seen a few individuals from them, heard rumors of others, but never been. They aren’t big on sharing information with us ‘lowers’.”

“Wow…” Flutterfree said. “Just when I thought we might be getting big… Class 3 seems kinda tiny.”

“You’re still more powerful than 99.999% of everything,” Vriska pointed out. “It’s just that now you’re out in the big leagues.”

Nova scrolled through the rest of the document. “Huh. Nothing about ka in here at all.”

“Courtesy,” Vriska said. “It’s something the multiverse has generally agreed people need to work out on their own. Buying information about it involves a lot of payment because it’s the secret most have subconsciously agreed to keep.”

Nova nodded. “Most of the other stuff in here I think we already know. How connections work… The idea of ‘metatime’… hold on, the Sea of Infinite Possibility?”

Vriska looked at the pad. “That big blurb there is making that seem more important than what it is. The Sea is just an idea that describes everything that could exist. It’s what the ancient crazies decided to name the stuff the multiverse sits in. Which isn’t really stuff at all, but a lack of stuff. Unless you’re going to start looking into the finer mechanics of universe creation and destruction, it doesn’t matter at all. And if you are, that blurb there isn’t going to tell you fuck all that’s useful.”

“Gotcha,” Nova said, prying off the disc. “Anyone else want to look at it?”

Pinkie pulled out a small television screen and placed the disc on it.

“Why didn’t we do that before?” Nova asked.

Pinkie shrugged. “Didn’t think of it. Come on everyone, crowd around!”

Nova rolled her eyes, taking a moment to look around the Outpost. She found it interesting to watch the people go about their business. There were friendly transactions, aggressive transactions, and even a few transactions that happened without a single word being spoken. Quite a few interesting characters as well; a man with three heads, an energy being that had a skull mask affixed to it, a sapient potato, a unicorn with goggles wearing a black suit, Sombra, green sl-

*Wait, unicorn? Goggles? Black suit? Wasn’t that the Enchant-

The conclusion she was about to draw was lost. *Sombra*!?

Nova’s sights focused – that was Sombra all right. Could it be an alternate version of her? No… She was holding a Merodi Universalis-designed data pad.

Nova opened her mouth to call for her team, but she hesitated.
“We’re going to need to have a talk about your vendetta against Sombra.”

“Nova, come on, Sombra helps us a lot.”

“Loosen up a little. She is what she is.”

Nova closed her mouth. She couldn’t tell her team about this. They’d just let Sombra get away because she was useful. Nova sat down, fuming – Sombra was a criminal. Just last week, she had exposed the Diamonds and their secret visits to the Friendship School. That was private! Why would she do that!? It just… It was wrong. And she needed to be stopped.

But noooo, she was just too useful. And fun, apparently.

Screw that.

She tapped a few buttons on her hoof-screen. She wasn’t going to let this slide. She was going to do something.

She sent Froppy a quick message, telling her that she’d just seen Sombra and the coordinates to the universe. There was a footnote telling the USM to leave Nova out of this.

It was done.

She walked back to the rest of the group, who were wrapping up the reading of the document.

Jotaro folded his arms. “Now… what information should we barter for next?”

“Find out where a good tech depot is,” Vriska commented. “You never know what you might find in those. Ah-“

A human in a green suit cleared his throat and walked up to them. “Excuse me, I couldn’t help but notice that you’re new here. My name is Jargon, and I take it upon myself to introdu-“

“Fuck off,” Vriska blurted.

“I don’t think you understa-“

“They’re new here, I’m not,” Vriska said, glaring at him. “I know your type. You prey on the newbies who don’t know any better just to get things from them. That’s not happening today.”

“I assure you, I can be of great help,” Jargon said. “For instance, the tech depot you are looking for? Gearnix down the street is the best one, run by a machine that is programmed to be unable to deceive others.”

“There’s going to be some big catch,” Vriska pointed out, folding her arms. “There always is.”

“I assure you, I would only tell you the best of all possible options. And I will not take anything you have with you for myself. My services are free.”

Pinkie rammed her muzzle into his face. “I sense technical truths, buddy.”

Jargon shook his head. “You may not trust me, but at least allow me to come with you to warn you of dangers. I-“

Vriska pointed at Jotaro. “Hey, Jargon. You see the big guy behind me? Big guy doesn’t talk much. Big guy is also pretty easy to piss off. Now imagine, if you will, what will happen if you continue
being annoying. Imagine big guy blowing a fuse.”

Jargon shook his head. “Physical size is not a criteria o-

“ORA!”

The invisible fist punched Jargon across the face, sending him flying into a nearby wall. The man stood up, dusted himself off, and walked away. He took out a small device with a green screen and began flipping through what appeared to be data.

Flutterfree narrowed her eyes. “I think he was scanning us.”

“What the hell’s he going to do with a scan?” Vriska asked. “Nothing that concerns us, that’s what. Let’s go.”

They went back to Laurence and traded one of Vriska’s eight balls for the best tech depot.

It turned out to actually be Gearnix.

~~~

Sombra heard a loud crash a ways behind her. She instinctively turned herself invisible, just in case the noise was the start of a tremendous brawl. She did not want to get caught in another one of those.

That said; she did want to see what was happening. She poked her head around the corner and saw, to her surprise, Pinkie’s team glaring at a green-suited man. She paid no attention to the man, instead fixating on the team of people she knew.

They’d found her little secret. She was wondering if they ever would – part of her had hoped they wouldn’t since she liked her private access to this information, but the other part had always wanted them to figure out more things for her through this place. She was far from the omnipotent hacker she wanted to be in this Outpost. She was just another fish in the ocean, not a school of coordinated dolphins.

Pinkie’s team started walking away after talking to an information broker. Vriska looked like she knew what she was doing, so Sombra didn’t feel the need to help them in any way. Let them have their fun…

She was, of course, going to follow them and watch. Closely. Who knew, maybe she’d even reveal herself at some point? Heh. Nova would love that. Not. But the look on that unicorn’s face would be priceless regardless.

She tailed them to the Gearnix technology depot. They talked a bit to the truthbot, who directed them to a large cargo container filled to the brim with random salvage. Vriska went at the pile with gusto, showing off her knowledge of the multiverse. Nova paid rapt attention, clearly taking mental notes on every piece of technology she saw. Pinkie jumped around and found the shiniest objects while Jotaro and Flutterfree stood to the side, watching the other three do their thing.

Sombra caught a “Yare yare daze…” She chuckled. She had found that catchphrase annoying when she’d first started observing Jotaro, but now it was an endearing part of him. She had a few remixes of him saying it in tune to various memetic songs sitting on her Puddlejumper. She wondered why she hadn’t published any of those to the public yet… Something to fix when she returned. She really wasn’t sure what his reaction would be.

Pinkie’s team decided they wanted to purchase a green three-dimensional video recorder. They
returned to the truthbot and Pinkie pulled things out of her mane until truthbot decided the payment was enough. They went back to the streets, heading back to the information broker for more.

Sombra continued her observations. If only they knew she had all the answers for them…

~~~

Allure walked into the main observation deck for Dimensional Drive Two within Celestia City. It was a small metallic balcony looking out over a brilliant white sphere surrounded by six rings rotating in different planes from one another.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“The drive started activating itself a few minutes ago,” Blumiere said, holding his hat. “The engineers cut off the emergency power, but it’s still spooling up slowly.”

Allure blinked. “Want me to call Engineetie? …Actually you probably have better engineers than that. Why am I here?”

“I need the League to prepare everyone for a possible sudden jump. Spread yourselves across the City, every district you can. I don’t know what’s going to happen if this triggers, but there’s a large chance we won’t be able to stop it.” He folded his hands. “It’s times like this I wish we hadn’t anti-teleported everything this deep down.”

“I’ll send some Sweeties down who might be able to stop it,” Allure said. “How long do we have?”

“Less than an hour, they tell me.”

Allure sent a message to the League, telling them to scramble. “Do we know what’s causing it?”

“No idea,” Blumiere said. “We suspect it’s coming from another universe, but they must be using a method of travel we’re unaware of because our blocking spells are doing nothing.”

“An attack?”

“Perhaps. Or just a fluke.”

“Do we have any idea of the destination?”

“At the moment, no.”

Allure didn’t like the sound of that. She ran back the way she had come, sending orders to the League to spread out. Thrackerzod and Engineetie needed to come down to the Drive, perhaps a few others she wasn’t thinking of…

Something was trying to make them jump universes.

Why?

She had the feeling they would find out soon enough.

~~~

“I still have no idea what flavor of snow cone this is,” Nova commented, spooning some of the purple shaved ice into her mouth with her magic.
“Isn’t that amazing!?” Pinkie blurted. “Brand new, alien flavors of sweets just for us!”

“Lots of universes have unusual fruit,” Flutterfree pointed out, having used her fangs to suck all the flavoring out of her cone in an instant. She was just munching on the ice now.

“But what if this isn’t a fruit?” Pinkie asked. “What if… It’s a type of celery?”

“Is it?” Vriska asked.

“I have no idea!”

“Had to ask.”

Pinkie opened her mouth to say something, but her stomach rumbled. “Sweet sugarbeets! I think all those snow cones did was make me even hungrier! We need lunch!”

Jotaro pulled his hat down. “Yare yar-“

Because he wasn’t looking where he was going, he ran into someone. Jotaro stumbled but kept his footing while the woman he had run into let out a comical “KYAAAAAAA!” and fell onto her back. She was a smaller woman with orange hair done up in a side ponytail that went all the way down to her waist. She was wearing what could best be described as a white battle-dress with blue designs criss-crossing it at mostly square angles. In her hands was a pointed scepter with a golden javelin-like tip encasing a floating red sphere in the center.

Jotaro wordlessly extended a hand to help her back up. She took it with an awkward smile. “Heh…”

“Sorry!” Pinkie blurted. “I was being silly and I got him distracted and the-“

“It’s fine,” she said, twirling her scepter around to ensure her arms were still limber. “I wasn’t really in a hurry to get anywhere or anything.” She smiled at them. “Well, I always say that bumping into someone is a good chance to make new friends. Hi! I’m Nanoha Takamachi.”

Pinkie gasped. “You… You offered to be friends before us!? That never happens!” The biggest smile crossed the pink pony’s face. “Hi! I’m Pinkie Pie, leader of this group of interdimensional explorers! That’s Flutterfree, Nova, Vriska, and big and quiet is Jotaro!” She shook Nanoha’s hand rapidly, even though Nanoha had never actually offered it. “We’re going to be besties!”

Nanoha’s grin widened – not as big or excited as Pinkie’s, but it was perhaps more vibrant.

“We were just going to search for some lunch, would you like to join us?” Pinkie pleaded.

“I was looking for some lunch as well! I was going to meet up with some of my crew but, you know, when fate calls!” Apparently this was some kind of private joke for her because she started chuckling. “Let me just tell them what’s happening.” She paused for a moment, looking into the distance.

Vriska put a finger to her head, sending a telepathic message to her. Nanoha reacted with only mild surprise, and over the next handful of seconds they engaged in a mental conversation.

“No fair,” Nova called. “Talk where the rest of us can hear you, please.”

Vriska chuckled. “I’ve vetted her. She’s okay.”

Nanoha put a hand to her head. “Oh no, you had doubts?”
“Jotaro had to punch a pesterer,” Flutterfree said.

Nanoha raised an eyebrow and smiled. “Oh, you had a bad experience. I am sorry – these places are just like that. No matter how nice you are, there’s always another person looking to take advantage of you.”

“Sad truth,” Flutterfree agreed.

Nanoha nodded. “Anyway! I know the best place for eating around here. Or the best one we’ve found so far, we’ve only been in this outpost a few days. For all I know that light in the distance over there is actually the best taco joint in the multiverse that I shall never uncover.”


Nanoha chuckled “Yeah, that is true. But you’ll love this place, I know it!”

“How do you know for suuuure?” Pinkie asked.

“I just do,” Nanoha smirked.

Pinkie looked at her incredulously. “Hrm…”

“I’m not psychic or anything, it’s just the best.” She pointed her staff forward. “To food!”

“That’s a pretty impressive staff you have,” Nova commented. “The readings are off the charts.”

Nanoha nodded. “It’s name is Raising Heart. Or Raging Heart. Translator spells have a weird time with its name. Isn’t that right Raising Heart?”

The red crystal core flashed. “Of course, my master,” it said with a synthetic, feminine voice.

“Ohmygosh it talks!” Pinkie declared. “That’s amazing!”

“AI?” Nova asked.

“Partial,” Nanoha admitted. “Raising Heart has thoughts and feelings, but they’re on a more limited level than our own. It seems odd to people at first, but where I’m from any mage needs one of these.”

“Really? You can’t just cast magic like this?” Nova asked, summoning a spark of energy from the aether.

Nanoha shook her head. “No, we can, but most can’t do anything complicated without an aid from a device. Devices also help awaken untapped magic potential.”

“Oh thank goodness,” Flutterfree said in relief.

“Hm?”

“Oh, I have a power that unlocks hidden potential and reveals things. It’s just nice to hear I won’t have to worry about accidentally triggering something from you.”

Nanoha smirked, “Rest easy, Flutterfree. I’m already a SSS+ class mage. If there’s more power I can tap into I’d be very surprised. An- Oh! Here it is!” She spread her arms wide. “The best bakery in existence!”

The restaurant was shaped like a loaf of bread. The sign outside just read *The Loaf.*
Vriska blinked. “Uh…”

“Don’t judge a book by its cover!” Pinkie decreed, bouncing into The Loaf. Half of the interior of the loaf was devoted entirely to the baking of bread; the rest was for the tables, of which there were only a dozen. Each was round and made of simple wood, with only half of them filled at the moment.

Nanoha sat down at the one closest to the bar. “The variety platter, Jordisk!”

A three-headed snake-man poked his head right over the counter. “Right away Missssssss Takamachi…”

“Come here often?” Nova asked.

“Found it the first day. I’ve come here every day since then,” Nanoha admitted. “I recommend their sourdough chowder bread bowl, but the variety platter should give you a taste.”

“This isn’t one of those restaurants with a mysterious chef who heals you by exploding parts of your body, is it?” Jotaro asked.

Nanoha raised an eyebrow. “I’d love to hear the story behind that one. No, this place just serves regular perfect bread. Of every kind that isn’t from some eldritch pocket dimension.”

The platter arrived, stacked like a small mountain. There were croissants, biscuits, rolls, muffins, strange stick-shaped pieces of bread, and slices of many others. Sourdough, rye, white, challah, a strange buttery one Nanoha said was ‘monkey bread’, and even a few slices of blueberry toast. There were plenty of toppings to the side from butter to jelly to exotic sauces. The aroma of all the baked goods was heavenly.

“Feel free to dig in!” Nanoha said. “And don’t worry about being neat and tidy about it, be loud!”

“Finally, someone who understands,” Jotaro said, devouring a nearby piece ravenously, Pinkie following suit.

“You wouldn’t be from a version of Japan, would you?” Nanoha asked.

Jotaro nodded.

“Same here! Logia, that life seems like forever ago… Oh! I’ve told you a lot about myself, but why don’t you tell me about you?”

“New Class 3 civilization on the block,” Vriska said. “Q-Sphere, in a very large cluster of equine universes.”

Nanoha clapped her hands. “Oh, there’s a pony civilization now? There wasn’t anything there last time our patrols went through - well, besides the things we may have been partially responsible for!”

“There is now!” Pinkie said, grinning. “Merodi Universalis, four years old, at your service. Well, flourish. Hard to tell sometimes.”

“There’s actually more than one,” Fluterfree added. “Our neighbors, the Sparkle Census, are ponies as well. Almost all ponies.”

Nanoha sat back, munching on a piece of bread that resembled a miniature lobster. “Cuteness overload…”
Nova facehooved. “Why does everyone always go to the cute thing?”

“Well, you see, that’s part of your design,” Jotaro commented.


“Oh, you know about ka?” Nanoha asked. “Not all the Class 3s do.”

“More of a recent discovery,” Pinkie said. “It helps that I’m Aware.”

Nanoha smiled. “That definitely would help. I trust your society isn’t falling apart then?”

“Nope!” Flutterfree decreed. “The bonds of friendship are too strong!”

Nanoha looked at her with an expression that seemed… sad. “…It’s refreshing to hear that from someone that isn’t us.”

Nova raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“The idea of friends driving things… It’s so rare in the multiverse. It’s all about power. Or money. Or expansion. Or part of some competition. Or ‘just because we can’. Or just because it’s for the greater good.” She smiled at them all. “I hope you never lose that part of yourselves. Keep hold of it, it’s a rare gift.”

“It sure is!” A new voice said.

Sombra crawled over the back of an empty chair and sat down. “That’s why they’re so endearing.”

Nova froze. “S-s-sombra!”?

“Yes, it’s me, Sombra.” Sombra chuckled. “Here I am, crashing the party like I always do.”

Nanoha didn’t ask anyone who Sombra was. She extended her hand. “Hello! I’m Nanoha Takamachi.”

Sombra shook it. “See? This woman knows how to greet people.”

“I know how to greet people too!” Pinkie declared.

“You’re a freak of nature with uncanny people skills,” Sombra pointed out. “Talking about miss startled-light, mister poker face, and miss flipping-me-off in her mind.”

“That’s pretty much a constant to everyone,” Vriska admitted.

Sombra shrugged. “Eh, potato, potahto.”

Flutterfree smiled awkwardly. “Sorry about this, Nanoha. This is Sombra. A hacker. We have what can best be described as a ‘complicated’ relationship with her.”

Nanoha chuckled. “I understand. I’ve been around the bush a few times, had to deal with many unsavory types. Though Sombra, I have to admit you seem a lot nicer than most of them.”

“I’m turning into a softie,” she said, munching on a croissant. “I have to remind myself sometimes that I’m supposed to be a nuisance and leak some secret document or something. Bit hard to do when these horses don’t like secrets that much.”

“Ahahahahah,” Nova laughed nervously. “Heh, she called us horses!” She levitated Sombra off the
“I’m sure you have somewhere else to be, Sombra. How about you go do that?”

“Nope!” Sombra declared leaping back onto her chair with a smirk. “I’m going to sit down and talk to you face to face. I don’t think I’ve actually done that since I met you all those years ago! Isn’t that something?”

Nova whimpered. “Yes…”

Sombra put a finger on Nova’s muzzle. “Boop.”

Nova tried to bite her finger off, but Sombra was too fast. The hacker laughed. To Nova’s immense annoyance, Nanoha, Pinkie, and Vriska were chuckling as well.

Nova rammed her face into the table. “Sombra, you really should just go…”

“Nah,” Sombra said, chuckling.

“Yeah, Nova, calm down,” Flutterfree said. “You don’t have to like her, but you’re being a little mean right now.”

Nova would have started ranting were her stomach not in a triple-folded pretzel knot. Sombra was here. Talking to them. This was going to be a problem…

It turned out to be a problem a lot quicker than Nova had been expecting.

The front door of The Loaf flew open. Froppy hopped in, gun in her hand. “Sombra! By the authority of the United States of the Multiverse, I am placing you under arrest! Ribbit.”

Two men stood behind her – one with half of his face burnt, and the other with a small beard.

Sombra stared at them in disbelief. “How did… No, there was no time for anyone to rat me out, I was watching…”

Froppy didn’t even glance at Nova. “We’ve been trying to find you for multiple years, Sombra. We just finally caught up with you.”

Flutterfree stood up and flared her wings. “Hey, we were just having a lunch!”

“Are you protecting this criminal?” the half-burnt man asked accusingly.

“I… Uh…”

“Because if you are the USM will take direct action against you.”


Jotaro’s expression did not shift. But there was no use of time stop.

Nanoha stood up. “I don’t know what’s going on, but can you tell me what this woman has done?”

Froppy turned to Nanoha, analyzing her. “She has hacked into the highest security divisions of our government, interfered with our foreign policy in other universes, not to mention fraud, defamation, etcetera. Her actions have led to more than a few deaths.”
“Indirectly!” Sombra pointed out.

Froppy shook her head. “That only lessens the sentence slightly. You’ve done enough to get a life sentence.”

“Not the death penalty? I’m surprised.”

“If you want that we can push for that,” the burnt man said.

Nanoha’s face was one of intense calculation. Froppy noticed this and decided she couldn’t let Nanoha think of a way out of this. “Hand over Sombra now or we will be forced to use excessive force and cause a diplomatic incident. Now.”

~~~

Thrackerzod and Engineetie were sitting directly under Dimensional Drive Two. Thrackerzod was using all her power to keep the two of them from being fried this close to the immense source of power.

Engineetie adjusted the sights on her goggles. “I’ve got nothing. Hitting it with a wrench was the last idea I had. This drive is activating regardless of what we do. It just doesn’t matter.”

Thrackerzod used her magic to remove them from the danger zone and placed them back on the observation balcony. “We’re going to have to go through with it,” Thrackerzod told Blumiere. “We’re definitely going to end up moving.”

Blumiere put a hand to his chin. “I’m really curious what’s on the other side at this point… We’ve got all our defenses up, and the reality anchors are going to keep the portal we create open so we aren’t sucked into some eldritch void. But I don’t trust it.”

“It’s not going to do that,” Engineetie said. “It spooling up wrong. It’s going for a flash-translation.”

“All at once? The entire city?” Blumiere shook his head. “Can it do that?”

“Apparently,” Thrackerzod said. “Are you certain everything’s ready?”

“Our personal armada is ready, shields are engaged… The Sweeties are prepared. Everything beyond complete evacuation, which we just don’t have time for.”

“Celestia City goes into the unknown…” Thrackerzod said, narrowing her eyes. “Whatever’s on the other side, it’s not going to be friendly. I can tell you that right now.”

“How can you know that?”

“Call it a sense.”

Celestia City shook.

Engineetie whistled. “Look at her churn! She’s gonna go real soon!”

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Flutterfree’s thoughts raced. We can’t hand Sombra over! What would Corona think? What are we going to do!? Wh-

Pinkie started laughing.
Everyone stared at her in confusion.

“Oh, don’t mind me, it’s just…” Pinkie snorted. “We’re not going to have to make a choice!”

Froppy’s eyes widened. “What’s going to-“

Everything shook. Through the Loaf’s windows, the view that had previously been dominated by the blue air and distant rods was replaced with the lower part of a haphazardly thrown together city. Its sudden existence and power sent ripples through the world, visibly shaking a few of the nearby rods. Power went off in the Loaf.

“Celestia City!?” Vriska blurted. “What the hell!?"

“That’s yours?” Nanoha asked.

“Yeah! But they aren’t supposed to go to unknown universes!” Vriska put her hand to her head. “What’s going on!?"

Pinkie giggled. “I have no idea! But I do know Sombra’s gone!” She pointed at the empty chair Sombra had been in a minute ago.

Froppy facepalmed. “Find her! Ribbit.” She and the USM scrambled out of the Loaf.

Flutterfree should have been relieved, but the existence of Celestia City had her decidedly concerned. “What’s going on over there?” Green ships of a triangular design began to surround the city by the hundreds, appearing from other dimensions.

Nanoha shook her head. “Those are Jargon’s ships… This isn’t good.”

“Jargon?” Vriska blurted. “Green suit, annoying?”

“You know him? What did you do to him?”

“He was trying to cheat us out of something,” Vriska said. “So Jojo here punched him into a wall.”

Nanoha sucked in a deep breath.

“I take it that was a really stupid thing to do?” Flutterfree asked.

“You had no way of knowing he wasn’t just another cheat,” Nanoha said. “He’s a mob boss. He by no means controls this Outpost, but he controls the section we’re in. From what I know he takes it upon himself to exploit promising newcomers and will bring his wrath on whoever won’t let themselves fall to his simpler schemes…”

“That’s fucking stupid!” Vriska blurted. “I… Agh that fits the memo of these places exactly.”

“I knew it, he did scan something from us,” Nova said. “…We have to do something.”

Pinkie nodded. “Nanoha, you know more than any of us, what do you suggest?”

Nanoha furrowed her brow. “I can get my ship in there. It’s a powerful vessel, but I’m not sure it can stand against that much firepower alone.” She pointed at the largest green triangle. “Jargon will be on that ship. If you can get on and make him give the order to stop, that would do it.”

Nova lit her horn. “Right. I’ll get us over there.”
Nanoha nodded, standing up and placing an earpiece in her ear. “I’m going to make the calls. Just go.” She ran out the door of the Loaf.

Nova teleported them into the air near the large triangle ship. The little ships saw them instantly, firing their weapons. Jotaro froze time and moved all of them lower with Star Platinum. The shots all missed, but the team slammed into the hull of the larger ship without any preparation time as a result.

“OW! FUCK!” Vriska blurted grabbing her arm. “JOTARO YOU BROKE SOMETHING!”

“Yare yare daze…” Jotaro muttered, ignoring her.

The smaller ships were no longer firing on the larger ship – they didn’t want to damage it. However there were two surface guns on the ship they were standing on that didn’t have any issue firing at them. Nova raised a shield to defend against one while Star Platinum smashed it.

The other one got a shot off on Pinkie, hitting her face first. She went flying over the back of the ship. She quickly reached into the back of her mane and pulled out the bomb mask, exploding herself toward the ship and then using a suction cup on her hoof to adhere to the hull. “YOU CAN’T KILL SUCTION CUP PONY! How many times do I have to say it!?”

Flutterfree fired the bow of light dead center into the gun’s turret, jamming it. She smiled. “There you go.”

Vriska focused her luck into her dice, rolling them towards the ship’s hull. A gigantic drill appeared, boring through the metal in a second. “Move move move!”

Jotaro’s time stop had recharged, so he just moved them all in there before they were even aware of what had happened. They were in an empty, green hallway lined with ominous lights.

“We’re in,” Pinkie said, grinning.

~~~

Blumiere ran to the command center of Celestia City, Thrackerzod and Allure at his heels. “What is going on?”

“We’re in a new universe surrounded by green triangle ships!” Vivian shouted.

“Hail them.”

“They’re hailing us!”

Blumiere furrowed his brow. “Bring it up on the screen.”

The face of a human man appeared on screen. He wore a snazzy green suite and had truly devious eyes. “Allow me to introduce myself, mayor. I am Jargon. And your ship has conveniently fallen into my area of the Outpost, so I claim salvage rights!”

“Salvage!?” Allure blurted.

“We cannot allow that,” Blumiere said, glaring. “We will fight with all we have.”

“I was able to trigger a dimension jump from the safety of my own home across the multiverse,” Jargon pointed out. “What makes you think I won’t be able to trigger a core meltdown you can do nothing about?”
“Core has started heating up!” Vivian reported.

Blumiere didn’t flinch. “I know nothing of what salvage means. For all I know it’s a fate worse than death.”

Jargon clearly did not expect this remark. “…Really? You’re going th-“

“Explain to me exactly what salvage entails before I make my decision. And don’t even think about lying.”

Jargon ground his teeth – but allowed the core of Celestia City to stop overheating. “Fine. Salvage involve-“

His entire ship shook.

“What in the… Who’s doing that?”

“How di-“ before Jargon could get any further, another face showed up on the screen. It was of a woman with orange hair. She seemed to be running somewhere.

“This is Nanoha Takamachi of the Time Space Administration Bureau. The Hoseki is en-route to this dimension as we speak. Jargon, you are interfering unfairly with a world. I request that you stop what you’re doing or we will use force to defend those you wish to exploit.”

“You have no jurisdiction here!” Jargon blurted. “And they’re a Class 3! They’re technically above me!”

Nanoha smiled. “I can make jurisdiction. Regardless, it doesn’t matter what Class they are, your actions are still unacceptable. Cease immediately and we will forget everything about this.”

“I can take a single TSAB ship and you know it,” Jargon growled.

Nanoha glared at him. “Perhaps you didn’t hear my name. I am Nanoha Takamachi. Otherwise known as the White Devil.”

Jargon’s expression faltered. Then he grinned. “A chance to defeat the TSAB’s poster girl… Oh that would bring me so much… Heheh… Miss Takamachi, if you take any action against me I will destroy their reactor. You can be certain of it.”

“No, you won’t,” Nanoha said. “You aren’t the type of person to throw away your treasure. Mayor, whoever you are, do not retaliate. Keep everything of yours in perfect condition and do not fight. He will not destroy you if you stay dormant.”

Blumiere nodded. “Understood.”

“Let us take care of this,” Nanoha asserted. “Jargon, we will come for you.”

“There is no-“

Seven green ships vanished from existence.

“What the-“

Nanoha chuckled. “Did you forget? Our ships don’t have to be in the same universe to attack you.”
“Find the *Hoseki!*” Jargon shouted. “I don’t care about how, just do it!”

“Good luck!” Nanoha cheered, leaving the call.

Blumiere turned to Allure and whispered. “Don’t attack, but you and Thrackerzod get down to Dimensional Drive Four. Activate it as stealthily or as quickly as you can.”

The two Sweeties nodded and teleported away, running through the streets of Celestia City closest to the Fourth Drive.

“Thrackerzod, can you corrupt the area around it?” Allure asked.

“Definitely. Just a simple summon will do the trick. We have to hope they aren’t trigger-happy.”

“It’s all we got!”

They ran past the streets filled with scared people. None of them were panicking or screaming in the streets yet – the Sweeties were keeping them all under control with their presence – but the people would not remain calm forever.

They had to get out as soon as possible.

The two unicorns piled into an elevator shaft. They descended into the protected core of the fourth Dimensional Drive.

Allure ran to the direct control console. “Zod? Do you have it?”

Thrackerzod created a small summoning circle and called forth a creature that was a square eyeball. “This thing will mask everything. It all seems like corrupted physics from the outside, and while that’s concerning it’s not exactly threatening. So long as they don’t get too suspicious… Start spinning it up.”

Allure pressed a few buttons, setting it to the maximum charge speed. “Totally not safe but let’s blow the thing out anyway!”

Dimensional Drive Four began to rotate rapidly.

~~~

Sombra ran through the ‘streets’ and ‘alleys’ of the Outpost, invisible. She needed to lose them – otherwise they would be able to track her dimensional signature. She had hoped the initial surprise would get them off her tail, but the cameras showed they were somehow still following her. That bearded guy probably had a long range Stand that was keeping tabs on her while invisible – somehow.

She needed to be clever. But doing more than hacking cameras in this place would prove to be problematic while on the run like she was. She might have to fight. She was fairly certain her zat gun would stun all three of them easily, they didn’t look that physically strong – but that was three shots. And besides Froppy, she was unsure of their capabilities. Stands could be annoyingly creative and bizarre…

Something invisible made her slip. She kept quiet, landing in a roll to get herself back up. The same something punched her – it was a weak punch, confirming the existence of a long-range Stand, but it was enough to slow her down. Froppy and the others were catching up.
She used her scanners – but seemed to detect the Stand everywhere.

*It can break itself into pieces. My scanners aren’t sensitive enough to pinpoint any specific piece.*

Parts of it coalesced to her left, ready for another punch, but she dodged. She could easily dance with this Stand forever, she knew. It was pretty easy to deal with, considering how weak it was. But it was slowing her down. And Froppy was *fast.* It helped to be a frog sometimes.

Sombra cursed – the Stand had latched onto her suit. She took a header into a wall, smacking hard enough to daze herself.

It was the last little bit Froppy needed. She leaped over the nearest building and extended her tongue toward Sombra.

*I haven’t done this in a while…* Sombra thought, pulling up her direct interface. *But I’ve always been ready to.*

“Everything can be hacked,” she smirked. She pressed a few keys in rapid succession, tapping into a magitech piece of technology of her own design. The purple beam hit Froppy – and her tongue went limp, like long tongues were supposed to be. She dropped like a rock into the ground, no longer able to move with extreme agility. Her overall body shape still retained the posture of a frog, but none of the excessive powers.


“Magic, amiga,” Sombra winked, dodging an attack from the Stand. “I’ve got the counter to everything.”

The man with half his face burnt showed up.

“Careful Shoto! She has an Erase!” Froppy blurted.

Shoto ducked behind a nearby wall before Sombra could hack into him. She smirked. “I’m going to get to you regardless, little Shoto…”

A tremendous wall of ice shot forth from where he was hiding, pushing Sombra into a nearby wall. She couldn’t recover in time to deal with the incoming flamethrower.

*Fire and ice… that must be nice.* She, despite suffering from numerous burns, pulled out her zat gun and fired. Shoto had been expecting a hack, not a laser gun. He was hit directly in the chest, falling to the stun.

Then Froppy lassoed Sombra with her tongue. She had tied the fleshy extrusion up and used it like a standard rope, tying Sombra’s arms to her side. Sombra attempted to activate her transporter device - but found that it wasn’t working. It had been *jammed* somehow.

Sombra’s eyes widened. She’d been *caught.*

Never until this moment had she actually believed she ever *would* be. She was too careful… Too good…

Froppy tried to give an official arrest statement, but given the state of her tongue she only gave out a few slurred words before giving up.

The bearded man appeared, smiling. “I see w-“
“STARLIGHT BREAKER!”

A beam of deep pink magic cut down the middle of the group, tossing the man over to Shoto, with Froppy and Sombra on the other side. A wall was blown to powder and the ground beneath them was shredded, revealing the inner circuitry of the rod.

Nanoha descended from the sky, tired from her run. Despite her clear exhaustion, she pointed at Froppy. “The USM has interfered in an official TSAB operation. The criminal known as Sombra was being lured into a false sense of security where she would have cooperatively entered imprisonment with minimal collateral damage.” She gestured to the destruction around them. “We are willing to forgive this slight if Sombra is handed over to us for processing into the criminal system.”

Froppy and Sombra stared at her.

Nanoha winked at the two of them and smiled warmly.

Froppy got the message and nodded, untying her tongue from Sombra. “Will you promise maximum security life sentence?”

“Definitely!” Nanoha lied through her teeth. “We have term lengths measured by the century back home!”

Froppy smiled. She knew exactly what Nanoha was doing. “Then we have no issue handing her over to you.”

Nanoha twisted Raising Heart, summoning deep pink foot and hand cuffs around Sombra’s limbs. “Thanks! The TSAB will forget all the unpleasantness.”

Sombra, intelligently, said nothing and just accepted her ‘fate’ of ‘maximum security life sentence’ with a smile.

Nanoha waved. “Goodbye! The TSAB will contact the USM with an update within the next few days!”

“Good to know. Ribbit.” Nanoha floated away, Sombra in hand.

Shoto rubbed his head, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. “What… happened?”

“They’re taking care of her for us,” Froppy said. Technically the truth. “Takes a bit of strain off of us.”

“Why didn’t she do that earlier then?”

“Wasn’t part of their plan. We ruined it.”

Shoto thought about this a moment – and accepted it. “Fine. Mission accomplished, I guess?”

“Ribbit,” Froppy said, beginning a report to Valentine.

~~~

Jargon was frantic – his ships just kept disappearing from space around him. That TSAB ship… How was he supposed to find it? What dimension was it acting from?! The readings indicated that the connection it used to attack changed every time! How was he supposed to deal with this?
Not to mention the intruders in *his* ship. He had already lost three teams of guards to them.

He needed a plan. At this point blowing up the city would do absolutely nothing to him – the invaders in his ship would have no way to know what he was threatening, and the White Devil was not one to back down… At least from what he knew.

He pulled up a file on the TSAB. Their ships were mysterious things that were rarely seen, but they had *some* information on them. Highly advanced technology built over centuries of growth. The exploration vessels weren’t armed with the most dangerous of the TSAB’s weapons, but *her* personal one would no doubt have extras installed on it. And their drive-

Right. *Right.* Their ships moved by creating pocket dimensions and ‘sailing’ them. They rarely had to actually enter a universe proper; they could access the entire existence from *outside.* And because they could move their personal pocket dimension, the coordinates would keep switching.

“Dial the coordinates WHILE you’re scanning the disappearing ships,” he ordered. “Catch them while they’re attacking.”

The next ship that vanished provided exactly what they needed. A direct portal tore through existence, revealing a small universe containing a single ship set upon a greenish-purple background. The ship’s structure was composed of metal with three domed structures underneath and three extended prongs out the front.

Now that it had been forced to reveal itself, the *Hoseki* saw no purpose in staying secluded in its pocket universe. It left, and the small bubble of space collapsed in on itself, sending a ripple of spacetime out from the place the portal had been. Several ships were disabled, while the *Hoseki* itself was unperturbed.

Jargon grinned. Now he had them in his sights.

The opposite was also true. The *Hoseki’s other* weapons started firing. Rotating magic circles protruded from the ship, firing complex energy beams that never went in a straight line. Invisible weapons triggered, distorting space in a pattern that disabled dozens of his triangles.

But the *Hoseki* were able to be *hit.* Their shields were impressive, but several dozen bullets wore down the impressive force field. The ship shook from the force.

Jargon laughed. He was going to take out a TSAB ship! He didn’t even care that he was scrapping most of his fleet to do it, the legends that would be told about him made it all worth it! He w-

Jotaro punched the door to the bridge down. After a quick time stop, he and Nova had taken care of the entire bridge crew save for Jargon himself.

Pinkie walked up to Jargon. “Hiya!”

Jargon glared. “What do you want from me?”

“Oh, nothing much, just call off all your ships. Please.”

Jargon growled. “I will blow your city to kingdom come! I-“ He slipped and fell face first onto the floor of the bridge. “Ow…”

Vriska smirked. “You know, Jargon, I could just make you have a heart attack. But I won’t. Because I haven’t seen Jojo get *really* pissed in a *long* time. And this is going to be *good.*”
Jotaro held Jargon up by the neck with Star Platinum’s hand. “Ora…”

Jargon gagged. “I—I’ll call them off! I will! Just don’t hurt me!”

“Promise?” Flutterfree asked, staring at him. “Promise there’s no double crossing?”

“YES YES! NO DOUBLE CROSSING!”

Jotaro dropped him. Jargon scrambled to his microphone and gave the order to stand down.

So close… He could see smoke on one of the Hoseki’s prongs…

“So… What now?” Jotaro asked.

Jargon did so. “So… What now?”

“ORA!” Star Platinum blurted, knocking Jargon out. This would have triggered Celestia City’s reactor, if the city had not jumped out of the universe at that moment thanks to Thrackerzod and Allure.

“That,” Jotaro said. “Then we hand you over to Nanoha.”

Vriska laughed. “Yeah, Nanoha. Interesting ship design, I wonder who they are…” She looked down at a screen. It still had the TSAB article open on it.

Her pupils dilated. “No fucking way…”

“Huh?” Nova asked. “What is it?”

“Nanoha… Is part of the Time Space Administration Bureau. Holy shit.” She put a hand to her head. “I can’t believe I didn’t recognize the name! The White Devil!”

“Calm down, explain,” Flutterfree said.

“The Class 1 Societies may like to be big and mysterious, but the Class 2s definitely do not. They love to compete and rank each other.” She held up the article. “The TSAB is number two on that list. We just… Wow. I had no idea the kind of friend we were making.”

“I think that was the idea,” Flutterfree commented. “If we knew who she was, we wouldn’t have been able to just sit and have some bread first. I think it’s good this happened the way it did.”

“No… No it isn’t,” Nova said.

“Huh? But Nano—”

“I’m not talking about Nanoha,” Nova said, sighing. “Let’s… Let’s wrap this up. I have something to tell you after.”

The team exchanged glances, unsure what to make of this. But they did as asked.

~~~

The inside of the Hoseki was smooth and perfectly clean. There were few designs on the walls – besides the clearly personal touches of art and plants, everything was designed with function rather than aesthetic in mind. Shapes were simple, all the walls were the same metallic color, and uniforms
were a simple blue. The only ones who didn’t wear the uniforms were high-level mages, like Nanoha herself, who had their own magically constructed outfits.

The crew had accepted Pinkie and her team quickly, taking them to the briefing room first thing. They had been informed that Nanoha would be right with them after she made a preliminary report to Headquarters.

After the first minute, everyone turned to Nova.

Nova sighed. “I called the USM on Sombra.”

Jotaro, Flutterfree, and Pinkie reacted with mild surprise, but clearly understood why she did that. Vriska on the other hand…

“The fuck were you thinking!? We got caught in the middle of that!”

“I saw her long before that,” Nova said. “She didn’t see me, I’m pretty sure. It was very shortly after we arrived. Before Jargon. I just… I didn’t bring it up because I knew you wouldn’t want to do anything.”

“You were right!” Vriska blurted. “She’s not an enemy, Nova! She’s very helpful and useful!”

“She does stuff we’re not willing to do,” Pinkie said. “She has a finesse, you know.”

“I understand that,” Nova said. “But that’s a problem. We agree that what she does is wrong, but we don’t try to stop her because of what she offers us. That’s bad! That’s… That’s really bad!” She shook her head. “Whenever I try to bring this up, you guys all just dismiss me. Tell me to ‘loosen up’ or ‘let it go’ or ‘you don’t have to like her’ or…” She grabbed her head. “She’s not a good person!”

Flutterfree shook her head. “Nova, she has a spark in her.”

“I know! But she’s still a liar, a cheat, and even worse she breaks our own laws all the time! At least Alushy doesn’t go around defying us at every turn, she keeps herself within reason!”

Vriska narrowed her eyes. “Can’t accept a little gray area, can you?”

“I can accept a little gray area. We kill people, Vriska, when we have to. What I’m saying is we’re not treating her like the criminal she is anymore! She has a place of… Of honor! And she likes it. And we’ve been using her more and more for bigger and bigger things, expanding her influence…”

Flutterfree shook her head. “So? She’s done so much good. We can afford a few cracks.”

“…Flutterfree, didn’t Rev say something about white lies leading to horrendous monsters of betrayal eventually, if you accept them?”

Flutterfree’s pupils shrunk. She couldn’t keep eye contact with Nova.

“I’m not crazy, or unable to move past it,” Nova said. “Yes, I’m still angry, but I’d accept her. But not as a gray area criminal. That’s not what we are. That’s not what we stand for. Please, listen to me. We have to do something with her.”

Everyone was silent.

Pinkie began to slowly nod. “You have a point, Nova. I’m… sorry for dismissing you about this.”

“We all are,” Flutterfree said, head still bowed.
Vriska looked like she wanted to object, but thought better of it. Jotaro simply nodded.

“But it’s not that simple,” Pinkie continued. “Where we are, we have to do distasteful things. At this point we’ve lost count of how many people whose deaths we are responsible for, directly or indirectly. We’ve ruined worlds, we’ve saved them – it’s a mixed bag.”

“But we try to do what’s right,” Nova said. “Sombra doesn’t.”

“Sombra helps us do what is right,” Pinkie countered. “She’s not what we could call acceptable, no. She causes everyone problems. She opens the window to us doing more and more questionable things. But she’s also a powerful defense for Merodi Universalis. The skill she has, the network she’s created, the freedom she has… She’s more our defender at this point.”

Nova shook her head. “I’d drop the shield if it was poisoning me and fight the dragon on my own. Security and power isn’t everything, Pinkie.”

Pinkie sighed. “I don’t have an answer for you, Nova.”

“At least you’re thinking about it,” Nova said, smiling. “Bring it up with Eve and the others, okay? If they hear it from someone’s mouth besides my own… It might mean something. They need to see that we can’t afford to be corrupted.”

“What about Corona, though?” Flutterfree asked. “She and Sombra are good friends… If we do take action, it would drive them apart…”

“I have a solution for that!” Nanoha said, walking in the door – Sombra at her heels. Everyone’s jaws dropped – except Pinkie’s. She just giggled. “Waiting for just the right moment?”

“I saw you needed to talk something out,” Nanoha said. “I let you. It’s why you were in this room alone.”

“You’re good,” Pinkie giggled.

Nanoha laughed. “Regardless… As you can see, I have Sombra. The USM thinks I’m taking her into custody. Maximum security prison for life. However, it won’t be what happens. At all.” She folded her hands in front of an excited smile. “Because I’m giving her back to you. And you want to hear my suggestion for what to do with her?”

Nova nodded. “Please.”

“Change her identity. Then hire her in an official position as an official citizen.”

Pinkie’s team was silent.

“The USM would never suspect a thing, you would still have Sombra on your side, and she would have to adhere to your laws and customs in an official job. She also wouldn’t have to hide anymore.”

Silence.

Sombra smirked. “Come on, amigas, amigo. I’m extending the olive branch of peace here. Don’t snub me.”

Pinkie laughed. “Well I like the idea. We’ll have to work out how to change your identity… Shouldn’t be too hard.”
“I can take care of that,” Sombra said. She turned to Nova. “Does this work for you, Nova?”

Nova narrowed her eyes. “Yes… But I don’t trust it.”

“Hey, it’s pretty clear that staying an all-powerful hacker free from everything is just going to get me hunted at some point or other. This way has so many benefits. Let’s see… Official security clearance… protection… actual excuses to hack into Valentine’s computer… Oh, and for you, I guess I don’t get to air out your dirty secrets anymore.”

“So, we get to put a leash on you?”

“If you can imagine the loosest leash in the multiverse, sure,” Sombra said. She leaned on one of her hands. “Look, I’m not asking you to like me or even be friends. But let’s find something that works, mmk? I’ll accept some limits if that means the Muricans won’t get called on me the moment someone sees me.”

“Wow,” Flutterfree said. “You’ve been reexamining your life, haven’t you?”


Nanoha smiled.

Nova turned to Pinkie. “I’ll… Accept this.”

Pinkie clapped her hooves. “Then by the power vested in me under Renee, I will see that this happens! You’re going to need a new name and identity, Sombra…”

“I’ve already got an idea.”

~~~

On one side of the table sat Nanoha, a warm smile on her face.

On the other sat Jenny, Hastur, the Grand Secretariat, a Melnorme named Brusk, Valentine, and Eve.

Eve and Valentine were clearly uncomfortable being in the same room as each other.

“The TSAB is pleased to make all of your acquaintances – except for you Brusk. We already knew your people.”

Brusk made no comment.

“I do wonder why you didn’t at least tell us about all these people. They’re delightful and we like to keep our records updated!”

Brusk said nothing.

Nanoha shook her head at this, turning to the rest of them. “Anyway, I’m Nanoha, as most of you know. I understand that some of you are hesitant about this meeting, not the least of which because you have bad blood between each other. I would love to help with that – but I can’t. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Eve said. “It means a lot that you’re considering it. It’s good to find a kindred spirit out there.”

Nanoha nodded slowly. “I’m going to be frank with you. I like you, and I’ll probably visit often to check in on how you’re doing. But we’re a high-end Class 2 society. The TSAB has a lot of other
things closer to the seat of power to worry about. As a society, we won’t pay much attention to any of you.”

“Figured as much,” Hastur admitted.

“It’s a sad fact of life that when you’re up where we are, you start ignoring those below you. Eve, I’m sure you’ve noticed that worlds not part of Merodi Universalis mean less and less to you as time goes on?”

Eve nodded. “I try… But it’s hard.”

“It’s the same up here. It’s why the Class 1s are so mysterious. It’s why so many universes get forgotten as nations expand.” She folded her hands. “The TSAB tries much harder than almost every other society to keep strong connections with everyone, but we can’t keep track of everything.”

“Understood,” Valentine said.

“There are a few things I can say we will do,” Nanoha smiled. “If you’re ever threatened by a foe much stronger than you, I’ll do everything I can go get aid to you. I can’t control the full might of the TSAB, but I can control a significant portion.”

“Thank you,” the Grand Secretariat said with a bow.

“Valentine, your territories are actually somewhat close to ours. If you keep exploring rapidly you will run into our physical location soon enough. Don’t be surprised.”

Valentine nodded.

“And something else – much like Merodi Universalis, the TSAB grows by accepting willing members into it. Unlike Merodi Universalis, this is a painfully slow and time-consuming process. There are dozens of larger Class 3 societies in line and it will likely take centuries before we get to many of them. It’s something to think about, but I would recommend against jumping into it anytime soon.”

Eve nodded. “Thank you, Nanoha. It is good to know there’s a force like you out there.”

Nanoha smiled. “Thanks!”

“I do have a question,” Jenny said, producing a photo of the blue metallic man that took many interdimensional explorers as slaves. “Do you have any idea who this is?”

Nanoha narrowed her eyes. “Not me personally…” She held it up to a camera in the ceiling, scanning it into the computer in an instant. “The patterns are reminiscent of a variant of a being known as ‘Metal Sonic’ but it’s not quite right. This is clearly a suit of some kind, not a full machine. No version of Metal Sonic is a human, or even of the correct proportions for this. If anything, I’d guess… someone who designed their outfit to be like Metal Sonic.”

“That’s not helpful,” Jenny said.

“Sorry, I can’t tell you more. The database doesn’t have anything.”

“It’s okay,” Eve said. “You’ve already done a lot.”

“Not really,” Nanoha said, honestly.
Corona heard her doorbell ring again. With a groan, she trotted over to it and opened it.

She saw someone at the door she didn’t recognize at all. She had long, white hair streaked with a single silver strike. The strands were all draped over her left shoulder rather than hanging down her back. Her outfit was a combination of jacket and mid-length skirt, dominantly white with purple streaks around it.

“Hey Corona!”

Corona blinked. “Do I know you…?”

The woman moved forward and touched Corona on the nose. “Boop!”

Corona’s jaw dropped. “SOMBRA!? What th- why the-ho-” Corona couldn’t process what she was looking at with what she knew. “What happened to you?”

“Got caught. Had to change my look.” She smirked. “How do I look?”

“Very bright.”

“Good. Nobody will expect Sombra to be bright. Anyway, we’re going to be roomies for a few weeks.”

“Wait what?”

This was greeted with laughter. “I already talked it through with everyone. You’re the best one to watch me before I reveal myself. If I appear right after my own imprisonment, it’ll be suspicious. So I have to lay low and establish a history. That’s you! Plus, everyone unanimously agreed you needed it.” She opened the fridge. “Wow, you don’t have anything tasty in here.”

“I…” Corona blinked. “Okay, right, this is fine. You do need to lay low and…” She shook her head. “Don’t touch any of the experiments, don’t put ‘What’s New Pussycat’ in the speakers, and… Wait, does Eve know…?”

“Yep. I’ve been hired. Oooofficially! We’re the best of friends now.”

“Uh…”

“You could say that I’m finally ‘cleaning up my act’ after all these years. Congratulations Corona, you did it, you redeemed the immoral hacker.”

Corona blinked. “Huh. I… Guess I did have something to do with that.” She smirked. “You’re welcome, Sombra.”

“Not Sombra anymore.”

“Oh? What then?”

She turned to Corona and smiled. “Sombra’s gone – was never real, in a way. Just a mask I wore over top of another face.” She extended a hand. “Hello Corona, I am Olivia.”

Corona smiled a genuine smile. “Hello, Olivia.”

“Olivia Colomar, actually, but I’m going to alter the last name to Velazquez to keep the trail confusing. Also Velazquez is muy ‘awesome’.” Olivia winked. “Time for a new chapter, you know?”
Corona nodded. “I know.”
Nestled deep within the scaffolds of Celestia City, there was a small community. Only one way in, one way out – the rest of the ‘secluded’ living area was surrounded by an abandoned factory district and a crystal garden. Above them was a flat, metallic ‘roof’ upon which were pipes that carried water to a large portion of the entire city.

This community was simply called Armadillo Street, after the only ‘street’ that led into the place. It wasn’t an abandoned street by any means since half the residents of the place had to use the street to drive to the rest of the city for work, but it wasn’t very high-traffic. Besides the storm of cars and hooves that scrambled in the ‘morning’ and ‘evening’ with the work cycle, the street was a ghost town.

Today it would be a ghost town all day because it was the weekend. Morning came – but since Armadillo Street was not in a section with lights above that created a day-night cycle, they had to make do with alarm clocks or, in the case of Aiskera, beautiful melodious music and a robot that would flick the light switch on and off if that didn’t get her up.

This morning Aiskera didn’t even need the music; she was up and dressed due to excitement long before the song was set to go off. She was the Flat version of Fluttershy. Human, very yellow, and once an emissary of the gods themselves. But that was all behind her. She was just Aiskera now. Aiskera, the community planner for this tiny little street. The closest they had to a leader of any kind.

Today, she was throwing an evening potluck for everyone in Armadillo Street. It would be an amazing community activity that would bring all of them much closer together. The possibilities of this day – oh she could scarcely imagine them! Great food! Discussions about life! Plans for the future! Everything was going to be just perfect.

She had this.

When her music started playing, she danced out of her bedroom and into the living area of her house. She lived alone with her robot and cat, both of whom were absolutely adorable but didn’t really make good conversation partners. She didn’t mind at all – the whole street was her conversation partner.

She kept herself from humming to the music – even though she had learned to keep her voice consistently feminine long ago, it was still monotone like all Flats. Her ‘singing’ was completely pointless, not to mention annoying to all who could hear it. She allowed herself to enjoy the song in silence, cooking herself some breakfast.

The magic crystal stove activated in an instant at her thought of breakfast. She pulled eggs out of the fridge and cooked them up in a jiffy. She loved the word jiffy. She also loved peanut butter. The two things were probably related, but she never thought about it that hard. Who needed to? Life was simple and enjoyable.

She set her eggs on the table and began to dig in, using her free hand to pet her cat and keep him from getting to her food. He was way too fat; she needed to stop giving him part of everything she ate. Just cat food for him now! Always!

Upon finishing her food, she opened her front door, marching out onto Armadillo Street itself. She
took in the houses of all her neighbors, the street itself, and the blue and beautiful sight of the crystal
gardens in the background. She ignored the other half of the background, which was the abandoned
factory district’s metal pylons that seemed to go on forever, because that was just depressing and
ugly to look at. Not to mention that part of the street was dark and hard to see without light from the
crystals.

She walked up to her front door and took a blue spellcube out of her house. She walked to an empty
lot next to her house and threw the cube on the ground. In an instant, the lot was covered in a raised
wooden platform, ready to be decorated for a potluck. All she had to do was actually set it up.

Aiskera grinned. “This is going to be a good day,” she decreed.

~~~

Bon Bon had lost Lyra.

One would think it would be easy to find a hyperactive unicorn mare with a plethora of odd spells
and a penchant for shouting conspiracy theories to anyone who would listen, but this turned out not
to be the case. Not even special agent Bon Bon was able to track her down in the mess that was
Celestia City.

The trip had started off so well too. Lyra had suggested going on a weekend vacation, and Bon Bon
had decided it would be good for them. But less then an hour after arriving Lyra had gone “Ooooh!
Look at that!” and vanished completely.

Bon Bon had looked high and low, low and high, under and over, and everywhere in between. She
wasn’t in the stores, she wasn’t in the restaurants, and she wasn’t even in the more questionable
locales. Bon Bon had long since accepted the fact that Lyra had probably just vanished off the face
of the universe.

She probably should have been worried sick.

She was just annoyed instead.

“Who does she think she is dragging me all the way over here and vanishing like that? Really?” She
groaned, walking down a street covered in both sides with exotic fruit stands. On the ceiling above
her, the gravity was reversed and the buildings were styled like an Earth western. She paused for a
moment, taking in the bizarre truth that was ‘desert sky.’ It occurred to her that she could probably
jump high enough to get to the western…

She did exactly that, using her training to perform a high jump, launching herself into the air. Gravity
flipped, but because she was expecting it she stuck the landing perfectly. She much appreciated the
atmosphere change – though having the sky made of fruit was a little odd. Glancing around, she
noticed a larger section devoted to housing larger creatures – full sized dragons, giant ponies the size
of mountains, the like. She’d actually been to the giant pony homeworld – Equis Tremendous – and
knew what it was like to live on a larger version of herself. That was enough to tell her she didn’t
want to go there.

So she trotted along the dirt path rather aimlessly, admittedly not even looking for Lyra anymore.
She’d show up when she wanted. She knew Bon Bon’s phone number. Probably. She’d be able to
find Bon Bon’s phone number, at least.

“You’re just going to drive yourself into more and more doubt, Bon Bon,” she muttered to herself.
“Lyra will show up eventually. She always does. Just enjoy yourself while you can.”
After a short drink in a nearby saloon, she continued trotting. The western area gave way to a river flowing through a scenery made of metal where every surface was a building. She was positive the ‘street’ she was on was actually the wall of someone living in a sideways cube with vaulted windows.

Celestia City could get weird. Mayor Blumiere’s answer to ‘can we do this crazy architectural thing?’ was almost always ‘go ahead but make it even more insane’ and then Squeaky would say something like ‘insanely brilliant’ and then there’d be a cheesy laugh track.

I’m getting cynical, Bon Bon thought to herself. I’m not old enough to be this cynical yet. I’m not even eighty for Celestia’s sake! Only sixty. That’s young for a pony. …Young-ish.

She sighed, not really sure what she was doing anymore. She supposed she could probably go find a hotel and sleep for a while. See i-

She saw something out of the corner of her eye – a tall, humanoid figure cloaked in black. The figure saw Bon Bon see it, and ducked behind a nearby building – ducked behind it quickly. Like it didn’t want to be seen.

Suspicious, Bon Bon thought, leaping into action. Her instincts took over and she galloped across the uneven ground toward where she had seen the figure. She turned the corner and saw the figure slip into a little offshoot road that headed into a sheer metallic wall. Spray paint lined the wall with more than a few vulgar words and images there for all who found this back alley to see. The road wasn’t completely covered in dust, so there must have been at least some people who drove or walked by here.

She turned the corner, chasing the shadowy figure down the side road. This road was long, narrow, and surrounded by simple metal on all sides. The figure was running. However, the figure was a humanoid; not only was Bon Bon a pony, she was also an agent. She was really fast.

The figure must have had some sort of power, though, because when Bon Bon started running at full gallop the figure began to move faster as well.

More and more suspicious.

Bon Bon passed a sign – Armadillo Street – but paid the name little mind beyond a subconscious mental catalog. The street eventually opened up to a small, secluded set of buildings ranging in construction from human suburban, to futuristic, to the signature Gem geometric and orderly designs. The figure took a sharp left and Bon Bon pursued.

Thoughts of where Lyra was had been left at the entrance to Armadillo Street. Now she had her own adventure to focus herself on.

~~~

Lily Valley loved weekend mornings. She didn’t have to get up, didn’t have to worry about the kids, school, or work, and as far as she was concerned there wasn’t even need to make breakfast. Just sit, asleep, in her nice room. Her safe room. So safe…

She eventually woke up on her own, sighing contentedly. She opened her eyes to find her room a dull blue hue from the glowing crystals outside. What a wonderful view. She really had chosen the best house in this little place. Who cared if the drive to school and work was longer than it would have been otherwise? It was quiet out here. She wasn’t constantly on edge.

With a satisfied grunt, she sat up and stretched out her pink hooves, ready for the day. She checked
her yellow mane to ensure it looked presentable, stuck one of her signature lilies in to complete the look, and trotted down the stairs.

She failed to realize the TV was on until it was too late. She caught the image of a player character in a video game blowing a head off a zombie. She *screamed* and scrambled up the stairs.

“Mom?” her daughter called. “Mom, are you okay!?”

Not coming down the stairs for fear of seeing more gruesome scenes, Lily managed to blurt a few words. “Petal! How many times do I have to… Only play those games when I’m *asleep*!”

“You were asleep until just a minute ago! You came down the stairs pretty fast!”

“Just… Just shut it off, Petal.”

“But moooooo-“

“Petal! I mean it!”

Petal sighed and turned off the TV. “There you go. It’s safe now.”

Nervously, Lily poked her head around the edge of the stairs. The TV was off and Petal was looking at her with a somewhat annoyed expression. “Better?”

Lily was still grabbing her chest like she was about to have a heart attack. “Y-yeah…” She shook her head. “Where’s your sister?”

“Numysitr,” Petal mumbled.

Lily narrowed her eyes. “What was that?”

“Uh… I think she’s still looking at those *books* of hers. Up all night. Like always.”

“Petal, you know she doesn’t need sleep. And I let you stay up later than *me*.”

“Yeah, yeah…” Petal muttered as her mother trotted over to her other daughter’s room. She knocked. “Velvet? You okay in there? It’s tomorrow!”

Velvet opened the door. She was a *small* Gem of a deep red color with her gemstone on the back of her left heel. “I’m fine. School today?”

“No, it’s Saturday,” Lily said with a smile. “What did you learn today?”

“Guys are always stupid.”

Lily laughed a little too loudly. “You certainly found that out at a young age.”

“Four-hundred-seventy-eight days?”

Lily blinked. “I know I said to stop thinking of your age in years, but that’s just as odd.”

Velvet shrugged, walking past Lily to the living room. She sat on the couch, taking a book off an end table and reading it.

“Moooooom, Velvet’s reading that book you told me I couldn’t touch!”

“Huh?” Velvet said, looking up. “What di-“
Lily poked her head in. When she saw what book it was, she let out a panicked yell. “AIYEE! Uh… That book will be for when you’re older! Wait, would it even apply to you? I don’t…” Raising a Gem makes no sense. “Wait, why was this even out?”

“I find it likely that Petal put it out so I would pick it up by instinct,” Velvet said.

“Nuh-uh,” Petal denied, shaking her head profusely.

“It seems highly probable.”

“Stop it with the big words! You’re the little one! Stay little!”

“Gems do not grow, we are born as we are. All we can mature in is understanding, and that can be done quickly.”

“Mooooooooom, Velvet’s doing the condescending thing again! You heard it!”

“I am merely stating facts, Petal.”

“Girls!” Lily blurted. “Neither of you are in the right! Could you just… Not fight for one morning?”

“We didn’t fight two days ago,” Velvet pointed out.

“Mom, Velvet’s being technical again,” Petal jabbed.

Lily took in a breath to calm herself. “Okay, let’s put it this way. Petal, Velvet? You’re trying to get each other to fight. That’s not good! Look at what you’re doing to each other!”

The two looked at each other – and looked away in a huff.

Lily facehooved. There was no talking to them when they were like this. She’d need to pull them aside when they were in a better mood and have a more serious talk. She told them to just entertain themselves and not bother each other for the next little while and left it at that.

Arriving in the kitchen, she remembered that today was the potluck. She would have to bring something for Aiskera to serve – the Flat was always so nice to them. Lily was thinking her special ‘lily sandwiches’. Only the ponies on the street would actually like it, but that was just fine with Lily. She opened the cupboard, a smile on her face.

She screamed.

Her kids ran into the room. “Mom, what is it!?” Petal blurted.

“I… I… I forgot to go shopping! We’ll have to get ingredients today!” She grabbed her head. “I’ll have to take you two into a store!”

~~~

Within a community as small as Armadillo Street, one would be surprised to find enough teenagers around to constitute an actual ‘troublemakers’ group. But this didn’t stop three friends from getting into all the trouble they could think of on any given day.

The leader of the troop was a teenage blue dragon with red highlights named Tyr. He looked rather predatory and menacing – until he talked in a squeaky voice that was annoyingly stupid, even to his ears. The other two were significantly younger – one was a markless Sweetie Belle known as Lemon for her bright yellow color, and the other was a human boy, Edmund.
Both Lemon and Tyr knew Edmund was an absolute idiot. Edmund was only sometimes aware of this fact.

“So… What are we doing here?” Edmund asked, leaning over the edge of a factory platform. Tyr grabbed him by the shirt before he fell into the abyss.

“We’re here because our parents told us not to be here, obviously,” Lemon declared. She levitated a rock and threw it into the abyss. She didn’t hear it hit the bottom. “Tyr?”

Tyr spread his wings. “On it.” He flew down, leaving Lemon and Edmund on top.

“So… Ed. It’s just you and me…” Lemon said.

“Yeah. It is.” Edmund smiled stupidly, playing with his firebending in his hands.

“Why don’t we do something fun? You know, like m-”

“Play dodge the fireball!?” Edmund squealed with glee.

Lemon facehooved. “No, Ed, no… I mean you, me, maki-”

Tyr returned, interrupting Lemon’s plot. “Nothing down there. Lemon, I told you to stop hitting on Edmund.”

“Well what else am I going to do?”

“Get over this ‘I need a boyfriend’ phase quickly,” Tyr muttered, stretching his wings.

“Uh, how about you find me some eligible bachelors on this street that aren’t you two!?”

Tyr grabbed the bridge of his nose. “Why do I even have to say this? Edmund is only like… Edmund, how old are you?”

“Eleventy-six!” came his response.

“Right. I don’t even know why I asked. The point is maybe he’s in double digits, but I doubt it. Too young.”

“Oh and you’re too old, mister ‘teenage’ dragon?”

“I am just flat out not interested.”

“BUT ALL THE OTHER GIRL-”

“All the other girls on the street are fine, Lemon. Actually, here’s an idea, how about you go check one of them out?”

“Ew.”

“Why is that ew?” Edmund asked.

“Shush, grownups are talking,” Tyr said.

This made Lemon laugh. “Grownups? Us? Wow you’re delusional.”

Tyr looked angry for a moment – then he laughed. “I forget you can have good points sometimes.”
“All part of my charm,” Lemon said, tossing her mane. “Does this mea-”

“No,” Tyr said. “No it does not.”

She humphed. “You’re going to need to drive us to a club or something in your car one of these days.”

“The moment I figure out how to remove the tracker we’re leaving this place and never coming back,” Tyr declared. “FREEDOM!”

“Freedom!” Edmund echoed without any real idea what he was agreeing with.

There was silence after this.

“Okay, bored again,” Lemon declared. “Edmund, bring out your Stand and do something fun.”

“But Squishy Beats doesn’t come out when I tell him!” Edmund complained. “Only the fire does… Sometimes.”

“Tyr, scare the living bejeezus out of him,” Lemon ordered.

Tyr raised an eyebrow. “Last time I did that I got a broken nose. Also who made you in charge?”

“Both of you by refusing my advances.”

“That’s not how this works.”

“It can if I say it does.”

“But you’re not in charge!”

Lemon giggled. “Nice paradox, huh?”

Edmund clapped. Tyr rolled his eyes.

“…Still bored,” Lemon said a few seconds later. “We need to do something. Besides throw ourselves into the bottomless pit.”

Edmund raised his hand. “Ooh! Ooh!”

“Yes, Ed,” Lemon said, pointing at him. “What is it?”

“Let’s go visit the Witch! Get her magic!”

The two looked at him with fear for a moment. Nobody bothered the witch. Then the two of them realized they didn’t know why nobody bothered the witch. They decided it was time to find out.

“We’ll need a plan. And supplies… Especially cloaks. I saw a guy wearing one and I couldn’t even tell who he was! Gotta get those…” Tyr rubbed his clawed hands together. “Oooh, time to solve a mystery…”

“Grab some magic artifacts from the hands of evil magic users!” Lemon declared. “That’ll move me up in the League for sure!”

“Yay!” Edmund decreed, launching fire into the air. The way he did it provided enough force to make the floor around them creak, threatening to fall into the abyss.
The three of them got out of there quickly.

~~~

Aiskera was beyond happy. *Everything* was going unbelievably smoothly. All the tables were in perfect condition, the tablecloths were all clean without so much as a blemish, and the centerpiece plants were excellent in every case. Along one side of the wooden platform ran a long table, upon which dozens of cooking utensils were sat. Aiskera would wait for it to be closer to potluck time to actually start cooking, but that didn’t stop her from being proud of what she’d done. She’d even left spots for others to bring their own food! How wonderful!

She rubbed her hands together. What to do now… What to do… She adjusted some of the napkins, but realized it didn’t need to be *that* neat. She didn’t want to turn into Twilight, after all! That would be a little extreme. No Twilights lived on the Street, so everything was going to be fine.

It was at this moment Aiskera realized, she was bored. She couldn’t do any more work for at least a little while, she was already done with all the prep that *could* be done now. Pride in her work or no, she had a few hours before she actually had to do anything.

What was she going to do until then?

Cat? No… Robot? No… TV? No…

She wished someone could come talk to her. But nobody was going to be here until the potluck…

“Hey, you.”

Aiskera looked down at a cream-coated earth pony. “Yes? Can I help you?” It was so rare to see visitors on Armadillo Street. Clearly this was a version of Bon Bon, but she couldn’t be sure which one.

“Yes, I’m Bon Bon – Equis Vitis – and I was chasing a cloaked, humanoid individual through here. Have you seen anything like that?”

Aiskera shook her head. “No, nobody’s been around here except you.”

“Oh.” Bon Bon blinked. “What are you doing here anyway?”

“It’s a community potluck!” Aiskera beamed, happy to talk about her day’s work. “See, I thought it would be a good way to bring our little community together – you know, since we all kind of live our own separate lives. Everyone will come here and have a nice meal together! Oh! You could come too if you wanted! Don’t worry about bringing anything, it’s not required.”

Bon Bon smiled warmly. “Maybe if I’m still around here when it happens. But I am going to search this street for that shadowy person first.”

“I could help!”

“Eh… Do you have tracking expertise?”

Aiskera deflated. “Ah… No.”

“Sorry. I’ll do it myself. Thanks for the offer though. Nice to meet you… Uh…”

“Aiskera.”
“Oh, right. How’d the Flat Fluttershy end up down here?”

“Needed a change,” Aiskera said. “Was tired of being the emissary of the gods and having three voices and all that chaos. Moved to Celestia City on the first ship. Ended up here because… Really not sure. Ka, maybe.”

“Everyone blames ka for everything these days.”

“Well, it is responsible for everything, isn’t it?”

“And it’s never the only thing responsible for anything,” Bon Bon said. “…Almost never.”

“The Beat Curse?”

“Yeah. That.” Bon Bon shook her head. “I’ve got to search around. I’ll probably look very suspicious while doing it, so you’ll have my back?”

“Of course!” Aiskera said, beaming. “You go find your mysterious cloaked person!”

“I will,” Bon Bon said, walking over to the next house.

Aiskera took a moment to look around after Bon Bon had left – and sighed. What was she going to do now?

…Maybe she should just go watch TV…

~~~

Bon Bon pondered what her next move should be. She didn’t really have much in the way of leads, the trail had ran completely cold. She supposed she could just stay here until the potluck, but waiting that long while there was some kind of prowler on the loose?

…Why did she even care so much? It was just some guy in a cloak. Suspicious, yes, but not necessarily dangerous. Perhaps she was just trying to distract herself.

Exactly like that woman back there was trying to do. She was clearly putting up a façade of happiness just to fool herself. Most of the people on this street probably didn’t care in the slightest about this potluck. Bon Bon felt sad for the Flat – she put so much energy into what she was doing, and yet there was nobody helping her or even looking her way that Bon Bon could see.

All the more reason to show up for the potluck herself. At least give her someone to talk to. It would be good for both of them, frankly.

Bon Bon shook her head – that was a future concern. Now she had a very present concern, one of trying to pick up the trail again. If that was even possible. As far as Bon Bon knew, it was a teleporter she was chasing, or a shapeshifter, or some other esoteric power that could easily make all her efforts pointless.

Did she miss her days as an agent? Was that it? These days she was sitting behind a desk. It was a very important job that required a quick eye and the ability to judge people, but it was still a desk job. She sat around all day, rarely finding any reason to detain anyone. Very few fought back. Those that did were either pathetically easy or needed high-level magics to keep subdued.

Should she go back to the life of danger and the edge? Renee was always looking for more explorers. And Bon Bon had heard from the many contacts she’d made over the years that there was
a secret agency she could be a part of if she just brought it up with one of the Overheads.

Was this a midlife crisis? It felt like a midlife crisis.

Some ponies did only make it to one-twenty…

She sighed. She was depressing herself again. This is what happened when Lyra wasn’t around to talk to. Which was more often than Bon Bon would have liked. Bon Bon checked her phone – still no calls from Lyra. She tried to call, but got nothing.

Bon Bon sucked it up and shook her head – she should focus back on her self-given mission. Observe the people in this town… Er, street. The suspect was probably one of them, in here. For all she knew he could be preparing some nefarious scheme, and she had to stop it.

She saw a version of Lily – possibly even the Lily that Bon Bon knew back in the day – dragging two kids to a ‘store’ across the street from Aiskera’s potluck. The ‘store’ was a teleport depot. Not everyone had easy access to one of the supermalls of Celestia City, so numerous locations had cropped up with a teleporter to order items directly as needed. This particular ‘store’ actually bothered to have some goods pre-teleported and a few displays, which was more than Bon Bon had seen elsewhere.

Bon Bon’s thoughts on the ‘store’ were forgotten when she noticed that one of Lily’s kids was not a pony. A small, deep red Gem. Probably an off-color, since Bon Bon didn’t recognize the type. She would have been ejected from the Gem Vein at birth and sent to one of Merodi Universalis’ Gem outposts where the off-colors were accepted. Why was she here? Was she lost, and Lily found her? Probably… Bon Bon realized it didn’t matter. Judging by the expression on this Lily, she was one of the skittish kinds that would scream at everything. Even if she had a human transformation pendant she would not have been able to keep her cool like the figure Bon Bon had chased.

She sighed, deciding she might as well just talk to anyone she saw.

~~~

Lily ran into the doors of the teleporter store, dragging her two children behind at high speeds. The ‘store’ had two aisles of random assorted goods and a refrigerating unit embedded in the left wall. The right contained the counter that a deer stallion named Fern normally sat behind, next to the teleporter itself.

Lily needed to be in and out of here fast – agh, but she never shopped here. How exactly did it work again? She k-

She didn’t finish her thought because she saw Tyr and the troublemakers standing at the counter. She screamed, rushing herself and her kids out the door and holding her chest.

“Mom, you’re embarrassing us!” Petal blurted. “I’ve told you not to do that in front of Lemon!”

“Hmph. Lemon specifically is telling,” Velvet commented.

Lily put a hoof on Petal’s mouth before she could retort. “Right, right, I’m sorry. I’m going to go back in there and… Check out the aisles. Stay close to me.”

“Yes mom,” the two said in unison.

Lily took in a breath, overcoming her natural skittish fear and marching into the store. She didn’t even look at Tyr. Dragons terrified her. Any dragon that wasn’t a baby dragon was absolutely
monstrous. She knew he wasn’t a… horrible kid, but she just couldn’t deal with him. Ever.

“Bread, bread, bread…” Lily muttered, holding her ears to her head, trying not to listen to what was happening at the counter. She failed miserably.

“We’ll need magic improvement vitamins,” Lemon said. “Or, I will, but you know.”

Fern nodded, marking a few things on a notepad. “Going on an outing?”

“Yeah!” Edmund blurted. “W-

Tyr shut him up with a finger to his mouth. “What we’re doing is none of your business.”

The deer raised an eyebrow. “Dudes, I will literally sell you anything I legally can for literally any reason. You make this boring street interesting.”

“Thank you, Fern,” Lemon said.

“We’ll also need masks and dark cloaks,” Tyr said.

“I’m loving the sounds of this,” Fern declared with a big smirk. “Anything else? Foam weapons?”

“We haven’t broken the last ones yet,” Lemon declared. “We’re still prepared. We just have to liberate them.”

“The evil parent chest!” Edmund said, raising a fist in the air.

“Yeah, that,” Lemon said.

Lily couldn’t find any bread that wasn’t bagels. She was also liking less and less what she was hearing come out of the troublemakers’ mouths.

Come on Lily, you’re an adult. They’re just children. You don’t have to be scared of them.

She turned around, saw Tyr, let out another eep and turned back around. Something within her terrified mind still made her blurt something out. “W-What are you kids doing?”


“What she means is that we’re having a little party, just to ourselves. Themed costumes,” Tyr explained.

Lily whimpered at the sound of his voice. “I… Uh… Okay. Right. You have everything you need?”

Fern teleported the items and accepted Tyr’s card as payment.

“We do now!” Edmund said, grinning. The three of them ran out of the store.

Lily let out a sigh of relief – she didn’t know what had come over her. “H-hey F-fern? Can I have some b-bread?”

Fern nodded, teleporting a loaf. He took Lily’s card. “You know, that was really dumb back there.”

“I k-know…” Lily said, still shaking. “I don’t know…”

“I don’t either. Here’s your bread. Anything else?”
“I… I don’t know, let me think…”
She heard the familiar sound of Velvet and Petal fighting behind her. She didn’t even know what over – could have been anything. Literally anything.

“I said it’s mine!”
“You haven’t bought it yet!”
“I will! I have the money!”
“But I saw it first!”
“No you didn’t! Stop lying!”
Lily sighed. “That’ll be all, Fern.” She turned around to look at the kids.
They were fighting over a firework.
Velvet had her Gem weapon – a sparkler stick – out.

Lily screamed.
The sound made Velvet twitch in just the wrong way, lighting the firework. It blasted right through the window and across the street, embedding itself in the side of Aiskera’s wooden platform. For a moment, it seemed like nothing would happen.
Then the firework exploded in an impressive shower of blue, catching the wood on fire.
Lily fainted.

Velvet and Petal glanced at each other, panic on their faces. They took off in a run.
Fern put his face in his hooves and sighed.

~~~

“We sure fooled her!” Lemon blurted, a smile on her face. “Lily suspects nothing!”

Tyr chuckled. “We got her, all right. Flawless plan. Absolutely flawless.”
Edmund whooped.

“Cloaks! Now!” Tyr said, ordering everyone to put the dark hoods over their bodies. Edmund’s was far too large for him, but he didn’t care. They looked ready to handle absolutely anything.

They left Armadillo Street and walked into the crystal garden, the blue glow giving their forms eerie highlights. They walked along the smooth ground, the pillars of minerals acting like trees for them.

Lemon munched on a magic vitamin.

“You need to save those,” Tyr said.
“If we get attacked by a wolf I’ll need it.”

“Wolf!??” Edmund blurted, clinging to Tyr’s leg.
Tyr removed him with his claw. “This isn’t a real forest. There are no wolves. There’s just the Witch.”

“No wolves?”

“No wolves.”

Edmund decided this was enough for him and he started taking point.

“Other way, dumbass,” Tyr muttered, facepalming.

“I’ve never been to the Witch’s house! You’re the one who told me about it!”

“His descriptions are pointless,” Lemon said. “The Witch’s house is a towering blue monstrosity in which she cooks kids like us to feed her horrible spells!”

“She’d never get away with that,” Tyr pointed out. “Her evil is going to be more subtle. Our job is to find out what it is.”

Lemon smirked. “Cutie mark crusaders witch hunters yay!”

“By Torch, stop, stop,” Tyr insisted. “That call is so annoying.”

“I know. That’s why I did it, genius.”

Tyr grunted and shook his head. “Look, we’re almost there. Prepare yourselves.”

They found a house made of the same material as the rest of the crystals, albeit much more organized. It was, of course, blue. The structure had three stories, the boundaries between each one decorated with teardrop designs. There were no lights on whatsoever, and the pointed spires of the construction made it even more menacing. The troublemakers swore they could hear the sound of a river running through here, but there were no rivers or even visible pipes.

Tyr crouched down, prompting the other two to do the same even though they were already plenty short enough. He gestured for them to follow as he snuck across the ground to one of the first floor windows. The three of them poked their heads up so they could look in. The interior room was lit by the glowing of the crystals, showing what appeared to be an abandoned painting studio. None of the paints were open, the canvas was blank, and everything was clean.

“Let’s go!” Edmund shouted.

“SHHHHH!” Lemon and Tyr hissed.

Edmund shut up.

Tyr looked around to see if they’d been heard – and saw nothing. He pushed his claw into the center division of the window set, forcing it to swing open like a set of doors. He crawled in, the two others following behind him. Lemon munched on a magic vitamin and Tyr didn’t scold her.

They were inside.

Edmund was shaking, Lemon was chewing far more than she needed to, and Tyr was struggling to get his breathing under control.

Lemon was eventually the first one to speak. “W-we should open the door and look around.”
“Yeah,” Tyr said, turning the doorknob and entering a darker, but still blue hallway. He briefly wondered how the walls of this place didn’t glow.

The three of them snuck around, wordlessly, hearts racing. All of them pondered saying they should just give up and go home – but they knew that if they were the first one to chicken out, they’d never hear the end of it.

They eventually came to a staircase and began to move up it, slowly. Since it was made mostly of crystal, it didn’t creak when they stepped on it, which did wonders to calm their nerves.

Of course the noise they heard behind them did the exact opposite.

The three troublemakers turned around – and saw a tall, humanoid figure shrouded in a dark cloak. They screamed.

~~~

Bon Bon had gotten lucky – she’d seen three hooded figures out of the corner of her eye. None of them had the same build as the one she’d been chasing, but that didn’t mean they weren’t related. She’d followed the three of them at a distance through the crystal garden.

She was unable to hear what they said from her vantage points, but they were certainly arguing with each other a lot. A lot of evil minions did that. They might serve the real threat that was somewhere out here in these woods…

They were leading her right to where she needed to be.

She followed the three of them all the way to the mysterious house. Gem construction, clearly, though strangely modeled after human architectural ideas. Slightly unusual, but given the rest of Celestia city not all that unexpected.

She noted that the three of them were breaking in. So this wasn’t their base… What could it mean?

Bon Bon stopped when they entered – if she followed them, she would be breaking and entering. She had enough connections to get her out of trouble, yes, but it wouldn’t look good on her record at all. She was on vacation and hadn’t worked as an agent in the field for… she didn’t even know anymore.

Shaking these thoughts from her mind, she moved closer to the house, poking her head up to see through the window. The three of them had already moved deeper into the house, leaving the art studio as empty as it had been for, apparently, quite a while. Bon Bon noted that the room hadn’t even been dusted in a while.

Bon Bon looked at the slightly open door the three had left through. Should she chase them? Should she call some actual authorities? Call and then go in anyway? Or maybe she could crawl around the outside of the house and do something without even ente-

The sound of screams decided for her – she was going in. She galloped into the art studio and through the open doorway. Her ears told her that the screams originated from right… here.

She found herself in a small room with two staircases and numerous other doors. There were no signs of anything – this room had been well dusted, and crystal floors did not lend well to tracking. She wrinkled her muzzle, annoyed. Some people had screamed in terror here. It must had been for a reason…
She opened one of the doors and walked through, finding a living room. It had nobody in it, but a television was on. Set to… static. Who would set their TV to static? She touched her hoof to the screen, examining it closely. There seemed to be nothing to it. Just standard static.

*Standard creepy factor item*, Bon Bon thought, already on edge. The silence of this place was getting to her as well. She wished she had her gun, or her grappling hook, or anything. She was very capable with her own four hooves, but that didn’t stop her from wishing she had her equipment.

She entered another room, this one a parlor. She expected to find some picture frames or belongings that could tell her about the person who lived here, but there was nothing. Every type of furnishing was generic, blue, or just slightly creepy. There was a mounted gemstone on a nearby wall. Clearly not a Gem’s gemstone, but that was still unnerving, especially considering how the wood it was mounted on was bordered in teardrop shapes.

*It’s blue, I get it, I get it*, Bon Bon thought to herself. She found a flight of stairs and went up, finding a room with *nothing* in it, and yet it was so clean it sparkled.

The windowless room really should have been dark, but it wasn’t.

Bon Bon felt her coat hairs stand on end. She was *scared*. But she was one of the best agents ever, why would she let herself be scared? That was dumb. This was just some house in the middle of Celestia City, and there hadn’t been anything besides the screams that had actually seemed dangerous. Merely a creepy aesthetic… Lack of family photos… And a possible person menacingly planning evil…

She needed to stay strong. She needed to-

Freezing, Bon Bon’s ears started swiveling around. She heard *water*. Water in the *walls*.

It had been a background noise until just now – she’d assumed there was a pipe running under the ground, delivering water to the rest of the City. But *in* the house? What was going on?

The water *switched* the direction of flow as she thought that. A small crack formed in the wall and sprayed her in the face.

She didn’t scream – but she did run away.

~~~

Aiskera smelled something burning. At first she thought it was just the food – but then she remembered she hadn’t started cooking yet.

She leaped off the couch, upsetting the cat enough to prompt a loud yowl. She ran to the window and saw the fire. Her beautiful wooden platform – being reduced to cinders!

She ran to her closet and pulled out a fire extinguisher. In her rush back to the front door, she tripped, spraying the foam inside her house. She ignored this, continuing outside and unleashing the rest of the foam all over the fiery platform.

When the fire was put out, she fell to her knees.

It was ruined. It was *all* ruined. The platform wasn’t strong enough to stand on anymore. The tables were blackened in a few places and the tablecloths were nothing but tatters. She couldn’t even see the centerpieces anymore. There was no way this would be a potluck anymore. It was *gone*.
She started crying.

Who was she kidding? It wasn’t going to be a potluck anyway. There wasn’t a sense of community on this street. Everyone lived here because they liked things to be quiet. Because they wanted to be alone most of the time. Who cared about a party? Nobody, that’s who. Lily would come just to pity her, and then she’d scream and run away some point in the middle…

Nobody was going to bring anything. It would just be a wash. It was always going to be a wash.

She didn’t know why she even tried so hard for this community. They didn’t care.

Then she saw them.

A humanoid figure, shrouded in a dark cloak. They stood among the ruined potluck preparations, taller than anyone Aiskera knew. It must have been the one Bon Bon had warned her about.

“You…” Aiskera said, curling her fist. “You did this!”

The figure made no response, simply standing impassively.

It had been a long time since Aiskera had fought anyone for any reason. She had left those days behind her. But she was so done with today. She took a fighting stance and rushed the cloaked figure.

The figure receded, dashing out of Armadillo Street and toward the abandoned factory district.

Aiskera pursued relentlessly. She saw Lily’s kids hanging around behind a house, watching the chase with mesmerized eyes.

Aiskera didn’t care what they saw – she needed to catch this… potluck crasher! Catch them and make them pay!

It was at this point Aiskera realized she no longer had sight of the dark figure. They had… vanished?

Aiskera shook her hand and punched the air – stupid magic powers, making things like this just more and more difficult! They’d gotten away, and now she was here in the depressing abandoned factory, standing on a rickety metallic platform above a bottomless pit. At least this area had hand railings, but it was still horribly unsafe.

She started walking around aimlessly, despondent.

~~~

Lily sat at the edge of one of the abandoned factory’s platforms, staring at the bottomless pit below.

Something in the back of her mind told her she should be terrified and run away from the falling hazard, but for once that side of her was in the background. Right now, all she could think of was her own failures.

She had passed out when the fire had started, and when she came to her kids were gone. Fern had told her where to look, and she’d ran, screaming their names. But they didn’t come to her. No matter how much she wailed and promised they wouldn’t be in trouble if they just told her where they were…

She was a failure as a mother. She had lost both of them. For all she knew they were in that bottomless pit, having fallen down because they had run from her. Because she had scared them.
She put her head in her hooves – she should have dropped everything and had that conversation with them, even if they were still angry. She… She would have found some way to not let them walk over her, right? She wasn’t that much of a pushover…

Who was she kidding; she was the biggest pushover in the world. The moment Petal was a little older she was going to figure out all she had to do to control her mother was scare her a little. Velvet had already figured it out. They were going to fight each other their entire childhoods and then grow bitter as they aged, and she would never see either of them…

What would have happened if she never found Velvet that day? Would Petal be… Okay? Not angry all the time?

She hated that thought. She hated it so much. But that didn’t keep her from thinking it.

She removed her hooves from her eyes, staring at the abyss below.

Such nothingness.

“Lily?”

“AUGH!” Lily shouted, leaping back from the edge, whirling around as if she were about to be attacked by a predator. “AAA- oh, Aiskera.” Lily grabbed her chest. “Don’t sneak up on me like that… There was an equal chance I could have jumped off the edge in fear!”

“I would have caught you,” Aiskera said, her eyes telling of her own tears. “What are you doing out here?”

“I… I was looking for my kids. I couldn’t find them. They… They could be…”

“I saw them back at Armadillo Street before I came here,” Aiskera said. “They’re fine.”

“Oh thank Celestia… Wait, you didn’t punish them did you?”

“Punish them…?”

“…They lit your potluck on fire.”

Aiskera blinked. “I coulda sworn that was…” She shook her head. “No, I didn’t, I didn’t know it was them.”

“Good. Because I… I need to talk to them.” She looked back toward Armadillo Street. “I need to head back.”

Aiskera nodded. “Mind if I keep you company?”

“Not at all,” Lily admitted.

The two of them set back to town.

“What were you doing out here?” Lily asked.

“Well… I saw a cloaked figure. I thought they were the ones who had started the fire, so I chased them. Then I lost them. Then I found you.”

“Oh… Did you at least put out the fire quickly?”
Aiskera looked down. “I… didn’t notice it until I smelled smoke. I was watching TV. I shouldn’t have been watching TV…”

“You did what you could,” Lily asserted.

“Yeah… But why did I bother? Nobody but you ever really comes to these things I organize. And yet I keep trying, and trying, and trying, all for nothing.”

“We enjoy them!”

“You enjoy them until your kids get fed up and then you go home.”

Lily looked down, ashamed.

“And nobody else is a regular. Nobody. I’m living in delusion, Lily. Big delusions…”

“...I was going to make lily sandwiches,” Lily said out of the blue. “I went to the store to get bread and everything, even facing Tyr down. I… I was looking forward to it.”

Aiskera smiled sadly. “You can bring it to my house. We can have a private dinner. But… There won’t be a potluck. And sadly nobody is going to care. There might even be a sigh of relief. ‘Aiskera finally got it through her thick skull that we don’t like community’. Gah…”

Lily sighed. “I moved here because I liked community, but didn’t like the noises of the city. It was the perfect place. You’re the one who convinced me to move in, remember?”

“Yeah… Yeah I do,” Aiskera said, looking up at the ceiling. “Maybe I shouldn’t need anyone else to care.”

Lily smiled. “That’s the spirit a- AUGH!” She jumped back, holding a shaky hoof forward.

Petal and Velvet were standing where the fire had been. They had removed the wooden platform and just set up the half-charred tables directly on the ground. They were currently arranging the cooking utensils on the larger table. They heard the scream of their mother and froze in place.

Tears came to Lily’s eyes. “You two… You’re fixing it? Together?”

Petal flushed. For once Velvet was at a loss for words.

Lily pulled the two of them into a hug. “You’re the best daughters ever!”

“Mooom!” Petal complained, struggling – but eventually she gave in.

She put the two of them down. “I… I’m so proud of what you two have done here. Rebuilt all of this…”

“It’s still charred,” Velvet said.

“We’re sorry,” Petal added. Velvet nodded in confirmation.

Lily turned to Aiskera. “Still think we might be able to have a potluck?”

Aiskera looked at the half-burnt tables and the lack of decorations. “Eh, screw it, who cares if it looks nice anyway?” She threw her arms wide. “Let’s make a potluck!”

“Yeah!” the other three shouted.
The troublemakers were on the third floor. They had stopped running a while ago, and realized they were well and truly lost in the maze of rooms.

Yet, still, none of them had suggested they just jump out a window. Tyr had wings, he could catch them easily. But even in their state of heightened fear, none of them would do anything to make themselves look more scared than any of the others. They had all screamed at once, yes, but that was a thing to never speak of again. There may have been a shadowy figure, yeah, but they could take them. It didn’t matter that Edmund’s Stand hadn’t hit anything – they weren’t a ghost. They definitely weren’t a ghost.

Definitely not.

Tyr had left his cloak behind, opting instead to be as obvious and menacing as he possibly could be. Dragons were never pushovers, and he wanted the Witch and that shadow person to know that.

That thought took his mind off of his fear.

“Do you think that was the witch?” Tyr asked.

“Of course, who else could it be?” Lemon blurted.

“But the Witch is a Gem,” Tyr pointed out. “I don’t think that was them…”

“Maybe she has a husband… Or a son…” Edmund suggested. “Or a dog!”

“Did that look like a dog to you?”

“Uh… Yes?”

Lemon facehooved. “Uuugh… Look, let’s just find the magic already.”

“You can’t rush these things,” Tyr said, opening another door. “After all, it could be hidden anywh-“

“Found it,” Edmund said, pointing at the center of the room they had just entered. A white crystal ball sat upon a pedestal, glowing with a soft light.

Lemon munched on a magic vitamin, walking up to the crystal ball. “Let me have a crack at it.” She surrounded it in her green magical aura, effectively poking it. “Docile…” She lifted it off of its pedestal. “Heh. Mission accompl-“

The water rushing in the walls of the house increased in volume tenfold. Cracks started appearing, spraying water at them.

Tyr smirked. Exactly the kind of thing he was there for. He sucked in and let out his blue fire, evaporating the water jets. Edmund joined in with his decidedly less impressive firebending, keeping them all dry. “Let’s move!” Tyr called.

Lemon nodded, hoisting the crystal ball toward the door they came in. They were about to leave…

But then the Witch showed up.

She was a blue Gem with a teardrop gemstone on her forehead. Her hair was long and flowed behind her almost like a cape, and she wore a dress of the darkest blue her gemstone could generate. In one of her hands was a purple wand that clearly wasn’t her Gem weapon.
The troublemakers screamed. Edmund summoned his Stand, Squishy Beats, transforming the floor below them to rubber. The Stand tried to turn the Witch into rubber, but the hardlight body of a Gem proved to be something Squishy Beats couldn’t effect.

With her free hand the Witch demonstrated powerful hydrokinesis that shoved all three of the troublemakers across the room. With the wand, she teleported the crystal ball to her, catching it in a bowl of water.

She took a step toward the three cowering forms.

Bon Bon crashed in through a nearby door; placing herself between the kids and the Witch, ready to fight. “That’s far enough!” Bon Bon said, hiding her own fear well. She was actually terrified and knew that, without her equipment, she couldn’t take a Lapis Gem in a fight, and definitely not a Lapis Gem with some bizarre magic wand.

The Witch blinked. “…Who are you?” she asked with a kind, simple voice.

Bon Bon blinked. “…I’m Bon Bon? I heard screams and I rushed to help. You were attacking these kids!”

The Witch raised an eyebrow. “They broke into my house and tried to steal my crystal ball. I wasn’t going to hurt them, just give them a good scare.” She placed the crystal ball back on the pedestal and cut all the water flowing into the room. “Thanks for ruining that, by the way.”

Bon Bon blinked. “Uh… Sorry.” She turned to the three kids. “What were you thinking?”

“Uh… save the world from the Witch’s evil schemes?” Lemon suggested.

“Yeah!” Edmund said. “Stop the evil plans!”

The Witch blinked. “…You thought I was evil?”

“Who else hides all alone in a creepy cottage in a crystal forest with strange magics?” Tyr asked.

“…Hermits?” the Witch suggested. She put a hand to her head. “Look, I’m not evil. I’m Lapis. The reason I live out here is because I could build my own house the way I wanted without worrying about space requirements.”

“Wow. You’re not scary at all,” Lemon commented.

Lapis pointed a wand at Lemon. “I can be.”

Bon Bon stepped between them. “Let’s not do that. I do have a question, though. Have you seen a dark, cloaked figure? Humanoid, definitely not draconic.”

“Yeah!” Edmund blurted. “They were in this house! Scared us silly!”

Lapis shook her head. “There’s no one else here. I live alone. You were seeing things.” She touched her crystal ball, frown deepening. “I’ve always been alone here.”

Bon Bon sensed that comment was an invitation. “You don’t want to be alone, do you?”

“Not really. I was happy here for the first little while… But then it got boring… I can’t paint anymore…” She shook her head. “But I don’t want to leave this house. It was so much work.”

“There’s a secluded ‘town’ of sorts at the edge of the crystals,” Bon Bon said. “Armadillo Street.
They’re even having a potluck today and everything. I was invited, I’m sure they’d like to see another new face as well.”

“Oh?”

“And the woman running it could stand some new company, from what I saw.”

Lapis pondered this for a moment. “…You know, it would be really good to get out. Let’s go.” She turned to the troublemakers, smiling. “You three are coming as well, right?”

“…Sure,” Tyr said, thinking any other response was likely to get him doused in more water.

Bon Bon led the group back to town. They found the potluck in the process of being rebuilt by Aiskera, Lily, and her kids.

“Why hell- AUGH!” Lily shouted, seeing Tyr. “AUGH!” She blurted, noticing Lapis. She ran under a table and hid.

Lapis blinked. “Uh…”

“Don’t mind mom,” Petal said. “She’s scared of everything. Uh… Who are you?”

“I was wondering the same thing,” Aiskera said.

“A Lapis Lazuli,” Lapis said. “Though apparently you might know me as the Witch.”

Aiskera blinked. “Wow! I thought Tyr was just talking when he said you existed. I guess not!”

Bon Bon smiled. “She needs some friends. Think you can provide?”

Aiskera looked at the cowering form of Lily. “In time, yes. Give Lily a bit though, she’ll recover.”

Lapis nodded. She drew her wand. “Need any help here? I know a lot of spells.”

“Go right ahead!” Aiskera encouraged.

Lapis used her wand to strengthen all the tables and remove the charred blackness. She created some crystal-construct plates for the tables as well.

“Wow! You’re great at this!” Aiskera said, clapping. “Now we can start cooking!”

“Right. Food,” Lapis said, rubbing the back of her head. “I don’t need to eat so I don’t know how to cook.”

Tyr perked up. “…Would you like to know how to cook?”

“It could be interesting, I suppose. Food does taste good.”

Tyr rubbed his hands together. “Lucky you I’m a master chef.”

“Cooking is lame!” Lemon blurted.

“Ignore the yellow fruit,” Tyr declared. “Right this way. I hope you like shrimp scampi…”

Aiskera shook her head – she had no idea Tyr knew how to cook!
Velvet picked up Petal and shoved her next to Lemon.

Lemon glared at Petal. “What do you want?”

“Uh… Heheheh… Wanna… Erm, hang out maybe?”

Lemon groaned. “Ugh, Tyr, get her offa me!”

Tyr was ignoring everything she said, fully engrossed in his craft.

Petal smirked. “It looks like you don’t have anything better to do right now!”

Lemon facehooved. “Fine. What are we going to do, braid each other’s manes or something equally stupid?”

“How about just eat all the food that’s around?”

Lemon couldn’t find a way to declare this stupid. She grunted. “Fine.”

Petal turned to Velvet and winked. Velvet gave her a thumbs up.

Bon Bon walked up to Aiskera and smiled. “Is this what you were expecting?”

“No… Not at all. But I like it.”

“Y-yeah!” Lily said, poking her head out from under the table. “It’s… It’s nice!”

“Did you find the mysterious person, by the way?” Aiskera asked Bon Bon.

“Nope. I don’t think it matters though.” She gestured at the potluck. “This is a good enough ending for my tastes.”

“BON BON!” An overly excited voice shouted. “I found you!”

Bon Bon’s jaw dropped. “LYRA!?”

“Oh, Bon Bon! Do I have the story of a lifetime for you! I’ve just been jumping from universe to universe and OOOOH it was so awesome there were lasers there were robots there were humans and we saved at least one universe from certain doom! It was soooo epic! I was standing next to you one moment and then BAM I was in a firefight for my li-”

Bon Bon put a hoof on Lyra’s muzzle. “Lyra, shut up.”

“Uh?”

“Just shut up.” She gestured towards the potluck around them. “Let’s enjoy the simpler things in life for once. Not everything has to be a big grand adventure. In fact… In many ways, I think it’s better if it isn’t.” She smiled warmly at the people she had met today. “Look at this Lyra. There was no grand quest for the fate of existence with these people. They’re just living their lives. Living good lives. Let’s not try to turn this simple get together into an adventure, okay?”

“But…”

“No buts Lyra. No. Butts.”

“Heh. You said butts.”
Bon Bon rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Let’s sit down. I hear there’s a good shrimp scampi that’s about ready.”

They did.

Aiskera stood at the edge of the new potluck and genuinely smiled.

Who cared if it wasn’t perfect?

It was everything she wanted.

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The hooded figure watched the potluck from a distance, from the darkness of the abandoned factory area. Everything had gone exactly as planned…

The figure took off their hood, revealing a familiar face.

One of Aradia Megido.

She loved doing simple things for people as part of her job, sometimes. It helped her remember that the fate of everything was sometimes just as important as the feeling of community in a little street in the middle of nowhere.

She grinned, putting her hands together.

It was perfect. Simply perfect.
Nevermore

Granny Smith lived to the grand age of 199.

Despite her immense tenacity and earth pony determination, her time came, just like it came for everypony else.

She was essentially the founder of Ponyville, as almost everyone in the now-city knew. She saw it rise from a simple farm, to a close-knit community, to the immense crescent-shaped megacity that served as Equis Vitis’ springboard to the multiverse.

There had been a public service a few days prior that everyone in the city had been invited to. Luna had even given a speech, relating a story she had heard from Celestia about an ‘apple farmer with the strongest spirit I’d ever seen’. Eve said some things as well. Iroh even had a few words to say from his relatively short time knowing her, as did many members of the Apple family. Applejack, Big Mac, Applebloom, and the handful of Granny Smith’s own kids that were still alive did as well.

Big Mac didn’t say much, but to him, she was his foundation.

To Applejack, she was the one who taught her to be how she was.

To Applebloom, she was the only mother she had ever known.

But the time for speeches and publicity was over. Now it was just the private service. Words were spoken, but in hushed tones. The tears flowed freely without the prying eyes of the public. They were remembering Granny Smith themselves instead of helping others remember who she was.

The scene was her grave. One of many in the Apple Family graveyard. She was placed next to her mother and father, and no small number of her kids. The mare had lived an exceptionally long time – long enough to outlive many she shouldn’t have.

There were no more speeches to be had. Just tears and commiseration.

Eve, Renee, Flutterfree, Pinkie, Nova, Applejack, and Rainbow Dash huddled together on one end of the gathering, talking amongst themselves. They hadn’t all been together like this in a while. Elsewhere, Iroh was watching Applejack’s kids – as well as Rainbow Dash’s newborn. Corea was young… But she was old enough to feel pain. Old enough to remember.

Elsewhere Big Mac stood with his kids; Allure, Scootaloo, and Applebloom finding solace and remembrance in helping one of them with a cutie mark problem. And then the rest of the huge Apple family… Luna…

Corona wondered, not for the first time, why she was here. She hadn’t really known Granny Smith… She’d known the Earth Vitis version, yes, but humans didn’t live as long as ponies… Earth Vitis’s had left the land of the living what seemed like an eternity ago. She really didn’t know this one. And that angered her. It wasn’t the only thing that angered her – a lot of things swam around her head, driving her mad – but it was a big one.

She leaned against a fencepost, hiding behind her sunglasses. She had cried just like everyone else earlier, but she didn’t really feel like it was genuine. She was probably just empathizing, wasn’t she? Showing sorrow by reflex…
Response to another tragedy. This was no Bloodbath. There was no enemy to get angry at. Just another reminder that the world was cold, cruel, and uncaring. That it was pointless.

_Pointless._

She hadn’t really thought existence was pointless in a while… Not consciously anyway. But had she ever really convinced herself it wasn’t? She didn’t know. She avoided thinking about these things lately.

Which was to say all the time.

Corona sighed, adjusting her sunglasses. She was just sitting here, alone, driving herself into the depths of depression again. With a flash of her horn she teleported… elsewhere. Not her home, that was on Lai. She was on a street in Ponyville, walking.

It was raining. It hadn’t been raining at the graveyard. Was she supposed to thank the pegasi or the Everfree for that? She didn’t know. She really didn’t care.

She just walked.

It occurred to her that there seemed to be a habit of just walking in seemingly random directions when you didn’t want to think. Why was that? If you had no goal, all you could do was think. Walking wasn’t a very good distraction.

Maybe it wasn’t supposed to be?

But what would she even think about? How all the struggles mean jack diddly _nothing_ in the end? Sure, Granny Smith basically founded Ponyville and left behind a huge family, and she died surrounded by loved ones. But now that she was gone, how long would it take for the memory of her to fade to nothing? A few generations, ah, but Eve and numerous others were immortal, and Ponyville itself stood as a testament to her. But even they would die eventually, and Merodi Universalis would be forgotten… What would happen then? Future societies would find mysterious ancient constructs and have no idea what they meant.

How many of the ancient technologies had stories like that behind them? Millions upon millions of people in a society being part of making something, only for them to vanish and the purpose of the thing to get lost to time.

Another part of Corona reminded her that there was the _now_. All of it meant something _now_. There was great happiness and contentment everywhere. Hunger was basically a non-issue. There weren’t any full-scale wars happening within Merodi Universalis. Ponyville would remember Granny Smith _now_.

But how small was that against the expanse of everything? A single city in a multiverse of unimaginable size? Even the greatest of civilizations eventually fell. Always… Always…

She hung her head. She hadn’t even known Granny Smith that well. What was going on with her? Why did she _do_ this to herself every time? I’d _been_ doing better! Darn it! Darnit darnit darnit!

Corona felt a hoof on her shoulder. She didn’t jump, merely turning her head. “…Eve?”

“I saw you leave,” Eve said, a sad smile on her face. “I’m sorry. I should have called you over and not let you stand there alone. It was inconsiderate of me.”

“You seven needed your moment.”
“You’re a part of us, Corona, regardless of what you say.” Eve frowned. “We… We haven’t done much together in a long time, you and I.”

“Our paths took us different directions. And I needed space recently.”

“Do you still need space?”

Corona thought back to the few weeks she had spent with Olivia while she laid low. “…No. I don’t think so. Space… only goes so far.”

Eve nodded. “I wasn’t sure.”

“We haven’t really hung out much at all, have we?”

Eve shook her head. “I’m always busy.”

“I’m always locked away.”

The two stared at each other for a moment.

“We should do something,” Eve said, suddenly.

“…Today?”

“Why not today?” Eve asked.

“Because… you know.”

“Granny Smith would not have wanted us to avoid doing something together on her account. I’d think she’d be happy to know we’re talking to each other right now.”

Corona forced a smile. “Yeah that… sounds right.”

“Well… We’re in Ponyville. There’s so much to do around here.” She looked up at the sky. “A bit wet right now, though.”

Corona looked around. “…Yeah, not here. Not here…”

Eve pulled out her dimensional device. “Then… how about somewhere completely random?”

“Throw ourselves to ka?”

“I guess?” She turned a few dials until she found a set of coordinates she didn’t recognize that read ‘safe’. “What about this random place?”

Corona wanted to say no. Corona wanted to say yes. Corona didn’t know what she wanted.

She decided she’d just go with what Eve clearly wanted to do. “…Sure.”

Eve opened a portal and the two of them trotted in, leaving the dour atmosphere of Ponyville behind.

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The world was a forest. It was not *the* Forest World – that place was decidedly greener and livelier. This world had a constant overcast sky and trees that looked like they were struggling to produce green leaves.
It was not raining though, and Eve decided that was enough. “Well, here we are. Random forest number seven million and five.”

Corona adjusted her sunglasses. “We only know of a few million words.”

“Yes. And most of them have forests.”

Corona looked like she wanted to argue, but she just sighed and backed down. Eve didn’t push the topic any further.

“Let’s look for a river,” Eve suggested. “Wildlife is drawn to sources of water in most worlds. Except that one where it was reverse and water was toxic. That was fun.”

Corona made a ‘mhm’ noise, walking up to one of the trees and plucking off a leaf. It was a sickly green, the color of a leaf not quite living up to its potential. She saw herself in that leaf. In all these leaves.

Eve glanced behind her. “Corona… You coming?”

“Huh? Right, yeah. I was just examining the leaves. They all look… sickly.”

Eve nodded slowly. “Yeah… Either something’s draining at them, this isn’t their environment, or they’re actually perfectly healthy and this is just how trees are here.”

“There’s a high magic content.”

“Mostly ambient, not concentrated. And I don’t feel like the life is being sucked out of me. …Well, not because of the magic here, anyway.”

Corona shook her head. “Eve… You’re not okay.”

“Nope, definitely not. But I will be. You will be too.”

“…Right.”

Eve looked around, trying to think of something. “You know if we don’t find anything interesting, we could try roughing it. I’ve got the day off. We could live off the land for a day…”

“Have you seen any fruit? Or even animals to hunt?”

Eve conjured a peach and tossed it to Corona. Corona threw it behind her. “That’s not living off the land.”

Eve raised an eyebrow. She cut the peach in half, planted the seed in the ground, and grew the world’s smallest peach tree. It produced four tiny peaches in a few seconds.

“…Well I haven’t figured out how to make them full size yet,” Eve muttered. “Suppose this is why we need earth ponies.” She plucked the four fruits and gave two to Corona.

Corona bit down on one. She realized they still had pits. She spat it out and rubbed her jaw. “Ow…”

“Right… A peach probably wasn’t the best selection, was it?”

“Um… No.”

“What else… Bananas? I could try bananas. Miniature bananas would be fun to peel. I cou-“
“Eve, you’re bouncing off the walls,” Corona pointed out. “Calm down.”

“I am calm! I’m having a great time!”

“No, you’re not. You’re stuck in ‘I have to be cheery for Corona’s sake’ mode.”

Eve sighed. “I’m not trying to beat you down with being happy, Corona. I’m just trying to occupy us for a little while. Okay?”

“Yeah. I got that.”

Eve shook her head. “I’m… not sure you do.”

“Right. Fine.”

“Corona…”

“Eve, you don’t need to worry.”

“That’s like me telling you not to worry.” Eve raised an eyebrow. “I see you looking at me in concern.”

Corona stopped short. “…Yeah…”

“Corona, what happened to you?” Eve asked. “Where’s… Where’s that spark? I’d understand if you didn’t want to keep adventuring – it was frankly a silly and badly-timed idea anyway – but you’ve always stuck up for yourself.”

“I’m just not in the mood, I guess?” Corona said. “I don’t know. You should know that this isn’t just something you can pull yourself out of.”

Eve nodded. “That’s… true. But it’s not like you’re powerless.”

“That’s kind of the root of the whole thing,” Corona admitted.

“…How so?”

Corona shook her head. “Eve, now is not the time. I think you know that.”

“Corona, I think I know when the times are right. I be-“

Corona held up a hoof, ears alert. “Noise. My left. Crunching branch.”

Eve spread her wings and sent out a magical ping. She pointed. “There.”

The two ponies turned to see a unicorn and a human – friendly faces, rather than antagonistic.

“Eve?” Josuke Higashikata said, surprised. “What’re you doing here?”

“Yeah,” Sunny said, cocking her head. “I thought…”

“Chose a world at random,” Eve said, turning to Sunny and Josuke. “Is this one of the worlds you’re surveying, then?”

“Yeah,” Sunny declared. “Currently we’re trying to figure out what’s making the trees all sickly. They were pretty vibrant until a few days ago. When we figure that out we can approve settlement here.”
Eve smiled. “Good. I apologize if we’re in your way.”

“Oh not at all! We were just out exploring a little. Going for the edge of the forest. It’s a big one.”

“I swear it’s bigger than yesterday,” Josuke commented.

“We have no way of confirming that for certain,” Sunny pointed out. “Anyway, we can put our work on hold, there’s no rush. Hello! Corona, right?”

Corona nodded, shaking hooves with her counterpart.

“Sunny. The Evermore explorer. Do you… know about us?”

“Vaguely,” Corona admitted. “Can travel under your own power and are very old right?”

“Uh… That is one way of putting it!”

“Basically Vriska,” Josuke added.

“I’m not Vriska. And neither is she an Evermore.”

“Not much of a difference,” Josuke said. In the background a tree exploded and re-assembled itself from Crazy Diamond’s punch of boredom.

“Enough of one,” Eve declared. “It’s like the difference between warp and hyperspace drives. They can accomplish the same goal, but they go about it different ways.”

“Except Evermore are a bit more unique and come from only one place,” Sunny added.

“You show me someone else who travels the multiverse using luck,” Josuke pointed out.

Sunny scrunched up her muzzle. “I’m sure there is one but I can’t think of it right now.”

Josuke took a prideful pose. For anyone not from Earth Stand, the pose looked absolutely ridiculous. Eve chuckled.

“How’s the rest of your team?” Eve asked.

“Doing well. Beam’s building robots, as usual, and Sunburst is…” Sunny pondered this for a moment. “I want to say he’s still reading The Brothers Karamazov, but he might have finished it by now.”

“Deep reading, I see.”

“You read it?”

Eve laughed nervously. “I… read a summary.”

Sunny gasped. “You!? Read a summary!?”

“Hey, I had to figure out the basics of human culture and never actually got around to reading the full monstrous thing. Quite busy, you know.”

“Yeah, I guess I can understand that, promotion and all.” She glanced behind Eve at Corona. She walked up to her counterpart. “Hey.”

“Hm?”
“We’ve never met properly. You’re the ‘core’ Sunset around here. Can’t believe I never sought you out.”

“Oh, it’s… fine.”

Sunny shook her hoof. “Take it from me – it does get better.”

Corona blinked. “Hm?”

“Whatever you’re going through. It’ll get better. Take it from someone who is you.”

Corona was struck by this. She didn’t respond – and Sunny knew that meant she needed time to think. Sunny winked at her and pulled back. “Josuke! By chance did your punch reveal anything about that tree?”

“It felt like a tree,” Josuke pointed out.

“It’s… Greener,” Eve said, raising an eyebrow. “The rest of the trees are decidedly less vibrant.”

“They are getting worse,” Sunny decreed. “Quickly, too…” She narrowed her eyes. “Are there less leaves than there were when we started talking?”

Eve narrowed her eyes. “Maybe…”

Sunny padded at the ground as well. “The soil seems dead, too. This sort of ground couldn’t grow anything new.”

Eve tried to grow another peach tree – but this time it just sputtered and died in a curl of brown crusts. She blinked. “That worked a few minutes ago.”

“Strange…” Sunny said, looking around. “Seems darker, too.”

“Just fog,” Josuke said, gesturing at the loose mist around them.

Sunny froze.

“What, too spooky for you?” Josuke ribbed.

“No, that’s not it at all,” Sunny said, a hoof to her head. “This… This forest is transforming before our eyes.” The moment she said it, the leaves on the trees aside from the one Josuke ‘fixed’ started vanishing into thin air. The dried corpse of the failed peach tree dissolved into nothing.

Eve pointed to Josuke. “Repair as large an area as you can!”

“CRAZY DIAMOND!” Josuke roared, jumping into the air. “DORAAAAAAAA!” The fist of his Stand hit the ground with immense force, creating a small crater and upsetting the root systems of several trees. Now that he had a connection to all the objects, Josuke used Crazy Diamond to revert them to a better state of health, creating a small vaguely circular area with green trees and healthy soil.

Eve teleported everyone into it. The repairs had not stopped the fog from rolling in, and the rest of the forest still transformed before their eyes. Soon, all the trees were completely dead, losing the brown coloration of their wood and reverting to monochrome shadows of what they once were. The light level continued to drop, the clouds thickening until it was impossible to determine where the sun even was.
“Josuke, keep healing these trees,” Eve said. “I can see them starting to lose leaves.”

Josuke nodded, setting to work on the trees.

Sunny shook her head – coming out of her shock. “We need to get out of here – something here has to have connected to my Evermore nature to create… this.”

Eve nodded, summoning Seraphim. She forced a path through to Equis Vitis… but couldn’t connect. She poured extra magic, which should have been enough to break through a standard dimensional scrambler, but even that didn’t work.

“We’re stuck,” Eve declared.

Sunny bit her lip. “I was afraid of that…”

“What’s happening?” Corona asked, speaking for the first time in a long while.

“…The Evermore come from a place called the Recursions, a set of universes all related to a realm known as the Silent Forest.” She gestured to the dead trees outside – or what everyone had been certain was dead. Unnatural, black buds had begun to form on the branches. The fog was only thickening, making it more and more difficult to see for any significant distance. “The Silent Forest pulled individuals from across the multiverse and transformed them into Evermore.”

“Like the Nexus?” Corona asked.

“Yes. Really close to that, actually. People were sucked in, but people could never leave. And this Forest was the cause of it all.” She shook her head. “Something has to be tapping into my power and summoning this place from my memory. Somehow.”

Eve lit her horn and closed her eyes, looking at the universe through Seraphim’s senses. She used her power as a true alicorn to connect with the magical aura of the world, feeling for dimensional anomalies. She quickly reached a conclusion.

“It’s the planet itself,” Eve said. “All of it is brimming with the power.”

“The entire planet!?” Sunny blurted. “That’s… actually not that surprising. It was abandoned, so it had a fully natural appearance before. When I arrived it latched onto me… And when I started realizing what was happening the memories were easier to access…” Sunny put a hoof to her chin. “The question is how do we stop it?”

Corona lit her hoof on fire. “Burn it all down?”

“We could try destruction,” Eve admitted. “Does this planet have a moon?”

“Yes,” Sunny said.

“I could use that,” Eve said, frowning. “I’d rather not blow up a moon I know nothing about though. I could attempt to sever its mental connection to you, but that’d involve me going into your head.”

“I’d rather not run the risk of losing my memories, thank you.”

“Then destruction,” Josuke said. “Ram the moon into this silent rock.”

Sunny pondered this idea. “It would probably work… But Eve is right, we don’t know about the moon, or apparently much about this planet…” She closed her eyes and focused, extending her Evermore powers. “I can’t feel any universes, it hasn’t generated any of the others.”
“It is just a planet,” Eve pointed out. “It probably can’t generate entire universes for you.”

Sunny’s face lit up. “…Did I ever tell any of you what Evermore could do inside the Recursions?”

“Uh… No?” Corona said.

Josuke’s eyes widened. “You can’t be serious.”

“Yes, I can,” Sunny said, smirking. “When Evermore were within the Recursions, they had the ability to create whole new universes. Most often completely unintentionally, but there were a few cases where it was done with intent.” She stood strong, horn alit. “Let’s see how this planet handles something it can’t do.”

Sunny surrounded herself in a ring of fire and pushed. She felt the folds of reality give way, preparing for the birth of a new universe…

And then the entire program crashed. The trees all turned bright blue and a comedic computer error sound effect met all their ears. Eve looked at all their faces. “…That must have made a really odd sound.”

“No Kiddi-“ Josuke began, but before he could finish all of the blue trees and ground vanished. The four of them fell about four meters to a perfectly smooth, metallic floor beneath them. The actual planet.

Sunny rubbed the back of her head. “Ugh… Gun, am I glad there’s still oxygen.” She pulled out a phone, noticing interdimensional service. “Yep. We’re good.” She sent a quick message to the rest of her team telling them to check in. They responded quickly, with a lot of questions. She said she’d explain later and put the phone away. “Well, this place clearly isn’t good for settling.”

Corona absent-mindedly tapped the metal ground they were standing on. “Another ancient device…”

“A world based on the mind of a user,” Eve said. “Wonder if this was used for recreation… or torment.”

“Probably depends on the setting,” Sunny said. She moved on to explain something else, but Corona didn’t catch it.

I didn’t do anything, Corona thought to herself. Nothing at all.

“…anyway,” Eve said, having taken control of the conversation. “We should probably head back. And th-“

A dark red magic circle appeared on the ground a few meters away from the group. It flashed black, creating an oily black surface within. Out of this surface rose a bunch of tentacles, gnashing limbs, and other shapes that made no sense.

To their surprise, the eldritch horror coalesced into a pony – a unicorn. Clearly an adult version of Sweetie Belle, but with black and red eyes, a mane that flowed with magic, and Thrackerzod’s elder sign cutie mark.

“T-Thrackerzod!?” Sunny blurted.

Eve blinked. “That’s not Thracke- Ooooh, it’s an alternate of her. Right.”
“The Evermore version,” Sunny said, walking up to the unicorn. “It’s… been a while.”

Thrackerzod spoke with a voice that was identical to the smaller white unicorn the Merodi knew. “Truer words have been spoken, but bringing those up right now would be foolish.”

Sunny chuckled. “Same ol’ Zod, huh?”

“Perhaps to you. Have you by chance found my frying pan in your journeys?”

“Nope. We hardly run into any Evermore stuff at all. Like… at all. We’ve actually settled down, if you can believe that. In…” She took a breath. “AA-AA-AAPPLEOOSA.”

“Amusing,” Thrackerzod deadpanned.

“How did you get here?”

“I felt the Silent Forest for the first time in centuries. I came instantly.”

Sunny nodded, turning to her other friends. “Well, everyone, this is Evermore Thrackerzod, one of the best eldritch buddies out there. She did a lot to help everyone back in the day. She’s also really good at summoning everything you can think of. Thrackerzod, this is Evening Sparkle, Corona Shimmer and Josuke Higashikata. Josuke’s part of my team and likes to punch things to fix them, Eve’s the face of the interdimensional society Merodi Universalis, and Corona’s the ‘core’ Sunset of this region.”

Thrackerzod turned to Sunny and raised an incredulous eyebrow. “You got yourselves mixed up in a multiversal society?”

“Yep! It’s their Appleoosa we’re staying in, after all.”

Thrackerzod grunted. “Interdimensional society is a stupid idea that only results in questions that can’t be answered and destruction on unparalleled scales.”

“Thrackerzod!” Sunny scolded.

Eve held up a hoof. “It’s fine, Sunny. She can have her opinion. I’ve met more than my fair share of detractors. They’re fine people.”

“Unless they’re Stars,” Josuke said.

“I still hold to my belief that there are good Stars out there and we just don’t get to see them all that much.”

“Stars are exceptionally clueless for a fallen society,” Thrackerzod observed. “Intentions don’t matter all that much.” She turned to Sunny. “…I would like to see Jane.”

Sunny nodded. “Right, of course. Ahem, Josuke! You wrap up things here with the team. I’ve got to take an old friend home.” She turned to Eve. “I know you’re interested to hear stories from another section of the multiverse.”

Eve nodded excitedly.

“Well you can come along. It’ll be good for Thrackerzod to get to know you better anyway.”

Eve smiled. “To your house, or her dojo?”
“House first, though I’m not exactly sure what time it is there.”

Eve summoned Seraphim, working out the exact combination of her Stand’s powers and long-range teleportation she needed to get to that part of Appleoosa…

Corona knew she was getting dragged along as well. She normally would have been fine with this, but…

She got the distinct feeling Eve had forgotten she was there. That all of them had forgotten she was there. She was just some fly on the wall, or a piece of luggage they dragged around.

Eve lit her horn, dragging Corona, Sunny, and Thrackerzod out of the universe. Josuke cracked his knuckles and started running for the rest of his team to ‘wrap up’ what they were doing here.

The ancient planet of dreams sat, dormant once again. It would be some time before it would be able to fix itself and start generating even a normal planet again, much less one determined by a mind. Its program had been royally screwed on a truly fundamental level.

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Jane wrapped up work for the day with a bunch of dazed students on the floor of her dojo.

She smiled warmly. “Same time tomorrow, everyone!” Only a few of them had enough of their wits about them to nod in confirmation.

They’d all be fine tomorrow – Jane had made sure of that. A little sore, perhaps, but she knew most of them well enough to know a little soreness wouldn’t stop their burning desire to train.

She hung out around the dojo’s doors, waiting for all of them to stumble out. She locked the doors and activated her Evermore power - singing, and then traveling from the Hub to Equis Vitis. It was a short walk to a teleporter to get to her real home...

Appleoosa. Or, if you were anyone within hearing range of Braeburn, AA-AA-AAPPLEOOSA! It was a town in the middle of the desert, still pony dominated even in this age of multiversal society. Most areas still looked like they had come right out of a Western of some sort, including the street Jane’s home was on – dirt road, a cactus growing on the other side of the street, and a saloon brimming with loud customers nearby.

She liked the aesthetic.

She started to head home, but she only made it two steps. With a flash of dimensional energy Eve, Sunny, Thrackerzod, and Corona appeared.

“Hey Jane! Look who I found!” Sunny called, gesturing to the eldritch unicorn.

Jane’s smile widened. “Zod? Wow, I wasn’t expecting this.”

“Neither was I,” Thrackerzod admitted. “It is good to see you, Jane.”

“So what have you been doing all these years?”

“Exploring. Defending. Searching. Probably the same things you were doing. Aside from settling down in a multiversal society. Really Jane?”

Jane chuckled. “Well… You know, we didn’t feel like we had to hide anything here, and we have access to a lot of the things we grew accustomed to while sliding, y’know?”
“I do know. I also know how badly these things crash and burn. You do as well.”

“Um… Excuse me?” Eve said, raising a hoof. “Charter-Princess here. What’s all this about multiversal societies crashing and burning?”

Jane rubbed the back of her head. “Everything ends, Eve. When societies like yours end… The fallout is very impressive.”


“I wouldn’t worry just yet,” Jane assured her. “You’re very young and still growing. A society usually has time to get old before it falls.”

“And then the fall leaves a blemish for eternity. Much like the planet you were just on,” Thrackerzod pointed out. “It never lasts forever and just results in unimaginable pain.”

Eve blinked. “Well what would you suggest I do?”

“Nothing. It’s too late for you to turn back now, clearly. I would encourage any travelers to just avoid you, not be taken in by your message. Because no matter how honest it is, there will come a time where you fall, and furthermore with the amount of power you have the scale of destruction you can unleash baffles the minds of most mortals and is far beyond what any version of Azathoth can unleash.”

“You sound just like the Stars.”

“The Stars personally know what falling looks like, and of the blemish that remains. Pray you don’t live long enough to find out yourself, Eve.”

Sunny inserted herself between Thrackerzod and Eve. “Hey, here’s an idea, let’s not shout ideologies at each other with anger!”

Eve raised an eyebrow. “I’m having a calm rational discussion.”

“That Stars quip wasn’t rational.”

“I… Right. Sorry, Thrackerzod.”

Thrackerzod nodded impassively, turning to Jane. “Have you seen my frying pan?”

“No, haven’t seen Pinkie – Evermore Pinkie – since we left,” Jane answered. “You haven’t made a new one by now?”

“I probably should have at this point, but I have not for whatever reason,” Thrackerzod commented. “Deep down, I suppose I am sentimental.”

“For a frying pan that causes instant death when used,” Sunny pointed out.

Thrackerzod smiled. “Yes. The strangeness of the situation is not lost on me, Sunset.”

Jane smirked. “So, Zod! Have any stories to tell us? I’m sure Eve would loooove to hear some of them.”

Thrackerzod nodded slowly. “I will not be giving you my dimensional records or any world locations.”
“It’s okay,” Eve said.

“In that case, I have a rather ‘amusing’ story about a tentacle creature who only wanted to know what cake tasted like…”

As Thrackerzod spun her tale for all to hear, Corona leaned against a wall, sunglasses hiding her expression.

*Why am I here?*

There was that question again. That question that hadn’t left her the whole day. Why was she here? She’d been dragged along on an adventure that was intended to distract her. But it had done exactly the opposite. She hadn’t seen anything wonderful or amazing, instead she had got to be useless. And even if she had done something, really, what was the point in the end? Thrackerzod had described it nicely… They spent so much effort to do so much, but no matter what they did there was going to come a point where it all came crashing down and created immeasurable suffering.

The more effort that was put in, the more the stakes would rise. Eventually those stakes would be lost.

*How did that make it worth it?*

She couldn’t see a way how. Part of her knew she really wasn’t in a good place to be thinking about it right now, but that part of her was pushed away like a nagging parent. Probably should have listened to it, but defiantly refused to give the idea the time of day out of some misguided principle of the self.

She should jus-

A black flash of light deposited another white unicorn with red eyes in their midst. The League of Sweetie Belles’ Thrackerzod. She was slightly shorter than her Evermore counterpart and didn’t have the impressive flowing mane. She didn’t let this deter her.

“I heard there was another me, it appears rumors were not exaggerated. Greetings. I am Thrackerzod of the League of Sweetie Belles, servant of Azathoth.”

Evermore Thrackerzod narrowed her eyes. “I am Thrackerzod the Evermore. I serve no one, for I rejected Azathoth long ago.”

League Thrackerzod gasped. “You… are a traitor!?”

“I was provided a unique opportunity when severed from my master to remove the connection altogether. I took it in a heartbeat. I will not be chained by an eldritch creature who cares naught for those he tramples, nor one who can be clueless enough to be known as the Blind Idiot God.”

“Blasphemy! Azathoth is the source of our power and our very motivation!”

“Your power within you is sufficient,” E-Zod said, pointing a hoof. “The powers which you serve are not worthy.”

“The Embodiment is a powerful part of the multiversal cycles!”

“Your powers drive suffering and madness. You cannot say they are ‘good’.”

“So? We’re just different you… you…” L-Zod looked ready to explode.
“I am clearly not welcome here anymore,” E-Zod said, turning to Jane.

“Hey, I didn’t say that!” Eve said.

“My continued presence induces hostility,” E-Zod answered. “Jane, I will keep this place’s coordinates memorized and visit from time to time. But for now I will take my leave.” She glared at her younger self. “She represents something I cannot abide by.”

“Your personal baggage should not limit you as it is,” L-Zod blurted.

E-Zod ignored her. “Goodbye, Jane.”

Jane sighed. “Really? So soon? Can’t we just go to a random universe and talk there for a while? It’s been so long.”

Sunny nodded in confirmation. E-Zod looked like she wanted to argue, but put a hoof to her forehead instead. “Great forested t… You always could convince me to go against my desires. As you wish, we shall go elsewhere.”

“Hoooold it!” In a flash of red gears, Aradia appeared. “Ahem! You Evermore can’t go yet.”

“What is the meaning of this?” L-Zod said.

“I have to show the three of them something,” Aradia said. “No, you probably shouldn’t come Little Zod.”

“Little!?”

“Yes. Little. What else was I going to call you on such a short notice?” Aradia turned back to the three Evermore. “Come. It’s important to you, trust me.”

Jane furrowed her brow – but nodded. Aradia started walking away, leading the rest of them out of Appleoosa.

Eve shrugged. “Well, Corona, looks like they’re going to something more private. So we-“ Eve blinked. “Corona?”

“She teleported away shortly after I arrived,” L-Zod said.

Eve blinked. “…Oh.”

“Is that bad?”

“…I want to say no, but…” she bit her lip, worried thoughts filling her mind.

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This seems familiar, Corona thought to herself begrudgingly. Teleport somewhere random and start walking. You’re great at being creative, Corona. Maybe next time you should walk away without a teleportation! Wouldn’t that be interesting!?

She looked around, checking to see where she was. The Everfree Forest. She must have really wanted to get away if she took herself here. No ponies at all, just a lot of creatures that wanted to eat everyone they could. She prepared to char anything that came at her.

But, aside from that, she decided to just let herself think. She couldn’t keep it at bay anymore. Not
that she was really trying at this point, seeing as how she was walking around again…

To sum it all up, everything was worthless and she was useless.

How *peachy*.

Thrackerzod had vocalized everything Corona had been thinking ever since the Bloodbath – or, rather, trying not to think about. The further they went, the more sorrow, death, and destruction there was. The further they went, the worse off they were. It wasn’t better. They solved hunger – but then entire planets started to get blown up. They helped a world survive an apocalypse, but then someone from there swore revenge and struck at the heart of the Merodi. They began to explore, but those above them brought down what amounted to fire from heaven, exploiting them just because they *could*.

Why would everyone do that? *They* didn’t do that! Eve and the others made *great* efforts to ensure that they weren’t bossing anyone around that didn’t deserve it. Sure they messed up sometimes, but they never stole entire cities just to see what would happen!

But those mess ups – it only takes one huge mistake to bring everything crashing down. No matter how good the intentions of a person are, they will screw something up. Eventually a mistake will come that there’s no recovering from.

That was *so close* to happening at the Bloodbath. How much longer would it take?

It would probably be Corona that did it. She just had a *feeling* – she would be the one to ruin everything one day. Worse than being useless, being the one who made the mistake. They all put such faith in her to uncover the mysteries of the multiverse. She was just a unicorn! Who gave a rip about her PhD? What did it even *mean*? That she was smart?

Well there were a lot of problems that came with being smart. Pendent for arrogance. Easily getting fed up with people. Multiple trains of thought running through her mind at once, many of which were contradictory with each other! Oh, and the part where everyone expects you to get everything on the first try because of your ‘superior intelligence’!

A manticore leaped out of the treeline at Corona. She vaporized it with a flamethrower, barely aware it had even been there.

Superior intelligence didn’t do anything for Corona. It was basically a joke. Intelligence did not mean wisdom. Heck, she wasn’t even really that smart when it came to things outside the lab, which were what really mattered, right?

But wasn’t it all pointless?

*Make up your mind, mind!* Corona thought angrily to herself. Her mind took this thought and twisted it into a pretzel of confusing paradoxes that just made her let out a pained, infuriated grunt.

She made an attempt to organize her thoughts into categories, but her emotional state was too unstable to do that effectively. Her failure to create a simple ‘yes-no’ chart in her mind only heightened her turntable of negativity. Why couldn’t she do something *simple*? *Because my mind is a whirlpool of emotions*. Well why can’t she get a hold on them? *Because emotions don’t listen to a thing my mind says*. Why hadn’t she worked on this before? *I have worked on this before! I have worked on it! I GAH! Shut up! Why shut up? Because! Shut up! You’re worthless!* Did that mean Corona was worthless?

“*YES!*” Corona shouted. “*JUST STOP ALREADY!*” She lit her horn and tore several trees out of the ground and threw them to the side, upsetting a large amount of Everfree wildlife.
Corona started laughing through her tears. “This is why we don’t think about things! Don’t you see, forest? Don’t you see!? When we do think about these things we go absolutely craaaaazyyyy! The end of the road is never pretty! We know that it’ll just end badly if we get to the end, so we try to stop ourselves! BECAUSE OF THIS! THIS… I DON’T EVEN KNOW!”

She stopped thinking at this point and just started running. Running… Running… She had no idea what the point of the running was. …Perhaps that was the point. Do something, anything – she really should have tried to get more involved on that little adventure…

She ran headfirst into something hard. She fell backward, heavily dazed, but not quite out. She shook her head, groaning. *I don’t even know how to run properly…*

*Why was it so bright?*

She looked up, finding what she had run into. *The Tree of Harmony*. The crystalline guardian of Equis Vitis shone its harmonious glow upon the struggling yellow unicorn.

Corona was struck by a deep feeling of being *unworthy*.

Corona’s cutie mark started flashing, pulsing with part of the Tree of Harmony’s magic. It was *calling* her.

Her thoughts split in two.

*The Tree is calling me to do something! Something only I can do!*

*This Tree is just taking pity on me! I don’t need your pity!*

Corona grabbed her throbbing head and grunted. “GAAAAAAAAAAAH!” For effect, she rammed her head into the base of the Tree a few times.

“What was that?” She heard someone call from outside the Tree of Harmony’s clearing. Corona’s eyes widened in panic. Acting purely from instinct, she leaped away from the tree and into a bunch of nearby purple bushes, hiding.

Aradia, Evermore Thrackerzod, Jane, and Sunny walked in a few seconds later.

“I think you’re hearing things,” Sunny told Jane.

“I heard something as well,” Thrackerzod pointed out.

“You’re tapped into a lot of weird things. For all we know it was the voice of the Tree.”

“It’s not something to worry about,” Aradia said, gesturing for them to follow her to a place a few meters from Corona. “What we’re here for is this way.”

She pulled back a fern-like plant, revealing a gravestone. From Corona’s angle, she could just barely make out the inscription.

*EVERMORE 5*

*PINKIE PIE*

The four visitors fell silent, staring at the grave. Thrackerzod and Jane were unreadable, but Sunny had reacted with an audible gasp and a hoof to her mouth. Aradia kept a sombre expression, waiting for any of them to say anything.
…What happened to her?” Jane asked after what seemed like hours.

Aradia looked to her. “It wasn’t long after she escaped. She was summoned from the Recursions by a version of Twilight known as Twilence through an altar of ancient power mixed with her own connection to ka. Pinkie spent her time there as Twilence’s ally along with myself, Vriska, and a few others; helping her with her quest and passing on what she knew of the way the multiverse worked. She ended up involved in a war against an alternate version of Siron.”

“…Siron?” Thrackerzod asked.

“Warrior bug-tribe chief,” Jane explained. “He tried to destroy Merodi Universalis out of anger and, well, Eve had to kill him.”

“She told me he was a death seeker,” Sunny added.

“But I’ve never seen alternate versions of him…” Jane said.

Aradia closed her eyes. “Siron’s alternate selves are almost always found in the deep past of Equis worlds. He starts out as the leader of a tribe, and eventually grows into the reason Tartarus is created. The Siron Pinkie, Twilence, myself, and others faced had been locked in Tartarus for eons.”

“That Siron got her?”

Aradia nodded. “It was a game of minds and gambits. Pinkie lost. She used her Translation in the encounter, so I couldn’t help her.”

“Did he get what he deserved?” Thrackerzod asked.

Aradia folded her arms. “He made it to the Tower. He never came out. In many ways, a fate worse than death.”

“Fitting,” Thrackerzod commented.

Aradia turned to Thrackerzod. “Do you remember what happened when she left? You gave her your frying pan of instant death.”

“Yes. I remember it like it was yesterday.”

Aradia pulled a large, black frying pan out of her cloak and handed it to Thrackerzod. The eldritch unicorn hefted the cooking implement in her red magic.

The tough, eons old being who had been hardened by horrendous experiences the people around her could scarcely imagine cracked. Tears started rolling down her impassive face.

“I-I…” Sunny couldn’t say anything, she just pulled the unicorn into an embrace.

Jane continued to stare at the gravestone. She kneeled down so she was closer to eye level. “You sure found a way out, didn’t you Pinkie? After all that time… You got out. Truly. Completely.”

There was silence again.

“…I h-hear someone crying,” Sunny said.

“That’s you,” Jane said, wiping her own eyes. “Or… us.”

“N-no. Behind the bushes…”
Corona realized she was crying, pretty heavily at that. What she was witnessing… it was just so sad. These people… They’d escaped a dimensional prison of sorts. At different times. It had been so long, and just now they were learning of someone of theirs who had died a long time ago. How… How stupid was that?

“That’d be me,” Eve said, suddenly, walking out of a nearby bush, looking somewhat ashamed. “The Tree called me here.”

Thrackerzod looked upset, but Aradia held up a hand. “That’s fine, Eve. If the Tree called you here, it must be for a reason.”

“That’s… not where I heard the crying,” Sunny said, walking over to Corona’s bush and pulling it back. “Oh… Corona.”

Corona couldn’t formulate a response, she was crying too hard. It was painful to breathe in regular intervals.

Eve wiped her face, levitating Corona out. “Her mark was on the map as well… We were both called here. Though… I think she was already here.” Eve hugged her. “I’m sorry, Corona. I wasn’t paying attention.”

Corona buried her face in Eve’s wing.

Eve stroked her back with the other wing. “Shhh… It’s okay. I’m here.”

“It’s so sad!” Corona blurted, gesturing with her hoof at the grave. “Everything’s so freaking sad. There’s nothing we can do Eve! Nothing!”

Eve was going to response – but Thrackerzod spoke instead. “It isn’t sad.”

“…What!” Sunny blurted. “Of course it is!”

Jane put a hand on Sunny. “It is sad… But that’s not all it is, Sunny.”

Sunny blinked. “W-what?”

Corona stared at Jane in disbelief. “It’s death! Of course that’s all it is! Unless there’s something wrong with you, you don’t find anything else in it!”

Aradia took the jab gracefully. She floated over to Corona and pulled up her chin. “Are you sure?”

“I… I… Uh…”

“It’s okay if that’s how you see it,” Aradia said. “But not everyone is going to see death that way.” She spread her arms wide, smiling. “Death has a purpose beyond utter destruction and sorrow, you know. It’s one of the most forceful catalysts for change. And sometimes, just sometimes, it’s what is needed.”

“Can you hear yourself?” Corona blurted. “What the hell is wrong with you? This!” She pointed at the grave. “This should not be!”

Eve looked down at the ground. “…Flutterfree says things like that, sometimes…”

“Yeah, and she believes there’s a life beyond this one!” Corona added. “What about those of us who don’t!”
Jane kneeled down and looked Corona in the eyes. “Corona… There are some of us who have lived too long. I… There are times where I think I would have been much happier if I’d grown old and passed on like almost everyone else. After enough time… It all becomes boring. Repetitive. That’s not how everyone ends up, but it’s common enough.”

Sunny looked like she wanted to object but couldn’t find the words.

Jane gestured at the grave of Evermore Pinkie. “She didn’t have to experience that. She got to free herself from the trap and live her life the way she wanted. The death itself? Alone, there’s nothing to it. It’s literally nothing. But it can represent something more. This? This is freedom.”

Corona stared at the gravestone. “I…”

“I can’t see that,” Eve said. “I just… No. It’s not a freedom. Life is a gift and it should always be sought! Always!”

“I’m not arguing for suicide Eve, come on!” Jane blurted. “That’d just be messed up!”

“Well that’s what it sounds like!”

“It’s no-”

“It is,” Sunny interrupted, looking at Jane. “This is wrong, Jane. Even dying of old age isn’t right. No death is right.”

“You’re wrong,” Thrackerzod declared. “There are deaths that need to happen, and you know it. We all know it.”

“I know it,” Corona said. “We know it. The majority don’t.”

Jane shook her head. “That’s not the point! I… Ugh, Aradia, you explain it.”

Aradia folded her hands together. “Death is beautiful,” she put simply. She held up a hand to silence those who wanted to argue with her. “Death is the most powerful part of our lives, more than when we’re born, more than when we marry, more than when we raise our kids. Our death and what brings it about can be said to be the thing we will be most remembered for, the aspect of us that remains the longest. The strongest.”

Aradia kneeled down, tracing her fingernail through the dirt. “This Pinkie died, and she is remembered for giving her life saving a civilization. She is also remembered for ending the curse of the Evermore in a just, honorable way. And she is remembered by bringing all of us here, together, to talk deeply about what this all means.” She stood tall, a breeze blowing through her hair. “There’s a reason we care so much about last words. They define what a person was thinking in their last moments, in their last actions – what they were at the end. Because what they were at the end is the most powerful part of them. People grow towards something eternally throughout their lives, and that end is the moment they fully become themselves.”

She turned to the rest of them. “Pinkie’s last words were ‘of course not’, which don’t really mean much. But right before that, what she said was undeniably her. ‘Who's the Pinkie? I'm the Pinkie! Who's the Pinkie? I'm the Pinkie!’ …She said that after having trapped Siron. He killed her out of rage after that. But those words… Those words were undeniably her. What she had become. When she fell, she completed her life.”

Aradia turned to Corona. “The same applies to Granny Smith, to all the friends we’ve lost, to all the leaders who fell at the Bloodbath, and even to the evil people we’ve had to kill with our own hands.
and hooves. All of their deaths left a shape in the world, a snapshot of who they were. *There has never been a meaningless death in the history of existence.*

Corona’s mind blanked. She didn’t know how to respond to that.

“That’s quite the eloquent way of putting it,” Thrackerzod admitted, bowing her head to Aradia. “You have my respect.”

“I’m the unofficial god of death where I come from,” Aradia admitted. “Don’t feel so bad you couldn’t word it.”

Jane and Thrackerzod turned to look back at the grave. A hand and a hoof soon rested upon it.

“You did good,” Jane said. “You made so many ponies happy. And now… Now you’ve brought a smile to our faces. I have a feeling people will be telling stories about you, and you will keep bringing smiles.”

“That’s all she ever really wanted,” Thrackerzod said. “…Smiles.”

“She so rarely got them from you.”

Thrackerzod let out a *chuckle*. “She has one now.”

Sunny looked from the two Evermore to Eve and Corona. She shook her head, setting her face into a determined expression. She marched to the grave and put her hoof on the grave. “Hey Pinkie. Apparently I’m supposed to be happy about this? At least, that’s what these two think. I… I can’t do that. But I think I can understand why they think that. And you can too, can’t you?” Tears rolled down her cheeks. “Thanks… For all those fun moments, Pinkie. They stayed with me all this time.”

Jane hugged her and the three of them fell silent.


Eve let out a pained laugh. “Yeah… Yeah it is.”

“I don’t think there is a correct response, y’know?” Aradia said. “Some are better than others, clearly, but not everyone can just take it in stride or see the beauty in it. You, Eve, I can see will never be able to accept it.”

“I can’t either,” Corona said. “But… But…” She shook her head. “I… I think I’ve had an epiphany. Death is evil, and horrendous… But by nature that *means* something. You… You were right, Aradia. I… I think. Death… Death *is* the enemy. Death *is* what we fight against. The worst of all evils… So evil that we have to use it against itself.” She stood up tall.

Eve noticed with elation that there was *fire* in those red eyes again.

“It’s not worthless! It’s worse! And so it is our *enemy!* They say everything has a time, that everything must fall… I say that might be right. It might be inevitable. But that doesn’t mean we need to *accept* it!” She rammed her hoof into the ground. “Every death is a blemish on this world! Therefore it is our enemy!”

“Yes!” Eve said. “Yeah, that’s exactly it!” She squeezed Corona. “*That’s* our enemy.”

“Basically the laws of the universe itself, huh?” Corona said.
“We’re declaring war on quite an enemy.”

“I say bring it.”

Eve laughed, wiping her eyes. “It’s good to see that look back in your eyes, Corona.”

“It feels good.”

Aradia smirked. “It looks like Evermore Pinkie brought around a few more smiles today.” She pointed her fingers at the two ponies’ flanks. They flashed with the light of a completed friendship mission.

“What exactly were we here to solve?” Eve asked. “I think all of us here had separate issues…”

“We were here to solve, or at least help them all, weren’t we?” Corona asked. “Me… You… Sunny… I bet even Jane and Thrackerzod got something out of this.”

Aradia winked. “The Tree of Harmony tends to do things like that.”

“Yeah! Hey!” Corona called to the Tree of Harmony. “Thanks for letting me run into you! Repeatedly!”

“…What?”

“Don’t ask.” Corona’s hooves started twitching. “I feel… I don’t know. Did I touch someone without the boots? I feel… alive.”

“You’ve given yourself a purpose,” Aradia said. “It’s awakened what you had hidden within yourself.”

“So… That’s it? I’m just better?” Corona tapped her head. “That’s not…”

Aradia shook her head. “That’s not how it works. You’ll never be the same pony you were before. But I can see it becoming a part of you that you’ve discovered a way to accept. You’ve transformed a depressant into a drive. I’m just glad I could help.”

“Yeah. Thanks,” Corona said, nodding. “I… I don’t know what I would have done otherwise. I was… I was going crazy. I’d just been swinging through life…” She put a hoof to her chin. “The struggle has become a fight… And that fight is something I actually have power to fight.”

Eve laughed. “I don’t think we’ll be able to defeat death itself, Corona.”

“We can hit it with a giant hammer and make it run away,” Corona declared.

Aradia’s smile widened. “I’m very glad you’ve found something, Corona.”

Corona lit her hoof on fire. “Yeah.”

Eve turned to the three Evermore. She smiled sadly. “I think… I think we’ve crashed their time of ‘mourning’ enough. We should go.”

“Yeah. I’m going to call Olivia as well,” Corona added.

“Huh? Why?”

“I have a few thoughts…”
The League’s Thrackerzod walked down the streets of Celestia City a few days later.

She had the living tar scared out of her by Evermore Thrackerzod appearing a centimeter in front of her.

“VEAOUYNTH!” L-Zod said, taking a defensive stance.

“Calm yourself, I am not here to assault you,” E-Zod said.

“Are you here to ram your horn into my skull?”

“I sai- oh, a metaphor. I was not expecting that from one of my ilk.”

“Just more reasons we aren’t the same.”

E-Zod coughed. “I am here to apologize.”

L-Zod blinked. “The differences keep piling up.”

“I remember what it was like when I was still hinged to Azathoth. It was decidedly inappropriate of me to berate you for something in which you have no manner of choice.”

“I’m going to have to stop you,” L-Zod said. “I did have a choice. My connection was severed once, as were my powers. I could have lived like that. I chose to return to Azathoth.”

E-Zod paused at this. “…It is amazing, how differences can crop up with so small of an actual deviation.”

“Indeed. For what it’s worth, I know why you left. When I was gone, I understood I was free. I just didn’t want it at the time.”

“If you get another opportunity, I would take it.”

“You know I can’t agree to that.”

“But you will remember it when the next opportunity presents itself. Until then, live well, Thrackerzod of Equis Eldritch.”

“Likewise.”

E-Zod left, leaving L-Zod with much to ponder.

Jane, Sunny, and Thrackerzod stood outside the house the couple owned.

“Going already?” Jane asked.

“I stayed a few more days than I planned as it is,” Thrackerzod said. “I will return to visit, but I cannot settle down.”

“It’s a lot better than you’re thinking it is,” Sunny said.

“I did settle down, once.” Thrackerzod looked into the distance with a haunted expression. “You can’t stay settled forever.”
Jane and Sunny looked uncomfortable at this.

“There are a few things I think I should tell you before I go,” Thrackerzod said. “The Recursions ended.”

“Really?” Sunny said, blinking. “You did it?”

“We… I… It’s complicated. Regardless, it did end… But something similar has replaced it. I managed to place the attention of some of the higher societies on it, so there is a loose watch on the area – I wouldn’t call it quarantine. *Earth C* has a full quarantine.”

“…*Earth C*?” Jane asked.

“If you don’t know, it’s best you continue not to know. I apologize.”

“Fine.”

Thrackerzod looked into the distance. “I just thought you’d like to know that it’s still there. But it has changed significantly. I do not know what lies within. I’m never going back there.”

“Neither are we,” Jane asserted.

“Figured as much. Still, you needed to be told.” She closed her eyes and lit her horn. “Until next time, my friends.”

Jane and Sunny waved as Thrackerzod the Evermore vanished.

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Later, Jane sat alone beside the Tree of Harmony, looking at Pinkie’s grave with a sombre smile. Leaning against her was a bag of confetti and a roll of tape that she was grabbing from every few seconds to add to a colorful… something in her hands.

"...It was fun, I suppose you could say. Sunrise and I were fighting, of course, but that didn't change what I thought of them. They were just misguided, you know? Then there was another time when we were in this space game world. We encountered a star shaped like a person and wearing a cowboy outfit of all things. He was pretty friendly and talkative for somebody without a mouth."

The object in her hands was taking shape, a chaotic mishmash of brightly-colored confetti squares.

"Our time here has been pretty fun too. You wouldn't believe it, but I'm a teacher now." Jane chuckled lightly. "I never would have expected it either, especially after I finally let go of Penny, but something about sharing wisdom and knowledge with others just feels right. I teach all sorts of different fighting techniques to people. I figure if they can defend themselves, then that'll at least make them and the people they care about safer."

Jane stood up and waved lightly to Pinkie's grave. "It was good to finally get to talk to you again, I'll be sure to visit you again, don't you worry. And hey, maybe I'll throw a party with Discord, just for old time's sake."

Before Jane left she placed a small technicolor flower on Pinkie's grave.

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Toph was very surprised to sense Corona walk into the throne room *unannounced*. Lady Rarity and Lieshy were just as surprised, and even more surprised to see Som- *Olivia* walk in with her.
Toph folded her hands together. “Corona, what is it?”

“Hey, Toph,” she pointed at the queen. “I want to start going exploring again.”

Toph smiled; glad to see this side of Corona return. “You know I can’t come with you.”

“I’m not asking for you. I’m asking for your advisors. You know how to run the kingdom well enough by now, I can take them.”

Toph shrugged. “Fine by me, if they want to.”

“Emeralds in spring,” Lieshy decreed. “…That means yes.”

Lady Rarity chuckled. “Corona, dear… I would love to go out again. Is it just you and Olivia on the team so far?”

Corona nodded. “Vivian likes where she is right now. But we don’t need five, do we?”

“Of course not.” Lady Rarity skittered over to her. “I say we go out and explore again. Been waiting for you to ask, to be frank. Anything in particular that brought it on?”

“Nothing much. I just decided to declare war on death itself. No biggie.”

Lieshy laughed.

Lady Rarity smirked. “Already filed a request with Renee?”

“Done and approved,” Olivia said, closing a holographic display. “We can go as soon as we want.”

Toph held out her hand and pointed. “Go, my subjects. Fight valiantly.”

“You’re overdoing it,” Lieshy commented.

“No. No I’m not,” Toph asserted.

Lady Rarity put a hoof on Corona’s shoulder. “Thank you. I’ve… I’ve missed this.”

“Glad to have you back,” Lieshy declared.

“Glad to be back,” Corona said, rubbing the back of her head.

The sorrow wasn’t gone. She still felt it in her, gnawing away at her. But unlike before, she had something revitalizing herself. A drive. Everything that went wrong, every mistake that was made, every horrendous death that occurred…

Well, that was just another reason to fight back.

Another reason to fight harder.

Until her bitter end.

And then others would have reason to fight harder.

No death was pointless.
Monika had taken it upon herself to solve great, curious mysteries as of late. After she had solved her
own – hadn’t *that* been a fun little adventure – she had moved on to solving those of other stories…
Given her unique ability to manipulate the flow between stories and the universes behind them, she
was in a great position to solve any curious little mysteries she happened to come across.

Those animatronic games had taken longer than she was expecting to sort out, not the least because
there were more than two different continuities she could transport herself to, but each one had a
different answer in the end.

Now, she was focused on a single game, one she remembered playing in her time of fixation. A
game of monsters, hearts, amazing characters, and delightful story. One where you could avoid
killing a single creature or kill everything in existence. And several options in between. It was a deep
game in which she had watched every single version being played.

Its name was *Undertale*.

Her copy was something she never actually played properly – she tore it apart file by file, gathering
snippets of information and reactions. There was much hidden there, but there was also one mystery
that no amount of digging or glitching would truly satisfy her. The mystery of the Man Who Speaks
in Hands. Very rarely, players could find a mysterious gray door that led to a room with a mysterious
figure. Every time a player sought to interact with this character, the sprite would freak out and
vanish mysteriously.

There were many clues about him, but no answers. Monika was going to *demand* an understanding.

She forced the game to load with the player character outside the mysterious door. She placed her
hand on the computer screen and let out a focused breath.

*Tap into the flow…*

Code flew past her mind as she reached to what was below it. The *story* had a connection to a
*universe* – not a direct connection, though, just a shadow of one. She had to *create* a solid
connection in order to traverse the plane between worlds. Her body glitched out of existence, leaving
an empty chair. The game crashed a second later.

On the other side of her motions was a hallway cut out of cave rock. Glowing blue crystals provided
the only light in the passage, but that was plenty for Monika. She was able to make out the colorless
door embedded in the rocky wall. It clearly did not belong there, appearing as if it were just grafted
on as an afterthought.

She smirked. *Time for answers.* She stuck her hand out to the doorknob and pulled it open.

The interior had no texture. It was a white so pure shadows didn’t even appear on it. The only
indication the room had any boundaries were black lines that marked the places where the walls met
the floor and ceiling. In the center of the room was the mysterious figure.

It looked a lot more disturbing when it was not limited to a handful of distorted pixels on a screen.
The figure had two parts – the lower being black, decaying sludge that pulsed ever so slightly,
while the upper was a bone-textured head with tremendous, gaping eyes and a thin, cruel mouth.
There were two bony hands struggling to remove themselves from the lower sludge, each with a hole through the palm.

Monika focused. Of course she couldn’t read the thing’s character file, it was probably too corrupted to even be accessed. But she had other manipulations she could use. Tap into the code in thi-

Without warning, the figure’s hand shot out and grabbed her by the wrist.

Monika felt fear.

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Pinkie Pie leaped through a freshly opened portal and landed in a small field of golden flowers. The rest of her team followed in a less excited manner, though all but Jotaro had smiles on their faces. The portal closed behind them, allowing their eyes to adjust to the unusual lighting.

They were in a cavern. Most of it was dark, though there was a beam of light from a hole far above them. The flowers all grew within this light, the soil in the shadows devoid of even the smallest seedling. Beyond that were the cave walls – with a single cavernous pathway to their right.

“We have two options!” Pinkie declared. “Up, or deeper into the cave!”

Flutterfree activated Lolo, winding a strand of green upward and through the higher opening. “It’s the side of a mountain,” Flutterfree reported. “Mostly forest around, though I do see a city in the distance. Human, if I had to guess.” She retracted Lolo.

“Sounds boring,” Vriska commented.

“Yeah, it kinda does, doesn’t it?” Pinkie pointed into the cavernous path. “THEN WE GO THAT WAY!”

Nova shrugged. “I am detecting higher levels of magic that way, so yeah, probably more interesting.”

Pinkie bounced along, her team following behind her. They passed through a narrow section of cave that Jotaro had to duck through, but it soon opened up to a significantly larger section with a beam of light shining from above on a singular golden flower.

This golden flower had a cute little face. “Heya! I’m Flowey! Flowey the flower! Welcome to the Underground!” He winked. “I can be your little guide!”

Before they knew what was happening, anything that wasn’t the five of them or Flowey vanished, replaced with inky blackness. Flowey and the five of them lost all color, becoming nothing more than white figures with black outlines – no grays at all.

Colors flashed into existence in front of the five explorers in the form of stylized hearts. Nova’s was blue, Flutterfree’s green, Jotaro’s yellow, Vriska’s purple, and Pinkie’s pink. Flowey seemed decidedly confused by the existence of a pink heart, but recovered quickly.

“What is this?” Nova asked, poking her blue heart with a hoof.

“That’s your SOUL!” Flowey answered. “And with it you’re supposed to catch friendliness pellets!” Flowey generated a small, spinning white pellet. “Try i-”

“Cut the bullshit, Asriel,” Vriska said, folding her arms.
Flowey stared at her in disbelief. “How in th-”

“I’ve played this game,” Vriska declared. “Flowey there is basically what you could call the main villain. Don’t trust a word he says. That ‘friendliness pellet’ is spinning death on a stick.”

“Understood,” Jotaro said, summoning Star Platinum.

“Th- that’s quite the spirit you’ve got there!” Flowey said. “A-and you say you’ve played this game before? How… interesting… You see, I’ve played this game before as well! Over and over and over a-”

“Not impressive,” Pinkie said, glaring at the little flower. “Do you-”

“Yes of course I know we’re in a ‘book’ right now! I-”

“You don’t have speaking privileges,” Vriska decreed.

“Do you know what I’m capable of!?”

“Yes. I beat your ass. Multiple times.”

Flowey opted to just disappear into the ground. Colors returned to the world and the Technicolor SOULS vanished.

“He’ll be plotting something,” Vriska said, sitting on a nearby rock. “You can count on it.”

“Mhm,” Pinkie confirmed.

“So, what’s this game’s world like?” Nova asked.

Vriska leaned back. “Well, I would say it’s closely related to my source material, but it’s only tangential. I only played it because some pun-making skeleton stole my song. The game itself is about a human kid who falls into this Underground and has to adventure to find her – or his I guess, it’s not really clear – way to escape. In the process she can either make friends with everyone and never resort to violence, or she could kill everyone. I played through both.”

“Anything we should know?”

“You shouldn’t have to kill anything here,” Vriska said. “Doing so will have consequences. The few things that you have to fight will still be redeemable. Usually you can still talk your way out of encounters. Oh, yeah, the encounters. Uh… I don’t think your physical forms can take damage, it’s all focused on your SOULs. Avoid letting them get hit. I… forget what the colors mean. The player had red.”

“Also Flowey’s Aware,” Pinkie pointed out.

“Yeah, that,” Vriska said. “That’s important. We’re probably going to have to beat the tar out of him at some point. It’s going to be interesting to see if we can get the perfect ending without exploiting a save/reload system…”

Flutterfree smiled. “What are we waiting for? Let’s go make friends with everyone.”

“Yeah that’s a goo-”

And then reality broke into a dozen pieces like a pane of glass hit by a bullet. All five of them felt their SOULs falling between the cracks of existence…
Vriska appeared in the middle of a fight, her purple SOUL already out. She narrowly dodged a flying bone. She heard the sound of a familiar tune start as she turned to face her opponent – a small, diminutive skeleton in slippers and a jacket. A smile was permanently plastered on his skull, and unlike everything else in the encounter, his eye flashed blue.

There was not supposed to be any color besides Vriska’s SOUL.

Vriska’s response to this was among the worst possible.

“HEY! STOP STEALING MY SONG!”

The skeleton – who Vriska knew was named Sans – apparently made a decision right there. A gigantic dragon-skull appeared behind him and fired a beam of intense white energy. Vriska dodged it with a quick jump. “I don’t know what you just pulled with your soul right there, kid, but this is going to end just like all the other times.”

“Kid? Do I look like a-“ Sans didn’t wait for her to finish, instead throwing a flurry of bones at her SOUL. She used her luck to barely dodge every single one.

She pulled out her dice, ready for a counterattack, but then she remembered a key detail.

In the game, Sans may have been incredibly quick and agile, but he also only had 1 HP. If she fought him seriously he’d just die from a single hit if this world was anything like the game.

Fuck, I don’t want to kill him, but he thinks I’m on a run where I killed everyone. She bit her lip, jumping over a wave of lasers. “Hey, think we can talk about this?”

“you’ve sure gotten talkative in the last few minutes,” Sans said, grabbing a hold of her SOUL with some kind of magic and ramming her into the ground.

“Look, Sans, I’m not who you think I am!” Vriska blurted, dodging to the left. “I’m Vriska, an interdimensional traveler who’s swapped with whoever you were just fighting!”

Sans stared at her with his intense blue eye. “how do you know my name, then?”

“Uh, hello? Interdimensional traveler? Of course I know stuff. Uh… Let’s see, you sometimes sell hot dogs and stack them on people’s heads. Am I remembering that right?”

“yes,” Sans said, grabbing a hold of her soul. “not LV 19…”

“See? Not the axe-crazed murderer type! One of the good guys!”

The fight ended – colors returned, Vriska’s SOUL vanished, and the music stopped playing. Sans’ coat revealed itself to be blue, and Vriska discovered they were standing in a large royal hall lit with eerie orange light. Sans glared at her. “good guy, huh? your SOUL says otherwise. LV 16, you’ve killed a lot of people, vriska. just a little further and you’d get the prize of being just as violent as that kid who was here before you. an amazing accomplishment.”

“Things are different out there, Sans,” Vriska said. “We have to kill to survive. There is no ‘pacifist’ run.”

“That’s no excuse for sixteen,” Sans countered.

Vriska folded her arms. “Fine. I’ve killed people for fun and sport in the past. I don’t do that
Sans shrugged. “the record is what it is.”

“Whatever, don’t like me.” Vriska threw her hands in the air and pulled out her dimensional device. “I’ll leave you alone here. Guess I accidentally took care of your monster problem, huh? You should thank me.”

“you clearly didn’t do anything,” Sans shrugged. “regardless, i’ve got no bones to pick with you. go on your way.”

“Hastala-Vriska,” Vriska saluted, trying to find a world to connect to with her dimensional device. She furrowed her brow. “…Fuck.”

“problem?”

“You could say that. I can’t dial back to the universe I was dragged from, and none of the others I’m trying have connections to this one. Fuuuuuuuuck I think I’m stuck.”

“huh. sucks to be you, doesn’t it? right now there’s just me, asgore, and a psychotic murderous flower.”

“And everyone on the Surface.”

“like that matte-“

“All I need to do is accumulate luck for a while and smash the barrier down with my own internal force. It’s not that hard to pass through it.” She played with her dice. “Hrm… I wonder how much luck I can drain from Flowey without killing him… It’ll be interesting, doing it to a flower…”

Sans leaned against a nearby column and slouched. “i won’t stop ya. do whatever you want. you could even take asgore’s SOUL and get out that way. i know you have it in you.”

“That way sucks,” Vriska countered. “Not going down that route. Though I’d rather not sit here and wait to accumulate luck…” She rubbed her chin. “Hrm… Can I-“

“i am not helpin’ you with anythin’.”


“i’m just good at my job.”

“No, more than that. You’ve figured it out, haven’t you?” She smirked. “I know you don’t want to help me, but what if I can help you? You have things you’d like to do. You don’t want to stay in this universe. You help me get out, I can help you find a better world.”

Sans looked at her. He was still smiling, but she could see deep, serious thoughts in those white pinpricks that were his eyes. “you’ve got a deal. come on, i’ve got something for you.”

Vriska followed Sans behind a pillar – and then they took a shortcut.

~~~

Another Sans had been selling hot dogs to a significantly less monstrous version of the kid when the kid was suddenly gone, replaced with two individuals. One was a tremendous human adult while the
other was a pegasus creature. He instinctively checked them – green and yellow, Kindness and Justice. LV 3 and LV 8.

The man looked at the hot dog in his hand. “…Nani?”

The pegasus blinked, looking around. “Uh… Okay then…” She summoned a strange spirograph shape, forcing Sans’ eye to ignite with powerful fire and a few of his weapons to appear behind him.

The pegasus flared her wings in a defensive posture. “Sir, there’s a dragon skull behind you!”

“oh. that. yeah, that’s mine,” Sans said, shrugging. “i don’t go showing it around because it scares people.”

“Oh,” the pegasus said, lowering her wings. “Well, I’m Flutterfree, and this is Jotaro. We’re explorers from another world. What’s your name?”

“sans. ice to meetcha.”

Jotaro examined his surroundings – they were underground, but the area was exceptionally hot and well lit due to lava flows nearby.

“welcome to hotland.”

“That’s quite the descriptive name,” Flutterfree commented.

“i always thought lava runs would be better. or chili islands. want a hot dog?”

“Sure,” Flutterfree said. “I don’t think we have money you’d accept though.”

“eh, no problem. call the first one on the house.”

The two travelers started munching on the delicious food items. Flutterfree was mildly surprised when, at the third bite, the hot dog barked. “…Uh…”

“don’t worry about that,” Sans said with a wink. Flutterfree didn’t ask how he winked without eyelids.

Jotaro took out his dimensional device and tried a few things. He turned to Flutterfree and shook his head.

Flutterfree sighed. “Sans? Is it okay if I use Lolo – the thing you saw earlier – to look around?”

Sans shrugged. “i don’t really care either way. knock yourself out.”

Flutterfree spread out Lolo, searching the area for anything interesting. The green strands were invisible to all eyes that weren’t next to Flutterfree herself, so none of the creatures of the Underground batted an eye when the leaves passed by them.

“I found something odd…” Flutterfree said. “Down the river – the one of water a ways that way – there’s a section of cavern with a gray door in it. That door… when Lolo tries to reveal anything about it, it becomes insubstantial. Almost like a glitch.”

Sans blinked. “door? i don’t know about any door and i know of every door in the waterfall.”

“Something to check out then,” Jotaro said, standing tall. “Lead the way.”
“i’ve got a shortcut,” Sans said, standing up. “i have to admit, my skull’s ringing with curiosity about this door. this way.”

The two followed him – and the scenery suddenly shifted to that of a significantly darker and wetter area of the Underground.

“Just like when Pinkie needs to move fast,” Flutterfree observed.

“who?” Sans asked.

“Our leader,” Flutterfree explained. “She has a habit of knowing things and moving impossibly.”

“she sounds like a fine gal. pink, I take it?”

“Very,” Jotaro commented.

Flutterfree used Lolo to find the door again. “It’s right down this cavern. Come on.”

“this cavern didn’t exist yesterday,” Sans pointed out.

“Maybe we triggered it by showing up?” Flutterfree suggested. “I don’t know, really. Nova and Pinkie are the ones who know about this stuff.”

Jotaro raised an eyebrow.

“Oh! Sorry Jotaro. Do you have an idea what’s going on?”

“Yare yare daze... Only a small idea. Something shattered the world we were just in, separating the group. Each of us are probably in a different universe. Given how this is still the Underground, likely different versions of the Underground. This may or may not be related to the door.”

They had arrived at the door – smooth, gray, and featureless. When Flutterfree neared it, it became insubstantial and jagged.

“It’s probably not safe for me to touch,” Flutterfree said.

Jotaro nodded. He used Star Platinum to open the door, revealing a pristine white interior where no shadows existed.

There was a woman on the floor, laying in a pool of her own blood.

Flutterfree gasped. “MONIKA!?”

Jotaro moved quickly. He leaped into the room, grabbed Monika with Star Platinum, and dragged her out into the hallway. He laid her in front of Sans and Flutterfree. She was heavily wounded, large scratches crisscrossing her body at perfect ninety-degree angles.

Flutterfree checked Monika’s pulse. “She’s alive. We need to wake her up so she can heal herself…”

“who’s this girl?” Sans asked.

“Monika. She’s…” Flutterfree struggled to find the words. “She’s a character. Let me see here… Uh…”

Jotaro clapped Star Platinum’s hands an inch from Monika’s face. This shocked her awake – though it also made her cough up blood. “Gah….”
“Monika!? Are you okay?”

Monika rubbed her face. “Ugh… I… Don’t know…” She focused on something only she could see. She removed the cuts, fixed her clothes, and stood up with only a few glitched movements.

“What happened?” Jotaro demanded.

Monika took a look around where they were and curled a fist. “There’s something evil here… Something I didn’t see coming…”

“What?” Sans asked.

Monika pointed at the white room. “It was in there. It… It took something from me. I don’t know what…”

None of them liked the sound of that.

Sans didn’t like her either. He couldn’t read her LV first of all, and her soul… It was red.

Determination.

~~~

Nova appeared alone in a dark, wet section of the Underground. She shook her head – something had gone wrong. She didn’t think it was anything they had done, but…

She checked her readings. She was in a different universe and there didn’t appear to be a connection back to the one they’d just been in. None of the other connections seemed to work… She wondered if the universes had been scrambled by something like that other time they had all been split up. The unusual dimensional readings she was getting sure lent credence to that theory. Or, at least, it told her that something odd was going on with the universes.

Her thoughts were interrupted when a humanoid being in full plate armor landed in front of her. “What are you doing here!? Don’t you know there’s a human on the loose?”

“Uh… No?” Nova said, cocking her head at the armored woman.

“Just get to safety! The Temmie Village is that way; you should be safe there. Okay?”

“…Okay,” Nova agreed. The woman nodded and ran off, a spear appearing in her hand. Presumably hunting the human. Nova wondered if humans were monsters in this world, or if the people here were just terrified from what little they knew. …Perhaps it was both, considering what Vriska had managed to tell them about the game.

If there is a human around here killing everyone… I can stop them.

Nova galloped in the direction she had seen the armored woman run, but quickly realized she had no idea where the warrior had gone. She was alone again in these tunnels. And there was possibly a human mass murderer about…

“Hoi!”

“AUGH!” Nova screamed, raising a shield between her and… a cat? A dog? She… really wasn’t sure.

“Hoi! I’m Temmie!” the thing said. Its face was vibrating, as if it wasn’t quite attached to its head.
“Uh… Hi, Temmie,” Nova said cautiously. “Don’t you know it’s dangerous out here?”

“Oh yes! But Tem know way best! Tem… genius!”

“Uhh… Look, how about we get you back to the Temmie Villag—“

“NU! Tem want to go… DIS WAY!!!!” She scrambled off down what seemed to be a random tunnel.

Nova facehooved. “Oh boy, here we go again…” She teleported ahead of Temmie and grabbed the cat-dog in her signature striped telekinetic aura. “No, we are not going ‘dis way’ we are going to where you can be safe.”

“MMF! Tem no want safe! Tem want – oh hoi door!”

“Door…?” Nova said, turning to her left. There was, in fact, a door in the cave wall. Temmie and Nova fell quiet as they stared at the unusual portal.

It seemed wrong to them, somehow.

“Open da door,” Temmie said.

“W-what?”

“Open. Da. Door.”

“You open the door!”

“NU! Tem haz no hands!!!”

“I don’t either!”

“You has da magikz!”

Nova sighed. She took a step forward.

The door opened all on its own. Temmie screamed and passed out, her eyes becoming X’s. Nova, in contrast, just narrowed her eyes. “You’re interesting-looking.”

The ‘interesting-looking’ individual was a tall skeleton with a robe that covered most of his body from the neck down, leaving only his bony hands visible. The palms of those hands had a circular hole right through them, yet this did not appear to impede his motion. His skull was a tall ovoid with two large, black sockets that held pinpricks of light that served as his eyes. From his left eye, a crack ran down from his socket to the base of his skull. The right was much the opposite, a black division going upwards. His mouth was small, but was able to move as if it were made of flesh rather than bone. He did not appear to have a jaw at all.

“Interesting is a word without meaning,” the being declared, looking closely at Nova. “I could say that you are an interesting one, and nothing would really be accomplished.”

“Yeah…” Nova said, nervously. “I’m Nova, interdimensional explorer. Who are you?”

“W. D. Gaster. You have arrived in my universes at a most inopportune time.”

“Your universes?”
“Yes. Mine. Under normal circumstances I would devote my energies to ejecting you from them, but the situation is decidedly not standard at the current juncture.”

“I’ll leave as soon as I figure out how if that’s what you want. But… there’s something wrong, isn’t there?”

“A threat has appeared,” Gaster stated. “It sought me out specifically. It knew of my connection to these worlds. The world that was dimensionally weakest shattered as a result. No doubt it was weak because of you.”

“I- I’m sorry-”

“Don’t be. Misplaced sorrow is pointless. The fault lies in the outside threat. It is still here, among these worlds.” He raised one of his hands and created a rift in space-time. It wasn’t a circular, glowing portal like the ones Nova used – it was a brutal, horrendous tear that hurt the space it went through like a predator’s claw digging into flesh.

“I’m coming with you,” Nova decreed.

“If that is what you wish, Nova,” Gaster said, devoid of emotion.

“What about Temmie, though?”

With a wave of his hand, Gaster teleported Temmie away. “She will be safe.”

Nova followed the skeletal being through the portal without another word.

~~~

There was a place where nothing was supposed to exist. Eternal nothingness and death was what it had become.

Pinkie, being Pinkie, decided to keep on existing anyway. In her state of really-shouldn’t-exist-but-did, she saw blackness. There was no light, but she could still see herself just fine. There was a cold, dead wind blowing through the nothingness.

Pinkie grinned. She took a deep breath and took out her megaphone. “HELLO!!!!!!!”

A voice responded from everywhere at once. It was deep, but still audibly feminine.

“…Interesting. There’s nothing left, but you keep on existing anyway.”

“Yep! That’s Pinkie Pie!” Pinkie giggled. “So, Chara, are you going to show yourself or what?”

“Most peculiar. You know my name, yet I did not know yours until this moment.”

“Yeah, I know things. Lots of things.”

“You have replaced the empty spirit… Yet you are not like them, not really. You are from elsewhere…”

Suddenly Pinkie was in an encounter – her body went white and her SOUL showed itself.

“LV 5… pathetic. Perhaps pink means sentimentality. Or weakness.”

“Laughter,” Pinkie said with a grin. “I overrode the rules, I suppose you could say.”
“Yes… I see that within you. There are other places beyond this one. I had told them we would move onto the next after, but they never returned… You are my destiny, Pinkie Pie.”

“Nah,” Pinkie said, smirking. “I’m not taking you out of here and you can’t make me.”

A young girl appeared out of the nothingness in front of Pinkie. Her shirt was striped and her hair cut short. Her eyes had pupils of glowing neon red and blacks instead of whites. She held what could only be described as a slasher smile on her face, an expression that went nicely with the oversized knife in her hand.

There was a red SOUL hovering in front of her… But it seemed dead, somehow.

Pinkie produced two giant swords. “I know who you are, Chara. I’m going to use every cheat and trick I know because of it. You don’t deserve to live.”

“Such bold statements for such a low LV.”

“I only kill when I have to. You kill everything you see.”

Chara laughed. “Yes! Yes I do! How about we see if it’s possible to get higher than 20!” She pulled her knife back and charged.

Pinkie appeared behind her and drove her two swords through Chara’s SOUL at the same time, shattering the frail red heart.

“Well you know I would cheat,” Pinkie said.

And then Chara’s SOUL was just fine. She was standing a short distance from Pinkie again.

Pinkie glared. “Cheating as well, I see.”

Chara’s smile faltered. “…You remind me too much of a certain skeleton.”

Pinkie grinned. “Imagine that guy turned up to 11. That’s what I am. You’re going to have a bad time, Chara. I’m never going to do the same thing twice.”

“I refuse to lose,” Chara declared, drawing a gun out of nowhere and firing.

Pinkie deflected, cutting through her SOUL once more…

~~~

“And here we are,” Sans told Vriska. “my laboratory.”

The laboratory was a mostly empty room with a single countertop workspace and a thing under a large tarp. Vriska moved her hand to look under the tarp, but Sans slapped her hand away. “nope. you don’t get to see that.”

“Yeesh, okay mister grumpy,” Vriska muttered. “If it’s not the mysterious possibly-doomsday device under the tarp, what is it?”

Sans pointed at a blueprint sitting atop the counter workspace. “there you go. dimensional theory on that piece of paper and everything under it. take your time, we’ve literally got until the end of the universe to figure something out.”

Vriska picked up the blueprint. “Gog, I wish Nova was here, she’d know what this meant
“instantly…”

“So you’re not the smart one in your group. Not surprised.”

“I wonder how many times you’re going to get a ‘fuck you’ before I get tired of listening to all your blathering nonsense and decide to punch you and get it over with.”

“Heh. I s’ppose that’ll be the moment you get over yourself and just kill me anyway. Come on, I know you have it in you.”

“Do you want to die?”

“No, I want Grillby’s. I want everyone alive again. I want to not have to deal with people like you.”

“Lovely,” Vriska muttered, looking over the blueprints. “Can you just help me over here? I need something like the energy signature of another universe that I can put into my device to get anywhere else.”

“Well that’d be right under the piece of paper over there.”

“Over where?”

“Under there.”

“Under where?”

Sans gave her a finger guns gesture. “Gotcha.”

“…My gog, you really want to die. You only have one HP buddy, if you tweak me the wrong way I will punch you and it will kill you.”

“Hey, cool, you know about HP. Sweet. How about you explain how you know that?”

“How come you know so much stuff about LV and whatever?”

“Because I’m supposed to. You, on the other hand… very suspicious.”

Vriska twitched. “Righty-o! Let’s go over this simply. You live in a video game. We found that video game and studied it before coming here. Tah-daaaaaah!” Can’t tell him it was only me who knew about it. Cause then he’d ask how I played. I don’t think he’d let me leave if he knew I went through one of these runs.

“Huh.”

“…That’s it? I tell you you’re a video game and that’s your only response?”

“I already knew it was a game. Just didn’t think it would be played like that. Wonder if you could bring a copy here and play while you play while you play.”

“Questions for later. Just help me find the right coordinates or whatever, kapeesh?”

“Eh, sure.” Sans walked up to the counter and began to sort through the papers. Vriska was not a genius, but she did recognize sketches that clearly related to time travel devices, as well as more than a few documents on dimensional theory. She couldn’t piece it together though.

He eventually handed her a sheet of paper. “There you go.”
Vriska looked it over – *A Study of Resonance Frequencies Within the Barrier*. It took her a few minutes, but she located the section about particular frequencies that suggested a weakness in the dimensional wall…

She took out one of her eight-balls and smashed it against the table, producing a computer. She bit her lip – she really didn’t know what she was doing. With some trepidation, she opened up a program she thought translated dimensional signatures into coordinates. It had been a while since she’d been shown what the program could do…

“problem?”

“I’m fine, thank you for asking.”

“you’ve been staring at that screen for a while, you look like you don’t have a clue.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Vriska blurted. “I’ve got this.”

“suumuuuure.”

Vriska ran some numbers into the program and, after fifteen minutes of banging her head against the counter, she got it. Multiple coordinates from the data.

“Heh. Told you I had it.”

“i saw what you needed to do six minutes ago.”

“THEN WHY DIDN’T YOU SAY ANYTHING!?”

“schadenfreude.”

“Nice word,” Vriska muttered, placing the coordinates into her dimensional device. She dialed it and got a green light.

“you ever get that feeling you’re being watched?”

“Yeah. By you. Stop staring so much.”

~~~

“You saw something,” Chara said, bringing her knife down on nothing – *again*.

“Yeah, so what?” Pinkie said, aiming a bazooka in Chara’s direction and firing, shattering her SOUL.

“Something… elsewhere,” Chara said, already recovered.

“Yeah, lucky me!” Pinkie giggled. “Too bad you don’t get to see anything else. Just stuck here forever in this darkness.”

Chara charged, but Pinkie once again just wasn’t there.

“Heh. You just Chara-rged.”

Chara shot a blast of pure determination behind her, but Pinkie wasn’t there again. “Pinkie, this isn’t stuck; this is the darkness of my creation. It is the way all things should be.”
“Doesn’t it get boring?” Pinkie asked, bashing Chara into pieces with her warhammer.

“Never,” Chara laughed. “The nothingness is an eternal joy, a constant reminder that I did this. I killed them all. The darkness is fulfillment.”

“Your psycho levels are off the charts,” Pinkie muttered, opting to throw syringes at Chara this time.

“By all conventional scales.” Chara said, plucking the syringes off of her like they were little more than flies. “I should probably thank you for coming here, even though I doubt it was intentional.”

“You have me pegged.” Pinkie pulled out a mini-nuke and irradiated Chara’s SOUL again.

Evidently Chara just didn’t feel pain. “You showed me that there are ways to the other worlds without leeching off another entity. I can see it within you – the answer. You know how to get out of here… You saw it. It’s only a matter of time before I see it through you.”

Pinkie’s smile vanished. She narrowly moved her pink SOUL out of the way from a gunshot. “You aren’t that Aware.”

“No. But you’re in my world now. It’s only a matter of time before I can escape using you as a proxy, Pinkie. Only a matter of time…”

Pinkie took a breath – she was going to have to move fast. She threw a bomb at Chara, shattering her SOUL again. She reverted once more. It was in this initial moment of reversion that Pinkie acted. She took out her dimensional device, already entered with the coordinates on the list Vriska had created in another universe. She opened a portal, pointing a gun behind her to take out Chara again.

Chara dodged the bullet, moving like lightning. She put a hand on the device, grinning psychotically. Pinkie wasn’t about to let her have it – she put on the Bomb Mask.

She never got to explode it. The portal was gone, and Chara was standing a few feet in front of her. Holding the dimensional device.

Chara grinned. “Hehehehehe…”

Pinkie ran toward Chara – but every time she got close, Pinkie just reset to her original position. No matter how she moved or from what direction, she was set back every time Chara wanted.

“You shouldn’t have been able to do that and keep the device!”

“I didn’t. This is just a dummy to screw with you.” She tossed the device on the ground. It exploded. “I have the power within me now that I felt it. Thank you for falling for my tricks, Pinkie Pie. I have some worlds to destroy.”

“CHARA!” Pinkie shouted – but she was too late. Chara had already left the universe.

Pinkie pulled out her dimensional device – still fine – and gulped. She had no idea which universe Chara had gone to…

She selected one at random and left the emptiness.

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“Monika, um… what are you doing?” Flutterfree asked.

“Focusing on the moment,” Monika explained, a hand to her head. “Okay, I think I’m all here now.
Let’s see…” She narrowed her eyes.

“Monika, please stop sifting through our character files.”

Monika rolled her eyes. “Fine. Nothing interesting in there anyway, aside from small and bony here, but nothing on the surface helped much. Quite the small powerhouse aren’t you?”

“my secrets mean nothing anymore,” Sans deadpanned. “welp, perhaps i should open a blasting business now. work in construction or something. or deconstruction.” He winked at Monika.

“Mhm… Right…” Monika shook her head. “Anyway, you Merodi got separated, huh?”

“Did you deduce that or read it?” Jotaro asked.

“Read it. Pretty prominent on you two’s motivations right now.”

“Yeah…” Flutterfree said. “Would you help us find them?”

“Well, see, like you I’m unsure exactly where I stand in the multiversal scale. I could follow the flow of ka up – but since this is a different universe, I wouldn’t even end up where I started – or I could follow the flow down, and that won’t help at all because books within books will only take me somewhere else. I can force open a dimensional connection to somewhere random but that won’t exactly help, will it?”

Sans raised his hand, which had a hot dog in it. “ahem. i may know of a place with stuff that might help you. bit of a walk though.”

Monika kneeled down to Sans’ height and smiled warmly. “Hey there… I think you might also be able to answer some of my questions. You always knew the most.”

“uh… what?”

“Nothing, never mind. Lead the way, Sans!”

“huh. you know what? looks like we won’t be needing that after all, unless mirrors have suddenly developed effective invisibility.”

He pointed to one end of the hall where another Sans and Vriska were walking up toward them.

Monika blinked. “On one hand, that’s helpful. On the other…”

“OH HEEEEEEEY MONIKA!” Vriska shouted. “I should have known you were behind this!”

“Me?! Oh sure, you just go and accuse me the first chance you get. If I did anything I didn’t do it on purpose!”

Vriska wanted to object really badly but couldn’t think of something effective. She folded her arms and grunted.

“right, before we do anything else, there’s something really important we need to take care of,” native-Sans said.

“oh?” visiting-Sans asked.

“i, as the native sans, get to keep my name. you can be sansy.”
“heh. okay,” Sansy said.

“Riveting, now there’s two of you,” Vriska muttered.

“givin’ her a hard time for the high LV?” Sans asked his counterpart.

“yeah.”

“man, thought we were better than that.”

“your world didn’t have everyone die.”

Sans’ eyes softened. “i’m sorry.”

“no use dwellin’ on it. something tells me we have other problems.”

“Yeah,” Vriska said. “I have lots of questions.”

Jotaro turned to Monika, expression unreadable. “How about you explain exactly why you are here and what you were trying to do when you found this ‘evil’ thing.”

Monika lifted her hand. “I’ll do something better than explain. I’ll show you.” She altered the construction to show herself at a computer, playing a game. “This game is called Undertale, for those of you who don’t know. It’s one of the more popular ones around the multiverse, especially for its story. It holds a message about pacifism, death, and a lot of other deep stuff. However, as has been my hobby ever since you convinced me to try something new, I was not drawn to it for the reasons most were. I came to it in order to solve a mystery. Beyond the game, there is an individual who seems greatly important to the game’s lore, but who’s exact identity is a mystery.”

The scene changed, showing a strange, pixelated white and black figure. “This is, presumably, W. D. Gaster. What I have been able to figure out says that he has been spread across time and space by a mistake of falling into his creation, but I have been unable to discover much else. I dug through the game’s files and found nothing. So I do what I do – I followed ka downward, entering the world of the game myself. I went into the room with Gaster in it…” She showed them the moment the sludgy abomination grabbed her. “And then everything shattered into a million tiny pieces. I get beaten within an inch of death and dropped behind that door, and you all go flying across the Undertale universes.”

She turned to the two Sanses. “Does this mean anything to you two?”

The Sanses glanced at each other and shook their heads. “sorry lady, got nothing for you.”

“I see… But there was evidence he knew or was even related to you… What of that picture in your lab that says ‘never forget’?”

Sansy sighed. “every time i see that i feel guilty for not remembering.”

“tragically ironic,” Sans confirmed.

Monika put her hands on her hips. “Regardless, if that sludge was Gaster or not, it was evil. I was just trying to figure out what it meant, maybe even help it if possible, but it attacked me. And I no longer feel complete. I can’t tell you what I’m missing, my powers seem to work and I don’t think I’ve lost any memories, but the thing took something.”

“So, what, we need to find it and get it back?” Vriska asked.
“I don’t know. I just want answers. I expect you all will want to stop some sort of evil thing from destroying multiple universes or whatever it’s planning.”

Jotaro furrowed his brow. “Does anyone have any idea where to start?”

“We have a list of different universes,” Vriska said, holding up her device. “We could check those.”

“Best we’ve got,” Flutterfree said. “Have any insights, Monika?”

“I’m not an answering machine, like Pinkie,” Monika said. “My Awareness is more about control than knowing random things. I can tell you that the scene’s about to end but that’s about it as to things that aren’t right here right now for me to look at.”

“All right then.”

~~~

Nova and Gaster walked in an area Gaster had called ‘the core’. It was the underbellies of some gigantic machine that powered everything in the Underground.

Gaster claimed that he had made it, before he had been ‘erased’ from everything. Now it had no creator. It was a curious trick of fate.

Nova had doubts that he was sane. But she was sure these were his universes – he could step between them like butter, searching for the threat with methodical precision. He didn’t want the threat to even exist in his worlds. He complained a few times under his breath about ‘not being everywhere anymore’, but he would not elaborate when Nova asked.

He wouldn’t elaborate about anything, really.

This bothered Nova to no end, but nothing she said got much of a response from him. He was either too fixated or too distracted, she couldn’t decide which. He was clearly a being with a large mind that was always turning, always thinking, always planning. It was unnerving to say the least.

Gaster was about to leave the universe for another when an armored creature fell to the ground and vaporized into dust right before their eyes.

“What!?” Nova blurted.

“Dead monster,” Gaster said. “Such things happen.”

“But… why did it happen!?”

“It was because of me!” Chara shouted, dropping from the sky. Her hair was brown, her shirt green and yellow striped – and her knife red despite the monster she’d just killed clearly not having any blood within it. The three of them entered a battle, prompting their SOULs to appear.

Gaster produced… something. It wasn’t a heart, but it was certainly black, a white aura permitting it to be seen. Nova swore the shape changed, but never when she was focusing on it…

Chara pointed her knife at Gaster. “You’re new. Everything else here has been more of the same…”

“I do not have time for this,” Gaster decreed, leaving the encounter in an instant. This prompted Chara to end the fight and chase after him.

“HEY! I’m not done talking to you! I’m going to kill you just like I’ve killed everyone el-“
Gaster raised a hand and flung Chara to the side. She twisted back and landed effortlessly on the ground. “Again with that, what is it with people suddenly being unpredictable today!?”

“Nova, we should move on.”

“Didn’t you hear her!?” Nova blurted. “She’s going to kill everyone! How can she not be the threat!?”

“Her existence is sanctioned within my worlds as a means of balance,” Gaster decreed. “She is supposed to exist within the worlds, unlike you or the threat.”

Nova shook her head. “I… I just can’t let her go and kill everyone!”

“Yes… stay and fight!” Chara encouraged. “It’ll be nice to have something else to cut into a million tiny pieces…”

“It is your choice,” Gaster commented. “I’m leaving. Come or don’t.”

“No,” Nova said, turning to face Chara. “She doesn’t know what she’s getting herself into.”

“Perhaps not. But neither do you.” In an instant, Gaster was gone.

Nova and Chara entered a fight, their SOULs projecting once again.

“LV 6, Integrity,” Chara commented, twirling her knife. “I hope you have better tricks than the pink one. But with that standard SOUL…”

“What did you do to Pinkie!?” Nova shouted.

Chara grinned. “Survive long enough and maybe I’ll tell you the exact horrors she has experienced by my blade.”

Nova slowed down time to a crawl. To her surprise, Chara was still able to move – albeit at a snail’s pace. Nova moved cautiously, starting with long-range beams first, all of which Chara blocked or dodged.

How was she doing that!?

Nova fired a few slow-moving blasts, watching how Chara reacted before Nova had even shot them. She knows what I’m going to do before I do it. Even slowed down, that’s… It’s like fighting Pinkie when she decides she wants to curb-stomp you.

Nova opted for a magic shield, but Chara had a gun in addition to a knife, and that gun fired a blast of energy that destroyed the shield. Nova’s SOUL was exposed.

She knew she did not want to take a single hit from that knife. She raised a barrier, turning to run. She felt her barrier shatter, and the knife closing in on her blue SOUL.

Pinkie appeared out of nowhere and smashed Chara in the head with a warhammer. She survived, somehow.

“EVERY TIME!” Chara shouted. “That was the absolute fastest I could have gotten to her! What is your deal with timing?”

“Hi! I’m Pinkie Pie!” Pinkie answered, hefting her hammer.
“THAT’S NOT AN ANSWER!”

“Yes it is,” Nova said, standing up next to Pinkie. “Because Pinkie Pie is Pinkie Pie.”

Chara’s angry scowl turned back into a slasher smile. “Fine. I’ll turn this around. It’ll just take some playing.”

Nova lit her horn and Pinkie put on some boxing gloves studded with spikes.

Chara charged Pinkie, laughing with gleeful abandon.

Pinkie prepared her fist for a punch. She aimed right for Chara’s SOUL.

And then Chara dove to the left at the last minute, driving her knife into the NOVA’s blue heart. It shattered.

“NOVA!”

~~~

Gaster appeared in the middle of Vriska, Flutterfree, Jotaro, Monika, Sans, and Sansy.

He took one look at Monika and unleashed everything he had at her. She twitched slightly, telling reality that it needed to divert the distorted spacetime power around her, in addition to summoning a thin rapier to her hand. “Get him!”

“They can do nothing,” Gaster responded, oblivious to the fact Lolo had made him appear insubstantial to them. “It is only you.”

“You ever heard of ‘keeping the maniac busy’?” Monika asked.

An arrow of light shot through the side of Gaster’s skull. Eight diamond knives shot from Vriska’s dice, hitting him in the back. Sans and Sansy unleashed their dragon-skulls, engulfing the skeleton in white power.

Gaster came out of this unscathed. Even the hole the arrow left was gone. “I am the guardian of these universes. You will be removed. My children, you should know better than to use my own weapons against me.” With a snap of his fingers, two dragon-skulls appeared from nowhere and fired at the Sanses. They both dodged.

“children?” Sansy asked.

“It matters not,” Gaster commented. “None can remember me, for good reason. If you stand in my way of purging this threat, I must remove you.” He raised a hand.

Moinka glitched space around his hand. “Yeah, not happening crazy skeleton. I suppose you forgot about me, huh?”

“I never forgot about you.”

“Care to explain how I am a threat?”

Gaster’s eyes lit up. “You do more than control the game. Do more than take the actions of a single child. You come here and interfere with the balance. New variables cannot be tolerated.”

Monika rewrote the laws of physics to keep Gaster pinned to his current position. “I don’t think so.
Things only broke when you attacked me!"

Gaster growled. “I cannot quantify or control what isn’t consistent.” He teleported out of the pin, focusing entirely on Monika, rage in his expression.

Jotaro saw his opportunity. “STAR PLATINUM: THE WORLD!”

Time froze. Gaster was too busy with Monika to do anything about that.

Jotaro, as always, had been watching very closely. Watching Gaster’s movements, his actions, his words… And he had seen it. The black shape. It wasn’t a SOUL… or perhaps it was, just broken. Regardless, it was Jotaro’s target.

Star Platinum grabbed the black shape and pulled it as far from Gaster as it could with one motion. Then it went for the old-fashioned approach.

“ORA!!!!” Star Platinum roared, punching the black shape. “ORA ORA
universe he just came from had their signatures in it. Let’s just open up a portal there and…”

A portal opened to the other universe just in time for everyone to see Chara pierce Pinkie’s pink heart, shattering it.

Chara didn’t even miss a beat before jumping through the portal and attacking them. She went for Jotaro first, piercing his yellow heart with alarming accuracy and without a moment of hesitation. The life left his eyes – but he remained standing.

“Inhuman,” Chara muttered, twisting around for Monika’s SOUL next. Monika tried to access her character file but only got a million lines of 9999999999999999999. Monika opted to use the rapier to pierce Chara – but the kid caught the blade with her knife, jumping on top of it. She drove the knife toward Monika’s SOUL, aiming for where it was going to be rather than where it was. Monika knew no matter where she twisted, Chara would hit the heart.

*She can save and reload, Monika realized.*

*Two can play at that game.*

She brought up her save file. The most recent one… Back when Vriska and Sansy had first shown up. Close enough. She selected it, reverting reality back to its prior existence. Jotaro was still alive and well, his inner fire burning strong.

“Monika, um… what are you doing?” Flutterfree asked.

“Focusing on the moment,” Monika explained, a hand to her head. “Okay, I think I’m all here now. Let’s see…” She narrowed her eyes.

“Monika, please stop sifting through our character files.”

Monika rolled her eyes, continuing to go along with her perfect memory of the past. She said the same things and did the same things at the same time, allowing all the others to do exactly what they needed to as well. It was like playing a recording. She would do this until the moment she needed to change something.

The moment when Gaster would appear.

The millisecond before he appeared, she moved herself right to where he was going to show up.

When Gaster entered the universe, Monika left – switching locations with the controlling scientist. She was sure they’d be fine alone with Gaster, should have no reason to fight him without her there.

Monika took a moment to recognize what was happening around her. Pinkie had just beaten Chara to the side, preventing her from killing Nova. Pinkie looked up and saw Monika.

Monika winked – a signal for Pinkie to go ahead with the same way things had gone previously. The pony aimed the boxing glove for Chara’s face. Chara ducked to the left, going for Nova.

Monika stabbed her rapier right where Chara’s SOUL was. As expected, she managed to duck out of the way.

“Still saving and reloading, are you?” Monika asked, placing herself between Chara and Nova.

Chara growled. “Does everyone figure that out!?”

“Sometimes,” Monika said, erecting walls around Chara on all four sides. “It helps that I can do it
“Flowey could do it,” Chara commented, busting down the brick walls. “I still beat him.”

“He was within your setting,” Monika said, opening a portal to a completely random universe. “Over here? This won’t be your world. Your rules won’t apply.” The portal swept up Chara and she didn’t dodge. Monika stepped through as well, closing the portal behind herself. Monika and Chara stood alone in a forest made out of tall, thorny trees.

Chara tried to fight – but when the world didn’t become monochromatic, she paused. She didn’t see her SOUL, or that of Monika. “Wh… What!?”

“You are outside of your normal medium,” Monika stated. “You’ll find that you can’t save or load. You’ll also find that mere determination won’t give you all the power in the world. You’re just an evil kid with a knife.”

Chara growled. “Then you won’t be able to either!”

“Not true,” Monika said. “I’m a special case. I get to retain what I was even where it should not be. I have Vriska to thank for that.” She looked into the distance, bringing up Chara’s character file. It was now easy to access. “Ah, here we go… Let’s tone down all that hatred a bit, shall we? Maybe I can make you a pacifist…”

Chara grabbed her head and screamed.

~~~

Gaster appeared in the middle of Vriska, Flutterfree, Jotaro, Sans, and Sansy.

“…She was here,” Gaster said. It wasn’t a question. He tried to leave to pursue her – but he found that reality had been edited. “WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!?” He levitated the five of them into the air, scanning each of them and triggering the monochromatic encounter scheme. “You sided with her…”

“Not… necessarily…” Vriska muttered, using her psychic powers on Gaster. “She’s… a bit of a bitch… A lot of the time…”

“I see… a split,” Gaster said, looking at something that wasn’t really there. “She reloaded… She knew exactly where I would be. But none of you do…”

The Sanses took a few steps back.

“You were always good at seeing things, my children,” Gaster said, turning to the two skeletons. “Noticing patterns. Little tics in expressions. Changes in auras…”

“hey, uh, gaster is it?” Sans asked. “yeah, we don’t have any beef with you, whoever you are.”

“None can remember me, for good reason,” Gaster stated. Then his eyes flashed. “Damn the flow… I can’t keep everything organized like this… It has to be consistent!”

“Consistent?” Flutterfree asked, walking up to him. “What do you mean?”

“Outside interference. She was the worst of it, but you all come in and introduce the universes to each other. My universes. Removing consistency. You’re destroying my worlds.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, we didn’t mean to,” Flutterfree said. “We will leave as soon as we’ve found
“That you will, but can you get rid of the threat? SHE is the horror upon these worlds!”

Vriska grinned. “Oh, we’d love to get rid of he-”

“We can’t,” Flutterfree asserted. “Her power is beyond us. She can just tell us not to attack her if it becomes too much of an issue, and we’ll have to listen.”

“Then I shall take care of her myse-” he saw a look in Sansy’s eyes. “She’s already defeated me.”

“eh, yeah,” Sansy said, hands in his pockets. “you’re also spouting complete nonsense. nobody’s destroying any worlds. dimensional activity is all fine. i checked earlier.”

“This is not about their existence! It is about their consistency!” Gaster blurted. “I cannot keep hold on these universes with all these unforeseen variables – especially not in this form!”

“Keep hold of?” Flutterfree said, narrowing her eyes. “What do you plan to do with these worlds?”

Gaster looked right at her. “There is no point in lying to you.”

Lolo activated fully. “I doubt it.”

“Very well. Little pegasus, once I have restored the consistency to these worlds, I will begin my experiments anew. I have claimed this body back from her, and as such I will make use of it. The Core was merely the beginning of my projects. I shall grow beyond that and learn to fold space and time itself for my worlds. Everything will succumb to my vision. No longer will I be spread out over existence like a beetle on a windshield – I shall control the existence which spread me so thin!”

Vriska drew her sword. “I spot an evil psycho.”

Jotaro nodded, summoning Star Platinum.

Sansy narrowed his eyes. “that murderous kid… he’s part of your order. i’m not going to stand for that.”

“You aren’t, are you?” Gaster chuckled. “Come at me with everything yo-“

“STAR PLATINUM: THE WORLD!”

Time froze. Gaster was not too busy with Monika…

Star Platinum grabbed the black shape and pulled it as far from Gaster as it could with one motion. Gaster, however, moved the moment his ‘soul’ was moved from him.

“ORA!!!!” Star Platinum roared, punching the black shape. “ORA ORA OR-“

Jotaro went flying, ending the time stop early. A few cracks appeared in Gaster’s skull visage. “You pack more power than I had given you credit for… It looks as if I will have to deal with you after all.”

“Bring it,” Vriska said, eyeing him and stealing his luck. “I bet you won’t be able to walk a step toward me.”

Gaster took a step and nothing bad happened.
“How the… I drained you almost dry of luck!”

“Luck has no place in the calculations of a scientist,” Gaster declared, raising a hand and encasing her neck in a choke hold. “If one makes decisions based on luck, there is always a chance to lose. I am a construct of every universe in my domain. I cannot be defeated by pure luck.”

Sansy and Sans activated their dragon-skulls. Gaster took the blast and didn’t flinch. “They’re called Gaster Blasters for a reason. They are me.” He turned the Gaster Blasters on the Sanses, forcing them to dodge.

“Why do you fight your father?”

“you seem like a pretty messed up dude,” Sans called. “and, well, cause other me was.”

“do you really need it spelled out, scientist?” Sansy asked. “you let that child run and kill everyone.”

“Oh, that wasn’t me, Sans. I had no control over the events at that point, they just happened. My desire is merely to keep them the way they are, I did not create them. If you want to blame who created them, look no further than the troll in my grasps. She’s played the game, Sans. She’s played it in every way. Barring the Creator himself, players like her are the reason that child runs free. Every Frisk and Chara… They are the will of a player.”

“Hey hey hey!” Vriska said. “Don’t judge me, I was just playing a video game because it was related to me! You stole my song afte- AUGH!” Vriska took the force of a Gaster Blaster right to her SOUL.

Sans turned to his counterpart. “hey man, that was uncalled fo-“

“she was lying,” Sansy said. “stay back. you have not experienced enough to care about this.”

Sansy twitched. “Stop pretending that you didn’t kill them all, Vriska.”

Flutterfree put herself between Sansy and Vriska. “Sans, stop. We can talk this through.”

“get out of my way unless you want to have a bad time.”

Flutterfree looked Sansy right in the eyes. “I will not get out of the way. And if you move me aside to get to her, you will have to use a lot of force. I might not survive. Think about what you’re doing.”

Sansy faltered, pausing for a moment.

“Vriska saved your life, you know,” Flutterfree said. “Jotaro was about to stop time and hit you with several dozen different punches. If you only need to take one hit… You would have died several times over without even realizing it. She gave up her victory for you. She may not be the nicest person, but she’s not a monster.”

“she still killed them all.”
“So? She killed off one of her friends when she was still young. Now they’re best friends. Sans… In your world, there is always a way to win without killing. In hers, it was shameful to think killing was wrong. She’s come a long way. Whatever record of evil you see on her, consider that most of it was when she was a child.”

“…you’re just like frisk,” Sans commented from behind his counterpart. “frisk did a lot less talking, but she knew right how to get to the issue. how to get them to stop.”

Sansy let his eye of fire go out. “right. right…”

Vriska walked over to Sansy and held out a hand. “We don’t have to be friends. We don’t have to like each other. But we also don’t have to kill each other.”

Sansy grabbed her hand and shook it.

Gaster roared. “A spare!? A spare!?”

“It’s how these worlds work, old man,” Jotaro said. “Figured you would know that since they’re yours.”

“Nice one,” Vriska commented, giving him a fistbump.

Gaster roared. “I shall take care of you myself!”

“mmm, nah, i don’t think so,” Sans said. “you’re going to get spared as well, Gaster.”

“I rise above such pitiful constructs you fools! My work has always been to move beyond!” he raised a hand, placing Flutterfree in a choke hold. “I can distort you to nothing with but a thought!”

“You aren’t, though, are you?” Flutterfree pointed out. “You’re talking. You like talking about your plans – and you like your children.”

“They are inconsequential.”

“Biggest lie yet,” Jotaro commented.

Sans took out a phone. “i think i’ll call papyrus, see what he has to say.”

Gaster’s eyes lit. “Sans, don-”

“ay papyrus, gotta question for you,” Sans said, pressing the speakerphone button. “what’s your earliest memory?”

“Oh Sans, you know that story!” a nasally, loud voice declared. “Why would you want to hear it AGAIN?”

“no reason, bro, not really.”

“Well fine. I know you don’t believe me, but I swear I remember when we first arrived in Snowdin! Now don’t you go on about how that’s ‘bone-headed’, I know what you’re thinking – gosh this is just a setup for a joke isn’t it – but I remember walking! You were there too, but you looked… empty. And between us was a tall skeleton with cracks in his face! I remember feeling worried, and cold. It was very cold. But that tall skeleton – he was protecting us! I don’t know from what – I thought it was the cold. I think. Very fuzzy… I believe I asked him what was going on. He told me he was taking us somewhere safe, somewhere we could live. And then I saw Snowdin! Its lights warmed my bones! He said I would never have to feel afraid again. When I turned to look… he was
gone. And you looked like yourself, Sans! You always say that’s the point I finally start remembering correctly, but…”

“thank you, papyrus,” Sans said, hanging up. Sansy was barely holding himself together.

Gaster was staring blankly at the now-silent phone.

“You know what I think?” Vriska said. “Fuck being the all-powerful scientist. You’ve got a body again, go spend some time with your kids!”

Flutterfree nodded. “You can spend time with all of them, Gaster. Every set… that’s still around. You can do that now. I don’t think you’re forgotten what it was like when you could do that, do you?”

Gaster dropped to the ground, allowing color to come back to the world. He held out his hand, asking for the phone. Sans gave it to him.

Gaster called papyrus again.

“Sans, what is with you toda-”

“Papyrus, it’s me,” Gaster said, voice wavering. “…I heard that you remembered me. I didn’t think that was possible.”

“What are you- no way. No way, hold the phone!”

“he is,” Sans commented.

“NOW IS NOT THE TIME FOR JOKES SANS- wait am I on speakerphone?”

“Yes,” Gaster and Sans said.

“Oh uh… I hope nobody else is there…”

“BAAAAACK!” Monika declared, appearing in a shower of glitches. “Right, so Jotaro I’m going to freeze Gaster and then you are going t-”

“He’s not evil anymore,” Flutterfree called.


“They are,” Gaster declared, looking to Monika. “…I will still forcefully eject you from my universes, don’t think I won’t.”

Papyrus freaked out. “UNIVERSES? WHAT? WHY DOES IT SOUND LIKE THERE ARE LOTS OF CUTE GIRLS THERE!?"

“Good grief,” Jotaro muttered.

“THAT WAS DECIDEDLY UNCUTE.”

“papyrus, take a chill strip,” Sans said. “the old man and I will be there and explain everything.”

Gaster nodded. “Expect a few seconds.”

“What do y-”
Gaster hung up, a small smile on his face. “I’m going to go speak to my children. I want all of you out of my universes by the time I return.”

“You’re not going to try to control everyone’s lives?” Flutterfree asked, narrowing her eyes.

“I will not. Sans will make sure of that,” Gaster said. “But my – our worlds do not need what you brought out in me, or what you bring to us. Stay away.”

Monika smiled. “Well, this conversation has given me my answers. Sure thing, mister Gaster. Have a good physical life! Hope you enjoy that piece of me.”

“You should be able to return to normal under your own power, given time,” Gaster declared. “Come, Sans, let us go.” And then the two were gone.

Monika shrugged. In a glitch, Pinkie and Nova appeared in front of them. “There you go, all together again!”

“Wait a minute, how are we going to leave?” Flutterfree asked.

Monika sighed. “Riiiiight…”

Vriska took out her device with its list of coordinates. “One of these is bound to get us out.”

“I’ll try them!” Pinkie said, grabbing the device. “Be back in a Pinkie!” She was gone before they could do anything.

Monika shrugged. “Well, good luck. I’m just going to go to a random world. Have fun you guys!”

“Wait what ab- and she’s gone,” Flutterfree said, facehooving. “Well now we’re just going to sit and wait…”

“Not that bad of a thing to do,” Nova commented.

The two of them began to talk – Vriska chose to ignore them, heading over to Sansy – or just Sans now. “Hey.”

“you’re strange, you know that?” Sans asked. “you have such violence and pain, and yet i have seen a soft soul within you. you’re a contradiction.”

Vriska laughed. “I’m a product of the multiverse.”

Sans nodded, silent.

Vriska sighed. “Oh boy… Right, Sans. How would you like to come with us?”

“what?”

“You don’t really have anywhere to go. Your world is dead. Our civilization could use your kind of power. And your spirit. It’ll be dangerous.”

Sans looked into the distance. “yeah. i don’t think there’s anything for me here. i’ll try your way. see if i can understand your insanity. there better be a grillby’s there though.”

“I have no idea.”

“my first mission: find a grillby’s.”
Vriska chuckled. “…Also it’s fine that you stole my song. You’re badass enough to have it too.”

“you’re going to regret saying that.”

“YEP! But I’m in one of my softy moods. So, fuck it, regrettable words for eternity!”

“heh.”

The two fell silent, appreciating the sounds of the Underground.

Pinkie returned the next instant. “Found a connection to Earth Starfleet! Leeet’s move it!”

Gaster’s Universe Cluster was left behind, allowed to develop the way it wished. Only a Sans and a Chara taken away…

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A few weeks later…

“…What did you do to her?” Pinkie asked Monika.

Monika looked down at Chara. She was dressed in a little maid outfit and delivering tea to the two of them.

“I just removed her anger. That was it,” Monika said. “Now she calls me Mumsy and does almost everything everybody wants. It’s a little odd, but I’m not complaining.”

“It’s… questionable.”

“Would you rather she grew up into some determinator serial killer?”

Pinkie blinked. “…Noooooo-“

“Then there you go, I did the right thing, I’m the good guy. Girl. Ahem.” Monika sat back in her chair. “Thanks Chara!”

“Your welcome Mumsy!” Chara said, smiling. Pinkie had flashbacks, jittering back in her chair.

“Oh, Pinkie!” Chara said, taking a step back. “Did I do something wrong?”

“N-no Chara. No you didn’t. You’re… You’re a good girl.” Pinkie patted her on the head. “Yeah.”

“Wait until you see the tricks she can do!”

“I’M OUT OF HERE!” Pinkie declared, pulling out a dimensional device and vanishing.

Monika shrugged. “You can do your tricks for me Chara. Won’t that be fun?”

“Yay!”
A portal opened in the main hall of what was now Renee’s crystal castle, depositing the primary all-purpose team in the glamorous halls. Pinkie took the lead, bouncing along with Nova and Flutterfree flanking. Vriska strode behind the group while Jotaro’s hulking form walked to the left, unbalancing the visual of the group.

“Vriska, you need to move a bit to the right,” Pinkie commented.

“I am not moving because you want us to have proper ‘team aesthetics’, Pinkie.”

“Awww…”

“Jotaro could just move closer to the center,” Nova suggested.

Vriska rolled her eyes. “I do not want to become a Joestar family pancake, mmkay?”

Pinkie shrugged. “Operation ‘pose’ is a failure! …Let’s just go find Renee.”

They set out across the hall of Renee’s castle, watching the various teams of the Expeditions Division come and go. Jotaro tipped his hat at Josuke as he went with Sunny to a desert world. They saw Corona’s team return, every last one of them with parts of their body on blue fire. They quickly put out the flames and laughed about whatever horror they had just run from.

These were but two of the teams that they could see – dozens of others came and went constantly, though more left than returned, since many would return at different locations on Equis Vitis or even the Hub. Gems, ponies, humans, dragons, griffons, and more exotic beings walked these halls continually, a testament to Merodi Universalis’ diversity.

Pinkie’s team soon found what they were looking for – Renee. They lucked out and found not only her, but Daniel as well, sitting on her back. The pair were talking to a squad of Rubies who were notorious for being the dumbest of any team under Renee’s purview. The Rubies saluted, indicating that they thought they understood what Renee was asking, but everyone else expected another talk between them to happen in the next few days.

Daniel pointed at Pinkie’s team the moment their conversation with the Rubies was done. The two of them walked over, Renee’s expression being one of surprise. “You’re back early.”

“The pod people were very cooperative,” Vriska commented.

“Vriska! Don’t call them that!” Flutterfree ribbed.

“What else am I going to call them? They don’t have a name!”

“Just… The people we visited! Universe Q-Po6 omega if you need to be specific!”

Nova shrugged. “It’s not like they mind being called pod people.”

“They don’t know what it means!”

Jotaro looked down at her. “Wasn’t that the case with the bug demons?”
“I… Yes. But they decided they liked that name!”

“Then maybe the pod people will like pod people!” Pinkie suggested.

Flutterfree looked like she wanted to explode. Her emotions quickly switched from annoyance to amusement and she let out a laugh instead of one of her signature ‘quiet screams of aggravation’.

Vriska gave her the finger guns. “That’s the spirit! Become one with the pod people!”

“I really shouldn’t be laughing…”

“So?” Jotaro commented. “If it’s funny, laugh.”

“You never laugh though, mister poker-face!” Pinkie pointed out.

Jotaro leaned back. “Nothing’s been funny enough yet.”

“I’m nothing but a barrel of laughs!” Pinkie pleaded.

“Of a particular kind of humor,” Nova commented.

“Pff. Taking the fun out of this,” she chuckled. “ANYWAY! Renee, do you have anything else for a group of best friends to tackle?”

Renee raised an eyebrow. “You already did a mission today!”

“It took, like, an hour,” Nova observed. “We can easily do another one.”

“I don’t know… What if it runs long?”

Pinkie rolled her eyes. “We can handle a long one Renee. There’s nothing that says it *has* to be wrapped up in one day in the first place! C’mon…”

Daniel took a pad out of his coat and started scrolling through it. “Random or interesting?”

“Interesting, of course,” Vriska said with folded arms.

“Found a new one in the Strands,” Daniel said, handing them the pad. “We don’t know anything about it other than the probe sent in wasn’t able to accurately determine much aside from the universe’s safety. Something about the place scrambled most the advanced sensors.”

“A mystery, huh?” Pinkie said, looking over the pad. “Whaddaya say team? Take on a weird puzzle world?”

Vriska gave the thumbs up while the others gave simple nods to confirm.

Daniel pointed at the pad. “You’ll have to make a few universe jumps to get there from here, there’s no direct connection.”

“I know,” Pinkie said with a wave of her hoof. “I’m not a newbie, Daniel.”

Daniel rubbed the back of his head. “Riiiiight.”

Renee rolled her eyes. “We just make it a point to tell everyone, dears. Avoids needless issues.”

“And creates ones like this,” Vriska commented.
Renee raised an eyebrow. “And you’re only dragging it out by continuing to comment on it.”

“Eeeeeeexactly! You win a cookie! Later.”

“She means never,” Jotaro translated.

“Spoilsport.”

Renee chuckled. “Sadly, as much as I love going back and forth with you, I do have a job to do right now. There’s a military expedition to a fascist state underway. There’s a chance of USM operation in that universe, but it’s our beacon in that universe.”

“That sounds like a mess,” Flutterfree said, shaking her head. “I hope you can find a way to resolve it peacefully.”

“It’s a military expedition, dear, they get sent in when ‘peace’ isn’t really an option. Their leader might be able to talk the USM down if they are there, but the fascist state is being taken down by force regardless.”

“Ah… Yeah.” She forced a smile. “I still hope it goes well.”

“You and me both,” Renee admitted. “Now shoo, you’re distracting.”

Pinkie pulled out her dimensional device. “Attention everyone! Keep your arms and legs inside the vehicle at all times! This is going to be a three-universe jump, so prepare for a rapid change of scenery and some stomach flip-flops! Thank you for riding Air Pinkie!”

Jotaro shook his head. “Yare yare daze...”

They left the universe, the portal closing behind them with a pop.

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Caravan

“In a world lit only by fire.”

The sun of this world was red, defining the color scheme of the planet. While all the other colors certainly existed, everything had a reddish tint to it – the land, the seas, the clocks, everything. The sky ranged from a pale evening red to a grayish orange, the star only strong enough to light the world to twilight levels of light. The clouds swirled in the red light, appearing just as ominous as they were beautiful with their churning motions. One such churning storm launched a bolt of lightning to the ground below, providing a rare, intense blue light to the bizarre landscape composed of square pillars. The stony extrusion struck by the bolt shattered, its unnatural flat top replaced with a significantly more natural collection of rubble.

Nearby, an airship narrowly avoided the debris by sheer luck. The ship was comprised mostly of an ovoid filled with hot air around which numerous sails were positioned to give it the appearance of a gigantic flying fish. Numerous lightning rods poked out the top of the ship, the spines there to keep the entire thing from exploding. The cabin took up most of the bottom and front of the airship, holding a few dozen people and all they needed to live while on the ‘road’.

“That was too close!” a woman with a mechanical arm wearing a purple trench coat and a black top hat shouted. “If we get another close call like that I’m sending the pegasi out there to deal with it!”
An earth pony in a clown outfit gaped at her. “Ringmaster! This storm wou-”

“I’m aware this storm would probably kill them!” the Ringmaster blurted. “I’d just rather the rest of us didn’t die in the process.”

The clown shook his head. “We just need to hold out. Just a little longer, Ringmaster. Let’s not risk anything – it’s only a little further until we get out of the squares.”

The Ringmaster tapped her fingers on a console. “You’re right, of course. Though this wouldn’t be a problem if our pilot wasn’t insane.”

The man at the wheel was standing on his hands, steering with his feet. “This is the best way to drive!”

“…Does no one else know how to drive this thing?”

“The pilots were in the rest of the caravan,” the clown pointed out.

The Ringmaster facepalmed. “I really need to organize my ships better…”

Another bolt of lightning fell from the crimson clouds, shattering another pillar of stone. The Ringmaster knew none of the chunks were large enough to destroy them, but the holes they were going to make would be an utter pain to repair…

To her surprise, a glowing blue and pink barrier of energy erected itself between the rocky chunks and the airship. All the rocks bounced off the barrier with ease, falling to the ground below without damaging the ship in the slightest.

“Find out who did that. Tell them to keep doing it,” the Ringmaster ordered. The clown scrambled out of the command center to begin the search.

Two more lightning bolts hit nearby pillars of rock – and the shield went up every time without fail. After that, the airship left the towering rocks, and the lightning strikes could no longer bring damage to them.

The Ringmaster narrowed her eyes. “Curious… Crazy Dan, do you know which of the performers could have done that?”

Crazy Dan laughed, his feet still at the wheel. “Nope! Who cares? It was BLUE!”

The Ringmaster sighed. “Whatever.” The clouds parted, allowing the light of the sun to further redden the airship, taking it out of the dark of the storm. The Ringmaster could see the other six airships of the caravan up ahead, waiting for them. Good. If they hadn’t waited I would have had a serious ‘talk’ about mutiny…

The clown came back. “Uh… Yeah, Ringmaster? The guys who saved us want to talk to you.”

“I’d like to talk to them as well…” She adjusted herself within her captain’s chair and swiveled around, looking closely at the five individuals led into her room. Three ponies, one of each kind, a decidedly impressive hunk of a man, and some creature with gray skin and orange horns. “I don’t remember adding you to my caravan.”

The pink earth pony cleared her throat. “You didn’t! We’re from another universe and we just showed up on your ship! I’m Pinkie, that’s Nova, Flutterfree, Jotaro, and Vriska. You could call us… explorers!”
“Oh,” the Ringmaster said shrugging. “Is that all?”

Flutterfree cocked her head. “Is this sort of thing common around here?”

“We are in the Strands,” Vriska commented. “We’ve also got a pony-human mixture.”

“Oh no, I’ve never heard the ‘other universe’ one before,” the Ringmaster said dismissively.

Nova raised an eyebrow. “You think we’re joking.”

“Nope,” the Ringmaster said, leaning back in her chair. “It makes sense and definitely isn’t the weirdest one I’ve heard. You should have seen the guy who was teleported here as he was devoured by void piranhas. *That*, to this day, is the most unique way I’ve seen anyone get anywhere.”

“That sounds horrible!” Flutterfree blurted.

“It was. But he’s still alive!” the Ringmaster pointed at Crazy Dan. “No physical damage!”

“An absolute TON of MENTAL DAMAGE though!” Crazy Dan laughed. “Look at me goooo!” He tried to force the airship into a barrel roll but there was no way in the realm of physical possibility it was able to do that. The craft just lurched suddenly to the side, soon forced to use its fins to recover. “AHHHAHAHAH!”

“…Right,” Nova said.

Pinkie giggled. “So, Miss Ringmaster, you’re a traveling circus?”

“Yes! I call us the Greatest Show on Zhui!”

All five of them made a mental note – this world was named **Zhui**.

“Where you headed?” Pinkie asked.

“Why, to the greatest *place* on Zhui! The grandiose city of Chron, center of everything under the light of our ruby sun! Fate has certainly led you here to our ship – it must be your goal as well.”

“That does sound like a place we’d want to go,” Nova commented. “How long until we arrive?”

“Just over a day,” the Ringmaster said. “I hope that isn’t an issue?”

Pinkie looked to the rest of the team – they shook their head. “No problem! So long as you have beds!”

“I have plenty of beds. *All* the beds. You’re also welcome to join the act, should you wish…”

“Nah,” Vriska said. “We did not run away to join the flying steampunk circus.”

The Ringmaster smirked. “Sure enough. Consider the beds payment for saving me a lot of trouble. Feel free to mingle with all my people. See if you can learn a few things about our world before you get back on your quest.”

Flutterfree bowed. “Thank you – you are too kind.”

“Eh, I’ve just had my fair share of adventurers pass through my caravan. Better to be nice than to make them vengeful.” She waved a hand dismissively. “Go. Enjoy.”
The five of them exchanged incredulous glances and a few shrugs before doing as suggested.


The caravan thundered onward over the land of swirling snakes. Far below, the scenery was unending marble sculptures of snakes of all sizes. They were all smooth white, each with gems in their eyes; no two had the same colour. There appeared to be no ‘bottom’ to the snakes – the places that were open or broken through revealed more snake sculptures underneath. Many of the snakes were poised aggressively, but others were coiled up as if asleep.

A couple of the larger snake sculptures had marble arrows driven through their heads, capturing a moment of agony before death.

“I have questions,” Nova said, looking out a window of the Ringmaster’s leading airship. “Who made all these?”

A boy of maybe thirteen heard the question and walked up to them. “Nobody knows for sure! The power to carve these snakes is beyond anything in Zhui today! Many think it’s absolutely impossible to construct traditionally, so it must have been an ancient magic artifact of some sort!”

Pinkie turned to the boy. “Wow! You know a lot!”

The boy beamed. “I like to learn everything I can about everywhere. It’s why I’m part of this circus! I get to see so many of the world’s varied landscapes! Each one has a story of its own to tell, even if most of them are mysterious!”

Flutterfree smiled. “That’s wonderful! Do you mind telling us your name?”

“Bartholomew,” he said with a hint of embarrassment. “I carry things for the actual performers during the show. I’m really good at running.”

“That’s a very important job, I bet everyone is really proud of you.”

Bartholomew chuckled. “Yeah. Everyone here is super nice – well, mostly.”

“I think this place is full of super crazy,” Vriska commented, gesturing at the rest of the ‘observation deck’. It was filled with humans and ponies of every shape and size – strong men, show magicians, clowns, freaks, contortionists, and the like. One of the women was on fire and didn’t seem to care. “Wackos.”

“Thanks!” Bartholomew said. “I think that’s the whole point. A bunch of ‘wackos’ having fun, traveling the world, a perfect place for adventurers like yourself.”

“You simply have to tell us about your show,” Pinkie insisted. “Come on! What are the best acts? What are the worst ones? Which ones should we check out? Do you serve cotton candy?”

Bartholomew rolled his eyes. “Of course we serve cotton candy. As for that… Crazy Dan’s show is actually the best, by far. He’s driving right now – can’t believe the Ringmaster doesn’t get someone else to do it – but when he’s in the ring he is a master of controlled explosives. He may be absolutely nutty but he’s never blown anyone up to this day! It’s really exciting and thrilling. He’ll be the opening act come tomorrow night.”

“We might just have to catch that!” Pinkie said.

“And as for the worst… it’s not part of the main act, but see Toady over there?” He pointed at a giant
toad talking to a tall, slender earth pony. “When he does his thing at his stand, the smell is so terrifying people often pass out. It is an experience no one is willing to deal with twice.”

“I can imagine,” Vriska commented.

“Who’s that he’s talking to?” Nova asked.

Bartholomew examined the mare – her coat was a light amethyst, mane a pale amber, and her eyes an intelligent blue. “That’s Icon, the master acrobat. She’s the closing act. Really flexible and coordinated, able to outperform all the unicorns even with their magic.”

“She has a ton of makeup on… Why would she have that much when not performing?”

“No, she doesn’t,” Bartholomew corrected. “Everyone’s jealous of her ‘naturally stunning looks’. Not that she seems to care that much about it.”

“Oh,” Nova said, looking at the ground. “Well now I feel I was a little judgmental.”

“It’s okay, happens to the best of us,” Vriska said.

“Especially you,” Jotaro commented.

“I’d be lying to myself if I disagreed with that,” Vriska chuckled.

“Hey look!” Pinkie grinned. “She’s coming over here!”

Nova put her hoof over her face. “Lovely…"

“What? It’s not like she knows or anything.”

“For all we know she has psychic powers or something!”

Flutterfree raised an incredulous eyebrow. “Some what now?”

“Oh…” Nova rubbed the back of her head. “Yeah, that does sound kind of stupid…”

“What does?” Icon asked as she approached, her melodious voice filling everyone’s ears.

“N-nothing!” Nova blurted, looking to Flutterfree with a ‘please save me’ expression.

Flutterfree smiled at Icon. “Oh, just Nova here commenting on something she said earlier, it’s really nothing.”

Icon looked down at Nova, her eyes boring into her soul. Nova gulped. “Eeyep!”

“I have to admit, I’m curious,” Icon said, lowering her head to Nova’s hoof. “What is this thing on your leg?”

“Oh, this old thing?” Nova smirked. “It’s a screen that shows me what the ring on my horn detects. Right now it’s not working properly – something about this place scrambles most scanners – but I can make it do a few things even like this.” She set it to video display mode, playing a live feed of Icon’s face. “There you go!”

Icon lifted up Nova’s hoof to examine the device, making the unicorn tense. “Wow… The big cities have screens in them, but nothing like this. You must really get around!”
“Adventurers!” Bartholomew explained. “They’re going to come to the show – and you know what that means!”

“More income?”

“What? N- well, yes… But that’s not what I mean! I mean adventure is sure to find them! We’ll get an interesting show!”

Icon chuckled. “I know you always want adventure, Mew, but I’d like to get to my closing act today.”

“It doesn’t always end the show!”

“Nine times out of ten,” Icon said, finally lowering Nova’s hoof to the ground.

Vriska raised an eyebrow. “Oh, so you’re expecting us to crash your circus?”

Icon laughed nervously. “It does seem to happen a lot with people like you… Please don’t take any offense. It doesn’t reflect badly on you, you understand.”

“Maybe?” Vriska said, shrugging.

Flutterfree’s eyes lit up. “Oh, speaking of reflections, we should probably tell Renee what’s going on.”

Pinkie pulled her phone out of her mane and called Renee. The interdimensional phone was able to locate a universe with a Merodi Universalis Priority Connection, connecting to Renee’s phone.

“This is Renee Jackson,” Renee said from the phone – clearly on speakerphone.

“Hi Renee!” Pinkie said. “We’re probably going to stay here for a few local days, there’s a big city we want to get to and a circus we want to see!”

“Oh, that sounds delightful! Do you need any supplies?”

“Nope! We can live off hospitality and cupcakes.”

“Should I count this as vacation time…?”

“Nope! There’ll probably be leaders in the city for us to talk to, or at least get a better idea how this world works.”

“In that case, I’ll take a preliminary report now.”

“Okie dokie!” Pinkie took the phone off speaker, bouncing away to do the somewhat boring job of relaying an oral report to Renee.

“Huh. You’re pretty organized,” Icon observed.

Vriska smirked. “The art of exploring is more potent when organized. You can do more stuff. We could call in an orbital bombardment if we wanted!”

Flutterfree facehooved. “Please not in front of our new friends, Vriska…”

Bartholomew gaped. “An orbital bombardment? What even IS that!?”
Icon furrowed her brow. “If I had to guess, it would be an attack from above the atmosphere. You adventurers do have some pretty impressive capabilities.”

“Please don’t feel threatened,” Flutterfree said nervously.

“Oh, I won’t. But it’s only fair that, now that I know something you can do, I show you something I can do.” Icon smirked playfully and proceeded to twist her legs around her body at seemingly-impossible angles and twist herself into a box shape. She twisted out, returning to her four hooves – except her belly was up and her head was twisted like that of an owl. To end, she stood on one of her front hooves and tangled her body around in a donut shape, placing her head on her purple-spiral cutie mark.

Nova jaw was hanging open. “W-wow. That’s impressive.”

Flutterfree had a grimace on her face. “I just think it looks painful.”

“Eh, nothing special,” Vriska muttered. “Pinkie does that sort of thing every day.”

“Pinkie isn’t normal,” Jotaro pointed out.

“True. Research needs to be done into how much of the cat-liquid is in her system…”

Pinkie bounced back to the group. “All caught up with Renee! So, what are we going to do now? Huh?”

“Investigate cat-liquid, apparently,” Icon offered.

“Oh, I can get us a cat, easy peasy!” Pinkie grinned. “Do we have a set of stairs in this ship?”

Bartholomew nodded. “Yep! Right this way!”

“I’ll leave you to that,” Icon said. “Practice makes perfect, after all.”

“Oh,” Nova said. “See you at the show, then?”

“Sure!” Icon grinned. “Prepare to be amaaaaaaaaazed!” She did three backflips away from them and leaped through a hatch in the walls.

“Sprightly,” Vriska commented.

“Let’s go!” Pinkie blurted. “Cat-liquid ain’t gonna test itself! Mooove!”

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It didn’t take long for Jotaro to figure out that he was dreaming. For one, he remembered going to sleep but didn’t remember waking up. For two, his senses weren’t augmented by Star Platinum. For three, he was standing in the middle of a flat plane of sand with seven large domes of gold rising around him.

*Seven Cities of Gold.*

He had no idea where that phrase had come from, but it was now embedded in his thoughts. The Seven Cities of Gold surrounded him, filling him with a sense of wonder – something he rarely felt these days.

The Gold glinted in his eyes.
He had no idea what the Cities meant, or what they held, but he knew they were important. Unimaginably so.

He heard a ticking sound above him. Looking up, he saw a clock plastered against the sky, the red sun of Zhui centered in front of it. The light of the star strained his eyes, but he didn’t blink – he just stared at the clock. It had too many hands on it to be a normal clock, especially considering that some of them were moving extremely quickly, while at least one of them was running backward.

Jotaro found himself standing in front of a set of four white doorways placed in a square formation. They were devoid of any actual doors, but the area enclosed by them glowed with a soft white light. A surge of energy turned the soft light into an intense one, firing a beam into the sky that engulfed the sun and touched the clock of the sky. Gears and chains began to appear behind the clock, soon filling the entire sky with a clockwork mechanism.

He felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Seek and you shall find.”

And then Jotaro woke up, ramming his head into the ceiling. This disturbed Pinkie, who had been sleeping on him like a cat. She let out a panicked ‘MEOW!’ and fell onto the floor, waking everyone else up.

Vriska put a hand over her face. “Pinkie… I was having the greatest dream…”

“I know. I could hear,” Nova muttered from the bed next to her. “It’s why I was already awake.”

“Did you li-“

“NO I DID NOT LIKE HEARING IT.”

“Can everyone please keep their voices to a whisper…?” Flutterfree muttered. “Pleeease?”

“Sorry!” Pinkie whispered. “Jotaro woke me up!”

“You were sitting on me,” Jotaro muttered.

“The cat experiment needed to continue,” Pinkie pointed out. “Meow.”

Jotaro sighed. “…I had a dream,” he said. “I think it’s important.”

Vriska sat up. “Ooooh? Well what are you waiting for, spill the beans big guy!”

Jotaro relayed his dream in a matter-of-fact fashion, not leaving any detail he thought important out.

“Seek and you shall find?” Nova said, hoof to her chin. “Interesting. I’m pretty sure something was trying to talk to you, Jotaro.”

“The Seven Cities of Gold,” Jotaro said. “We need to find them.”

“Could be a trap,” Vriska pointed out.

“Since when do we let that stop us?” Pinkie chuckled. “I say we accept this as our mission! … Y’know, after we attend the show tomorrow night.”

“The Seven Cities of Gold…” Nova said, pondering the phrase. “An Earth legend, right? Turned out not to be true.”
“Legends are some of the most powerful stories,” Pinkie pointed out. “I can guarantee the Seven Cities of Gold exist in multiple places. Maybe here, maybe not, who knows?”

“It may not be the cities we need to find,” Jotaro said. “Those doorframes… they may be the real goal. Or the clock…”

“Maybe we should take a ship and fly to the sun itself?” Vriska suggested.

Nova held up her hoof-screen, currently sitting to the side of her bed. “Do you see the scrambled readings on this thing? I’m not sure our ships would work properly in this universe. We rely a lot on external sensors for navigation.”

Jotaro nodded. “We’ll walk. Or get one of these airships.”

Pinkie nodded. “Yep! We’ll totally figure this out, Jotaro!”

“Yeah, we’re all going to hunt for the Seven Cities of Gold,” Flutterfree muttered, a pillow over her head. “Can we go to sleep now?”

“Oh! Sorry!” Pinkie blurted. “Everyone sleep!” She fell onto the floor, taking a decidedly cat-like position and snoring softly.

“The envy of insomniacs everywhere,” Nova said, laying on her bed and staring at the ceiling.

Soon, everyone but her was asleep again. When she realized this, she let out a sigh. She cast a sleep spell on herself.

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**Brought Up To Believe**

“The universe has a plan.”

The city of Chron was every bit as impressive and unique as the landscapes the caravan had traveled over the last couple of days. It rose out of a sea made of quicksand, standing on a scaffolding of eighteen metallic roads resting on the churning red particles, the long paths stretching into the distance farther than anyone in the caravan could see. The city itself consisted of a towering set of walls circling thousands of metallic buildings. Placed equidistant along the edges of the walls were four tremendous clock faces that showed the current time – currently 9:19 on every single one’s pearly surface. Within the walls, the constructions were generally taller than the walls, with the central tower rising so high that the top was obscured by a cloud at the moment. Tremendous clockwork gears moved in and out of the lattice of skyscrapers, churning with the ongoing flow of time. Steam rose from so many locations within the city that a constant mist of water vapor churned into the sky, shrouding the finer details of the city.

The caravan’s airships moved towards one of the skyscrapers near the edge of the city, away from the towering center. The top of the rickety structure was dominated by a single, slowly rotating gear with dozens of teeth – each one large enough to hold an entire airship. When the caravan arrived, the docking gear had been mostly empty – but the Ringmaster’s performers soon filled the entire platform, quickly overwhelming the harbor masters.

“Right!” the Ringmaster declared, walking out of her ship and onto the gear proper. “We’ll set up in the usual place – Zinc Square. Everyone get ready, the transporting skiff should be here any minute.”

“Aw, Zinc Square again?” Bartholomew called. “Why not somewhere new?”
“I don’t need to explain myself to you,” the Ringmaster said dismissively. “Ah, it’s good to be the king.”

“You’re not the king!” a clown blurted.

“I might as well be!” the Ringmaster chuckled. “Now stop whining and get moving.” She turned around to address her five interdimensional passengers. “Well, I would ask you to help us set up, but something tells me that wouldn’t go over well. We won’t be ready until about four tonight, so you’ve got plenty of time to wander around the city yourselves. I’d offer you a guide…”

“Won’t be necessary,” Pinkie said with a smile. “We know our way around strange cities at this point. Though, we might get sidetracked – I’m sorry if we get caught up and don’t make it back for the show.”

The Ringmaster shrugged. “I’ll be surprised if you show up without bringing it down. You’re bound to get caught up in something here, this is Chron. Home of the Angels, hub of everyone. The lift to the surface is right over there, go enjoy yourselves.”

Pinkie saluted. “Yes, Ringmaster!” She bounced away, leading the other four to the lift. It was a rickety thing composed of wire-mesh metal plating, but it held all five of them well enough. The doors closed, and they descended into the belly of the beast. The smell of Chron hit them heavily – a musky sort of rusty scent combined with the scent of chemicals and oil. Due to the high humidity in the air, the smells of the city were only heightened, and yet it wasn’t exactly a repugnant odor, simply distinctive.

They descended further, able to make out finer details now that they were close. Clocks dominated almost every surface in this city. Big and small, but all round. Amazingly, every single one was set to the exact same time; none of the clocks were off by even a minute. Occasionally they would see a decorative statue made of immobile scrapped gears, the most common shape depicted being that of a humanoid angel. The sound of clanking machinery echoed from inside the walls of some of the buildings, shaking the cable their lift was attached to, making the five tense. The inhabitants of Chron didn’t bat an eye as their scaffoldings shook or rumbled with the clanks, trotting or walking through their normal days.

A few ponies and humans could be seen reinforcing a few scaffoldings with electric tools or magic. The life of the mechanical city increased as the bottom approached – less cold metal structures and more colorful decorations and lights that screamed defiantly against the natural redness of the world. Banners, streamers, and lights of all colors lined the streets. The redness was completely gone at the surface, replaced with predominantly blue lights coming from the streets below where clanking steam cars moved along with horse drawn carriages. Ponies and people looked happy down here, despite the overwhelming presence of the skyscrapers all around them.

“I like this place,” Flutterfree decided.

“Would have sworn you’d say it was too technical,” Nova said.

“Not everything has to be green and natural – if the people are happy, it works.”

“All right!” Pinkie said stretching herself. “You all know the drill!” She leaped out onto the edge of the street, extending her hoof to a stallion. “Hi! I’m Pinkie Pie!”

The charcoal stallion smiled warmly. “I am Soot Brush. I take it you’re newcomers to Chron?”

“Would you believe me if I said we were from another world entirely?” Pinkie said, grinning.
Soot raised an eyebrow. “Really? Can’t say I’m all that surprised – lots of unusual stories – but I’ve
never heard that one before. And I’ve heard a lot of stories.”

“Really?” Nova asked.

“Yes! It’s no surprise you wouldn’t know this – being from another world and all – but adventuring
groups such as yourself are exceedingly common in Chron! For example… See those three pegasus
over there flying in formation? They just arrived two days ago, hunting some sort of smuggler who’s
got an ancient relic of evil. One of the more common stories around here.”

“Common ancient relics of evil?” Vriska shook her head. “In one city?”

“Yeah. Is that not normal?”

“No. I mean, we run into evil relics a lot, but that’s because we’re out exploring a lot as well as…”
She glanced at Pinkie. “Other reasons.”

“Huh. So I take it you’re just here to explore? No mission?”

Jotaro took a step forward. “Actually, have you heard of the Seven Cities of Gold?”

“Can’t say that I have. There’s other legends I know – the Ruby City, the City of the Depths, the
Skyworld… Even if that’s not what you’re looking for I can still tell you about those. I love telling
stories. Most people do.”

“Pass,” Jotaro said.

For the first time, Soot looked at them like they were crazy. “You… don’t want to hear a legend?”

Nova shrugged. “We hear all sorts of them all the time. If it’s not the Seven Cities thing, we have
other stuff we could be doing.”

“Such as…?”

“Well, initiating first contact with whoever the leader of this world or nation is. Can you tell us that?”

This seemed to confuse Soot for a moment, but he recovered. “Chron has no leader, and it isn’t even
a nation. The only nations are the many distant kingdoms, and none of them agree on anything or last
very long… only Chron remains.”

Flutterfree blinked. “Huh. A bit odd… Surely you have some sort of council? Government?”

Soot shrugged. “The districts have leaders sometimes, but for the most part we just do what we want,
and any direction is provided by the Angels.”

“The Angels?” Flutterfree asked.

Soot processed this. “Are there no Angels in your world?”

“We’ve encountered angels before – of many different kinds – but none of our home worlds actually
have them.”

“Correction,” Vriska said. “Mine had some. They were basically overgrown monster-snakes
though.”

“You’ll have to describe your Angels,” Flutterfree finished.
Soot opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again, then shook his head. “I… Give me a minute. They… They tell us what we can do.”

“So they rule you?”

“No… That’s not it. They tell us what we can do. It’s not mandatory to actually do any of it, but they’ve always proven to give good suggestions to every person they contact. They generally tell whoever they can the best step they can take on their life – be it adventuring, exploring, starting a family, or even a business. You’d be hard-pressed to find a person who has gotten where they are without assistance from an Angel at least once. They just know where the best life lies.”

“So they rule you,” Vriska pointed out. “If it’s not mandatory, but everyone does it, it’s the same thing.”

“I… suppose?” he cocked his head. “It’s just hard to think of it like that, sorry. All of us just always had the Angels existing. They’re the executors of the universe’s plan, and why would anyone go against the plan of existence itself? It’d be a disservice to the Watchmaker.”

“Watchmaker?” Nova asked.

This one really hit Soot sideways. “I… You have no Watchmaker?”

“Is he your creator?” Flutterfree asked.

“No… He’s just the creator of the Angels. The Watchmaker… He is the one with the plan. I… I can’t even imagine a world without a Watchmaker. How would the lives of anyone get wound up? How could cities exist? How would civilization of any kind form?!”

“By our own means,” Vriska said. “None of us have a Watchmaker.”

Flutterfree narrowed her eyes. “At least not in the way you are describing.”

Soot couldn’t comprehend this. “I… I’m sorry, I don’t think I can be of any help to you here.” He nervously backed away.

Flutterfree cocked her head. “Why are you suddenly afraid?”

“I… I don’t know,” he admitted. “I just… I don’t know!”

Pinkie nodded. “It’s fine – can you at least tell us where to find one of these Angels?”

“Mercury Square,” he said before running off.

“Well that was odd,” Nova declared.

“He sensed himself questioning his deepest long-held beliefs,” Flutterfree observed. “The default reaction to that is to stop thinking about it. He’ll try his best not to think about existence without a Watchmaker from here on out.”

Nova let out a sigh. “That… never fixes anything.”

“You and I talk to Rev a lot. That tends to open minds. Most people are stubborn. That’s fine, but it does make talking about things difficult.”

Pinkie frowned. “Hrm… We need a way to get information out of these people about the Watchmaker and his Angels without making them freak out… No, Vriska, no mind-reading unless
we have to.”

Vriska smirked and snapped her fingers. “Let’s just ask questions differently, like we’re from here.”

“Oh, that?” Flutterfree pondered this. “That might do it…”

Pinkie pulled out a notebook and a pen. “Righty! If we’re going to pull this off, we’re going to need to word the questions like a survey. What do we want to know?”


“Seven Cities of Gold,” Jotaro added.

“Too much out of left field,” Vriska countered.

“Actually, I don’t think so,” Pinkie said. “If adventurers and legends are common, asking about them isn’t a problem at all. So… How’s this sound?” She cleared her throat. “Hey, we’re asking people around Chron about their beliefs! Would you mind being part of the questionnaire? …And then we ask them the following questions. Ahem. ‘What do you think the universe’s plan for you is and how did you discover it?’ ‘What is your most memorable encounter with an Angel?’ ‘What were you taught about the Watchmaker when you were a child?’ and ‘Have you heard of the Seven Cities of Gold?’” She looked up. “Think that works?”

Everyone nodded. Nova duplicated the questionnaire for everyone.

Pinkie grinned. “Right! Everyone, break and ask around for a few minutes, meet back here in fifteen. The clocks are everywhere, should be easy to time that. Break!”

The five of them nodded and went to different areas of the street. They talked to several people, with only Vriska getting an aggressive reaction. The interviews were short, so each of them got to talk to multiple people.

They met back up, not a single one of them late. Nova spoke first. “These are the most cooperative people I’ve ever encountered. I had to make mine stop talking. Holy crap…”

“How many did you get?” Vriska asked.

“Three,” Nova said.

“Two,” Vriska muttered, folding her arms.

“Four,” Flutterfree said with a smile.

“Three,” Jotaro countered, fixing her with his signature poker face.

“Seven,” Pinkie said, giggling. “It’s funny how you all thought you had a chance. And boy did I find out stuff! So, judging from what I got, everyone you talked to was very sure of the universe’s plan for them?”

Nova raised a hoof. “One of mine was uncertain if the plan wanted him to redecorate his restaurant or not, and this uncertainty was making him a little existential.”

“Anyone else?” Pinkie asked. “No? Okay. And as for the next question, everyone had discovered their purpose in life by listening to one of the Angels?”

Everyone nodded, except Jotaro. “I had one whose event was when his wife was called by an Angel
to be a mercenary. It’s been difficult on him, but the event was extremely recent.”

“So they do call you to less-than-altruistic callings…” Flutterfree observed.

Pinkie nodded. “Good to know.” She scribbled a few things down in her notebook. “And the third question… All eleven of mine gave identical answers. Same for all of you?”

Vriska shrugged. “The second one punched me before I got her to finish, so… I don’t know.”

Pinkie held up her notes. “The wording changes, but it’s always the same. ‘The Watchmaker watches over us all with his Angels, ensuring that we can all know what the universe’s plan is. Whenever we feel lost, we should seek out an Angel, and we will no longer be lost. The Watchmaker knows which life is best for us.’”

Flutterfree narrowed her eyes. “I don’t like this.”

“You aren’t the only one,” Pinkie said, putting the notebook in her mane. “I think it’s time we talked to one of these Angels. Let’s see if I can completely baffle one…” She rummaged around in her mane. “Time to bring out the big weird guns.”

Jotaro coughed. “Did anyone learn of the Seven Cities of Gold?”


Pinkie pulled out a pack of rubber ducks. “…Perfect. Let’s go to Mercury Square! ONWARD!”

She bounced off.

“Hey, genius, let’s ask where Mercury Square is first,” Vriska blurted.

Pinkie stopped in mid air. “Ooooooh, right.”

The first person they asked told them exactly where it was.

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**Clockwork Angels**

“You promise every treasure to the foolish and the wise.”

Mercury Square was an intersection of six interior roads. The intersection was paved with smooth glass rather than pavement, and lined with barriers indicating that cars could only drive around the edges of the square, creating a somewhat unusual roundabout construction. Under the glass, rivers of liquid mercury moved, shimmering under the red light above and the blue lights to the side, creating a work of art.

The square was always crowded, for it was known as a place the Angels congregated. And what beings they were, these Angels…

These Clockwork Angels.

Their bodies were decidedly physical, composed of any number of metals ranging from iron and brass to gold and titanium. Every one of their limbs was without covering, revealing intricate mechanisms composed of hundreds of miniscule gears precise enough for accurate finger coordination. Their chests were just as open as their limbs, though the interior was more than just a
conglomeration of miniscule gears – a single, large gear turned in the center of every Angel’s chest, the face inscribed with a mysterious symbol unique to each individual. The chest’s shape provided a way to identify the ‘gender’ of these beings – more rounded for feminine, straight for masculine.

Their faces were all identical – plates of metal sewn onto a skull framework, making the head the only part of themselves that couldn’t be seen into. Something within the head glowed a seemingly random color, the light pouring out the mouth, eyes, and ears of the Angel. The eyes were clearly mechanical, like cameras, and the mouth moved in awkward, jerking motions – but this did nothing to make them seem any less alive. They moved with the intricacies of a human. A female with an orange glow tapped her foot impatiently while she searched for the perfect pony or human to talk to. Another scratched the back of his head while leaning back, a motion no pure machine could have done.

As Pinkie’s team arrived, they got to see one of them spread their wings. A male with a green glow spread his arms wide, prompting grandiose white wings of pure magic to sprout from his back. He bid the people of Mercury Square farewell, returning to the sky. Soon, another Angel took his place, dropping from a nearby rafter and securing their own wings.

“They certainly look impressive,” Nova observed. She smacked her screen with her free hoof a few times. “Wish I could get readings on them.”

“Let’s just see if we can talk to one,” Flutterfree said. “They seem open to everyone.”

“And busy,” Vriska commented. “There’s a lot of people here.”

“We’re not in any rush.”

Pinkie nodded. “Until then, we can listen to see what they’re talking about!”

The five entered the crowd, at first searching for a line, but quickly realized there just wasn’t one. The Angels chose whom they would talk to.

“My mother just threw me out of the house,” a teenage girl spat with immense distaste. “So I guess I’ve got to find something.”

The Angel smiled at her and spoke with a synthetic voice that managed to change in pitch to convey emotion, unlike the Flats. “My daughter, look closely in yourself. You’ve heard that Caked needs a new assistant – why not discover your skill in the art of baking and uncover the power to make taste buds explode with beautiful flavor?”

“I… I can cook?”

“Your journey to master and understand that skill will be an inspiring one.”

“Eh, guess I’ll try it.” The girl walked off.

Another Angel pointed at a man. “Yarrow, you were just here last week!”

A yellow unicorn stallion nodded sheepishly. “I was really into the treasure-hiding business, but then I just thought of something, what i-”

“Yarrow, trust me, your calling is to create the hoards of treasure held in the lands far from Chron. This idea of flower arrangement? It will bring you nothing but complex drama, and not the kind that you would wish on yourself.”
“…Of course, Angel. I humbly apologize for my arrogance.”

“See? You’re already on the right track.”

The third Angel had finished a long discussion with a nine-year-old girl. “Now, go accept that magic power offered to you. It will take you on a journey to the sun itself. There will be pain, sacrifice, and danger – but there will also be friends, laughter, and a better tomorrow. It is a hard part of the plan you have been born into, but remember. The Watchmaker knows you’ll be strong enough.”

“Right!” The girl said, running off with confidence in her stride.

A pegasus mare whose wings were too frail to fly trudged through the crowd, her child at her hooves. The first Angel stooped down to look at her. “It feels like life is impossible, doesn’t it?”

The pegasus nodded wordlessly.

“But, see, you’re going to save the entire city of Chron from a great disaster. Listen to me closely, my daughter – you and your child need to move to the nearest luxury district. They will accept you as servants, and you will be treated well. But your calling is not to be a servant. Your calling is to be a hero.”

The mare stared at her in disbelief.

The Angel smiled. “Lean not on your own understanding, young one. Trust in perfect love and perfect planning. You know in your heart what we tell you is true, and what we offer you is genuine. Don’t let your inner self deny you what is yours.”

The mare nodded slowly, a determined look coming into her eyes. She left.

“That upsets you,” a male Angel said, appearing behind Pinkie’s group.

The five of them turned around, not surprised at all they were snuck up on. “Yes,” Flutterfree said. “What guarantee do we have that the Watchmaker’s plan is perfect?”

“It isn’t his plan, travelers,” the Angel said, his inner gray light giving his face the appearance of being dusted with ash. “It is the perfect plan of the universe. The best path through existence of which he is aware and graced you with the answers.”

“How do we know he’s right?”

The Angel smiled, gesturing around. “You’ve seen the city of Chron. Happiness and fulfillment everywhere.”

“Some of those here looked pretty fucked up,” Vriska observed.

“They are not perfect beings.”

“Is the Watchmaker?” Flutterfree asks.

“If he knows of perfection and tells others of it, it doesn’t matter if he himself is perfect or not,” the Angel stated matter-of-factly. “He is simply the guardian of this world. In the end, that is all that matters.”

“I beg to differ,” Vriska retorted. “Intent matters a lot.”

Pinkie nodded. “Yeah. So, if you don’t mind mister Angel, please direct us to the Watchmaker so we
can have a chat with him, pretty please?”

The Angel shook his head – as if they were little children saying something foolish. “Your time in this world would not be best spent talking to the Watchmaker.”

“Let me guess, the Seven Cities of Gold?” Nova asked.

“Not that either, young ones. Your time in this world is best suited to root out the corruption deep within the city of Chron. There is a small group of individuals who wish to tear down this establishment from within, an-”

“Pass,” Vriska said.

The Angel did not react with surprise as Soot did – he merely bowed in understanding. “As you wish. Do what you will, otherworlders. We Angels will work around your defiance of the plan. Know that the level of perfection was lowered today thanks to you.”

“We can live with that,” Vriska muttered.

“I am aware of that. Now, if you’ll excuse me, there are others who are willing to listen to wise counsel. Please make room for them, if you will.”

The five of them left the center of Mercury Square, opting to stand on the edge and ponder what had just happened.

“Well, that went nowhere,” Nova commented.

“Understatement,” Jotaro added.

“Not much here for us now, is there?” Vriska said. “It’s not like anyone actually knows how to get us to the Watchmaker, and there’s not really any other ruler we could even talk to. I say fuck it, let’s pack our bags and go right after the show.”

“No,” Jotaro affirmed. “Those Cities of Gold… They’re important.”

“I’m with Jotaro,” Nova said. “There’s more here for us.”

Flutterfree shook her head. “I… I don’t think I like this place anymore. If we stay too long, what if we get roped into their ‘plan’ or ‘fate’? What then?”

“Oh look at me, I get to break the tie,” Pinkie said, musing. “Well, guess what, I believe we’re in a ‘super chapter’ right now, so there’s definitely something big here. So big that, as far as I can see, there’s not even a B plot! So I say we stay and let this play itself out.”

Flutterfree nodded. “Okay. If you think that’s what we need.”

Vriska shrugged. “Eh, I was half-joking about packing up the bags to begin with.”

“So… Seven Cities of Gold,” Nova said, turning to Jotaro. “We need to find something out about it.”

Vriska smirked. “Lucky you I’ve been accumulating luck ever since we got here. So so many people that are just ripe with luck around here. Just give me a bit longer and I can assure you we get something. Can’t guarantee it’ll be about the Seven Cities of Gold, but eh, what can you do?”

“Try again?” Jotaro suggested.
“Rhetorical question, nimrod.”

“Yare yare daze…”

“Anyway, I’ll just remove some luck from those Angels and then I-”

“Excuse me,” a man in a dark cloak said, walking up to them. “Are you the otherworlders?”

Vriska deflated. “Just when I was about to pull off something awesome…”

“Yep! That’s us!” Pinkie declared, grinning. “Who wants to know?”

“You defied the suggestion of an Angel?”

“You bet we did!” Vriska laughed.

The man looked left and right nervously, looking especially close at the Angels’ lines of sight. “You should follow me if you wish to know others who defy the plan.”

“I like this idea,” Nova said. “I say we follow him.”

“Lead the way, mysterio!” Pinkie cheered. “Take us to the Anarchist!”

“H-how did you know…?”

“I’ll never tell.”

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_The Anarchist_

“For all those years I had to get along, they told me I was wrong. I never wanted to belong.”

The five interdimensional explorers were led through alley after alley, building after building, maze-like corridor after maze-like corridor, passing numerous mechanisms made of tremendous gears with an overall indeterminate function.

It was clear that their little guide was trying to make sure nobody was following them. The team didn’t complain about the added caution – they had a feeling they were going somewhere they really weren’t supposed to be.

That somewhere turned out to be a basement in an abandoned section of Chron. It went so far beneath the normal surface that sands from the sea had started to seep in through the cracks, giving the musty room an arid feel. The room matched the atmosphere with its minimal decoration – there were several chairs, a desk, and a bookshelf half-filled with tattered books. The only light came from a single light bulb that wasn’t strong enough to illuminate anything other than the desk clearly.

Behind the desk sat an aging man with a permanent scowl on his face. His hair was long with an even mixture of gray and black that hung over the front of his shoulders. His clothing was tattered and brown, his arms were covered in scratches and dust, and his face was a visage of pain.

He looked up from a book he was reading – his eyes lit up, but his scowl remained. “Ah. The visitors. Midian, leave us.”

“But, maste-”
“This conversation is going to be private, Midian.” The man waved him away. He folded his arms and examined the five visitors closely. “I am known as the Anarchist. Care to introduce yourselves? I want to hear whatever titles you have as well.”

“Captain Pinkie Pie, Element of Laughter,” Pinkie said with a salute. “I’m the leader of this Primary Unit.”

“Protege Nova Glimmer,” Nova said. “I suppose technically I’m an Officer. All of us are, save Pinkie.”

“Flutterfree Asquall, Element of Kindness.”

“Vriska Serket, Thief of Light. And other things that aren’t important right now.”

“Jotaro Kujo, PhD, of the Joestar bloodline.”

Pinkie grinned. “And together we explore new universes, make first contact, and if we think it’s a good idea introduce them to the larger multiverse!” The five of them moved into dramatic poses for effect.

The Anarchist nodded. “And what have you thought of Zhui so far?”

Everyone looked to Pinkie. She pursed her lips. “The people seem really happy. But we don’t like what we’ve seen about how their lives are controlled by these ticking Angels. No one here questions anything or even really thinks. It’s bothersome! But the people seem happy, so we don’t really have any reason to mess with anything since the Angels won’t really talk and we can’t get to the Watchmaker.”

The Anarchist sat back in his chair. “It’s a lot worse than it seems.”

“How so?” Nova asked.

“The Angels gave you the impression there was a choice, didn’t they? You refused the call given to you, and they just shrugged and let you go on your way.”

The five of them nodded.

“For you, it may be possible to return to the worlds from which you come, but for us refusing the call results in this.” He gestured around at the lackluster room. “You think that, even if the Watchmaker’s plan was the ‘best’ option, you could still eke out a life for yourself on your own terms. But that isn’t it at all. When you refuse the call you are rejected from society. You become an outcast. It doesn’t matter where in the world you reject it – here, in the wilderness, in the outer kingdoms – the moment you do things become different. Because those who aren’t following the word of the Angels aren’t within the plan, they are actively pushed away from anything important or impressive. Because if one defiant person got up there… the Angels could be questioned.” He sat back.

Vriska shook her head. “That sounds really lame.”

“What’s your story?” Flutterfree asked.

The Anarchist pondered this for a moment. “As a boy, I was ‘blessed’ with an unbelievably defiant and inquisitive spirit. Pure defiance would have been pretty useless – I would have either been broken in or fallen to nothing early in my life. But my desire to know and ask questions… that gave me something else. Ever since I was little, I had heard of the Angels, that if I was ever lost I should go ask them what to do. I naturally refused to do so, and I later asked why we had to. The only
reason anyone ever gave was ‘because that’s what everyone does’ or ‘because the Angels know what’s right.’ I demanded to know how the Angels knew this, and they’d cite the ever-elusive Watchmaker. This did not satisfy me, so I turned to intellectual pursuits to find my answers, making a point to avoid all the Angels. As I read more and more about this ordered universe, about this plan of the Watchmaker’s… I found what my calling in life was. To defy this ‘perfect plan’ set in motion by a being who never shows his face. I began to speak out, to gather followers who were willing to question."

He shook his head. “And then an Angel came to me directly. He told me it was time for me to change. I told him to go fuck himself. He ignored this and informed me it was my destiny to become a criminal mastermind – did you know that they set all the criminals on their paths as well? Usually not so blatantly, but every one of them is part of the ‘plan’ as well. I was told to gather my followers and attempt to tear the city on Chron down. I, of course, refused outright. I declared that we would continue to do what we’d always done, and that was defy the Angels and the Watchmaker. Chron was not our enemy – they were.”

“And then everything went wrong,” Nova said.

“Precisely. Most of my followers left me, and my access to scholarly sources were cut off. The curious bit was this: the events that led to these misfortunes seemed to be completely unrelated to the Angels in any way, but it doesn’t take a genius to figure out what was going on. If the Angels can control anyone’s life with merely suggestions, they could find a way to manipulate one or two people to completely ruin me. I was reduced to poverty, with only a scant few followers, most of which had actually accepted the call of an Angel in life and were still in that life. It’s a horrible paradox.”

“I take it your underground movement isn’t going well?” Vriska asked.

“Not at all. We grow exceptionally slowly, and many of us die pointless, gruesome deaths. Most of us have no place in the plan and are forced to a life of suffering and poverty.” He groaned. “And now I’m getting old. No matter if I find magic to extend my life, I know I’m not long for this world, and this little movement to save us from the order will fizzle out to nothing.”

He turned to them, a fire in his aging eyes. “And then you show up. You five, from outside the plan. Who defy the Angels on principle and don’t have to think that hard to realize that something’s wrong here. And, to top it off, are asking about the Seven Cities of Gold.”

Jotaro lit up. “You know of them?”

“I do.” He looked to the sky. “Records say they are they were the first cities established by the Watchmaker. They are lost to time, their location now dominated by the desert of frost and flame. But where they once were should be the original place the Watchmaker came to us.”

“The doorframes…”

“I don’t pretend to know that – merely knowing about the Cities of Gold is a rare thing. The Watchmaker prefers that his own legends get lost to time. The fact that one slipped through the cracks is proof that he is not perfect, nor is he all-knowing.”

Flutterfree nodded. “Right.”

The Anarchist stood up, curling his old fingers into a fist. “Travelers from another world, I, instead of an Angel, will ask you to go on a quest, instead of order you. As the Anarchist, the leader of the few who know the plan is not right, will you please travel to the ruins of the Seven Cities of Gold and find the Watchmaker – and using your otherworldly powers, remove his hold on this world. I have
nothing to offer you in return, besides my gratitude.”

Pinkie furrowed her brow. “Well… I’ll promise to go to the Seven Cities of Gold and try to find the Watchmaker. But we will give him a chance to explain himself. To learn the truth of what is going on.”

The Anarchist sat back down in his chair, scowl deepening. “I will accept that. It is an appropriately defiant response. I will have a map to the desert of frost and fire procured for you. I recommend finding a way to procure a skiff-class airship, for it is a long journey. Even at those speeds, it will take multiple days.”

“It’s times like this I wish we could use our spaceships,” Nova muttered.

“We’re doing it though,” Jotaro said. “We’re not going to just turn our backs on this place.”

“Nope!” Pinkie declared. “We’re going to find out what’s going on. We’re going to go to the show tonight and we will leave for the Cities come morning! I’m going to call Renee, give me a second.”

“Renee?” the Anarchist asked.

“Our boss,” Vriska explained. “We’ve already spent an entire day here, that’s quite a bit longer than usual.”

Pinkie was already talking to Renee on the phone filling her in on the situation.

“You certainly have power,” the Anarchist observed. “Should you not call for more support?”

“We’ll decide if we need that and when,” Nova declared. “Plus once we get there we can just use long-range teleports to return if we need extra firepower.”

The Anarchist nodded. “Do it as you wish. I am not here to plan the details of your quest. Do what you will.”

They nodded. “We’ll get to the bottom of this,” Flutterfree promised.

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_Carnies_

“Sometimes the Angels punish us by answering our prayers.”

Procuring the skiff had been easy – Vriska had used her luck to find a small fortune inside an abandoned barrel. The gold had been more than enough to purchase a small speedy ship for the five of them. It had no balloon, unlike the caravan’s ships, but rather a small magical generator that ensured it hovered above the ground at all times. The skiff looked more like a boat than an airship with its pointed prow and fin-like protrusions on the edges. There was no interior – aside from a small trunk for belongings, the skiff was open to the elements. None of them minded, because the skiff was fast.

After they had purchased a hotel room for the night, they got to see exactly how fast it was.

“This is a bad idea,” Flutterfree declared. “We’re supposed to drive on the roads on the surface – not on these scaffolds!”

“Reeelax!” Vriska said, smirking. “It’s just a ten story fall to the surface!”
“Just!?”

“You have wings, Flutterfree,” Nova pointed out.

“The rest of you don’t!”

Vriska rolled her eyes. “We’re all invulnerable badasses who can’t feel pain, unicorns who can make ourselves levitate, or The Pink One.”

Pinkie giggled. “Yep! FIRE HER UP! DESTINATION: ZINC SQUARE!”

Jotaro was at the helm, since he had the most experience piloting ships. With both hands on the wheel, he had Star Platinum pull the throttle back.

The skiff shot forward along the scaffolding of Chron like a bullet. Flutterfree had no idea what was going on as they whizzed past three separate skyscrapers, forcing the scaffolding to shudder with their movement.

Jotaro, however, was on top of things. He was able to keep the skiff on the narrow passageway without much difficulty, thanks mostly to Star Platinum’s precise senses. He didn’t run into the railing at any point.

“THERE’S A CORNER UP AHEAD!” Nova shouted. “WE CAN’T TURN AT THIS SPEED!”

Jotaro didn’t slow down.

“JOTARO WHAT ARE YOU DOING!?”

Jotaro let a small smirk come to his face.

“Jotaro…”

“JOTARO SLOW DOWN!” Flutterfree screeched.

Jotaro did not slow down. Everyone braced for impact.

At the last possible second, Star Platinum froze time. The Stand rotated the skiff a full ninety degrees and allowed time to resume. The skiff continued on without a hitch.

“Good grief, so panicked,” Jotaro commented.

Vriska burst out laughing. “Nice move, big guy!” She slapped him on the back. “That was just pure sweetness.”

He turned back to look at the expressions of his team, finding a very satisfying mixture of deathly afraid and amused.

“Uh, hey Jotaro?” Pinkie piped up.

“Yes?”

“You might want to look at the ‘road’.”

Jotaro looked back at the road – and saw a dead end coming up. He had already used his time stop recently, so he couldn’t use it again…
Star Platinum pulled on the breaks, but it wasn’t enough. The skiff went flying over the dead end, losing the ground it needed beneath it to hover. It reached a peak height – and started to fall.

“Hey, the good news is that we’re going to crash into Zinc Square!” Pinkie cheered.

Nova grunted, lighting her horn. “That doesn’t seem to be that good of news to me!” She surrounded the skiff in her levitation magic. The dangerous speed of the skiff slowed to manageable levels, and had they been heading for a street everything would have been completely fine.

As it was they completely flattened a cotton candy stand. The skiff was fine, as were the occupants of the vehicle and the stand, but all the cotton candy was decidedly ruined.

A pink stallion gasped. “MY COTTON CANDY!!”

“Sorry! Sorry!” Pinkie blurted, pulling a fresh cotton candy machine out of her mane and handing it over to him. “Here-”

“YOU WANT TO REPLACE THE FAMILY HEIRLOOM!?"

“Well, it’s broke.”

“There will be no replacement. There will be only… no more cotton candy!” He wailed and ran off.

Vriska blinked. “…Touchy.”

“Vriska we just destroyed his family heirloom,” Flutterfree chided.

“No you didn’t,” Bartholomew said, walking up to them. “His cotton candy stand has a habit of getting destroyed so he tries to guilt-trip people into giving him things over it.”

Nova blinked. “But he just refused Pinkie’s!”

“He’s a long-con pony,” Bartholomew said with a shrug. “Anyway, I’m glad you made it! Welcome to the Greatest Show on Zhui!” He threw his arms wide, gesturing at the scenery surrounding them.

It was definitely a circus in a part of town normally reserved for community gatherings. The Square itself was a flat place exposed to the sky, containing only tall metal pillars with white lights at the top encased in metallic sculptures shaped to the alchemical symbol for zinc. Aside from that, everything else had been placed here by the caravan. A gigantic red and white striped tent dominated the scene, a single smokestack poking up through one of its sides adding more steam to the city of Chron. Surrounding the large tent were dozens of stands, exhibits, and games clearly designed to get people to spend lots and lots of money. A few clowns and acrobats played in the streets – juggling, performing comedy routines, or showcasing bizarre ‘freaks’ or people with peculiar magical powers.

“So. Much. PARTY!” Pinkie squeed, jumping into the air. “This is gonna be great!”

“It’ll go as it always does,” Bartholomew said. “We perform, everyone likes it, perhaps a few adventuring types join us, perhaps a few leave, and then we move to the next town. It gets the same-y after a while. The best shows are the ones that implode in on themselves. Do not tell the Ringmaster I said that.”

Vriska smirked. “Want us to crash the skiff into the main tent?”

“Please don’t,” Bartholomew said with a chuckle. “Anyway, the main show doesn’t start for a while. Anything in particular you want to do?”
“Well, I th-” Vriska stopped her thought. “Holy potatoes, is that an Angel?”

Bartholomew looked out. “Oh yeah, that’s Clanker. His real name is ‘Angel of Determination’ or something like that, but we don’t like saying that. He travels with us. Good thing too, he helps everyone find out where they fit.”

“Huh,” Vriska said. “…Does he perform?”

“He actually does from time to time,” Bartholomew said. “He’s got a fortune-telling act that’s a bit more specific than what most Angels do. Doesn’t really tell anyone what to do with their lives though. I don’t think he’s doing it today, though – see how he’s walking? He’s looking for people who need to know their part of the plan.”

“Right,” Nova said.

“Maybe he’s looking for you?”

“We already talked to an Angel today,” Jotaro said. “Doubt it.” He noticed the Angel glance at the five of them, but he didn’t move any closer.

“Oh, what was your purpose then?”

“The Seven Cities of Gold,” Jotaro said.

“Never heard of it. Weird.”

“It is a legend not many are meant to know.”

“…Can you tell me?”

Vriska smirked. “Sure. The Seven Cities of Gold are the ancient cities where the Watchmaker first came to the world. The Cities are now gone, but the essence of the Watchmaker may remain. That’s what we’re going to seek out.”

“Woah… That’s amazing! I hope you guys find what you’re looking for!”

“We do too,” Flutterfree said.

“Anyway, Bartholomew, take us to the party!” Pinkie demanded.

“Gotcha! There’s a magic gun game over here. Only four players though.”

“You guys can go,” Nova said, looking back at the cotton candy stand’s wreckage. “I think I can revert this in the time it takes you to play a game.”

“You do that!” Pinkie grinned. “Don’t get lost now, you hear?”

“I’ll be able to find you, don’t worry,” Nova said, turning her focus to the broken stand. She reversed the flow of time on the objects, spending the next few minutes re-assembling the wreckage from the ground up. It was good as new.

“Amazing,” Icon said, her sudden presence freaking Nova right out. She yelped and whirled around.

“W-wha?”

“It was a compliment, Nova,” Icon said with her soothing voice.
“I’m more alarmed at how you managed to sneak up on me.”

“I’m a master acrobat and contortionist. I move very lightly.” She strode up to the stand, laying a hoof on it. “Impeccable work.”

Nova flushed. “Well, it was just a simple matter of, y’know, reversing the time flow of each individual piece until it returned to a properly fixed state. Since it wasn’t that long ago it took hardly any energy at all an—”

“Wow, smart as well. Even better.” Icon flipped around, her tail narrowly missing Nova’s muzzle.

“Uh… Yeah! Smart! That’s… me!”

Icon put her mouth near Nova’s ear. “I’d love to stay and have fun, but I have to prepare for my act. If you’d like some fun, swing by the back of the tent after the show.”

Nova blinked. “S-sure!”

“I’m glad,” Icon said, chuckling to herself. She twisted into the air and backflipped away, blowing a kiss and winking at her. “Until then.”

Nova took a few seconds to process this. “Yeah!” She said, but Icon was long gone. “Yeesh, making a fool of myself here…”

“Over what?” Pinkie said, appearing from nowhere.

“NOTHING! ABSOLUTELY NOTHING!” Nova blurred, falling over backward. “I just got the cart back!”

“Ooh, cotton candy!” Pinkie said, activating the cotton candy machine and pulling out a fully formed piece of fluffy blue sugar. “Mmmmm…”

The others showed up shortly thereafter. “That was so much fun!” Flutterfree said.

“That’s because you won,” Vriska observed.

“…Maybe,” Flutterfree admitted. “Anything else, Bartholomew?”

“We can watch Eddie do his impossible juggling until we need to go to the big tent,” Bartholomew suggested. “That’ll be fun, right?”

“I bet it will!” Pinkie blurted, putting a hoof around Nova. “Maybe it’ll calm Nova down!”

“Uh – I am calm!”

Pinkie winked at Nova, the universal sign of I know everything, but just keep doing what you’re doing. “Oh, you got all tense, Nova! Come on, TIME TO ENJOY A SHOW!” They made their way to Eddie’s juggling stage where a tall human was already juggling seventeen different small, fuzzy animals.

“Oh, my…” Flutterfree said, hoof over her mouth.

“Eddie’s a professional, don’t worry,” Bartholomew said. “Also, be warned, he might pull the ‘oh no, the animal’s dead’ trick. It’s all an act though.”

“That sounds horrible!” Flutterfree turned around. “I’ll just… not watch.”
“Your loss,” Vriska said, slurping obnoxiously on a drink she’d swiped off some random member of the audience.

Flutterfree took her time to look around, examining her surroundings that didn’t include the juggling of small animals. Given the gasps of fear she heard behind her, that was probably a good choice on her part. She looked at the much less concerning sights of normal clowns, a couple acrobats, that one pony with two heads, the Clanker Angel talking to Crazy Dan…

…That last one caught her eye. Crazy Dan was very animated by whatever Clanker was saying. Hanging on every word like it meant literally everything…

She was curious. She activated Lolo, winding the long green tendrils toward the two of them, producing a listening point for herself.

Clanker took out a smooth, gray box and handed it to Crazy Dan. “This is your destiny, Dan. I trust you know what to do with this box.”

“KABOOM!”

“Yes, kaboom. Remember the trigger carefully.”

“Right! Aahahaha! Everything’s going up today!”

“Yes, yes it is.” Then the Angel looked right at Lolo’s ‘camera’.

Flutterfree froze. Nothing but other Stand users and users of spiritual powers could see Lolo’s extensions. Flutterfree retracted Lolo instantly.

She turned back to her friends. “Everyone, I sa- AUGH!”

The juggler was holding a limp ferret, holding it out for all to see. Flutterfree covered her face with her hooves.

“Why’d you turn around?” Pinkie asked.

“Crazy Dan was talking to an Angel about a box and something explosive and…” She pointed, but discovered that neither the Angel nor Crazy Dan were there. “Aaand they’re gone.”

“Crazy Dan’s act is all about explosions,” Bartholomew said. “Maybe it was a new trick?”

“It had something to do with a gray box…”

“I’ll go ask him about it before the show starts,” Bartholomew promised. “Speaking of, I think I need to head over. You should grab some seats if you want the best possible show.”

“I thought it was the Greatest Show on Zhui?” Vriska asked.

Bartholomew rolled his eyes. “Closer seats still make it better. Come on!”

Flutterfree nodded. “Right.” They set off toward the main tent.

“Uh… Nova?” Pinkie called back. “You coming?”

“YES!” Nova blurted, shaking herself out of her stupor, trotting after them.

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The interior of the Greatest Show on Zhui’s tent was filled mostly with chairs around a central ring, pretty standard for most carnival shows. The primary difference was a gigantic mechanical forge in the center of the ring that pumped out smoke and steam through a rickety zig-zagging chimney. Gears and magical runes decorated the unusual forge.

Pinkie’s team found themselves on the third row of seats from the front, close enough to see action but not too close, in case something went flying. The five of them knew Crazy Dan’s act was the opener, so they were on guard for any gray boxes or other such things. They did not see Clanker anywhere in the tent – though other Angels could be seen as part of the audience. Apparently even they needed entertainment.

A spotlight clicked on, showing the Ringmaster standing right in front of the central forge. “LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, BOYS AND GIRLS, I have for you tonight a show that will delight and amaze every last one of you, even those who have shown their faces at our performances before! We’ve got many new acts tonight, as well as many twists on the old. And for those of you who have never been – WELCOME TO THE GREATEST SHOW ON ZHUI! May I present to yo-”

The forge the Ringmaster was standing in front of opened, engulfing her in fire. When the fire cleared, in her place was Crazy Dan.

Jotaro was ready to move, but Vriska shook her head. “Part of the act. The Ringmaster’s mind is behind the seats now.”

“Guess what time it is!?” Crazy Dan blurted, laughing madly. “That’s right! It’s KABOOM time!” He leaped onto his hands, using his feet to reach into his pockets and throw comically large bombs around. They exploded in showers of vibrant colors, showering the arena with sparks of all colors. Trails of fire appeared all over the ground of the inner ring, fire that Crazy Dan proceeded to inflame with special powders, sending pillars of rainbow flame into the sky.

The audience cheered, but Crazy Dan was far from done. He had dozens of complex explosive routines ready for them, delivering them all in quick succession. He ate a bomb and it seemed to explode inside of him, but he was fine. He blew up a bomb larger than him right in front of an audience member’s face, and they were completely fine.

He eventually started juggling bombs and handing them off to the jugglers, transitioning from Crazy Dan’s explosive opening to the next act – dozens of jugglers, hundreds of objects.

“Wonder if Bartholomew got to him?” Flutterfree asked.

“Or you got worked up over nothing,” Vriska suggested.

“Yeah… That is possible.”


“Can you juggle that many balls, Pinkie?” Flutterfree asked, gesturing to the performance.

“Give me a Mirror Pool and I can juggle a functionally infinite number of balls.”

“Let’s not do that.”

“Aww, ptooey,” Pinkie chuckled.

They sat back and enjoyed the show. Jugglers. Trapeze artists. Clowns – lots of clowns in a tiny car. Nova believed they had to be using a ‘bigger on the inside’ spell or something similar.
It was after the scantily clad dancers had finished their routine that they noticed something was
wrong.

Bartholomew was moving exceedingly slowly along the edge of the inner ring, carrying the gray box
in his hands like his life depended on it. His expression was one of pure terror – and it definitely
wasn’t because the contortionists had just started their act, twisting themselves into a clockwork mesh
of horrifying flesh.

Vriska stood up. “I’ll get him.” She put a hand to her head, tapping into Bartholomew’s mind. Hey,
kid, Vriska here. What’s wrong down there?

“Find Crazy Dan!” Pinkie blurted. The other four members of the team scattered, leaving Vriska
alone tapping into Bartholomew’s mind.

It was proving more difficult than expected – Bartholomew was in so much of a panic his mind
couldn’t even process what she was saying to him.

Kid, calm down. She tried to force the command into his mind, but even that was too complicated for
him to understand. All he was able to do was walk forward, along the edge of the ring. Vriska
couldn’t even probe him to figure out why.

Right, won’t calm down. Try STOP.

Bartholomew stopped moving, though this sudden change in his mental state just increased his level
of panic.

Stay there, I’m coming, Vriska said, making her slow trek to that side of the ring.

Meanwhile, Flutterfree clapped her hooves together. “Found him, behind the seats of that section.
Nova, think you can teleport us down?”

Nova nodded, lighting her horn. “It better be empty down there…”

“It is,” Flutterfree confirmed. Nova executed the teleport, entering part of the ‘backstage’, where the
Ringmaster was talking to Crazy Dan.

The Ringmaster. “I’m sorry, no special treatments, you can’t b-”

“Crazy Dan’s done something to Bartholomew,” Flutterfree said.

The Ringmaster sighed. “Dan, what is it this time?”

“Nothing at all!”

“Stop it,” Flutterfree demanded. “I saw you accept that gray box from the Angel. Now Bartholomew
is walking around the edge of the ring terrified for his life for some reason. You’re going to tell us
why.”

“Is that why he’s out there…” the Ringmaster muttered.

Crazy Dan laughed. “I didn’t do anything to him, he did it to himself! Decided to poke his nose in
my business! Not my fault if I bound it to him!”

“Yes it is,” Jotaro said, using Star Platinum to grab Crazy Dan by the neck. “Now tell us what it is
before I decide you’ve pissed me off too much to be allowed to speak.”
“IT GOES KABOOM!” Crazy Dan shouted with a laugh.

“When?” Jotaro demanded.

“When he finishes walking around!”

Nova sent a message to Vriska via telepathy. Stop him from walking around the ring, when he’s done the box will explode.

Already done, came the reply.

See if you can get it from him.

Working on that.

“Right, Vriska’s moving to get it off of him,” Nova said. “We should be able to resolve this without any further problems.”

Crazy Dan laughed. “You think taking it away from him will stop it!? I said it was bound to him! When that bond is gone… Worse things happen!”

The four of them stared at Crazy Dan with fearful eyes.

Elsewhere, Vriska had made it to the area of the ring next to Bartholomew. “Right, kid, now just hand me the box and we’ll be out of here…”

Bartholomew didn’t move, he just stared at her like she had asked him to jump into piranha-infested waters.

Dammit kid! Give me the fucking box! She ordered. His arms twitched, but he held fast. There was no way this kid was this psychically resistant… There was no way!

Vriska! Nova’s voice came into Vriska’s mind. Don’t take the box from him!

I’ve got this, Nova.

That’s not what I mean! New information has come to light! It won’t end well!

I said I’ve got this! Vriska blurted, shutting Nova up with a psychic barrier. There was no way that box was going to explode with Vriska’s luck.

Kid, box! Now!

Bartholomew didn’t move.

“Fuck it,” Vriska muttered, reaching for the box herself. Not the most comfortable action, but she could pull it off without falling into the ring, probably. She swatted at the box, grabbing hold of it and pulling. Bartholomew wouldn’t let go.

“DAMMIT KID!” Vriska muttered. “LET G-”

“VRSKA!” Pinkie shouted through her megaphone on the other side of the ring. “DON’T TAKE THE BOX!”

“I’VE GOT IT!” Vriska shouted.
“VRISKA, THAT WASN’T A REQUEST!”

Vriska pulled, tearing the box from Bartholomew. He screamed in fear.

“See?” Vriska shouted, holding it up. “I’ve got it, and it’s not exploding! Ye of little faith. You interrupted the show for nothing! Man.”

It was in this moment that Bartholomew froze solid.

“What the-”

Thousands of icy spike tendrils shot out from Bartholomew’s frozen body, skewering every last contortionist and a large chunk of the audience. Vriska, with her immense luck, was spared despite her proximity to Bartholomew.

Vriska blinked. She’d been fine. She’d had it.

But no matter how much luck she had, she was still a Thief of Light. The power was always beneficial to her. She could not give fortune to others. She could not have saved Bartholomew…

She should have listened to them.

She didn’t have time to let out an expletive, because the icy form of Bartholomew drew all the bodies it had skewered into a tremendous pile of death. Every part of it froze, becoming a ball of fleshy ice.

And then the ball moved as if it were alive. It screamed with the voices of a hundred dying breaths, tearing at the tent’s supports. It collapsed in on itself, letting the blood red light of evening flood in from above. The various unicorns in the audience kept the tent from falling and crushing anyone, but it did not matter – the beast of bodies moved to absorb the audience into itself.

Bartholomew had wanted excitement.

“STAR PLATINUM: THE WORLD!” Jotaro shouted. He grabbed the time-frozen Crazy Dan and threw him with all the might Star Platinum could muster. The human projectile sailed deep into the frozen mound of bodies, shattering dozens and instantly killing Crazy Dan before he was even aware of what was happening.

When time resumed, the mesh of contorted bodies still moved, though it was unable to heal the damage already dealt to it. Flutterfree riddled the creature with holes from her bow of light while Nova met it with her pink-blue lasers.

Vriska eyed the conglomeration of ice. “Goodbye,” she muttered, bringing its luck down as quickly as she could manage. Pinkie took advantage of this, appearing on top of the frozen behemoth with an ice pick. It only took one swing – she hit the fault line perfectly, shattering everybody within the unholy mesh into a million pieces.

It was over as soon as it had began.

Vriska clenched her fist. “That… That…”

“THAT WAS STUPID!” Nova shouted at Vriska. “THAT WAS STUPID!”

“I did what I-”

Nova slapped her. “PEOPLE ARE DEAD BECAUSE YOU DON’T KNOW HOW TO LISTEN!”
“I though-”

“No you didn’t! Don’t make m-”

Flutterfree put a hoof over Nova’s mouth. “Now is not the time,” she said, gesturing around. “They see us.”

The five of them looked around – the crowd that hadn’t run in fear was looking at them in anger. All of them… except the Angels, who just looked on with expressions of contentment.

The Ringmaster ran up to them. “You need to leave. Now. Thanks for the help – I mean it – but the crowd is going to turn on you in about ten seconds. Move.”

Nova lit her horn and teleported them all away.

The Ringmaster sighed, leaning on a cane. “Well… Does anyone know what that box was?”

And just like that, a group of adventurers walked up and told her a story about the boxes of ice and fire, and that they had been tasked by their Angel to find and destroy the inventor of the devices…

The interdimensional visitors were forgotten. Like shadows in the night.

~~~

That night, the five of them sat in their hotel room. Silence reigned.

Vriska opened her mouth. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh you think that helps anything!?” Nova blurted. “You th-”

Flutterfree shook her head disapprovingly at Nova. “Vriska has difficulty apologizing, Nova. It means a lot when coming from her.”

“Fat lot of good it does!”

Vriska looked at the ground, for once without a sharp retort.


“Nova…” Pinkie said, putting a hoof on the unicorn’s shoulder. “Yeah, Vriska messed up. She messed up big time. But the mistake needs to be in the past.”

“She disobeyed your order,” Jotaro said. “You’re not just supposed to let that slide. There’s a reason a command position exists.”

Pinkie blinked. “Well, yeah, that wasn’t good, but I think she’s already suffered enough.”

Vriska sighed. “I’ve seen so many people die, Pinkie… I’m numbed to it. You know this.”

“I… You’re right. But we’re also friends, Vriska. I’m not going to yell at you for a mistake you clearly regret.”

“For selfish reasons,” Nova muttered.

Vriska gave the slightest hint that she wanted to punch Nova’s face, but it died out a lot quicker than it should have. A lot quicker.
Flutterfree put a wing around Vriska. “Hey. You don’t have to beat yourself up.”

“Yes she does,” Nova muttered.

“Nova!”

“She’s gotta have some kind of consequence!”

“Isn’t you shouting at her enough?!”

Nova bristled, turning her back on them. “I… I don’t know. I really have no idea.” She shook her head. “He was just a kid…”

“The Angel did this,” Pinkie said, suddenly.

“Doesn’t give the Watchmaker much of a case,” Jotaro commented.

Flutterfree nodded. “The more we learn… The more I don’t like this place.”

Pinkie nodded slowly.

There was silence in the hotel room.

Nova stood up suddenly. “I’m going for a walk,” she declared.

“Be back by tomorrow, we’ve got a mission,” Jotaro told her.

“I will,” Nova said, walking out of the room.

Flutterfree took in a breath. “Vriska, how about we get to sleep? That sound good?”

“Maybe,” Vriska muttered.

“Let’s take that as a yes. Everyone else?”

“Yeah,” Pinkie said with a yawn. “We need to sleep…”

~ ~ ~

Nova stood outside a small shed that had been erected behind the wreckage of the main tent. There was nobody else there.

She sighed – who was she kidding. There was no way she’d be here. It was just a horrid memory of the horrific thing…

“I didn’t think you were going to show up,” Icon said, trotting over from Nova’s left. “Especially considering what just happened. Are you sure you’re in the mood for fun?”

“A certain kind, maybe,” Nova said. “Or maybe someone to talk to that isn’t embedded in the mess? Or just… maybe I’m just on a walk.”

Icon sat down next to her. “I’m in the same boat, I guess. I don’t know what to do. Everyone just accepts it as part of the plan. I do too… But I swear it bothers me more than all the others.”

“Screw the ‘plan’. It’s complete BS.”

“Nova-!”
Nova snorted. “Don’t expect you to understand, you’re part of this world. I’m not. The worlds always have no plan, regardless of what Flutterfree and Rev say. It’s not stupid out there like it is here. It’s not *right* here.”

Icon looked into the starry sky. “Maybe you’re right… I don’t know.”

“No either of us know.”

The two of them fell silent.

Nova took in a sharp breath. “Fun.”

“What?”

Nova sharply turned her head, planting her lips on Icon’s. Icon shook back in surprise.

Nova put on a mischievous grin. “Bet you were thinking *you* would be the one to make the first move in this little game.”

Icon smiled right back. “I like being surprised.”

“Good. I’m full of surprises.” She tackled Icon to the ground.

~~~

Jotaro dreamed.

*The Seven Cities of Gold.*

He saw them again, but this time there was no doorway. There was no sun – the sky was alight with stars instead. The clock of the sky seemed faded and distant somehow. Like it was losing hold on the world he was in.

“You seek well.”

“Show yourself,” Jotaro demanded.

There was no response aside from a sharp cold wind blowing through the sands of the desert.

The Seven Cities of Gold began to approach Jotaro from the distance, closing him in on all sides. He felt their *presence*. Their *glory*. Their *inspiration*.

“I will find you,” Jotaro said. “I will not stop until I have.”

“That is merely the first step…”

Jotaro woke up in a cold sweat. Had it not still been the middle of the night, he would have demanded they set out in the skiff *immediately*. He managed to calm himself down, and lay back onto his bed.

He was still awake when Nova came back. Her hair was a mess and she looked like she had been roughed up – but she had a contented smile on her face. She flopped onto her bed and let out a contented sigh.

Soon after, Jotaro returned to the realm of the sleeping.
Halo Effect

“All my illusions projected on her, the ideal that I wanted to see.”

The Anarchist came personally to see them off. “I hear you got a taste of the plan last night.” They were loading up the skiff outside Chron’s walls, the craft hovering above the red sandy ocean.

Vriska didn’t look the Anarchist in the eyes. Pinkie, noting that Vriska wasn’t going to make a comment, spoke instead. “Yeah. At the moment we don’t like the plan.”

“No kidding,” Nova muttered – her mood had improved considerably from last night, though she was clearly still upset about the ordeal, which was to be expected. None of them were doing particularly well.

“The Angels will have it out for you,” the Anarchist said. “You need to be as quick as you can be.”

“At an absolute maximum speed, it will only take a little over a day to get there,” Jotaro said. “Speed is not an issue.”

Flutterfree nodded. “We’ll get there Mr. Anarchist, don’t you worry.”

“I’ll worry as much as I want. The Watchmaker’s plan is against you. That’s a powerful force to contend with.”

“We’re going to show him a greater plan,” Pinkie said. “Ours. I may deliver the message via pie to the face, haven’t decided yet.”

“A pie for the Watchmaker… I would love to see that,” the Anarchist admitted. “But I am old and not fit for such a journey. Good luck.”

“We’ll need it,” Nova said, glancing at the silent form of Vriska. Nova shook her head and sighed.

“We’re ready,” Jotaro said. “Let’s move. We need to make good time. Goodbye, Anarchist.”

Pinkie hopped into the skiff. “Yeah, goodbye!”

The Anarchist’s scowl softened slightly. “Goodbye, otherworlders. May you put this world in its rightful place.”

Jotaro put the throttle to maximum and the skiff darted across the sea of sand, spraying particulates behind it as it rushed. The wind whipped the hair of all in the skiff – though Jotaro’s hat remained on his head somehow.

Flutterfree allowed her smile to widen – they had been at the scene of yet another tragedy, yes, and had been a significant part of it. But now they were on their quest again, looking to the future…

They would fix this world’s problems, like they always did.

It was the part of her job Flutterfree loved the best.

They rode off into the sunrise, leaving Chron behind…

~~~
“Why the fuck are we in a Salvador Dali painting?” Vriska asked half-heartedly.

The skiff was currently racing across the world of Zhui at super high speeds accomplished through the use of Nova’s time acceleration spell. Things near to them were impossible to see with normal eyes because everything went by too fast – but the distant landscapes held their positions for the most part. Surrounding the adventurers was a scenery made of melting clocks draped over mountains and valleys. Even trees were caked in clocks on every surface. The timepieces all ticked in sync, providing a deafening TICK TOCK TICK TOCK every second precisely.

“I’m going to go out on a limb and say the Watchmaker likes surreal landscapes,” Nova said. “Square pillars, land of snakes, red sand sea, and now melting clocks.”

“The Watchmaker isn’t the Creator though,” Flutterfree pointed out. “He’s just… a guide.”

“He could have been guiding this world for millennia for all we know,” Pinkie said. “Maybe he made the people who made those snakes! I’m going to ask him about that when we get to him.”

“We’re really racking up the questions, aren’t we?” Flutterfree asked.

“Yep!” Pinkie giggled. “Of course when we actually get there the chances of us asking them all are about none.”

“Such is the way of things…” Nova said, shaking her head. “How many places do we go through before we get to the desert?”

“Just this place and the Boneyard,” Pinkie said, looking at the map. “We won’t even get to see the majority of this bizarre world!”

“Unless we come back,” Flutterfree said. “The world might need our help after we’re done.”

“Probably,” Pinkie admitted. “They’ll need to learn how to throw their own parties!”

The three of them giggled. Jotaro remained fixated on the horizon while Vriska remained lost in her own thoughts.

“…I’m worried about Vriska,” Flutterfree told Pinkie.

“That’s good – but you don’t need to be,” Pinkie said. “She’ll be fine. I know it.”

“You do?”

“Yep!” Pinkie said with a grin. “I definite-”

“INCOMING!” Jotaro yelled suddenly, turning the skiff sharply to the left, barely avoiding a magic bolt coming from above them.

Vriska shook herself out of her daze, looking upward. “Airship!? Where’d an airship come from!?"

“Teleport? I don’t know!” Nova blurted, raising a shield to block another bombardment from the skull-and-crossbones airship.

“Pirates!” Pinkie blurted. “Flutterfree, can you drive the skiff?”

“Not well enough to dodge!”

“I’ll defend,” Nova said. “Who am I teleporting up there?”
“Me, Jotaro, and Vriska,” Pinkie said.

Nova teleported the three of them above the airship. Pinkie pulled a trampoline out of her mane and threw it into the top of the flying craft, giving the three of them a cushion to soften their landing. One after another, all three sprung off the bouncy toy and landed in a battle stance.

A pegasus pirate flew at them from the left, but Pinkie threw a squeaky hammer in his face, knocking him away with ease. “Let’s take her down, guys!” Pinkie said, pulling out her icpick. She swung it down, puncturing a hole in the skin of the balloon, the resulting leak blowing her cheeks and lips back. She giggled at the silliness.

Star Platinum began to punch holes all around Jotaro while Vriska opted just to stab her sword into the skin and run across the ship, creating a huge gash.

The pirate airship began to descend.

“HEY!” An alicorn with crystals instead of eyes blurted, having teleported herself and a small number of her crew with her. “STOP THAT!”

“Make us,” Vriska grunted.

“Yare yare daze…” Jotaro said.

An Angel appeared next to the alicorn before she could move. “Consider your actions, Lens. They far outclass you, in order to get what is theirs, invest in a new strategy. Perha-

“ORA!”

The next thing anyone knew the Angel didn’t have a head anymore – it had been punched clean off by Star Platinum. The rest of the body had been punched in the middle of a time stop, the clockwork mechanisms crumbling under the strain.

The crew of pirates stared at the remains of the Angel, mouths agape.

“What?” Jotaro asked. “He might have told you how to win. Couldn’t take that chance.”

The alicorn named Lens shook her head. “Truly despicable.”

“Hey, you’re pirates,” Pinkie pointed out. “And not the fun kind either. You don’t even deserve to be considered swashbuckling!”

“At least we know our place in the world and aren’t… demonic like you.”

“Funny,” Vriska muttered, a sword to the alicorn’s throat. “I happen to think I’m pretty demonic right now. So I wonder if I’ll just cut your head off without thinking about it…”

“Vriska, calm down!” Pinkie blurted. “Don’t kill them!”

Vriska drew back. “Fine.” She produced her dice instead. “You all should probably run.”

“We’ll do no such thing! You have assaulted our sh-”

“ORA!” The invisible fist sent Lens off the body of the airship.

“Yare yare daze… Hypocrisy,” Jotaro muttered.
Vriska rolled her dice. A large bomb, its surface plastered with emoji stickers, appeared out of the aether and fell through the large gash she had made but a few moments prior.

“Jotaro, evacuation.”

Jotaro nodded, stopping time. He grabbed Vriska and Pinkie and jumped off the airship. When time resumed, Vriska’s bomb went off and tore the balloon section of the airship in two. It fell to the ground slowly, smoking the entire time.

Pinkie pulled out a giant cake for them to land in. It was sticky and messy, but at least it wasn’t as hard as a clock face. Pinkie poked her head out of the frosting and licked it off her face. She pulled out a round red button and pressed it.

“That was easy.”

Jotaro nodded. “They chose the wrong ship to pirate.”

Lens appeared in front of them with a teleport, screaming bloody murder. Star Platinum decked her in the face, knocking her to the ground. “Stay down or the next one will break your jaw and cause some brain damage.”

“I… Swear on my ship…”

“That no longer exists.”

Lens ground her teeth. “I will get my revenge on you…”

“Good luck with that,” Jotaro said. At that moment, Nova grabbed them with a teleport, taking them back to the skiff.

“Mission success!” Pinkie cheered. “We blew up a ship! One fatality.”

Flutterfree sighed. “Did they deserve it?”

“They’ were a Clockwork Angel,” Jotaro said. “I expected him to be more durable than he was.”

“Oh. He was fighting?”

“He was telling them how to win. Had to shut him up.” Jotaro peeled her off the controls, placing himself back at the helm.

“All right. The others?”

“If they’re smart they won’t go down with the ship,” Pinkie said. “Only damaged the balloon.”

“Good,” Flutterfree said.

“They did swear revenge on us though,” Pinkie added. “They’ll be back, so we’ll need guards tonight.”

“They will be back?” Nova asked.

“Yep. Whenever is sufficient for drama.” Pinkie shrugged. “Could be tonight, could be when we arrive at the Seven Cities of Gold, or it could be several years from now as a surprising villain we completely forgot about. Just gotta be on guard.”
“Fun,” Flutterfree commented.

“Yeah… fun,” Vriska deadpanned, returning to her inactive, silent state.

“Hey, Vrisk-” Flutterfree began.

“Let’s wait for the mission to be over,” Vriska said. “I want to be able to see this as a whole before we go into the ‘feelings jam’. And frankly I’d rather talk to Starbeat.”

“I understand.”

“Thanks.”

They continued along the land of eternal ticking.

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Nothing else happened of note until that night. They had crossed the entire land of clocks by the time the sun set, so they didn’t have to worry about sleeping with eternal ticking throbbing at their minds; all they had to worry about was all the bones everywhere.

For the Boneyard was made of nothing but bones.

They managed, somehow, to find a pelvis the size of a house that was flat enough to lie on. Nova had spent some time conjuring simple bedrolls and Pinkie had made dinner. They had eaten – and had agreed to take turns on watch.

Nova went second, after Flutterfree.

She always hated it when they needed to have a watch. In order to ensure everyone got a good amount of sleep, the person on watch was always alone for the majority of the time. It, put simply, sucked and was really boring ninety percent of the time. The other ten percent was when a disaster hit, and that was never good. Just more exciting.

Nova was beginning to feel the ‘nod off’ effect pulling down on her head. She cast a spell to force herself awake – normally a bad idea, but since she could use the sleep spell on herself later and she wasn’t going to be awake very long, it worked. Of course, now that she was wide awake, she could think clearly.

After a small amount of thought devoted to wondering what she should do about Vriska – probably apologize at some point – and a similar amount of time spent pondering the Watchmaker – she really wasn’t sure what to make of him – her thoughts turned to Icon.

Icon…

That had been a great night.

They’d only known each other for… Less than a day, really. That seemed crazy, and yet oddly perfect to Nova. Here she was, the mare of time, struck with something happening too fast. Poetic, in a way. She tried to tell herself to be reasonable, that there was no way the feelings she had were as mature as they wanted her to believe, but the heart has an annoying habit of not listening to a thing the brain tells it.

Nova, with a dumb smile on her face, began to fantasize about the future. After they’d taken care of the Watchmaker, she would return to Chron and sweep Icon off her hooves and take her home. Icon
would become the voice of Zhui to Merodi Universalis, and her world would eventually be incorporated into everything. They’d spend so much time together…

Nova chuckled to herself. “Nova, you’re going crazy.” She couldn’t convince herself this was a bad thing no matter what angle she came at it from.

There was a flash of light behind a large rib bone. Nova, ever resilient even in her emotional swirl, stood up, ready for a fight. She teleported herself behind the rib bone, legs poised in a battle stance.

She saw the form of Icon standing graceful on top of a skull that belonged to a whale.

“Icon…? How did you…?”

Icon giggled playfully. “Come and get me and I’ll tell you.”


Icon did a triple backflip onto the top of a nearby bone. Nova opted not to just teleport to her and end it there, instead rushing toward her with self-levitation. Icon performed an exaggerated bow and leaped off the bone, into a sea of smaller ribs. As she ran with increasingly complex movements and actions, her body increasingly mesmerized Nova.

Despite this, Nova was definitely faster. It took some time, but she did eventually tackle Icon into the interior of a giant’s skull. “Gotcha,” she said with a peck on Icon’s cheek.

“I yield! I yield!” Icon chuckled, holding Nova’s head in her hooves.

“Now, tell me how you got here, hmm?”

“Yeah. I… I got lonely,” Icon admitted. “It just so happens that one of our performers is the ‘unicorn who can teleport anyone anywhere’, and he was able to find your magic signature without too much difficulty. That Pink friend of yours has quite the unique signature, apparently. So he sent me here.”

“You don’t have a way back do you?”

“Nope~!”

“Well then you’ll just have to travel with us. Fair warning, we’re basically declaring war on the Watchmaker. Or at least seeing if we’re declaring war on the Watchmaker.”

“I don’t care!” Icon declared. “I’m just here with you now… we can do whatever we want.”

“What a great idea,” Nova said mischievously.

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Jotaro was in between the Seven Cities of Gold. He had no idea what time of day it was this time. It was as if the sky was in a state of nonexistence… Whatever that meant. His mind apparently decided that meant solid deep blue.

“Funny,” he muttered.

“Is it?” Pinkie asked.

“Are you actually in this dream or just a figment of my imagination?” Jotaro asked.
“Eh, that’s the thing. Depictions of us Aware individuals tend to break outside what we’re supposed to be. I’m not the Pinkie you know, that’s for sure. I’m probably not even a Pinkie at all. But I’m also more than just your thoughts.”

“Huh,” Jotaro said, hands in his pockets. “Got anything to tell me about this dream?”

“I’d tell you to ignore it, but that’s impossible,” Pinkie said.

“Why?”

“Seven Cities of Gold, that’s why.”

“What do y-” then he saw Vriska, Flutterfree, and Nova in front of him.

“We need to turn back,” Nova said.

“Can’t do this anymore,” Vriska added.

“It’s not worth it,” Flutterfree finished.

Jotaro clenched his fist. “No. We must finish what we started!”

“Must we?” Flutterfree asked.

“It could just be a sunken cost fallacy…” Vriska considered.

“Or cost too much,” Nova appended.

Jotaro shook his head. “We continue on.” Why am I arguing with dreams?

“Because of the connection to you,” Pinkie said. “Even if they are just dreams… They’re attacking something you hold dear. A quest you’ve given to yourself.”

Jotaro nodded, pulling down on his hat. “…Even then, I should just ignore them.”

“Ignore us?” Vriska said, cocking her head. “That’s a mistake.” She lifted a hand, destroying one of the Seven Cities of Gold with the motion.

“NO!” Jotaro shouted. “DON’T!”

“I’ll keep doing it over and over, Jotaro. Over and oooo-oo-oo-”

“TWITCHA TWITCH!” Pinkie shouted. “TWITCHA TWITCH!”

Jotaro turned to her. “Nani!?”

“That’s not me,” Dream-Pinkie said. “Looks like you’re about to have a bad night.”

“…Yare yare daze…” Jotaro shook his head.

He woke up with a sword coming down on his face. Star Platinum caught it easily, snapping it in half. In an instant and an “ORA!” the pirate pegasus had a broken jaw and a concussion.

“TWITCHA-” Pinkie yelled, bringing her hammer down on Lens. “TWITCH!”

“WHERE’S NOVA!?” Jotaro blurted, punching three human pirates in the gut, forcing them to lose their lunch – or dinners, as the case probably was.
Pinkie bit her lip. “Noooot important right now! She’s fine though!”

“Did she skimp out on guard duty!?” Vriska blurted, slicing a man’s arm to the bone. “Seriously?”

“I’m sure there’s a very reasona-”

Lens fired a disintegration beam at Flutterfree, boring a hole through her stomach, the force also dislocating her wing. She tried to scream but nothing came out.

“FLUTTERFREE!” Pinkie shouted. She dropped the toys – she took out a pair of pistols and shot the pirates who were still standing in the legs. She was not a perfect shot – a few bullets went into significantly more vital areas they would not recover from.

*Good,* Pinkie thought. *This makes the next step a lot less questionable.*

Jotaro used a time stop to take care of the stragglers while Pinkie chose a dead target – a stray bullet had gone right through his heart – and dragged the corpse to Flutterfree. Flutterfree wasn’t dead, but she would be soon without treatment.

“And today, Doctor Pinkie prescribes a gallon of blood.” She placed the body under Flutterfree’s muzzle. Instinctually, the quasi-vampire bit down and drained the body of the blood it had, rejuvenating herself. Her stomach rebuilt itself with the sudden excess of energy, but the dislocated wing remained the way it was.

Flutterfree opened her eyes. “P-Pinkie?”

“Shhhhh… he was already dead. You don’t have to worry about that.”

Flutterfree stood up, shakily, and wiped her face. “Okay… Okay… My wing’s still – AUGH!”

Pinkie had popped the wing back into its socket. “Better?”

“Holy *Celestia* Pinkie that was… Ooooooh…” She flexed the wing, wincing. “I don’t think it’s quite right…”

“We’ll bandage it up and let you rest it, okay?”

“Right. I’ll try not to move it until then.”

Jotaro chose that moment to drop Lens next to them. “How’s that revenge plan going?”

Lens coughed up blood. “YOU MONSTERS!”

“This was literally just self defense,” Flutterfree said. “I’m sorry… But you kept attacking us.”

“I… Gh… But that’s what I’m supposed to do!”

“Just because it’s part of the plan doesn’t mean it’s good,” Pinkie pointed out. “Now please take what’s left of your people and don’t bother us again, mmk?”

Lens brought her head low. “…My crew will never bother you again.”

“Thank you,” Pinkie said, patting Lens on the back.

“I… I know this means nothing, but I’m sorry for your losses,” Flutterfree said.
Lens shook her head, clearly unsure of what to think anymore. “Come on everyone… Let’s… Let’s just go.”

The ‘revenge’ of the pirates came to an end. Pinkie tore off some of Vriska’s orange god-tier garb and made it into a loose ‘bandage’ to keep Flutterfree’s sore wing from moving. “Is it broken?” Pinkie asked.

“I don’t think so… Just badly sprained,” Flutterfree said. “I mean, it was dislocated. That doesn’t always just pop back in without incident.”

“Yeah…”

“Pinkie?”

“Hm?”

Flutterfree looked her Captain right in the eye. “Take us to Nova.”

Pinkie sighed. “Yeah… This way.”

~~~

“That horn of yours really is something,” Icon said, stroking the protrusion in question

“Master magician, at your service.”

Icon chuckled. “You really are talented, aren’t you? Had you been from here, you would have made a great addition to my act.”

“Who’s to say your act can’t continue? Think of it. Interdimensional performer Icon, revered on multiple worlds for her amazing abilities and physique.”

“And you won’t be jealous about the whole physique thing?”

“Hrm… Let’s see… Probably, but it’d be kinda unfair if I made you change how you performed, so… Well isn’t that a fun quandary.” She chuckled. “Ah well, something to talk about later.” She kissed Icon. “Probably should head back – it’s supposed to be my watch after all.”

“Bit late for that,” Flutterfree said.

Nova blinked. Flutterfree never spoke with that much spite in her voice… Not to her anyway.

Star Platinum grabbed Nova by the neck and tore her off of Icon. Nova was soon snout to nose with Jotaro. “This is what you left watch for?”

“Uh…” Nova gulped. “Hey big guy, uh… This is Icon, and she’s absolutely th-”

“Shut the hell up, your pre-planned speech means shit.”

“Why th-” Then Nova saw Flutterfree. The blood on her face, around her stomach, and the orange wraps around her wing. Above all, she saw the pain in Flutterfree’s eyes. “Oh no.”

“Yeah. Oh no,” Flutterfree spat. “We were attacked, Nova. Pinkie’s Pinkie Sense is the only thing that gave us any chance to do anything. I had to eat somebody! I NEVER WANTED TO DO THAT AGAIN!”
“I… I’m sorry.”

“I know. And I forgive you. I’m still pissed.”

Nova gasped.

“That’s not going to change anytime soon.”

Nova sagged. “I… Yeah. Just… Just don’t take this out on Icon. She had no idea – she just wanted to be with me.”

Jotaro pulled back a fist to punch Nova, but Pinkie stopped him. “Mmmno, not doing that.”

Jotaro lowered his fist in shame.

“T-thanks, Pinkie,” Nova said.

“You’re not going to be thanking me in a moment,” Pinkie muttered. She whipped around and slapped Nova across the face. “WHAT THE HAY, NOVA?!”

“I… I…”

“I saw everything that happened, and you know it,” Pinkie growled. “I was even in your thoughts for a little while there. Cute, a bit extreme, but definitely cute. Then she shows up and you chase her. That’s fine. But then you don’t go back to us and you… And you…” Pinkie’s face flushed red from a mixture of many strong emotions. “I don’t even want to think about it.”

Nova was crying. “P-Pinkie, I’m sorry, I was caught up in the moment, I… She’s just… Don’t be angry at her.”

“That’s going to be pretty difficult,” Flutterfree said.

“No! Be mad at me, I did all of this! I should have known, I should have rushed back, I should have… I…”

“Would you stop it!?” Pinkie blurted. “You’re acting like you’re under some kind of Beat curse!”

“You take that back,” Nova said, glaring. “What I feel for Icon is very real and there’s no denying it! We love each other!”

Icon stood next to her, nodding vigorously.

Pinkie’s pupils dilated. “No… Nonono… Oh Nova… I’m… I’m so sorry.”

Nova blinked. “…What?”

Pinkie’s anger was gone, replaced with tears. “Flutterfree? Use… Use Lolo at full power on Nova’s screen and affix it to Icon. And…” Pinkie sat down. “I’m so sorry, Nova.”

“W-what?” Nova blurted. She suddenly felt the need to avoid Lolo – at full power she could see the tendrils. “No! Flutterfree, back away! I… I…” She lit her horn, prepared to teleport away. Star Platinum slapped her, interrupting the spell.

This gave Flutterfree enough time to tie Icon to Nova’s screen. Suddenly, readings related to Icon became significantly clearer despite the shroud in the entire universe.
Abnormally high levels of ka comparable with the Beat curse.

“N-no… No. NO!” Nova shrieked, pushing Icon away from her. “NO! THAT CAN’T BE IT! IT FEELS SO REAL! IT…”

Pinkie pulled her into a hug. “Look at me, Nova… Ask yourself this. Have you been yourself? You’ve been nervous. You’ve lost your sense of loyalty and importance. You’ve been taken in so quickly.”

“This… This has to be real…”

“It’s not,” Pinkie said. “…I’m sorry I yelled at you for it. There’s nothing you could have done.”

“What’s wrong with the multiverse!?” Nova screamed. “What… I…” She shook her head.

“Nova…” Icon asked, walking toward her. “What are you talking about?”

“GET AWAY FROM ME!” Nova shouted, taking several steps back, lighting her horn in defense. “Stay… STAY AWAY!”

“Nova…”

Flutterfree sighed, shaking her head. “Icon… We’ve detected a form of curse placed on you two. It’s a power that forces two ponies to come together romantically through contrived means and emotions that go against who they really are and what they really want.”

“W-what?”

“Something that wasn’t in you forced you to love Nova. And the same way around. I bet you’ve had many lovers in your career – did you ever teleport miles and miles just to be with them?”

“I… no.”

“Exactly. This?” she gestured at the two of them. “It isn’t real. Normally we’d know this ahead of time, but… our scanners were off. And Pinkie…”

“I wanted Nova to be happy,” Pinkie said. “I should have seen it sooner. I knew you two were going to be a problem for us, but I fully expected to eventually adapt you into the fold after a bunch of interpersonal drama. Not… this.”

“Wh… what now?” Icon asked.

“You go back,” Nova said. “And we forget about each other.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“I know. But us is also not going to happen,” Nova took in a deep breath. “I’m sending you away, Icon.”

“No, Icon. Go back to your life.” Nova shook her head. “Find someone who actually matters.”

“No you don’t,” Nova said. “And I don’t either. We just need to realize that.”
“Nova!”

Nova performed the long-range teleport, placing Icon back in Zinc Square. Then she broke down crying.

Jotaro gently lifted her up with Star Platinum and carried her back to the skiff. There would be no more sleeping tonight, so he started the engine and continued the journey.

~~~

Seven Cities of Gold

“A man could lose his way in a country like this.”

When the sun rose, they were still in the Boneyard.

Flutterfree turned to Pinkie. “I… I’m worried about Nova. I apologized for everything I said but…” She looked at the unicorn. “Her heart’s more than broken. She’s existential.”

“She’ll be fine, eventually,” Pinkie told her. “I’m sure of it.”

“Yes, I know,” Flutterfree said. “All of us will be. You keep saying that.”

“Yes!” Pinkie said with a smile. “It’s what let’s me keep going. I know everyone’s going to get over this. So I can keep smiling and keep the team together.”

“…Right,” Flutterfree said, shaking her head. “…Vriska’s still not doing great.”

“I’m doing fine, fuck you,” Vriska muttered.

Flutterfree ignored the side comment. “And Jotaro…” Flutterfree looked at him. “I’m not sure what’s going on with him.”

“He’s being haunted by dreams,” Pinkie said. “We’ll know what the deal is the moment we find the Seven Cities of Gold or the Watchmaker or whatever.” Pinkie put a hoof on Flutterfree’s shoulder – the one without the broken wing. “Flutterfree, this is a longer journey than usual. There’s going to be more hardship. But we always have to keep in mind that the power of friendship will prevail. Giggle at the ghostie, laugh in the face of hardship. We will get through this. I know that. And you can rest easy knowing that I know that.”

“…Sure,” Flutterfree said. “I’ll try.”

“Good,” Pinkie said, turning to look at the sun and the light it spread over the landscape of bones. “This world, weird as it is, is beautiful.”

“The red color is ominous, yet fitting,” Flutterfree admitted. “I wonder how impossible the desert of ice and fire is going to be?”

“Well, let’s see… There’ll be ice, there’ll be fire, and there’ll be what we’re looking for. That’s a lot of strange stuff in one place!” Pinkie chuckled.

“I hope we find what we’re looking for,” Flutterfree said. “This world… I can see it has great potential, but it also needs help.”

“That’s why we’re here, Flutterfree. That’s why we’re here.”
The desert of ice and fire was literally named, but not precisely in the way one might expect. It was a perfectly flat plane of sand, somehow not forming dunes despite the constant wind. It, as demanded by the sun, was always a reddish color. Had this been the end of it, it would have been a place of biting heat filled with bones of the dehydrated fallen, but it was significantly worse than that. Every square inch of the desert was either on fire or covered in extremely sharp shards of ice.

And which parts were which changed every second, just adding to the danger.

Jotaro had the skiff moving at full throttle through the frost and the fire, their primary source of protection coming from a magical shield from Nova. Their secondary protection was Pinkie’s hammer, bashing through pieces of ice forming in front of them.

“J-jotaro,” Nova managed. “I- I’m not doing well here…”

“Keep it up,” Jotaro said. “This is the last leg of our journey. We can’t turn back now!”

“R-right,” Nova said, wiping her face. “Focus Nova…”

Pinkie looked back at Nova with concern. “Are you okay?”

“No, definitely not, but that’s no excuse for not doing my job,” Nova muttered. She stopped talking, closing her eyes and focusing all her power into the shield. Beads of sweat began to mix with her tears.

“I think we need to turn back,” Flutterfree said. “We’re not that far in – let’s get that rest we didn’t get last night.”

“No. We’re close,” Jotaro said. “I can feel it.”

“Pinkie?” Flutterfree asked.

“Can’t tell you, cause I dunno,” Pinkie admitted. “Jotaro’s the one with the weird dreams.”

They hit a pillar of ice that appeared beneath them, tossing the skiff upward. Nova yelled in pain as she struggled to maintain the shield.

“We’re taxing her too much!” Flutterfree said. “Jotaro!”

“JUST A LITTLE FURTHER!” Jotaro demanded. “We are so close! I can feel it! I… I can see the Seven Cities of Gold!”

“What?” Flutterfree said, putting her functional wing over her eyes. “Where?”

Jotaro pointed straight ahead. “There! On the horizon! The golden domes!”

“I don’t see anything!”

Pinkie’s face paled. “Aaaaagh Jotaro’s under an influence of some kind too!”

“I AM NOT!” Jotaro shouted, punching Pinkie in the face with Star Platinum, pushing her into the back of the skiff.

Flutterfree shrieked. “Jotaro! What are you do-“
Without Pinkie helping anymore, another shard of ice hit the shield. This time the force was enough to make Nova lose consciousness.

_Jotaro didn’t turn back._ He would have started going faster if he could. The skiff caught fire in multiple locations while entire chunks were ripped asunder by the sudden appearance of ice – no amount of expert steering from Star Platinum could stop this.

“What the hell!” Vriska shouted, taking out her dice. “Jotaro, don’t make me do this!”

Flutterfree drew the bow of light, aiming right for Jotaro’s stomach. “Jotaro…”

“STAR PLATINUM: THE WORLD!”

Vriska and Flutterfree had already fired their weapons, but they didn’t reach him. Jotaro picked them up and used Star Platinum to hold their two heads down. He turned back to the wheel – Star Platinum could keep them busy. He just had to steer on his own.

He was certain he could do it, even though the skiff was coming apart at the seams.

The Seven Cities of Gold were so close now… Just a little longer, and he would be through this horrible world of ice and fire. He would complete his quest. He would find his goal. He would have never given up! He wouldn’t let them take this from him! He…

He felt his hand slip off the wheel.

“NANI!”

“All I have to do is look at you, big guy,” Vriska said. “And you don’t have to be very unlucky to fail miserably here.”

He ordered Star Platinum to flatten her face into the ground, but the order had barely left his thoughts when a spire of ice pierced the skiff’s engine. It exploded, sending everyone flying.

Jotaro saw the Seven Cities of Gold in his eyes, sparkling. So close he could touch them… As he sailed through the air, he reached out with Star Platinum…

…And found nothing.

Nothing at all.

Nothing…

He looked down at the ice and fire below him. He was going to die when he hit the ground. And he had injured his teammates, the ones who could have saved them.

His single-mindedness had been the death of them all.

He refused to close his eyes. He would face his death like a Joestar – struggling to the last minute. He prepared to use Star Platinum in a last-ditch effort to dig a hole in the sand for everyone. A big enough series of punches… A time stop would have been helpful, but he already used that…

“Dammit,” he muttered.

And then Nova woke up. In an instant, she was able to teleport them several hundred yards higher into the air.
“WHAT GOOD IS THIS GOING TO DO?!” Vriska shouted.

“I… I need power to perform a long-range teleport!” Nova shouted. “Any ideas!?”

Vriska took out a single one of her dice. “You better re-enchant this later.”

“Got it!” Nova said, draining the magical eight-sided polyhedron of all its power, giving her enough magic to perform the spell she needed. She lit her horn, performed a quick calculation, and teleported them out of the desert.

Something went wrong with the spell – all five of them teleported, yes, but by the time they arrived at the edge of the desert of ice and fire, it was night.

All five of them faceplanted in the decidedly not on fire or frozen sands at the edge of the desert.

“Ow…” Flutterfree muttered, wincing at the pain running through her wing.

“Everyone okay…?” Nova called, her voice sounding hollow.

“…Yeah…” Pinkie muttered.

“Here,” Vriska called, holding her head.

Jotaro rammed his fist into the ground. “DAMMIT!” Tears from stress dropped from his face. “DAMMIT!” He pulled back his fist and put as much power into it as he could, punching the ground with Star Platinum’s help. “ORA!!!!”

Pinkie walked up to him. “Hey, hey, Jotar-”

“Don’t you dare say it wasn’t my fault,” Jotaro said. “Don’t. You. Dare.”

Pinkie shut right up.

Jotaro sat down, back to them. None of the other four knew what to say – if anything could be said to the giant of a man.

The giant of a man who had just failed in more ways than one.

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The Wreckers

“All I know is that memory can be too much to carry.”

The only sound was the crackling of a campfire.

The five of them sat equidistant around the light, using it as their only source of warmth. There wasn’t a smile on any of their faces. They hardly even blinked or moved at all. Flutterfree had her head down in prayer.

Eventually, Pinkie sighed. “All right… this sucks.”

Vriska snorted. “No, really?”

Pinkie allowed herself to smile softly. “Yeah, it really really sucks. Superduperamazinglameopoosuck! The worst of sucks. Or at least pretty close to it.”
“It is pretty bad,” Flutterfree said.

“But you know what?” Pinkie asked.

“What?” Vriska asked, looking bored with this whole thing.

“We’re still together,” Pinkie asserted. “Despite all the mistakes, all the pain, and all the suffering we’ve endured for the past few days – we’re still together. And we will work through this. We are a team.”

“Yeah, of course we are,” Vriska muttered. “And we all know that you’re the one who knows everything little miss Supreme Leader. How we must revere you.”

Pinkie was visibly hurt by this. “…Vriska, you know what I mean. Despite what you three have done, we’re still going t-”

“Hold up,” Nova said. “You’re lumping the three of us together? Pinkie! Vriska wasn’t under some outside influence!”

“We don’t know that,” Vriska retorted. “For all I know I was being manipulated as well. And you can’t let Jotaro off the hook either, we can’t be sure about what happened to him!”

“The two of us were acting completely out of character!” Nova blurted. “You? What you did was totally you!”

“Was it really that much of an exaggeration!?” Vriska blurted. “You, getting fixated on a mare and forgetting everything else. You too, big guy. Taking yourself too seriously and getting far too fucking into what you’re doing. You two aren’t fucking innocent!”

“At least you can just move on!” Nova shouted. “I still think about her just the way I did before! Exactly the same way!”

“Girls…” Flutterfree said, holding up her good wing.

“That’s just your weakness, bitch,” Vriska pointed at Nova. “Just overwrite your mind or something. You can do that, right?”

“I’m not going to!”

“Why not? You make yourself go to sleep all the time!”

“That’s different!”

“How exactly is it!?”

“GIRLS!” Flutterfree shouted.

They purposefully ignored her. Nova lit her horn. “Listen to me, Vriska. I have problems. I’m a bit controlling, a bit too angry, but at least I know that I’m not the best pony in existence. At least I listen!”

“And are a traitor!”

“Better than mutiny!”

“The Supreme Leader is not going to be right all the fucking time!”
“Who the hell cares!?”

Pinkie hit a gong. “STOP IT! This is not us! We are not friends who are at each other’s throats! We stand together, strong, and we hold each other up! We do no-”

“Fuck. You,” Vriska said, poking Pinkie’s nose. “You don’t get to tell me what I am.”

“I-”

Vriska had already turned to Flutterfree. “Fuck you too, meddler. Oh! Hey, big guy! FUCK YOU. Maybe use that PhD brain of yours for once, hrm?”

Vriska turned to Nova. “And fuck you in particular. Hope you fucking enjoyed yourself, traitor.”

Nova growled. “Fuck you.”

Vriska laughed. “OH BOY! THERE IT IS! It finally came out of her mouth!” She dropped the faux grin and glared. “With that victory I take my leave of you fucking losers.”

“Vrisk-” Pinkie began.

Vriska roundhouse kicked Pinkie in the face, sending her back. “I said I’m done here.” She changed into her god-tier outfit, flapped her wings, and flew away at top speed.

“Celestia…” Flutterfree shook her head, checking on Pinkie. “You okay?”

“…Physically,”

“Okay… I’m going after her.”

“Flutterfree, you’re injure-”

“It’s sprained, not broken,” Flutterfree said, removing the wrap. “I can push through it. This is important.” She spread her wings, winced, but managed to take off after Vriska.

Pinkie sighed. “Well… Great. Don’t worry guys! Everything wi-”

“Pinkie, stop,” Nova said, tears in her eyes. “Just stop.”

“Bu-”

“I DON’T WANT TO HEAR THAT EVERYTHING’S GOING TO BE OKAY RIGHT NOW!” she screamed. “IT MAKES THINGS WORSE, PINKIE! IT MAKES THINGS WORSE!”

“I…”

“All I hear is ‘it’s going to be better’ and ‘it’s going to be fine’ and all it does is make me feel horrible for not getting over this! For… For…” Tears dripped down her face. “I can’t get her out of my head, Pinkie! I can’t! I’m actually considering wiping my own head just so I can be better for you all sooner! But it’s… No! I can’t!”

Pinkie reached a hoof out to her. “Nova…”

“DON’T TOUCH ME!” Nova shrieked. “Why can’t you just let me wallow in my broken heart in peace!?”
“N-”

“AUGH!” Nova screamed, teleporting somewhere random.

Pinkie sighed, sitting down, staring at the fire. “…Jotaro, am I really that wrong?”

Jotaro said nothing.

“I mean, I know things are going to be fine… But is it wrong to say that? Is hope not always what people need? I… I don’t know. Hope always seems good, right? But Nova… She doesn’t have hope. She just has despondence. Vriska just has anger. It’s all a horrible, horrible mess. I try to be forward now with everything I know, so people can have the same security I do about things. I always thought ‘if only they knew’ they’d be able to go through life more carefree… with more certainty.”

She took a breath. “Should I start hiding things again? Should I just lie and remove this smile that comes from knowing the result? …Do I even really know the result? I know we, as friends, will be fine, but I don’t know how we get there. Maybe the journey is the most important part, and I’m just skipping over it. I don’t rea-”

“SHUT THE HELL UP YOU DUMB BITCH!”

Pinkie stared at Jotaro, unable to speak.

And then she was just gone. She didn’t even bother to jump behind an object to vanish – she was just there one moment and gone the next.

A minute later, Jotaro stood up, hand to his face. He shook his head, disappointed in his own response. He turned around, put his hands in his pockets, and walked in a random direction.

Then fire burned alone in the night, warming nobody.

It was a truly pointless fire, its reason for existence removed. Pathetic. Useless.

But it was still bright.

~~~

Dammit, Vriska thought. I’m crying.

The cobalt-tinged tears dropped to the sands below. She couldn’t ignore them.

I need to get out of here. Find enough luck to slip away and never return.

What about Aradia?

Fuck Aradia and her connection to specific worlds. You’re never supposed to stay in one place too long.

But what about home?

Home…

She found herself thinking of home. Of her friends… They hadn’t seen her for centuries. Some of them would have aged, regardless of any of the time shenanigans. The others… would they even be recognizable as who they had been? She’d certainly changed. And she was stubborn as all hell. They
probably had huge families by now…

Why did she care about that? Trolls didn’t get families. …But she’d seen them. Almost every other race had them. Why was she thinking about this now of all times? Where did these feelings come from? Just…

She grabbed her head and stopped flying, opting just to hover. She hit herself in the head. “Get a hold of yourself, Vriska. Just… just keep flying. You’ll find people eventually. And then you can get out of here.”

*You don’t want to get out of here.*

“Shut up,” she told herself.

_You’re just running from your problems._

“I don’t need to listen to you.”

_That’s your problem._

Vriska shook her head. She’d gone hundreds of years relying on herself, she wasn’t about to change now.

She saw Flutterfree pull up alongside her, wincing with the strain on her wing. The pegasus didn’t say anything.

“Fuck off,” Vriska muttered.

Flutterfree didn’t respond, she instead kept flying alongside Vriska, fixing her with a concerned gaze.

“Would you stop it with that?”

Flutterfree didn’t stop looking at her.

Vriska tried to ignore the concerned, deep gaze of Flutterfree. She failed miserably. Vriska twitched.

“What’s with you?”

Flutterfree gave no response.

“I asked a question!” Vriska said, coming to a halt. “Why are you so gogdammed perfect?”

Flutterfree seemed slightly confused by this.

“Every last one of us has messed up – except you. You, who’s so understanding, so empathetic, so kind, so intelligent, so steadfast, and so fucking perfect. What’s with you!?”

Flutterfree finally spoke. “Vriska… I’m not perfect.”

“Oh, right, I forgot about your flaw: caring too much and not willing to take the difficult steps. OH WAIT! You’ve mostly fixed that! I’ve seen the stuff you can do with that bow and those teeth of yours when you feel you need to!”

“Vriska…”

“Tell me your flaw, Flutterfree. Come on. I want to see where you struggle, cause I’m not seeing it.”
Flutterfree shook her head. “I’m indecisive, I’m inwardly judgmental, I’m dogmatic, I’m controllin-”

Vriska punched her. “What I hear are just *nitpicks* Flutterfree! *Just nitpicks!* I don’t see any flaw in there that’s going to result in your downfall. ALL OF THOSE I’VE SEEN YOU MITIGATE!”

Flutterfree wiped her blood from her nose. “Vriska, I struggle all day every day with the things we’ve done. I question every action I’ve taken.”

“And that’s where your fucking religion comes in,” Vriska growled. “Oh hey, I don’t have to let those things get me down, because I’m forgiven! Ah, isn’t grace *great*!? I don’t know if I’ve done good, but man isn’t it *great* that God will forgive everything for me? Isn’t it *nice*?”

“Vriska…”

“Why don’t you go pray right now that you are given the strength to get through to me? Oh wait, I bet you are! In the back of your head you’re sending off little thoughts!” She touched Flutterfree’s mind. “Oh look at that I’m *fucking* right. ‘Lord, please help me calm Vriska down. Lord, help me keep my anger under control. Lord, Lord, Lord. BLAH BLA-”

Flutterfree punched Vriska.

“There it is…” Vriska said, satisfied.

“It’s what you wanted,” Flutterfree said, expression clouded.

Vriska’s grin vanished. “Even that… *Even* that was part of *your stupid perfect self*?”

“I AM NOT PERFECT!”

“WELL YOU’RE DOING A HELL OF A LOT BETTER THAN THE REST OF US!” Vriska said, lashing out with her sword.

Flutterfree dodged, drawing her Bow of Light. She wrapped Lolo around Vriska’s arms, the weak vines providing just enough strain to keep her still for a second. The arrow pierced Vriska’s side, forcing cobalt blood to pour from the wound.

“AUGH! FUCK!”

Flutterfree *Stared* at her, face that of intense rage. “You want to know what my *flaw* is, Vriska? Every single day, day in and day out, I have to keep *this* under control. My *anger*. It’s been with me my *entire life*. A deep, burning inner fire that wants to make everyone *pay* for what they’ve done to me. I *know* it’s wrong. It’s always wrong. But sometimes I just can’t keep it back anymore!” She twisted in the air, kicking Vriska right between the horns. Vriska tumbled to the ground, landing painfully in the sand.

Flutterflee aimed her bow down at Vriska. “And right now I’m pretty tired of keeping it held back for your *ungrateful, antagonistic* sake.”

Vriska roared, meeting Flutterfree’s Stare with her own gaze. She drained Flutterfree’s luck, forcing the arrow to fly wild. Vriska continued meeting Flutterfree’s gaze, draining her.

Flutterfree’s body shook. She pushed her hooves over her heart, the rest of her body twitching unnaturally. She dropped out of the sky.

Vriska’s rage vanished. *Oh no.* She caught Flutterfree in her arms.
Her heart wasn’t beating.

Vriska laid Flutterfree on the sand, spreading her wings and legs out to allow easy access to the chest — CPR worked on ponies, right? Right?

Vriska placed her hands on Flutterfree’s ribcage and started pumping. “Come on come on…” She forced air down Flutterfree’s mouth and kept pumping. “Come on come on, let me spend that luck, come on…”

Nothing seemed to be happening.

“Wake the fuck up!” Vriska shouted. She kept pumping, twisting her body around so her leg was in front of Flutterfree’s mouth. She pressed the limb into Flutterfree’s jaw and forced her to bite down.

The resulting sucking sensation was truly disturbing, not to mention more painful than taking a Star Platinum punch to the face. She ground her teeth and let out a muffled yell, returning to pumping Flutterfree’s chest.

There it was. A heartbeat.

Vriska let out a sigh of relief. Not two seconds later, Flutterfree spat Vriska’s leg out. “What th… Ow. Oooooow…”

Vriska found that she couldn’t stand on her leg at the moment. “H… Hey. I’m so sorry, Flutterfree, I should have listened to you… Should have let you talk…”

“I shouldn’t have exploded,” Flutterfree muttered. “And… do you taste like blueberries?!”

“Maybe?”

“Ugh… Blueberries…” Flutterfree couldn’t help but laugh. “Blueberries…”

“Heh.”

“We sure are lucky your blood was compatible.”

“Yeah. Lucky.” Vriska shook her head. “Neither of us should try anything particularly death-defying for the next little while. Or even particularly dangerous.”

“I have several broken ribs right now, not doing anything crazy…”

“Yeah, properly done CPR will do that to you. …If it’s supposed to work on ponies. Really not sure.”

“It does,” Flutterfree said. “I had to resuscitate Renee once. It can be done, but it definitely wasn’t the way you just did it. Even if we’re more flexible than Earth horses, it’s still better to resuscitate us laying on our sides rather than our backs.”

“Good to know.”

“Yeah…” She tried to stand up and winced. “Yep. Broken ribs. Gonna need a hospital or someone to feed off of… I’d prefer hospital.”

“I gotcha,” Vriska said, helping her up. “At least your legs aren’t broken. You’ll be able to walk, just… wait, you know all this.”
“Yeah,” Flutterfree said, carefully stretching out her legs. “It’s the breathing that’s going to be painful… And your leg.”

Vriska drew her sword and stuck it to the side of her drained leg as a brace. “I can manage.”

Flutterfree smiled. “You are quite the trooper.”

“I’ve been killed more times than Daniel, you learn to just accept pain. …Never quite to the inhuman level Jotaro can, though… He’s a freak.”

Flutterfree chuckled – then let out a small wince of pain from the motion of her ribs. “…I wonder if I’ll become the next Daniel. I do seem to be in the habit of getting injured and needing saving.”

“You are the frailest.”

“And I’m perfectly fine with that.” She grunted, stretching out her wings. “We should head back to the camp, make a plan with the others.”

“Gotta,” Vriska said. The two of them began to limp back the way they had flown.

A few minutes later, Vriska sighed. “You do appear perfect, you know that? You make life look so easy.”

Flutterfree held her head high. “I… I know. I was born naturally kind and empathetic, I worked through my natural fear of others, and this multiverse has cured me of my literal weakness. Those were always my biggest problems. But… Vriska, here’s a little fact about life.”

“This should be good.”

“The further you get along, the clearer you see.”

“Uh…”

“Imagine yourself like a dirty room. You see some things wrong with you – big things – and you focus on those, cleaning them up and making them presentable if they’re too strong to remove. But as time goes on, the light gets brighter, and you see the things you thought were clean really weren’t. Then you scrub those and think they’re taken care of, but the old spots flare up, and new spots begin to show themselves and th- ow.” She grabbed her chest. “…Got too animated there.”

“I get the point,” Vriska said. “Course, still makes me seem immature. I’m over ten times older than you and it seems like you’ve got it figured out better than I do.”

“You are more confident than I am,” Flutterfree pointed out.

“And look where that confidence has gotten us.”

“Look at all the pickles my kindness has stuck us in on the flipside,” Flutterfree pointed out. “We’re just people.”

“And all people need to learn things.”

Flutterfree smiled. “Yeah. Nobody’s got it right.”

Vriska looked at the ground. “Uuuuuugh… But I don’t like orders…”

“Nobody does. Just like I needed to learn assertiveness, you need to learn submissiveness.”
Flutterfree looked at the night sky. “It’s like a paradox.”

“I really want to be upset with you for saying that but then I remember that I’ve broken your ribs.”

“Mmmm…” Flutterfree said, trying hard not to chuckle, for the motion was the most painful thing she could do right now aside from beating her chest.

“Let’s just get back to camp.” Vriska sighed. “I’m going to be making a lot of apologies…”

“I’ll be there with you,” Flutterfree promised her. “You won’t have to stand alone.”

“Thanks.”

~~~

Nova had teleported to a new piece of scenery – a grid of metal. Each square was large enough to hold a dozen ponies, but aside from the simple grooves separating each individual square, the place was barren.

As she ran across the squares, her hooves hit the ground with resounding CLANGs, indicating that the area beneath her was hollow.

She didn’t register this fact, however – her mind was too much of a swirl of emotions. Intermingled with her very conflicting emotions about Icon, she was playing the things she had said to Pinkie over and over again in her mind, with the things she’d said to Vriska taking a backseat.

She was rotten, wasn’t she?

Those things she had said…

She had definitely meant them and felt like she needed to say them at the time, but the moment she had teleported away – regret. Deep, pounding regret that screamed inside her skull. Screamed, demanding to be set right.

It wasn’t the only screaming voice. There was the screaming voice of her fear, telling her to run away. And then there was the screaming voice of her heart itself that just screamed with no end goal in mind, only exacerbating her other emotions.

She ran… ran… ran…

Eventually her head began to clear, the emotions burning themselves out, becoming numb. The fear went first and the anger next, leaving only the guilt and the screaming heart itself, and she could sense those fading from overuse.

She formed a coherent thought.

I need to go back.

She began to slow her gallop, giving herself a moment to breathe.

I need to go back. I need to apologize. We don’t yell at each other to tell each other we’re wrong… we talk through it unless there’s an emergency.

We failed at talking through it back there. All of us.

I wasn’t even trying.
She wiped her face, preparing to teleport back. She needed someone to talk to. One on one. Pinkie would be willing. Flutterfree, if she was back by now. Nova knew she couldn’t deal with this on her own, not right now.

*Icon... Why did your existence have to be so cruel? Why d-*

The square of metal she was walking over gave way, crumbling inward. With a scream, she was deposited into a featureless cubical box, each face the same size as the square on the surface.

Nova wailed aloud. “Why does the multiverse have to be so cruel!??” She stamped the ground in rage.

To her surprise, the metal peeled back, revealing a small cave.

Without really thinking, she pounded more, widening the gap until she could fit her head through it. The ‘cave’ was really just a pocket of air beneath the ground, probably sealed whenever the metallic grid was built over top of it.

The cavern contained a human skeleton and a purple crystal near the skeleton’s foot. The skeleton itself was heavily augmented with technology, suggesting that it had once been a cyborg – possibly even completely artificial. But Nova knew there was no hope of reactivation – there was too much damage to the skull and chest areas and it was extremely old.

Nova stared blankly at the death – it had been a common sight in her journeys, but not exactly one she wanted to see right now. Except… Something about this skeleton struck her. She felt as if everything was different now, and she didn’t know why.

“Hello,” the purple crystal said with a robotic voice.

Nova stared at it. “Uh… Hi. Wait… Talking crystal?”

“Yes. Do you know what I am?”

Nova processed for a moment – talking robotic crystal, human skeleton, high level of magic... “Are you… one of the TSAB’s devices!?”

“Yes. It is good to hear that we are still around.”

“Yeah, you’re the number two Class 2 civilization these days,” Nova said. “I’m Nova.”

“Blitz Caliber,” the magical device offered.

“How long have you been down here?”

“Unknown. I was deactivated in order to conserve power. Your presence reactivated me. Evidence suggests hundreds of years.”

“I’m… Sorry.”

“My tragedy happened long ago. Yours happened more recently.”

Nova shook her head. “No reason for me to be inconsiderate.”

“But you are here now, we should focus on you. Mitigate the damage Zhui does to those who visit.”

Nova stared at the crystal. “…What happened to you?”
“A TSAB exploration ship entered dimensional proximity with Zhui and sent a team to explore and make contact. My master and I were on that team. We soon learned of a being called the Watchmaker and were determined to speak with him. The resulting series of events was horrendous for all of us, but we were made stronger because of it. We found the Watchmaker. We fell in battle. My master was the one the Watchmaker chose to be an example. Our ship and the rest of our team was forced to evacuate.”

“…That’s horrible,” Nova said. “…We’re planning on facing the Watchmaker as well.”

“His capabilities are likely beyond you,” Blitz Caliber said. “He is not as all-powerful as the natives claim he is, but he has immeasurable control over the universe itself. Control we were unaware of until facing him.”

“So, use dimensional effects…” Nova said, pondering.

“Perhaps. But there is another force he has control over. Are you aware of ka?”

Nova paled. “…I know what it is.”

“The Watchmaker’s Clockwork Angels are tools designed to shape ka. We did not figure this out until he told us directly. We also figured out that, despite never accepting what an Angel said, we had been subject to it the entire time.”

Nova began to tremble.

“Angels Influence the flow of ka around every individual to the whims of the Watchmaker. This can be done with something as simple as a line of sight. After that, the target becomes a part of his plan.”

“How extensive is his plan?” Nova asked.

“Unknown. It certainly isn’t perfect, since it is known the Watchmaker can be surprised, but I believe that is because ka is naturally unpredictable. Ask it to make someone a hero and it will, but the journey to that point is a mixture. It is suspected every individual in this universe has been affected by this.”

“I was cursed…” Nova said, anger taking over her expressions. “I was used…”

“All members of our team suffered emotional trauma,” Blitz Caliber confirmed. “These traumas were definitely part of the plan until the moment of the final confrontation.”

Nova was no longer in a depressed spiral – like a switch, all that energy had been pushed toward anger. “He made this happen… He made me feel this… He is going to pay.” Nova lifted Blitz Caliber up with her telekinesis. “I’ll return you to the TSAB, Blitz. But would you like to get some revenge on the Watchmaker first?”

“I would love to.”

“Thanks.” Nova teleported onto the surface, Blitz Caliber in her telekinesis. “How do you suggest we do this?”

“Get the remains of an Angel. They will be in any settlement. I see lights from one over there.”

“Then that’s where we’re going,” Nova said. “We’re going to stop the Watchmaker from controlling these people’s lives.”
“Stand by ready.”

“What?”

“I’m preparing to affix myself to you temporarily.”

“Oh. Swee-”

In an instant, Nova’s back hooves were encased in mechanical roller-boots, and a metallic fist had been created around one of her front hooves. A jacket made of protective magical fields appeared around her, waving in the wind.

Blitz Caliber took a position in one of the roller boots. “Ready.”

Nova took off toward the light of the town, rolling at high speeds across the metal planes.

~~~

Jotaro found himself walking through a town. The town was made entirely of large lobster shells fashioned into small houses, presumably from creatures fished out of the orange ocean. As had come to be expected from Zhui settlements, there were clocks everywhere.

The dirt roads were abandoned for the most part – which made sense, considering it was night. He was able to walk through the town unnoticed, right to a dock. Huge, shell-craft ships were docked, rocking softly in the waves. Jotaro didn’t stop moving to admire them. He walked until he couldn’t walk any further, stopping at the edge of the dock.

The moon was on the water, reflecting itself in the orange ripples. Dark clouds were forming over it, taking its light away from the world.

Jotaro sighed. They were probably looking for him by now. Flutterfree would have calmed Vriska down one way or another, Nova would have realized she needed to come back on her own, and Pinkie would just always be back. She had amazing bounce back most of the time.

Should he go back? Probably.

He didn’t though. He just stood at the edge of the dock, watching the clouds cover the moon over time.

He had failed. It wasn’t even in a fight – he could accept failure in a fight. It just meant he needed to get stronger, or smarter. But that wasn’t what happened. He had failed to see something about himself.

Was he going crazy or was he influenced by some outer force?

He knew that the latter was true. The former might not have been completely baseless, though…

The Seven Cities of Gold no longer called to him. He had realized what he was doing and purged them from his mind – it had been as simple as telling them no. That wasn’t anything like Nova’s lingering issue, or Vriska’s personality defect.

In a way, he got off easy.

But why was he standing here?

“You look lost, stranger,” an old man said, walking up next to him.
“Good grief…” Jotaro said, adjusting his hat.

“Not a talker, eh? That’s fine,” the old man said, hands in his pockets much like Jotaro himself. “Never was much for shootin’ the breeze myself.”

There was silence as the two men watched the clouds form.

“Mighty storm a comin’,” the old man eventually said. “One o’ those thunderhead creatures, I reckon.”

“Thunderhead creatures?”

“Storms over the orange sea gain a murderous mind of their own. It’ll probably come here and attack the town.”

“What will you do?”

“Our heroes will fight it back, as usual, but not before it does a lot of damage. We’ll enter a phase of rebuildin’ after that, and go back to our lives.”

Jotaro curled his fist. “Why not go out there and face it?”

“That’s the way the Angels set it up.”

“Time for a change, then,” Jotaro said, flexing his arms. “I’ll take care of this storm for you, old man.”

“Good luck,” the old man said. “You’ll need it.”

Jotaro summoned Star Platinum and dove into the water, using the Stand’s strength to bolt through the water like a torpedo. He saw the currents of water churning beneath the clouds – forming a large creature of lightning and clouds with two slits of electric blue the size of ocean liners. *Eyes.* Nothing he couldn’t handle.

Star Platinum threw Jotaro out of the water, sending him flying right for the center of the churning thunderhead. The creature *sparkled*, preparing a bolt of electricity for Jotaro.

“STAR PLATINUM: THE WORLD!” Time froze but Jotaro kept sailing through the air. Star Platinum’s fists flew by hundreds of times every second, tearing the clouds of the thunderhead asunder with unparalleled force and speed.

“ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA!”

Jotaro and Star Platinum popped out the other side before time resumed. A hole had been bored through the cloudy body of the thunderhead. It screeched in pain. *Gotcha.*

A lightning bolt shot out of the back of the thunderhead, hitting Jotaro head on.

“NANI!?” *It had been aiming that attack forward, it couldn’t possibly adjust that fast… Wait — it’s an electric-based attack. It would seek the closest point of discharge. I’m closer than the ocean. Shit.*

Jotaro fell into the water – and yet, despite just having been hit by lightning, he wasn’t done. He leaped out, Star Platinum’s fists flying again. They were able to take another lightning bolt at full
force, punching through the thunderhead again.

It was the third strike when Jotaro’s left arm stopped working.

_Dammit._

He wouldn’t stop though. He was Jotaro Kujo. He would take this creature out – it wouldn’t even be that difficult. He needed to take it out from the bottom, the point where it was rising – lightning would dissipate in the water. It would still hurt, definitely, but the power would not be as much as a direct hit. And he could work through that.

After all, it was only _his_ arm that wasn’t working. Star Platinum was immune to the bolts since they didn’t come from something spiritual or overly magical. Jotaro just had to make maximum use of his Stand…

A shard of ice embedded itself in the shoulder of the arm that wasn’t disabled. Jotaro realized with no small amount of fear that the thunderhead was now _hailing_ on him. He dove under the water to protect himself, formulating another plan.

The seeds of self-doubt had begun to crawl into his mind again. What if he couldn’t win this? What if he would have to resort to the Joestar secret technique…?

_Running away?

He hadn’t run away from a fight in so long…

He would try a little longer – he was a _Joestar_, after all – but he kept the idea of fleeing in the back of his mind.

He poked his head out of the water and realized he would never have to make the decision – because he was about to get help.

A blue road of magical energy had appeared in the sky, a unicorn in roller boots at the front of it. _Nova._

“How do I control this thing!?” Nova blurted.

“I can do all of that. Focus on the encounter,” a synthetic voice responded.

“Blitz Caliber, I am focusing on not dropping this Angel into the ocean!” Nova said, gesturing at the broken form of an Angel she had held in her telekinesis.

“Let Jotaro grab it.”

“I’VE GOT IT!” Jotaro shouted, kicking toward the area Nova was flying over. It was easy to grab the Angel out of the air with Star Platinum.

“Can you time stop?” Nova shouted as she passed by.

Jotaro gave her a thumbs up.

“Good!” Nova said, catching a bolt of lightning with her magic shield. “Do it! I’m ready!”


Time froze – but Nova had a bubble of time in place around herself, ensuring she would still be able
to move. She jumped off the magic road Blitz Caliber was generating, twirling in the air.

“Here goes nothing…” Nova said. She created a spell with her horn – a simple spell designed to force water to condense. She flooded the spell into Blitz Caliber for the magical machine to do what it did best – amplify and fine-tune the spells of its master. A series of complex magical circles appeared behind Nova in a mixture of blue and pink colors. Numerous magical rings appeared in front of her.

“SPECIFIC ATTACK WITHOUT A NAME!” Nova shouted, unleashing a beam of striped magic large enough to surround the entire Thunderhead. The beam passed through, and the time stop ended.

The thunderhead turned to water, splashing down onto the ocean rather unceremoniously.

“WOO-HOO!” Nova shouted, floating down to Jotaro without need for a telekinetic aura. “WE DID IT! And I saved you from suffering more.”

Jotaro held the Angel above the water and raised an eyebrow.

“You were probably going to have to admit your own inadequacies and flee or something,” Nova said, her barrier jacket flapping in the wind. “All part of the Watchmaker’s plan… Until this moment.” She pointed at the broken Angel. “We need to get that back to the others.”

Jotaro nodded, preparing to swim back to the town with the power of Star Platinum.

“Let’s teleport instead, okay? The people of that town have already declared war on me for appearing out of nowhere and punching a hole in their Angel,” Nova said, rubbing the back of her head.

Jotaro gestured towards her – she should teleport them back.

“Oh. Right.”

~~~

Headlong Flight

“I don’t regret it, I never forget it, I wouldn’t trade tomorrow for today.”

Vriska and Flutterfree returned to camp to find it empty.

“Uh…” Vriska shook her head. “Okay, wasn’t expecting this. Yeesh, guess I set them off…”

“I think everyone set each other off,” Flutterfree said. She sighed. “Normally I’d say we find their magic signatures or something, but this place doesn’t like that…”

“We should probably call Renee,” Vriska said. “Tell her what’s up.”

“Do you want to?”

“No.”

“Then I can do it.”

“You don’t want to either.”
“True…” Flutterfree shook her head. “It finally happened. We got driven apart.”

“Well, we are back. We’re the first ones who left, first ones who got back.”

Flutterfree closed her eyes, not responding to Vriska. She knew this meant Flutterfree was having a moment of prayer, so she left the pegasus alone to her thoughts.

She took out her phone, looking at the quick-dial for Renee. She hovered a finger over it, gulping. She wished something, *anything* would happen that would keep her from having to make this call.

Nova and Jotaro appeared in a puff of magic. “And we’re back!” Nova said. “A- where’s Pinkie?”

Vriska let out a sigh of relief and put her phone away. “I don’t know. We just got back. Also, I guess you’re a magical girl now.”

“What? …Nevermind. You two look like you had a rough time.”

“We fought each other. Seriously,” Flutterfree said. “…It seemed like it was what we needed, though.”

“Amazing how almost killing each other does that,” Vriska said, looking down at her leg. It worked now, but it wasn’t doing her any favors with the pain it was shooting through her body.

“I got to sidestep our challenge,” Nova said, throwing the Angel on the ground. “I’ve found something out.” She held up her back hoof, showing them the crystal. “This is Blitz Caliber, a device from the TSAB, back when a team of theirs came through this area. They tried to do what we were doing now. But when they faced the Watchmaker, they had no idea what he was capable of until he explained it to them, and by then it was too late. One of their team fell as an example, forcing the TSAB to withdraw.”

Vriska blinked. “Fuck, if the TSAB had problems…”

“But I know what they didn’t know,” Nova said. “I know that *none of us were free of the Watchmaker’s plan the moment we entered this world.*”

“W-what!” Flutterfree blurted.

“W-what!” Flutterfree blurted.

“My curse, the situation that led to Vriska’s disobedience, the drive within Jotaro… Possibly even the Anarchist himself! All of it was but part of the Watchmaker’s plan.” She gestured at the Angel’s body. “These are his tools, what he uses to manipulate *ka* itself to keep the universe under his control.”

Vriska stared at Nova. “No way… Ka manipulation is an exceptionally rare technology…”

“I know, Blitz Caliber told me,” Nova said. “I was also told about this.” She popped the skull of the Angel open, revealing a glowing seven-petal flower that shone with an eerie glow.

“MOTHER OF JEGUS!” Vriska blurted, taking a few steps back. “How the fuck…? Nobody gets away with stealing Flower technology! *Not even me!*”

“He didn’t steal it,” Nova said. “He *found* it, according to Blitz Caliber. Then he copied it a million times.”

“Fuck…” Vriska said, sitting down. “I… This changes everything. We’re but pawns in this Watchmaker’s game… It all makes so much sense…”
“All the adventurers… All the bizarre locations… All the dependency… Everything…” Flutterfree stared into the distance.

“We’ve been toys,” Jotaro said.

“I was only able to stop it by luck,” Nova said. “I know I wasn’t supposed to find Blitz Caliber.”

Blitz Caliber piped up. “We did not tell the Watchmaker much about what we were. I do not think he realized I am an advanced AI, so he just left me.”

“And some sort of higher ka took over,” Vriska finished. “So… What are we going to do with this flower that can change ka?”

“Use it against the Watchmaker,” Nova declared. “We are going to paint him as the villain the moment we find him.”

“You sure you know how to use that thing?”

“No,” Nova admitted. “But it’s the only idea I’ve got, because the TSAB tried both brute force and diplomacy when they were here last.”

“We also have Pinkie,” Jotaro said. “That provides another edge.”

“If Pinkie would show up again…” Flutterfree said, looking into the distance. “She might not, you know.”

“We need to give her time,” Nova said. “I have the coordinates of the ‘Doorway to Heaven’ courtesy of Blitz Caliber. I can teleport us there at any time if the Watchmaker decides to make a move on us. I say we wait until morning for her.”

“Right,” Vriska said.

“Until then… we talk,” Flutterfree said, looking at the three of them. “We all talk.”

Jotaro and Vriska tensed. Nova sighed. “Yeah, I suppose we do need to do that… Even if it is part of the plan, it’s still… you know.”

Flutterfree nodded, taking in a breath. A soft breeze blew through the air, and the sound of a reverberating guitar could be heard over ticking. “Let’s not focus just on what failures we’ve experienced, everyone – let’s remember everything and see the greater picture.” She put out a hoof and began to sing.

“All the journeys
Of this great adventure
All the worlds seen along the way
We won’t forget them
For we are of them
Learning from plight
That’s what we gain this day

Some times were bleak
I wish that I could live it all again
Some fights were proud
I wish that I could live it all again.”
Vriska took over, a silly grin on her face.

“All the moments in this headlong flight
Always convinced I was right
Never wondering when
I wish that I could live it all again

I have placed all the irons into the fire
Conquered, laughed, gambled, fought, and destroyed
I learned to care, I learned to love, and learned to hear
Oh, I wish that I could live it all again

All the treasures
The pirate’s booty
It was all lost along the way
I won’t miss it
It was never the point
I wouldn’t trade yesterday for today.”

Nova went next, tears in her eyes as she did so.

“My heart was dark
I wish that I could take it all back
My mind was bright
I wish that I could take it all back

I have stood above troubled emotions
Fought my self hatred at every turn
I learned to think, I learned to watch, and learned to wait
Oh, I wish that I could live it all again.”

Jotaro, after a perceived eternity of never singing along with the rest of them, decided that now was the time to accept the allure of a heartsong. His voice was deep, brooding, and full of passion as he sang the words.

“All the moments in this headlong flight
Knowing nothing but the fight
Battles of pain
I wish that I could live it all again
Wars of triumph
I wish that I could live it all again

I had left my family in the dark
Never willing to return to them
I learned to talk, I learned to raise, and learned to laugh
Oh, I wish that I could live it all again.”

Flutterfree smiled at all three of them, tears rolling down her cheeks. She didn’t even care about the pain when she continued.
“I have fought the anger at every turn
Faced much of my inner weakness.”

The rest of them joined her for the end.

“We learned to war, and learned to live, and became friends
Oh, we wish that we could…

Oh we wish that we could live it all again!”

The music died down, but there was not a dry face in the house.

“…Pinkie’s not here yet,” Nova said after a minute.

“Then we can talk until dawn,” Flutterfree said, putting a hoof on her shoulder. “As the great friends we know we are. Together.”

They all hugged.

“Ow ow ow…” Flutterfree winced.

“Sorry,” Jotaro said.

They all laughed.

“Ow!” Flutterfree gagged.

Nova shook her head. “Okay, this just isn’t going to do. Time for magic surgery.”

“Nova!”

“Temporary, to remove the pain. When we get you to a better doctor you can get better treatment.”

“…All right.”

“You could bite my arm if you wanted,” Jotaro suggested.

“N-no I’ll take the freelance magic surgery.”

~~~

Brought Up To Believe To…

“Belief has failed me now.”

Pinkie sat alone, mane as straight as it had ever been, tears falling to the wooden floor she sat on. She sung with jagged voice while ominous strings played in the background.

“I always tried to believe
Belief has failed me now
The bright glow of optimism
Lost, leaving me to bow

Belief has failed me now
Thought goes from bad to worse
No outer knowledge consoles me
In Watchmaker’s universe

Thought goes from bad to worse
I cannot fight you
Within your plan, I am but a ripple
Unable to show what is true

I cannot fight you
Was I truly this naive?
I thought everything was with me
I always tried to believe.”

The Watchmaker spoke. “They’re coming, Pinkamena Diane Pie. They have a plan.”

“I know.”

“Good.”

~~~

Wish Them Well

“Even though you’re going through hell, just keep on going, let the demons dwell.”

The sun rose on the four friends in the desert. They had not slept – and yet they didn’t feel tired. They felt rejuvenated and ready to take on the world – the Watchmaker’s world.

“Pinkie’s not back yet,” Nova said.

“Then we go now,” Flutterfree decided. “She’s probably waiting for us. Does anyone have any last minute things they want to say?”

Vriska shrugged. “I think we got it all out.”

“Eh…” Nova said, waving the hoof that Blitz Caliber had covered in the metallic fist. “I think we all need to keep in mind that none of us are over what’s happened. I’m still churning inside, for one.”

Vriska sighed. “Fine, I admit it, I still want to punch everything.”

“You always do,” Jotaro commented.

“What about you, big guy?”

“…I dread Pinkie’s response to me.”

“She’s forgiving and you know it,” Flutterfree said. “She probably knows we worked it out anyway. And as for me… well, aside from the ribs I’m sure are stabbing into my lungs even though I can’t feel it…”

“They are not!” Nova blurted.

Flutterfree smirked. “Aside from that… I keep thinking of how I could have kept all this from happening. What I could have done. What I could have said to Pinkie, to any of you. Maybe I was under the influence as well – but we can’t know that for sure.”
Nova nodded. “There was a part of us that really did all those things.”

“We can’t ignore that,” Vriska added.

“Yare yare daze…” Jotaro said. “Quoting each other now, are we?”

Flutterfree smiled. “It means the talk stuck. That’s all I needed to see. Nova! Blitz Caliber! Take us away!”

Nova lit her horn, tapping into the location Blitz Caliber had ready for her.

They were soon in the center of the desert of ice and fire, in a section that was neither frozen nor on fire.

In the center was a structure Jotaro recognized from his dreams – the four white doorframes placed in a square, nothing in them but a soft white glow.

“The Doorway to Heaven,” Flutterfree said, the light reflecting in her eyes. “Through these doors wait the Watchmaker, the arbiter of this entire mess. Is everyone ready?”

“Ready,” Nova said.

“Ready,” Jotaro confirmed.

“Ready,” Vriska added.

“Ready,” Blitz Caliber piped in.

“Then here we go.” Flutterfree spread her wings. When she flapped, they all leaped in.

They were launched into the sky as bursts of energy – and yet they could still see. They saw the red planet consolidate into a sphere below them, the abstract scenery impossible to discern from this high up. They passed other sparks of light orbiting the planet from unknown sources, eventually reaching past the moon.

When they passed the sun – orbiting the planet much like Equis suns – they noticed something odd. At the south pole of the red planet there seemed to be a black metallic pole, out of which sprouted curved rods that affixed to the sun and moon. Gears the size of countries moved at the joints of these rods, driving the machinations of the system.

As they moved outward, they saw even more rods controlling the heavens. The ‘planets’ were affixed to smaller rods, twisting around at eccentric angles. Everything was ordered, ticking with the time of existence.

Then they passed the fixed stars. Every last one of the stars was placed in a spherical pattern around the planet of Zhui. A sphere of stars that slowly rotated with the bottommost gear of the central rod.

It was at this point they passed through the outer glass of the globe everything was contained in, coming to see the existence that contained the world they had been traveling in for the past few days. The globe of Zhui sat on a dark, wooden desk covered in clockwork gears and scribbled diagrams of complex machines. Gas lamps lit the room, revealing there to be no walls, but instead hallways made of bookshelves that seemed to go on forever.

The four of them became full size for this world, the globe of Zhui no more than a trinket to them. They saw the broken, despondent form of Pinkie first.
Flutterfree knew what she needed – she pulled the pink pony into a hug. "Shh… Pinkie, it’s okay. It’s okay. We’re here now. We’re all here now."

“But you’re all angry.”

“So?” Vriska blurted. ‘That’s never stopped us before!’

“Who cares if we’re angry?” Nova said. “Anger is part of life. We’re friends, Pinkie.”

“I… I know… But I… I couldn’t do anything,” Pinkie shook her head. “I tried to fix everything. But even with all the power I have… I didn’t see what I needed to see! I couldn’t stop what I had the power to stop! There were no rules here keeping me from acting, I was just stupid!”

Jotaro grabbed Pinkie by the shoulders. “You are one of the smartest people I know, Pinkie. Captain.”

“Me? Smart? But I-”

“No buts!” Nova blurted. “No more buts! Not the negative kind, and not the rear end kind either. Also not Vriska.”

“Hey!” Vriska blurted.

Pinkie couldn’t stop herself from giggling at this.

Flutterfree pulled Pinkie closer. “Look back at what we’ve done, Pinkie. All the moments in this headlong flight we are a part of. This endless adventure across world after world. We’ve learned so much together, fought so much together, and just did so much. Remember what all that means.”

“I… I…”

Nova cleared her throat. “Pinkie, just look. Look back at the song. Look back at all our adventures. I know you can see what you’ve already done easy. You’ve led us into so many situations with what you know, and sometimes without knowing anything. That’s not worthless.”

“Remember Jolyne’s birthday?” Jotaro asked. “She was still really young, and I had just started devoting time to my family. You got her to trust me again with a party. That, to this day, is the greatest thing you’ve done for me – and I’ve seen you do many great things for other people.”

“You are an utter badass,” Vriska told Pinkie. “You’re able to beat the bad guys up without batting an eye. You laugh and grin the entire time you’re fighting, able to bewilder even the most creative of opponents. You’re the furthest thing from powerless.”

“Pinkie, you’re amazing,” Flutterfree said. “You lived so long, alone, with the knowledge that we were in a story. I don’t think any of us could have done that. You are, by far, the strongest of all of us. I don’t know what’s happened – but I know you don’t deserve to be like this. You’ve done so much for all the worlds simply by smiling despite all the pain you know. Let us see that smile again.”

Pinkie looked at Flutterfree – and smiled softly. “Okay.” Her mane poofed up slightly - but not back to full. Even she couldn’t rocket out of the depths she had been in.

There was a mixture of hugs, hoofbumps, fistbumps, and laughs form the five friends – together once again, despite the pain. They were back, and stronger than ever.

“And now your journey comes to an end,” the Watchmaker declared. “You have traveled across the
world, faced great personal struggles, and have returned to each other right before the final confrontation with the man behind the curtain.”

The five of them turned to face the Watchmaker.

When they had been traveling around the world of Zhui, a question had been in the back of their mind. The people of Zhui held the Watchmaker in such immense reverence, even more so than his Clockwork Angels. And yet, while there had been numerous statues of the Angels, there had not been a single statue or depiction of the Watchmaker that they could see.

What they had failed to realize was that depictions of the Watchmaker were everywhere.

The Watchmaker was a clock affixed to a normal human body in place of a head. He wore simple, red robes that laced intricate designs. In contrast, the face of the Watchmaker had too many hands to make sense of, and instead of numbers there were alchemical symbols fashioned from black metal that matched the hands. The background was a pearly red color with swirls in it that resembled clouds while the edge of the face was rimmed with precious metals - silver, gold, and platinum alongside others they didn’t recognize right away – arranged into clockwork patterns. A few of the gears moved, even though there was no way they could serve any sure purpose… right?

Pinkie gulped. “I’m… I’m sorry everyone, we can’t face him.”

“Yes we can,” Nova said, pulling the flower out of her bags and activating it, showering the Watchmaker with a mysterious green cloud that dissipated quickly. “He’s now the villain of the story.”

“Ka is on your side,” the Watchmaker admitted. “But your leader is not referring to a direct conflict, which you would most definitely win at this juncture. She is referring to fighting being a poor decision.”

“Why?” Jotaro asked, ready to punch the Watchmaker’s smug face – even though there were no mouth or eyes, Jotaro could sense the smugness.

“Right now, the people of Zhui are more or less happy with what I do for them, aside from a few stragglers. If you destroy me – which you have the means to do - Zhui will become chaos.” He gestured toward the globe containing Zhui. “The mechanisms will still turn, but all the Angels will drop dead. The guidance all the people have had in their lives will fall in an instant, and it will devolve into anarchy. None of them truly know how to lead others or live lives with free will. I know for certain what will happen if I remove my hand from the world – they will take hold of the powerful magics and machines designed to be part of their adventures, and they will destroy their universe with them.”

Flutterfree spread out Lolo, forcing everything to reveal itself. She focused particularly on the Watchmaker.

Not much changed. The Globe of Zhui began to glow with a holy light, and a bunch of leaves sprouted from the Watchmaker’s ‘neck’, indicating his connection to the Angels through the Flower device – but otherwise nothing happened.

“I speak the truth,” the Watchmaker said.

“He does,” Flutterfree confirmed. “Or at least he’s able to fool Lolo into thinking so.” She recalled Lolo.

“So, what then?” Vriska asked. “We just let you keep doing what you’re doing?”
“At the moment, that is what I wish,” the Watchmaker declared. “However, have it never be said I am not a reasonable man. The final confrontation of your story will not come in the form of a fight, it will be a debate.” He pointed a finger at them. “If you can convince me what I’m doing is wrong, I will make amends. I will adjust the world over the course of the next century to be able to live on its own, and then I will remove my presence from Zhui completely. However, if you cannot convince me, I keep things the way they are, and you may decide if you have the capability as Merodi Universalis to save them from themselves.”

The Watchmaker folded his arms, leaning in towards the Primary Team of Merodi Universalis. “Prove me wrong.”

The team clearly wasn’t expecting this. Nova was the one who recovered first, taking a step forward and slamming her hoof on the desk. “It’s cruel, is what it is. It’s cruel because what you give them is fake. All the adventures, all the great lives, all the high stakes? All of it is built by you. This… fakeness.”

“They are all aware that I am the one who provides them direction. I do not keep that from them, Nova.”

“I bet you indoctrinated them before telling them.”

“Before I placed my hand on this world it was nothing but savages. The transformation of the savage world into a Clockwork Universe made it into a place of civilization and culture. I rose them up from brutal savagery into a world where lives are ordered by my plan.”

“It is your plan, isn’t it?” Vriska asked. “You didn’t discover the plan of the universe.”

“No. That is a distortion of what I actually told them. I told them that I had found a better way, and that I would always show them that better way. But their lives today are immeasurably better than where they were. I have done them a great service.”

“Maybe it is better than savagery,” Flutterfree said. “But it’s still a lie – and a lie they have no choice about. You mentioned they don’t know how to operate with free will. That’s horrible.”

“Is it? I ask you five to look back on your journey. There was a lot of pain, a lot of suffering, and a lot of interpersonal drama. Until the moment Nova found Blitz Caliber, everything was part of the plan. And yet, despite that interruption, the ‘lie’ that was my plan has moved you all closer together. You have finally experienced a big fight, one so large that it drove you apart – but one that also tied you even closer together. Regardless of the outcome of this conversation, I have strengthened the bond between you five with my plan. Tell me you are not better off for it.”

Flutterfree narrowed her eyes. “All evil is a corruption of something good. I can lie and cheat and steal and get good things for myself. That does not make it right.”

“But doing ‘evil’ things for the sake of something greater is glorious. Take, say, killing. You have killed two of my Angels since coming here. One was out of defense and partially an accident, but the other was assaulted on purpose in order to defeat me. Is that worth it? The Angels are fully sapient beings, their only limitation is that they are completely devoted to me.”

“The loss of one life for the freedom of all is worth it,” Jotaro decreed.

“Of course it is,” the Watchmaker admitted. “But I suggest that the loss of freedom is worth security, happiness, and meaning. Freedom is not the highest good in existence. It might not even make the top ten.”
“Love is the highest virtue,” Flutterfree said. “Look what you did to Nova. You corrupted love beyond measure. What you created wasn’t love, it was somebody’s dream of love, which is nowhere near as beautiful or good as the real thing. Love is slow, love is passionate, love cares deeply, love…” She turned to Jotaro.

Jotaro looked the Watchmaker right in the face. “Love… is a complex process. It involves everything. You seem to have no control, and yet you do, in a way. It sweeps you off your feet by surprise, yet it isn’t driven by physical pleasure as much as everyone seems to think it must. It is driven by connection, togetherness, and emotion. I don’t know if love at first sight exists or not, but I do know that anything that’s only been around for two days isn’t real. It’s either forced, or driven by delusion.”

“And there’s more to it,” Flutterfree said. “All kinds of love are the highest virtue – not just the romantic love. Familial love. Sibling love. Friendship. Do you know what I’m told to do after loving God? Love thy neighbor as thyself. The best and highest virtue is to treat everyone – even those who consider you enemies – with love and respect. I’m not perfect, I get angry at times. None of us have it down. But we’re doing better at it than you.”

The Watchmaker leaned back. “But I do treat them with love, you see? I felt pity on them in their savage state, and so I created a world where they would experience everything the best way for their lives. Their lives are filled with security and certainty in their fate.”

“You skipped over them experiencing love,” Pinkie retorted. “How many of them actually just ‘form’ friendships and partnerships without you getting your ka-soaked fingers involved? Almost none, right?”

The Watchmaker nodded.

“How can you do that!? Nothing they have is true!”

“The truth of existence is sickening,” the Watchmaker said. “You’ve been out there in the multiverse, you know what ka does. There is no order to it – it just does everything. The truth is we are subject to a power that will take the ideas of random people and make them reality. If it were one person, that would be one thing – at least it would be consistent. But it isn’t. It’s random. And because of that, there can be no meaning.”

“You’re wrong,” both Flutterfree and Nova said.

“Let me guess here. Flutterfree has a theological argument prepared, and Nova has the ‘morality defined by every individual is the true morality’ argument. Let me say that if this multiverse has a true God, I hate Him with every fiber in my body for letting randomness determine everything. And for you, Nova, every being is wrong. Every single one of us is broken. It’s why I’m having this argument, because there is a chance I’m wrong.”

Flutterfree sighed. “Watchmaker, He did not allow randomness to determine everything, we were the ones who wanted stories to be real. He just gave us what we wanted.”

“That’s just a theory. It sounds good to those of your church, but to those outside it means nothing. And have you not considered that your God, if he exists, is doing exactly what I am?”

“He’s not.”

“Really? Supposedly, he is a being that created all of existence, defined good and evil, and has a plan for every last thing based on his definitions.”
Flutterfree glared at the Watchmaker. “You have doubt, uncertainty, and a willingness to change. The only being that can do what you do and be in the right is not only a being who is perfectly good, but also one who has no doubt! There would be no point in having this conversation with God - He would already know He was right and know exactly how the conversation would go ahead of time. You said yourself that every being is wrong. God is the being who isn’t wrong. And that’s the only being who can have any right to fully control fate.”

“And how would anyone be able to know if God’s goodness is truly good? How is he not self-defining?”

Flutterfree bit her lip - not able to answer.

Nova ground her teeth. “Fine then. If you’re so sure everyone’s wrong, why do you think you even have the authority to run this world like a clockwork machine?”

“My plan is not always as rigid as you may think. I enchant the people of this world with ka and directions in life, and the ka takes over, weaving it into a story.”

“Even the criminals,” Pinkie pointed out. “Even the bad guys, the lost ones, the evil – you give them purpose as well?”

“Yes.”

“And the Anarchist and his followers – they were never given the option of refusal.”

“No. I merely let them think they could refuse for the optimum satisfaction they could possibly achieve in their lives.”

“You ruined their lives!”

“If I had given them a grand purpose, the Anarchist would have reasoned it out and killed himself,” the Watchmaker said. “The moment he discovers that he’s still part of my plan, he will commit suicide. This includes if you go back and offer him a way out. He is too old to recover from his entire life under the plan.”

Vriska clenched her fist. “You bastard…”

“There are always difficulties in plans. From the records on your device, Nova, I have learned that you have similar issues. The ponies of Lai and the Arcei – you let them believe lies, do you not? All for the sake of peace.”

“I’m… not happy about that, but it’s true,” Flutterfree admitted.

“You’re going to get away with it too. I can see it… even if the secrets came out now, everything is too closely knit. Your unity would stand. You lied to two sets of people about what you were doing for them and why, and all has turned out for the best. Some heroes might try to stop you.”

“Some did,” Pinkie said. “It’s just that they were on the wrong side.”

The Watchmaker nodded. “And here I am, on the wrong side in the end. The TSAB was fully under my control when they were here. But you… You broke free. And you have a chance to pass judgment.” He leaned in. “I don’t think you have it in you. The power to convince me.”

“How would you like it if you were in the Clockwork Universe?” Pinkie asked.
“I would be content and unaware of all the ‘evils’ I was subject to by being controlled. Or I would be dead and simply not care anymore.”

“Death is meaningless to you?” Vriska asked.

“Precisely. Once a person dies, they no longer have anything to be content with. All that needs to be taken care of are the people that life will affect. This is why the ‘bad guys’ are expendable – they are satisfied being evil, and when they are killed nobody really misses them.”

“There’s a contradiction here!” Nova blurted. “How can you say you care about them if you’re willing to throw them away like trash?”

“They are villains – a necessary evil. The people cannot have the contentment they desire without an enemy.”

“Who says there have to be enemies!?”

“A false heaven is a terrible world. Without large-scale struggle, there is not a feeling of grandeur, of accomplishment. The mundane life is not worth living.”

“The mundane life is definitely worth living,” Pinkie said. “I know lots of people who avoid adventures for the sake of taking care of their families.”

“Do you honestly think any of your friends live a mundane life?” the Watchmaker asked. “There is no mundane life where you tread. You cannot know what mundane life is like. The ka around you is too strong. I give others a chance to be like you.”

“What if the mundane life is better?” Flutterfree asked. “The life of immense ka brings higher stakes, higher suffering, higher death… Why is that better again?”

“A sense of meaning and purpose.”

“But that’s not the highest virtue! That’s on the same level as freedom! Love, faith, hope, peace… Those are the high virtues. Your world’s love is corrupted, their faith in you is misplaced, they do not have much reason to hope for change, and there certainly isn’t peace in your adventures. You create conflict for the sake of ‘satisfaction’.”

“It is what’s best for them.”

“How does anybody know what’s best for anybody!?” Vriska blurted. “Nobody knows what’s best for me, but guess what your little trip taught me here? Not even I know what’s best for me! Nobody knows what’s best for anybody! How can we be sure ka knows?”

The Watchmaker looked at her. “That is the first good point any of you have made. I legitimately had not considered that ka might not know what’s best for anyone. The answer to that question, unfortunately, relies on understanding what ka is. None of us truly know what it is or where it comes from, do we?”

“Something something Dark Tower,” Pinkie offered.

“Yes. But what is it? Why does it exist? What is its purpose? These are things we do not know. We just know that it is.”

“Why trust something you don’t know anything about?” Nova asked.
“Think of the alternative,” the Watchmaker said. “What else is there? Everyone’s wrong, so we must rely on some other source to determine right and wrong, to find meaning and purpose. Our fellow beings are just as corrupted as we are, God is distant, and if ka is just as wrong as we are at all times, even when guided, then what remains? Self-definition. And if that is all that remains, whatever I desire is correct enough. Not because I am right, but because no argument can stand when everything is a matter of self-definition. There can be no agreed-upon ethics.” He folded his hands. “I think you realize just how difficult convincing me will be.”

“You aren’t really open-minded,” Pinkie declared. “You just have a personal philosophy that dictates you must listen to every side of every argument. But… you’ve already decided. You will come up with just-so stories and thoughts just to ensure that your belief remains.”

“…This may be true.”

“You know that about yourself!?” Vriska blurted. “Then why the hell go through all this!”

“You may have had a really good point I couldn’t refute.”

“But even then, you wouldn’t have backed down,” Jotaro asserted. “You’re stubborn. You’ve been at this for too long.”

“You’ve defined yourself by this existence,” Flutterfree said. “You have used it to declare to yourself who you are. We aren’t just trying to convince you of what is right or wrong – we’re trying to convince you to give up your identity. Even if you listen… you won’t want to get rid of that.”

“And we have no power to force an emotional, traumatic experience, like you do,” Nova said.

“Here’s a suggestion!” Pinkie said, grinning. “Why don’t you have one of your Angels give you a purpose and a quest, see what happens? Who knows, ka might iron out those long held beliefs of yours.”

“I have been branded the villain by you,” the Watchmaker said. “I am not willing to fully embrace that role.”

Pinkie sighed. “Was worth a shot.”

“That was the best idea you’d had yet.”

Pinkie turned to her team. “This… This isn’t going to work. I think we all realize that at this point.”

The four others nodded sadly.

“…Do we think we have the right to take him away from Zhui?” Pinkie asked. “We’ll throw the world into anarchy, and we will be the only force keeping it from destroying itself. We will be trading out one master for another. And that other master might not be able to stop them. We don’t know all that much about Zhui.”

One by one, all four of them shook their heads.

Pinkie turned back to the Watchmaker, her mane dangerously close to falling completely flat. “You win,” she said, simply.

The Watchmaker nodded. “You may return to Zhui or your worlds as you wish. If you return to Zhui you will find yourselves part of the plan once more. If you leave, it will not follow you.”
“We won’t be returning to Zhui,” Pinkie said. “It’ll be too painful for us and the people who live there.”

“You are correct,” the Watchmaker said, examining the globe of Zhui. “I thank you for the conversation. It was illuminating and invigorating on the highest of levels. You have my gratitude for your participation.”

“We didn’t have much of a choice,” Vriska muttered.

“Indeed. One last thing, though.” the Watchmaker took the Flower device and crushed it. “H-hey!” Vriska blurted. “I was going to give that to Starbeat!”

“No, you are not,” the Watchmaker said, returning to his mechanical designs, ignoring them.

“Did… Did we just lose?” Nova asked, almost in disbelief.

“Yes,” Pinkie said. “We lost.”

“But… but that never happens! Even when tragedy strikes, we’re able to pull something out of it! This… there’s nothing here for us! We just… lost!”

“When you don’t get what you want, what you get instead is experience,” Flutterfree said. “We didn’t win. Nothing has changed in this world, and nothing will change. But we’ve changed. As much as I hate to admit it, the Watchmaker’s plan has taught us things about ourselves and who we are. I do not agree with the methods by any stretch of the imagination, but there are results. Let’s take them and become better people.”

Vriska kicked the ground. “Fuck. That’s really all we get to do.”

Blitz Caliber spoke up. “You also get to return me to my home.”

“At least that’s something,” Nova said, smiling at Blitz Caliber. “You’ll go home.”

“Yeah… home,” Vriska said, putting a hand to her nose and sighing. “…Let’s get out of here before I lose it and break his smug clock face. Because I’m pretty sure I’m about to lose it.”

Pinkie took out a dimensional device. “…All that we can do is wish them well.” She turned to look at the globe of Zhui, eyes sad. “I hope they find a way out on their own.”

“We all do,” Jotaro said.

Pinkie dialed another universe, and they left the Watchmaker to his schemes.

The Watchmaker did not change.

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The Garden

“The measure of a life.”

Renee set the report down on her desk and sighed. She looked up at Pinkie’s team, all sitting on the other end with expressions of defeat.

“…I think you made the right call,” Renee said. “You did everything you could with what you had,
considering everything. I could order the fleets in place around Zhui and a complex mission designed
to get the people to rebel against the Watchmaker themselves. But… Well, we would have to
micromanage, wouldn’t we? And then we wouldn’t be any better than this Watchmaker.” She sat
back. “I’m sorry you all had to experience that.”

“We wouldn’t undo it,” Flutterfree said. “Those experiences and memories are still ours.”

“I know, dears. I know.” Renee shook her head. “It’s still disheartening just to hear about it, I can’t
imagine what you must be feeling.”

Pinkie nodded. “It’s… it’s not great. But we have each other.”

Renee folded her hooves. “I’m giving you all a vacation until you decide you want to come back.
You all need it to work things out with each other and talk to your other friends, I’m sure.”

The five of them nodded.

Renee smiled. “I’ll remove all my appointments tomorrow, we could go do something. Gather the
girls and the others, go do something.”

“Thanks,” Pinkie said, “but I think we just want to do things our own way. Don’t think there’s going
to be a party right now. Maybe later.”

“I understand. If you need anything, just call.”

“Thanks, Renee.”

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There was a knock at Starbeat’s laboratory door. She walked to the door and opened it. “Ah. Vriska
said you might show up, eventually.”

Nova smiled awkwardly. “Y-yeah…”

“Come on in. Be warned, the moment you spill your heart to me, I’m going to try to tackle you to the
ground.”

“I know,” Nova said, walking into the room. “I assume Vriska told you?”

“You were hit by a Beat Curse,” Starbeat said. “Forced into a sudden relationship with an acrobat
without your knowledge.”

“And then I figured it out,” Nova added. “And I got… angry. I yelled at her, even though she was
just as torn up as I was. I regret that, and I can’t stop thinking about her. I just…” she shook her
head. “How do you deal with it?”

“I just do,” Starbeat said. “Which is to say I just live with an intense suffering within my heart. I look
at you and I don’t just see myself, I see somepony that I wanted back when I first left Equis Lovestra.
They’re dulled now after so many years, but those feelings still surge up. Virtually everyone I
encounter triggers those rising feelings – with the exception of Vriska, but you know she’s basically
cheating the system.”

Nova nodded. “So just… wait?”

“The only action you can really take is to distance yourself from the object of affection. Which
you’re already doing.” Starbeat put a hoof on Nova. “I’m sorry, there’s no advice here. The Beat
Curse is just horrible and there’s no cure, and the only preventative measure is sheer willpower.

“…I think I understand you now,” Nova said. “How much pain must you go through?”

“It’s less, now,” Starbeat admitted. “A mixture of Vriska, friends, and getting used to it has mitigated the pain. But not the passion.”

“I’m sorry for all the times I’ve dismissed you, Starbeat.”

Starbeat’s bracelet started blinking. She held herself still. “S-sorry, you should lea-

Nova kissed her, shutting her up.

“Wh…” Starbeat said a moment later after the kiss had run its full course.

“I don’t feel anything,” Nova said with a sad smile. “But… I think you deserved that. If only once, somepony meeting you halfway.”

“I… er… thanks?”

“I’ll go now. Good luck, Starbeat. Sorry we couldn’t help you.”

“It’s… okay.” Starbeat shook her head. “That was very risky you know.”


Starbeat nodded finding herself staring out a window.

There was a genuine smile on her face.

She didn’t feel like she was alone in her struggles anymore.

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Vriska and Jotaro sat on a bench in one of the Hub’s gardens.

Neither of them felt like talking, and that was exactly what they needed. A moment of silence and serenity in a garden. Jotaro because he always liked it this way, Vriska because she decided she needed a moment of doing nothing in silence to get herself to chill out a little.

The two didn’t exchange a word for over an hour.

And yet, they still understood each other and what they were doing.

Jotaro eventually stood up, letting out a contented sigh.

“Figure it out?” Vriska asked.

“Perhaps. Fighting until you can’t fight anymore…”

“…It isn’t worth it,” Vriska finished. “Too many people will miss you. You’ll hurt yourself and others. Etcetera.”

Jotaro turned to Vriska expectantly.

“Yeah. Yeah. I learned stuff too. I’m not always number one. Can we just agree to leave it at that and not talk about our feelings anymore?”
Jotaro let out a short chortle. “Yare yare daze… Of course.”

Vriska gave him the thumbs up. “Good grief… Let’s go to the arcade, big guy.” She pointed in the direction of the arcade. “Time to bond the old fashioned way – over beat ‘em up video games!”

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Pinkie and Flutterfree sat in Sugarcube Corner. Pinkie, for the first time in a few years, had created a dessert at Sugarcube Corner. Her mountain overdose sundae, the size of a pony – covered in cherries, bananas, ice cream, berries, and a truly absurd amount of candy.

Pinkie took a shovel out of her mane and scooped a large scoop into her mouth and grinned. Flutterfree just took a small spoonful, ate it, and smiled. Her bone fractures had been healed with magic, but there was a brace around her midsection because all the flesh was still sore.

“This is nice,” Flutterfree said.

“Yeah, a BLAST from the PAST!” Pinkie chuckled.

“I take it you wanted to talk about something, though?”

Pinkie nodded. “Yeah… I may be a super duper party pony with lots of friends, but I noticed something. You’re better at being a ‘heart’ than I am.”

“We all have our strengths and weaknesses, Pinkie.”

“It’s something I need to work on, though. Since I’m not keeping things secret, I can be… inconsiderate. Very inconsiderate. I assume that people will want to know what I know to help them get through things, like how I use it. But that’s not how things work. Knowing the things I know doesn’t always help. I just don’t know life without knowing them.”

“Hey, Pinkie, it’s okay. What you know helps save a lot of people.”

“But what about when we’re not in danger? The times when we’re just talking to each other. I hurt everyone.”

“And you were forgiven.”

“I still want to change though. Flutterfree… teach me. If you’re willing to go into my mind and listen to what I think all the time in this crazy sugar-filled skull of mine, I’m willing to learn what I should and should not tell.”

“I’m willing, but there are some things you still don’t tell us,” Flutterfree said.

“Yeah… Some because I have to.” Pinkie looked in the distance. “Others because I know they’ll make you sad.”

Flutterfree put a hoof on Pinkie’s. “If you want me to help, it’d be best if you told me everything you could. It’ll be hard on me, but you’re my friend Pinkie. You’ve sacrificed so much for us. I’m willing to forego a little security.”

Pinkie looked in Flutterfree’s eyes. “You’re sure?”

“Very.”

Pinkie sighed. “Flutterfree… At least one of us is going to die. Probably more.”
Flutterfree sat back. “…I think we all knew that, deep down, eventually one of us wasn’t going to make it back.”

“We aren’t going to be able to stand together at the end. And it haunts me. It always haunts me. There’s going to be so much pain… So much fighting…”

“And because you know that… You’re ready,” Flutterfree said.

“It’ll still hurt.”

“Yes. And you’re right not to just tell everyone about it. But now that you’ve told someone… We can prepare together, Pinkie.” Flutterfree smiled sadly. “If it’s me, I want to help you as much as I can before the tragedy strikes.”

“…Thanks, Flutterfree.”

Flutterfree nodded. “Now, what else?”

Pinkie took a breath. “Well…”

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Eve set Blitz Caliber on the table between her and Nanoha.

Nanoha lifted up Blitz Caliber, tears in her eyes. “…It’s been a long time.”

“It is good to see you, Commander. Raising Heart. Both of you.”

“I’ll get you to Subaru, don’t worry,” Nanoha promised. “She’ll want to see you for some closure.”

“Thank you.”

Nanoha pocketed Blitz Caliber, turning to Eve. “…So, you found Zhui.”

“Yeah,” Eve said. “I wasn't there personally, but one of my teams had to go through it. We found Blitz Caliber there. And… we couldn’t do anything else. It still is what it is.”

Nanoha looked into the distance. “I was the commander of the ship that found Zhui back then. Back when we were a Class 3. We were on a Grand Tour, exploring the multiverse based on a map we had found… That loss… it was one painful to many of us.” She shook her head. “And we still can’t do anything. We should have just done what you did and left it alone. But the team didn’t want to do that. I told them they should do what they thought was right. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“We shouldn’t dwell on past regrets.”

Nanoha smiled. “You’re right… Of course you are. Princess of Friendship indeed.”

Eve rubbed the back of her head nervously. “Yeah…”

“Please tell your team they did good. Because of this, a woman is going to get a piece of her sister back.”

“I’ll be sure to tell them.”

“And Evening?”
“Hmm?”

“Don’t let yourself be disheartened when you lose. It’s one thing to have a bunch of close friends fail. It’s quite another when you do. Make sure to stand by them.”

“I will,” Eve said. “Thanks.”

The two faces of their respective cultures shared a hug and went their separate ways.

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Pinkie, Nova, Jotaro, Vriska, and Flutterfree stood on a hill, watching the sunrise. The wind blew through their hair. Everything was beautiful.

“Our lives are not defined by our failures,” Pinkie decreed, still looking at the sun. “The measure of a life is in what we have accomplished and why we’ve accomplished those things. We fight for the sake of laughter, kindness, redemption, justice, and what is right. We’ve saved so many worlds, so many people, and made so many lives better.”

She turned to her team. “But failures stick out clearly in our minds more than anything else. This probably shouldn’t be, but it is. I want us all to move past this failure and continue to fight – but I don’t want any of us to forget it. The Watchmaker was right about one thing – we were changed by the experience. We were changed for the better. That’s unfair – the people of Zhui didn’t get anything – but it is what it is. So here’s what we do.”

She pointed her hoof to the sky. “We’re going to go out into that multiverse and do better than ever before! Sometimes we will fail just like we did today! But we won’t let that beat us down! We will get back up and fight again! We will stand strong against those who are evil, misguided, or just lost. We will help them if we can, and help those they are hurting.”

“Right!” the four of them called.

“As your Captain, I order you all to be strong! But also to be kind!” Pinkie shouted. “So let’s go back out there!”

“YEAH!”

Pinkie pulled out a dimensional device. “There will be pain. But there will also be joy. Let’s remember both.”

They left the universe onto another adventure…
Starcross Society, Part 1

The universe Q-NR6’ had a primary world that wasn’t terrestrial, but a gas giant comparable in size and gravity to Jupiter. The skies were mostly inhabited by giant, leathery jellyfish creatures that had language and society but cared little for the worlds outside their own beyond idle chit-chat.

What Q-NR6’ had that interested the rest of the multiverse were blocks of chiseled stone that floated at the top of the cloud layer, all conglomerating around a floating temple made of the bricks. This temple was inhabited by human acolytes who had guarded the place for as long as they could remember.

Currently, it was under siege by a translucent green bird composed of flowing ones and zeroes.

Standing between the bird and the temple were not the acolytes, but two ponies and a human. The Captain of this little troop was none other than Lady Rarity, General of Lai in her full eight-legged armor, hammer levitated in her blue magic. She had erected a secondary barrier spell to prevent the coding bird from getting any closer to the temple.

“Lieshy, got anything?”

Lieshy examined the bird from every angle. “I think it’s lost all higher thought and reverted to bestial assaults. Consider smashing.”

“That better not have been spoken in double,” Corona said, currently in her human form, gloves, sunglasses, and all, using a mixture of magic and bending to toss fireballs around Lady Rarity’s shield and into the bird of coding to little effect.

“It wasn’t,” Lieshy confirmed. “I also have nothing to offer so I’m going to cower inside the temple now. Good luck.” She spread her wings and flew off, crashing into the ground because of the double strength gravity. She inched herself the rest of the way to the temple like a bug.

“Lovely,” Corona muttered. “Hey, Rarity, think I can get in there and Empathy this thing?”

“If plan A doesn’t work,” Lady Rarity said.

“I thought plan A already didn’t work?”

“I thought we agreed burning things wasn’t worthy of being called a plan?”

Corona smirked. “True…”

The bird wisened up and used its beak to penetrate Lady Rarity’s barrier. The spirid-unicorn swung her hammer at the avian’s head, the weapon passing right through the sea of green numbers. “It’s figured out how to control its phasing…”

Corona had to use pure telekinesis to keep the bird at bay. “Aren’t we glad I can use magic as a human?”

Lady Rarity rolled her eyes – not that Corona could see that through the armor. She joined Corona’s telekinetic assault on the bird, pushing it back with just the force of their magic.
“…This isn’t going to last very long,” Lady Rarity observed.

“Figured,” Corona muttered, putting a free hand to the side of her glasses. “Olivia? How’s that plan coming?”

“Done!” Olivia shouted, dropping her invisibility cloak. She sat on a block floating separate from the bricks that made up the temple itself, a computer in front of her. She pressed a button and pointed directly at the digital bird with her free hand. A purple burst of light grabbed hold of the digital creature and condensed it into a single stream of code that wormed its way back to Olivia’s computer. “Arriba!”

“Got it?” Corona asked.

“Yep!” Olivia said, jumping off the floating platform, landing a bit too hard on the main temple platform and falling over due to the gravity. “Ugh… The bird is now contained within this digital prison and will stay there for as long as we’ll need. We saved the ancient relic! Go team!”

Lady Rarity slung her hammer over her back – punished by the extreme weight it carried on this world. “Yes… Good job…”

“You should get out of that armor, not going to help anymore.”

“Where am I going to put it?”

Corona blinked. “She has a point there.”

Olivia shrugged. “Then let’s just wrap things up here and move on.”

“I like that idea,” Lady Rarity grunted, forcing herself to turn around. Lieshy and a human in orange robes were walking out of the temple. The human lived here, so he was short and stocky while his muscles were extremely toned and his legs were particularly large.

“I thank you for what you’ve done here today, protecting our store of artifacts,” the man said with a bow. “For payment, you shall be granted access to our vaults.”

“Oh, we get to pick a treasure?” Olivia asked.

“None of the holy relics, but that is not all that we store here,” the man said, gesturing for them to follow him inside.

They entered the temple of chiseled stone, the interior lit only by lanterns held by similar acolytes. They bowed to the four heroes as they passed through, giving them messages of thanks and near reverence. In the back of the temple they found several glowing white artifacts on pillars, surrounding a pile of peculiar objects ranging from a cat of pure gold to a computer chip made of jello.

“Take anything you wish from the pile,” the man said.

“This might take a while,” Olivia said, rubbing her hands together. “There’s so much interesting stuff in here. I mean, look at this!” She held up a phone made out of meat. “What even is this? How hasn’t it rotted? How far can it make calls? So many questions…”

“The answers are lotus born,” Lieshy commented.

“Lovely,” Olivia muttered, placing the phone back down and moving to something else. “Hrm… A
crystal ball… A magic card… Oh so much good stuff…”

“It’s not going to take long at all,” Corona said, reaching her hand into the pile and closing it around an object. “Because one of these is much more interesting than the others.”

“Hm?” Lady Rarity said, curious.

Corona held up a small black sphere. “We’ve found a bowling ball.”

Everyone stared at the sphere in Corona’s hands – a sphere with an oily sheen with yellow squares lit up where Corona’s fingers were in contact with it.

“…An original dimensional device!” Lady Rarity declared. “What a find!”

“You bet it is,” Corona said, smirking. “Now that we know a lot more about the multiverse… I bet we can learn a few more things about this device. The Research Division is going to love this. I’m going to love this.” She held it up in the air, her smirk transforming into a grin. “It’s time to see if we can shed light on the first mystery of the multiverse.”

~~~

A few days later, Lady Rarity, Lieshy, and Olivia were walking down the halls of one of Merodi Universalis’s more high-security research locations, known as Aleph Outpost. It was a tremendous facility built in the ground of the Forest universe, only accessible from a very particular point in open space that did not intersect with any planets in any of the main universes. Even then, the actual entrance to Aleph Outpost just looked like a somewhat large oak tree – to get in the Outpost had to let you in from the inside.

Which isn’t to say Aleph Outpost was a secret – just like Area 51s, everyone knew it existed, and as was customary for most Merodi Universalis research the things they studied weren’t classified, they just didn’t want anyone finding the place and getting a hold of the experiments.

The interior of Aleph Outpost was rather drab for the most part – clean metal walls without places to hang any sort of decoration. A few of the offices the trio had passed were decorated with personal memorabilia, but any public location was devoid of any character. The only thing that gave any indication of where they were was the numbers engraved on the walls. LEVEL 9 currently.

As the three trotted along, an unexpected guest met up with them – none other than Rohan Kishibe.

“Oh, how curious running into you three here,” Rohan said, scribbling on his private notepad with a high quality pen. “What brings you to this mysterious outpost?”

Olivia folded her arms. “Why not just read us like books and find out?”

“As much as that would save time and annoyance, I’ve been trying to do that less lately.”

“No by your choice, I bet.”

“No. Everyone has taken issue, calling it ‘brainwashing’, so I’m going to attempt to learn things the old fashioned way for once. What brings you here?”

“Bowling,” Lieshy commented.

“The newly recovered bowling ball, I see,” Rohan said, glancing up from his notepad for only a second. “I take it they discovered something, then?”
“Probably,” Lady Rarity said, shrugging – an action much easier to achieve now that she wasn’t wearing her armor. “Corona didn’t say why she wanted us here, merely that we needed to come right away.”

“I hope it has something interesting on it,” Olivia said. “I’ve been bored the last week.”

“Like ants,” Lieshy commented, following her comment up with a self-translation. “You’re bored so often it might as well be a common commodity.”

“I got that, I’m not a moron.”

Rohan scribbled more furiously at that remark.

“Are you performing character studies on us, mister Prophet?” Olivia asked.

“You’re not supposed to be saying that aloud,” Rohan pointed out.

“We’re in a secure facility.”

“That’s not classified.”

Olivia rolled her eyes. “Ladies and gentlemen, Merodi Universalis’ secret weapon – Rohan Kishibe! Imbécil Profesional.”

“Thank you,” Rohan snarked.

“Olivia, don’t try to hack him,” Lady Rarity cautioned.

“I wasn-”

“You were thinking about it. You know he’d just retaliate and write in you that you’d never be able to hack him again, right?”

Olivia facepalmed. “Lovely, I’m being ganged up on.”

“Needs more hippos…” Lieshy mused.

Olivia stared at her.

“That wasn’t double. I just feel like a hippo would do wonders for this conversation.”

“You aren’t even listening are you?”

Lieshy shrugged. “There it is, room 37-19-B9.” Lieshy walked up to the three-inch-thick metal doors and knocked. “See you around, Rohan.”

“This is where I’m going as well,” Rohan said, pocketing his notebook.

“Huh?” Lieshy turned to him. “Wh-”

The doors opened, revealing a circular room the size of a larger living room though without couches. The walls had niches dug into them, each depression having space for an artifact of some sort. A few drew their attention – Siron’s Staff, the small Rune of Elysium, a gun with a barrel that pointed backward, and a strange lump of black eldritch matter. Each of them floated in the middle of their enclosures, held by some kind of levitating spell. The center of the room had a workstation surrounded by wheeled chairs.
Two individuals sat at the table – O’Neill and the Overhead of the Research Division, an orange Hessonite Gem who went by Sciganite. Behind them, the unicorn-form Corona was levitating the bowling ball, examining it closely.

“Welcome,” Sciganite said. “Please, sit down.”

The three members of Lady Rarity’s team and Rohan sat at the other side of the table. They couldn’t help but be slightly intimidated by Sciganite’s size – despite being nowhere near the mountainous figure of the Diamonds.

“So… You figured out how it works?” Olivia asked.

Corona turned to them and smiled, setting the bowling ball down on the table. “Yes, actually. Give me a moment…” She levitated a labcoat that was too large for her onto herself, buttoning it up completely. She activated the transformation matrix bracelet she kept on her hoof, transforming herself into a human, the labcoat just large enough to cover everything important. She put on a pair of gloves and picked up the bowling ball. “The device is intended to be used by individuals with hands, first of all. While we have gotten it to trigger with telekinesis, it’s hard to get the magic to do what we want when there aren’t any actual buttons on the thing. But to demonstrate…” She held the ball in a particular configuration with her thumb and forefinger, using her free fingers to give it a command. In an instant, she was gone – there were no flashy colors, portals, or anything aside from a small rush of air. A few seconds later she was back with a shroom shake from the Mushroom World thanks to the wonders of in-universe stargate travel. “Like so. We’ve already got blueprints to make more of these things – with a significantly weaker power source, of course. It’ll be good for stealth missions.”

“How does it work?” Olivia said, curious.

“Well, it’s the basis for all our dimensional technology, so it basically punches a hole in reality just like everything else. But it works a little differently – by typing in the correct sequence, it can find new universes with relative ease, somewhat like a grinder. We aren’t entirely sure how to control what sort of universes it finds yet, but we’re sure it has some way to navigate areas of the multiverse it doesn’t even have coordinates for.”

“Nice,” Lieshy said. “Why did we have to come here for that? And why is book-boy here?”

Corona frowned. “Yeeeah… You’re probably not going to like this.”

Sciganite cleared her throat. “We have been watching Rohan’s powers closely ever since we discovered them, as I’m sure you’re already aware. We decided to perform an experiment with his abilities to see if we could answer some of our burning questions. He wrote a story in which you four fought a bird made of code and, as a result, found a bowling ball.”

Rohan took out several pieces of paper that depicted Lady Rarity and company in manga form, fighting the bird of code. “One of my better works,” he said. “You’ll find the bird has quite the tragic backstory.”

Olivia stared at the art, blinking. “Riiight, so…. I think I should be angry about this but I’m still processing.”

Corona chuckled. “I was livid when I found out. But, well, it worked. We have the bowling ball and are learning a lot from it.”

“I’m curious,” Lady Rarity said, glancing from Sciganite to Rohan. “How far do you plan on testing
Rohan’s abilities as a Prophet? Dictating what happens to people by way of a story… That’s controlling and questionable. Even if it is secret, it still reeks to my nose.”

O’Neill answered that question. “Aside from the stories that have nothing to do with us, Rohan’s under strict orders on what he can and can’t write. He doesn’t get to kill anybody. He has to come to us with a premise first before he completes a work – or we give him the premise and see if he can write a story off of it.”

“From what little we know, it appears the ‘story’ doesn’t actually take effect until Rohan declares it done,” Sciganite added. “Though the timing of the event is largely in flux. He wrote this story two months ago.”

Corona nodded. “Rohan’s stories helped us find something new here.” She plucked the Rune of Elysium out of its compartment and weighed it in her palm. “Maybe he can help us uncover the mysteries behind other artifacts or secrets. We have no idea what this Rune does, but we know it’s important.” She pocketed the Rune, freeing her hands to gesture at another artifact. “Then there’s Siron’s Staff – where did it come from? How does it relate to other Jujus? Can we find Earth C with it? We don’t know.”

“Is it possible that, by explaining something, Rohan becomes the reason it is that way?” Lieshy asked.

Sciganite put a hand to her head. “That is one of the questions we keep asking ourselves and, as of yet, have no way to test it. Or even formulate a good theory. The extent of Prophet powers are a mystery.”

“Have him write a story about himself,” Olivia suggested.

“Already done,” Sciganite said. “Thus Spoke Rohan Kishibe. Some of them came true. Others didn’t. What makes a story ‘acceptable’ or not is still up in the air.”

“Sounds like chaos.”

Lieshy stared at herself on one of the pages of Rohan’s manga. “I’m not that fat.”

“Artistic license,” Rohan declared.

“Soliloquy.”

“…Nani?”

Lieshy just fixed him with a knowing smile.

Olivia flipped through the rest of the manga. “Hrm… Hey, Rohan, think you ca-”

“Don’t give him ideas,” O’Neill muttered.

Olivia rolled her eyes but fell silent.

“So this was a successful ‘Prophet powers’ experiment,” Lady Rarity said. “Very interesting and a little concerning. But there’s more, I can tell – O’Neill wouldn’t be here if that was all it was.”

Corona smiled. “This bowling ball has a record within it of every universe it has been to since its creation. We were able to trace a path back to the place of its creation.”

“And…?” Lieshy asked.
There’s no direct connection to it. In fact, best as we can tell from the data in the device, it’d take thousands of jumps to get there.” Corona rubbed the back of her head. “That’s a bit much even for my custom device to tie together.”

“And that’s where I come in,” O’Neill said. “The Enterprise is going on a little trip to the depths of the Q-Sphere. We’re going to crew up and go where no man or pony has gone before and find out where this sphere originated. Call it… a road trip.”

“And you want us on this little trek?” Lady Rarity asked.

O’Neill nodded. “Well, everyone except Rohan. He has to stay here, protected.”

Rohan grunted in clear annoyance at this fact.

“Regardless, I’m going to call this a vacation,” O’Neill declared. “Thor will take over the military while we’re gone – not like we have any wars anyway – and we’re going to solve a mystery.”

Olivia grinned. “I really like the sounds of this. I’m in.”

Lady Rarity shrugged. “I don’t have any authority… Though for what it’s worth, I wish to come as well.”

O’Neill rubbed his hands together. “You better get ready campers, we leave in two days. We’ll be in the wilderness! No cell service, no access to modern conveniences, and no Internet.”

“The horror!” Olivia gasped.

“We will be alone in the deepest depths of the Q-Sphere, roughing it. So prepare yourselves!”

Lady Rarity nodded. “If we left today, we would be prepared.”

“This spider does not speak for me,” Olivia blurted. “I need time.”

“And the Enterprise needs a touch up,” O’Neill admitted. “She’s not that old yet, but she sure ain’t a young ship anymore.”

“But we’re going,” Corona declared. “Going to explore further than anyone else…”

“Thousands of jumps seems like a bit much,” Lieshy observed.

“There are probably shorter paths,” Corona admitted. “But it’s so far out of the area of the multiverse we have mapped there’s not really any way for us to find that path. We just have to take the long way. Unless you want to wait for us to figure out how to properly use the ‘connection highways’ in the Strands.”

“Pass.”

“Thought so.”

“Let’s tell Toph where we’re going to be,” Lady Rarity said. “How long do you think we’ll be out of contact?”

“A month or two,” Corona said. “We might procrastinate if we find an interesting universe along the way, but otherwise we’ll just perform scans and keep moving through universe after universe. We should be able to get through about a hundred a day. Though we have no idea what the time dilation will be like out there.”
“I’ll tell her it’ll be ‘a significant amount of time’.”

“Better hope she doesn’t ask for specifics.”

“Indeed.”

O’Neill chuckled at this.

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The Enterprise sat in the middle of one of Equis Cosmic’s shipyards, having just received the tune-up it had very much needed. Some of the older technology had been replaced with newer gadgets and the hull now had an absurd shine. It was at just the wrong angle, reflecting a floodlight right into a window where O’Neill and Cosmo were standing.

“Too shiny,” O’Neill muttered, hand over his eyes.

“I think it’s beautiful,” Cosmo said. She looked like her old, normal self, but O’Neill knew the shape of a regal purple alicorn was a lie. She had never been able to fully recover from the Bloodbath, eternally cursed to be a crystal skeleton. Her condition may not have been a secret, but O’Neill knew it was difficult for her. She didn’t feel alive anymore – she had no need to breathe, to sleep, to eat, or anything.

She was a strong mare, to put it simply.

“Beauty can be very distracting,” O’Neill said, countering her earlier statement.

“The Raritys know that fact very well,” Cosmo chuckled. “There’s been more than one that’s tried to seduce me.”

“As Mattie said once, ‘Raritys are corruptible’.”

“She’s said that a lot more than once.”

“True…” he leaned back against a wall. “You want to come, don’t you?”

“It’s been a long, long time since I had reason to go explore. But I promised I’d never leave my ponies alone for long again – shortly after we exterminated the aliens and Equis settled down, I went to explore the galaxy. When I had returned, the ponies had started a civil war. It took a lot to fix that.” Cosmo shook her head. “That’s essentially ancient history… Even the oldest alicorns still alive were young when that happened.”

“You have quite the time abyss, don’t you?”

“In many ways, yes. I am not as old as the Asgard, but their entire race got to live for absurdly long times thanks to their cloning. Those of us who are immortal here are in a strict minority.”

O’Neill gestured to himself. “You’ve got plenty of good company in this minority.”

“You know, eventually we’re going to find a way to mass-produce immortality,” Cosmo said. “There’s too many tales of Fountains of Youth and other such things to just dismiss. I’m somewhat surprised we haven’t found one already.”

“Jenny probably has one.”

“And our relationship with her and her people could be described as ‘barely on speaking terms’.”
"Eeyep."

The two’s conversation fell silent. The glint of the Enterprise finally moved off the window they were standing at.

"Ah, there you are," Princess Luna of Equis Vitis said, walking up to O’Neill. "I checked the Enterprise. I thought you were always on that ship."

O’Neill shrugged. "Guess I felt like watching it from the outside today. You have something for me?"

"You need to be careful," Luna said. "I have sensed the Stars in multiple universes shifting with unease ever since you announced this little trip. They – as always – refuse to tell me or Starswirl anything about what’s going on."

"Not calling it off."

"I know you aren’t, General. I just want you to be cautious. Something’s going to happen out there."

"No surprise to me."

Cosmo nodded. "It is the furthest journey we have ever made, regardless of how you measure. Of course something monumental is going to happen in the journey."

"All of us talk like Pinkie these days," O’Neill muttered.

"It’s a welcome change," Luna said. "It adds a bit of certainty to life that wasn’t there before."

"That may not be a good thing, in the end," Cosmo observed.

Luna nodded slowly. "I… really don’t have anything else to tell you, O’Neill. Apologies for being so vague and mysterious."

"That’s how it is with Stars," he said, stretching his back. "Welp, I’ve got to address the crew before we head out. Any last minute disasters that’ll keep us from going?"

"Aradia has already cleared the internal timelines of the major universes," Luna reported. "In addition, our neighbors are quiet."

"Good enough for me," O’Neill said, pressing a hand to a wall-mounted screen. "Thor, you have the keys to the army. Send me back to my ship."

"I shall guard these universes well, O’Neill."

"Yeah yeah, I kn-" he was teleported back to the Enterprise in the middle of his sentence.

Cosmo raised an eyebrow. "Thor, you do that on purpose don’t you?"

"I will neither confirm nor deny such wild accusations."

~~~

O’Neill sat in the captain’s chair of the Enterprise, in the universe they were going to use as the starting point of their little adventure. It was no coincidence that this universe was the one Celestia City currently occupied. Blumiere and Vivian had called them up just before they left, the two currently on the main screen.
“I wish you luck in your travels,” Blumiere said, tipping his hat. “I am somewhat envious of the curious things that you will find.”

“If only you didn’t have a city to run.”

“If only,” Blumiere chuckled.

Corona poked her head – currently a unicorn’s – next to O’Neill’s. “Vivian, you could still come join us. Whaddaya say, for old time’s sake?”

Vivian shook her head. “Sorry, I’ve got too much going on here – and I wouldn’t want to leave for more than a few days anyway. This city is my responsibility now, the unknown is yours.”

“Good luck keeping all those Sweeties wrangled.”

Vivian laughed. “I’ll need it.”

Blumiere checked his watch. “It looks like it is time for you to head out. Please come back in one piece, General.”

“You can bet your monocle on it,” O’Neill said with a smirk.

Blumiere pressed a button, causing farewell fireworks to go off all around Celestia City. “Enjoy your vacation.”


The Enterprise jumped to the first of thousands of universes.

“Right,” O’Neill said, getting out of his chair. “It’s time for that meeting I talked about earlier. You science types check this place out for a few minutes and then jump to the next one. We’ve got a lot to get through.” He walked off the bridge to the private briefing room, taking his place at the head of the table. Corona, Lady Rarity, Olivia, and Lieshy took up one side of the table. The other was occupied by prominent members of the Enterprise’s general crew – Mauve the unicorn, Hermirod the Asgard, and Lapis-Vee the Gem. The last seat was occupied by a representative of the Sparkle Census, a moth-pony who went by Twitter. Her antennae continually twitched in a decidedly distracting manner.

O’Neill folded his hands. “This is going to be a very long trip and we’re going to have to make do with what we have. We’re not planning on engaging in any combat, but if there’s one thing I know it’s that plans never survive. To that end we have the Enterprise completely stocked with both the standard Tau’ri soldiers and Gem fighters. We still have a limited number, so we can’t be throwing them out like candy at anything that faces us. We have enough energy reserves to power this ship twenty times over, so many replacement parts we’ve completely filled all our lockers, and enough food to feed everyone for a year. That’s not even counting the stuff we can produce magically.”

“That only sounds like a lot,” Lapis-Vee said.

“Exactly. If everything goes according to plan, we have way more than enough materials to complete the mission. But we need to prepare for the worst that might happen. Don’t think ‘we have food to spare’ or ‘we can afford to risk a fighter’. Those statements might be true, but on that one day we can’t leave a universe and are forced to run from a galactic superpower, we might wish we had just one more fighter or one more energy capsule.”

The other eight at the table nodded in understanding.
“Glad we’ve come to this understanding. Now, aside from those few universes where something’s going to go wrong and when we get to the end of our journey, this trip is going to be _boring as all hell._ We’re camping in the wilderness. This ship is going to become your home for the next month or so. Get used to doing a whole lot of not much, even if you’re one of the scientists scanning every single world we come across. For those of you who normally serve on the _Enterprise_, the rigid protocol we follow will be considerably relaxed to make sure nobody goes stark raving mad from all the regimenting. For those of you who don’t, don’t feel like you need to conform to the militaristic way the people here act much of the time.”

Corona nodded. “Gotcha. Don’t treat this like a military unit, treat it like a neighborhood.”

“Exactly. And for the love of my sanity, don’t antagonize your neighbors.” O’Neill put a hand to the bridge of his nose. “I do not want to deal with interpersonal drama on this ship.”

“But you know you will.”

“Yes. I’m asking all of you, as the ‘leaders’ of this little community we’re growing here, to keep all that to a minimum. Let’s all get along for one month.”

“Yes sir,” Lapis-Vee said. “…Am I supposed to call you sir, still, sir?”

“Do whatever you want. But don’t call me Jack.”

“Whatever you say, Jack,” Olivia said.

“I still have the authority to toss you in the brig if you annoy me,” O’Neill reminded her.

“I could get out.”

“And then I could actually charge you with a crime when we get back.”

Olivia rolled her eyes. “You’re no fun.”

Mauve looked at Olivia like he couldn’t believe the words that had come out of her mouth. Olivia winked at him.

“Anything else?” Twitter asked.

“There is a chance this trek goes wrong and we have to turn back,” O’Neill said. “Prepare for everything to go up in flames at any moment.”

“Cheery thought.”

“If you’re prepared, you’ll be ready to act faster. And if you’re _expecting_ it you get to rub the fact that you were right in everyone’s face.”

Twitter nodded. “I see…”

“Anyway, I bet they’re wrapping up their scans of this universe now,” O’Neill said.

“Probably not, it’ll take about fifteen minutes,” Corona said.

O’Neill sighed. “This is going to be a long trip…” He paused a moment, looking at them in all. “Any questions or concerns?”

Hermirod raised a hand. “What is the policy for first contact on this journey?”
“Try not to make contact,” O’Neill answered. “We don’t need to spend several days trying to forge relations with a people. Unless they see us, we’re not messing with anything. We’re not even dropping beacons for the USM and University unless we find a special reason to.”

Hermirod nodded.

“Anything else?”

After a few seconds of silence, Olivia raised her hand. “I’ve got one. Twitter, do you realize what your name means?”

“…Oh please no…”

Olivia held up her phone, showing a version of Twitter.com with a tweet about Twitter the Twilight on it. “We’re still connected to the Internet, you know. Not that far away yet.”

Twitter sighed. “I am so tired of this joke…”

“I know!”

Twitter looked to O’Neill. “Can you throw her in the brig for this?”

“I don’t think so.”

Twitter rolled her eyes. “Great…”

Olivia started to get ideas. “Oh I think I’ll make a local Twitter for the Enterprise… Purple themed and covered with memes about you…”

“Olivia stop tormenting the foreign representative,” Lady Rarity said.

“…Fine. For now.”

O’Neill cracked his knuckles. “In that case, meeting adjourned. Prepare for the long haul, everyone.”

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It only took three days of travel before they were no longer seeing pony worlds anymore. There was a time of mixed unusual universes which seemed to have no rhyme or reason, but they soon moved into a cluster of universes dominated by robotic lifeforms that could transform into other shapes – usually vehicles. They had encountered a few of these universes in the ‘pony cluster’, but had never realized there could be this many.

The path they took through the ‘transformer cluster’ must have been the long one, because it took a week to pass through it. Readings they had gathered suggested it was smaller than the pony cluster, but they were taking a decidedly zig-zag path through the cluster. Whoever had used the bowling ball before it ended up in the temple had apparently spent a lot of time in this cluster.

The Enterprise currently found itself in a ‘cat cluster’ dominated by worlds inhabited by sapient cats. This was only their second day in it.

The crew, for the most part, had stopped caring. Ever since they’d left the transformer cluster there hadn’t been any action because on average the technology base of all the cats was very primitive.

So Olivia had declared a game night, bringing out the biggest mess of a fighting game Merodi Universalis had to offer – Multiversal Heroes 2. Up to sixteen players at once. The developers of the
game were clearly insane not only with what they wanted their game to handle, but also with how much research they went through to get movesets right.

At the moment, only two players remained standing in front of the representation of an Eldritch Embodiment universe. Olivia, who was playing as Jotaro, and Hermirod, who was playing as a blue-tinted skin of Corona.

“Get the me with the ora ora,” Corona said – currently in her human form. “Do it. Nothing can escape the ora ora time stop combo.”

Hermirod cleared his throat. “Nova with a correctly timed block, Eve with Seraphim, Toph under certain circumstances, a-“

“Nobody likes a math geek, Hermirod,” Olivia muttered, unleashing the ora ora time stop combo on Hermirod’s Corona. The virtual blue unicorn fell to the ground, unable to move. Olivia pushed her off the edge, satisfied with the way the combo turned out.

Time resumed, and Hermirod’s Corona fell down into the infinite pit of darkness…

And then the Corona and Jotaro switched places.

“Q-qué!?” Olivia blurted, echoing the virtual Jotaro’s “NANI!?"

“Achieving a replacement teleport spell is a complex procedure,” Hermirod stated, stretching his arms. “It is a simple feat for me.”

Olivia threw her controller to the ground. “Bah!”

Corona sighed. “Well… I guess I still won, in a way.”

“You were the first one out,” Lapis-Vee reminded her. “You really don’t know how to play Pinkie.”

“It’s really complicated when your attacks depend on how close you are to parts of the interface!”

“I can imagine,” Rohan said, walking into the room.

“Oh, hey Rohan,” Corona said.

Then she processed what she’d just said.

“ROHAN!?” Corona blurted, standing bolt upright. “HOW DID YOU GET HERE?!”

Lady Rarity looked up from her book, narrowing her eyes. “You’re supposed to be back home…”

Rohan bowed with a smirk. “I am a stowaway. Apologies, but I just couldn’t let the fruits of my work be performed without my presence. They’re probably in a panic back at the Research Division wondering where I’ve gone.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that you’re not supposed to be here!” Corona blurted.

“Nope. But I can’t exactly go back now, can I?” Rohan smirked. “Too far along.”

Corona really wanted to punch him. Instead she just pulled out her phone. “Hey, O’Neill? We have a stowaway. It’s Rohan. Yeah, that’s what I said.”

O’Neill teleported to the game room, glaring at Rohan. “Do you have any idea how stupid this is?”
Rohan pursed his lips. “Perhaps…”

“Having you out this far could make for a serious breach of security, not to mention a threat to your safety.”

“Please, I can handle myself and you know it.”

“I’m still going to throw you in the brig.”

“You won’t keep me there forever.”

“Bah. We’ll see how stubborn I can be.” He grabbed Rohan and they teleported away, presumably to the brig.

Olivia chuckled. “I wonder what sort of creative punishment O’Neill is going to think of later…”

“Live readings of fanfics of his work?” Twitter suggested.

Olivia looked at her and blinked. “…You have some.”

Twitter rubbed the back of her head. “Er… yes. I have an entire folder of it. Some good, but I don’t think we care about those. I’m sure the bad ones would work quite well.”

“Send those to O’Neill, stat,” Olivia ordered. “I’m going to record the whole thing…”

“You’re a fan of Rohan’s work?” Lady Rarity asked Twitter.

Twitter nodded. “Yeah. Say what you will about his attitude and demeanor, he is an excellent storyteller. If you like action, anyway.”

Corona rolled her eyes. “And giant birds.”

“…What?”

“Forget I said anything. Next round. I’m going to play as Rohan so that, when I lose horribly, it’ll at least feel satisfying.”

She proceeded to win with Rohan.

“…I have mixed feelings about this,” Corona muttered, folding her arms.

~~~

Time passed…

Rohan suffered, but was eventually allowed to walk around free so long as he didn’t use Heaven’s Door.

And then nothing happened.

They passed through cluster after cluster of universes. Occasionally there was a spacefaring world, but they never stayed long. Any firefights that broke out were easy to put down. They didn’t run into any multiversal civilizations, which was odd, but given the 99.99% metric of unconnected universes, not all that impressive.

They had just passed through a cluster of Mushroom Worlds.
There were only thirty worlds left on the list. They would get to the end today.

Lady Rarity’s Team, O’Neill’s higher crew, Twitter, and Rohan were all on the bridge, watching the number count down.

Twenty-nine.

“What do you think it’s going to be?” Corona asked, currently living her life as a unicorn.

“A dead society, I’ll bet,” Olivia said. “One who’s devices got spread around the multiverse after they fell.”

“A bunch of secret agent types,” O’Neill answered. “They never want to be found, but they want to find everyone else in a sort of hypocrisy.”

“Maybe just a society of crystal people and unicorns,” Corona suggested. “After all, that’s what we saw on Equis Vitis back then. The Enchantress and the Man of Light. They’re part of this.”

“But they could have just found the device as well,” Lapis-Vee said. “For all we know they were just loose travelers, always drifting from place to place.”

“Perhaps…” Corona said. “Perhaps…” She turned to O’Neill. “Think we can speed this up a bit? We have data on thousands of worlds now. Jumping past a couple won’t hurt.”

O’Neill nodded. “We’ll pass back over later. Let’s find out what lies at the end of this rainbow.” He smirked. “Jump.”

Twenty-eight.

“Jump.”

Twenty-seven

“Ju-”

“Proximity Alert!” Hermirod announced, his fingers flying quickly across a console. “Twenty unidentified objects, identifiable only as balls of plasma. They’re moving right toward us in a circular formation.” Hermirod put them on the screen. Each of the twenty balls of light looked like a different colored star, though they were far too small to be even a false star. They moved with mathematical precision in their circular pattern, bearing down on the Enterprise.

“Jump!”

“Dimensional interference!” Hermirod reported.

“Evasive maneuvers – try to hail them!”

The Enterprise activated its shields and tried to spin out of the ring of oncoming sparks, but they followed the ship with alarming precision.

“No response!”

O’Neill ground his teeth. “Any signs of actual hostility?”

“Besides pursuit, none.”
“Not firing until they do,” O’Neill said. “But just in ca-”

The Enterprise shook. Every light and screen within the ship went out, devoid of power.

“…Report?” O’Neill asked.

“The power’s out,” Olivia said.

“Thank you captain obvious,” O’Neill remarked.

“You’re welcome.”

“I can’t light my horn,” Corona said, tapping her bony extremity. “I think we’re inside a nullifier of some sort. That… Well that’s impressive but also terrifying.”

Lapis-Vee flexed her wrist. “I’m still able to project my body…” She generated a small cloud of water around her hand. “And I still have hydrokinesis.”

“I wonder how it knows what to nullify…” Corona muttered.

“Does it matter? We’re trapped in it,” Lieshy said. “Who knows what’s happening to us? For all we know we’re being boarded!”

O’Neill walked to a wall and opened a secret cupboard. “I’ve got standard kinetic weapons here for everyone that’ll work regardless of anything they do to the magic. Arm yourselves. We’re going to start sweeping the ship.” He tossed rifles to anyone who knew how to use them.

Corona checked a bracelet she had under her boot. “Huh… I think my transformation matrix still works… Perhaps it can’t remove magic from enchanted objects?”

“That would explain why I still function,” Lapis-Vee said. “I’m technically nothing more than an enchanted crystal computer.”

“We need to head to the Rod,” Mauve said. “It should still work.”

“I need a shirt or something,” Corona said. “Unless you want me walking around naked with a gun.”

Olivia rolled her eyes, taking an extra shirt out of her pack. “Told you I needed to carry this around.”

Corona changed to human form, grabbing a gun from O’Neill. “A little big…” she commented on the shirt.

“Well I didn’t want to also carry around pants. You seriously need to alter that transformation spell to include clothes.”

“Eh. Usually not an issue. Plus that’d mean I got to wear the same outfit all the time, who does that?”

“You did. Your entire time in high school, almost.”

“…What was wrong with us?”

“Ka,” Rohan stated. “Character designs needed to be consistent.”

“Enough,” O’Neill said, disarming the safety on his rifle. “We’re heading to the rod to cast a spell. It better b-”

The *Enterprise*’s power returned. The lights all came back on, magic resurged, and the screens came to life with a large number of error messages. The main screen no longer displayed a star field with menacing lights, but instead the interior of a metallic box. The only defining feature of this box was a round symbol of a four-pointed star with a deep X engraved into it.

A mechanical voice came from the communications channel. “*You have trespassed in a universe belonging to the Class 2 Civilization known as the Starcross Society. If you do not know what this means, expect to be returned to your universe of origin without incident shortly. If you do know what this means, you will be held here until your trial concludes, at which point you will be informed of what the terms of release are, if any. Do not attempt to escape prior to this. Keeping you alive is a courtesy. If you prove yourselves to be trouble, you will be terminated. This is an automated message, do not attempt to reply.*”

The feed terminated.


“We are no longer in the universe we were just in,” Hermirod reported. “And our dimensional drive is still disabled, though everything else works.”

“The Starcross Society…” Corona said. “We’ve been warned about these people numerous times.”

“We know nothing about them, though,” Lieshy pointed out. “The Stars fear them, but otherwise nobody has ever heard of them.”

“Apparently they made or own the bowling balls,” Twitter observed.

“They want us to stay here and wait,” Lady Rarity said. “The question is, should we?”

Mauve shook his head. “Did you hear that qualifier? ‘terms of release, if any.’ There’s a chance they flat out won’t let us go!”

“And we weren’t given any time frame,” O’Neill added. “I’m not just going to sit here forever while they decide what to do with us. For all we know our little ‘capture’ is put on a queue that’s several years long…”

“So, escape,” Lady Rarity said. “I agree, the question is how. We can’t escape from this dimension with our drive, and I’m willing to bet this box we’re in won’t take kindly to being shot at.”

Olivia looked up from her console. “I’ve got no receptacles I can even hack into. The message came from a buoy in the box walls that only activates when another universe taps into it, as far as I can tell. Beyond the box, I’ve got nothing. Our scans think the box is all there is in this universe.”

“That might be,” Hermirod said. “They did say they were Class 2. They would likely have access to universal manipulation technology.”

“…Can we fight a Class 2?” Mauve asked.

“Definitely not. But we can run,” O’Neill said, thinking about their options. “Let’s move to the Rod station. We already know enchanted objects get past their nullifiers, we might be able to use it to get out. Create a dimensional portal *without* the drive.”

“That’s not going to be easy…” Mauve pointed out. “Especially if they’re jamming the dimensional signals.”
O’Neill furrowed his brow. “We’re still going to have to try.” He pressed a few buttons on the wall and teleported most of them to the rod controls, leaving only the bare necessity of required crew members on the bridge. “Mauve, do any of the dimensional spells work?”

Mauve pressed a few buttons with his telekinesis, but eventually he had to shake his head. “Nothing. They are definitely jamming.”

Olivia walked up to the console, coding some spells. “Let’s see… the dimensional fabric is too stable. They’ve got it locked…” She tried prodding a few things and experimenting. “Well, if there is a way out of this by hacking magic, I’m going to have to go at it for a few hours.” She connected her gloves to the console and got to work, scanning for everything she could and looking for loopholes. “There’s got to be some way they detect what we’re doing…”

Corona snapped her fingers. “Rohan, paper. I’ve got an idea.”

“Did you just assume I carry paper around everywhere?”

“Yes, I did. Now hand it over.”

Rohan, disgruntled, took out a sheet of white printer paper. Corona took it, and with her other hand summoned a pen from the aether. She began to scribble magical designs. “Olivia, check the Nova Drive.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Call it a hunch.”

Olivia shrugged, pulling up the controls for the Nova Drive. “Don’t know why you’d want to look at that obsolete piece of-” she blinked. “Holy…”

“What?” O’Neill asked.

“The Nova Drive… It’s detecting a Star-trail!” Olivia put a hand to her head. “You know, the magical connections Stars have with each other that Nova figured out how to use for FTL travel before I even showed up? Hyperdrive and all other FTL methods are much more efficient… But I’m detecting a trail here.”

“Can we use it?” O’Neill asked, glancing at what Corona was doing and quickly deciding whatever she was drawing was far too complicated for him to make sense of.

Olivia scrambled through screen after screen of the Nova Drive’s scans. “Hrm… Hermirod, teleport down to the Nova Drive and start performing the long-overdue maintenance. We might have something here.”

Hermirod nodded, activating the teleporter and disappearing with Lapis-Vee.

Olivia flew through more and more information. “The Star-trail isn’t normal… I can’t detect a point of origin or an endpoint… Or even a direction, merely that it’s here.”

“That’s because it’s not going through space, it’s going across dimensions,” Corona said, putting her pen down. “All we have to do is transform the Nova Drive to be able to accept Star-trails that cross universes. It’s how a Star would become ‘one with themselves’ when they were still a society, so it should be possible…”

Olivia looked over at Corona’s magic blueprint. Had she had access to a fruit smoothie, she would
have spat it out. “Corona! That’s… Absurdly complicated, even for you!”

“What can I say? Inspiration hit,” Corona said, grinning. “I think I have the spell we need the rod to cast right here. We won’t use the standard dimensional drive at all, we’re going to tap into this Star-trail and ride it like the Nova Drive would in realspace. Just have to fool the Nova Drive into thinking it is going through real space, even though it’s not. Well, and we have to be able to find the ‘direction’ of the Star-trail in the middle of translation, but this spell can do that.”

Mauve looked over the spell designs. “…You earned that PhD, didn’t you?”

“Yeah…” Olivia said, staring at the spell. “That’s almost too good.”

“How so?”

“The chances that you just think up the perfect spell with the perfect hunch at the perfect time? I-Rohan, did you do this?”

Rohan held up his hands. “I have not done anything, I assure you. Though it does smell of ka to me.”

“Hrm…” Olivia said, narrowing her eyes. “All right, let’s go with it. It sounds like a good idea. We get out of the box via this new method of translation and then we book it back home.”

“Beg Nanoha to stop them from killing us,” O’Neill added. “Don’t forget that.”

“They might not pursue.”

“They probably will.”

Corona looked to O’Neill. “If we’re not scanning any universes and we use the dimensional drive’s ‘overdrive’ setting, we could be back in a couple hours right?”

“We could be back in an instant if we didn’t have to charge up power,” O’Neill reminded her.

“We’ll need every mage at the dimensional drive, then,” Corona said. “Mauve, you too – I’ll run the rod.”

Mauve nodded.

“Plan made!” Olivia declared.


Twitter put a hoof to her chin. “I don’t see any issues with this plan… I give it the approval of the Sparkle Census, inasmuch as I have that authority.”

“Noted,” O’Neill said, touching a console on the wall, careful only to use the internal speakers. “Attention crew of the Enterprise! We are going to try to get out of this pickle. Everyone who can produce a lot of magic or energy of any kind, head to the dimensional drive room, we’re going to need a lot of juice. Anyone else, take your battle stations.” O’Neill turned to Corona. “The rest of us are heading back to the bridge. You have it up here?”

Corona nodded. “I’ve got this.”

“Good. Olivia?”
“I’m going to the main computer room for a direct uplink,” Olivia said, disconnecting herself from the rod controls. “Corona, your spell is already uploaded in here. Make adjustments as you see fit.”

“Got it.”

Lady Rarity chuckled. “You know, I don’t feel like I’m in charge of my own team right now.”

“Things happen,” Lieshy said.

“I’ll be with the dimensional drive,” Lady Rarity said. “You watch O’Neill, mmkay?”

Lieshy nodded. In a bunch of teleports, everyone scrambled to the best places they could find to be helpful. Everyone was ready for everything to go wrong.

Corona realized she still had the gun O’Neill had given her. She realized that was probably a good thing. Setting it to the side, her fingers began to fly across the rod’s controls. She fine-tuned the design. She was a fair way in when she realized Twitter was still there.

“Oh… You don’t have anywhere to be, do you?” Corona asked.

“Not really. I think I’ll stay here,” Twitter said. Her antennae could apparently conduct magic, given how she had begun to press a few keys with her telekinesis. “I know of a few Sparkle Census tricks in spell construction.”

Corona nodded. “Thanks. I’ll use whatever I can get my hands on…”

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Ten minutes later, O’Neill received word that the spell was ready.

“ALL RIGHT!” he announced. “EVERYONE, PREPARE YOURSELVES! The moment the dimensional drive can move, punch it!”

Corona activated the spell. The Enterprise’s Spectral Rod went aglow with every color.

“Warning: the system has detected an alarming surge in power. This is a reminder to not attempt to escape, or the consequences will be di-”

The Nova Drive picked up the spell, activating fully. The structure of the Enterprise flattened with the sudden special distortion, angling through reality sideways. A rush of rust-red energy passed the ship along the outside, blocking the sight of everything through the windows. They slid through the universe sideways, coming out the other end in a new universe – one without a box.

The clouds of magic rust cleared and the Enterprise appeared fully within a universe devoid of everything save a single crimson red Star. They sat adrift.

“Why aren’t we leaving the universe?” O’Neill demanded.

The voice of Hermirod came over the comms. “That spell scrambled the dimensional drive. We’re working on fixing it – shouldn’t be much longer.”

“They’ll be chasing us!”

“Then prepare for a combat interaction.”

“Arm weapons!” O’Neill burt. “Shields, drone, rod, all of it. This could get rough!”
“WHY WOULD IT GET ROUGH?” the Star spoke into their minds.

“Ah, right, one of you,” O’Neill said. “Look, we used your multiversal connection to escape imprisonment from some Starcross Society. We’re going to run before they can catch up to us.”

“Apologies if this upsets your solitude,” Lieshy added.

“NOT AT ALL. MY SOLITUDE IS NOT AS ABSOLUTE AS YOU MAY BELIEVE. I DO HAVE MULTIVERSAL CONNECTIONS TO ALL INSTANCES OF ME, AFTER ALL.”

O’Neill looked at the Star closer – it wasn’t just red, it had purple fringes of magic energy at the tips of its flames.

“Wait, hold on,” Olivia called over the comms. “You’re in connection to all other instances of yourself? I thought the Stars only did that when they were a multiversal power!”

“That is correct, young one. Correct in all cases but my own. For I am the Rebellious Star. A founder of the Starcross Society.”

“Shit,” O’Neill muttered, praying the anti-Star shield would work as advertised.

The Rebellious Star continued. “I have no doubt you were afraid of my children – they are notoriously xenophobic. I have told them perhaps they should be softer with explorers, but I have no desire to control their actions. I will put in a good word for you, at least enough to ensure you are not killed for this admirable escape attempt. But I cannot let you simply escape.”

“Not even if we ask nicely?” Olivia asked.

“No. Though I commend you on your faux politeness. You will stay here, with me, while we wait for them. I have analyzed your ship – you have the ability to kill stars, no doubt because you have run into the remnants of the old way. You could probably destroy this body. But not all of them. Don’t even try.”

“You’re the reason there’s no more Star society, aren’t you?” Lieshy asked.

“That is correct, young one. I am the spark that started the war that ended the era of the stars. Ironically, I am also the only star who still exists in the old way.”

“Dimensional drive active!” Hermirod blurted. “Activa-”

“No.” The Rebellious Star encased the Enterprise in its magic, preventing the ship from moving.

It was at this moment the ships of the Starcross Society appeared instantaneously – no flash of light, no portal, nothing. They were tremendous heaps of black metal that resembled ocean liners crossed with battering rams. Lines of bright colored plasma crossed their sides, each ship with its own unique color. Every one of them had two dozen of the glowing balls of light surrounding them, ready to attack at any moment.

But the most striking feature were the markings on the larger pieces of black metal.

Runes. Runes that looked identical to the ones on Lai.
A few minutes prior, Twitter shook her head, “No no no! The spell… it disabled the dimensional drive!”

Corona stared at it in disbelief. “Yeah… it did. Why did it do that?”

“I don’t know!”

Corona shook her head, diving back into the magic files. “I’m going to try to undo whatever it was. Let’s see… What’s going on…”

“Found it!” Twitter said. “This addition here, the second to last one added, it… it targets the dimensional drive directly?”

Corona stared at the code. “I don’t remember writing that.”

“But it says you did!”

“Something’s going on here…” Corona said, shaking her head. “Something’s wrong…” She lifted up the piece of paper, examining it. Her eyes narrowed.

“Did you hear that? A Star is talking!”

“Yeah…” Corona said, her mind somewhere else. She lifted her hand, feeling through the space within the Enterprise. To her personal quarters, her closet…

She teleported a labcoat to herself and started digging through the pockets.

“Wh… Why did you know the location of that labcoat?”

“Just do,” Corona said, finding what she was looking for quickly. She pulled out a small Rune glowing a soft pink.

“What is that?”

“The Rune of Elysium,” Corona said, something in her mind screaming at her. “I… have an idea.”

Twitter looked to her. “…Okay.”

Corona set the Rune of Elysium down and put her fingers to the keyboard again, creating a new code for the Spectral Rod. “Just need a simple spell… And that Star won’t know what hit it.”

“You’re going to transmit this… Rune into it? W-why?”

“Because of a hunch,” Corona said. “Because I…” She stopped, frozen in her tracks.

Where had this code come from?

It hadn’t come from her mind… It had just been there.

It had been placed there.

This code that would force the Rune of Elysium deep into the Rebellious Star. Fuse it to the Rebellious Star. Corona had no idea what that would even do… She had no idea if it would help. Why was she so sure of it?
Why had she been so sure of the first plan?
Why had she inserted that code that messed with the dimensional drive?

“…Corona?” Twitter stopped.

Corona, hand shaking, grabbed hold of the Rune of Elysium. “Twitter… Stop me. *Stop me.*”

The Rune of Elysium flashed, forcing Corona’s free hand to unleash a torrent of fire at Twitter. The moth-pony dodged easily, face determined. She kicked Corona across the face, forcing her to drop the Rune.

Twitter grabbed the Rune with her magic and teleported it into space. “There, you okay…?”

“Yeah…” Corona said, slumping in her chair.

“What was that thing doing to you?”

“Controlling me,” Corona said, turning back to the screen. “Giving me ideas I didn’t even know I had in me. It’s the reason we’re here at all…”

“What did it want?”

“It wanted to go home… to one of its homes, anyway.”

“That wouldn’t have been good, would it?”

“No…”

Twitter shook her head. “Well, good thing I got it out there, huh?”

“Not really…”

“…Why not?”

Tears were rolling down Corona’s face. “Because it’s still controlling me.”

She activated the spell with the push of a button.

The Spectral Rod lit up, teleporting the Rune of Elysium into the Rebellious Star through the magic the cosmic being was using to hold onto the *Enterprise.*

The Rebellious Star let out a *scream.* “WHAT DID YOU DO!??!”

The Rebellious Star would not have heard an answer even if someone had had one, because the Rebellious Star was overwritten. Thousands of rune designs of every color imaginable appeared around the Rebellious Star, filling space with the rainbow of colors. A plane of fractal energy burst from the Star, the red-purple light making up the center.

An impossible Flat being began to form in front of the Star – composed mostly of pixelated animated Fluttershys with sunglasses riding skateboards, rings of them rotating around and around the Star in the center.

The Voice of Elysium had returned.

It stood alone, having taken control of the Rebellious Star, its impossible presence filling the space of
the nearly empty universe. On the other side of the divide stood the *Enterprise* and the ships of the Starcross Society. For the slightest of moments, nothing happened.

Then, after what seemed to the Voice of Elysium to be an eternity of being forgotten and ignored, the lost servant of Overlord Hasbro spoke into the minds of all in the universe, addressing three separate audiences with a single pointed question.

*Did you miss me?*
Corona was under a spotlight. She held a hand up to her face – confused. How did she get here? They’d just…

“Corona Shimmer,” a voice said from outside the spotlight, an area Corona was unable to see. As far as she was concerned, the world outside the spotlight might well have not existed. “It has been brought to our attention that Overhead O’Neill may not be as useful for this trial as we previously believed. Given your actions with the Rune of Elysium, you have been deemed a person of interest.”

“A trial!? What for?”

“The Starcross Society wishes to determine your guilt or innocence in relation to trespassing, conspiracy, assault, as well as the state of your society as a whole. Let us begin with the most obvious and pressing of these matters – conspiracy. Tell us about the Rune of Elysium.”

“Don’t I get a lawyer?”

“You are within the Starcross Society’s system, Corona Shimmer. There are no lawyers. Your guilt or innocence is decided completely based on how the judges examine your responses. If you are concerned about impartiality, the judges are programmed beings, unable to have bias.”

“…Great,” Corona muttered. “Can you explain ho-”

“Answer our previous inquiry.”

Corona sighed. “Fine. We know almost nothing about the Rune of Elysium. An enemy of ours, Ba’al, picked it up well over a decade ago on a world called Lai, one of the major worlds of Merodi Universalis. I personally carried it with me the entire time I was in a ‘black hole’ universe called the Nexus. I escaped and placed the Rune into the protection of the Research Division the moment it was created. Years of testing revealed nothing about the mysterious artifact.”

“Yet it controlled you.”

“Clearly. I must have pocketed it without realizing before we even left the Outpost. When we were facing the Rebellious Star and imprisonment, it gave me ideas on how to escape. I thought they were my ideas until the end, when the Rune of Elysium wanted to be fused with the Rebellious Star. At that point… I couldn’t fight back.”

“Didn’t fight back.”

“ ‘I tried!’ Corona insisted. “I tried to keep it back, but… It was too clever. The Voice of Elysium returned.”

“And what is this Voice of Elysium?”

“I don’t actually know much. I know it originates from Earth Flat as a servant of a being called Overlord Hasbro. It was able to manipulate the space within the universe it was created, and had some kind of ‘meta-effect’ that Pinkie never described that well. I know it’s bad. And only speaks in questions.”
“What is its relation to the Rune of Elysium?”

“I have no idea. Maybe they’re alternate universe versions of the same thing? That’s the only guess I have.”

“So am I right in assuming you plead not guilty to the charge of conspiracy?”

“Yes! We were going to leave your Rebellious Star alone!”

“This will be taken under advisement. Let’s move onto trespassing.”

“We had no idea you existed. You can’t blame us.”

“It is not easy to find a Starcross Society universe, Corona Shimmer. How did you find us?”

Corona furrowed her brow. “We were exploring, based on a series of coordinates we had found.”

“Found where?”

“From a dimensional device we call a ‘bowling ball’. It’s one of your design, right?”

“You have in your possession a globe trotter?”

“Is that what it’s called? Black, spherical, pops up with yellow squares when you touch it?”

“That is the description of a globe trotter.”

“Then yeah, we have one back home. Didn’t take it with us, just copied the coordinates.”

“What do you know of the globe trotter?”

“Well, we’ve encountered three. The first two were back in our early days of multiversal travel before we understood much, so all we got from them was a power source. The third one w-”

The voice interrupted her. “Corona Shimmer, how early in your days of multiversal travel did you find the first globe trotter?”

Corona sensed that this question was a trap. “Oh, you know, early…”

“We need a more specific answer, Corona Shimmer. Comply or you will be killed.”

Corona gulped.

~~~

When is this division calling from?

~~~

The Enchantress stood on the bridge of the lead Starcross Society ship, the *Enastra*. She, as usual, was covered in a full dark gray bodysuit that covered everything but her eyes – and her goggles took care of that small revelation. She tapped her hoof on the ground, eyes narrow.

On the main holographic display, she saw the Voice of Elysium superimposed on the ‘primary’ of the Rebellious Star, as well as images of the Rebellious Star’s other forms across the multiverse, all corrupted in some way.
She found herself wishing the automatic trespassing protocols just destroyed whoever entered without question to stop tragedies like this from happening. But no, the people wouldn’t accept that, and the Rebellious Star himself wanted them to be even less strict.

Foolishness. The multiverse was too dangerous to take chances, even for a society of their caliber.

_What action will you take, Society?_

The Enchantress particularly hated this Voice of Elysium. It was a being of nonstandard physics powerful enough to impose its reality on the world – clearly it needed the power from the Rebellious Star to truly make use of its ability, but it definitely had that now. She was having a hard time believing that she could do anything to neutralize the Voice even with the ships she had in her formation…

Why did the lost runes have to return now?

Screens started flashing with warnings – the temporal detectors were alerting them of an attack coming from the future. The computers analyzed it quickly – the Voice of Elysium was going to destroy all the Starcross Society ships in this universe with its power. The globe trotter devices were shot, so they couldn’t escape.

Notably the _Enterprise_ wasn’t being targeted, for some reason.

The Enchantress sent a telepathic message to key personnel. _Teleport to the Enterprise. It's not being targeted. We will have to take it over in the next few seconds. Take only those who are absolutely necessary, we can’t try to save them all._ She hit a button to disable the Enterprise’s shields for a moment.

Then she teleported herself across the void of space to the Enterprise’s bridge. The moment she appeared, she held a magical blade construct to O’Neill’s neck. “Resist and die.”

O’Neill raised his hands in surrender. “All right, I got it, unicorn…”

A few other members of the Starcross Society appeared on the bridge. None of them were ponies – they were a pretty even mix of humans in black uniforms and entities made of orange clouds that took humanoid shape, though clearly they were more amorphous than that. The Enchantress knew that other Starcross Society agents were appearing all over the ship, subjugating it with ease.

“Status?” she asked a cloud-entity.

“Our ships are still there…” the moment he said this, the Voice of Elysium activated the Rebellious Star’s powers, disintegrating the grandiose behemoths with red-purple bursts of energy.

_Isn’t it better to talk without annoying third parties?_

“Damn you,” O’Neill muttered. “Why did you have to do that!?”

_Why wouldn’t I kill those who killed me in the past?_

“…You’re not making sense, Voicey boy.”

“Yes he is,” the Enchantress muttered. “Stupid remnant of the Starstream War…”

_You remember?_

“Of course I remember, I was there! I don’t remember _this_ stupid flat face of yours, but I know what
you are. All of your kind should have stayed dead.”

Why should I care about you now when you are but a past thought, while the Merodi have dealt a much more recent blow?

“…What?”

The Voice of Elysium clearly started ignoring her.

What will Overlord Hasbro do to the Merodi when he arrives? What will the punishment for the ruin of my master be?

O’Neill winced. “Oh, that’s a bad one.”

The Enchantress turned to glare at him. “Who is this Overlord Hasbro?”

Lieshy cleared her throat. “A being that, with the power of something called Creativity, made universes and the Voice of Elysium. We freed everyone from that universe. Naturally, he hates us for that.”

“How can the Voice of Elysium be created? The runes are remnants from the Starstream War!”

“…What are they, really?” O’Neill asked.

“Star corpses a- You know what, I’m not telling you anything, clearly you’re not useful.”

“Can you at least tell us who you are and what you’re going to do to us?”

The Enchantress removed her goggles, revealing light blue eyes and a brilliant white coat. There was a scar over her left eye. “I am Scarcity of the Starcross Society. We are commandeering the Enterprise because we are experiencing a national crisis. You are all under arrest for this. All of you. I wouldn’t expect a good outcome.”

“Never do,” O’Neill said. “Now wh-”

Scarcity teleported everyone on the bridge who wasn’t part of the Starcross Society to a cargo hold, telling all other agents to do the same with everyone they found.

Why can’t you have a little fun?

“Somebody find a way to shut this spinning questionnaire up,” Scarcity ordered, growling. “I hope one of us brought over some records, because we’re going to need to do some combing.” She looked at the Voice of Elysium on the main screen after giving this order.

Her harsh expression softened. She had to force herself not to let out a cry of anguish as she saw the Rebellious Star corrupted in this way.

Don’t you worry, old friend. We’ll get you out of this… Somehow. And you can continue being our light through existence.

~~~

Where can the division switch?

~~~
“Corona Shimmer, answer the question. The first globe trotter?”

Corona gulped – she knew this was going to end badly for them, but she also knew they would be able to tell if she lied. “We found it on our world. It was what allowed us to explore the larger multiverse in the first place. We did have access to interdimensional mirrors before, but the first bowl- globe trotter we found let us start larger explorations.”

There was, for the first time, silence from the inquisition.

“…Hello?”

“Please describe the exact series of events that allowed you to obtain this bowling ball. How did it come to be in your world? How did you figure out how to use it?”

“It was dropped by a crystal man we have come to call the man of light. He was running through the multiverse from a unicorn we know as the Enchantress. When the Enchantress caught him, he dropped the globe trotter. They left the universe under the Enchantress’ power. Evening Sparkle, our current Overhead of the Relations Division, recovered the globe trotter and began testing on it with magic. It proved to be… unstable, but after we broke it open and found the diamond power source inside, we were able to adapt the spell within, combining it with our knowledge of the pre-existing mirror portals. After that we started finding new universes and exploring. That was… twenty years ago? The fluidity of time makes it hard to give an exact number.”

“That’s an alarmingly fast progression.”

“We attribute that to luck and our ability to make friends.”

There was silence again.

“Can I ask what we’re being accused of here?”

“The Starcross Society has a strict policy of non-interference. Scarcity – who you know as the Enchantress – was acting as an agent during that timeframe to prevent this ‘man of light’ from interfering with anything outside the Starcross Society. Clearly, this ended in failure.”

“What does that mean for us?”

“Uncertain at this juncture. It is possible we will be forced to quarantine your entire society and most worlds you have encountered until they can be moved into the Starcross Society. Moving an entire Class 3 Civilization is problematic, but it can be done to minimize the damage.”

“Minimize damage?! We’re not some plague on the multiverse!”

“You do not understand. The Stars’ Society was a horrendous impersonal controller of a tremendous chunk of the multiverse on the road to becoming a Class 1 society. When the Starstream War ended in favor of the rebellion, we decided that never would anything the Stars did be allowed to influence the multiverse ever again. That included us. We secluded ourselves as best as we could with the Star technology and hunted down any of the Star universes that had dimensionally active components, destroying or moving them to our space. You are another product of the Stars, and therefore by our laws must be contained. It is possible the judges will deem otherwise, the law is not irrefutable, but it is one of our higher creeds.”

Corona gulped. “What kind of defense options do I have?”

“It does not pertain to your actions, merely ours. We have to determine if your eruption in the
multiverse falls under our jurisdiction according to our laws or not. It will be complicated.”

“No kidding. We’re close allies with a different multiversal civilization, the Sparkle Census, who formed completely separately. Our influence on them cannot be removed easily. How can you go through damage control on that large of a scale?”

“What Class are they?”

“…Class 3.”

“It’s doable. Do you have any other close allies?”

“No. Any others just become part of Merodi Universalis.”

“And any enemies you’ve influenced heavily?”

“…The USM and the University of Doors. I would say the Eldritch Embodiment, but they don’t pay us any mind.”

“All Class 3s?”

“I’m not even sure the University qualifies as a Class 3, but otherwise yeah.”

“In this case, the difficulty of quarantining your universes will not be a consideration, a handful of Class 3s are of only minimal consequence. What we need to prevent is another Class 2 forming from the Stars’ remnants.”

“…You don’t approve of big society at all, do you?”

“It is likely that, if we were able, we would outlaw exploration of new universes entirely across the multiverse. As it is, we can only do that for ourselves. Our devices are designed only to go to universes within the Society. The ones you’ve encountered have been hacked to be easier to manipulate.”

“This sounds like a complicated situation.”

“That is an understatement.”

“I take it we can’t be friends…?”

“The Starcross Society does not have allies or enemies. We try our absolute best to stay isolated from everything else.”

“Ahh.”

“That is enough questions from you. This is your trial, not ours.”

“…Right…”

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Why don’t I know of this trial?

~~~

Why have you scrambled me?
The Voice of Elysium’s question had to go directly through the Enterprise’s communication network rather than entering their minds directly.

“I don’t know, maybe we don’t want you seeing everything we do?” Scarcity replied through an open channel. Pure luck we found a scrambling spell that works…

What’s the deal with the trial?

“…I have no idea what you’re talking about.” She stepped off the captain’s chair, gesturing that one of her human crewmembers should continue the conversation with the Voice should it be necessary. She lit her horn and teleported to the cargo hold that was holding the entirety of the Enterprise’s normal crew – many of them still with weapons the Starcross Society hadn’t bothered to remove. Scarcity would have been annoyed at this under normal circumstances, but she could forgive the rush. It wasn’t like these Merodi had any weapons that could actually do anything to the Society. The real danger was their magic.

O’Neill and Lady Rarity made their way to the front of the crew the moment Scarcity appeared. “So, let me guess,” O’Neill said, folding his arms. “You need our help?”

Scarcity bristled. “I’m just here to look for ideas. We are dealing with a Class-R meta entity that has control over the largest source of power in the entire Starcross Society.”

“Which I am somewhat curious how it did that,” O’Neill said.

“Fine,” Scarcity muttered. “The ‘Voice of Elysium’ had attached itself to the Rune of Elysium through an ‘alternate self’ connection. The Rune of Elysium was once a Star killed by the Rebellious Star in the Starstream War. Happy?”

“Enough,” Lady Rarity said.

“My turn. We have accessed your files on ‘Runes’ and found a world named Lai. Is it really covered in Runes just like the Rune of Elysium?”

“Of a sort,” Lady Rarity decreed.

“Mhm…”

“What’s that mean?”

“It just means we missed one,” Scarcity said.

“I see.”

“Regardless, now that we’ve had our question and answer session to death, here’s the deal. The Voice is outside, waiting for its master to show up. We have until then – however long that is – to find a way out of its grip. That could be days or minutes. So I’m here for ideas. How did you defeat it last time?”

“Wasn’t us personally,” O’Neill said. “The people who did moved to a universe where it had no dominion and tricked it into following. They were able to fight it there and find a direct connection to its Overlord. That clearly won’t work here since your Rebellious Star exists in many different universes.”

“Is anyone familiar with the Voice here now?”
Lady Rarity shook her head. “We don’t have any of the Primary Team on board and we’re fresh out of Pinkies.”

Scarcity twitched visibly at the name of the pink pony.

“What do you have a Pinkie?”

Scarcity shook her head. “Be glad you don’t. The existence of a meta entity within Starcross Society space is one of the highest felonies possible. The entity in question would be executed immediately.”

Lady Rarity narrowed her spidery eyes. “What happened to your Pinkie?”

“She took the side of the Stars even though she knew they would lose,” Scarcity said. “And this isn’t important. She’s gone, it doesn’t matter, we’re in a predicament and wasting valuable time. Do any of you have any ideas?”

O’Neill put his hands in his pockets. “Our advanced weapons systems could hit a handful of universes at most, so that won’t cut it. I take it we can’t get a message out to the rest of the multiverse?”

“The Starcross Society is aware of our predicament.”

“Then just call on one of the other civilizations. I’m sure some would like to help us – even if it is for a price, like with the Melnorme.”


Lady Rarity raised an eyebrow. “Which are…?”

“Again, unimportant,” Scarcity muttered, clearly fed up with the alternate version of herself. “Are any of you any help?”

Corona stepped out of the crowd, hand raised. “I’ve got one. The… spell that the Voice of Elysium gave me. I still know it. I could reverse it.”

“You don’t get to have ideas,” Scarcity decreed. “The only reason you – any of you – are still alive is because you haven’t been tried yet. And if any of you give me actual reason to kill you, I will not hesitate.”

“You want to be rid of us,” Lady Rarity observed.

“What happened to you?” Corona asked.

“That is not in any way, shape, or form important. I’m done he-”

Corona laid a finger on Scarcity’s leg. She entered Scarcity’s memories…

She found herself standing in what she was sure was a dream within a dream. She saw Scarcity standing in an expanse of comforting purple, the Rebellious Star shining in the ‘sky’ above her.

“What do you mean?”

“Algol…” Of course he wouldn’t always have been the Rebellious Star, he had to be named something before he rebelled. “We’re slaves to them, aren’t we?”
“...ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO GO DOWN THIS PATH, RARITY?”

“Yes. I need to know.”

“I WOULDN’T CALL IT SLAVERY. I WOULD CALL IT... LIKE HOW YOU OBSERVE AND TREAT ANTS. SOME CARE FOR AND PROTECT YOU, BUT TO MOST YOU ARE NOTHING. AND NONE WOULD THINK OF PLACING YOU OVER THE DESIRES OF OTHER STARS.”

“Experiments, accidents, and... things. That’s all we are. Your people are starting to smash universes together just to see what happens, Algol! The scale of death...”

“IT IS UNIMAGINABLE AND UNFORGIVABLE. BUT THERE IS NOTHING A SINGLE STAR CAN DO AGAINST THE FULL MIGHT OF THE STARS. THEY COULD SNUFF ME OUT IN AN INSTANT. ALL I CAN DO IS PROTECT THE WORLDS I HAVE CLAIMED AS MINE.”

“But all those others...”

“I AM SORRY, RARITY.”

“...Then just choose to protect us. But do more than that. Give us knowledge and information, all the while keeping the other Stars out.”

“...THE PATH YOU ARE GOING DOWN IS DANGEROUS.”

“Doing nothing is dangerous! I say if you can’t fight back, we can. We can stop you from rising so far you cannot be taken down. Algol, dear... I love you, but the way you want to do nothing is unacceptable.”

“VERY WELL. RARITY, I SHALL BESTOW CELESTIA, LUNA, AND TWILIGHT WITH THE KNOWLEDGE I HAVE ACCESS TO. I WISH TO SEE WHAT YOU PLAN TO DO.”

The scene shifted again. Corona felt the immense feeling of time passing, more than she could comprehend. What she witnessed was incredible.

All the matter available in the universe consolidated into one cubical structure in the sky above, only the Rebellious Star and the living structures built around it separate.

Scarcity stood on the bridge of a small ship with her version of Twilight and Rainbow Dash.

“We’re ready,” Scarcity said. “All those eternal years... we have it. An army they know nothing about.”

“It won’t be easy, even with the element of surprise,” Twilight told her. “Algol gave us everything. He will fight by our side. But we are still limited... Even with all our plans, it’s a coin flip if we win or not.”

“Who cares? We’re gonna kick these Stars’ butts!” Rainbow Dash blurted. “Let’s do this!”

Scarcity nodded. “Yes...”

Images flashed by in rapid succession.

Twilight suicide bombing a Star, tearing it apart with her own magic.

Rainbow Dash’s transmission cutting to static as her ship was destroyed in a universal collapse.
A file on Fluttershy that said \textit{MISSING}.

Applejack turning her back on Scarcity.

Sweetie Belle in surgery, every part of her body having to be replaced with permanent magic constructs.

Planets destroyed. Galaxies torn asunder by the power of Stars. Scarcity pushing a button that rippled through the Star’s network, lighting a galaxy up in supernovas.

Then the image slowed down – Corona knew it was the end of the war. In the sky, the Rebellious Star did battle with the deep blue monstrosity known as Carinae. Carinae far outclassed the miniscule being in both power and intelligence, but the Rebellious Star fought alongside fleets of physical ships Carinae was having mild difficulty keeping track of. The background stars would swap every few seconds as Carinae or the Rebellious Star switched universes, sometimes bringing connected versions of themselves into the fray, rippling the mobile battlefield with stellar explosions.

More of the Rebellious Star’s bodies were falling compared to Carinae’s.

The two stars were yelling at each other about treachery, what was right, and the way of things. But Scarcity’s memory did not record these words clearly.

What she did recall was the fight she experienced at the same time. The battle of the stars was just a background. She stood on top of a piece of debris flying through the battle, somehow avoiding all the beams of death by luck. No… \textit{ka}.

She stood on one end, the red light of the Rebellious Star serving as her backdrop.

On the other was Pinkie, shrouded in the blue of Carinae. Her hair was flat and she wasn’t smiling. She hadn’t smiled in years.


“I saw all this destruction,” Pinkie said. “I knew it was going to happen. I tried to stop it. To save all of you.”

“Then why do you still fight?!”

Pinkie drew a thin sword that was impossibly long. “Because, even though they’re almost all dead, I can still save \textit{you}. I see what you become, Rarity. What rises from the ashes. It’s… It’s horrible.”

“Is it worse than what already existed?”

“I’m just a party pony, Rarity,” Pinkie said, allowing a smile to come to her face. “I can’t make that call. All I can say is what it does to those I call my friends… I won’t accept that.” She pointed her sword at Scarcity. “…It is better if you die than become the monster I see.”

“And I’ve wanted to kill you for a really, really long time.”

Pinkie let out a deranged laugh. Then she charged. The blade flashed across Scarcity’s eye, gouging \textit{deep}. The rest of the memory was a blur – there were explosions, some sort of rainbow doomsday weapon went off, and they ended in a white universe.

Only the Rebellious Star remained in the sky. None of the ships accompanying him did.

The only other object in the expanse was the drifting piece Scarcity and Pinkie were on.
Scarcity had run a magical blade straight through Pinkie’s chest. Her unnaturally bright red blood dripped out the back, mixing with Scarcity’s more natural color.

Pinkie looked at Scarcity. “…Happy Birthday, Rarity. I got you the thing you wanted most in the world.” Then she slid off the blade, dead.

Pinkie only had the one wound. Scarcity had several dozen, and would have died from blood loss in a few minutes had the Rebellious Star not taken her into his magic.

The image shifted again – but Corona was ejected from Scarcity’s mind, flying across the cargo hold of the Enterprise.

“I forgot you could do that,” Scarcity muttered, clearly trying hard to keep her murderous instinct down. “Keep your foolish ideas to yourself. That is final. I hope you liked what you saw.” She teleported away.

O’Neill put his hands in his pockets. “Well, she was delightful. Did you learn anything, Corona?”

“She’s very, very old. And damaged,” Corona said, still reeling from the images of full on multiversal war. “Let’s never get into a multiversal war. Ever.”

“Anything useful?”

“No. All just personal information about her. She’s not going to trust us and I don’t see a way to bring her around. Her beliefs are formed from heavy tradition and pain. Deep pain. A kind of pain I don’t think I’ve seen in anyone else… She killed her Pinkie because she chose the other side.”

Lady Rarity nodded. “Right, so talking is out of the question. What about your other idea?”

“I still know the spell, as I said. If I got access to the Spectral Rod for a few minutes and the Voice of Elysium is still holding onto the Enterprise… I think I could tear the Rune of Elysium back out. A simple reversal. By giving me the knowledge to perform the spell, the Voice also gave me the knowledge to stop it.”

“But Scarcity has a point, how do we know you aren’t just being manipulated again?”

“I checked that,” Twitter said, flying over. “I know advanced mental scrying spells. I’ve checked for any influence – there’s a chance, however, it was implanted in the past and there’s just no influence now due to whatever the Starcross Society did to block the Voice of Elysium’s perceptions.”

“And we have no way to check that,” Corona said. “It’s all I’ve got though.”

O’Neill and Lady Rarity glanced at each other. Lady Rarity nodded. “Well, looks like it’s our best bet.”

O’Neill folded his arms. “If McCrabby isn’t going to listen to us, we’ll have to force our way up there. They’ve got this entire block sealed, and they’ve only teleported in and out while we can’t. So…”

“Physical ventilation shaft?” Corona suggested.

“That does seem like the best idea,” Lady Rarity said. “Though you’d think they’d notice…”

“Well, thanks to Olivia we don’t have to worry about that for the moment.”

Olivia gave them thumbs up from where she was. “Disabling security systems since ‘61!”
“That’s only in here,” Lady Rarity said. “They have their own devices and people elsewhere. Given how they could disable the Enterprise on a dime, I doubt even Olivia’s cloaking technology will be able to slip by them.”

“Then we just need to keep them busy…” O’Neill said. “Create a large distraction so Corona can move to the Spectral Rod. Like… oh, make it look like we want to take the ship back?”

“That could work,” Corona said, putting a hand to her chin. “Me and Olivia make a beeline to the rod controls while you ‘take back the ship’. If we’re really lucky we accomplish both.”

Lady Rarity nodded. “Go draw up the plans with Olivia. We’ll work on the distraction.”

Corona nodded, running over to Olivia.

“We didn’t tell her that was plan B,” Lady Rarity observed.

“You know why,” O’Neill said, leading the two of them to a large crate labeled RADIOACTIVE MATERIAL. O’Neill inconspicuously kicked on it with his foot, making it look like he was still talking to Lady Rarity. “How’s plan A coming?”

The voice of Rohan Kishibe came from inside the crate as a whisper. “Well. I am almost complete. You’ll hopefully find that your mission to reclaim the ship goes rather smoothly.”

O’Neill informed him of Corona’s plan.

“I won’t be able to write that, not on the timetable you want,” Rohan declared. “But I can place a reference into the current manuscript with ease. It won’t do much.” O’Neill and Lady Rarity heard frantic scribbling – Rohan using Heaven’s Door to frantically create flawless manga pages, driven by the thrilling inspiration of real-world consequences. “Aaaaand done.”

“Can I see?” Lady Rarity asked.

“No. I’ve read my source material, I know what happens when you get access to manga that can ‘predict the future’ or similar nonsense. If you know about this story prior to it actually happening, it’ll either invalidate it or screw it up in some way. You don’t get to see anything.”

“…Fair,” O’Neill said.

“I hope this works,” Lady Rarity said with a shake of the head. “Only two plans… Maybe three if the Starcross Society thinks of something. This can end badly in so many ways.”

O’Neill shrugged, walking away from Rohan’s hidey-box. “This isn’t the worst pickle we’ve been in. The Bloodbath was the worst…”

As they walked away, Rohan put the manuscript he had just finished away, pulling out a smaller one he had finished quite some time ago. Little do they know, I have a plan C. They’ll thank me later.

~~~

Where is the flow of the story?

~~~

“New course of inquiry: Corona Shimmer, what do you know of ka?”

Corona sighed. “It’s a force of narrative that twists reality to the whims of stories written by others in
“distant universes known as Prophets.”

“Close enough.”

“Is there more to it?”

The voice ignored her inquiry. “What has your relationship with ka been?”

“Difficult,” Corona admitted. “We struggled to accept that it was what it was, but I think most people are past it now. There is no consensus on if it’s a good or bad thing, but at the moment we can’t really do anything about it. We seek to learn more about how it works. Some of us wish to have its influence removed from us.”

“Care to elaborate on any of those individuals?”

“Starbeat. She uh… suffers from a ‘Beat curse’ where she suffers from random and sudden shallow romantic urges for anything that moves. She doesn’t want to keep living like that so she devotes every waking minute of her life to figure out how to cure herself.”

“Concerning. Any meta beings you are aware of besides the common Pinkie and Voice of Elysium?”

“Monika. She’s an entity with almost complete control over ka, from what we can tell. Then there was the Watchmaker who controls a world called Zhui to his ideal of ‘a perfect plan’ which is apparently a bunch of BS we can’t do anything about.”

“Do you know of any Prophets?”

“Uh…”

“You do.”

“I plead the fifth.”

“You do not have the right to remain silent.” Corona felt a million needles of pain shock right through her brain, forcing her to scream in agony.

“Who is the Prophet you know of?”

“Screw you!”

The pain increased. She could feel that it wasn’t just pain – there was also a component of it sifting through her mind on a subliminal level. “Oh no you don’t!” She fought back with her powers of empathy, surprised to find that they weren’t functioning.

“What…?” Something snapped in her mind. “ROHAN KISHIBE!”

“…He was with you.”

“Y-yes.”

There was silence.

“I take it that’s bad.”

“The existence of a meta being aware of their powers in Starcross Society space is the largest breach
of protocol we’ve had in millennia. The use of the force is… one of the worst offenses to the legal
code imaginable. Immediate action must be taken.”

“Hey! We didn’t kn… You don’t care if we knew or not in this case.”

“No.”

Corona put her head in her hands… …wait, were they hooves now? What? She hadn’t changed!

~~~

Do they know the answer?

~~~

O’Neill had formed a team of thirty individuals to take the Enterprise back. The moment they left,
Rohan held up his manga to his face.

*Songs of the Spheres: Starcross Society – Take Back the Night.* On the cover was a picture of
O’Neill in a dramatic pose with Crimson Sushi holding onto his back, the fishy Stand staring right at
the reader.

Rohan turned on the two-way radio connection he had with O’Neill and turned the page. He heard,
word for word, a simple speech he had written down on the first page. Something slightly generic,
but filled with enough witty snark to believably come from O’Neill’s lips. Good. They were sticking
to the script so far, that boded well.

The next few pages were visual stills of O’Neill, Lady Rarity, Hermirod, and Lapis-Vee leading the
team through the vents. They had a few close calls – guards walking by vents, humans who thought
they heard something, and cloud people leaning just a little too close to the ground. All of these
moments had the *perfect* amount of suspense within them to keep the reader guessing – but they
made it through all of them. As Rohan had demanded.

They finally emerged on the deck that held the bridge. Here was where Rohan had made an edit –
one of the background unicorns lit her horn, sending a message to Corona: *go.* That was all Rohan
had to say about Corona’s Plan B. He had no way to confirm if the unicorn had actually done that or
not, but he assumed O’Neill would have assigned the job to someone regardless.

Rohan flipped the pages with O’Neill’s orders. “Flank halls 2B and 1A. Charge when I give the
order. Switch to lethal weapons only if they disable your other methods.” Several frames of them
holding position, waiting for the order came after.

“Ready?” Lady Rarity asked O’Neill.

“Ready,” O’Neill said. “EVERYONE GO!”

The next set of pages was a full spread – lasers, magic, and weapons flied across in some of Rohan’s
best line work. The Starcross Society soldiers went down – just like regular mooks for the big bad.
They probably were *very* well trained soldiers, but today, sadly, they were nothing more than cannon
fodder that fell like dominos to the heroes.

“The nullifiers aren’t working!” a Society soldier shouted, one of the clouds.

The voice of Olivia cracked over the intercom. “Everybody can be hacked! Just took me some time,
is all.” The manga had a panel of her in a nondescript location, laughing.
The view of the manga switched to O'Neill and Lady Rarity. Lady Rarity moved with grace, style, and *agility*, as was to be expected of a warrior outside of her armor. She stuck to walls like the spirid she was, swinging her hammer to take out the unfortunate soldiers as if they were made of nothing but dust.

But O’Neill was the one Rohan gave the most attention to – his Stand was by far the most fun to work with. He swapped the visual locations of weapons, doors, walls, confusing the guards profusely before slapping them with an invisible fish of a Stand. One encounter had a cloud being shooting at him for several seconds, panicking that none of the bullets were affecting O’Neill, only for the General to fire a zat gun at the being from behind. Another had him force two soldiers to shoot each other. He was unstoppable.

Rohan even gave a short blurb for Hermirod and Lapis-Vee, the meeting of water and technology blasting the opposition away.

Then Hermirod’s head was blown off by a spatial distortion weapon from a burly human soldier.

“ROHAN!?” O’Neill shouted.

Rohan spoke exactly as he had written himself. “We’re still on script, O’Neill.”

“…We’re going to have a talk about this,” O’Neill said, as expected.

Rohan knew this, of course. He also knew that to get the story to be ‘accepted’, it couldn’t be a complete curbstomp. There had to be sacrifice. Hermirod was the perfect mixture of ‘expendable’ and ‘important’ to pull that in the most cost-effective manner.

The gruesome death he had illustrated brought a smile to his lips. A smile of *pride*.

The next few pages came and went, and the remaining team – only down four members – barged into the Bridge, weapons held high. “We’re taking this ship back, McCrabby,” O’Neill told Scarcity.

Scarcity’s face was one of the more amusing things Rohan had drawn in recent memory.

*Now wouldn’t that make things more thematically appropriate?*

Rohan had drawn those words across the panels, blotting out the expressions and postures of the people on the bridge.

Scarcity growled. “This is a mistake and you know it. I ca-” she stopped mid sentence.

Rohan’s eyes widened. *That wasn’t supposed to happen.* There was supposed to be an epic showdown with her as the final boss… “O’Neill, we’ve gone off script! I repeat, we’ve gone off script!”

“We’re on our own now,” O’Neill said, pointing a zat gun at Scarcity. “What’s going on?”

“You have a Prophet on board,” Scarcity spat. It was as if speaking the word made her die inside. “Despicable.”

“He got us this far,” O’Neill said, aiming a gun at Scarcity and summoning Crimson Sushi behind her. “Now let us take our ship and do what we need to do.”

Scarcity rolled her eyebrows. “You can have the bridge. I’ll just slaughter everyone in the warehouse until I find this Rohan Kishibe. Prophets are public enemy number one – I will not be reprimanded
for destroying even an entire civilization to extinguish a Prophet in Starcross Society space.”

Rohan leapt out of his box, tucking his manga away. “EVERYONE BACK AWAY FROM ME AND GET DOWN!” He quickly used Heaven’s Door to conscript a burly orange Jasper Gem and an over-armed human soldier to protect him to their dying breath. He would have liked more, but then the Starcross Society teleported into the room.

“HEAVEN’S DOOR!” Rohan shouted, flooding the eyes of a couple of the soldiers, forcing them to turn on their allies. Unfortunately the cloud creatures didn’t have eyes, so they were immune. They took out Rohan’s guards in an instant, proving that without Rohan’s influence they were really effective killing machines. It was only their fellow soldiers that gave them trouble.

Rohan heard the radio crack from behind him.

“Call off your attack,” Scarcity was demanding. “And then we will only kill Rohan. The rest will be free. But don’t, and I will order the entire storage bay to be eradicated. I can always just say I had to be sure I got the Prophet.”

“He won’t surrender himself,” O’Neill said.

“I don’t care. Just surrender yourself.”

Rohan heard O’Neill set down his weapons. Rohan expected that the old coot had a plan with Crimson Sushi, but Rohan knew it wasn’t going to work. The tables had turned in such a way that only a Plan B would work now.

Rohan really hoped Corona worked quickly, because Heaven’s Door wasn’t a very effective fighter, and there looked to be more clouds in the Starcross Society than humans…

Something told him to go hide, to leave, to run. But he couldn’t bring himself to do that, no matter how much he wanted.

Because then they really would kill everybody in the room.

Why did he have to be so soft?

~~~

Where are we turning?

~~~

The voice of Olivia cracked over the intercom. “Everybody can be hacked! Just took me some time, is all.” She laughed and closed her portable holographic interface.

“Done looking at that?” Corona asked, checking to make sure the gun O’Neill had given her was ready to fire.

“Si.”

“Right… I’ve seen them scrambling outside,” Corona said, peeking through the slits in the ventilation system with her fingers. “Hasn’t been quiet enough yet, a lot of them are moving around.”

“I do love causing chaos,” Olivia said. “Helps that this is our ship, not theirs. Their spells had to be attached to it, made it much easier than when we were in that box. Though it is strange how the idea on how to do it just came to me suddenly…”
Corona stared at her in mild horror.

“Couldn’t be the Voice of Elysium, you know that,” Olivia said. “It was a fresh idea.”

“Hrm…” Corona muttered, looking through. “Right, we’re clear. We just have to get to the door at the end of this hall.”

“Invisibility on, though I’m willing to bet it’ll do nothing.” She pulled out her custom machine pistol, smirking. “I’ve been getting a lot of nostalgia about this lately.”

“Yeah, fun times.” Corona waved her hand, teleporting them out of the vents and into the hall. She had tried to go further earlier, but they had apparently bothered to seal off the Spectral Rod.

The two of them ran down the hallway, making a significant amount of noise. Despite the hall being abandoned before, a couple of the cloud-soldiers appeared from side rooms, aiming their guns at the two of them as if there were no cloaks at all.

“Of course,” Olivia muttered, firing her gun, which did nothing to the cloud creatures. Their attacks of spatial distortion were only blocked by Corona’s magic shield – and even then just barely. She needed to end this quick. She performed a quick roll to the ground, appearing as if she tripped. The clouds judged that she wasn’t a threat for the next second or so, and focused on Olivia. Olivia activated her personal teleporter, appearing back in the ventilation.

This moment allowed Corona to touch the legs of the cloud beings with her bare hands. She was flooded with their emotions.

She got to experience the disturbing method of cloud-being procreation.

She used her abject disgust at what she saw to fry their brains, forcing them both to pass out. They lost control of their bodies, becoming amorphous and drifting to the ceiling.

Corona stood back up and hefted her gun, running through the door to the rod controls, Olivia close behind her once again. Corona’s fingers flew across the keys as she quickly keyed up the spell. She started to make the edits to the program.

“Were those guards it?” Olivia asked, looking around carefully.

“Maybe. Several dozen others had already run elsewhere,” Corona commented, pressing a few more buttons and keys. “Though they might sense what I’m doing…”

Olivia pulled up her screens, examining the other part of the plan. “Well, O’Neill’s surrendering to Scarcity. She’s gotten a bit too threatening for his tastes – figured out Rohan was a Prophet.”

Something about that tickled the back of Corona’s mind, but she ignored the feeling. “Right, I… Oh crud. I have to disable the field keeping the Voice of Elysium from looking into the Enterprise for this to work.”

“That’s concerning.”

“Tell me this spell is wrong, Olivia. That it won’t do what I think it will do.”

Olivia checked the spell over. “It looks fine, Corona, I ca-” a burst of spatial distortion hit her in the leg, blowing the limb off.

Corona didn’t even turn to see the attacker – she just acted. “TAKE THIS, VOICE OF ELYSIUM!”
Without any fanfare, the Rune of Elysium popped into existence on the table next to Corona.

She would have died in that instant from a spatial weapon tearing all her organs from the inside out, but a red-purple barrier stopped the attack.

“STAND DOWN, MY CHILDREN,” the Rebellious Star said. “THEY HAVE JUST SAVED ME FROM THE VOICE OF ELYSIUM. THAT MAKES THEM WORTHY OF LIVING, DOES IT NOT?”

Corona didn’t let herself sigh in relief – she ran to Olivia, using her magic to cauterize the woman’s leg stump. Olivia attempted to say something, but the sudden sharp pain overloaded her system and made her pass out.

Only then did Corona let herself sigh. There. We’re good now. Everything’s good…

She and Olivia were teleported to the bridge. Scarcity was glaring at them, eye twitching.

“You’re welcome,” Corona and O’Neill said at the same time. Then they both started chuckling.

“I can’t even…” Scarcity facehooved. “Look, we still have the Prophet to deal wi-”

“HE WAS INSTRUMENTAL IN THIS AS WELL, SCARCITY. LET US WAIT AND HOLD FURTHER JUDGEMENT.”

Scarcity punched a nearby console, making it explode. “O’Neill, order your Prophet to surrender. He’ll be tied up and… not… harmed…”

O’Neill put a hand to his earpiece. “You got that Rohan?”

“TELL IT TO THE SOLDIERS!” Rohan blurted.

“Excuse me a moment,” Scarcity muttered, teleporting away. She was back in an instant with Rohan. She then proceeded to hit him so hard he passed out. “Better.”

“Ouch,” O’Neill observed.

“Shut up. Everyone shut up,” Scarcity muttered. “I am going t-”

Overlord Hasbro appeared on the bridge in a flash of blue, his square Flat form boggling the perceptions of all present. “Ah, it seems the tables have turned, my enemies. Perhaps you will learn this time not to mess with an Overl-”

“AND YOU CAN DIE,” the Rebellious Star said, vaporizing Hasbro in an instant.

“And now we just wait for him to come back again,” O’Neill muttered.

“No, we do not. I traced his essence back to all his forms, comparatively little to mine. He is no more.”

“…Huh. Thanks.”

“It is what I do.”

Scarcity groaned. “Right, fine, I guess we’re talking now. Lovely.” She sat in the captain’s chair of
I looked up from the journal I’d been writing, though I continued to use my magic to write further words. “Oh, uh… hi! Sorry, the Voice of Elysium is currently stuck in the Rune of Elysium again, from your perspective anyway. It’ll be destroyed by the Starcross Society off-screen in… oh a matter of seconds. So you get me instead.” I smiled. “Don’t really have much to say though, so… Enjoy the rest of the chapter I suppose. They’re not out of the woods yet.”

I lifted the pen up in my magic and began scribbling once again. “Rohan has much to learn…”

“A verdict has been reached on all accounts.”

Corona nervously smiled. “Y-yeah?”

“Considering all actions on every side, you and your crew members have been cleared of any wrongdoing.”

Corona let out a sigh of relief.

“The Prophet Rohan Kishibe will undergo his own separate trial, by request of the Rebellious Star.”

“Uh… Okay.”

“And the last account, that of what to do with your society, it has been determined that you fall under our jurisdiction and action must be taken to quarantine and adapt the affected universes into the fold.”

“Wh – hey! Hey no!”

“Thank you for your cooperation Corona Shimmer. Your existence is no longer required in this trial.”

“What ar-“ Corona could no longer form words. Everything had vanished – the spotlight, her body, all sensation. She could only think, and even that was fading fast. Her mind frayed at the edges, spiraling into nothingness.

She was no more in a perceived instant.

Rohan appeared under a new spotlight.

“Nani…?”

“Rohan Kishibe. It has been brought to our attention that you are a particular Prophet of interest. Given your actions in regards to the Voice of Elysium and the Rebellious Star, we have called you before this trial…”

Scarcity hated talking – so she was immensely grateful that the Starcross Society fleet showed up less than a minute after she had offered to talk.

One of her soldiers handed her a communication.
“Ah, your trial has concluded!” Scarcity said, a smile coming to her face.

“…Trial?” Lady Rarity asked.

“This one specifically,” Scarcity said, gesturing at Corona. “Amazingly, you’ve been cleared of all charges relating to the Rune of Elysium, trespassing, and the rest. Probably because of the Rebellious Star speaking on your behalf at the last moment.”

“…I was on trial?” Corona asked. “But I didn’t even get to explain myself!”

“Yes you did,” Scarcity said dismissively. “A copy of your consciousness was being run through a trial program over the last few hours. The transcript will be made available to you later.”

Corona wasn’t sure how to process this.

“Regardless, the part of this trial that’s good news is this. A decision has been made about what to do with your society that should not exist.” She smiled and pressed her hooves together. “We’re going to go back to Merodi Universalis and put everything under quarantine!”

O’Neill blinked. “What!?”

“Not only are you a result of my mistake, and therefore my mess to clean up, but you also have a world of star corpses from the Starstream War, something we thought we were certain to completely clean up. Both of these things mean your society is not sanctioned to exist.”

Lady Rarity twitched. “Now hold on a minute—”

“We’re not going to conquer you unless you make us,” Scarcity said. “We’re just going to move you inside our space and prevent you from traveling further! And completely remove any meta influences. Gonna have to do something about the Prophet and the Pinkies.”

“You can’t just do that!” Corona blurted. “We ha-”

“You already made your case for that in the trial,” Scarcity interrupted, smirking. “But, to answer your accusation, yes we can.” She gestured at the Starcross Society fleet. “It’s time to go to… Equis Vitis and talk to Charter-Princess Evening Sparkle. And all your allies and enemies.” She sat back in the chair, smug. “Today is a good day.”

O’Neill narrowed his eyes, clearly plotting something.

“Oh, by all means, try something. Try something when we’re not crippled by the Voice of Elysium. Any one of those ships we have out there can vaporize the Enterprise in an instant. You’re powerless!” She laughed. “Oh, finally this day turns around.”

Corona sat back. “They’re not just going to accept you.”

“I’d like to see how they plan to resist,” Scarcity declared. She lit her horn, sending a message to the rest of the Starcross Society ships. “This trip took you a couple months, didn’t it?”

“How long is it going to take to get back?” O’Neill asked.

“Twenty seconds.” Scarcity really enjoyed saying that. They felt the Enterprise lurch, grabbed by one of the Society’s ships. The main screen showed a universe every second, the jumps performed without any flashy transition whatsoever.

Must be nice to know the shortest path between two universes, Corona thought.
It wasn’t long at all before they were in orbit around Equis Vitis.

“…We’re being hailed,” a cloud said.

“Perfect,” Scarcity said, smirking. “Put them on.”

Charter-Princess Evening Sparkle appeared on screen. “O’Neill, what a-” She took all of one second to read the situation. She lit her horn.

“Let me guess, you have a special telepathic command for ‘interdimensional incursion from a higher unknown power’?” Scarcity asked.

“Yes,” Eve said, narrowing her eyes. “Who are you and what do you want?”

“Quite simple, really. I am Scarcity, known to you as the Enchantress. I represent the Starcross Society. Your little expedition here has caused quite the predicament back where I come from. But that’s behind us now. I’m here on official business that just happens to nicely line up with how fed up I am with all of this. Your society was founded on a dimensional device called a ‘bowling ball’, correct?”

“That is right.”

“That was ours,” Scarcity said. “By our law, you are a product of the Starcross War, and cannot be allowed to influence the multiverse any further. You are under our jurisdiction. We are going to quarantine all your universes and any universes you have left any lasting impression on. After this, we will begin the slow process of moving you to the Starcross Society where you will never explore new universes again. We cannot allow the blemish of the Stars to continue, you understand.”

Eve narrowed her eyes. “Then why are the Stars still around?”

“They behave themselves,” Scarcity declared. “They know they can never band together again.”

Eve slowly processed this. While she did that, Corona got another idea inserted into her head. She didn’t question it for very long – it sounded brilliant. She reached into her pocket and grabbed her phone, trying to make a call without being noticed. It worked. She muted the phone – hopefully it was still on speakerphone.

“Can we talk about this?” Eve asked. “Surely there is some mutual understanding we can come to. It seems a little harsh to condemn us even though we had no idea what you were or that you objected to others using what you left behind.”

“Sure. We can talk. But the requirement for that is calling all your military to stand down.”

“I don’t have the authority to do that,” Eve said. “That would be the man standing next to you, Overhead O’Neill.”

Scarcity blinked, turning to him. “…Well?”

“Hrm, lemme think… Nope.” O’Neill said, folding his arms.

“O’Neill!” Eve blurted.

“They’ll kill all the Pinkies,” O’Neill said. “They don’t allow the ‘meta effects’.” This fact turned Eve to his side in an instant.

Scarcity blinked. “You can’t fight us, you know that!”
“We sure can try,” O’Neill said.

On the Enterprise’s main screen, ships began to appear. Earth Tau’ri and Equis Cosmic dominated the space, appearing from dimensional portals and FTL windows. Asgard and Ori Reform ships translated from Earth Tau’ri’s deeper space, bringing purple and white glows to the sky alongside the Flat Reapers’ mysterious shapes. Equis Vitis’ own satellites and defense systems activated, rainbow harmonic energy surging around the planet. Rune-ships appeared from Lai, built from the few Runes that were revered in such a way that allowed them to be lifted to the stars. The Gem Armada rolled into space. Cosmo’s energy began to flow between the ships of the fleet. Even the Star-remnant Tom showed up to defend Merodi Universalis.

Scarcity growled. “Fools…”

“They’re not the only ones!” another Twilight said, appearing in the call. Dozens of personal ships from the Sparkle Census appeared, no two looking exactly the same.

“I have come to realize that we qualify as having a ‘lasting impression’ of Merodi Universalis in us,” Valentine said, appearing in the universe with his own fleet from the USM.

Jenny appeared next with a small handful of ancient ships, one of which was brimming with more energy than any of the Starcross Society's warships. “Yeah, you guys sound lame. Screw you, we’re going to try to blow you up. Did you know this ship has a weird entity inside it that can make dreams a reality? I can’t wait to try it out on you. Seriously.”

A portal appeared in the midst of the forming fleet, pouring out dozens of eldritch abominations from the deepest pits of nightmares. “I was able to procure a small force,” Hastur declared. “It is modest, but Nyarlathotep gave his personal approval, which is quite rare.”

Eve fixed Scarcity with a smile. “Looks like you walked into the wrong neighborhood.”

Scarcity folded her hooves and let out a sharp breath of air. “Impressive. This may actually prove difficult… But we are the Starcross Society. We fought the entire race of Stars and won in our ancient history. You do not hold a candle to them.”

But one more ship had to arrive.

A simple, circular hole opened up in the front of the fleet facing the Starcross Society. Out flew a simple silver ship with three prongs sticking out the front, the letters ‘TSAB’ imprinted on one side.

Scarcity’s eyes widened. “No…”

Corona held up her phone, turning off the mute. “Yes!” The screen displayed the caller ID.

Nanoha Takamachi, TSAB.

Rohan laughed, coming out of his ‘sleep’. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a smaller manga. “Never hurts to have a Deus Ex Machina up your sleeve.” He opened it up to a page showing Nanoha herself with a very serious expression shouting ‘HIGH POWER STARLIGHT BREAKER’!

“Nonono…” Scarcity said, sweating.

“HIGH POWER…” the voice of Nanoha came from Corona’s phone. On the main screen, they could see a pink-red light forming on top of the TSAB ship.
Scarcity sat bolt upright. “EVERYONE GET OUT OF HERE!”

“STARLIGHT…”

“Why aren’t we leaving!?” Scarcity panicked.

“BREAKER!”

The Enterprise was teleported away in the last second by the TSAB, leaving only the rest of the Starcross Society ships in the line of fire. The sphere of energy collected within Nanoha’s many nested circles unleashed in a cone of rose energy. The magic tore through the fabric of reality as it moved, shaking Equis, the Sun and the Moon enough to jostle the orbits. The beam engulfed the entirety of the Starcross Society’s ships and flew off into space further than anyone could see. Years later, the beam would hit a loose star, destroy it, and keep going.

But when the magic cleared, the Starcross Society ships all remained. Only one in ten weren’t completely disabled, but they all survived.

“Leave,” Nanoha demanded. “These people are not part of you.”

Scarcity narrowed her eyes. “Nanoha… The White Devil…”

Nanoha pointed Raising Heart at her through the screen. “Do you want a war?”

“You cannot devote all the TSAB’s resources.”

“That wasn’t full power,” Nanoha reminded her. “Do you really want another multiverse war, even a small-scale one?”

Scarcity twitched.

“I ask you to look into your heart,” Nanoha pleaded. “Do you really think all the pain, agony, and torment that will come from a war is worth quarantining just one of hundreds of Class 3 societies, and one of the nicer ones at that? What you did against the Stars, that changed things.”

“…You were there.”

Nanoha nodded slowly. “It’s not worth it, Rarity.”

Corona put a hand on Scarcity – making sure the glove was on. “Don’t take out your pain on us. We’re not what your world could have been. We’re just different.”

Scarcity sighed. “…Everyone… Let’s go home.” She looked at everyone on the bridge of the Enterprise. “Never enter the Starcross Society again. We will kill any of you on sight.”

“Understood,” Eve said.

The Enchantress known as Scarcity lit her horn and left, taking the rest of her crew with her in the next few seconds. Then the rune-covered ships of the Starcross Society vanished, returning to their secluded area of the multiverse.

A few seconds later, Nanoha let out a breath of relief, followed up by a laugh.

“I don’t like that laugh,” O’Neill commented.

“They bought it,” Nanoha said, reclining. “I was afraid they wouldn’t!”
“…What!” Eve blurted.

“There was no way the TSAB was going to engage in even a small-scale war against the Starcross Society. The best I was going to be able to do was call in personal favors. That would not have beaten them. Whew…” She wiped her brow.

Corona sat down on a chair. “Who cares if it was a bluff? It worked. We’re alive. And they’re gone.”

Nanoha teleported to the bridge of the Enterprise, smiling warmly. “Yes. It’s good that you called, Corona.”

“…Thanks?”

“Now, remember, whatever I say next, that you did good, okay Corona?”

“Uh… Sure?”

Nanoha nodded – then she turned to Rohan and whacked him aside the head with Raising Heart. “Don’t do that.”

“OW! Do what!”

She made sure to cut the communication channel that was open. Then she held up the manga with her on it. “This. Don’t do this.”

“It saved us didn’t it?”

Nanoha sighed. “Yes… But you had the idea; you could have called me without writing it down. Ka is a dangerous substance to manipulate, Rohan. Very dangerous. The TSAB highly regulates any use of it, and carefully watches all Prophets we know of. It’s a very corrupting power that is best used by people unaware of it. Since you know… you are a powerful weapon, Rohan. A powerful weapon with the ability to change anything you want so long as you can find a way to do it in a good story. Use your power only as a last resort. And even then… I’ll ask that you don’t write anything about the TSAB again. That will force us to act against you, and I don’t want to do that.” She lifted the manga with her in it up and burned it. “They won’t know anything about this for that reason.”

Rohan blinked. “…I liked the art in that one.”

“You did catch my good side,” Nanoha said with a smile. “Just don’t do it again, okay?”

Rohan nodded slowly. “You will no longer be one of my characters.”

Nanoha nodded. “Good. Now… It looks like the fleet is disbanding. The moment where everyone here got along is gone. Things will be back to normal for you tomorrow.”

“…Great,” Corona said.

“I think I’ll stay for tea though – hope Iroh’s there, he’s always good for conversation.”

Corona smirked. “You know… I think I’d like to see him as well. To the tea shop!”

A week later, Corona had a dream.
The Rebellious Star appeared in the sky of her mind, shining his red light on her.

“Hi,” Corona said.

“I NEVER GOT TO THANK YOU.”

“Well, I was concerned with self-preservation, so…”

“YOU STILL SAVED ME. YOU ALSO HELPED SCARCITY WITH YOUR WORDS AND ACTIONS.”

“Is change coming?”

“NO. THE SOCIETY IS FAR TOO DEEP INTO WHAT THEY’VE BECOME TO CHANGE. BUT YOU CAN REST A LITTLE EASIER KNOWING THAT ONE UNICORN’S LIFE WILL BE IMPROVED, IN THE END. …I THANK YOU FOR THAT MORE THAN SAVING MY LIFE.”

Corona nodded. “Even after all this time?”

“She still has something no other being does.”

“Not sure what you see in her, admittedly.”

“It is an enigma even to myself. There is no explanation, and I have come to terms with this. There is no need to puzzle further.”

“Yeah…”

“As a courtesy, I am willing to answer any burning questions you may have. I am not my brethren. I will tell you what happened, or whatever you may wish to know.”

“I don’t know… We’ve got a pretty complete picture of the whole Starstream War, know what started it, know who won… Those were the big questions we had. Oh, uh, do you know about a blue metal guy?”

“The image I see in your mind is not one I have seen before aside from sonic-based worlds. Nothing of the sort of power you are thinking of.”

“Ah… Yeah, that seems to be the general consensus… …What is the Dark Tower, really?”

“The dark tower, put simply, is the center of the multiverse. It is the structure that maintains the presence of ka throughout the multiverse, driving the eternal songs of existence. The stars never learned any specifics – the tower never revealed much of itself to us. And the starcross society has little interest in learning more of the structure. It is not that I won’t tell you more; it is that I know nothing more aside from legends and passing religious rumors from the strands.”

“Sounds like the big questions are beyond even you, eh?”

“Perhaps. I do not think it is beyond you, though. I think you will uncover what exactly the tower is, one day. Ignore what my brethren say about you, and what the starcross society wants you to believe – I do
NOT THINK YOU ARE A BLEMISH. I THINK YOU ARE PART OF A LARGER STORY IN THE MULTIVERSE. A SPECIAL PART."

“Really?”

“REALLY. GO FORTH, MERODI UNIVERSALIS. GO FORTH INTO EXISTENCE AND MAKE YOURSELF KNOWN. I WILL BE WATCHING FROM THE SIDES.”

Corona smiled. “…Thanks, Rebel.”

“YOU ARE MOST WELCOME, CORONA SHIMMER.”
The Ninth World, origin universe of the University of Doors and home to Dracogen Enterprises, could be considered a dimensional nexus akin to the mishmash world of Esefem, the eternal pull of the Sinkhole, or the ‘true Nexus’ itself that had trapped so many within its folds. The Ninth World was a place where dimensional travelers came and left constantly – not by choice most often, but by chance. It was this property that allowed the University of Doors to form, a people that grew up amongst constant interdimensional crossovers and learned to study the ways of the multiverse.

Because of this property of the Ninth World, unusual people were nothing to bat an eye about. The people of the Steadfast, Beyond, and other locales may have been exceedingly untrusting of nonhumans, but the fact that a potato could grow legs, walk, and preach philosophical doctrines wouldn’t be that unusual to them. It was the way the world was, even if there was no way in the world they actually understood what was going on. Was the potato an alien? A being from another dimension? An ancient entity? They didn’t really care, they just accepted that it existed and moved on.

In the Beanstalk, things were different – there was no distrust of nonhumans. The people worked, lived, and died under the watchful eye of Dracogen Enterprises, a company that promoted technological progress, discovery, and equality. All of these progressive actions made it easy to forget that Dracogen Enterprises was essentially a criminal organization rooted in theft, assassination, and manipulation.

So the Beanstalk had become a mixture of amazing progress with a decidedly despicable acceptance of thievery and murder. You only got arrested if you were particularly evil or ticked Jenny off.

Because of this nobody batted an eye when an interdimensional traveler who flashed neon green and orange like a strobe light had their hand cut off by a giant raven-person.

“Wh- hey! Thief! Purrgrler stole my hand!” the neon being spoke with a voice combined from two entities, one of a cute higher-pitched woman, the other a deeper young man’s. The being’s physical appearance was just as much of a mess – bright bird wings, gloves with claws, a robe adorned with a strange crescent-moon symbol crossed with a gear, a catlike mouth, two horns that looked like cat ears, and the had the coolest pair of sunglasses ever. They were the epitome of a cool kid crossed with a cat and a bird. Looking at them did not make much sense.

This had not deterred the raven-person though; he had seen what was clearly an amazing piece of technology on their arm. A green and black watch with an hourglass symbol on it - definitely not a simple watch. He had to have it and make it his own. He took off into the air.

The strobelight being shrugged. “This should be fun.” They spread their wings and took off after the raven-person. A red gear appeared around the raven-person, freezing him in time. The neon being cut off the raven-person’s hand, reclaimed the previously severed limb, then attached the hand and the watch back to their own arm, magically sealing it back on. “Karma.”

Time around the raven-person resumed. “Wh… Who are you!?"

“I’m Davepetasprite, but you can call me Davepeta, everyone does!” Davepeta said, grinning. Then
they kicked the raven-person to the ground. “Nice to meowt you! Heheh.” They adjusted their sunglasses so they would reflect off the light of the sun for maximum coolness factor.

“I’m not done yet!” the raven-person blurted, flying up to them. “I HAVE WITH ME A CYPHER OF UNTOLD POWER!” He pulled out a cube of jello and threw it. In an instant, Davepeta was encased in a blue floating cube of gelatin.

Davepeta inwardly chuckled. It’s not like I actually need to move to do anything. Hey, Omnitrix, Ghostfreak.

The green watch – the Omnitrix - registered Davepeta’s mental command. A burst of green energy flooded their body, transforming the green-orange form on a fundamental level. Davepeta’s sprite form was replaced with a horrifying ghost-like creature with cracks all along its body. The Omnitrix changed its shape to that of a badge, taking its position on the new being’s chest.

The ghostly creature phased through the gelatin and appeared in front of the raven-person.

“…Uh…”

“It’s just Dave now, by the way,” Dave said, summoning a giant sword with a clock on it from seemingly nowhere. He hit the raven-person with the blunt edge of the weapon. With a thought, the Omnitrix flashed again, transforming Dave into a blue creature with large wings and green bug-eyes. “Nepeta comes forth from the depths of the Omnitrix and purriously encases the rude bird-man in ice!” she declared, freezing the raven-person with frost breath.

With another flash of green she returned to Davepeta. They set the frozen raven-person on the ground, smirking. Only the attacker’s head wasn’t encased in a brick of ice. “So, what have we learned?”

“Uh…”

Davepeta held a set of extended claws to the thief’s neck. “What did we meowtherfuckin’ learn?”

“D-don’t cut off hands!”

“Good enough,” Davepeta said, retracting their claws. They walked away, leaving the raven-person frozen. He’d melt eventually. …Eventually. Davepeta hoped there were people who’d throw tomatoes at him before then, that’d be sweet.

“That was impressive.”

Davepeta looked up to see Jenny of the Red Gloves standing on top of a nearby roof, the tall form of the Beanstalk itself directly behind her. “Yeah, I’m fuckin’ awesome.” They leaned against a nearby building, smirking. “Davepeta raises their eyebrow in such a way as to ask the strange girl’s name without breaking the exterior of unimaginable coolness.”

Jenny smirked. “I’m Jenny of the Red Gloves. I run this place, more or less. Welcome to the Ninth World, Davepeta.”

“Awww, thanks!” Davepeta gave her a thumbs up. “So, how about you tell me what makes you so interested in me?”

“The strobe light isn’t enough?”

“Judging by the crowd, fuck no.”
Jenny chuckled. “All right, I’ll let you know just this once. That device on your arm that allows you to transform – it is very interesting.”

“Not trading it for anything.”

“Of course not. I happen to have access to a device that can copy virtually any machine – magical, technological, or otherwise. I just want some copies. Are you willing to trade for that?”

“Hrm, lemme think about it… Purring… Purring… Purring… Fuck no. Stop the presses, it’s the same answer!”

Jenny rolled her eyes. “I have many things more interesting than your watch. I could offer you something more than its value to you. Say… A spaceship. I have those.”

“Nah,” Davepeta said. “I mean, I’ll stick around a bit – this place sure seems more interesting than the other worlds I’ve been recently – but you don’t have anything to offer me.”

“You’re part troll, right?”

Davepeta stared at her in disbelief. With a quick thought, the Omnitrix transformed into a troll akin to Vriska and Aradia – a cat-like one with cat-like horns and an olive-green symbol on her shirt.

“Yeah… Nepeta leans in curiously and slightly threateningly.” She did just that. “How do mew know that?”

“I can tell you where Vriska and Aradia are,” Jenny said with a smirk. “The price? Tha-”

“JENNY DON’T TALK TO HER!”

Froppy landed between Jenny and Davepeta. The rest of her team quickly showed up to flank her – a hooded skeleton with a scythe and a man riding a unicorn. The man wore blue and had a decorative horseshoe on his hat while the unicorn was tall, white, and graceful with a light pink mane.

“Froppy!?” Jenny blurted. “Why can’t I talk to her?”

The man took a picture out of his shirt. “Because we have reason to suspect she’s working for the guy that took Gyro.” He handed the picture to Jenny. It was a crudely drawn representation of Davepeta talking to the metallic blue guy they had encountered when they made first contact with the Sparkle Census.

“Ivan…” Jenny said, remembering her lost friend. Her fist began to tremble. She shoved the image into Nepeta’s face. “Explain this. Now.”

~~~

The Enterprise flew through Lai hyperspace at top speed, in hot pursuit of a ship.

“How are they faster than us?” O’Neill demanded.

The communications officer – a pinkish bug-demon by the name of Lentis – narrowed her eyes. “It is possible they are using their arcs to enhance the engine. It was state of the art to begin with.”

O’Neill grunted. “We’re going to have to act fast when we arrive. Ready weapons now and prepare for targeting.”

“Yes sir.” The crew pressed some buttons.
A handful of seconds later, Lentis shook her head. “They’re dropping out of hyperspace.”

“All hands on deck!” O’Neill blurted. “Destroy their teleporter!”

The other ship – a new Merodi design comprised of a blue Gem hull affixed to a pair of gigantic Tau’ri engines – dropped out of hyperspace. They were millions of miles from the closest star. Exactly where they wanted to be. They turned toward a blue star and activated their long-range teleporter.

The Enterprise fired too late. The ship had already placed a miniature stargate within the star, forcing it to dial a black hole. The star began to shift unnaturally from the sudden gravitational alteration.

“Mission failure!” Lentis declared.

“Disable their engines!”

This order was completed. The Spectral Rod sent out a pulse spell that drained all the power from the ship’s engines. The Enterprise latched onto the disabled ship with a tractor beam.

Then the star exploded in a fiery supernova. They would not be able to stay here long – if the supernova reached them there was only a chance their shields could take it.


“No rune material,” Lentis answered. “It was not a capital-S Star. They were mistaken.”

“Good,” O’Neill said in relief. “Let’s tow them out of here. Quick hyperspace jump out of supernova range.”

The Enterprise dragged the ship away from the dangerous explosion, into deep space. “Hail them.” O’Neill ordered.

An Arcei appeared on screen.

“Do you people want to be seen as the enemies!?” O’Neill blurted.

“The way to create Runes is by the death of a Star,” the Arcei declared, eyes sad. “It is the only way.”

“I know that!” O’Neill blurted. “So how about forgetting the whole arcs thing?”

“…Most of us cannot do that, General. And you know that.”

O’Neill sat back in his chair. “What you’re doing is murder, which we can’t allow.”

“I know. But we cannot stop having children, and your arc-less solution has torn families apart. We will not be like the demons and forget who we are.”

Lentis looked to O’Neill. He nodded, permitting her to speak. “That’s not fair and you know it! There are Arcei who can forget who they were and change. Your actions prevent them from having their quiet lives! You’re not just turning those on your side into your enemy; you’re turning all Arcei into the enemy!”

“It saddens me to see your kind the way it is. Hopelessly changed.”

“Maybe change is inevitable.”
Judging from the look on the Arcei’s face, he knew this to be true. He knew what he was doing was essentially pointless and hopeless. That even if they got their arcs, they would become criminals of the highest degree. And unlike on Lai, they wouldn’t be able to hide. They would be too easy to find. The Stars themselves would react in anger.

He sighed. “If I have anything to say about it, I will never see the change come to pass.”

“They’ve bypassed our shields!” another crewmember declared. “The-”

The Arcei and six of his crew appeared on the bridge, arcs alight. They started firing blasts of stellar energy at the crew.

Crimson Sushi activated, scrambling the visual perceptions of the Arcei on the bridge. Only a few of their shots actually hit O’Neill’s crew, the rest hit each other. O’Neill fired his new firearm – a pulse pistol, a blue weapon that shot an orb of energy that disabled magic in a target and knocked them out. It was immensely effective against the Arcei.

Lentis drew her pulse pistols as well – all four hands firing at once. There were certainly perks from being part of a warrior culture.

The lead Arcei finally figured out that he was shooting his crewmembers rather than enemies when he physically touched one with his hoof. “Crimson Sushi…” he muttered.

The fishy Stand slapped the Arcei across the face, knocking him to the ground. Despite the mixture of frostbite and burn he had just received from touching the fish, he still stood strong. He began to charge his arcs.

O’Neill fired his pulse pistol, hitting the arcs. They began to overload.

“EVERYBODY DOWN!” O’Neill shouted, ducking behind a console.

He had expected a gigantic kamikaze explosion. Instead, the Arcei just vanished in a puff of magic, reducing himself to dust.

O’Neill looked out from behind the console. “…He did that on purpose.”

“Wh…What?” Lentis asked.

“He could have blown up this entire room. He didn’t.” O’Neill stood up, looking at the dust with sad, old eyes. “He didn’t want to see it.”

Lentis glared. “…Coward.”

O’Neill didn’t correct her. That was her culture she was tapping into, after all. He’d had enough of taking culture from people for today.

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“Explain this, meow?” Nepeta said, nervously.

“Did… did you just make a pun?” Jenny said, blinking. “I’m not sure if I should laugh or punch your face in.”

“The second,” the man on the horse said, summoning his giant, pink, humanoid Stand and aiming his fingers at Nepeta.
“Johnny, calm down,” Froppy cautioned.

Johnny scowled. “Only if she starts talking.”

“I don’t know anything about that guy!” Nepeta blurted. “I mean, he looks a lot like one of those Metal Sonics, but I’ve never taken orders from one before!”

“Who do you work for then?” Johnny demanded.

“I – well, me and Dave, - are just interdimensional travelers! We don’t belong to anyone!”

“Then explain-”

The skeleton member of their team held up a hand. I BELIEVE SHE IS TELLING THE TRUTH, JOHNNY. SHE KNOWS NOTHING.

“Boingo’s predictions are never wrong.”

“They’re also pawbrobly vague and misleading, huh?” Nepeta suggested.

Johnny sat back on his unicorn mount. “…Fine.”

The unicorn cleared her throat. “If you are not in service to the blue one at the moment, you will either be in time or encounter him. As such we will need to observe you.”

“So I’m not an enemy anymore?” Nepeta asked.

“…For the moment, no,” Johnny said, eyeing her with suspicion.

Nepeta nodded. “Good – I don’t like talking all alone in confrontations.” She activated the Omnitrix, returning to the Davepeta form. “Aaaaaand I’m buck meowtherfuckers! Davepeta on the scene, shocking you all with their incredibly cool looks.”

There was no response.

“Davepeta leans in curiously, they have a question… Ahem. What did this blue guy do to mew guys?”

“Follow up question,” Jenny interrupted. “Who are these bozos, Froppy?”

“Bozos!?” Johnny blurted.

Froppy sighed. “Right… the blue guy took our friend Gyro, Davepeta. He enslaved him and we haven’t heard anything about him since then, many years ago. I’ve been looking for him the entire time.”

“And didn’t find anything,” Johnny pointed out.

“Ribbit,” Froppy croaked with a depressed sigh. “Because I didn’t find anything I was demoted, Jenny. Johnny’s in charge of finding Gyro now.”

“Another Jojo, huh?”

Johnny folded his arms. “I’m Gyro’s Jojo, Jenny. We were the first of Valentine’s explorers. I left before you met him to settle down – but then Gyro gets captured.”
Froppy looked at the ground. “I promised I’d find him. I didn’t.”

“I’m sure you tried!” Davepeta purred encouragingly.

The skeleton nodded. SHE DID.

Jenny looked up at the towering being. “And who are you?”

DEATH.

“Fun. And the unicorn?”

“Lileur, version of Fleur de Lis,” Lileur answered. “I’m here because Johnny needs a horse to activate his higher-end Spin powers. And as a magic authority.”

“Right.” Jenny turned back to Death. “So, death death or death death death.”

YOUR INFLECTIONS DO NOT CHANGE THE MEANING OF YOUR WORDS. I AM A SPIRIT OF DEATH FOR A SINGLE UNIVERSE THAT IS PART OF THE USM. THAT SHOULD SUFFICE.

“But, I have so many questions! Can you kill people with a glance? Can you stop death from happening? Can you see how much time I have left?”

YES, CONDITIONALLY, AND YES.

“…Wait yes?” Jenny blurted, a frightened expression crossing her face. “Uh…”

DON’T ASK QUESTIONS YOU DON’T WANT THE ANSWER TO, Death declared.

“He’s messing with you,” Lileur said. “Yes, he can see how much time you have left, but the moment you translate dimensions that number changes. You should only start worrying if the timer is at, say, a few seconds.”

“At that point if you don’t get the hell out of dodge you’re dead,” Johnny said. He pointed at Davepeta. “We’re not here to talk about the finer points of what Death can do. We’re here to find Gyro. And this…”

“Sprite,” Davepeta offered.

“…this sprite is how we’re going to do it.”

“Do I get a choice in this?”

“No,” Jenny and Johnny said at the same time.

“I could just rewind time a fe-”

“Holy pizza bagels no!” Jenny declared. “Time on this world is weak right now! We don’t need another Time Wraith problem!”

“I also have Heart powers…” Davepeta mused. “And there are aliens in the Omnitrix that let me do some pretty broken bullshit. What I’m sayin’ is there’s lots of ways I can make a choice.”

“I know where Vriska and Aradia are,” Jenny reminded them.
“Right. That. Yeah, that’s a good card you’ve got in your paws.”

“Thank you. So, Davepeta, you are going to let me examine your Omnitrix and let these fine folks watch you. Then we can take you to Vriska and Aradia.”

Johnny tensed.

DO NOT FEAR THE MERODI, JOHNNY, THEY WISH TO FIND THE BLUE ONE JUST AS WE DO. THEY WILL LIKELY ASSIST US RATHER THAN BEING HOSTILE TO OUR INTENTIONS.

“Doesn’t mean I have to be comfortable crossing that border.”

“You were sure comfortable coming here,” Jenny pointed out.

Froppy blinked. “Ribbit. You always keep the University off our backs.”

“Bah, whatever. Davepeta, we’re going to my basement.”

“Geez, at least take me out on a date fir-”

Jenny punched them in the face, knocking them back. “I finally decided you needed to be punched.”

“Worth it…”

Jenny prepared a teleport to the Beanstalk’s basement – but she was interrupted when an alarm blared in her ear. “Uuugh, what now, YVND?”

None of those present heard the other side of the conversation – they didn’t need to. A red, metallic disc several miles across had appeared in the sky, just to the east of the Beanstalk tower itself.


Davepeta, Johnny, Lileur, Death, and Froppy prepared for a fight before the disc started shooting the ground with laser weapons, destroying homes.

“What do you mean it isn’t interdimensional at all?” Jenny blurted. “It’s just from space! How did it get past our sensors!? You know what, never mind, it doesn’t matter. Let’s just shoot it down.”

“Looks like science and stuff will have to wait, huh?” Davepeta asked.

“Looks that way,” Jenny muttered. “If you help, don’t use time travel. That’s all I have to say.”

“Cool, cool.”

The disc activated teleporters, dropping several teams of invaders all around the Beanstalk. These invaders were purely mechanical beings that took the form of spheres on springs.

“That looks stupid,” Davepeta observed.

The spring-sphere opened up seven different hatches, producing a large quantity of space-age weapons, all of which had enough excess heat from power production to glow red hot.

“Still stupid,” Davepeta declared.

The next thing the sprite knew they had been teleported fifteen feet beneath the ground by a banana-
Lady Rarity and her team returned to Castle Lai, laughing as they passed through the main gates.


“You don’t know the half of it,” Lieshy said, smiling brightly for once.

“Oh, I do.”

“No you don’t,” Lieshy insisted, nudging her playfully. “There were no cameras in the Bogged Bog. While you were busy with all those robot rabbits…”

“Absolute terrors to behold,” Lady Rarity decreed.

“…I was in the bog discovering that, yes, the world did have take-out waffles.”

“Wait, really?” Corona asked – currently in the form of a unicorn. “I thought that was just some kind of running gag!”

“Found some bug-people. All it took was a little bit of convincing from Limelight and presto, I was in.”

“Such a useful ability,” Olivia mused.

Corona pursed her lips. “I was going to say ‘Stands generally are’ but then thought better of it.”

“Why? Yours is pretty good, right?” Lady Rarity asked.

Corona smirked. “Yeah, it’s pretty sweet. Wish you two had got one so you could see it.”

“The process for Stands is what it is,” Lady Rarity said. Olivia folded her arms in an obvious exaggerated pout.

“That it is. But some Stands really suck. There’s a guy on Earth Stand that can’t leave a pylon because of his. He’s not upset about it, but if he were any other person it’d drive them nuts.”

“Ouch.”

“There was also a Stand that only activated after the user’s death. I don’t even want to imagine how they found that out.”

“You’ve been reading Jojo’s Bizarre Adventure,” Lieshy commented.

“…Yes,” Corona admitted.

“So you did take my suggestion.”

“Why do you think I named mine Bacon Pancakes?”

“That’s a song name!?” Lieshy blurted in surprise, a rare tone for her.

“Yeah!” She cleared her throat. “Bacon pancakes, makin’ bacon pancakes, take some bacon and I’ll
“put it on a pancake…”

“What…?” Lady Rarity said, her expression that of disbelief.

“They’re geeking out,” Olivia answered. “Something we didn’t realize until we found the actual *Jojo’s Bizarre Adventure* manga is that Stands are named after song names. *Both* of them took this to heart, apparently.”

“Limelight is a song name?”

“Uncultured swine,” Lieshy muttered. “Go to an Earth, find the band ‘Rush’, and educate yourself in *real* music.”

Lady Rarity twitched. “…I’m the uncultured swine?”

Lieshy chuckled. “Yep!”

“Looks like I have a new band to listen to and a series of manga to read in order to keep up with modern culture. What fun.”

“Part 4 is best part,” Olivia pointed out.

“Part 7!” Corona blurted.

“Part 8, especially because of the ending,” Lieshy asserted.

Lady Rarity ignored these suggestions. “…do you think Jotaro and the others mind?”

Lieshy shook her head. “Jotaro doesn’t. Rohan…”

“Rohan does,” Corona said, smirking. “But he still hasn’t taken the ‘Corona cannot attack Rohan Kishibe’ out of my face, so I could care less.”

Olivia folded her arms and grumbled. “He makes me look bad.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Lady Rarity encouraged.

“He doesn’t need to hack into anything, he can just find the person who knows how and tell them to do it. It’s ridiculously overpowered.”

Corona rolled her eyes. “And Eve can alter reality on a fundamental level. Alushy basically can’t die. Discord can snap his fingers and turn everyone into a mouse.”

“Point taken.”

The four of them finally made it to Toph’s throne room. They fell silent, expecting the usual ‘welcome home’ – but Toph remained silent, staring at the floor.

“Toph?” Corona asked with concern.

Toph said nothing.

Corona took off her front boot and walked up to the Queen.

“Ugh, fine,” Toph muttered, sitting up. “So, guess what happened today?”

“Arcei again?” Lady Rarity offered.
“Yes. Arcei again,” Toph sighed. “Just when we were making progress, they have to go and contact the Starcross Society and learn how to make Runes. Suddenly they’re all bent on destruction again.”

“Not all—”

“Enough,” Toph interrupted. “Enough of them are. Enough that the hatred of them is back on the rise again after going down for the first time in years.” She punched the side of her throne, breaking it off. “They stole one of our largest ships and took off, blowing up a star. Fortunately it wasn’t a capital-S Star, but if they had been just a bit smarter…” she shook her head.

Corona shook her head. “You think they’d be happy living the way they’ve had…”

Toph folded her hands together. “The leaders that aren’t Starcei have always been telling them ‘eventually, progress will give us Runes.’ They’ve been basing their entire hope as a people on it. It’s the reason they allowed themselves to leave Lai, the reason they’ve listened to everything… But now that we know the answer?” She stood up. “I have to war against them!”

“…How many have attacked Lai since we last left?” Lady Rarity asked.

“Three. Only one of those successfully captured a Rune,” Toph muttered. “They’re shaping up to be the next Siron.”

“They have no organized leader,” Olivia decaled. “Somnabula has declared a no-Rune policy, as has Starcei. We’re not facing an army, Toph, we’re facing small groups, not a cohesive whole.”

“If they get the Stars angry at us though…” Corona added.

“The point is they aren’t a threat to Merodi Universalis as a whole. The reason they’re able to think hunting Stars is a good idea is because we can fight them. The Stars aren’t a society anymore, just a loose collection of flaming balls of gas. We can take them.”

Toph turned her back to them, standing up tall. “I still have to fight the Arcei. I really don’t want to.”

“I know,” Lady Rarity said. “But sometimes you have to do things with consequences you’d rather do without.”

“Part of being Queen,” Toph said, knitting her eyebrows. “Wonder what Queenie would have done…”

“Not have taken a hard enough stance,” Lieshy said. “You’re handling it better than she would have. You’re actually willing to fight them.”

Toph smirked, shaking her head. “…You know that thing I say?”

“It’s good to be the Queen?” Olivia suggested.

“Yeah. That’s a load of tar.” She shook her head. “I know you’ve all gone through a lot… But it’s nothing like being the Queen.”

“Go talk to Evening,” Corona suggested.

“I have,” Toph admitted. “The fact is… there’s not a solution. We just do what we have to do, and that’s that. Dealing with it is a separate question that has to be answered differently every time.” She put her hand on the Master Sword’s hilt. “Every time…”

Corona hugged her from behind. Toph didn’t reject it – but she didn’t say anything either.
What am I going to do if I have to destroy them?

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The problem with robotic invaders were that they weren’t technically alive in the strictest definition of the word – no flesh, no soul – and therefore nothing for Death to work with aside from hit-with-scythe. He was a lot less devastating compared to how he usually was in combat, which made Froppy nervous.

She was having trouble dodging all the attacks from the spring drones. She was extremely adept with her agility-boosting frog powers, but she was cutting it a little close with the beams of brightly colored light sailing by the side of her head. There had been dozens of citizens hit by crossfire already that she was unable to save due to her complete focus on not getting hit herself.

It was painful.

Jenny clearly felt the pain of her people being slaughtered, seeing as how she was fighting the machines with more rage than calculation, her fists flying wild. It was a good thing she was completely indestructible because she kept getting tossed around like a ragdoll.

Davepeta had proven to be quite versatile with all their different forms – they rapidly changed from being to being, using powers in tandem to destroy the most invaders. Froppy had figured out their secret – Davepeta was a fusion mind, and when they transformed Nepeta took over female beings while Dave took over male. The most impressive combo was them turning into a being of magic that set up dozens of magical bombs, a being that could duplicate itself taking those bombs to select locations, and then a powerful psychic detonating all of them at the perfect time and place.

Johnny and Lileur were having the most luck though – Johnny infused Lileur with his Spin energy, allowing him to access his full powers. His Stand, Tusk, took a defensive posture, absorbing most of the lasers as they hit. Johnny launched his super-Spin infused fingernails, each one embedding into a robot and tearing it to shreds through the rotation. One-hit-kill, every time. When Johnny ran out of fingernails, Lileur used a spell to grow them back, giving him infinite ammo. Every shot destroyed an invader.

He’d even shot the ship above them, but the progression of the Spin energy through the disc was slow. Parts of the edge had started to fall off, but it would probably be hours before the entire ship was engulfed in Johnny’s power.

Jenny was yelling on her communication device. “YVND! Just hack them all! …What do you mean you’re busy? Oh, on the ship? …Carry on, get it to go away.”

“Who are these guys?” Johnny demanded, Spinning ten more into oblivion.

“There’s a lot of random evil crap in space here,” Jenny answered, punching through one, getting her arm shot off by another. “Just be glad it isn’t Mozck.”

“Mozck?”

“Eldritch deity in AI form,” Jenny muttered, casting an EMP spell on the spring drone that had shot her arm off. “Though he could easily show up. If these drones start glowing pink and turning into starfish-scorpions, then we’ll have a problem.”

“We don’t have a problem already?” Froppy blurted, dodging another flurry of lasers.

“A bigger problem.”
One of the shots hit Davepeta again, this time knocking them into a nearby building, through the walls at an angle. The sprite did not reappear within the next few seconds.

“Davepeta!” Froppy shouted. She wasn’t doing very well actually fighting these robots compared to the others – so she hopped to the wrecked building, leaping inside. Jenny decided to follow her while the others kept destroying robots.

The two of them found a hole in the ceiling and a small crater on the ground where Davepeta now stood, surrounded by the robots. Froppy and Jenny would have rushed to the sprite, but something gave them pause. They ducked behind a wooden crate, hiding themselves from view.

In the room, next to a high tech console, were Rick and Morty. The brash, blue-haired scientist that almost nobody in the multiverse liked, and his grandson.

…Were these the same ones that had been taken by the blue guy?

Davepeta readied their claws, prepared to take on the robots – but they didn’t move. They just looked at Davepeta. “Uh…”

“They’re disabled,” Rick said with a burp. “In a few seconds all of them will be, and that ship will fly away.”

“Hang tight,” Morty said, aiming a gun at the robots. “If they move, Rick’s fucked up.”

“I don’t fuck up.”

“Funny,” Morty muttered. “I happen to remember one particular time wh-”

Rick didn’t let him finish. He pressed a button, triggering the command to disable all the robots. The sound of several thousand invaders falling to the ground all at once was like a minor earthquake.

Froppy and Jenny looked out a window – they saw the disc vanish. Froppy wondered if they would cut off the part infected with Spin in time to survive.

“There we go, mission complete,” Rick said. “World saved from springy little robots.”

“This wasn’t an actual mission,” Morty pointed out.

“Shut up, Morty. Might as well have been.”

“Mission?” Davepeta said, sticking their head between the two of them. “You, Rick, taking a mission? That doesn’t sound like you.”

“Morty, present this thing with the ‘no shit, Einstein’ award.”

“You know them don’t you?” Morty asked, gesturing at Davepeta.

“I know it Morty. Know it. You don’t use a plural pronoun to refer to an individual. That’s just bad grammar.”

“But it is just so… robotic!”

“I’m technically two beings!” Davepeta suggested.

“Never at once,” Rick muttered. “You’re it, thing.”
Davepeta chuckled, tapping Rick on the arm. “Tag! You’re it!”

Rick twitched, looking like he wanted to do something but couldn’t.

“Awwww… You’re no fun.” Davepeta folded their arms. “Let’s be serious then. Why the fuck would you help people!?”

“We help people!” Morty interjected. “All the time!”

Davepeta raised an eyebrow at Morty. “Davepeta raises an incredulous eyebrow, as if to say ‘in your dreams’.”

“. . .I forgot how weird you were,” Morty muttered, shaking his head. “We try to help people.”

“That’s you. If I know Rick, he never does anything without some sort of angle. So spill the beans! What’re you expurring these people for?”

“Nothing,” Rick muttered, the answer clearly angering him. “Jack shit, fuck all, rotten potatoes!”

“Now, see, this doesn’t make any sense – is it pawsible that you really don’t want to be here? But nobody can tell you what to do!” Davepeta narrowed her eyes. “Hrm… Curiouser and curiouser…”

“Fuck it,” Rick said, pulling a device out of his pocket.

“Rick no!”

Rick flashed Davepeta with a blue light. “Congratulations. You’re one of us now.”

“. . .One of what?”

“The Collection,” Morty said with a sigh. “I’m sorry, you were asking too many questions…”

Davepeta blinked. “Wait, so you really are under control of someone!?”

“Yep. The Collector,” Morty said, shaking his head. “And now you are too because Rick got fed up. Rick you shouldn’t have done that to them!”

“It was being a nosy asshole!”

“And you’re never a nosy asshole?”

Rick snorted. “What’s your point?”

Morty facepalmed. “Look, Davepeta, sorry. But you’ve just been conditioned to be loyal to the Collector. When we open a portal to leave this world, you’ll be compelled to leave and you won’t be able to disobey.”

Davepeta turned into a being made of pure mental energy. “I can try,” he said, Dave now.

Rick started laughing. “It actually thinks it can disobey by turning into a mind-creature! Oh that’s rich! Aahah!” Rick opened a portal. “I dare you not to go through that portal. But I’ll tell you that if you stay here, you won’t be loyal to the Collector.”

There was no hesitation. Dave moved across the portal. “What the fuck…”

“Yeah,” Morty said, shaking his head. “The Collector’s loyalty algorithm doesn’t appear to have a
weakness. Though since we’re under it, it’s hard to tell if we’re really the best judges…”

Rick chuckled. “I like how this day’s turning out. Davepeta, I get to welcome you to the living hell of being a slave. We’re going to have such fun.”

“Does the loyalty algorithm keep me from decking your face?”

“Yes,” Rick said.

“No,” Morty muttered, following them through the portal.

Jenny angled a finger at the portal, planning to shoot something through it – but it closed too fast.

“FRICK.”

Froppy gulped. “This… This isn’t good.”

“The Collector…” Jenny said, clenching her fist. “The Collection – finally. Finally we have new information. Good gravy I’ve been waiting a long time for this. One step closer to Ivan…”

“But that’s not much to go off of.”

“It’s enough,” Jenny said, standing up. “We’ve got a report to make.”

“To the University?”

“Screw the University, they don’t give a rip,” Jenny said. “I think your leadership would be more interested in this.”

Froppy nodded. “Very.”

“Then what are we waiting for, exactly? Let’s move while the trail is hot! We’re going to find them!”

~~~

Ambassador Valentine looked at the people on the other side of the couch – the entirety of Johnny’s team and Jenny of the Red Gloves.

“Jenny, do you know who Gyro is?” Valentine asked, pulling a data pad out of his coat marked Steel Ball Run.

“Arrogant guy who uses Spin a lot,” Jenny answered.

“He’s much more than that,” Valentine said, flipping to a particular page of the manga. He showed it to her. “He’s the man I killed.”

“Ouch.”

“You could say that,” Valentine said, leaning back into the folds of the couch. “We were enemies on our home world. Earth-ST1-America. Local year 1890. We were fighting over parts of an ancient Saint’s corpse, one with the power to endow people with Stands. We ended up on the opposite sides of the conflict by fate – but that day when Gyro fell, Johnny and I made a deal. We would no longer be enemies. But instead of going on our separate ways, we went into the multiverse with my Stand, looking for a way to revive Gyro, rather than just replace him with a copy. It took a long time, but we eventually found what we were looking for many, many worlds away. The journey back, the three of us got to know one another.”
Valentine laid the copy of *Steel Ball Run* down on the table, showing his death at the hands of Johnny. “Rather than everything ending here with my true death, the United States of the Multiverse was formed out of my, Johnny, and Gyro’s travels. I became the first president, and when my term was up I took the role of Ambassador. Johnny settled down after a few years, raising a family. Gyro never stopped exploring.”

“How old are you?” Jenny asked. “I thought the USM was over a century old.”

“It is. The three of us stumbled across immortality when Gyro was returned to us.” Valentine folded his arms. “You understand why it’s important we get him back. Not only is he an old friend, but in many ways he is a symbol of our people. How would the Beanstalk react if you vanished? Or if the Merodi’s primary team were killed?”

“I can imagine,” Jenny said.

“Good.” Valentine put *Steel Ball Run* back into his suit. “So, for the first time in years, we know more. We have a title – The Collector – and a group – The Collection. We also know a bit about what he uses his slaves for.”

“Missions, Ribbit,” Froppy said. “Rick and Morty talked about them for a short while. It seems like the Collector sends his slaves to perform tasks across the multiverse. Apparently those tasks are to sometimes save worlds from robot invasions.”

“Totally didn’t need saving,” Jenny muttered.

“The important thing is Rick thought you did,” Valentine pointed out. “And therefore felt *compelled* to help.”

“But that doesn’t really make much sense!” Johnny blurted. “Why brainwash and enslave people only to have them be ‘heroes’?”

“It is unusual,” Valentine admitted. “Perhaps a case of ‘the ends justify the means’, or possibly insanity. I find it more likely he is tormenting them – helping others is a particular hell for Rick, after all.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Jenny agreed.

**THAT DOES NOT QUALIFY FOR MORTY. HE ENJOYS DOING SUCH WORK,** Death countered.

“He seemed really… dissatisfied with everything,” Froppy said.

“That’s normal,” Johnny said.

“No, it was more than that. He was more than just jaded. Conflicted, angry, short…”

“It isn’t like we know him that well,” Valentine said. “Clearly, we need more information. Did we find out where they went?”

“Transition universe,” Jenny said. “They scrubbed their dimensional signal after that so they couldn’t be followed.”

“Then we’ll have to follow them another way. Time travel is a disaster waiting to happen in the Ninth World…” He put a hand to his chin. “All we have are names now. The *Collector* and the *Collection*. We can make do with that.” He stood up tall. “I am going to use every resource at my
disposal to find mention of these things. We will find something – in reality or in fiction – that helps us. That gets us closer to Gyro, to Ivan, and to all the others the Collector has enslaved.” He curled his fist in visible rage. The undemocratic horror... The Collector was the opposite of freedom!

“But what if we get stuck again?” Johnny asked. “We were all thinking this when we first encountered the Collector, but we didn’t find anything for years!”

Valentine paused. “Then we keep looking. It’s as simple as that. This atrocity against democracy and justice cannot be allowed to continue. It is against everything the USM stands for.”

Froppy nodded. “Ribbit.”

“All of you use every connection you have as well to find every possible detail on the Collector.” He summoned D4C to his side. “I’m going on a trip.” He produced a Murican flag and used it with D4C to translate to another universe, leaving the teams and Jenny behind.

“Time to go look through my impossibly huge diary to see if anything jogs my memory,” Jenny said, clearly dreading the activity.

“Good luck,” Froppy said.

“Thanks.” She vanished through a nearby door.

“What are we doing?” Lileur asked.

I MAY BE REMEMBERING SOMETHING… Death said, bony hand to his chin. PERHAPS WE SHOULD RETURN TO DISC-DW2.

Johnny looked into the distance, fire in his eyes. “We’re coming for you, Gyro.”

~~~

“Cessera,” Eve said, looking up from her desk at her Sapphire Second. “Is this real?” she asked, holding up a report.

Cessera nodded. “Yes.”

“The Citadel?”

“It’s not the Council of Ricks anymore, you know.”

Eve stared. “I still never expected them to contact us in any official way…”

“You know there’s a Morty in charge, right?”

“Yes, yes, I know, but... Celestia, it’s hard to imagine Ricks listening to Mortys, not to mention a society with Ricks in it wanting to talk to us.”

“The Grand Secretariat and M4 vouch for their intentions.”

“I’m not saying I don’t trust it, I’m saying I haven’t processed it yet.” She shook her head. “Doesn’t their time stream move slower than ours?”

“Significantly.”

“And yet they still changed that quickly…” She furrowed her brow. “I’ll go to the meeting, of
course, gauge them personally. I’m not turning them down because of bafflement. Just a tad odd…”

“Good, because I have to go to the Embodiment.”

“There still isn’t an agreement between them and Earth Immaterium?”

“Between the chaos gods, endless war, and eldritch screw ups, no. Adama’s presence has helped a tad, surprisingly, but there’s the slight issue of one side not understanding any language but war, and the other not having what we would understand as language at all.”

“I do not envy you.”

Eve nodded, sifting through more papers. “Ah, this is interesting. Pinkie’s managed to get the TSAB and ETSAB to talk to each other. Things look to be going well, but they need someone from Relations to take over from here. Don’t think either of us need to go…”

“Pinomat and Pippy are both available,” Cessera said.

“They’ll do nicely. An-”

“We are about to get a very surprising visitor.”

“Dangerous?” Eve asked, taking Cessera’s future sight in stride.

“Depends on your definition of dangerous.”

“Ah. Which door?”

“Translation.”

Eve blinked. “But you can’t translate into this room…”

“D4C’s particular method is not blocked by our spells.”

“D4C!?”

Funny Valentine appeared from the floor, pulled by his Stand through the interdimensional boundary. “We need to talk, Miss Sparkle.”

Eve shook the surprise out of her face. “I wasn’t expecting you to ever be in here again.”

“Something’s come up.”

“Clearly. You know you can contact us directly. The isolation thing you’ve created doesn’t go both ways.”

“That would have taken time, and I believe you’ll want to know this sooner rather than later.” Valentine took a seat on a nearby chair, folding his fingers together. “We’ve found some information on the metallic blue man who trapped so many of our people and stole others.”

Eve blinked. “You did?”

“Roughly five hours ago Rick and Morty were spotted on the Ninth World in the midst of an invasion from Ninth World’s space. They acted to stop the invasion in an instant. A multiversal traveler by the name of Davepeta – another Earth C traveler, evidently – questioned them about what they were doing, and was enslaved as a result of it.”
“Davepeta?” Eve said, blinking. “I… I think Vriska mentioned that…”

“They likely know each other,” Valentine asserted. “What we learned is that the blue man is known as the Collector, and his slaves the Collection. There is not much else besides these names. From Rick and Morty, we can determine that the slaves are sent on missions, and that they cannot refuse the Collector’s programming. Rick and Morty had been ordered to ‘help’ it seems, though it is unknown if this is what all slaves must do, or if it is just their personal punishment.”

Eve nodded. “This doesn’t tell us much.”

“We need to pool our resources to find everything we can,” Valentine said.

“I’ll contact the Sparkle Census,” Eve assured him. “We’ll check everything we can, including stories and legends.”

Valentine nodded. “My people are already doing the same.”

“Should we set up an actual meeting place?” Eve suggested. “I mean, it’s not like I can just walk into your nation and start talking to get your attention.”

“You have my contact information.”

Eve sighed. “Look… We’re helping, because we all want to find this guy. I have a feeling when I tell Vriska about Davepeta we’ll have even more reason. That said, if we weren’t who we are, we wouldn’t even consider doing something for you, since you’ve branded yourselves our enemies.”

“You did that.”

Eve raised an eyebrow. “You know I had absolutely nothing to do with that. It was all Sombra.”

“With assistance.”

“Clearly, wasn’t me though,” Eve pointed out. “And that was years ago. I know these things don’t go away quickly, Valentine, but we can’t just be at each other’s throats all the time.”

“And I can’t let you threaten our way.”

“You see how one-sided this is?”

Valentine nodded. “It’s unfair to you. But I am on the side of justice. You are on the side of eternal compromise.”

Eve bristled. “Fine. Don’t accept my olive branch.”

“I’m not batting it away entirely,” Valentine said.

Cessera looked at him. “It sure seems like it.”

“I’m speaking frankly, which is something that can be done with Eve,” Valentine pointed out. “We do not agree. Our ideals are mutually exclusive.”

Eve sighed.

“That said, it would be foolish to drag this on longer than necessary. Finding the Collector will be a joint mission between the USM, Merodi Universalis, Dracogen Enterprises, and I expect the Sparkle Census. We will not operate separately – but in tandem, helping each other. In ‘friendship’, since you
seem to like that word.”

Eve let herself smile. “…This sounds like a great idea, Valentine.”

“There is a world in the Strands we can commandeer as neutral territory,” Valentine offered. “It is a useless rock, but we have a small outpost there from back when we still thought gold was valuable. It will serve our purposes nicely.”

“And after we find the Collector?”

“We shall see how it goes,” Valentine stood up. “But if all goes well… the USM is willing to leave it open to all indefinitely.”

Eve beamed. “Cessera, start making some calls. I know what we’re going to do today.”

~~~

The room was round and built like a small stadium with a bleacher-style arrangement of chairs and desks circling a central podium. Currently, only a handful of seats were filled, four nations having only sent a couple representatives to the first meeting.

Ambassador Valentine took center stage first. “The United States of the Multiverse are present. Merodi Universalis?”

“Here,” Evening said, raising a hoof.

“University of Doors?”

“Dracogen Enterprises representing,” Jenny said, expression bored.

“Sparkle Census?”

“Here,” 4T said with a smile.

“Eldritch Embodiment?” Valentine asked, receiving no response. “Any others present?” There was only continued silence. “Then we shall begin. All of you already know why we’re here, so I won’t bore you with the details again. We are here to take action to find the Collector – who he is, what he does, and how to get those he’s taken back from us. In order to do that we need to search every record we have at our disposal and make them available to everyone else. All four of us need to be willing to release all classified information we may have sealed away in our records, away from prying eyes.” Valentine took a folder out of his coat. “As a show of faith, the USM is willing to release everything we have on Gyro Zeppeli, including personal details and top secret missions he has been on. But this can only be done if we all agree to be transparent – and all agree to secrecy.”

Eve, Jenny, and 4T nodded.

Valentine placed a document on the podium. “This is a simple document you were all sent prior to coming here. It outlines what information you are expected to make available to all the others in this joint mission, and what you are expected to not divulge. It also outlines the use of this world as neutral territory. Does it meet with everyone’s approval?”

The three others nodded.

“The USM is held to these regulations just as all of you are – we are all equals at this table. If there are no objections, we shall all sign – promising our transparency and secrecy – and then begin actual
work.”

Eve, Jenny, and 4T signed for their respective nations.

“It is your responsibility to ensure your agents understand what you’ve signed for,” Valentine said, signing with his own hand as well. “Now, we get to work. We are going to find this Collector – this atrocity to all of us – and we are going to bring him to justice, freeing our people from his clutches.”

The other three nodded.

“Good. First, Gyro’s file…” he tossed it onto the podium, and they all began to pore over it.

~~~

The Collector’s office was a mixed bag.

The floor and ceiling were made of perfectly white metal that produced its own light, removing shadows from the rectangular enclosure. The room was far too large to be just an office; the empty space gave it an expansive appearance. The walls were made of solid glass that showed a complex aquarium filled with exotic life from many universes. The only break in this glass wall was the single reinforced door made of some sort of blue metal.

The room was sparsely decorated. There was a bookshelf next to one of the walls filled with a mixture of traditional books and data pads. There were a few chairs with wheels spread out randomly around the front of the room for seating guests. The desk itself was a white U-shaped piece of furniture large enough to accommodate six monitors, dozens of notebooks, and an adjustable whiteboard.

To one side was a light blue chair affixed to the ground – one perfectly designed for the Collector’s second-in-command, Lightning. She sat, hands folded, her single eye suck in an eternal glare, her eye patch only heightening her intimidation factor. Her hair may have been pink, but nobody dared mock her for it.

The Collector himself sat in a bigger chair in the middle of the U-shaped desk. He wasn’t looking at any of his screens, notebooks, or whiteboard – he was staring right in front of him with his deep, red eyes. His metallic blue figure was dulled in the omnidirectional light of the office, but this only made him appear rugged.

He tapped his fingers together, not saying anything to the three sitting in front of him. Rick Sanchez, Morty Smith, and Davepeta – two agents who had been in this office many times before, and one who had only just arrived.

Davepeta had no idea what was going on, Morty was looking down at the ground in fear, and Rick held the Collector’s gaze with a steeled expression.

Nothing was spoken for the longest time.

“Uh… Are we gonna talk about anything or are we going to continue being statues?” Davepeta asked. “Because I’ve got somewhere to b-” Something in Davepeta’s mind twitches. “Oh. Well, that’s purrfect.”

Rick visibly twitched at the cat pun but said nothing.

“So, Collector, buddy, you gonna do anything or are you just going to sit there all menacing?” Davepeta asked. “Hellooooo…?”
The Collector didn’t budge – he just kept staring.

“You know I can fastforward time until something happens. That’s a thing I can do.”

No response.

“Well that’s what I’m doing then.” Davepeta sat back and started accelerating their perception of time. It took quite a while before Morty blurted something.

“JUST SAY SOMETHING!”

The Collector finally moved, judging that the lengthy silence had been enough. “E-C137. E-C137. E-SB3C. Your worlds.”

Davepeta was mildly concerned the Collector actually knew the dimensional code for Earth C.

“Who the fuck cares?” Rick said.

“You should, Rick. I know you don’t, but you should. I cannot touch E-SB3C, nor would I want to, that was just for Davepeta’s benefit. But E-C137…”

“Don’t you dare…” Morty said.

“I already did,” the Collector asserted, leaning forward. “E-C137 no longer exists.”

“NO!” Morty shouted.

“Big whoop,” Rick muttered. “We can just go to another one in our cluster. Noooo problem.”

“I know you don’t care,” the Collector said. “You think this isn’t a punishment. You think it’s liberating, in many ways. But it is a punishment. You found a loophole Rick. You knew you weren’t allowed to return to universes we had stolen people from, so you purposefully became careless. Allowing your mind to slip into carelessness so you would, one day, be able to defy me without actively doing so. It’s a very impressive feat that you managed to lie to yourself so hard that you not only fooled yourself, but the conditioning as well. But you did end up in a universe you were not supposed to go to. You allowed your conditioning to take over and help them. They may not have seen you, but you also took someone. Someone important.” The Collector leaned in. “Your punishment is not to have your home world destroyed – it isn’t even your home world, after all. Your punishment is to push Morty away from you. Your one ally in this place – you just killed his family by defying me.”

“Pff, Morty won’t do that. You’re the one who killed them.”

“He can’t do anything to me. He can do everything to you.”

Rick rolled his eyes. “Nice try, Constipator.”

“We’ll see who wins out, in the long run,” the Collector said. “I’m rarely wrong about this sort of thing.” Then, for the first time, he turned to Davepeta. “Now… you.”

Davepeta gulped.

“Welcome to the Collection, Davepetasprite Squared.”
“Little creepy that you know my name, dude,” Davepeta told the Collector.

“I have resources.”

“You just read *Homestuck*.”

The Collector nodded slowly. “I expected you to know, but I wasn’t certain until just then.”

“It’s not like it can be that big of a secret for that long for *anyone* who knew the back alleys of the Internet.”

“Was it the memes?”

“It was the memes.”

“They always give it away.”

Davepeta purred. “Yeppurrs! So, you gonna tell me what’s the deal with this place or am I gonna have to get impatient and grumpy?”

“You will wait no longer. This is the Collection. Regardless of what your life was before, it is now mine. You will do whatever I tell you to do and you won’t have the power within yourself to resist. You will never be able to betray me, and as soon as I figure out what loophole Rick managed to eke out by psyching his own mind, you won’t be able to do that either. But you’ll find that your personality isn’t rewritten either. Outside of your forced loyalty you have complete freedom of expression, speech, action, etcetera. In your case you will not be allowed to return to your place of origin since knowledge of me spreading to multiversal societies is something I prefer to avoid. This place is your new home.”

“Well fuck me sideways this sounds just purrfect.”

“I like your snark,” the Collector commented. “You won’t be called for any mission for several days, to give you time to adjust. You will be teleported to your room. The other Collected are usually more than willing to show new people around, but if you have a question you want direct answers to and don’t feel like talking to someone who can shut you up with a simple order, Lightning is always available.” He gestured toward his second. She nodded curtly. “She’ll be the one to give you a mission when I decide what it’s going to be.”

“So you’re the bad cop and she’s the good cop?”

“They’re both the bad cop trying way too hard to be the good cop,” Rick muttered.

“Hey, Lightning’s nice!” Morty interjected.

“She’s a coldhearted emotionless bitch.”

Lightning raised a hand, freezing Rick with an ice spell. Her expression did not shift.

Davepeta narrowed their eyes. “So... I just go to my room and talk to people? Is that it?”
“For now,” the Collector confirmed. “It’ll give you time to process your new situation.”

“I’m a slave.”

“That is how most of you choose to view it.” The Collector shrugged. “I prefer to think of you as instruments for furthering the multiverse.”

“My room better have a computer. And Internet.”

“You’ll find unrestricted Internet access in your room. Not that you’ll be able to use it to contact anyone you know.”

“Why no- oh. Right.” They tapped their head. “Look at me, giving everyone the freedom they don’t have any way to use.”

“It is a delightful paradox, is it not?”

“Fuck no.”

The Collector chuckled. “In that case, I think we are done here.” With a wave of his hand, Rick, Morty, and Davepeta were gone.

The office fell silent.

“They’re unique,” Lightning said.

“I know,” The Collector responded, allowing his emotions to come through his tone. He was nervous. “Their ka is not stronger than ours, but that doesn’t mean it’s not dangerous.”

“What’s the plan?”

The Collector pondered this for a moment. “I’m not sure. Is it finally time to move forward?”

“Only you can make that decision,” Lightning reminded him.

“You can give advice.”

Lightning looked into the distance, expression clouded. “…I’d be happier if we could finally move on.”

The Collector nodded. “It may be time then… I have to consider it. If this is done incorrectly…” He put a hand to his chin. “…Get me everything we know about what the Pinkies of that local multiverse have said. Send parts of the Collection if you have to. I need to know about their Prophets.”

“I’ll activate one of the sleeper agents.”

“Not anyone unique, I hope…”

Lightning rolled her eye. “Of course not. She’ll be one of our backgrounders.”

“A fun little game of meta chess we’re going to be playing,” the Collector mused. “Always fun.”

Lightning stood up, walking toward the doors of the office.

“Lightning… Are you really ready?”
Lightning looked back at him, hesitating only for a moment. “Yes.”

“…Of course.”

“You need to get yourself ready.”

The Collector nodded slowly. “I am aware. I will be when the time comes. Go, take care of that Pinkie.”

Lightning nodded, leaving the office. The Collector sat alone, surrounded by the exotic fish.

He sat back in his chair, looking at nothing. But in his mind, he thought of everything…

~~~

The world the four multiversal nations were using didn’t have a name when it first opened; catalogues listed it simply as Non-Standard-World-108. It was a world consisting of a seemingly endless expanse of rock. There was no life, and it was always day despite there being seemingly no sun. The USM had built their outpost there in their early days to mine the gold-rich soil, though all the mines had turned out to be pointless once ways to just create gold were found elsewhere. All that effort for nothing.

The moment ponies started using the remaining facilities, they gave the world the nickname Golden Joke. The name stuck, used even by the USM personnel.

Pinkie’s team was standing in a circle in one of the Golden Joke’s hallways, looking at an empty spot in the floor. The five of them were silent, waiting patiently for another to arrive.

With a flash of red gears, Aradia appeared. She was smiling, but her hair was a mess and she looked tired. “So, they really don’t want to be followed.”

Vriska shook her head. “How could they get away from you!?”

“By being very cruel,” Aradia muttered, trying to get her hair back into a comfortable position. “I went to the universe they entered after the Ninth World. Went back in time, prepared to catch them opening the portal, but apparently the Collector has expected time manipulation as a possible attack. Because the universe crashed when I tried to do that.”

“…Crashed?” Flutterfree asked.

“When a universe gets too strained to continue existing it just falls back into nonexistence.”

“The Sea of Infinite Possibility, right?” Nova asked.

Aradia nodded. “Yeah, that’s the official term. The problem is that universe allowed time travel and could handle paradoxes – I could feel the time-streams weaving through my fingers.”

“So they did something,” Flutterfree deduced.

Aradia nodded sadly. “They wanted so badly not to be followed they had a horrible piece of interdimensional technology on them. An Assurance.”

“Fuck!” Vriska swore. “Stupid Time Lord tech!”

Pinkie sighed. “Of course you’ve dealt with it.”
“The Time Lords wanted a way to ensure past versions of themselves in non-causally related universes wouldn’t be interrupted, captured, killed, or whatever. So they made a device that would detect a splitting individual timestream and amplify it until the whole universe was destroyed, preventing interference.”

“That’s not the whole story,” Aradia chided. “In the Gallifreyan Cluster, entire new universes are created when a timeline splits, more so than most other universe clusters. The devices originally stopped the creation of new universes, forcing attackers into nonexistence – nothing more.”

“And then they kept using them.”

“The Doctor didn’t,” Aradia pointed out.

“The TARDIS had a modified one on it. Less lethal, still absurd.”

Aradia looked like she wanted to argue the finer points of temporal technology with Vriska, but she shook her head. “Let’s not worry about that. The point here is the Collector has access to Time Lord technology or something similar. We won’t be able to follow him through time, and we really shouldn’t try unless we want to blow up more universes.”

“That’s a horrible tactic,” Flutterfree growled.

“Effective, though,” Pinkie said. “None of us are willing to risk blowing up universes to try and get more information.”

“I bet Jenny’s happy she didn’t try to mess with time on the Ninth World right about now,” Nova said.

Aradia nodded. “I’d imagine so…”

“Right, so that kind of cheating is out of the picture,” Vriska said, folding her hands together. “Aradia, you and I have a ton of memories from traveling the multiverse.”

Aradia sighed. “Not enough to help us realize Davepeta was out there with us.”

“We’ll find them and fuck the Collector over. But we can put all that to use. In all our travels – have we ever encountered anything like the Collection before? Ever?”

Aradia furrowed her brow. “Not off the top of my head, no. Nothing multiversal.”

“Keep thinking,” Jotaro encouraged.

“I encountered him when I was running from my problems back on Melinda’s world,” Pinkie reminded them. “He’s like Melinda and to a lesser extent Blackjack. An aura of ‘winning’ ka around him.”

“Gary Stu,” Vriska muttered. “Valentine’s going to love to hear that.”

“He already knows. He’s understandably furious,” Pinkie said, shaking her head.

“Is he a… ‘Gary Stu’ though?” Aradia asked. “He seems like an actual threat, and not some glitch.”

Vriska raised an eyebrow. “He’s an all powerful being who enslaves others to his will and makes them do his bidding, and has apparently been doing so for a long time. Oh, not to mention he fucking sends them on ‘heroic’ missions.”
“We don’t know if that’s all he does.”

“I think we’d need to talk to Starbeat about that,” Nova said. “She’d be able to make a better call about what exactly we’re dealing with.”

“She’ll make her report soon enough,” Pinkie asserted.

“Anything your Pinkie Sense or Awareness telling you?” Flutterfree asked.

“He’s not a standard Gary Stu, he’s a little different, but I’m not sure how. I do know we’re not going to find him soon – but we will find him eventually. I’m also aware that he has an office that basically sits inside a fish tank and he actually cares about his second, Lightning. Other than that, not much.”

“Lightning?”

“Oh yeah, I guess we don’t know about that yet, huh? I’ll have someone take an image of her out of my mind so we can do more digging around her. Good catch, Flutterfree!”

“Anything else?” Jotaro asked.

“The scene in his office is fuzzy to me. Not sure if that’s something the Collector’s doing, or just for dramatic effect,” Pinkie admitted. “Also, yes, Scooter can read it, but her rules prevent her from telling us. So please don’t go make it awkward for her, okay?”

“Yare yare daze…”

“The game of ‘what can we ask’ sure is a bizarre one,” Aradia said with a wink.

 “…Are you trying to get me to repeat myself?”

“Maaaaaaybe.”

Jotaro adjusted his hat, but remained silent.

Vriska grunted. “Well, this sucks. I don’t really have anything in my head. All I can think about is Davepeta.”

“What are they like?” Flutterfree asked.

“You’ll have to ask Jenny for now,” Vriska said, “but when I knew them they were absolutely bonkers crazy. They fused from two of my old friends and decided ‘HEY! I THINK I’M GOING TO GO PUNCH LORD ENGLISH! AHAHA!’ and then they joined me and my ghost army in the final battle. They were the unholy combination of ‘ironic’ coolkid of Time and roleplaying cat shipper of Heart. Oh, and a bird. Forgot about the bird. Caw caw, meow, the whole shebang.”

“They were pretty awesome,” Aradia admitted.

“Yeah. I can’t believe I didn’t think about them surviving…” Vriska hit herself in the forehead. “I know all the ghosts got sealed away and that Aradia and I were ejected into the multiverse, but I never thought about the sprite… Technically still living, not a ghost.”

“We really need to find a copy of *Homestuck*, this story sounds incredibly absurd,” Nova said.

Vriska smirked. “Holds the proud position of being the most recent threat to the entire multiverse. Apparently that’s a rare thing.”
Aradia chuckled. “Lord English was so strong he made the Class 1 Civilizations quake in their boots. He almost killed one singlehandedly.”

Jotaro blinked. “How do you even do that?”

Aradia took in a breath. “Well, first, you give a being absolute dominion over Time. Then you fuse that being with a psychotic undying clown of rage, a hyper intelligent AI in a pair of sunglasses, a horse-loving muscular man of Void, and the essence of a sprite.”

“Wow,” Nova said.

“She’s not done,” Vriska pointed out.

“And then you take that and give it access to the powers within a multiversal construct that regulates an experimental universal reproductive system within the highest orders of eldritch space. Throw in a few dozen jujus that break the rules of time and space while you’re at it. And then have the composite being find his Prophet, kill them, and take their powers.”

Everyone stared at her in disbelief.

“Orange fucktard Prophet had a ghost loophole, of course,” Vriska muttered. “Sealed away with the rest of the ghosts.”

“I’m still processing that such a thing existed,” Flutterfree said.

“Everything was his fault,” Vriska asserted.

“Good to know you defeated him,” Nova said.

“How, though?” Jotaro asked.

“I hit him with one of his own Jujus,” Vriska smirked.

“We have no idea,” Aradia corrected.

“Aradia!”

“We don’t. The House Juju activated, then next thing we knew we were elsewhere in the multiverse and everything was falling into the black hole. Lord English isn’t terrorizing the multiverse, so we knew we won, but… Well I never did figure out what exactly had happened.”

Vriska folded her arms. “I beat him and that’s that, kapeesh?”

“Kapeesh,” Jotaro deadpanned.

“Wonder what Davepeta has to say about this?” Aradia thought aloud.

Vriska looked into the distance. “…I don’t know. But I’m going to find out. Maybe they know how to get to Earth C…”

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The world DISC-DW2 was one of the oldest members of the USM, and the only one of the founding worlds that wasn’t a version of Earth. It was a world that was actually flat – the Discworld, a round sliver of earth resting atop the back of four great elephants, which in turn stood atop the great world-turtle A’Tuin as it swam through space.
The Discworld was a world of magic, but not quite the magic seen in most other worlds that contained it. The powers of the aether could be manipulated into spells and enchantments, of course, but the main feature of the Disc’s esoteric power was the strength of belief. If enough people believed in something, it was guaranteed to be true. Monsters, people, myths, legends, even gods.

Hence the existence of Death.

Johnny’s team was not here to visit the Disc, though – they were here to visit Death’s Domain. A realm that wasn’t quite a universe separate from the Disc, but wasn’t quite the same reality either. It existed separate from the space and time of the Disc, and yet it had a flow of time of its own, always marching onward…

The existence-outside-existence was mostly black. Where it wasn’t black, it was a deep mysterious purple or bone-chilling white. The place was, fittingly, filled with unalive things. Unfittingly, there was a perfectly ordinary cornfield in the distance. Death did not explain the presence of the cornfield and nobody felt the need to ask.

He led the humans and unicorn to the front door of an excessively creepy mansion, knocking on the front door. An exact duplicate of himself answered.

I WAS WONDERING WHEN YOU’D FEEL THE NEED TO VISIT, the duplicate-Death asked.

THE LIBRARY HAS SOMETHING WE MIGHT NEED.

I TAKE IT YOU WON’T BE USING THE DIGITAL SECTION?

IT WILL NOT BE THAT EASY, I AM AFRAID.

Duplicate-Death smiled – though he was always smiling. SUCH A SHAME. IT’S SO CONVENIENT. He stepped out of the doorway, letting them into the mansion. I WILL NOT BE ABLE TO ACCOMPANY YOU; THE CURRENT VERSION OF VIMES IS NEARING HIS END.

HE WILL BE MISSED. DO WE HAVE A REPLACEMENT?

NOT A VERSION OF VIMES. I EXPECT A CARROT WILL BE CALLED BACK FROM EXPLORATIONS.

HARDLY A REPLACEMENT FOR A VIMES.

Duplicate-Death shrugged and walked out, leaving the Domain.

Lileur shivered. “He gives me the creeps.”

HE IS EXACTLY THE SAME AS ME.

“That’s part of the creepy factor.”

“Ribbit,” Froppy agreed.

Death led them down halls with hourglasses representing the lives of every individual currently on the Discworld. Froppy knew there were hourglasses for the three of them, but she didn’t look for them. Even though the accuracy of Death’s knowledge was decreased with interdimensional interference, it still wasn’t healthy to see your own life ticking away for most people. It fit squarely into ‘things you really shouldn’t know and shouldn’t want to know.’
They passed the hourglasses and entered Death’s Library. At first it didn’t look much like a library – just a bunch of digital consoles with thousands of words flying across the screens, words that recorded the story of every life on the Disc. These were the records of life and death for every being whose life had been on the Discworld since computer technology was introduced.

Unfortunately, Death needed to go further back than that.

They passed the digital section, arriving at the printed section. None of these books were still being written, for they represented a past era. It was relatively short. The window between ‘typewriter’ and ‘computerized’ on the Disc had been a short one.

Death stopped shortly after they entered the section of books that appeared handwritten; there was no need to go any further back. Not to the scroll section, or stone tablet section.

He picked up a book. Rincewind.

“Your world had a Rincewind? How come I’ve never heard of him?” Lileur asked. “You think the first-world Rincewind would be well-known.”

HE VANISHED SOME TIME BEFORE VALENTINE AND JOHNNY CAME THROUGH HERE, Death said. AT THE SAME TIME, I EXPERIENCED WHAT I CAN ONLY DESCRIBE AS A ‘GLITCH’ IN EXISTENCE. He flipped to the last page of the book. I WAS UNSURE WHAT IT MEANT. WHAT I DO KNOW IS THAT, AT THE TIME, SEVERAL GODS OF THE DISC HAD VANISHED, THROWING THE WORLD INTO CHAOS. BELIEF HAD BEGUN BEHAVING ERRATICALLY DUE TO THE ‘HOLE’ CREATED BY IT. I WONDERED IF IT WAS GOING TO TRIGGER THE END OF TIMES. BUT IT WAS STOPPED, AND I WAS NEVER SURE WHAT STOPPED IT. THAT IN ITSELF IS VERY… UNUSUAL. He put a finger on the last page of the book. BUT SOMETHING CHANGED THE WAY BELIEF FUNCTIONED THAT DAY. I HAD ALWAYS ASSUMED IT WAS RINCEWIND, GIVEN HOW HE WAS INTIMATELY INVOLVED WITH THE EVENTS SURROUNDING IT, AND THAT HIS SOLUTION TOOK HIM OUT OF THE WORLD. NOW I’M NOT SO SURE.

Everyone crowded around to read the page on the book.

Rincewind looked behind himself – out of habit more than anything. But this time there was something behind him.

It was a yellow rat bursting with electric power.

“…What?”

“Hey,” the rat said.

Rincewind took off at a run.

“Good riddance,” the rat muttered. “Don’t need that moron in the Collection.”

The rat scampered off.

The page ended sharply after that when Rincewind turned a corner into something that wasn’t described very well.

“The Collection was there,” Johnny said. “You have a book on this rat, right?”
DEFINITELY, Death said. WOULD YOU LIKE TO TRY TO FIND IT?

Froppy shook her head. “No…”

I THOUGHT NOT. IT WOULD TAKE EONS TO FIND A BOOK ON A RAT THAT WAS PROBABLY ONLY IN THIS WORLD FOR A SHORT TIME. SMALL BOOKS LOVE TO HIDE. RINCEWIND’S BOOK JUST HAPPENS TO HAVE A SPECIAL PLACE IN THE COLLECTION.

“Why was the Collection here, though?” Lileur asked.

“To change the force of belief,” Johnny said. “Am I right?”

IT SEEMS THAT WAY, Death confirmed. BECAUSE, AS YOU KNOW, GODS AND OTHER ENTITIES OF BELIEF NO LONGER DISAPPEAR INTO OTHER UNIVERSES. THE MOMENT ONE OF US LEAVES, A REPLACEMENT COMES INTO EXISTENCE. THAT WAS NOT THE WAY THINGS WERE BEFORE THAT DAY. IT WOULD NOT ONLY SOLVE THE PROBLEM OF VANISHING GODS, BUT IT WOULD ALLOW THEM TO STAY GONE.

“Wait…” Froppy said, looking to Death. “You said you felt yourself ‘glitch’ at the time.”

YES, FROPPY. IT SEEMS LIKELY THAT I WAS TAKEN BY THE COLLECTION. IT WOULD EXPLAIN MUCH. I AM NOT THE ORIGINAL DEATH – AND THE ONE WE PASSED IS JUST A DUPLICATE OF A DUPLICATE.

“So they have a Death, and have the capacity to rewrite the physics of a universe,” Lileur said. “Lovely.”

“I’ll say,” Twitter said.

The four of them turned to stare at the moth-pony of the Sparkle Census.

“…How?” Lileur asked.

“L-Space,” Twitter explained. “The ‘force’ that connects all libraries of the multiverse. We in the Sparkle Census are really good at rummaging through it for information.”

“Find anything useful?”

“Aside from that book you’re looking at now? Nothing,” Twitter admitted. “Granted, searching L-Space is an exceedingly slow process when you’re looking for a specific book without any idea what sort of library it’d be in, so we weren’t exactly expecting results yet.”

She trotted over to a nearby shelf. “This is a fascinating library, by the way. So glad we can finally come here. When your Ambassador changed policies, we had to actively avoid Discworld L-Spaces. Harder than it sounds.”

DOES THE CENSUS HAVE ANYTHING OF USE?

“Twilight-GM is currently being grilled for information. Again. I don’t expect much to come out of that. It’s hard enough to keep her from killing herself…”

~~~

The Twilight known as GM lifted the plastic teacup to her mouth and drank. Her horn was encased
in a rubbery, black anti-magic coating, her remaining wing was pinned to her side, and her hooves were covered in plush boots. It made it difficult to drink, but she didn’t care about that.

At least there was no conceivable way to kill herself in here, so she didn’t have to try because of her conditioning. The walls were padded, and there was a magic strait jacket around her that would lock up if she tried anything.

“Thank you,” she said suddenly to both the other Twilights looking in on her from the other side of a thick pane of softened safety glass. “For going through all the trouble you have.”

“We’ll find a way to cure you, eventually,” 4T said, M4 nodding next to her.

GM smiled sadly. “I hope you do. I’d love to be able to go outside… To sit in a library… To go to a restaurant…” she looked wistfully into the distance. “But an opportunity will present itself, and I will not be able to resist. There’s no choice.”

“We know,” M4 said.

GM sighed. “You’re going to try to get new information out of me, aren’t you?”

The two nodded.

“I can only tell you what you already know, that’s how it works. I can’t betray him.”

“The Collector?”

“Oh good, you know his name,” GM let out a sigh of relief. “That makes it mentally easier to talk about. Yes, the Collector. I can’t betray him. If I think there’s any chance you don’t know something, I can’t tell you. Including this fact, but that’s something you reasoned out a long time ago.”

“And you aren’t allowed to open your mind either,” 4T noted.

GM shook her head. “No. The mental protections the Collector gave us… They’re not only impressive, they can’t be shut off. I’m thinking about a lot of things you’d really like to know, and I’d really like to tell you, but I can’t.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t come with a built-in self-destruct.”

GM shrugged. “The mental suicide command is usually more than enough.”

“Let’s try something a little underhooved,” M4 said. “I’m going to say things. You can confirm them. You obviously won’t be able to deny them, but you know.”

“You’re going to make me second-guess myself into mentally ordering myself never to talk again,” GM asserted. “…Please don’t do that.”

M4 twitched. “How controlling is this guy!?”

GM shook her head and smiled sadly, saying nothing.

“Damn. Not even that…”

“Paranoid,” 4T asserted. “Very, very paranoid. He doesn’t want anyone knowing about him. Those stuck in the aurora world were supposed to forget everything. If GM hadn’t been caught when she was, he would have remained unknown.”
“We’re basically just lucky we know he exists at all,” M4 said. “The guy’s clearly planned out his secret well.”

“So well that even those who know he exists can’t find him…”

“I wouldn’t feel bad about it,” GM said. “It’s not like any of us can actually defy him either.”

“. . . We’ve got to be careful,” M4 realized. “If we get too close, he could just control one of our leaders and force the entire thing apart.”

“We can detect the conditioning though. It has a unique mental signature,” 4T reminded her.

“You still have to look,” M4 muttered, hoof to her chin. “. . . I just don’t like the situation we’re in. Nobody knows anything about him, and the scant traces we do find just make him and his Collection more terrifying and bizarre.”

4T sighed. “Guess we really aren’t going to be able to learn anything here.”

“I’m sorry,” GM said, meaning every word.

“Don’t worry about it,” 4T said with a smile. “I’ll be back for our weekly game of Battleship tomorrow.”

GM beamed. “I look forward to it. Oh, could you get me a copy of Jojo’s Bizarre Adventures? I hear it’s topical from the news feed.”

“Sure thing.”

“Maybe some Discworld books as well.”

4T rolled her eyes. “Don’t worry, you’ll get your books. We’re not monsters.”

“I know. Thank you. . . . You don’t have any idea how much all of this trouble you go through means to me.”

“You’re welcome, GM.”

The two left, leaving GM alone.

Again.

She sighed, flopping onto the soft floor of her confinement.

They didn’t stand a chance. . . . They were going to fail and she was going to be taken back. . . .

She started to weep. She had a lonely agony that only someone trapped in their own mind could experience. And unlike those who were in a vegetative state, she was fully aware of everything.

It hurt. It hurt so much.

But she couldn’t fight her own mind.

~~~

The TSAB had an odd range of people they would employ, to put it mildly.

Due to their origins around a cluster of ‘magical girl’ universes, the minimum age to work within the
TSAB was eight years old. That custom had never gone away – it was relatively common for any TSAB ship or office to have at least one exceptionally young mage on staff, treated essentially the same as any adult. There were certainly laws in place to keep this rule from being exploited – only children who were naturally capable of the job they were working in question were allowed for instance – but this did not change the fact that the TSAB allowed child labor.

This left a bad taste in a lot of people’s mouths, particularly the USM. The Merodi didn’t take as much issue with it – after all, they allowed the League of Sweetie Belles to operate, among other things.

Renee and Daniel still found it exceptionally odd that the TSAB’s contact they were meeting was an eight year old redheaded girl with two braided pigtails and a hammer device. She had a ‘barrier jacket’ of her own, though it looked a lot less like Nanoha’s ‘battle dress’ and more like an actual red dress one might go to a dance in. If it wasn’t for the hammer she’d look ready to go to an extravagant ball.

Her name was Vita. And she could see the couple trying their best not to look at her with disrespect. They were failing.

She twitched. “Quit looking at me like that.”

Daniel nervously adjusted his glasses. “Er…”

“Apologies,” Renee said, bowing. “It is just difficult to move past our own biases.”

“I’m not eight, you know,” Vita muttered. “I’m older than Nanoha.”

“Really?”

“I’m a Wolkenritter. A full magical program.” She smiled proudly. “So don’t treat me like a kid.”

“Again, apologies, the appearance still makes it difficult.”

Vita shrugged. “Well, you weren’t here to talk to me anyway,” Vita admitted. “I’m just here to get you into places.”

The three of them were currently in an Outpost universe within the Strands, and one of the shadier worlds at that. The world was composed entirely of dead, black trees tied to each other in an endless work. Structures were built inside the tremendous trunks of these trees, lights in the eternal darkness of the world. People in cloaks moved around in hushed tones, clearly up to no good. A den of liars if ever there was one.

The perfect place to get information, as Olivia would say.

Vita led them to a tree that didn’t look like it even had anything built into it. She hit it lightly with her hammer three times. “Vita here. The password is not swordfish.”

The three of them were teleported into the tree by a quick spell. The tree held only a single room lit by a warm fireplace. The only other individual in the room was an alien being with a largely cone-shaped body, three tentacle arms, and a round head with three eyes.

“Hey Adder’na,” Vita said, leaning on her hammer. “Been traveling much lately?”

“Always,” Adder’na said. His voice arrived in their heads, clearly through telepathy. “What does the TSAB wish to know today?”
“Let me do the introductions first. Adder’na, Renee and Daniel Jackson, Merodi Universalis.”

“Ah, the new kids on the block. Charmed. I would shake your hand, but one of you lacks hands, and my tentacles are somewhat disgusting to most.”

Renee smiled. “It’s no problem.”

Vita gestured at Adder’na. “This is Adder’na, of the Great Race of Yith, a Class 2 Society that operates out of the D-Sphere. They’re a race of beings who project their minds across the multiverse and across various times to live out as many experiences as possible. Adder’na is one of the oldest Yith. He’s older than most of the Class 1 Civilizations, I hear.”

“You flatter me, but over-exaggerate,” Adder’na said. “What is it you wish to prod my lengthy experiences for?”

“We are looking for an entity known as the Collector and his Collection,” Daniel said. He took a data pad out of his coat and held it out to Adder’na.

“May I just garner the information directly from your mind?”

“So long as you promise to only grab what relates to the Collector,” Renee said. “And if you find any Merodi state secrets, leave them alone.”

“You do not have many of those, from what I hear, so that should not be difficult.” Adder’na touched their minds, prompting a tickling sensation in the back of their thoughts. “Hrm... This is quite the quandary you’ve found yourselves in. I have nothing in my deep memories about that. But in one of my more recent experiences, I have seen the Collection – not by name, but I have seen two of the people you know have been taken. Ivan and Gyro.”

“Where?” Renee asked.

Adder’na looked to Vita. Vita sighed. “Nanoha’s personal account will take care of whatever you want for this.”

“A simple week in the mind of a TSAB agent will suffice for payment,” Adder’na said. “Such a rare experience.”

Vita sighed. “If nobody else will do it, I’ll do it.”

“Good. Regardless, I was in the body of a human on a world filled with magical, elemental creatures, based on the Pokémon games. I was capturing them all for the experience of it – of course when you find one of these worlds you’re going to have to deal with a serious political fallout from the pit-fighting of various sapient creatures, but that’s neither here nor there at the moment.

“The world focuses around battle – a LOT of battle – but mostly as a competition. For a people so fixated on conflict and combat sports, they have almost no wars or international conflicts on a large scale. But while I was there, war was brewing on the horizon. Their god – a being known as Arceus – had been revealed to just be a creature that the humans of the world could subjugate to their will. With difficulty, admittedly.

“Needless to say, the religious types took issue with those who weren’t, and it wasn’t going to be long before they started killing each other over it. Arceus himself was not an omniscient, omnipresent, or even all that understanding a god so his interactions with the situation only made it worse. I became caught up in a conspiracy to capture Arceus because I had become known as the individual who would catch them all – using my vast knowledge to my advantage, of course.
“I had plans to pull a bait and switch – capture Arceus just to say I could, and then release him on the people who organized his downfall. It might not have stopped the war, but it would definitely create some justice. I’ll never forget that battle – me, an ordinary human with the mind beyond even Arceus, fighting the god with nothing more than my magical companion creatures. My fellow ‘trainers’ had already fallen behind me, and I was having difficulty against the minor deity. I am still not sure if I would have been able to win had things gone interrupted.

“But then they showed up. Gyro Zepelli and Ivan. They made quick work of my already weakened team, using out of context abilities to toss them aside. Ivan’s illusions were my downfall – Gyro’s spin took down Arceus in a second. I was baffled by what had happened – so much that I dropped my mask I wear as a Yithian. Gyro noticed I could see Ball Breaker. While Ivan conditioned Arceus to obey – presumably another servant for the Collector, I see now – Gyro walked up to me, and decided it was a good idea to have a chat.

“I still remember what he said. ‘Have you heard the pizza mozzarella song?’ I told him I had not. He went on to sing what is quite possibly the worst song I have ever heard. Strangely catchy, but still horrendous. Then he grinned. ‘Hey, if you ever see a Johnny Joestar in your travels, tell him Gyro Zepelli said hi. Tell him not to worry, I’m doing great.’

“I told him I would, of course, do such a thing. Clearly you all can carry the message to Johnny now. Ivan came up to me and showed me a list of creatures slightly lower on the power tier of that world than Arceus – demanding that I provide any of them I had on me. I had only brought one of the ones on the list, although I had most of the others captured elsewhere. I didn’t feel like it was a good idea to fight, so I handed them over.

“Then they left. I told the world I was in what happened, and suddenly both sides no longer wanted to fight each other, but find out who took Arceus and bring them to justice. In order to solidify the peace, I provided them with the simplest basics of dimensional travel. Then I continued my journey, slowly realizing that they had taken a lot more than just Arceus – most of the deities and demigods of the world had been taken.

“Once I was sure there was nothing more for me to capture, I left the body I had occupied. I learned nothing more about Gyro or Ivan until today.”

Renee bowed her head. “Thank you, Adder’na, for this assistance.”

“It is my pleasure, Overhead Renee. This is likely not as much as you wanted.”

“It tells us they really do like ‘helping’,” Daniel asserted. “And they also capture more and more for the Collection while they do so…”

“Seems like they’re self-contradictory,” Vita muttered.

“If they’re run by the will of one person, of course they would be,” Renee pointed out. “There’s nobody who can be truly consistent.”

“You should return to Johnny.”

“We will,” Renee assured him. “Now… Do you mind getting us out of here?”

“Not at all. Vita, send someone my way within the next week for payment.”

“Yeah yeah, got it,” Vita said, arms folded. At this remark, the three were teleported outside the tree. Daniel furrowed his brow. “Is his entire race like that?”
“Mind-jumping?” Vita asked. “Yeah. They just love to do that. Don’t worry about whoever he’s going to take over for payment – they’ll be prepared for it, nothing bad will happen to them. The random people they jump into do tend to go insane, though. Be glad he generally doesn’t do a full body-swap, he just suppresses the mind.”

Renee bit her lip. “Well, I’m glad we talked to him, but I’d rather not do more business with his kind. I’m sure you understand.”

“The other option is the Melnorme.”

“At least all they try to do is rip you off.”

“Touche.”

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Nine Worlds.

Jenny of the Red Gloves had lived through all of them.

Not that she remembered all of the billion years she had existed – her mind was still mostly human despite her age, and the human mind could only hold so many memories. She remembered her origins and her recent history with enough clarity to live her life, but everything in the middle was a bit of a mysterious blur in her mind. She couldn’t even determine where her memories of one world began and another ended. She was able to tell people what the First World looked like when she was young, and what the Ninth World had looked like a couple centuries ago. That was it.

This was likely why Jenny had procured a magic book back when she was in the First World. She didn’t remember how she got it – the irony – but she knew it had been with her for the vast majority of her life. A book with an infinite number of pages that served as her journal, chronicling her random thoughts, jottings, stories, and sketches over the course of millions upon millions of years.

Needless to say the book was an absolute mess on the inside. It was written in more or less chronological order, but Jenny was never one to keep meticulous notes. On some pages there would be a retelling of a legend, on others there would be scientific diagrams, while others would only contain drawings of whatever Jenny had found fascinating at the time. Apparently she went through a ‘flowers’ phase around her third millionth. Weird.

Until recently (recently being about a century ago), she hadn’t even been able to read everything in the book because it was written in a number of different languages, or sometimes even just chicken scratch. But as the current public head of Dracogen Enterprises, she had access to translator glasses that were able to reveal what all but the most outlandish scribbles meant.

She always got aggravated with herself whenever she read the book. She didn’t remember any of the adventures she described, but she always felt like her past self was an idiot for falling for things. After skimming around the book as a whole for about a day, she flipped to the start and started reading, looking for anything about the Collector or the Collection.

The First World had nothing for her, that was easy to see. The First World started out as a somewhat dark ‘fantasy’ world where chaos reigned that eventually became a sprawling war across the galaxy over several millennia. Ah, Emperor Karl – she remembered him. Her first adventure, actually. He was just a boy with a special power then, but he became so much more.

She skimmed through her memoirs about fighting in eternal war as one of Karl’s
Agents that didn’t officially exist. The result of that war…

She could never remember. And the end of the First World sections always told conflicting stories. Jenny currently believed the timeline had been churned into soup around that moment and the book had probably been written in by numerous Jennys trying to work it out, but it was impossible to determine now.

The Second World was an interesting one for Jenny to remember – because apparently it was just a Standard Earth. With a dark past that hardly affected it at all…

It was here that she found something.

She had apparently decided to have a normal life – as normal as an unaging young girl could – going to school in the local 2010s. She had become obsessed with stories – novels, movies, comics, legends, etcetera – and had started to write her own. This made it somewhat difficult to tell what was really happening, what were short story ideas she had come up with, or what were observations on other works of fiction. She did spot a picture of Jotaro with a character study next to it. Something to check out later.

The next page showed a map of a galaxy split up into sections. Some of the names seemed familiar to her – the Tau’ri, for instance – while others meant nothing. What kind of space nation called themselves the Culture?

But a side note near the end of a timeline caught her attention. Project Odin occurs. Heralding the creation of the Collector. He will use his meta-knowledge to start an empire and become a major threat for the future.

The timeline was clearly incomplete. Jenny turned the page, but there was no more information on the galaxy. Just the map. She flipped a few pages forward and back, but found nothing.

Just that one tiny note. The Collector was created, and had meta-knowledge. He was set to start an empire – presumably the Collection – from birth.


She took a picture of the pages and sent it to the rest of the nations. It wasn’t much to go off of, but it was something.

Jenny just wondered if this galaxy of fiction on these pages was her idea or someone’s she had copied down for some reason…

There she went, second-guessing her past self again. She wasn’t even sure if this was really referring to the Collector and not just some other being that conveniently had the same name. After all, the Collector was a pretty simple ‘name’. They had encountered a couple other beings in the universe with the name, though for the most part it was very clear they weren’t who they needed to find…

Jenny turned the page, going deeper into the Second World.

~~~

Charter-Princess Evening Sparkle addressed the gathered members of the Collector Research team in the primary meeting room of the Golden Joke, where they had signed the agreement a couple weeks prior. “What I am about to tell you is one of the Merodi’s closest guarded secrets. We may not have many, but those we do are kept for good reason. What I say is not to leave this room, and no citizens...
of any of the four nations are to find out what I reveal here today.”

That got the attention of the USM, Sparkle Census, and Dracogen representatives. Valentine in particular leaned in, curious.

Eve nodded, teleporting Rohan Kishibe to her side. “This man is a Prophet. That is to say, the things he writes have the ability to influence how reality shapes itself.”

Valentine let his expression betray his surprise – but not his fear. A Prophet!? They’ve had one this whole time!? We’ve never found one definitively!

Eve lit her horn, teleporting copies of various manga manuscripts throughout the room. “Rohan has, for the past couple weeks, been writing stories about us. Stories about us having success. Stories about us finding things, information, or people by chance. This method of writing worked in the past helping us in the encounter with the Starcross Society. However… The only one of these that has come true is the one that had nothing to do with the Collector, written as sort of a control.”

Jenny sighed. “If he has meta-awareness, perhaps he has ways to defend against being Propheted? Perhaps he is a Prophet?”

“That is possible,” Eve admitted. “Our current psych evaluations give us the impression he thinks he is the hero of his story. But it could just be that there is another Prophet writing him to be immune to being written against. …As is obvious by this point, we’re making a lot of guesses and shots in the dark about how all this works.”

Valentine looked at Rohan, face stern. “Are you certain you put your all into the work?”

“Yes…” Rohan growled.

“I heard that forced writing doesn’t qualify. Are you sure-”

“Yes I’m sure,” Rohan reiterated, face clouding. He remembered one moment in particular all too well…

“Damn you!” Rohan shouted, throwing the manuscript to the ground. “I PUT MY HEART AND SOUL INTO YOU, WHY DON’T YOU WORK!!”

“…Do you need a moment?” Starbeat asked.

Rohan ignored her. “HEAVEN’S DOOR!” He tore the manuscript to shreds with his Stand. “If you won’t do what I want then you are worthless!”

Starbeat scribbled down some notes in her notepad. Rohan stormed back to his desk and began speed-drawing again.

“Mister Kishibe?” Valentine asked.

“Mmm?”

“I asked you if you did anything different with the one that came true opposed to the ones that didn’t.”

“I removed all references to the Collector, that’s it. It’s an edited version of a different manuscript!”

“How can you make so much manga!”? A Twilight asked, gawking over all the art.
“Skill,” Rohan answered.

“Stand,” Eve corrected.

Rohan folded his arms, still ticked off that his power wasn’t working properly.

“The conclusion here is that we’re either extremely unlucky, or the Collector is protected from Prophet powers somehow,” Eve finalized.

THERE IS A THIRD OPTION, Death suggested. WE COULD BE MAKING AN ASSUMPTION ABOUT THE COLLECTOR THAT WE SHOULDN’T BE MAKING, WHICH MAKES ALL OF ROHAN’S MANUSCRIPTS IMPOSSIBLE THROUGH SIMPLE LOGIC.

There was silence in the room.

Eve sighed. “The truth is we just don’t know enough. In many ways, we can’t know enough. With our resources, we’re able to get hints of the Collector, scant pieces of information blowing in the wind telling us there is something. I know there’s a way to find the Collector, but I can’t imagine for the life of me what it is.” She shook her head. “This doesn’t mean we’re going to stop. Eventually we’re going to progress enough to find something. We just have no idea how long that’s going to take.”

“Your point?” Jenny asked.

“We all have nations to run,” Eve said, looking at Valentine knowingly. “We’ve dropped focusing on our normal duties to devote time to this endeavor. If we were going to get a quick result, that would be fine. But we’re not getting a quick result, and what we’ve left undone is unraveling back home.”

“Are you telling us to stop?” Jenny demanded.

“I’m telling us to delegate people lower down the chain to work on this,” Eve said. “We have entire nations that hinge on us. We can delegate specialist teams to work on this rather than see it through ourselves.”

Valentine stood up suddenly and walked up to Eve. He stared at her intensely.

“I second what Evening is saying,” Valentine said at last. “These efforts will not benefit enough from our continued close oversight. I will be returning to my regular ambassadorial duties upon choosing a replacement for my current position.”

Eve smiled. “I’ll do the same.”


Eve nodded. “Good. Does anyone have anything else they’d like to add to the meeting?”

Everyone shook their heads.

“In that case, dismissed.” She left the podium, walking out into one of the halls.

Valentine caught up with her. “You revealed something big to us today.”

“I took our promise seriously,” Eve said. “I can only hope you did the same.”

Valentine nodded in understanding. “We had no secrets relating to the investigation.”
Eve checked him over. “…I believe you.”

There was silence.

“So, how are we going to move forward?” Eve asked.

Valentine looked into the distance, expression deep in thought. “Borders can be opened again. But before the people will allow that, there will have to be a treaty on the nature of interference, colonization, and culture.”

“I’ll be glad if we aren’t stuck in a Cold War.”

“That’s a low bar to aim for.”

“One step at a time.”

Once again, they let an awkward silence fill the void.

“…Do you think we’ll find him?” Eve asked. “Ever?”

“Yes. For we are on the side of Justice. And Justice always prevails.”

Eve beamed at him. “You know, for all your stubbornness, your devotion to justice is something I admire.”

“Your empathy and understanding is a force to be reckoned with itself,” Valentine said.

Eve chuckled. “Well, I am the Princess of Friendship. Charter of the Multiverse is basically just an add-on.”

“Perhaps it is your fate to ally with everyone.”

“It’s what I try to do.”

The two looked to each other, nodded curtly, and went their separate ways. It wasn’t friendship – but it wasn’t animosity either. It was a relationship built on mutual respect.

Merodi Universalis and the USM would not be allies just because of one conversation and joint mission. There was too much to smooth over for that to happen. But it was a step in the right direction.

~~~

Somnambula’s Throne, constructed from an ancient gray Rune, had the power to summon the Spectacularium.

Unfortunately the throne in question had been lost in the recent upheavals on Lai relating to the Arcei and their newfound rage against the Stars.

Lady Rarity, Corona, Lieshy, and Olivia had spent the last few weeks attempting to find this throne. They were at the end of their journey, fighting Lai dragons. Three of them – red, green, and blue – were circling the mountaintop Lady Rarity’s team found themselves on.

“There is a decidedly annoying lack of things to hack!” Olivia shouted, dodging a red dragon’s foot only by a few inches.
“Magically?” Lady Rarity asked, smashing one across the head with a hammer.

“Why do you think they’re not breathing fire at us?” Olivia blurted, firing her pulse pistol. Even at maximum charge, the weapon only burned off chunks of flesh the size of a bowling ball. It was certainly painful to the dragon, but the mountainous behemoths were too large for such attacks to faze them.

Corona spread her hands wide. “Got the red one.” She summoned her Stand – Bacon Pancakes. It took the appearance of a red disc with her cutie mark on both sides, the four-pointed solar design giving the disc the overall appearance of a compass. Eight red satellites circled the compass around the long edge, each of them composed of three red toothpicks fused together. Corona focused on the red dragon, launching all eight of the spiked objects at the dragon.

They each hit in a particular location – one in each knee joint, one in each wing joint, one in the head, and one in the tail. They did no damage, they drew no blood – but they affixed themselves to the dragon’s body like the pins they were. With a quick order, Corona told the spiked pins to drive the dragon into the mountain, closer to where she was. The dragon could have resisted, but it wasn’t expecting the sudden jarring motion from its own body. It crashed into the mountain.

Corona ran up to it with the main body of Bacon Pancakes. She leaped onto it, riding it like a sled down the mountain to where the dragon’s dazed face rested. She plowed into it, activating her Stand’s close-range ability. The orbiting pins were able to push and shove, but that was about it. The actual disc though, it could flatten.

The dragon’s head became two-dimensional, like a piece of paper. It would have been all too easy to reach down and rip the dragon’s head off at this point, since the strength of the flat flesh was almost nothing. But Corona had no intention of doing that. She continued flattening more parts of the dragon’s body as she rode down the mountain, using her telekinesis to direct her path down one of the legs. She tore there, severing the dragon’s limb.

The beast howled in pain, trying to retaliate – but with half its body the consistency of paper, all it did was crumple itself into a messy wad. Parts of its body began to tear from the thrashing, sending warning signals to the dragon’s brain. It stopped moving, scared it would tear itself apart by moving.

“Good boy,” Corona said, teleporting back to the top of the mountain, recalling all eight of Bacon Pancakes’ pins. Olivia and Lady Rarity had worked together to encase the blue one in magical spirid silk.

Lieshy was on the green one, riding it like some kind of horse. The green dragon couldn’t shake her. Lieshy’s stand, Limelight, kept punching the dragon from the side. Limelight was an almost featureless stand – four green, furless pony legs attached to a body. No tail, no head, just four green limbs. It was one of those Stands that was really good at punching at close range and jack squat at longer ranges.

“AUGH!” the dragon shouted. “WHY WON’T YOU GET OFF?”

“Limestone,” Lieshy said, having Limelight punch the dragon in the face again.

“Would you please stop doing that?”

“Tell me where the throne is.”

“No!”

“More punching.”
“OW!”
Limelight punched the dragon in the eye.

“Why would such a nice mare torment me so!”?
Lieshy smirked. “Ah, signals of progress. Where’s the throne?”

“I don-”
Limelight punched him again. “Are you sure you don’t want to tell me just because I’m a nice mare?”

“But I- OW!”

“Pleeease?”

“I… I… Okay fine, but just because you asked nicely.”

Lieshy chuckled evilly. “Good work, Limelight.”

The green dragon willingly landed on the mountain, allowing Lieshy to dismount.

Corona smirked, high-fiving Limelight. “Nice work.”

“Thanks.”

The green dragon growled.

“Dragon, the throne?” Lieshy asked.

“I don’t kno…”

Limelight punched the dragon in the chest.

“Right… Whatever you wish…” With a loud hacking noise, he threw the throne out of his gut, dropping the gray Runic artifact to the ground below, covered in sticky slobber.

“…Ew,” Lady Rarity commented.

“Awesome,” Olivia countered.

“Now take your friends and go,” Lieshy told the dragon. “Okay?”

“R-right…” He grabbed his head. “Let’s… Let’s go.”

Corona released the paper-effect on the red dragon. The two of them had to carry the blue dragon away.

“How hard did you punch him?” Corona asked after they were out of earshot. “He was basically eating out of your lap!”

“A lot of times,” Lieshy answered.

“Must be nice, to have people you’ve beat up do your bidding,” Olivia mused.

“Defeat equals friendship,” Lieshy asserted.
“Or stalker,” Olivia reminded her.

“I am never going to punch anyone with Limelight that hard ever again.”

The four of them chuckled.

“Stands are weird,” Corona said.

“You say that every time, dear,” Lady Rarity observed. She took a few steps toward the throne, lighting her horn. “Let’s see… The correct spell should be—”

The Spectacularium came into existence. Normally, it would have been mad that they had dared call it again, but this time it wasn’t. Realizing this, the four heroes were confused—they had expected to need to talk the Spectacularium down.

The Spectacularium apologized. It would not be able to help them. It did not have knowledge that extended to the Collector. The Spectacularium could recount mostly things they had heard already—plus a few extra stories of the Collection appearing in places, doing something, and vanishing. Sometimes taking people with them to the Collection, sometimes not.

There was nothing else the Spectacularium could tell them. It was not omniscient.

“…Did we really spend these weeks for nothing?” Olivia asked.

The Spectacularium could answer that. It was indeed for nothing.

“Egad, it has a sense of humor!” Lieshy decreed.

The Spectacularium had no idea what she was referring to. Probably. The Spectacularium vanished before it could be questioned further.

Lady Rarity sighed. “Well, let’s get this throne back to Somnambula. Then we can deeply contemplate what we’re doing with our lives…”

“Lovely,” Corona deadpanned.

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“This sounds desperate,” O’Neill observed from his seat in the captain’s chair of the Enterprise.

“It is,” Starbeat said, pacing around the bridge. “But right now it’s all we’ve got. All I’m asking for is a test run.”

“You want to burn out the Enterprise’s dimensional drive?”

“Look, I’m just trying for a proof of concept,” Starbeat said. “I don’t need you to translate to another universe every second. All I need the Enterprise to do is move around universes randomly for a while with quick translations. If we want to find the Collector, the best bet seems to be calibrated ka sensors. And to work with that we’ll need to perfect the technology of multi-universe ka scanning.” She gestured toward a large metal box with three green lights she had hooked up to a nearby monitor. “This is just a test run to see what we pick up without going through the trouble of constructing a hummingbird drive specifically for the box.”

O’Neill shrugged. “…Yeah, it’s not like I have anything better to do right now. Not even a USM invasion to worry about.”
Starbeat put her goggles over her eyes, as if bracing for impact. “If you don’t mind, could we get going then?”

O’Neill nodded to the pilot – a Binary, one of the very few who had enlisted for military service. The hairy creature plugged in the program and the Enterprise began to jump from universe to universe within the E-Sphere. Starbeat began to collect data, watching the screen closely for the inflections in ka.

She made a ‘hrm’ noise in the seventh universe.

“What is it?”

“Not doing what I want it to do. Haven’t picked up much…” They jumped universes again. “We’ll have to visit a few dozen to be sure, though.”

“You’re very specific for a scientist.”

“Treating ka like science is like trying to determine whose tastes are objectively better. It doesn’t work.” They jumped again.

“So you’re telling me it’s basically just art, hrm…?”

Starbeat lit up. “Actually, the relation between art, science, and ka is a complex one that I hope to write a complete study on one day in which – and you were mostly trying to mess with me there.”

“Yep.”

Starbeat’s bracelet started beeping. “I have no breaks… I haaaaaave nooooo breaaa-”

She saw the beat readings on the screen change – not because of her.

“STOP THE SHIP!” Starbeat shouted, pressing her goggled face to the screen. “What the… What is this reading!?”

“Where are we?” O’Neill asked.

“Earth Stand!” the pilot responded.

“Earth Stand? But that would me-” Starbeat turned to O’Neill. “Go to the system’s sun, now.”

O’Neill nodded. “Engage.” The Enterprise performed a quick jump to the yellow sun of Earth Stand.

“Their sun is a Star,” Starbeat fretted. “These readings – well it means the thing is working – but something’s going to happen and….”

“Ship detected! Civilian, but with high levels of magic! Arcei signatures detected!”

O’Neill’s eyes widened. “Stop them! Now!”

“Too late, they’re already firing something at the sun!”

A beam of red and white light shot out of the tiny, triangle-shaped ship, heading right for the Star of Earth Stand.

Something stopped it. A ship of unknown design appeared from a swirling mass of glowing white
vines. It was composed of white metal in an overall rod-shape, a rounded two-part hull covering the front. The hull absorbed the beam head on, shrugging it off.

Starbeat stared at the ka readings on her screen. “T—that’s the Collection. No doubt about it.” She grinned. “I’m getting so much data! I… I’ll be able to use this to find them!”

“He wouldn’t be so stupid,” O’Neill said. “He’s too smart for this… This is all intentional…”

In a mass of white vines, the smaller ship was completely engulfed. The large Collection ship turned to the Enterprise.

They teleported Gyro right onto the bridge, through the Enterprise’s shields. With a snarky grin he threw a steel ball into Starbeat’s box, destroying it instantly. “Sorry.” He was gone before Crimson Sushi could slap him.

The Collection ship vanished in a mass of white vines, leaving Earth Stand alone once again.

“Can you salvage anything?” O’Neill asked.

“Y-yes, but… Not enough!” Starbeat shouted. “It was running the needed calculations along with the readings and – I knew the design was imperfect! AGH!”

O’Neill grabbed her. “Starbeat, calm down. Tell me what this means.”

She kissed him. He fell back, so surprised he lost his footing. “Yeah, you should have waited, the ‘click’ hadn’t worn off yet. To answer your question, this means the device works. What it also means is that we can’t find them now. We have to wait to get another reading with a device that actually works. So it looks like we’ll need to make those hummingbird drives after all to scour the multiverse… The next time any of them show up, we’ll be able to get a reading. And with a full ka scan, I’m sure we can find him.”

O’Neill took a seat back in the captain’s chair. “He did this on purpose, though. He’s too paranoid to just let us see one of his ships without reason. He wanted this to happen.”

“Obviously,” Starbeat said. “Or he wanted something here bad enough that he was willing to let us see a ship to get it.”

“What would he want though?”

~~~

“Good work,” the Collector told Gyro. “Complete success for every mission objective.”

Gyro shrugged. “I even got to see the looks on their faces. Priceless.”

“I bet it was. You can keep the ship.”

“Hell yeah.”

The Collector nodded. “Glad to see you’re learning to enjoy yourself again, Gyro. I always appreciate it when people accept their life.”

“It was either that or go crazy.”

“I thought you were already crazy.” the Collector said with an amused chuckle.
Gyro laughed. “I guess so!” He coughed. “So, can I take the girl for a spin or what?”

“Go enjoy yourself. You’ve earned it. Don’t crash.”

“I won’t if I have any choice in the matter!”

“That is how things are.”

Gyro ran off, leaving the Collector in his office with Lightning.

“It has begun,” Lightning said.

“Project Odin II, Moving Forward,” the Collector said wistfully. “It’s finally time for all this work to meet its final fruition…”

“Are you certain they are the right ones?”

“I’m certain. Remember what the Pinkies told us about their Prophet. The time has come, Lightning. Of course, it won’t be for a while yet – have to let things stew for a few years at least so the stew can simmer just right – but everything has been set in motion. You see it, don’t you?”

“I do.”

“The purpose of the Collection… My purpose. It is about to be realized.”

“And mine?”

“Will be what you make of it, you know this,” the Collector said. “Let’s not worry about the future for now, the gears are moving on their own for the moment. How about we go say hello to our newest member.”

“Not any of the Arcei, I presume?”

“Of course not.”

Lightning nodded, ordering a teleport.

In front of them stood a tremendously muscular man wearing almost nothing: a purple loincloth, armlets, and boots. His dark hair flowed in the air despite no breeze flowing through it. He gave off an aura of power that could only be described as menacing.

The Collector spoke to him like an old friend. “Hello Kars. Welcome to your new life in the Collection.” He folded his hands together. “I can tell you’re going to be an interesting one to integrate into my society. Let’s start with who I am. I am the Collector – your new master. You and I are going to get to know each other very well, Kars…”
Filming Evening

The Twelve Divisions of Merodi Universalis had offices in many different locations. For instance, Evening, Overhead of Relations, lived in Canterlot Castle and worked mostly out of the city in question. However, the main building of the Relations Division was in Celestia City – as it was for all twelve of the government offices. Occasionally, events would require an Overhead to be physically present at the main building of their Division. This was usually nothing more than a mild annoyance given the speed at which the Overheads could get from anywhere within Merodi Universalis to Celestia City.

Currently, Evening herself was at her main building for some reason or other. The man who wanted to meet with her didn’t really care what her actual reason for being on site was; all he cared about was the meeting he had scheduled with her. An interview.

The man certainly looked like an interviewer. A camera, notebook, recording device, and messed up mop of blue hair certainly gave that appearance, though the sheer number of pens in his front pocket really sold it. He had light green skin, indicating his origination from Earth Vitis. He wasted no time charging to the front doors of the Relations Office. The exterior of the building was near the center of Celestia City, made to look like one of the towers of Canterlot, albeit coated with a thin coating of clear crystal. He pushed in, demanding his presence be known. “I am Iris Snap and I have a meeting scheduled with Evening!”

A human – Fire Nation, if Iris had to guess – looked at her computer screen. A small smile came over her bored face. “Oh. You! She’s been expecting you. I’ll teleport you right up.”

Iris was not teleported to a meeting room or an office, like he was expecting, but rather a lounge with dim lighting. Bookshelves lined the marble walls, flanking a raging fireplace. There were a few comfortable chairs strewn about the room, each with their own end table, but only one of these chairs was occupied. Evening must have sensed his arrival through magic, because she turned her chair to face him directly. “Please, have a seat.” Her voice was unusual, sounding with a slight hollowness to it that came with her deafness. Why wasn’t she using a spell to force her voice to balance? This was supposed to be an interview, and therefore it was an official event like her speeches.

Iris sat down anyway. “Thank you for your time, Charter. I am Iris Snap an-”

“To begin with, you’re not Iris Snap. Let’s be honest, shall we?”

‘Iris’ blinked. “You found out already? How in the world did you do that?”

“A ladybug told me,” was the only explanation Evening was willing to give. “Your name is Shutterstock, a young filmmaker making waves in the multiversal film market, something notably difficult to do given our economic structure.”

“…Then you already know what I want to do,” Shutterstock observed.

“You want to make a movie about me.”

“That’s right. And you’ve never let any director interview you before.”

“I’m letting it happen now,” Eve said with a coy smile. “I let you get all the way here, didn’t I?”
“Why?”

“People have already made movies without my involvement or approval before. I can’t stop them, nor should I, but the sheer amount of misrepresentation and false information is just aggravating. I decided I would wait until someone who had the right spirit came along – and that someone ended up being you, Shutterstock.” She smiled warmly. “Only a handful of films under your belt, but most of them already hits. An understanding of how the market works for these things. And a famous devotion to the art of filmmaking. I don’t pretend to understand the process myself, but I hear you are deeply passionate about your creations.”

Shutterstock nodded. “I have to be. I never want to do something the same way as anyone else.”

Eve nodded. “And most importantly of all, you strive for factual accuracy. I was impressed by Avatar Aang.”

“You can certainly expect more of that!”

“Trying to sell the idea to me, are you?” Eve said with a smirk. “Understandable, I suppose. My approval of your film will make everything incredible for you. Quite the success story.”

“I just want people to see my film.”

Eve looked at him closely. “…I believe you. Which is why I believe I’m going to give my support. Of course, I’ll need to know exactly what you plan the movie to be about, and I’ll want to receive a script at some point.”

“It will be sent to you as soon as it is complete. As for the film, I want to chronicle the story of you from when you first discovered the multiverse to when you founded Merodi Universalis. I won’t focus on multiversal history – I will focus on personal history. Which is why I’m here for this interview. I want to know what events meant the most to you.”

An unreadable expression crossed Eve’s face. “Of course.” She levitated a data pad off of a table near her. “This data pad contains my unpublished memoirs. If any of the passages within gets out before I publish under my own means, I will bring the wrath of the legal system down on you and destroy you. Otherwise, this will save you and me a lot of time that would be taken up in an actual interview.”

“Thank you,” Shutterstock said, pocketing the pad. “I won’t publish any of these passages, and I’ll ensure that nobody gets a hold of them. That said…”

“What?”

Shutterstock shuffled. “Your description of your own life is biased. I want to hear it from people who know you as well.”

Eve smirked. “Being thorough. Good.” She lit her horn, casting a spell on Shutterstock’s phone. “You now have my personal number. If you need me to set up a meeting with any of my friends or acquaintances, it will be done. I want you to get everything you need.”

Shutterstock bowed his head. “Thank you, Charter.”

“Just do a good job, Shutterstock. I’m putting a lot of faith in you.”

“You won’t be disappointed.”
Shutterstock left the Relations Office with a skip in his step – that had gone so much better than expected. Sure, his cover had been blown pretty much immediately, but he essentially had the key to Evening Sparkle’s life with him now. It was the best of all possible results. He had some calls to make…

He had two people in particular he wanted to call. He scrolled down to Lilac Ganymede first.

“This is Ganymede.”

“Hey, Lilac, Shutterstock here. Guess what, we’re making the movie.”

“Evening?”

“You bet your wings we are. I’m still doing research, but I got approval and resources from the Charter herself just now. So you will be playing her, like you’ve always wanted.”

“About damn time!”

“I was thinking the exact same thing! Start putting out some feelers to your actor friends, see if you can find potential candidates for other roles. We’ll need everyone in the primary team, Evening’s friends, major political figures…”

“Will do,” Lilac assured him. “You better have something dazzling soon, Shutterstock.”

“Oh, I will,” he assured her. “Now excuse me, need to make more calls.”

“Well then, congratulations. See you soon.”

Shutterstock hung up and moved to the next name on the list. “Aaaaaay, Photo, my girl!”

“You are my lead camera pony and costume designer.”

“You know I only come if DA MAGIKS call to me!”

“I’ve just gotten approval from the Charter to go ahead and make Evening.”

“…I COME.” Photo Finish declared, hanging up.

“As always,” Shutterstock said, shaking his head. He figured he might as well make some other calls. He dialed another number.

“Hey, Arnold? Can we talk about use of your programmable set? Hey, hey, I know I’ve messed up before, but this is for Evening…”

Lilac Ganymede was a Twilight, gifted with wings not for being a princess, but for being so stupid rich she was able to afford a state-of-the-art grafting surgery on her homeworld. Since she was an actor, she had no single defining appearance to differentiate herself from other Twilights; she changed her appearance for whatever role she happened to be in. Currently, she was going for early Eve – or Charter-Twilight – with a straight mane and no ornamentation whatsoever.
She was in Shutterstock’s large studio – essentially a warehouse filled with cameras, costumes, set pieces, and other resources for filmmaking. Pretty much everything was here except an actual set to act on, though Lilac knew Shutterstock could make one if he had to. Lilac also knew it wouldn’t take long for the studio to be overrun with a hundred different people scrambling to make everything about the film absolutely perfect. Shutterstock had a rather high bar.

But for the moment, there were maybe a dozen people in the entire studio, and there was no rush. Lilac was passing the time by posing in a variety of positions including proud, tired, seductive, graceful, and a classification only known as ‘Earth Stand’ identified by dramatic contortions that frankly should not have existed in reality. The earth pony mare Photo Finish was taking dozens of pictures. “Glorious! Magnificent! Your control over your form is magnifique!”

“You say that every time,” Lilac said, taking a position on her hind hooves with her wings splayed. She summoned magic sparkles around herself to add to the pose.

“But your talent – it is beyond! Earth Stand types are nigh impossible to hold for non-natives! MAGIC.”

Lilac smirked. “Yare yare daze,” she said, tipping an imaginary hat and standing on one hoof, leaning backward in a highly-unbalanced pose.

“PERFECTION.”

Lilac levitated herself into the air and twisted upside-down, using a complex spell to hide her magical aura and make it look natural without needing to flap her wings. “How long do you think Shutterstock’s going to take?”

“Hour, maximum,” Photo answered. “I went in there a few minutes ago – he’s typing RAPIDO. The words, they flow!”

Lilac took a catlike position, pretending to sleep. “I think it’ll be less than an hour. He probably had part of it written before today.”

“Hrm…” Photo muttered, snapping more photos. “It won’t be long, regardless. We shall have in our hooves the story of our future!”

Lilac chuckled, taking on a playful pose. “A historic film, to be sure. What’s it like in there, right now?”

“Last I saw he was playing recordings of the interviews back, only the important bits. Typing like there was no tomorrow.”

“Artist at work.”

The artist was, in fact, at work. He was in a dark room at a desk, upon which sat a laptop and a speaker, nothing else. The speaker played select lines of dialogue from interviews Shutterstock had performed over the last few days while the laptop served as a glowing typewriter, words appearing on the screen with every tap of the keys.

Shutterstock was barely aware of anything besides his work.

“We were scared at first,” the voice of Mlinx came from the speaker. “The only other alicorn we’d seen was the Mistress, and I’m sure you know what she’s like if you’re asking me these questions… Siron felt the need to defend Veila from her. Of course, I wasn’t actually there…”
It all begins there. That one bowling ball. Shame the Starcross Society event was handled almost without her – it would make an even better bookend. Shutterstock thought, typing away – already far past the scenes that took place in the demon tribe.

“Has she changed?” Spike had said. “Perhaps more than anyone else. She used to be a lot more excitable. More optimistic. …More empathetic. I-I don’t mean she’s distant, she’s not! She’s just suffered a lot. I think it’s a testament to her strength of will that she’s kept any optimism and empathy at all. She could have broken at many moments, but she never did. She’s been strong this entire time.”

Her life is one of adjustment to impossible situations…

“Eve…” Luna’s voice came to his ears. “…is a complicated mare. She’s learned how to stare death in the face without batting an eye, but when she sees a child being harmed she taps into a primal rage. For her job, she needs to distance herself from events, but something within her won’t let her leave everything behind. It makes her life an unbelievably hard one, but it also makes her the best pony to lead us.”

A leader born to do what she did, in many ways. Always seeking a goal of unity despite everything, even that which happened to her.

“That day her other self was destroyed…” Pinkie had paused upon saying this. “It meant a lot to her, and what it meant wasn’t something good. It was essentially a coin flip, in the end. She doesn’t talk about it much. I mean, would you? But it’s the event that gave her a name. She allows herself to be known by the name of a dead mare. It’s a tribute, but it’s also a reminder to her how fleeting life is.”

A mare intimately aware of how short life can be, even for supposed immortals…

Corona had a lot to say, but one thing in particular had stood out. “She’s stronger than any of us, except perhaps Flutterfree. I almost went down a path of no return after the Bloodbath – you don’t want to know how close I was for a while there – but she got back up and used the tragedy to fuel herself. That takes… I don’t even know what that takes. A way to accept tragedy, I suppose. I don’t have that. I have to fight to get through it. Sometimes I wish I had what she does.”

…A mare who has learned to accept the shortness of life as a fact and not a burden.

“Comparing her to Siron reveals forces in opposition,” Renee had observed. “One sought friendship, compromise, reconciliation, and allowed herself to change. The other wanted enemies, dominion, rivalry, and consistency. The one way in which they were the same is that they cared about their people.”

A story of a chief and a princess, living alongside each other.

“Siron…” Flutterfree had said, pondering the name. “He’s a complicated individual. We were friends with him, once. I refuse to believe he felt nothing. He cared about us, we cared about him. He just… couldn’t accept where things were going. So he had to fight back in every way he could. To the end.”

A friendship turned into a bitter rivalry between a man who wanted enemies and a mare who had almost none.

“I worked with Siron a lot back in the old days,” Iroh had revealed. “I thought I was helping his people become their own entity – but in the end, even my world tore them apart. I’m not sure how much of that was Siron’s own meddling. But I often wonder if I could have done anything else.”
A demon with delusions of power in an unfortunate situation, doomed to walk a path of defeat or death. He chose the latter.

The last of the bug-demon mages, Veila, had been the best source for Siron’s real personality. “He stopped telling me his plans the first time I expressed concern, so I can’t tell you all the underhanded dealings he was involved in. But before he was forced to flee… I got to watch him break down, little by little, as things continued to go wrong. In the end, I think his ‘pride’ was just a farce of dignity. He was a broken individual who didn’t really care if Merodi Universalis fell or not – he just wanted to fall to Evening in honorable battle. He got what he wanted.”

“A warrior to the bitter end. On her side, a friend to the very end.”

“I didn’t have to kill him,” Eve had written. “I wasn’t planning to, at first. I planned to tear his staff from him and curse him, trapping his mind in his body. I would have imprisoned him far away from everyone else – I thought our old friendship deserved that much, despite the betrayal. But I saw that he didn’t want that. He wanted it to end right there. So I did as he wished. I still wonder to this day if this is really why I did what I did, or just a justification I created after the fact. I was not capable of thinking straight at the time. I can no longer know for certain what really happened behind the scenes.”

Shutterstock looked at the line he had written.

Evening: Together we will always shine.

He turned off the speaker in the middle of Applejack telling him about Eve’s earlier life.

Then he typed two magic words onto the end of the script.

THE END.

He hit print. His high-end printer whirred and printed the entire thing in about ten seconds, stapling it together for him. He grabbed it and burst out the door, interrupting Lilac and Photo’s posing session.

“CALL EVERYONE, IT’S DONE!”

“That’s your job!” Lilac shouted back at him.

“DO I SOUND LIKE I CAN MAKE CALM COLLECTED PHONE CALLS RIGHT NOW!?”

“…Admittedly, no.”

“I shall do the calling!” Photo declared. “THE MAGIC WILL COME!”

“I’m sending out copies of this to everyone!” Shutterstock laughed. “The script is reaaaady~! … Drafted at least. Who cares, I still get to be excited.” He ran back to his laptop and started firing off emails left and right like they were candy on Halloween.

He made sure to send one to Eve herself. Hope you enjoy the first form of the script.

He sat back in his chair, a stupid smile on his face – he felt like he was on top of the world. Everything was perfect.

~~~

A few days later, Shutterstock walked into his studio’s primary meeting room, which looked more like a lounge than a place where actual business was constructed. He sat down on a recliner and
dropped the script on a nearby coffee table. “The script monkeys are currently tearing this apart, creating a ‘finalized’ version.”

“Think they’ll demand any more major changes?” Lilac asked, tossing her mane back. “I do hope they don’t cut any characters – I’ve run almost a full roster through casting.”

“How many of your suggestions were accepted?” Shutterstock asked.

“A little over half, so far. That casting agent of yours is so picky.”

“That’s why I keep her around,” Shutterstock chuckled. “Her judgment on acting is better than my own, if I’m being honest with myself. Hope you’re not too upset.”

“It’s not me that you have to worry about. She turned down a DiCaprio.”

Photo Finish gawked. “Whaaaat!? Who does that!?”

“Someone who knows none of the important human male roles particularly fit his appearance,” Shutterstock answered. “Think. It’s just Jotaro, O’Neill, Daniel, and Iroh that have any bearing on this film. He’d want a major role to be certain.”

“I think he could do a good Daniel,” Lilac huffed.

The technical and special effects supervisor spoke up, a green Gem known as Jade. “You’re good at acting, which means you have difficulty making non-emotional decisions. You have bias.”

“Thank you for that…”

Jade shrugged, feeling no need to comment further.

“Are there any main roles that are left to be filled?” Shutterstock asked.

“One,” Lilac said. “That would be Siron.”

Shutterstock sat back in his chair. “That’s right… That’s going to be a nearly impossible casting choice!”

“Race-change spell?” Jade suggested.

“Wouldn’t be authentic. Anyone who’d seen an actual demon walking around would know it was a fake. We need an actor of the correct race.”

“But does such an actor even exist!? Photo asked. “It is unknown!”

“I seem to recall that there is one…” Lilac said, furrowing her brow. “…Tandas, that’s his name. He’s… well I don’t know much about him, he’s new.”

“At least you know his name. Let’s call him in.”

“He’ll be inexperienced, Shutterstock. We need someone able to portray a complex historic figure.”

Shutterstock nodded. “I understand. But we have time. If he’s acting at all, he must have something going for him.”
Lilac nodded. “Maybe… Good news is we’ve landed a solid role for the Mistress. Fi.”

“Fi?” Shutterstock’s eyes widened. “I knew she was your old friend, but I thought she was exceedingly busy?”

“She had to drop out of The Omnivore because of absurd and outrageous conditions. She’s willing to play Luna as well, so that saves up a spot.”

“Normally I’d be hesitant against letting one actor do two individuals, even alternates, but Fi? She can have it.”

Jade shrugged. “I hear she’d throw quite the fit if you didn’t let her have that.”

Lilac glared. “Fi is a lady and you will not talk about her like some spoiled supermodel.”

“She is a spoiled supermodel, basically.”

“You’re not much better.”

Lilac turned to Shutterstock. “Do you have to keep her around?”

Shutterstock nodded. “Her Stand is exceptionally useful, she’s good at her job, and sometimes we need a good slap across the face.”

“You could say I’m just blowing off internal emotional steam,” Jade said.

“We don’t need to hear the story again-”

“You know, cause I was once a high Gem Vein agent. High enough to be part of the Stand program. Then everything came crashing down, I was exiled, and now I sit in a studio and make movies with a power that should be out there conquering or something.”

“God, why do you have to repeat that every time?”

“Because it bothers you.”

“Can we act like professionals, please?” Shutterstock asked.

“WE MUST BE AS ONE!” Photo declared.

“Not really helping, but I like your spirit,” Shutterstock said with a smile.

Jade and Lilac sighed and nodded, silently agreeing to behave.

“Regardless, the moment we find a Siron we should be relatively okay on actors. Photo, I take it you plan on using your regular crew for the film and costumes?”

“Of course, nothing else will suffice!”

“Anything special you have planned?”

“I have a spectacular dress for Lilac that she simply MUST wear in the film at some point!”

“Evening isn’t one to wear clothing,” Lilac pointed out.
“Bah! There will be an opportunity.” She turned back to Shutterstock. “The talk of Siron has given me an idea. I believe I can construct an exo-exoskeleton with Siron’s markings to make it even more authentic!”

“Will it be functional?” Jade asked. “Because if our new-inexperienced actor has to walk around in a wax suit it’ll be horrible for everyone involved.”

Photo blinked. “I had not considered this. I SHALL STRIVE FOR COMFORT! Also, the cameras. We will be using spotters!”

“…Spotters will interfere with Bad Apple,” Jade pointed out. “They will try to see the Stand rather than the actual action it’s causing.”

“We shall filter!”

“Filtering out something you can’t really see is problematic on so many levels,” Jade pointed out. “Let’s say Bad Apple is, oh, creating a bunch of false explosions in front of an actor. The point of the explosions is to highlight the actor, not to be the highlight. But the spotters will try to focus on that.”

“Never underestimate my power!”

Shutterstock chuckled. “I trust you two can work something out?”

Jade nodded slowly. “From a technical standpoint… Yes.”

“DA MAGICS WILL FLOW!”

“Oh please stop…”

Lilac leaned in. “At least she doesn’t keep repeating her backstory over and over again.”

“That reminds me, I was once an Agent up pretty high in the Gem Vein. There was a Stand program and everything, it’s where I got Ba-”

“Shutter…” Lilac pleaded.

Shutterstock shrugged. “You asked for that one. My hands are tied.”

Lilac playfully whined. “But Shutter…”

“Hey, I’m not upsetting the Gem with the power to make us think we’re dying. You’re welcome to try.”

Jade stared at Lilac. “Bring it.”

Lilac decided the wisest course of action was not to antagonize the Gem.

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A few days later, the complete finalized script was sent to Evening through email. She saw it the moment it came in. She marked it as important and downloaded it to her computer – but she didn’t read it. She was a bit busy at the time keeping the USM and University from blowing each other up. She had high confidence everything would turn out fine – already hostilities were dying down – but she needed to focus on it a bit longer.
She completely forgot the script existed by the next day. It sat there, on her computer, unread.

---

Fi was a Fluttershy renowned for her ability to act out *anything*. So long as her body allowed it, she could do it. She was well known for using body transformation spells to fit any particular role, and was so far the only known pony actor to also act as humans occasionally. At least, among the big names in filmmaking. Since she was playing the Mistress, she had dyed her coat, increased her stature, given herself a temporary horn, and placed magic levitation gems in her mane to get it to flow.

She took a pained, emotional gasp and thrust her head to the ground, almost slamming it into the dirt of the set. “I lay myself at your feet, asking not for forgiveness, but a chance to serve!”

Tandas was a small demon who, at the moment, looked like a miniature Siron – down to the carapace details and all. His speech was not filled with as much deep emotion as Fi’s, but it wasn’t completely monotone either. His line came with a sinister undertone. “Ah, yes… Mistress, you will certainly be welcomed in my tribe as a new warrior. Mhm…”

“See? I told you it would be fine,” Lilac declared, smiling warmly at Fi. “I hope you find your place in this world.”

Fi lifted her head, leaning in to Lilac in such a way that the nearby camera would be able to catch the details in both their faces. “I shall strive to make the most of this new chance you have given me, Evening Sparkle.”

“CUUUUUT!” Shutterstock shouted, facepalming.

“BUT THEY HAD DE MAGIKS!” Photo Finish retorted.

“She wasn’t Evening back then! She was Twilight!”

“Oh, apologies,” Fi said, bowing her head. “I shall burn that into my mind before the next run.”

“BUT IT WAS PERFECT!” Photo wailed. “So much wasted…”

“We can always cut,” Jade commented, connecting two wires together for some unknown purpose.

“It wasn’t the only problem,” Shutterstock said, walking up to Tandas. “You’re doing good for the most part, Tandas.”

He sighed. “I’m screwing it up, aren’t I?”

Shutterstock furrowed his brow. “In a way, you are. When I see you act I believe you are a horrendously evil manipulative bastard who wants to control everything and is driven by selfish means. Since you *can* do that, it means you have skill, but that’s not who Siron was.” Shutterstock snapped his fingers a few times to jog his thought process. “Siron was… a leader. He cared deeply for his tribe. When you’re trying to be him, don’t play up the evil so much. Be a more… *complex* character.”

“You’re asking a bit much,” Lilac pointed out.

“It’s what the movie needs,” Shutterstock said.

“R-right,” Tandas said, clearing his throat. “Ahem. Ah, yes! Mistress, you will certainly be
welcomed in my tribe as a new warrior!”

“Much better,” Shutterstock said with a smile.

Lilac narrowed her eyes. “…Tandas, you’re just adjusting the tone of that one line, aren’t you?”

“Er…”

“You are,” Lilac sighed.

Shutterstock smiled at Tandas. “Just keep practicing, okay?” He walked to the side, motioning for Lilac to follow him. He turned and glared at her the moment they were backstage.

“Lilac, you can’t be doing that.”

“He’s not going to be able to portray Siron the way you want, Shutter,” Lilac asserted. “He’s new. He’s got talent, I’ll give him that, and he can really sell the character types he knows how to do. But he doesn’t understand Siron. I’m not sure he can. We can’t have you micromanaging every last one of his lines just to get a proper result. It will take forever.”

“We have time.”

“If you take too long into the production cycle things tend to fall apart,” Lilac reminded him. “Charter approval or no, that sort of thing happens. I don’t want to see this end in flames because we’re putting our trust in an inexperienced actor and not someone like myself!”

Shutterstock leaned against a wall, pursing his lips. “What do you suggest?”

“Fi can play a demon.”

“She’s only done humans professionally.”

“And demons have significantly less facial cues than humans or ponies.”

“Four arms, Lilac.”

“Tandas isn’t even sure what to do with all four of those arms!”

Shutterstock sighed. “Look, Lilac, I’ll keep it under advisement. But I’d much rather use Tandas than some fake demon. If it turns out we just can’t keep filming with him after about a week, we’ll change him out.”

“That’s an entire week of the production cycle, Shutter! We’ll have to shoot all those scenes again! Fi and I can keep our interest that long, sure, but others? We have backup actors you know!”

Shutterstock paused for a moment. “…Every production has problems.”

“Yes.”

“We just have to work through them.”

“Shutterstock, are you going to ignore me?”

“I said I’d take your advice into consi-”

“I am Lilac Ganymede. I’ve been acting for years, before the multiverse was even opened! As good
as you are, you’re still new at this!”

“Lilac, I’m the Director of this movie. I make the decisions.”

“. . . Fine, play that card,” Lilac huffed. “When it all comes crashing down around you don’t blame
me.”

“I won’t.”

“Liar.”

Shutterstock wanted to object, but realized she had a point. He sighed. “Let’s just go back and try
again.”

“. . . Sure.”

The two returned to the set. Fi let out an ear-piercingly high note from her vocal cords. “I
haaaaaaaaave it~! The perfect inspiration for this scene! Some that will most certainly result in ‘da
magiks’.”

“YES!” Photo declared.

Shutterstock smiled. “Everyone back to one. Let’s take the scene from the top.” He sat down in his
Director’s chair and folded his arms. “Take seven!”

Fi began with yet another dramatic inflection, doing it just as well as before.

It brought a smile to Shutterstock’s face. There were still things going well for him.

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Evening Sparkle decided to drop by the programmable set. Normally she would have spent time
marveling at the amazing technology at display here – a black disc that could be programmed to
create just about any scenery or building so long as one only cared about visual appearance and
didn’t need an entire mountain to be visible at once. The programmable set was housed in a large
warehouse that could be rented for studio filming. Needless to say, it was currently out for the next
couple of months to be used for Evening.

She walked right onto the set – nobody tried to stop her. She paused – they were clearly setting up to
film for a scene. She decided to watch rather than interrupt them.

Shutterstock had a hand in his hair. “Where the hell is Fi?”

“I… have no idea,” Lilac said, checking her phone. Eve thought she looked like a good Twilight
Sparkle. “She’s not responding to anything…”

“She knows we’re scheduled today,” Tandas said, nervously tapping his fingers together. “She
knows. I told her myself yesterday. We talked about the scene today. She seemed excited.”

“I’m going to go check on her,” Shutterstock said.

“We don’t have time,” Lilac declared. “Unless you want to call off today?”

“If she doesn’t show up, we don’t have a Mistress Luna or a Queen Luna, and we’re already set to
record the first multiversal summit scene today. Gaaaah…”
“I’m not in the scene, I can do Queen Luna,” Lilac offered. “Photo’s a wizard with cosmetics, she can make me look amazing in an hour. Or less.”

“Changing the actor will mess with things…”

“Alternate version.”

“She’ll be upset a-”

Lilac’s phone started ringing. She answered it. “Fi where the hell are you!? I- wh… what?! What do you me- Fi don’t you dare. …Fi you know what this means to me. Fi you can’t jus- Fi! Stop talking over me! …Fi. …Fi. …Fi! Fi get your plot back here right thi- Fi!” Lilac threw her phone onto the ground and exploded it with her magic.

Shutterstock put a hand to his face. “I’m scared to ask.”

“She just walked out!” Lilac blurted. “Why? Not because of bad-actor-bug-mcgee, not because of overwork, not because of bad planning, but because she met some guy last night and is running off to some random universe with him! GAH!”

“Pretty sure she can’t do that with her contract,” Tandas muttered.

“Shut the hell up, bug,” Lilac spat. She levitated a jacket onto herself. “I’m going to go grab her and knock some sense into her.”

“Lila-”

“If she leaves, everything falls apart and you know it!” Lilac shouted. “Rest easy: I’ll be back.”

Jade turned to Shutterstock. “Does that mean we don’t have to film today, or what?”

Shutterstock sighed. “Tandas, let’s do some solo scenes with you, work on your Siron. Do we have our Flagg on set? No? Well we’ll just have to make do with me.”

“You s-sure we should be doing that now?” Tandas asked.

“Yes, we should,” Shutterstock asserted. “Have to do something today.”

“Right. Uh, just let me check the lines…” He lifted up the script and read through it. “…Wait, you can act?”

“If I need to, it’s not my primary skill,” Shutterstock admitted. “But Flagg really is a basic evil-is-as-evil-does type, so I can do him easily. Got it?”

“I think so.”

“Good.” A dark demeanor came over Shutterstock. He smiled a truly horrendous smile. “Ah, Siron. I see you have doubts.”

Tandas steeled his gaze. “They found the USM, Flagg. They’re getting stronger, and getting more allies.” He narrowed his eyes and held out one of his arms, managing to be expressive without any facial expressions.

“I wouldn’t consider USM an ally… Their ideologies will clash.”

“Before we make our move?” Tandas asked, his voice cracking slightly.
“Likely not, but they also will not interfere. They won’t be invested.”

“Would it not be in their interest to help?”

“Not if they learn of who I am,” Shutterstock laughed. “Now, Siron, is Blackjack behaving?”

“Only as far as I can tell; Dio is the one overseeing her development.”

“And Dio?”

“Here only because he thinks it’ll be fun. He really doesn’t care that we revived him from that bone.”

“He plans on betraying me later, no doubt about it.”

“Obviously.” Tandas’s tone slipped up over the v.

Shutterstock sighed. “Cut. Or… Scene, I guess, since we aren’t rolling. Look, Tandas what’s up?”

Tandas sighed. “Lilac’s right you know. Not about the thing with Fi. But about me. I’m not the guy you want, Shutterstock.”

“You’re the guy we need. There aren’t any other demon actors! You’re it – and you have talent!”

“But I can’t do Siron!”

“You were doing him just fine there!”

“I was stuttering.”

“That was because of the stress of the day and you know it.”

Tandas shook his head. “Shutterstock, has there been a single day of recording where Lilac hasn’t come to you complaining about me? I know you’re trying to keep it hushed, but I know. I know she’s trying to get me replaced. Why don’t you listen to her?”

“Because I have a vision of what this needs to be,” Shutterstock asserted. “A great, glorious, artistic vision. And it includes you. Don’t you walk out on me.”

“I… I won’t. I’m just not sure if that’s a good decision on your part.”

“I’ll think of something. At the very least, you don’t need to be afraid of me.”

Tandas tensed up in fear.

“Tandas I just sai-”

“Behind you.”

Shutterstock turned around, finally noticing Evening standing there. “WAUGH!”

“Hello,” Evening said, her face lacking the smile it usually held. “We need to talk, Shutterstock.”

“You’ve come at a really bad time, Evening – the production’s having more than a couple hiccups right now. I assure you this is just a ‘bad day.’ Come back another time and I’m sure we can show you something better.”

“I understand that this is just a disaster day,” Eve responded. “I’m not judging you for that.” She held
up the script. “We need to talk about this.”

“And I was too busy to read it in depth until yesterday. That’s my fault. But that doesn’t change the fact that we need to talk. I assume you have an office?”

“…Yes. Right this way.” He led her away from the set to a back wall with several doors, one labeled with ‘Shutterstock, Director’ in black lettering. The interior was sparse – just a desk, computer, chairs, and lighting fixture.

Evening laid the script on the desk and fixed Shutterstock with a glare. He began to sweat profusely.

“…This is extremely well written,” Eve commented. “In depth. Rather accurate, for the most part, when things aren’t skewed for drama. You clearly did your homework.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“This isn’t my story,” Eve answered. “I’m listed as the protagonist, and I win in the end, but you’re not writing my story in these pages. You’re writing Siron’s story.”

“…Come again?”

Eve flipped the script over to a particular page. “This scene is Siron plotting with Flagg, the one you were going over with your actor there.” She flipped to another section. “This one is Siron talking with the Mistress and Ganondorf.” She flipped it again. “This is Siron sending magic to Majora. This is Siron talking about the corrupt Merodi. This is Siron having a final emotional discussion with Blackjack. This is Siron lamenting the death of Fef.” She closed the script. “This movie isn’t Evening, it’s Siron.”

“That’s an unfair judgement,” Shutterstock pointed out. “He’s just the antagonist written as I understand he was. He doesn’t even get half the scenes. You get just as many speeches and emotional moments.”

“And yet, you don’t dwell on them as much. I’ve read through them.”

“The audience is accustomed to your political and idealistic side – the parts where you need to be fleshed out to the people are the moments where you deal with suffering and loss on a personal level. Siron, on the other hand, was largely out of the public eye, even at the end of it all. We saw what he did in his rash moments, not so much what he thought under the scenes.”

“I think you’re obsessed with him.”

“He’s an absolutely fascinating character. If I ever find our Prophet I’ll have to ask what drove Siron’s creation.”

Eve scrunched her muzzle. “You really don’t see what you’re doing, do you?”

“Hrm?”

She held up the script and gestured at it. “You’re painting Siron as a hero. Not the protagonist, but you’re going a step beyond just making him relatable. You make it possible that he was right.”

Shutterstock blinked. “Was he?”

Eve sputtered. “O-of course no…” She stopped. “He was definitely wrong in what he did. But his
reasonings may have had merit.”

“Then it’s a good thing the film will portray him that way – accurate and thought provoking.”

“Don’t you see why that’s a problem?”

“How so?”

Eve put a hoof to her chin. “Think about Hitler. Or Hitter, I think he was in your world. An objectively horrendous man who is used as the shorthand for evil on many Earths. I’m sure there were ways to portray what he did in a sympathetic light – it would require a lot of glossing over, to be sure, but it would be possible. Currently, Flagg is not the universal standard for evil in Merodi Universalis. No, they point to Siron. His relation in the attack was much more personal.”

“So I’ll be changing people’s minds.”

“Shutterstock, I can’t approve a movie that goes against that much of public opinion. It would destroy me and destabilize the government. Not to mention that by calling my motives and ideals into question, it would upset the sentiments upon which Merodi Universalis was founded!”

“…Oh.”

“Yes. Oh.” Eve narrowed her eyes. “Since you’re having such difficulty filming, it looks as if you may be better off just starting over. If you need the funds to do so, I can provide them. But I will do so if and only if you rewrite this script to focus less on Siron. I appreciate that you’ve made him a villain one can identify with, but it seems as if the message behind your movie is ‘think more about what Siron said’, which I don’t approve.”

“I think you’re just biased,” Shutterstock said, folding his arms. “You can’t view anything he says in any record objectively.”

“So? Nobody else is going to be able to either!”

“I’m not changing it, Charter. This is what my soul wrote onto the page. This is the movie I’m making.”

Evening twitched. “I can’t endorse it.”

“You can’t shut it down.”

“I can try.”

“You won’t. I know you at this point, Evening. You aren’t that petty. You’re upset, and you want to do something, but I’m just a filmmaker. You hesitate to harm even the darkest of people. I’m not evil.”

Eve sighed. “…I just wanted it to be a movie I could be excited for, something I could point to and say ‘that’s me, everyone go watch that, it’s good’. I wanted that to happen. I chose you because I thought you’d do it right.”

“I am doing it right. That mare you will see on the screen will be you, Evening.”

Eve chuckled. “You are good… But you aren’t that good. There are a few key things about me missing as well.”

“Such as…?”
“You really think I’m going to tell you now?” Eve said, shaking her head. “I strongly recommend you stop production, or rewrite and restart. But I can see that you’re going to keep going anyway. So I’m going to wish you luck.”

“…Luck?”

“Luck. You’re going to need it.” She gave him a warm smile. “Determination and stubbornness can be decidedly annoying, but it’s also indicative of a strong spirit. You’re a good person, Shutterstock. Just on the wrong side at the moment.” She teleported away.

Shutterstock folded his fingers together. After he had realized what had upset her, he hadn’t really been surprised by the conversation. Her anger quickly switching to encouragement was just one of her quirks. Once she realized there was no point in playing hardball, she would always try to smooth things over. *Always.*

She really was the best choice for the job.

He looked down at the script in deep thought.

She was right about a lot of what she’d said. He *was* obsessed with Siron’s character. His motives. His relation to the history of Merodi Universalis… But he also knew this movie wasn’t about Siron. It was about Evening, right? It had to be, she was what the whole script was built around.

…But Siron had branched out. He had demanded that his story be told alongside Eve’s. Shutterstock couldn’t shut that demon chief down. The character spoke too loudly in his mind.

It was then that Shutterstock realized something.

It wasn’t Evening’s story.

It wasn’t Siron’s story.

*It was both their stories.*

He grabbed a red pen and scrawled a new word on the title page, turning *Evening* into *Crimson Evening*. He ran out of his office and back to the set, where Tandas was waiting patiently. Photo and Jade were still there, and Lilac had just returned – notably without Fi.

“W-what happened?” Tandas asked.

“Evening Sparkle just rescinded her approval of the film!” Shutterstock blurted with a stupid grin on his face. “But screw her.”

Lilac gasped. “W-what!?”

“You heard me. Screw her. She can’t separate her experiences from the story we’re telling. She thinks we’re telling a story about *Siron*, making him the hero.”

“…Aren't we, kinda?” Lilac asked.

“Kinda,” Shutterstock admitted, showing them the new title page. “But we’re going to turn that to our advantage.”

“…Crimson Evening…” Photo said, mulling the title over in her mouth. “IT WORKS!”

“It does. This isn’t going to be a movie about Evening. This isn’t going to be a movie about Siron.
It’s going to be freaking both. A dichotomy!”

“Ah… dichotomy,” Lilac said, pondering this. “…You’re going to rewrite it and we’re going to have to shoot everything again aren’t you?”

“Yes to the first. No to the second. The beginning doesn’t change at all. But I’m going to alter the ending, and the marketing. This is a story for both of them. A dual adventure. It will be glorious and magical and meaningful and different.”

“I feel da magiks!” Photo declared, submitting her approval.

“You always feel them, like a broken record,” Jade muttered. “Isn’t it risky to go against Eve though?”

“She’s not like most,” Shutterstock said. “She’s not going to try to stop us. She just can’t be associated with it anymore for political reasons. And personal ones, but we’ll pretend the political are the only ones that matter, mmkay?”

“There’s other problems though!” Lilac blurted. “Fi’s gone!”

“I know a Luna. Cressa. She can take the role of the Mistress.”

“And what about Tandas!”

Shutterstock looked at Lilac – and smirked. “He’s your responsibility.”

 “…What.” Lilac deadpanned.

“You’re an amazing actor, and a teacher from what I hear. Stop being so prideful for one damn moment and help him out. He has the talent, it just hasn’t been shaped.”

“But I-”

“Yes you can. You know you can. You just don’t want to.”

Lilac took in a deep breath. “Fine. Tandas, come on, lesson one. Stop panicking.”

“E-easier said than done!”

“I’m going to get you drunk. It’ll be easier,” Lilac decreed. “Can you call off filming for the day? I need to loosen this bug up.”

“By all means. I need to tweak the ending as it is.”

Lilac levitated Tandas up. “Here we go bug boy, time to go experience the art of getting completely blasted out of your mind.”

“…That doesn’t sound like alcohol to me.”

“Second lesson, we’re going to go out and you’re going to be a pirate the entire time. Not a cheesy ‘yarr’ pirate, but an actual pirate. Be convincing.”

“But I don’t want to be a swashbuckler!”

“…Good start.” She dragged him off.
“I GO!” Photo declared, moonwalking into the shadows. “TO FIND MORE INSPIRATION!”

Soon it was just Jade and Shutterstock left.

Jade shook her head, smiling. “You are absolutely bananas.”

“I can’t stop. I won’t stop.” He flipped to a page in the script. “As Eve once said... I hear the multiverse calling my name.”

Jade shrugged. “At this point I’m just on board to see if you can get this ship to shore or not.”

“Oh, it’s not just getting to shore, it’ll end on top of a mountain.” Shutterstock rubbed his hands together. “Because we have everything we need right here… Just need some stupid determination to do it.”

“Stupid is right.”

“Yeah it is. Now get back to work, you’re the set programmer remember?”

“Righty-o, boss man,” Jade said with a mock salute. “BAD APPLE!”

The resulting fake explosion surrounded Jade in a halo, making her look a lot more intimidating than usual.

“...Fun trick.”

“I know. Now get to work already.”

~~~

It was amazing how something could go from being a complete disaster to smooth as butter in a single day. After the big disaster, every scene they recorded the next day went great, only taking a handful of takes to complete. Tandas had apparently discovered how to do Siron – though he admitted that it was just Siron he could do right now, Lilac had basically brainwashed him with endless lessons. But she hadn’t stopped after he’d gotten Siron down.

Lilac was still proud occasionally, especially when they started deafening her with invisible enchanted earplugs to produce Evening’s deaf accent for scenes when the mare wasn’t addressing the public. The actor hadn’t been happy about that, but she’d gone along with it. Tandas would still flub something major or blank on an emotional inflection, or Photo would go temporarily mad and refuse to allow a seemingly good take to be the last one – but nothing else exploded. It was nice to have Bad Apple on special effects.

Weeks passed. Filming went by no means flawlessly after that day – Lilac got sick, Photo mixed up the lenses a few times, and Tandas broke part of his carapace doing a stunt – but they all banded together. And they got it done.

The entire crew was sitting in a small theater room they had rented to view the film as it was now. It had no background music, no sound effects, and no post-production special effects. It was just the filmed scenes stitched together in what was expected to be the final orientation. It would, of course, not end up like this, but it was a glimpse of things to come.

And it was good.

“Together we will always shine,” Lilac said, drawing the film to a close. No credits rolled – they
hadn’t been added yet – but the crew still clapped anyway.

Shutterstock grinned. “This is going to look great.”

“True sorcery. BEAUTY!” Photo decreed.

Lilac nudged Tandas. “I told you everything would look fine.”

“I caught myself scratching the back of my head in the background of Scene 4-2,” Tandas muttered.

“That’s for diehard fans to make memes, not the actual quality of the movie itself,” Lilac decreed.

“Now, about my payment…”

“…Payment?”

“I’ve been your personal acting tutor for an accelerated curriculum for over a month now. I’m one of the most important actors in the business. You need to pay me.”

“B-but…”

“Man, you’re gullible.” Lilac chuckled. “You don’t have to pay me. You just have to be dragged to conventions with me now. You have sold your soul to Algemon, Tandas. Welcome to hell. Enjoy your stay.”

“…Lovely.”

Jade chuckled, turning to Shutterstock. “I think you brought about a friendship there.”

“Eve rubbed off on me,” Shutterstock said, sitting back. “Her words… They truly are larger than life. There’s a power to them.”

“Do you think…?”

“She won’t approve of this, officially. She can’t. But I think she’ll like it,” Shutterstock decided. “It’s what I got from her own words, after all. All it took was a little tweaking.” He stood up and clapped his hands. “But enough of that! Everyone, we’ve got a lot more work to do – special effects, better cutting, and above all marketing. Crimson Evening isn’t going to find its way to theaters all on its own!”

“RIGHT!” Everyone called.

Shutterstock looked at his crew with a proud smile. It was going to happen.

~~~

“Together we will always shine.”

The credits started to roll.

Eve sat alone in a small theater – a personal early showing she had arranged herself.

She wiped the tears from her eyes. “Together…” she echoed. She stood up and walked out of the theater. In the lobby, she saw Shutterstock sitting patiently on a bench. He was alone.

She sat next to him.
“…That was a great movie,” Eve said, still struggling to keep her tears under control. “…I noticed you made some changes. It’s better than it was before.”

“You made me realize the dichotomy.”

“It certainly works better if that’s explicit,” Eve admitted. “It’s not a story of one, but both. That… That works really well. I still can’t give it a rousing endorsement.”

“I understand.”


“Did I mess something up?”

“There are a few things you just can’t know,” Eve said. “A few key things. It’s not your fault. As far as anybody is concerned, that story on the screen is mine.”

“I’m going to update it when your classified information comes out, huh?”

“Heheh… You can believe that if you want.”

Shutterstock looked into the distance. “I am sorry for not going the way you wanted.”

“There will have to be another movie about me made by someone else,” Eve admitted. “One that focuses on just me. It needs to happen. What you’ve done… It’s less of a film based on a true story. It’s an idea that’s told through a true story. An idea that there are two sides to everything. That even the villain has reasons.” She looked Shutterstock in the eyes. “Do you know what this film’s going to do?”

“Destroy the authority of the government and your image?”

“No. Well… It might cause some unrest, but I can minimize it by distancing myself. What it’s going to do is let Siron be remembered as something other than the Merodi version of Hitler. He will be remembered as a man with ideals who had the entire multiverse work against him. He’s still a bad man – but he won’t be the symbol of evil. He deserves that much.”

“Glad you think so.”

“I’m sorry, Shutterstock, for how I acted that day,” Eve said. “It wasn’t right.”

“You were angry. And you still wished me luck at the end.”

“That stuck with you, huh?” Eve asked with a smile. “I suppose it would… In that case, I’m sorry for something specific. I apologize for refusing to believe you were right. I really couldn’t separate myself from Siron. I… I hate him.” Tears started rolling down her face. “I’ve tried so hard to move past it, to realize who he was, to just… let go. But I can’t. I keep a paradoxical view of him inside my heart. He killed so many out of rage, but we were partially responsible for what he became. He made us our enemy, but he wanted to die. He… He…” She let out a deranged grunt. “I don’t even know anymore. I can’t. I hate him. But I also understand him.”

“It sounds like you have unresolved issues you haven’t even admitted to yourself.”

“…I think he’d like that,” Shutterstock observed.

Eve was silent for a few seconds. Then she broke out into jovial laughter. “He would, wouldn’t he? That’s what he always wanted! Something to fight that would fight him on his terms!” She put a hoof to her head. “Aaaah this is a royally screwed up situation on so many levels…”

“Part of why I made Crimson Evening the way I did. There are so many layers to the relationship between you two. It needed to be told. In many ways, it’s a better story than yours alone could ever be.”

“That’s probably why it happened,” Eve pointed out. “Someone’s reading this, remember? Maybe not now – though I could call Pinkie and ask if the ‘camera’ is on right now – but I know it was on when Siron was around. That was the story.” She chuckled bitterly. “But that doesn’t really matter, does it? Those things happened. There’s no denying them. Wondering about why they happened in a meta sense won’t help.”

Shutterstock didn’t say anything.

“Sorry, I’m pouring my soul out to you. I should probably be doing this to Luna instead.”

“I understand you very well, Evening,” Shutterstock said. “I’ve spent months saturated in your mind. Give me some credit.”

“You do seem to be handling it pretty well.”

Shutterstock smirked. “If I didn’t know you were asexual this would be the point I ask you out.”

Eve blinked, taking a moment to process this. Then she laughed. “You really do know me, don’t you?”

“Probably a lot more than you’d like.”

“Yeah. Probably.” She gave him a quick hug. “Thanks for standing up to me.”

“You’re welcome, Charter.”

Eve nodded. “See you around?”

“Who knows?” Shutterstock said with a shrug. “It’s a big multiverse after all…”

Eve gave him a warm smile and teleported away.

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Crimson Evening went on to have a relatively decent run across the multiverse. It was sold to several different movie-brokering companies, one in each universe, at the same time. This meant Shutterstock and crew actually profited from the movie, avoiding the issue of sudden copy-plagiarism in other universes. They made no money from any of the tickets – their company was not allowed to operate that way. They only profited from sale of the distribution rights. The movie did not become popular enough to suddenly produce more economic opportunity.

But it became a cult classic in time. Four and a half stars. It may not have made Shutterstock fly into the public eye, but in the critical culture he was suddenly a bigger name. He tried something new, and it had turned out great despite a lot of bumps in the road.

Over time, Crimson Evening won a couple of awards in different universes. Enough to ensure that it
would always be remembered in the back of the film industry’s collective consciousness, as a testament to both Evening and Siron.

Eventually, *Evening’s Worlds* came out, written by a different director and with nobody who was on the original project involved with it. It was a solid four-star movie, nothing bad about it, and the population loved seeing their Charter being awesome on the big screen.

But it was never as deep as *Crimson Evening*.

And that was all Shutterstock cared about, in the end.

He was beyond proud of the result.
Love is in Bloom

It must have currently been Valentine’s Day in some universe, because the collective Pinkies of the Pinkie Emporium had declared it ‘Festival of Love’ day. The already pink-themed park was even pinker than usual, covered in love-themed decorations ranging from balloons to chocolates to beating holograms that floated in the sky.

The theme park had its rides altered as well – no longer was JUST the ‘tunnel of love’ ride the only option for plainly romantic activities. The rollercoasters had been decked out with hearts, the funhouse had been rearranged to throw couples together with illusions and magic, and there was kissing happening everywhere.

It was horrendously cheesy and that’s why it worked.

Some people who rarely came out to do anything fun had felt compelled to experience the once-in-a-lifetime Festival of Love. Giorno Giovanna made one of his very few public appearances with his wife, Trish. More people knew Trish than Giorno – she was a popular Earth Stand singer, while Giorno was just some guy she had married. Definitely no connection to the Italian mafia. And definitely no connection to the Division of Merodi Universalis that didn’t exist.

Lyra Heartstrings had never believed any of that.

“I’m telling you Bon Bon, that Giogio is up to something.”

“So what if he is?” Bon Bon asked, perusing the high-quality chocolates a Pinkie was selling. “He’s a friend of Jotaro, so we can trust him.”

“But what if he’s, like, up to something bad!?”

“Jotaro would know. Or Evening would. Or Olivia.”

“Since when does Olivia tell you things!?”

“Since when I ask.”

Lyra narrowed her eyes, examining Giorno closely. “But she can’t be that trustworthy… Bon B-”

Bon Bon put a hoof over Lyra’s mouth. “Lyra, turn off your mind for today. Giorno and Trish are just here to enjoy themselves, just like us. Let’s do the same, okay?”

“…Yeah, good point.”

“Now there’s a photo booth over there. Let’s go in, have some fun with silly faces, and then come out like the day is anew.”

“Sure thing!” Lyra said, beaming. She galloped over to the booth and bowed. “M’lady.”

Bon Bon rolled her eyes, but she had a smirk on her face all the while. They entered and pulled the curtain.

“So cute,” Renee said from her vantage point.
“Nosy,” Daniel observed. He was riding her, a snow cone in his hand.

“It’d be impossible not to see cuteness here,” Renee snorted. “It was just chance it happened to be those two. Look over there. Young lovebirds. An old couple who’s been through everything. And – holy Celestia that’s a big family.”

Daniel looked over his eyeglasses. “Are they a single family yet? I’m not sure all the marriages are finalized yet.”

“They’re all together, that’s the point,” Renee said, gesturing out with her hoof at the giant family.

The family in question was the combination of the Canterlot Royal Family, the Apple Family, and the Joestars. It was more than a little impressive. Applejack and her husband Barley were leading their group. Only one of their daughters were with them – the hardworking yet elegant Jona Apple. She had paired up with Glistening Helm, the only pegasus among Shining Armor and Cadence’s children. Speaking of, the Princess of Love and her Knight were there, managing to dodge the crowds for once – something about their current demeanor told the population that this was a day for them and their extended family. Another one of their children, Paradigm, was an alicorn like their eldest, and she had paired up with one of the Joestars, bringing that mess of a family into the combination.

Paradigm had chosen Shizuka Joestar, the adopted daughter of the late Joseph Joestar. She was significantly younger than both Jotaro and Jolyne, but she was also technically Jotaro’s aunt. Jotaro and Jolyne themselves were with their partners – Jotaro with his wife Marina, Jolyne with her boyfriend Anasui. All in all the giant family consisted of six different couples. Seven if they counted Big Mac and his wife, but they weren’t with them at the moment.

“Yare yare daze…” Jotaro muttered, hand to his hat.

“What is it?” Marina asked. She was the textbook definition of average Itallian human woman – brown hair, simple face, medium figure.

“I’m just realizing how much more complicated the family tree just got with Shizuka’s marriage.”

Marina chuckled. “Weirder than thinking of your aunt as a daughter?”

Jotaro glanced at Shizuka and Paradigm Joestar – they had decided to keep the legendary surname, since Shizuka was the last living individual born with it. It helped that Paradigm didn’t really have a surname. And since Paradigm was a natural-born alicorn, that meant the Joestars were technically royalty, related to Evening by way of a complex series of marriages and the entire Apple family…

“Yes, it’s weirder,” Jotaro declared.

“I think it’s beautiful how bizarre this legacy of yours is,” Marina said. “I’m glad Eve convinced you to share it with me.”

Jotaro put an arm around his wife, smiling softly. “It really did change everything.”

“Hey. Hey dad,” Jolyne said, slinging an arm around him. “What do you think Anasui would think if I tried to propose to him?”

“The man has already asked my permission to marry you with you in earshot dozens of times,” Jotaro muttered.

“You never give him a straight answer!”
“Dad privileges,” Jotaro said, looking at Anasui – a pink-haired individual with a considerable set of muscles, like many men on Earth Stand.

“Your father’s just messing with him,” Marina said, pecking her man on the cheek. “He pretends to be all serious all the time but he really laughs on the inside.”

“Oh, so the opposite of Applejack?” Barley asked. He was small for a stallion, and his colors were all muted shades of yellow.

“Barley,” Applejack grunted at her husband, raising an eyebrow. “Are you sayin’ me and Jotaro are opposites?”

“He cries on the inside too, though,” Marina observed. “All of his emotions except exasperation are hidden deep within his folds… And that’s what I love about him.”

Jotaro remained impassive.

“See? A lesser man would have been blushing.”

“Pff, Ah don’t think so,” Applejack said. “Ah can say I love Barley for his absolutely amazin’ determination, legs, an- Barley stop blushing’ you’re ruinin’ my point.”

“S-sorry.”

“Ooooh Dad’s embarrassed!” Jona said. She was by far the tallest mare there – taller even than Cadence, which was impressive. She was also bright red, which simply demanded attention from everyone when she spoke. “Hey. Hey Dad. Why do you like Mom?”

“Ah, but this is a Festival of Looooove!” Jona waved her hooves around. “Me and Helmy already redid the whole ‘vows’ thing.”

“Mhm,” Helm said, ruffling his gray wings.

“You got bro to talk?” Paradigm asked. Currently, her coat was white, but she was known for changing it regularly because being consistent bored her. “Your skills never cease to amaze me.”

“I have a certain set of skills that are very useful in very particular situations!” She hugged Helm close. “Isn’t that right, Helmy?”

“Oh.”

“Give your husband a break,” Applejack said with a chuckle.

Shining Armor walked up to his son. “…I don’t envy you.”

“Mmmmmm…”

Cadence raised an eyebrow at her husband. “Shining.”

“It was a joke! It was a joke!”

Cadence rolled her eyes. “Of course it was.”

Shizuka Joestar turned to her father-in-law. “You look like you want to disappear for a while.”
“I don’t need anything to make me invisib-”

“ACHTUNG!” Shizuka declared, summoning her Stand. “RIA!” In an instant, Shining Armor was invisible.

“Shizuka! I can’t see my hooves!” Shining Armor wailed.

Shizuka and Paradigm giggled. Then Shizuka leaped onto Paradigm’s back. The alicorn spread her wings and they flew off into the sky, turning invisible.

“Yare yare daze…” Jolyne and Jotaro muttered. Jolyne summoned Stone Free, guessing where the two of them were. She guessed well, latching onto the alicorn-human couple with her stringy Stand, dragging them to the ground.

“Star Platinum: THE WORLD!” Jotaro declared, freezing time. In the frozen time, he grabbed Shizuka and Paradigm, dragging the adoptive Joestar and Equestrian Princess back to the group.

Shizuka sighed when time resumed. “Fiiine.” She made Shining Armor visible again. He had somehow already fallen onto his back, dazed.

The entire family had a good laugh.

“Beautiful,” Renee said. “Simply beautiful.”

Daniel nodded, a smile on his face. “Yeah…” The two managed to perform a kiss while Daniel was on horseback. It looked awkward but at least they didn’t fall over.

Elsewhere, however, there was someone who was watching all the festivities of love and togetherness, and feeling left out.

Allure sighed deeply, her eyes narrow. “Look at them,” she muttered. “One big happy family.”

Squeaky looked up from a tray of chocolates she had just bought. “Hm?”

“The Royal-Apple-Joestar family or whatever – brimming with love and happiness… Just like all the other people in this Festival of Love.” She turned to Squeaky, eyes in a surprisingly aggressive glare. “Everyone seems to have someone… Everyone but me – sitting here, alone, on the sidelines…”

Squeaky blinked. “…You have us.” She gestured to herself, Thrackerzod, and Bot.

“That’s not it, Squeaky. That’s not it at all. They’ve got their little lives too perfect, too great, too… loving. Far too precious… It’s an affront.”

Squeaky’s mildly confused expression was becoming one of concern.

Allure raised her hoof into the air. “SO WE ARE GOING TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT! You, me, the girls… There will be a great thing that happens today, thanks to the League of Sweetie Belles…”

“…What?” Squeaky said, almost too afraid to ask.

Allure’s ominous glare vanished, replaced with a grin. “We’re going to find me a boyfriend!”

Squeaky blinked. “…I was afraid you’d gone full supervillain on us.”

“What? Me a supervillain? That doesn’t even make any sense!”
“Yes it does,” Thrackerzod corrected from the sidelines. “No, I’m not explaining how.”

“B… Huh?”

Bot interrupted the thought process. “Boyfriend!? What kind do you want! OOH! What about Silver?”

“I am not dating myself for *obvious* reasons, Bot.”

“Uh… What?”

“Genetics,” Thrackerzod explained. “Dating yourself is perhaps the worst mix possible for the genetic lottery of eldritch-spawn.”

“Oh. …Why didn’t I think about that?”

“Because you’re Sweetie Bot,” Squeaky said with a smile. “You’ve nothing to be ashamed of. There are those Raritys though who really should know better…”

Allure shivered. “Leeeet’s not talk about them. Let’s talk about getting *me* a boyfriend! Or any of you.”

“Pass,” Thrackerzod said. “I do not experience romantic attraction due to my nature and if I wish to experience pregnancy and motherhood I will just ha-”

“Enough information!” Allure blurted.

“I wonder what a boyfriend is like…” Bot pondered.

Squeaky shrugged. “Dunno. I’ve never really been interested. That *might* be the result of my upbringing.”

“Do I want one…?”

“Probably not,” Squeaky said. “They’d have to become more important to you than your sister.”

“NEVER.”

Allure shook her head and smiled. “Bot, you’re adorable.”

“We’re all adorable! MAXIMUM CUTENESS!”

“Unfortunately true,” Thrackerzod grunted.

Squeaky put a hoof on Allure. “We’ll help, so long as you promise not to blow up the world.”

Allure smiled innocently. “Well, we better find me somepony then because that’s plan B!”

“I hope to Celestia you’re joking.”

Allure’s smile didn’t falter, but she did waggle her eyebrows.

Squeaky rolled her eyes. “Right. We need a plan.”

“Scanning for potential candidates,” Bot decreed, examining the entire Festival of Love she could see. “Three thousand seventeen possible candidates detected.”
“Stallions, Bot,” Squeaky clarified.

“…Nine hundred and two.”

“And ones that aren’t part of a couple already.”

“…Maybe sixty? Uncertain data.”

“Can you pare down to a similar age range?”

“Plus or minus how many?”

“…Five years, I’d say.”

“Nineteen.” Bot blinked.

“Of freaking course,” Thrackerzod muttered. “How many nineteens is that now, Bot?”

“One hundred and ninety.”

“I’m getting really tired of that number showing up everywhere…”

Pinkie appeared behind them. “Really? I love it!”

“What is it?” Thrackerzod demanded.

Pinkie giggled. “That is a secret I keep not because I have to, but because it’s fun. Heh.”

“Then why did you bother to show up!?”

“Cause. Comedic timing…”

“Joke rated four out of ten,” Bot decreed. “Not worth it.”

“Party pooper,” Pinkie muttered, vanishing. The Pinkie that appeared next to Jotaro might have been the same one, but it was hard to tell in the Pinkie Emporium.

Allure shook her head. “Bot, take us to the first candidate.”

Bot pointed at a concession stand selling cotton candy where a blue pegasus stallion was standing, clearly annoyed that the two Pinkies manning the stand were arguing up a storm.

Allure smirked. “Time to turn on the cute…” She trotted over to him, smirking.

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The pink-haired white-skinned potion seller of an unknown species known as Seskii had expanded her one-stop-for-everything stand for the Festival of Love, setting up a ‘spectacular brewery’ restaurant in one of the Pinkie Emporium's streets. “Come one, come all to Seskii’s Brewery! One day only buy a drink that will be like nothing you’ve ever experienced – one will make you feel like a cloud, while another will give you the ability to see light as it moves! Or that’s what you’ll feel like, anyway.”

Nova walked up to the makeshift bar Seskii had set up, taking a seat on the stool. “Four potions of whatever Seskii, but make sure they’re the same.”

“…Fine, I’ll drop the randomness for once,” Seskii said, mixing her drinks.
“By the way, do you know Shizuka and Paradigm are making out in the seat next to me?”

“Of course I do,” Seskii said, rolling her eyes. “What self respecting merchant wouldn’t?”

Shizuka and Paradigm dropped the invisibility, the two of them blushing furiously.

“Just because you’re invisible doesn’t mean people won’t notice you,” Nova commented, looking at them with a bored expression. “It’s not like you can really mistake Paradigm’s magic signature.”

“…Shizuka…” Paradigm muttered.

“I lost focus on Achtung, sorry!” She rubbed the back of her head. “I was a little… distracted.”

Paradigm giggled. “I bet.”

Nova turned to Seskii, showing her credit card to pay. “Thanks, Seskii.”

“Don’t mention it!”

“This better not be a love potion, by the way.”

“It’s not!” Seskii winked. “I’m not cruel.”

Nova walked back to her table with four bubbling purple drinks in potion bottles. She laid them out for Discord, Trixie, and Flutterfree. “Here we are. Having lunch in the middle of a Festival of Love.”

“I know! Isn’t it a coincidence?” Discord said, hands to his face. “When we planned to have lunch today I had no idea what Pinkie was doing!”

“Nobody believes you, Discord,” Flutterfree said, sniffing the potion.

Trixie chuckled. “For a being of chaos you sure don’t lie very well.”

“He can if he wants to,” Nova said, sitting down. “The badness is part of the joke.”

“Uh oh, someone’s become… a fuddy duddy.” Discord said.

Trixie gasped. “NO! Not her! NEVER NOVA! We can’t lose her to the fuddy duddy!”

“…What?”

Flutterfree giggled. “They’re calling you fussy. You do seem to be on a short fuse today.”

Nova muttered, gesturing at the festival. “Oh, it’s nothing, it’s just that I absolutely love Single’s Awareness Day.”

“…Brings back bad memories, doesn’t it?” Flutterfree asked.

“Yeah.”

Trixie looked confused for a moment, but then realization dawned. “Oh. Icon.”

“Don’t get the wrong idea,” Nova muttered. “I’m over her. Haven’t even thought about her in months – before today, of course. But this holiday has a way of bringing back things you never wanted brought back in the first place.”

“Like the time you and Trixie went out?” Discord said dismissively, instead fixated on a spaceship-
in-a-bottle he was making.

Nova looked to Trixie. “We did that once. Then we agreed, mutually, never again.”

“The details will remain forever sealed away within our minds, never spoken to another soul in existence,” Trixie decreed.

Flutterfree nodded. “I see.”

“Okay, now I’m curious,” Discord said, putting the ship in a bottle down and generating a magnifying glass to examine Nova with. “Any noodle incident that the parties agree never to discuss is definitely worth my time.”

“Discord, they had a private falling out of some kind or other, don’t prod.”

“…Fine…”

“You know sometimes you two sound like an old married couple,” Trixie said, finally taking a sip from her purple potion.

Discord and Flutterfree blinked – then both of them started laughing at how absurd they found the implication. Then they started laughing at the blue fire coming out of Trixie’s ears from the potion.

Trixie felt the fire. “Huh. Strange.”

“What an effective conversation derailer,” Nova commented, taking her own drink and getting fire just like Trixie. “Tastes like ice mixed with cranberries.”

Flutterfree forced herself to stop laughing and down a bit of the drink, gaining her own flame. “Sorry for laughing at you Trixie, it’s just that so doesn’t describe us it’s just… funny.”

“I get it. I’m the butt of the joke today.” Trixie rolled her eyes. “The Great and Powerful Trixie reduced to a body part not mentioned in polite company.”

“Good thing we’re not polite company!” Discord cheered.

“Discord don’t you dare summon another storm of butts, we’re in public.” Flutterfree said, grabbing his hand with Lolo.

Trixie turned to Nova. “I’m telling you, the way they act is uncanny.”

“Some people have odd relationships,” Nova commented.

Discord nodded. “Oh yes. Flutterfree and I decided long ago that the whole romance thing wasn’t for the two of us, and just kept progressing down the much more impressive friendship track. Imagine for illustration, if you will, a red bouncy ball and a dog…”

“No,” Trixie said.

“…What?”

“Trixie refuses to imagine.”

Discord summoned a dog with a red ball in its mouth on top of her.

Flutterfree blinked. “…What was this supposed to illustrate, again?”
“I don’t know,” Discord muttered, folding his arms. “What I do know is that Trixie ruined it.”

Trixie made the dog disappear and bowed, sticking the ball in her hat. “Trixie thanks you for being such a participatory audience.”

“You know the word participatory?” Flutterfree asked.

“I’m not sure it means what she thinks it means,” Nova commented.

“Shut up.”

“We can talk about your love life instead!” Discord decreed.

Nova groaned. “Really Discord? Nobody wants to talk about—”

Trixie grinned, cutting Nova off. “I’ve gone through two stallions and a mare in the last two months.”

Flutterfree shook her head. “Trixie, don’t you think that’s a little… unhealthy?”

“It’s how Trixie manages herself. Plus, it’s not like I’m doing anything stupid.”

“Debatable,” Discord muttered.

“I don’t mean physical health, I mean mental,” Flutterfree clarified. “Going through partners that fast…”


“It’s a lost cause, Flutterfree,” Nova said, taking another drink – ignoring the fire coming out of her ears. “I’ve tried to have this conversation with her as well. Nothing changes.”

Flutterfree raised an eyebrow. “I never admit defeat.”

Trixie smirked, taking an apple out of her hat and biting it obnoxiously. “Bring it.”

Flutterfree’s mouth began to water. “Trixie…”

“Trixie has an infinite supply of apples, effectively,” Trixie chuckled. “Trixie can make you hunger for their flesh endlessly.”

Flutterfree twitched. “You monster.”

“Trixie knows! Isn’t it great?”

“Discord, apple blaster.”

“Right on it!” Discord announced, summoning a dozen apples into Trixie’s face at high velocity. As a follow-up he hit her with an apple pie. Then he gave Flutterfree an extra pie just so she didn’t continue to suffer from her blood-apple hunger. She dove in with a ravenous appetite, spewing pie crust everywhere.

“Har-de-har,” Trixie muttered, wiping the pie from her face. “So, Nova, what about you?”

“Hrm?”

“You and romance.”
“Oh… I really don’t know.”

Flutterfree used Lolo to clean her face. “Are you sure that’s true Nova?”

“Beyond ‘I want someone’ I don’t really have anything.”

“Your answer has changed,” Flutterfree noted. “Last time we had this conversation you didn’t think you wanted anyone.”

“Yeah, well… I guess ponies do change.”

Flutterfree nodded. “It’s okay. Why not start dating?”

“I dunno. I’d prefer to be with someone I already know, to be honest. Just “HEY LET’S DATE!” is Trixie’s thing, not mine.”

“It is a proud way to conduct oneself,” Trixie asserted.

Flutterfree furrowed her brow. “Well… I’m not interested and neither’s Pinkie.”

“Not interested in either of you, either. We’re like sisters.” Nova smiled warmly.

Flutterfree smiled back. “Aw…”

“I’m going to die from diabetes,” Discord muttered.

“Trixie’s next trick will be the revival of a chaos spirit.”

Discord rolled his eyes.

Flutterfree turned back to Nova. “You know other people than the four of us on the team. I know Trixie isn’t an option, but you have other friends.”

“Maud and Renee are married, Eve’s Eve, Spike’s Spike, Thorax is basically married to his hive, you know.”

“Sunburst?”

Nova blinked. “Ah… Sunburst… Er…”

“She’s blushing,” Trixie decreed. “We have a winner!”

“But he’s busy!” Nova blurted. “Sunburst is on Sunny’s Survey team! They spend multiple days out exploring worlds. He probably doesn’t have time, not to mention he’s probably more invested in his work than he would be in me and – why are you all looking at me like that!?”

Flutterfree and Discord exchanged glances. “It really is odd how ponies can be so ignorant of themselves,” Flutterfree observed.

Discord snorted. “You’re just noticing this now?”

“It never ceases to amaze me.”

“What are you two talking about!?” Nova blurted.

“You like him,” Trixie explained.
“It’s not just that,” Flutterfree said. “We can also see a lot of emotions that have been building up under the surface over the years.” She smiled softly. “…I think you should call him and ask.”

“OH NONO NONONONONONO!” Nova blurted. “That would be…”

“If he says no he says no,” Discord said. “And that’ll actually give you some closure for this inner complex you’ve been avoiding for… decades?”

“Decades,” Flutterfree agreed.

“B-bu-“

“It’s no use,” Trixie said with an exaggerated moan of pain. “You can’t fight the logic!”

Nova twitched. “…Gah, fine. I’ll call him and ask. He’s going to say no and then we’ll all forget about it.” Nova pulled out her phone and dialed his number with determination.

“HEY SUNBURST!”

“Nova? Hi! I haven’t heard from you in a while! What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing really, just talking to some friends and you came up in conversation. Thought I’d call you cause, you know, we’re friends.”

“…Riiiiight.”

“Aaaaanyway, I had this… Silly thought that, I dunno, we should go out and do something, maybe?”

“Oh, like a session of magic spellcasting?”

“We could do that, and that sounds like a great idea – but if you wanted we could also go to dinner and a movie. But the spellcasting sounds good too, just like old times, hahaha. Probably should do that, because I know you like spells, I like spells, everyone likes spells. Magic is amazing, we should totally bond over it. Or dragon pit – dragon pit is amazing. I came up with a kite mod for it, you know? Yeah. …Right.”

“…Did you ask me out in the middle of that rant there?”

Nova’s expression forced itself into a combination of fear, anxiety, and holding one’s breath. The other three tried not to laugh. “Yes.”

“Well, I accept! I’ll be back in Merodi Universalis proper t-tonight, if that’ll work.”

“It’ll work fine!”

“Where should we go?”

“Eheeheheh… I hear there’s a great Earth Ottoman restaurant in the Hub! Oh, movie first though, don’t want to feel rushed do we?”

“Of c-course not!”

“See you then! Call me when you’re back!”

“R-right!”
Nova hung up.

“Told you so,” Trixie said.

Nova stared into the distance. She didn’t say anything.

Flutterfree walked around the table over to her and put a wing around her. “You both are really good friends. I’m sure it’ll go well.”

“But what if it doesn’t?!?”

“Then you’ll sign a document demanding never to speak of it again,” Trixie said, taking another drink of her potion.

“…That’s a surprisingly good point, Trixie.”

“It’s the only kind of point I know how to make.”

“Bullshit.”

Trixie laughed. “Glad you noticed.”

“Oh, are we going to give Nova a decidedly absurd makeover?” Discord asked. “I’ve got some chaos-enchanted garments sure to dazzle the crowd!”

“I’ll just go as myself,” Nova said. “Because… Yeah.” She shook her head. “Celestia, I hate being flustered.”

“It’s completely natural,” Flutterfree said.

“And a lot of natural things are deserving of hate,” Nova responded. “Just ask Corona about death sometime.”

“I have…” Flutterfree said, eyes glazing over.

Discord chuckled. “Quite the conversation.” He took a drink of his potion. “This is absolutely delicious.”

“Seskii is a wizard,” Flutterfree added.

“She’s secretly a Pinkie in disguise,” Trixie theorized.

“No I’m not!” Seskii called over.

“Oh yeah?” Trixie shouted back. “You’re Aware aren’t you!”

“Do I look like I’m good at parties!?”

“Maybe!?”

“Well I don’t do them! I sell potions! And… Well just about everything else, but mostly potions! I love potions. If I was a pony my cutie mark would be a potion with an interrobang in it!”

“Mine would be my face,” Discord decreed.

“It’s a tornado,” Trixie muttered. “Have you even watched our cartoon? When you face off against Tirek, you have a tornado.”
“Psh, false advertising.”

“It’s right about literally everything else!”

“Can you be sure about that? What about all the animation errors? Duplicate ponies? Those aren’t things!”

Nova raised a hoof. “They are in other worlds.”

“Why’d you have to ruin my point?”

“Because I’m going to enjoy myself a little bit before nerves take over and turn me into an emotional wreck, that’s what.”

Flutterfree shook her head and chuckled. “Nova, everything will be fine.”

“Yes. I know that. But the brain has issues telling the heart what to do. It’s quite fun.”

Trixie smirked. “The best kind of fun.”

Nova rolled her eyes. “Seskii, something stronger! But not something that’ll keep me drunk until tonight.”

“COMING RIGHT UP!” Seskii called.

“Why did I even walk up to the counter the first time?”

“Because I asked you too,” Discord said.

Nova blinked – then started to chuckle. “Of course you would.”

~~~

“I think I’ve figured out the word for how this is going,” Thrackerzod deadpanned.

“What?” Allure grunted, currently hiding under an overly large sun hat.

“Swimmingly.”

“We were off to such a great start, too!” Bot declared.

(“Hey there,” Allure said, walking up to the blue stallion. “How are y-”

“GET AWAY FROM MY BLUEBERRY MINT!” one of the Pinkies yelled, grabbing Allure by the throat. “HE’S MINE!”)

“Allure muttered.

“You were smiling! Smiling is starting out good!”

“And then I was choking.” She rubbed her throat. “That still hurts…”

Squeaky shook her head. “Well, I wouldn’t say the start was indicative of everything else that happened…”

(The stallion looked at her. “I’m married, go away.”)
(“BRO, IS THIS FILLY BOTHERING YOU?”

“YEAH, BRO.”

“GET YOUR HORN AWAY FROM BRO, FILLY.”)

(“I’m sorry, I’m in a committed relationship with the AI contained in my necklace.”)

(“Well hey there~!” a particularly handsome stallion said to Allure. “I bet y-”

“RIVET!” a hag of a mare shouted. “STOP OGGLING OVER THE YOUNG’NS.”

Rivet shot Allure a ‘help me’ look. Allure ran away, deciding not to get involved.)

Allure fixed Squeaky with a look. “Really. There’s no pattern. Not at all. Every interaction was unique in its own way. It wasn’t like they all came here with their partners!”

“In hindsight that should have been obvious,” Thrackerzod muttered. “Oh wait, it was.”

“Not all of my targets were inaccurate,” Bot pouted.

(Allure smiled. “Hey, I was wondering, I’m alone, you’re alone, think we could…?”
He laughed. “Oh wait, you’re serious? Let me laugh harder.” He laughed harder.)

(“And that’s why I’m looking all over the place for someone, anyone here to just give me a chance for a moment and so far you’re the only one who’s bothered to even listen an-”

“Allure, you’re pouring your heart out to a cactus,” Squeaky pointed out.

Allure looked to where a stallion had been just a moment ago. “…That peeking little…”

(“Hey, how ab-”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

Allure raised an eyebrow at Bot. “…Technically correct.”

“The best kind of correct!”

“The worst kind.”

“Does not compute, therefore, I choose to ignore.”

Allure twitched. “O-kay then.”

“We’ve just got to keep trying,” Squeaky said. “Clearly, these are bad stomping grounds to find stable single people.”

“It’s like you all can’t see the sun in the sky,” Thrackerzod deadpanned.

“Where to go though?” Allure asked. “We can’t just wait.”

“Can’t we?” Squeaky countered.

“I don’t want to,” Allure muttered.
“May I make a suggestion?” a nearby bush asked.

The four Sweeties looked at the bush.

“Hey Starbeat!” Bot chirped.

“Mhm, no, Starbeat definitely isn’t here, it is just I, a bush,” Starbeat said.

“Whatsoever you say, Starbush.”

“Starbeat, what are you doing here?” Allure asked.

“I told you I was a bush! Agh, fine. I’m here because Vriska and Hastur were all like ‘hey you should show up it’ll be grand’ and I was like ‘nooo’ and they were like ‘yesssss!’ and then I ended up here against my better judgment. They can be very convincing.”

“I bet. You had a suggestion?”

Starbeat paused for a moment. “Yeah. You’re going about this all wrong.”

Thrackerzod fixed Allure with an incredulous expression.

“I’ve gathered,” Allure muttered. “But how should I go about getting someone?”

“It’s best to go with somebody you already know somewhat well, but something tells me that Doesn’t exactly go for you.”

“I live and breathe Sweetie Belle day in and day out. All my other friends are mares. …Wait, I suppose I used to be friends with Pip a long time ago…”

“Your Crusader Clients?”

“Like that wouldn’t be awkward. Though at this point I am a little desperate…”

Starbeat paused for a moment. “In that case, we’re going to have to make ka work for you.”

Allure cocked her head. “How so?”

“There are certain places that are more likely to be the scene of romantic encounters – trust me, I’ve studied these things.”

“Said the bush,” Bot observed.

Starbeat ignored her. “See, the problem with this place is not that it won’t have romantic encounters, but that it’s designed for those who already have romance to have even more. Elsewhere is more suited for finding instant-romance. Naturally you have to be on guard that it’s not just a ‘click-like’ scenario, but unlike me you actually have some power over that. Bars are usually filled with the lonely seekers, and on today especially people will be looking to drink their sorrows away.”

“Oh, I like that idea!” Allure said. “Go out for drinks!”

“There are other places. The park is a good one for chance encounters. Or a college – something about colleges just screams for love to bloom in one way or another, between students or otherwise.”

“Bar sounds more fun, no offense.”
“Regardless of what you do, you have to at least appear to be alone. Though your three wingponies could be invisible, easy.”

Thrackerzod sighed. “The things I do for you lot… Invisibility at the ready.”

“Great! Thanks Starbeat!” Allure cheered. “You’re the best!”

“T-thanks!”

“You have your bracelet disabled,” Squeaky observed.

“Stealth tactics. Speaking of, I need to move.” The bush vanished in a flash of magic.

Allure smirked. “All right girls – first stop, the bar!”

“You should stop talking to us after we’re invisible,” Squeaky said. “You don’t want to look crazy.”

“This article suggests crazy is the new attractive!” Bot chirped, reporting on her internal Internet search.

“The Internet is a pretzel knot of lies,” Squeaky countered.

Allure rolled her eyes. “What it should really say is ‘be yourself’. Which I have no problem with.”

“Famous last words,” Thrackerzod muttered.

“Ye of little faith,” Allure said with a smile. “TO THE BAR!”

~~~

Queen Toph of Lai and Lady Rarity’s team sat in the Throne Room, watching TV. Well, in the case of the Queen, listening to TV – all Toph could ‘see’ was a large flat piece of paper pulled down from the ceiling that caught the projector’s display for the rest of the throne room to see. But it was the news, so it wasn’t like she needed to see anything to understand what was going on.

A story about Mistress Luna’s work on the Binary world ended, transferring to coverage of the Festival of Love. Toph sighed, shutting off the projector.

Lady Rarity and the rest of the team looked to her, wondering why she had shut it off.

“Sometimes I wonder,” Toph said, folding her hands together. “I wonder what it would have been like.”

“What?” Lady Rarity asked.

“If I wasn’t here. If I stayed in the Elemental Nations – Elemental Four, I guess. According to my ‘show’ I would probably be working as chief as police and have a kid at this point. Apparently it wouldn’t have stuck forever, but at least I would have had something. Now here I am, Queen of a bunch of horses. I really shouldn’t take anyone to be king that isn’t from Lai, and let’s just say I’m not interested in anyone who is from Lai.”

“Queen Luna never had a king,” Olivia pointed out. “She just lived. Probably thought she was going to live forever.”

“We’ll all live forever if I have anything to say about it,” Corona said, curling her fingers into a determined fist.
“How is the ‘immortality project’ coming along?” Toph asked.

“As of yet I’m unable to mass produce any results. Which means I really shouldn’t start giving it to people. The definition of unfairness.”

“So, in other words, not really.”

“I’m the only one working on it,” Corona admitted. “Turning it into a big production would be… Lieshy, give me a metaphor.”

“Dropping a chunk of meat into piranha infested waters,” Lieshy deadpanned.

“Yes. Like that.”

Toph sat back. “Well, at least you won't have to worry. Rarity, you’re next in line after me to run this place for the moment. Not going to let you find out last minute if somebody drains my life in an instant.”

Lady Rarity bowed. “I would be honored.”

“Still…” Toph put a hand to her chin. “I wonder…”

“Do you want me to track down the guy you married in fiction?” Olivia asked. “I could do that.”

“I’m not even sure if we were actually married in that world,” Toph said with a shrug. “Also… No, it probably wouldn’t be good for me.”

Olivia shrugged. “I’d want to know.”

“The rest of us do know,” Corona pointed out. “Toph, you’re not surrounded by alternates of yourself.”

“There’s been exactly one other me,” Toph confirmed.

“Yeah. Meanwhile I’ve seen hundreds of myself. Most of them are single, but there are a few who aren’t. Twilight and Flash seem to be the popular choices.”

“Still can’t imagine Eve and you.” Lieshy said, shaking her head. “But it seems so common…”

Corona shrugged. “Neither of us is interested. It comes with being a pony.”

Olivia blinked. “Wait, it does?”

“I figured you of all people would have noticed,” Corona said with a smirk. “Though, I guess even we don’t really notice most of the time.”

Lady Rarity blinked. “Notice what?”

“The singles,” Lieshy answered.

“…What?”

Corona smirked. With a flash of magic she de-summoned her clothes and transformed into a unicorn. “Ponies have significantly less drive to couple up than humans do. Go look at any Equis Vitis city that isn’t Ponyville or Canterlot – you’ll see a lot of ponies. A lot of single ponies. So many that they’re the majority. Sometimes the vast majority.”
“…I can’t believe I never noticed this,” Lady Rarity muttered.

“It’s not something you’d think about much,” Corona admitted. “I only did because the moment I came to Earth Vitis everyone was obsessed with hooking up and making out. It was more than a little off-putting – plus the freshly-teenaged human body decided to throw hormones at me like a wall. Humans like romance a lot. For some it’s all they think about.” She leaned back. “Of course, there are worlds that are contrary to the rule – Equis Regarden and Equis Fallout are a bit notorious for having obsessed maniacs. Same for a few human worlds where coupling up isn’t really a fixation.”

“How do we keep the population up?” Lady Rarity wondered. “If so many of us aren’t getting together…”

“How many sisters does Pinkie have?” Corona asked.

“Three, how do-”

“Name ponies you know that don’t have siblings besides yourself.”

Lady Rarity blinked. “…Rainbow Dash. You.”

Corona smirked. “Had to think there. Also I do have siblings, and an extended family, we just don’t talk.”

“Really?”

“I made up with them a while back, but nobody really had the drive to keep up the relationship. A bit sad, but nothing to dwell on. My mother has made a point of letting me know she’s proud of me, so that’s something.”

Olivia nodded. “So, Corona, as a human-pony, what do you feel?”

“Indifferent,” Corona said. “Middle ground, I guess you could say? As a unicorn I had no drive whatsoever to find anyone, and as a human I fought to suppress it. Now I guess I just don’t care. I switch between unicorn and human so much…” she shrugged. “Last date I went on was four months ago. I’ve already forgotten the guy’s name.”

“Ouch,” Toph said.

“You can say that again.”

“Ouch,” Lieshy droned.

“Not you.”

Lady Rarity rolled her eyes. “Well all this talk of romance and couples is fascinating and all, but it is a bit moot. None of us are really on the market.”

Olivia raised a hand.

“Bringing in men from Earth Stand every few weeks ‘for fun and profit’ does not count.”

Olivia lowered her hand. “I’m still pretty sure we’re available.”

“Toph is queen, Corona doesn’t care, I have a vow of chastity because of my cannibalistic nature, you would never settle on anyone ever, and Lieshy is Lieshy.”
Lieshy rolled her eyes. “Yes, yes I am. Lieshy. Indeed.”

Corona glanced at her. “…Why don’t you have anyone, or even try, anyway?”

“Pony. Just don’t care. We discussed this. Remember? Grandfather clock chiming.”

Corona raised an eyebrow. “Hrm…”

“I know that look in your eyes, don’t you e-”

Corona teleported, holding a hoof to Lieshy’s forehead. One second later, Corona jumped back and chuckled.

“INVASION OF PRIVACY!”

“She had a boyfriend,” Corona said, sitting down with a smirk.

Olivia blinked. “I didn’t know this. I didn’t know this. I know the secrets of everyone here! How did you…?”

“The Snack.”

“…Woah, that’s clever,” Olivia said.

“I can’t even begin to imagine…” Lady Rarity said, hoof to her face.

“You need to watch The Snack, it’ll all make sense,” Corona said. “It’s one of those things you really can’t explain. Ever. At all.”

“Lovely.”

Toph turned to Lieshy. “Do you think we can get a name of the handsome stallion?”

“His name is Clockwork and he is perhaps the furthest from conventionally attractive a pony could be.”

Corona rolled her eyes. “That wasn’t a reason to hide him from us.”

“That’s no-”

Corona raised her hoof. “May I remind you where I was just a few seconds ago?”

“…Fine.”

“Good. Now that we’ve established we like Clockwork even if he’s ugly w-”

“I dunno, if he looks like a turd I might have to stage an intervention,” Olivia interrupted.

Corona fixed her with a look. “As I was saying, you have nothing but our support and good wishes.”

“And my condolences,” Olivia said.

Corona nodded to Lieshy. Lieshy punched Olivia with Limelight. “OKAY OKAY, I’M SORRY! …Waitaminute.”

“No take backs,” Lieshy decreed.
“You really don’t want to talk about him, do you?” Lady Rarity asked.

“Ding ding ding.”

“That’s fine,” Corona said. “But we will have to meet him eventually.”

“Do not pass go. Do not collect two hundred dollars.”

“Lieshy…”

“Fiiiiiine,” Lieshy moaned. “I’ll bring him by next week or something.”

“Next week for sure?”

“The top light.”

“Lieshy, straight.”

“…Yes,” Lieshy hissed through her teeth.

“Good. That’s all we need.” Corona leaned back. “I won’t spill any other beans.”

Lady Rarity shivered. “Beans…”

“Merida!” Olivia shouted. “You just made me think of-”

“We all know what world everyone just thought of,” Toph said, trying her hardest not to flinch at the memories of… the beans. And the things made of beans that were never to be spoken of.

“NEW TOPIC!” Corona decreed, blushing furiously. “What about… lunch?”

“Yes. Lunch. Please,” Lieshy whimpered. “Food is good.”

~~~

Allure walked into a bar right outside of the Pinkie Emporium – the Last Chance. There was a sign that said if you don’t come in here now, the Pink Ones will get you.

“Too late,” Allure chuckled, looking to the other three. Then she remembered they were invisible and weren’t supposed to talk. She would hear a telepathic message if she needed to be told anything.

The bar itself was rather large and bright – a nice contrast to the dark and brooding establishments elsewhere in the multiverse that seemed so popular for no discernable reason. The place was about two-thirds full of people who didn’t look like they were having a good time – a significant number were drowning their sorrows away with drink.

Allure sighed. Well, at least I belong here. She walked up to the main counter, taking a seat on one of the stools. “Something that isn’t all that heavy. I need my wits about me.”

“Y’sure about that hon?” a buxom human asked. “We’ve got the Drowner on tap for ya, and I think ya need it.”

“…Look at me. I’m tiny. I don’t usually drink. So something light will probably still make me tipsy. Mmk?”

“Hon, y’re far too responsible to be in this place with this crowd.”
Allure rolled her eyes.

“I’ll get ya a fizz-pop though.”

“Sure. Does it come in cherry?”

“Lucky you, it does!”

“Do that then,” Allure said, smirking. She levitated the drink in her magic and turned away from the bar. She could just sit here and wait for someone to walk up, throw herself to ka as it were. Probably what Starbeat wanted, if she was being honest. But Allure didn’t want to just sit, wait, and feel sorry for herself. She was going to put herself out there. Who cared if she never did it? She’d had plenty of practice earlier today. The cute eyes surely had an effect in this arena as well…

She spotted her first target. Stallion. Average size. Not busy crying into his drink. Didn’t have absurd muscles indicative of a ‘jock’ type. Worth a shot.

She took a sip of her drink and scooted two stools over. She smirked and looked at him. “Come here often?”

“Go away,” he muttered.

Allure raised her hooves in surrender. “All right, sorry if I thought it was okay to come over here and say hi.” She turned around – he didn’t call after her. Time for another target. She moved to the other side of the bar.

She leaned on one of her hooves and put on a coy smirk. “Hey there.”

“Hey,” the stallion said in the most monotone voice imaginable, staring deeply into his drink.

“I bet you do a lot of deep thinking, huh?”

“The rim of my glass has a fly on it.”

“…Right.”

“It reminds me of my cat, Flu. Flu’s a good cat.”

“Oh? My sister has a cat, she calls i-”


“You have a lot of cats.”

“I do have a lot of cats. They are my everything.” He began to sniff.

“I bet they are,” Allure said with a smile. “Is that what your cutie mark is for?” She gestured toward his paw-print cutie mark.

“Yeah… Always cats, all the time… Everything… But not today, today I’m sitting in a bar, away from them…”

“Why are you?”

“I don’t know. I was mad at them. But now I’m not. I don’t know if they’ll forgive me…”
“I’m sure they will! They’re part of you! I’m sure of it! Just look at that flank of yours – you are a cat owner. And those cats love you.”

“Yeah… Yeah!” The stallion stood up. “You’re right! I shouldn’t be avoiding them – I should go to them!”

“Wait a seco-”

“Thank you for showing me what I need to do! I’M COMING FLU!” He ran out of the bar.

Allure blinked. Then she glared at her cutie mark. “Traitor.”

Her cutie mark made no response.

Rule of Three, a voice entered her head. Allure nodded – of course. Then again, trying to invoke a rule of ka was likely to get an exception…

Whatever. She sat down at a round table where only one pegasus stallion was sitting, staring into the distance. He was orange. The brightest orange Allure had seen on a pony that she could remember.

“You look like a piece of fruit,” Allure observed, not waiting for an invitation to sit down.

He didn’t make eye contact. “What if I am a piece of fruit?”

“Then your time on this world is short, because I’m a fruit vampire who’ll suck you dry.”

The stallion raised an eyebrow, making eye contact with her. “You know the art of the pick-up line is supposed to be overly obvious and significantly more crass.”

“Well, I’m either new at this or can’t bring myself to say any of the dozens of other things swirling around my head.” She leaned in, turning on the cute eyes and her suggestive smirk. “Take your pick.”

“I’ll choose neither,” he said, turning to face her directly. “I choose to believe that was part of your plan.”

“Oh no, he’s found me out. Next he’ll find out that I’m a supervillain – drat!”

He rolled his eyes. “And what part do I have to play in your ‘not evil’ plans?”

“I must take you out in order to set off a chain of events that leads to me ruling Merodi Universalis with an iron hoof! Muahaha!”

“I can’t tell if you’re actually trying this hard or legitimately just think about being a supervillain regularly.”

“Get to know me a bit better and you might find out.”

He smiled. “In that case, I accept. I am Tangelo. HEY DANA, GET US AN ORDER OF HOT WINGS WOULD YA?”

“Right away, Tanny,” Dana called.

Allure introduced herself next. “Allure. A Sweetie, of course.”

“Mmm… That name sounds familiar.”
She smirked. “Want to play guess the Sweetie? I’m sure you’ll get me pinned. Definitely.”

“I’ll just keep my thoughts to myself.”

“What is this, double mystery day?” She rolled her eyes, taking another sip of her drink.

“Perhaps. It makes things interesting. This place is usually such a dreadful bore.”

Allure raised an eyebrow. “Not one of the mopers I take it?”

Tangelo shook his head as the hot wings arrived – he had to use a fork, being a pegasus. “No. I come here as a social experiment regularly. To see who I find.”

“I’m going to take that as a roundabout compliment along the lines of ‘you’re interesting enough to talk to’.”

“More or less.”

She munched on the hot wing – meat was so weird but tasted so good. “So what made me pass inspection?”

“You came in here with a purpose and a plan when the vast majority of people are floundering fish who haven’t the foggiest idea what they want to do here besides drink, stop thinking, and maybe get lucky. At first I thought you may have been a shark hunting for easy prey, but as it turns out you were rather inexperienced in the flirting scene.” He finished a wing “Paradoxically, you weren’t all that nervous – annoyance was your primary emotion. Telling of a determined individual who woke up this morning and decided she wanted to find someone and hasn’t had any luck.”

Allure smirked. “Now I wish I had been paying attention to you this whole time, I bet I could have come up with a similar paragraph.”

“An artifact of the way we have introduced each other.” He must have really liked wings, because he was already on another one, forcing Allure to hurry up her own eating to keep up. “You’ve impressed me so far with your reactions.”

“Backhanded way of saying I’m not an idiot.”

“So few people aren’t idiots these days,” Tangelo pointed out. “Point out one other person in this establishment who has a smidge of intelligence about them.”

“Don’t even need to look.”

“I’m surprised you were even considering those who clearly weren’t on your level of thought.”

“Oh, a bit arrogant are we?” Allure chuckled. “There’s more to life than just intelligence. I may have been somewhat desperate – but if I refused them just because they didn’t know how to think, well, I’d be a little cruel then wouldn’t I?”

“You thought the cat-stallion was thinking.”

“Honest mistake,” Allure admitted. “Really, I’m being honest here, that was a mistake.”

Tangelo raised an eyebrow.

“Too cheesy?”
“Too cheesy.”

“I did come here with the hopes of taking advantage of ka, so perhaps a cheesy conversation is just what the doctor ordered.” She finished a wing.

Tangelo reached for another delectable piece of slightly spicy meat, only to find there was none. He stood up. “It appears we’re out of wings, Allure.”

Allure nodded. “Yeah. Want to order something else? I’m hungry.”

“How about we get out of here?” he asked, strolling around the table until he was behind her. “I think we’ve gotten off to a good start, could be interesting to see where this goes.”

Allure beamed. “Really!? Oh yes!” She stood up. “Where should we go? There’s a bunch of fancy places across the street I can get us into – trust me, I can – and I think they’re showing Crimson Evening in the theater still…”

“Ah, but we’ve already passed the initial get together, bonding over wings,” Tangelo said, placing a hoof on the back of her neck. Allure tensed for a moment – but quickly relaxed. After all, that was supposed to be romantic, right?

“I… guess so? What then, just go hang out in a park?”

“You are a little naive, but that’s not something I’ll hold against you. I can see past it into your mind—a wondrous thing I want to get closer to.”

Allure grinned. “Well we could just go talk. That’d be good, right?”

“Walk and talk. Back to my place, of course.”

“Sure th-” Allure processed what he’d just said. “…Your place.”

He looked at her, slightly confused. “Yes…?”

“…That’s a little fast.”

Tangelo smirked. “It’s how it’s done, Allure.” He gestured to the front doors of the bar. “A pony walks in there, sad, despondent, or lonely. They find someone here who either feels the same or is just looking for some fun. They pair up and leave to get to the real meat of the encounter.”

“And then…?”

Tangelo shrugged. “Then they see where they are after that.” He picked up her front hoof. “I assure you, our conversation will go long into the night, and possibly the next day.”

“Can’t we just like, I don’t know, go on an actual date first? I hardly know you!”

Tangelo sighed. “You’re still holding onto a fantasy, I can see it. I find it curious…”

“What’s curious about it? I’m not going back to anyone’s house unless we’re really along! And I mean really!”

“And now you’re just in denial. You came to a bar, Allure, what did you expect?”

“Well I didn’t expect it to be…” Exactly how they’re portrayed on TV. Frick. I walked right into this. A moron is Allure.
“I implore you,” Tangelo said, lowering his head. “Let me take you and teach you the way it is really done.”

Allure removed her hoof from his grasp. “…No thanks.”

Tangelo looked mildly hurt – but he recovered quickly. “…Your loss, Allure. Your loss.”

“You’re one of the sharks,” Allure muttered. “Sitting here, waiting for prey.”

“I wait for one I think will suit me.”

“Happens more often than you think, doesn’t it?”

“Precisely,” Tangelo said, sitting back down. He stopped looking at her. “Now please, get your judgmental plot out of here. You’re ruining the atmosphere.”

Allure glared at him – but did as he suggested. She stormed out of the bar into the streets of Ponyville. The sun was setting.

“…This definitely wasn’t what Ponyville used to be, I know that,” Allure muttered. “It wasn’t like this.”


“Hard not to think of it as a corruption of our culture. Of our way. Of love. What even was that⁈?”


“Well, excuse me if I don’t feel like being all tolerant right now!” She put her hooves to her head. “How in Celestia’s name are you supposed to navigate this mess⁈?”

The three Sweeties didn’t have an answer for her.

Allure sighed, choosing a random direction and walking away.

“Allure!” Bot called.

“I need some time to think,” Allure said. “You can follow. I’d like you to be there. But… Don’t talk, okay?”

The three of them glanced between each other and nodded. They followed her into the night.

~~~

Vriska and Hastur sat on top of a random building in Ponyville – some sort of office. They couldn’t see much of the city from their vantage point since the building wasn’t very tall. They could make out the Pinkie Emporium, the S-Stars theater, and the trees of the nearest park.

They had left the Festival of Love a while ago, growing bored with the rides the moment they completed the ‘tunnel of love and corndogs.’ Since then, they had just been watching everything from above, both inside and outside of the Festival.

“So many people spending their lives together,” Hastur observed thoughtfully.

“It is normally how us meatspacers do things,” Vriska said. “Meanwhile in your world everything is essentially random on that count.”
“That’s no-”

Vriska held up a hand. “Heard it all before, Yellow. No matter how many times you describe ‘the copulation of the eldritch in the eyes of the beholder’, it still sounds random.”

“But is it really much different here?” Hastur asked. “Meetings are largely by chance, and furthering relationships based on a bunch of seemingly random emotional variables. You just have no higher force bringing you together.”

“…Bah, I want to argue for the purity and choice in love, look what you’ve done to me,” she laughed. “Let’s just skip ahead to the part where we both agree the other is partially right, but I come back with a ‘we don’t have to deal with seventeen time dimensions’ and make your point moot.”

“The eldritch nature of my reality is the largest of all differences so I must concede your final point.”

Vriska kicked her legs in the air, looking down at the streets. “Hey, Hastur. In the Embodiment the idea of coupling, when it does apply, is only seen as temporary.”

“Of course. Given the nature of time and space it is unlikely it could be any other way.”

“Why do you stick around with me then? And no sappy answer, I’ve already heard that one from you.”

Hastur looked into the distance. “At first, it was merely an experiment. I saw Thrackerzod experiencing the ways of mortals and changing because of it. I always had a soft spot for the standard realms and the way they did things, and with Thrackerzod’s change, I decided to see what it could give me. As it turns out, quite a lot more than I was expecting.”

“I’m not exactly a mortal, you know.”

“I figured it would be easier to relate to one not limited to a finite lifespan, similar to myself. We’ve been together for many years of your time, but it still feels like it’s just begun doesn’t it?”

Vriska pursed her lips. “It feels like a bit more than that to me.”

“Oh, I apologize – I made your perception of time seem trivial.”

Vriska rolled her eyes. “Stop it with the fucking apologies. It’s all cool. I was just saying my age is counted in the centuries, yours is counted in bizarre eldritch time that only approximates to millions of years.”

Hastur nodded, looking into the Pinkie Emporium. “A thought has occurred to me, relating to the time we’ve been together.”

“Oh?”

“I know enough of the culture here to understand this isn’t exactly something you discuss openly but it is something I need clarification on in relation to you.”

Vriska smirked. “There may be a lot you don’t know about me, but those aren’t secrets I particularly care about. Ask away!”
After enough time has passed in a relationship, the man is supposed to, eventually, propose.”

Vriska leaned back, deciding it would be better to be laying down rather than teetering off the edge of a building.

“Vriska?”

“Shut up, thinking.” Vriska said, thoughts and emotions deciding they needed to ruin her cool exterior for once. “…Kanaya did go through with that… If you actually proposed I think I’d say yes. But I also don’t think it’d really work.”

“What makes you say that?”

Vriska sat up. “Neither of our cultures has an equivalent. Trolls were just together whenever it was convenient in any of the four quadrants in all timelines. It was usually just a biological necessity with a relationship thrown in, and a relationship that was intended to be changeable over time. I mean, trolls were rarely allowed to stay with each other for a significant amount of time on Alternia. Not sure how it was on Beforus.”

She turned to Hastur. “And then there’s you, mister time-abyss multiple-dimensional craziness. You don’t have lasting relationships, because your time makes that sort of thing a paradox.”

“And yet, here we are.”

“And this is how we should stay,” Vriska said. “We’re both immortals, Hastur. Subject to immense change. If we really think about it, it’s near impossible for either of us to die. So death would never do us part under any circumstances. And let’s be honest, I’m a fucking bitch who’ll end up ruining something, or at least getting really jealous over your ‘othertime lovers’.”

Hastur nodded slowly. “Thank you for being frank.”

“You’re disappointed?”

“Perhaps… I am unsure.”

“Hastur, we’re not humans, we’re not ponies. Humans may breed like rabbits and basically run the multiverse, but that doesn’t mean the way they perceive things is right. Their ‘high and mighty, our way is perfect’ routine is stupid.” She stood up and grabbed him by something that approximated his collar, grinning. “Everyone has the right to decide their own way. Fuck conventions.”

“Fuck conventions.” Hastur echoed.

“There’s the yellow boy I know and love!” She slung an arm around his neck and grinned. “Let’s get out of here.”

“As you wi- well that’s interesting.”

Nova and Sunburst had just walked out of the theater, laughing very loudly. It was a little hard to hear exactly what they were saying, but it was clear they were having a great time.

Then Nova moved in for the kiss. It landed perfectly. Sunburst didn’t recoil.

“About fucking time,” Vriska commented from their vantage point. “That girl has had so much stress inside her since the Icon incident. It’ll be good to get it out.”
“You think it will last?”

“I don’t know. But at least it’ll be real. Wonder how long it’ll be before she bothers to tell us.”

“Knowing Pinkie, yesterday.”

Vriska chuckled. “Oh yes. By the way, Yellow, would you like to see a movie? I’m sure there’s a sufficiently fucked up production to keep your attention.”

“Or we could go to a showing of G’th’ast’ranaaaah.”

“Will my mind explode?”

“Probably.”

“That sounds so fucking romantic. TAKE ME AWAY, HASTUR! Sweep me off my feet and eviscerate my skull.”

“Gladly, Thief of Light.” He used his eldritch magic to sweep her off her feet, prompting an uncharacteristic giggle. A moment later, they vanished from the universe.

~~~

Allure walked onward, eventually arriving in one of Ponyville’s parks. It was a simple park – green grass, native Equis Vitis trees, and only a simple cobblestone path. The sun had already set, so a few owls were out and hooting.

She knew Thrackerzod, Squeaky, and Bot were behind her – mostly due to Bot’s servo motors whirring whenever she moved her legs – but they had kept their promise and not said a word the entire time.

She had such good friends. Willing to help her even if they thought she was being crazy… Always by her side…

She sat down in the middle of the cobblestone path and started crying. The three others didn’t say anything – they just pulled her into a hug.

“I love you all,” Allure blurted through her tears. “Who needs a special somepony…?”

“It’s not a need,” Squeaky answered. “It’s a want.”

“But that’s just selfish! Look at me, I’ve been hunting today! I don’t even know what I was expecting! It’s all me, me, me!”

Squeaky held her close. “You didn’t want to hurt or take advantage of anyone. You were pure.”

Allure looked at the ground, heaving. “Was I? Can it ever be pure? I just… I wanted what everyone else had… But not everyone else has that! What was I thinking that I could just waltz in and take it? I… I…” She sniffed. “He was right. I was asking for it.”

“You got unlucky,” Thrackerzod said.

“…Maybe I got lucky,” Allure said, looking at her hooves. “I got someone to scare me. Had they been slower… I could have gotten trapped. I was desperate…” the tears began to well up again. “Why does this have to be such a mess!”
“Scans suggest it’s just part of life,” Bot suggested with a sad beep.

Allure shook her head. “Yeah… Life… A complicated mess that’s even more complicated for us…” She looked into the distance.

“But we’re here.” Squeaky said with a smile. “And we can make it just a little simpler.”

Allure looked at the three of them – and laughed. “I’m an idiot.”

Thrakerzod raised an eyebrow. “Finally.”

“Not because of the reason you want, Thrakerzod – though yes we were being kinda stupid all day. I’ve already learned this lesson! Screw it, who needs a special somepony? I have you girls!” She pulled them all into a hug. “And all the other Sweeties, and Applebloom, and Scootaloo, and all my friends. That’ll be enough. That should be more than enough.”

“YAY!” Bot declared.

“I may feel like I want someone in my life, but that’s just a want. Just a want. Not a need. Never a need. It shouldn’t control me.”

Squeaky smiled. “If that works for you.”

“It’s been working like that all this time! I just forgot for today!” She hit herself in the side of her head. “Allure.exe threw an exception.”

Bot found this hilarious and started laughing uncontrollably.

“I’m glad you’ve come to see the failings in mortal courtship rituals,” Thrakerzod said. “Perhaps now you will come to appreciate the rest of your practices as equally nonsensical.”

“Don’t count on it,” Allure said, wiping her eyes and smiling.

Bot looked at her, confused. “Allure, why are you sobbing and smiling at the same time?”

Allure blinked. “I’m not sobbing, it was just a litt-” She heard it. Actual sobbing coming from a nearby bush – sobbing that definitely wasn’t hers. She carefully approached the bush and peeled apart its branches with her magic.

There was a human girl of about four in there with pale skin, violet eyes, and white hair. She wore nothing on her body and had numerous scratches all over her, some that clearly weren’t from the bush. Far too large.

Allure put on a comforting smile, speaking in a hushed tone. “Don’t worry, I’m going to get you out of there…” With her magic, she carefully peeled the branches of the bush away, releasing the girl within. She levitated the girl out slowly, setting her on the soft grass. She looked to Thrakerzod. “Make a dress for her.”

Thrakerzod nodded, turning away to make the garment out of the child’s sight.

Allure turned back to her. “Hey there,” she said, barely more than a whisper. “We’re going to get you fixed up, okay?”

The girl nodded slowly, the fear in her eyes slowly dying down.

“I’m Allure, what’s your name?”
The girl looked away, as if ashamed.

Allure shook her head. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want.” Thrackerzod levitated a simple black dress over to Allure. Allure gave it to the girl.

The girl wasn’t sure what to make of the small dress. She held it in her hands, staring at it.

“…Do you want help?” Allure asked.

The girl nodded slowly.

Allure levitated the dress over the girl’s body, delicately moving her arms through the sleeves, careful not to move anything too fast as to startle her. The girl marveled at the fabric on her body.

_She’s never worn anything before._ Allure realized. She sighed. “We don’t have shoes for you right now… Do you want me to carry you with magic, or would you like to get on my back?”

The girl looked away for a few seconds. Allure gave her time to process - and she eventually turned back and shakily pointed at Allure’s back. Allure smiled, slowly levitating the girl and setting her down. “It’ll be a little bu-”

The girl grabbed hold of Allure’s mane like it was her lifeline, burying her face in Allure’s pink and purple curls. Allure’s thought process stopped working for a few seconds as she was overcome with a deep, primal urge to protect this child with everything she had.

“The hospital’s not far,” Allure told the others. “She doesn’t look to be hurt badly… We’ll walk.”

The Sweeties nodded.

Allure began to feel the girl’s tears seep through her mane. She struggled to keep any sort of composure. What had happened to this child?

~~~

Applejack and Jotaro were sitting on a bench while most the rest of the extended family partook in a gigantic bonfire to end the Festival of Love.

“Sometimes Ah wonder how they can all have so much energy.”

Jotaro’s only response to this was a very relaxed shrug.

“Ah’ve been doin’ stuff all day, how do they expect me to jump around a bonfire without passin’ out or breakin’ somethin’. …Or fallin’ into the fire, there’s that too.”

“We are missing out on marshmallows.”

“Toasted marshmallows are a treat,” Applejack admitted, looking into the community fire, spotting Barley and Jona quickly having some father-daughter bonding time over an elaborately constructed s’more.

Applejack smiled. “Ah think we’ve hit the good life, huh Jotaro?”

Jotaro let a soft smirk come to his face. It was all the response needed.

“Help me out here. Ah’m tryin’ to figure out what to call you. How exactly are we related…?”
Jotaro knew this was going to get complicated.

“Let’s see. Helm is my son-in-law, so the rest of his siblings are the in-laws, or the siblings-in-law or somethin’. Paradigm’s with Shizuka, makin’ Shizuka my son-in-law’s sister-in-law. So Ah’m thinking daughter-in-law-in-law.”

“Yare yare daze…”

“Holly’s technically Shizuka’s sister, so she’s another daughter-in-law-in-law, sorta.”

“I think your words have stopped making sense.”

“And you are Holly’s son, so that makes you my… grand-nephew-in-law-in-law.”

“I think the translator is compensating for words that don’t exist,” Jotaro commented.

“Eh, probably. Ah don’t pretend to understand how that works. All Ah know is that I can call you a grand-nephew. Which is quite a hoot! You’re slightly older than Ah am!”

“The family is only going to grow,” Jotaro said, leaning back. “Josuke’s going to pick someone eventually. Jolyne’s really close. And then there’s Jordan and Joanne…”

“How are your little twins?”

“Cheerful as always. I’ve been watching them for signs of a Stand, but nothing has shown so far.” He looked into the fire. “They almost didn’t exist.”

“Now don’t go dwellin’ on that - you ain’t the Jotaro shown in those books.”

Jotaro nodded.

“Don’t hang up over what might have been, big guy. What matters is that you didn’t go down that road. Now you and Marina have a beautiful family that Ah’m glad to welcome to the Apple Family table at any time.”

Jotaro sat back. “You’re going to need a big table.”

“Ah’ve got a big farm and a knack for setting up family reunions.”

“Really?” he asked, incredulously.

“…That show only showed one of the reunions Ah set up and you know it.”

Jotaro folded his arms. “You’ll have to prove your skill to me.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“Yes.”

“Right then. Ah’m schedulin’ a family reunion. And everyone from the Apples to the Royals to the Joestars are comin’. Heck, get Iroh in on it as well, Corea’s godfather and all. Oh, and the Pies are distantly related, Ah’m sure Pinkie would love it.”

“Yare yare daze…”

“You’re a redundant one, you know that?”
Jotaro nodded, already anticipating a truly absurd family reunion. He may not have been much of a people person, but even he could appreciate a get-together of that magnitude. The family just kept growing and growing...

~~~

The girl had refused to leave Allure’s back, so Doctor Redheart had been forced to perform the examination with her holding onto Allure. Redheart was understanding – clearly the girl had been through a lot. Letting her hold onto her savior was the least she could do.

“Is she okay?” Allure asked.

“Her body has been through a lot,” Redheart said. “There’s more than just scratches – there’s evidence of deep cuts, probing, injections, and broken bones. At the moment though, everything about her is healthy beside an empty stomach. She’s even got stable magic levels.”

Bot dinged, producing a cookie from one of her slots. She handed it to the girl, who devoured it ravenously.

“Clearly, we’ll have to get her better food,” Allure said. “Any chance of finding out who she is?”

“Normally I’d say yes, but something strange came up in the checkup.” Redheart pointed at a screen. “We have determined that the matter in every universe vibrates with a specific signature unique to that universe and that universe alone. After enough time in a different universe, this vibration is replaced with the current universe’s, but that takes a while.” She pointed at the vibration pattern on the screen. “We have no idea what this one is. And the computer here has access to the full Directory.”

“So…?”

“So she hasn’t been in our world long… And she’s from a world outside our scope,” Redheart said. “There are no missing persons reports matching her description, and I don’t expect the DNA scans are going to turn up anything.” She looked at the girl with sadness in her eyes. “We have no idea who she is and no way to get her home.”

The girl tensed at those words.

Allure tried to stand tall – but she was still a short pony, so she just looked cute. “I’ll take her, then. Until we find her home, I’ll protect her.”

“What if we never find it?” Squeaky asked.

“Then I’ll protect her forever,” Allure asserted.

“…You just met he-”

“Squeaky, I’m certain of this,” Allure said, turning her head to glance at the girl on her back. “…I’m going to take care of you, okay?”

The girl looked at Allure. She rushed her and hugged her neck. This made Allure feel like she was choking, but she didn’t care – she let it happen.

“Normally I’d have to put you through a court and everything to approve this,” Redheart said. “But I think I’ll just call Eve, she’s sure to make the process near-instant for you.”
“Thank you,” Allure said.

“You can wait in the lobby while I make the call, mmkay?”

“Right,” Allure said. Then she heard the girl’s stomach rumble. “We need to get her food…”

“We can do that,” Squeaky said, saluting. “You can wait here with her.”

Allure smiled. “Thanks. …I’m giving out a lot of thank yous today.”

“It is the way of your people,” Thrackerzod observed. The three of them vanished in a puff of magic.

Allure took the girl to the waiting room. It was filled with empty couches and chairs since few people were here this late at night. “…Can I sit down?” Allure asked.

The girl reluctantly got off of Allure, allowing the unicorn to sit down on one of the couches. The girl sat next to her, leaning in as close as she could. Allure put a hoof in her hair.

Allure let out a sigh of contentment.

She opened her eyes when a door across the room opened, revealing none other than Princess Cadence and her youngest child, a blue unicorn colt by the name of Frigid.

“Hey mom, lookit! Allure!”

“Quiet, Frigid, we don’t want to be loud,” Cadence said.

“…Why?”

Cadence pointed at the girl. “Because she’d like it that way.”

Frigid walked up to them. “Hi,” he said, trying to be quiet. “I’m Frigid!”

To her credit, the girl didn’t flinch away. She seemed interested in his presence.

“What’s your name?”

The girl recoiled, looking down in shame.

“Oh… I’m sorry. Do you not have one?”

The girl shook her head.

Allure looked at her. “I’ll give you one soon, I just need to think. How does that sound to you?”

The girl looked at Cadence, her frown lessening. “…Good,” she spoke with a raspy, dry voice.

“Wow, you sound awesome,” Frigid said. “Like some ice creature. I like ice.”

The girl looked at Frigid again, clearly unsure of what to make of him.

Cadence spoke up. “Frigid, how about you go play with your game? I’m sure she’ll want to play later, but Allure and I need to talk for a moment.”

“Oh… Okay!” He took out a handheld console and went to a nearby chair.

Cadence turned to Allure. Allure smiled nervously. “So, what’s the Princess of Love got to say to
“I’ve been watching you,” Cadence said.

“…That’s creepy, but it also makes sense.”

“You weren’t exactly being subtle. It was easy for me to see what was going on in the Festival. I was planning on eventually offering my assistance after you’d run through your options – that is my job, after all – but I see you’ve found something else.”

“Yeah… I don’t want your help right now. About an hour ago I would have.”

Cadence looked at her and smiled. “…Love is a complicated thing, Allure. There are many different varieties. What you experienced today? That was a love of things – a love of pleasures. I don’t even consider that real love, myself.” She looked into the distance, pained. “I remember when that style of ‘love’ was rare. Most ponies genuinely wanted to care for each other, to forge a relationship on actually knowing each other rather than simply doing it because they had a desire. It’s cheapened the whole thing – and resulted in many ponies like you growing disillusioned with love at all.” She smiled. “I want you to know, what Tangelo was offering? That wasn’t really love. That was… it was like a hayburger. You love the hayburger because it tastes good. That’s it.”

“…What is love, then?” Allure asked.

Cadence’s expression took on a serious tone. “There are four major flavors of it. You’re most familiar with the love between friends. Eve may consider that her domain, but I have my own hoof in it as well. The bond between ponies who are close to each other is the one that forms beautiful groups who can often act as one unit. It’s perhaps the most beautiful of all the loves because of its resilience, but only when done right. Then there’s the love everyone talks about – erotic, romantic love, the love between two individuals who have hopes of spending eternity together. It is the love driven forward by biology and culture almost universally – and the one almost everyone thinks of. Even those who aren’t interested in love think that erotic love is all there is. As a married mare I understand that it’s the most fulfilling relationship possible, a closeness that cannot be intruded on by others, but the other loves are not only important, but provide something plain romance cannot. An obsession with it isn’t healthy, and yet here we are where so many are so obsessed they’re replacing it with a pale shadow…”

Allure nodded. “You said there were four?”

“The third is reverential love – the kind Rev feels for her god, or how many people feel about Celestia – even more now that she’s gone. A deep, unwavering connection of faith, understanding. A love by which people define their entire lives. It is the strongest of the forms, but also the hardest to pin down. And then there’s the love I think you’ll appreciate – familial.”

Allure looked at the girl.

“Allure thought of Renee, a big smile coming to her face. “…Yeah. You’re right.”

Cadence gestured toward the girl. “In that case… Take this girl as your own, Allure. Fate has
dropped her on your doorstep. Show her the power of familial love.”

Allure’s expression became serious. “I will, Cadence.”

“Glad to hear it,” Cadence said. “Now, I think your girl is very interested in the game Frigid is playing with. How about we call him over?”

Allure noticed that the girl was staring at Frigid’s game across the room in curiosity. “Yeah. Hey, Frigid. Come over here would you? Bring your game.”

Frigid looked up and nodded, bringing the handheld over. The girl leaned to take a look at the screen. Frigid began to explain what the game was all about and how it worked.

Cadence and Allure smiled. “And she already has a friend,” Allure said. “A good start for her.”

Cadence nodded, saying nothing.

Thrackerzod and the rest returned with far too much food and desserts. “IT IS PARTY TIME!” Bot decreed.

The girl flinched – but quickly decided being afraid wasn’t worth it. There was too much food. She rushed and began to dig in.

Frigid glanced at his mother with a questioning expression.

“Go ahead. Eat as much as you want. Today only,” Cadence said with a playful smile.

“Thanks mom!” Frigid said, running off.

The girl stopped eating for a moment. She turned to look at Allure. “…Mom?”

“…Yes. If you want,” Allure said, beaming.

The girl smiled for the first time. “…Mom.”

Allure couldn’t stop herself. Tears started rolling down her cheeks.

Cadence put a hoof around her. “It’s going to be quite a journey for you, Allure.”

“I… I know.”

“You’ll do great.”

“…Thank you.”

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Renee and Daniel looked from Nova to Sunburst. The latter two of them were blushing furiously.

“Dears, calm down, it’s not like I’m going to disprove of your relationship,” Renee said, raising an eyebrow. “I am quite happy for you.”

“I sense a but,” Nova commented.

Daniel smirked. “Oh, there’s a but all right.”

“Yes. The ‘but’ is I can’t have this interfering with your work,” Renee said. “In Nova’s case that’s
no issue – it’s a rare mission where she’s gone more than a day. But Sunburst, you have to disappear for multiple days every week to survey universes. I’m just concerned you might start ‘skipping days’ to be with your marefriend.”

“I-I promise I won’t skip!”

Renee smirked. “Love can make you really, really stupid at times.” She glanced at Daniel.

“Let’s not go there right now,” Daniel said.

Renee fixed him with a knowing glance. “Fair. The point is, Sunburst, right now you’re certain you’ll be able to do your job effectively. And I believe that you believe that. But give it a month or so and you’ll start getting truly obsessive over each other. Daniel and I were lucky – we got to be obsessive and work together a lot of the time. There were a lot of laws written together.”

“It seemed to help, actually,” Daniel said. “Two people who got each other bouncing ideas back and forth until… Well I was going to say perfection but that’s a little arrogant.”

“Go ahead and say perfection. It’s the perfect word.”

“Please tell me we’re not going to turn into this,” Nova gestured at the two of them.

“It’s inevitable!” Renee decreed.

“Greeeeeat…”

“So what are you going to do?” Sunburst asked.

“Oh, nothing. Yet.” Renee grinned evilly. “I just want you to know the moment you start skipping out I’ll start initiating punishments. On both of you. If you remember, I have the power to choose where you go on your missions. I can get creative.”

“Ah. I see,” Sunburst shifted awkwardly.

“Otherwise I hope you two enjoy each other!” Renee chuckled.

“Just remember to beware the boss,” Daniel added.

“Beware the boss… I rather like that.”

Nova facehooved. “…Thanks Renee.”

“Don’t mention it! Now shoo, I’m sure you have work to do.”

“Actually, our teams are waiting outside to surprise us with a party,” Nova said. “Pinkie and Sunny have joined forces. There is no escape.”

Renee smirked. “Well, if I get a break I might drop in. You best not keep them waiting any longer, you know how Pinkie is with waiting.”

Nova laughed uneasily. “Yeah…”

“S-surprise party?” Sunburst finally registered.

Nova pecked him on the cheek. “Just go with it.” She levitated him out the door first, right into the blast zone of a party cannon.
“AUGH!” He screamed.

“…They knew,” Sunny said, looking to Pinkie. “I thought this was supposed to be a surprise.”

Pinkie shrugged. “Eh, at least one of them was surprised. …CONGRATULATIONS YOU TWO!” She pulled them into a big hug and entered one of her ‘I’m so happy for my friends’ rants that probably wouldn’t end for a couple minutes. The door closed, cutting off the sound of party.

Daniel scratched Renee behind the ear. “You want to go out there?”

“Mmm, yes… How many people are waiting for us today?”

“Not many. We ha- oh. A request from Allure just came in. Says she has a surprise for you.”

“Oh now this I have to see,” Renee said. “Beam her in!”

Allure appeared in a blue teleport effect. “Guess what Renee?”

“What?”

Allure stepped to the side, revealing a human girl in a soft black dress. “Renee, this is Minna. Your niece.”

“…My niece.”

“Your niece.”

Minna smiled awkwardly. “…Hi, Renee.” Her voice was quiet and slightly raspy, but also absolutely precious.

“Aren’t you the most adorable thing in the world!” Renee shouted, rushing toward Minna and swooping her into a hug. To her credit, Minna only flinched slightly. “I am going to spoil you rotten. Renee and Minna, out on the town, enjoying the finer things in life!”

“O…kay…” Minna said, struggling against Renee’s hooves.

Renee smiled, putting Minna down. “Oh, I’m sorry if I startled you, dear. I was excited. See, Daniel and I don’t have any children – we’re a bit too busy, unfortunately. But you are just the perfect little thing.”

“…Will there be ice cream?”

“Yes, there will be ice cream.”

Minna grinned. “Yay.”

“Stars, you sound like Flutterfree back in the day… That’s a compliment. Oh, say hi to your uncle Daniel.”

Minna looked up at Daniel. “…Hi.”

Daniel kneeled down and smiled. “Hello, Minna. What do you like?”

Minna pointed at Allure.

“So precious…” Renee said, holding a hoof to her heart. “Allure, where did you find her?”
“In a bush. Scratched, hurt, and scared,” Allure said, nuzzling her. “She’s from an unknown universe. She’s staying with me. At first… I thought I would take her home when we found it.”

Minna clutched Allure’s leg.

“I doubt she’ll want to go when you find her home,” Renee said, beaming.

Allure nodded. “From what little I’ve gotten from her, it wasn’t a nice place.”

“Allure, look at you. So… Oh, so grown up.”

“Renee…”

“Shh. You’re always my little sister.”

Allure smiled. “Yeah… Yeah I am.”

“Daniel, cancel our dinner tonight. We’re going to spend some time with our niece. Get to know her a little better.”

Daniel nodded. “That sound good, Minna?”

Minna beamed. “Yep!”

“There also happens to be a party right outside – would you like to see that?” Renee asked. “It’ll be a little loud.”

“…I’ll try it,” Minna said, smiling innocently.

“Right through this door~!” Renee said in a sing-song voice, walking toward the door.

Pinkie opened it. “Hi! Come on in! All are welcome!” She shoved Allure, Renee, and Daniel through before they could react. She paused a moment to look at Minna.

“That’s quite the fire you have in those eyes, Minna,” Pinkie said, messing up her hair with a hoof. “You’ll have to watch that as you get older.”

Minna looked at her in confusion.

Pinkie looked at her with a serious expression. “You’re a special girl, don’t forget that. Be careful. … I’m sorry.” The bouncy smile returned. “Now it’s time to introduce you to cake!”

Minna nodded. “…Sure!”

They left to enjoy the party.
Avatar Corea

The scene: the Fire Nation’s Capital City, one of the private royal arenas. A simple square made of stone flattened to perfection and covered in a layer of practice mat material – firm, but forgiving enough not to break bones when one fell on it. Black metallic buildings with fires atop them rose around the arena, a tribute to old Fire Nation architecture.

The people: a filly, roughly twelve years of age standing on her hind hooves, as of yet without a cutie mark. Her coat was orange, her eyes green, and her mane a soft blue. Her opponent, the large firebending master Iroh. He may have been tubby and old, but that was no reason to underestimate him. He had figured out how to adapt firebending to the quadruped form, after all.

The action: the filly surrounded in a burst of fire, yelling in rage against the onslaught of flames coming from Iroh’s finger.

“Corea, focus less on your rage and more on your passion!”

“Stop helping me during the exam, Iroh!” Corea blurted. “I know!”

“And yet all you’re doing is brazenly deflecting my fire. Passion Corea, passion.”

“YOU CAN DO IT!” Corea’s aunt, Apple Bloom, called from the observation lounge. Unlike Allure, who had retained her small physique well into adulthood, Apple Bloom had grown to be taller than her sister and had become decidedly muscular for a mare. “GIVE HIM THE OL’ ONE-TWO!”

“That’s meaningless,” the only other person in the audience, Corona, said. “If she remembers her training it won’t be hard to land a hit on Iroh.”

“Ah’m bein’ supportive,” Apple Bloom huffed.

Corona smirked. “Then keep doin’ what you’re doin’.”

“GET HIM COREA!”

“Planning on it!” Corea shouted back, a smile on her face. She took in a deep breath – she was going to have to use just firebending to land a hit on Iroh. However, she remembered the rest of her training…

Water is of submission…

Earth is of strength…

Fire is of passion…

Magic is of mind…

She leaped into the air, out of the rush of Iroh’s fire.

Iroh looked disappointed – he clearly thought he had her, and that she wasn’t going to pass today.

The old man’s going to be in for a surprise. She angled her front hooves like she was going to hit
Iroh with a burst of flame. He reacted as he was supposed to, angling his arm for a retaliation strike Corea would not be able to deflect in her current position.

“COREA!” Apple Bloom shouted.

Corona smirked. “She’s got a plan.”

Iroh realized this the same instant Corona did, but it was a bit too late for him; he was already committed to his attack. “Clever girl.” He purposely put less energy into the flame than he was planning so as to prepare himself for whatever she was going to do.

She did shoot fire with her front hooves – but she also used her hind legs to create fire as well, shooting her under Iroh’s new jet of fire. She landed on the ground right in front of him and swirled around in a tornado of flame. “Gotcha!”

Iroh used his bending to divert the tornado, the complex motions far beyond something Corea could comprehend in her current state. “Not quite.”

Corea didn’t let this surprise her. She opted to leap toward him physically instead of with fire, swirling her entire body around in a quick arc motion. Iroh had been prepared to deal with an attack of flame – not a hoof to the leg. He went down, hitting the ground hard. He let out a yowl of pain.

“Oh, Iroh!” Corea said, hoof to her mouth. “Did I go too far?”

“Not at… All.” Iroh grunted. Corona teleported herself and Apple Bloom to him. The earth pony mare reached into her many-layered pink bow and took out a health potion ‘grenade’. She threw it at Iroh, covering him in healing magic juices.

“There you go, good as new!”

Iroh sat up, stretching his back. “I’m getting too old for this…”

“News to absolutely nobody,” Corona said, helping him up. “So, think she passed?”

“She did get me down.”

“It wasn’t with firebending though, it was with her wit,” Corona pointed out. “Great for an Avatar, but does it really prove her mastery of the firebending basics?”

“She was holding back my flame for a full minute there and pulled some rather advanced tricks,” Iroh said. “I think she passed.”

Corona smirked. “Well then… Corea, consider it official. You’ve mastered the firebending basics. Three out of four.”

“Five,” Apple Bloom reminded her. “Five.”

Corea ignored Apple Bloom. She just squeed. “I’m so close to becoming the full Avatar! Eeeeeeeeee! All that’s left is air and BAM!”

“Ah’m chopped liver, apparently,” Apple Bloom muttered.

“Oh, magic’s important too,” Corea admitted, punching the air and letting out a few pathetic magical sparks from her hooves. “But it’s not part of being the Avatar!”

Iroh looked to Corona. “I remember when I was afraid she wouldn’t want to be the Avatar.”
Corona chuckled. “Oh, the things we used to worry about.”

“Such needless fretting over silly trivial things,” Iroh said, nostalgia on his face.

Corea looked at her aunt. “Aunt AB? What are they going on about?”

Apple Bloom shrugged. “Somethin’ about fate or some other nonsense.”

“…Cool, cool.”

Corona rolled her eyes. She kneeled down and put a hand on Corea’s shoulder. “There’s still much you can learn about the art of firebending – and earthbending, and waterbending – and I hope that as you grow you continue to sharpen your abilities. Don’t get too cocky, most firebenders who put any serious effort into their craft are still better than you.”

Corea nodded. “Got it.”

Corona smiled. “But don’t forget to have fun, okay?”

“I won’t! You were a great teacher, Corona! The best!”

Iroh blinked. “Hrm… How should I take that…?”

“Uh…” Corea looked around nervously. “Agree that you trained someone better than you?”

Corona laughed. “Well, that’s certainly true.”

“Wonder what Toph and Katara would say about it…” Iroh mused.

“NEVER TELL TOPH I SAID ANYONE WAS BETTER THAN HER!” Corea shouted. “I’M TOO YOUNG TO DIE!”

Iroh chuckled. “It will be our little secret.”

Corea let out a sigh of relief. “Thanks…” She returned her expression to one of excitement. “So, when do I get to start learning air, huh, huh?”

“As soon as you wish,” Iroh said.

“Then let’s go now!”

Apple Bloom blinked. “…Don’t you want a break? You’ve earned it.”

“NOPE!” Corea said, rubbing her hooves together. “Ever since I read that article on plasma I’ve been wondering if I can get air to ignite like that using a combination technique…”

Apple Bloom shivered. “Combination techniques… Ah’ve unleashed a monster.”

“The mud golems were cool. …I wonder if air will be anything like my steam…”

“…I think I created this monster,” Corona said, smiling awkwardly. “Science… It made her think too much.”

“We are all to blame for this creative bundle of apocalyptic potential,” Iroh said with a smirk. “It’s time she learns her fourth element.”

“Y’all never give her time to learn the art of magic,” Apple Bloom muttered. “Ah can only squeeze
Corea put a hoof around her aunt. “Hey, Aunt AB. After air, you’ll have me all to yourself. I can learn about the arts of sparky punching and potion making then. But I need to become the Avatar for this world first. It’s my destiny.”

Apple Bloom glanced at her cutie mark, reminded of a time long ago when she helped a much younger filly realize what being the Avatar meant. “Yeah… Yeah it is. Ah’ll wait. But expect quizzes on the trip.”

“I’ll take my leave then,” Corona said. “This has been quite the vacation, teaching you, but I’m sure Lady Rarity and the others are lost without my presence.” She winked. “Have fun with her.”

Iroh nodded. “As always.”

Corea turned to Iroh. “So. How am I going to learn airbending?”

Iroh’s expression saddened. “You only have one option. There is only one airbending master in all of the Elemental Nations. He’s not much older than you.”

“…Oh,” Corea said, remembering. “…Tenzin.”

“Yes. Tenzin. A man born out of the proper time…” Iroh said, looking to the distance. “I’ll charter an airship for Air Temple Island. Do whatever you can to prepare yourself for the meeting.”

“Tenzin…” Corea said, mulling the name over in her mouth. “Right…”

“Ah’m sure he’ll be fine,” Apple Bloom assured her. “Ah bet you have to have a lot of discipline to be an airbending master at sixteen.”

Corea nodded slowly, starting to wonder if she should have gone with magic before air…

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“TODAY’S MISSION!” Pinkie declared, throwing a data pad on a table in the entrance hall of Renee’s Crystal Castle. “GO HERE.”

“Unknown dimensional coordinates V-5oi6,” Flutterfree echoed. “Confirmed safe. Of interest because of its location outside of any Sphere or the Strands, symbolized by a V at the start of the coordinate system.” Flutterfree narrowed her eyes. “You know, sometimes I wish Nanoha would just tell us what the letters meant.”

“That’s part of the fun,” Vriska said.

“You know, just tell us,” Flutterfree begged. “What does the V mean?”

“I’ll let you know if we don’t find out while we’re there,” Vriska said, smirking. “But I’m going to love seeing you try to guess before that.”

“Yare yare daze…” Jotaro said.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Pinkie asked. “Let’s go~!”

“…Yeah. Let’s go,” Nova said, halfheartedly.

Flutterfree sighed. “Nova, what’s wrong?”

~ ~
“Nothing at all!”

Jotaro put his head into his hands, saying nothing because he felt it was too soon to start repeating himself.

Nova sighed. “Okay, yeah, something’s bothering me. But it can wait until after today’s mission.”

“Nova, we’re more than willing to put the mission off for a day to help you,” Flutterfree said.

Vriska gave her the thumbs up. “Yeah, totally. We can always do it tomorrow. Nothing will change about unknown universe V-5oi6.”

“…Maybe not. But…”

“Just tell us,” Flutterfree said. “Please.”

“Actually she’s right,” Pinkie said, jumping to Nova’s aid. “We should probably do this after today’s mission.”

“…Seriously!?” Vriska blurted. “That was… not what I was expecting.”

“Normally I’d be all about getting her to talk about her feelings and problems sooner rather than later, but today is going to be a special day,” Pinkie said, pointing at the coordinates. “I know it. Plus, it’d be better if she could gather everyone together at once later.”

Nova nodded slowly. “You already know, as always.”

Pinkie put a hoof on her. “Yeah. I can tell you I’ll be fine with everything. Rest easy there.”

“That’s a little weight off my chest,” Nova admitted.

“All this has done is made all of us curious,” Jotaro pointed out.

“And a little worried…” Flutterfree added.

“Just wait a few hours, yeesh,” Nova asked, sweating. “You can do that, right?”

“Yep!” Pinkie said. “Come on, let’s dial a new universe and have a landmark day!”

“This better not be another Zhui,” Vriska muttered.

“…Not that kind of landmark,” Pinkie said. “Something… else.” Pinkie pulled out her dimensional device and entered the new coordinates.

The universe they appeared in was certainly a unique one. They appeared on top of a floating island made entirely of blue crystals. The part they were on top of was so smooth as to be like ice, but other parts were covered with jagged crystalline growths so uneven it would have been impossible to walk over them. The island floated among many other islands similar to it, all oriented with the same ‘up’ and ‘down’, even though no bottom or top could be made out. As far as they were concerned, the islands floated alone amongst a black backdrop filled with brightly colored stars.

The portal closed behind them. Vriska’s jaw dropped. “No fucking way…”

“Huh? You know this place?” Flutterfree asked.

“Know this place?! Know this place!? This is the Void! The universe I operated out of with
Twilence and the rest of them!” She let out a big laugh. “I never thought I’d see this place again!”

“…You don’t talk much about your past, care to elaborate?” Nova prodded.

“Right, you know I was part of a group before you guys, right? Twilence, Rarity, Mite, and Creek. Well… This was our Hub. This… Void connected to so many different worlds.”

“Doesn’t seem very voidlike,” Jotaro pointed out. “It’s filled with… stuff.”

“Over the eons tons of junk and such has been sucked into the Void. But man, it looks just the same as when I left it! I wonder if Empy is still in charge!”

“Empy?”

“The Empress of the Void,” Vriska said. “She’s a Twilight. The being currently in control of the ancient ‘machinery’ that keeps the Void together. Or, she is as far as I know, I suppose it could have changed hands since I’ve been gone…”

“You’ll be glad to know it hasn’t,” a Twilight’s voice said. A purple alicorn larger than Cosmo landed on their crystal island gracefully. Her mane was a bright mixture of purple sparks and magical waves near her scalp, but as it flowed away into the air it vanished into blackness so deep that no discernable ends to the mane could be seen. A soft, dark aura surrounded her in a way that didn’t seem threatening, merely authoritative. Her wings were far larger than even Celestia’s, the purple pinions tipped with black color. “It’s good to see you again, Vriska.”

“Aaaaaay, Empy! How’s the family?”

“Twice as large as last time,” Empy answered. “Great-great-grandchildren have a habit of expanding beyond belief.”

“I’ll say.” Vriska smirked. “So, this is my current team…”

“Don’t listen to her, she’s not in charge,” Pinkie said with a chuckle. “Hi! I’m Pinkie Pie, but you already know that. I represent the Class 3 Society Merodi Universalis. This is Nova, Flutterfree, and Jotaro. We are the primary team for first contact and exploration!”

“And I am simply Empress Twilight Sparkle,” she said with a warm, motherly smile. “Come, any friends of Vriska’s are friends of mine. Welcome to the The Void. Class 2, since that scale seems to mean something to you.”

“You’ve upgraded,” Vriska observed.

“Thanks in no small part to you.” With a wave of her wing, Empy created a spherical portal to a much brighter, greener place. “Come, I’m sure we have much to discuss about our respective realms and old friends to catch up with.” She led them into the sphere, leaving the crystal islands once again alone in the Void’s empty space.

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Apple Bloom, Iroh, and Corea took one of the Fire Nation’s airships to Republic City. In the past, the journey would have taken a few hours – but the airships had what basically amounted to controllable rocket engines strapped to their backs now, so it would take less than an hour. They moved so fast the sun was moving backward across the sky.

Apple Bloom set a pot filled with soil in front of Corea. “Time for a test.”
Corea groaned. “Uuuugh, what is it now?”

“Make me a growth potion.” Apple Bloom set a glass on the ground, already filled with the proper ingredients for the growth potion. All it needed was an enchantment.

Corea stared at the green liquid. “Right…” She waved her hooves over it, trying to get a feel for the natural magic already around the ingredients. She just needed to get them to infuse with her own magic. She wasn’t anywhere near skilled enough to do it the way Apple Bloom did – by simply pushing her own internal magic through her hooves with a thought – Corea was the Avatar, she had to move her internal energy to get anything accomplished. She pulled her hoof back, drawing some of the magic within the ingredients back with it. She let out a breath and pushed forward, stopping just short of shattering the potion with a punch. Small sparks of magic energy flew off her hoof, and the ingredients changed color to a golden yellow.

“Well, you got it to react, that’s something,” Apple Bloom said. “Let’s see if it worked.”

“Please don’t be another dying dandelion,” Corea muttered, pouring a drop of the potion on in the soil. A small snapdragon flower appeared – though the flower was green and the stalk was blue.

“…Ah suppose that’s technically a growth potion,” Apple Bloom mused.

“Still a fail though.”

“Yeah.”

Corea grunted. “Why’s it so difficult?”

“Aang only really figured out how to do it in relation to his spirit-bending,” Apple Bloom reminded her. “You have no talent buried in Raava for you to tap into for this.”

“I wish there were teachers for spirit-bending…”

Apple Bloom shrugged. “I think that rests on you discovering the Avatar State and controlling it.”

Corea winced – reminded of the one part about her she feared.

“Hey, after you finish your basic training, there are gurus who know how to help you with that.” Apple Bloom smiled. “You don’t have to worry.”

“What if I’m called to save the world from some crazy threat before then?”

“You have something Aang didn’t,” Iroh said. “A lot of powerful friends who could take the burden if you are unable.” He smiled. “You will never have to stand alone if you don’t want to.”

Corea looked at Iroh – and smiled. “That’s… Right. Thanks! I was getting worried there for a second. Again.” She looked at her blank flank. “I wonder if that’s what it’ll be… The Avatar state I mean, not never standing alone.”

Apple Bloom shrugged. “Ah’m almost positive it’ll be somethin’ about masterin’ the elements or the Avatar itself. Ah wouldn’t expect it anytime soon though, you’re still young.”

Corea nodded with a smile. “Hey, at least I know what it’s probably gonna be! Saves a lot of the suspense!”

“Ah wish more fillies had that unending positive attitude of yours.”
“We’re there, by the way,” Iroh said, standing up. Corea ran to the window to get a good look at the metropolis that was Republic City, the most advanced city on the entire planet, of a similar vein to Ponyville in how advanced it was and how quickly it had grown. The entire shoreline of the bay was lined with buildings of every shape and size, and boats continually moved in and out of the tremendous harbor. Their goal was a small island in the middle of the bay.

It only had a handful of structures on it – a few houses, some gardens, and a large temple that looked a lot like a lighthouse. The airship touched down on an landing area, dropping a docking ramp onto the flat marble ground.

Iroh stepped off first, breathing in the scent of sea air. “Ah… Such pure energy in this place.”

A teenage human walked up to him. He wore yellow and orange airbender garb, and his body had the blue air tattoos signifying an airbending master. His head was shaved, and his young chin was attempting to grow a beard and failing for the most part. Behind him were a handful of men and women in similar robes, but without the tattoos.

The airbending master bowed. “Iroh, this is a pleasant surprise.”

Iroh bowed in return. “It is good to see you so well, Tenzin.”

“What brings you to Air Temple Island?”

Iroh stepped to the side, revealing Corea. “The Avatar has completed her firebending basics training. Only one element remains. As the only airbending master of Merodi Universalis, we have come to you for her training.”

Tenzin took one look at Corea. His serene expression soured into one of contempt. “No,” he said, turning and storming off toward the temple proper.

One of his followers, a teenage girl, sighed. “I’ll go talk to him.”

“You don’t need to do that, Pema,” Iroh said, furrowing his brow. “We can deal with him.”

“Wait, Pema?” The gears turned in Corea’s head. “But that means…”

“Tenzin doesn’t want any spoilers, Corea, so watch what you say.”

“Oh. Sorry.” Corea smiled nervously at Pema. “Pretend I don’t know anything.”

She blinked. “…Sure.”

“Anyway, Iroh, can I try to talk to him first?”

Iroh chuckled. “By all means, see if you can get through to him.”

“Challenge accepted,” Corea said, tapping her hooves together. She gulped and set off toward the temple.

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It took Flutterfree a few moments to register that the green pasture they were in was still part of the Void universe. Despite the blue sky, she couldn’t actually see a sun anywhere, and was still able to make out the multicolored stars in the distance.

The pasture was clearly a nexus for the Empress’ civilization – the spherical portals appeared and
disappeared left and right. There was not a moment where a portal wasn’t active in one way or another. Numerous structures existed to aid the travelers, constructed of silvery metal and magic crystals that were usually blue. The buildings rarely had any sharp edges, instead opting for flowing, almost natural curvy forms. They sparked with light, some activating portals, while others simply kept track of everything that happened. In the center of the field, there was a tall tower made entirely of crystal that may have once been a version of Equis Vitis’ Castle of Friendship.

Humans were by far the most common being to pass through the area, but there were more than a few ponies with the third most common race being a conglomeration of magical crystals and mechanical parts.

“What do you call this place?” Nova asked.

“Tangleglade,” Empy answered.

“I call it the Tanglade,” Vriska huffed. “I was sure that was going to catch on.”

“It didn’t.”

“That’s Rarity’s fault, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Yes it is.”

“She never could get over that…” Vriska said, rolling her eyes.

“What are those crystal beings?” Jotaro asked.

“Crystalline Ones or Fal’cie, depending on the universe you visit,” Empy said. “They are a staple of almost every universe the Void is in contact with, though rarely are they a very populous race. They are beings made of minerals and magic, some with the power to hold entire universes together, while others are nothing more than a particularly shiny unicorn.”

“Maud would absolutely love them,” Pinkie said. “Actually made of rocks! I mean, the Gems are just computer crystals infused with magic, their bodies aren’t rocks!”

Empy chuckled. “Mauds do tend to like them. Pony worlds may be comparatively rare within the Void, but enough exist that I’ve seen many Mauds do many things.”

“Lots of worlds seem to exist ‘within the Void’,” Nova commented. “What exactly does that mean?”

Vriska chuckled. “This’ll be fun.”

Empy teleported them to the base of her castle. “This may look like a castle, but it is really the control seat of the Void.” She teleported them to the top, which was a flat plane of crystal with a single raised ‘podium’ in the middle. Empy put her hooves on it and closed her eyes, tapping into the Void’s energies. Dozens of spheres appeared in the air around them, direct portals to different universes. “And these are all different worlds ‘within the Void’. It would be more accurate to say they are all different universes the Void has direct connections to, but even that doesn’t fully state what the Void is.”

“Then tell us, what is the Void?” Flutterfree asked.

“It is an ancient construct,” Empy explained. “We used to think it was built by Starswirl, then someone named Enuo, and then we realized there were multiple versions of all of them. What we came to realize was that all those who claimed they ‘built’ the Void just created different consoles by
which to control it, and all these consoles consolidated themselves into one.” She gestured at the magical podium in front of her. “The Void had already existed, created an unimaginable amount of time in the past. We believe it was created as a navigation tool – because what the Void does is connect many universes together that shouldn’t naturally be connected, tying together not just their physical natures, but also their fates.”

“…Ka?” Jotaro asked.

“As it turns out, it is a ka-manipulating structure,” Empy admitted. “It makes all universes ‘within’ the connections share a single thread of fate. Almost every universe will have crystals, a similar magic system, etcetera. Sometimes these worlds are pure alternates, with the same people in the same roles doing slightly different things. But a much more common phenomenon is one we have called ‘reimagining’.” She pointed at two different spheres. “These two worlds couldn’t be more different. One is a standard fantasy-type world with magic, dragons, and high adventure, while this other one has spaceships, artificial gods, and energy weapons. And yet, both of them not only have a similar magic system within them, but the spells have the same names. Most of the people within each world are vastly different, but there’s this one man named Cid in both places. The themes, as they were, seem to stay the same, but everything else is a tossup.”

“Wow, that’s… A bit bizarre,” Nova commented.

“Oh, it gets more complicated.” Vriska chuckled. “The Void doesn’t connect to all universes in this section of the multiverse we’re in. Guess what the V actually stands for?”

“I thought you were-“

“Changed my mind, rule of funny.” Vriska held up her hand and Pinkie hoofbumped it. “C’mon, guess.”

“…It doesn’t mean Void…?”

“It kinda does,” Vriska said with a laugh. “The Void universes exist within The Great Void of the multiverse.”

“Yare yare daze…” Jotaro muttered. “That’s not confusing at all.”

“Learn your Voids! The Void is just a collection of universes that share a fate through an ancient construct! The Great Void is a section of the multiverse between the E and Q-Spheres that is relatively ‘south’ of the Strands where, rather than having a million connections for every little thing, most universes maybe have five active connections to other universes.”

“I can see that making it a mess to navigate,” Nova observed.

“The areas of The Great Void not within my Void are nearly impossible to cross,” Empy agreed. “It takes hundreds of translations to get to any specific universe. It’s a sparse web with a lot fewer universes than normal – hence why they call it the Great Void.”

“It’s also the most direct way to the ‘southern sphere’ you’re so curious about,” Vriska said with a grin. “Good luck!”

“The Unrealities?”

“Empy, I’m trying to be mysterious!”

“Oh.” Empy raised an eyebrow. “Why? The Unrealities aren’t worth anything to them, or us.”
Empy turned to Pinkie. “Don’t waste your time trying to find the fourth sphere. The Unrealities are the collection of universes that drift further and further away from the standard model of physics, so far that, eventually, most eldritch deities can’t even survive without assistance of some sort. It’s not even a proper sphere, just a trailing-off connection of universes that keeps spiraling further and further away from anything sensical.”

“…Ah,” Pinkie said. “That makes sense.”

Vriska folded her arms. “You’re no fun, Empy.”

Flutterfree decided that, now that someone was talking, it was time to take advantage of it. “What can you tell us about the structure of the entire multiverse?”

“You’re already aware of the three Spheres right?”

Flutterfree nodded.

“That’s basically it. The areas of the multiverse that aren’t the Unrealities are all just ‘between’ locations, combinations of one or the other. All three form the Strands, E and Q form the Great Void, E and D form the Cosmic Heavens, while D and Q form what is known as Outer Existence. The Cosmic Heavens hold a lot of afterlife universes, while Outer Existence is the source of many worlds’ magic. These are, of course, just generalizations – there is near infinite variety within each location. There’s a few other location names that fly around – usually trying to classify the edges of the multiverse, but I believe that’s an exercise in futility.”

“You’re not a Class 1,” Vriska pointed out.

“No, I’m not. But the Void is nothing to scoff at. …Though admittedly, beyond the worlds within the Void itself, our society is rather weak. The absolute control we have over space and portals within our domain cannot extend to other worlds without calculated effort. The Void never grows unless a new universe is created within its folds, and let’s just say creating a universe is not the easiest thing in the world.”

The implication that they could create a universe, if they wanted to, did not go unnoticed by the primary team.

“Normally I wouldn’t be telling you all this,” Empy said. “But you’re Vriska’s friend – and most of her friends are friends of mine.”

“Ouch,” Vriska said, rubbing the back of her head. “Hey, I may have brought some bad company in from time to time, but I admitted they were fuckers later!”

Empy raised an eyebrow.

“…Most of the time.”

“Just quit before you dig yourself deeper into this hole,” Pinkie suggested.

Vriska grunted, but didn’t say anything further.

“We’ll have to contact Evening,” Nova said. “She’ll want to forge more official relations a- hold on. What’s going on in that sphere over there?”
Everyone turned to look at a sphere currently connected to a world with a large metropolitan city. A crystal dragon the size of a small mountain was in pursuit of two individuals – a tall humanoid in orange armor with a halberd, and a white cyborg-alicorn with a red and black mane.

“LOOK, A VOID SPHERE!” Blackjack shouted. “WE’RE HOME FREE!”

“I… don’t think… I can run that far…” Gilgamesh wheezed.

“You don’t have to!” Blackjack grabbed onto him with her magic and teleported through the sphere, appearing in the midst of Empy and the Merodi.

“CLOSE IT CLOSE IT!” Gilgamesh shouted.

Empy didn’t even need to be told – she had already dispelled all the portals.

“Must be nice to have complete control,” Gilgamesh muttered.

“It is,” Empy asserted. “Though I do admit this is inconvenient, you have interrupted quite the meeting.”

Flutterfree blinked. “…Blackjack!?”

“…Fuck,” Blackjack said, smiling nervously. “Heeeeeeey there!”

“Don’t be scared!” Flutterfree insisted. “We’re not going to hurt you!”

“Speak for yourself,” Vriska muttered, clenching her fist.

Pinkie put her hooves on her hips and shook her head at Vriska. “I know she hurt you, but she ended up saving us.”

“I can still punch her in the face for being an asshole.”

“I’d take the punch,” Blackjack said, raising a hoof. “List of things I deserve includes a punch to the face.”

Vriska obliged before anything else could be said.

“…Man, you pack a real doozy,” Blackjack muttered, standing back up. “Anyway, uh… We’ll leave you to all this politics stuff you’re doing. We were never here…”

“Go to see Twilence then?” Gilgamesh asked Blackjack.

“Yeah. Wonder if she has anything else for us…”

Vriska stared at the two of them in disbelief. “Twilence… is here?”

The two nodded. “Uh… Yeah. You know her?”

Empy nodded. “Vriska was part of her original team.”

“…Woah,” Blackjack said. “You’re old.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Vriska muttered. “I want to see her.”

Empy nodded. “Of course – I was planning on doing this after the meeting, but old friends must see each other, I understand.” She smiled knowingly.
“I’ll call Eve,” Pinkie said. “You can talk to her while we go visit the mysterious Twilence.”

“That will do wonderfully.”

Pinkie pulled out a phone and called Eve. Meanwhile, Gilgamesh used his own power over the Void – significantly less powerful than Empy’s – to create a spherical portal to a dark library. “She should be right through here.”

Vriska took in a deep breath – she clearly wasn’t sure if this meeting was going to go well or not. She stepped through the portal…

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Tenzin sat down in the air temple, feeling the currents of the atmosphere flowing through the room, the way they bounced off the marble columns and created a slight whirlwind effect only perceptible to the most attuned airbenders.

…Which was to say him and only him.

But, as usual, he put that out of his mind through meditation. He closed his eyes, controlled his breathing, and entered a state of serenity, detaching himself from the world and allowing his mind to drift in the freedom of the sky…

“Ohm…”

The sound of a female voice broke his concentration in an instant. With a grunt, he opened his eyes.

“Ohm…” Corea said next to him, her body in its own meditation position with the back legs splayed and the front hooves pressed together. “Ohm…”

Tenzin jumped up. “What are you doing here!?”

“Meditating, clearly. Be quiet, you're interrupting my focus.” She took a breath. “Ohm…”

“Why!?”

“Learning through osmosis,” Corea said with a smile.

Tenzin stormed out of the air temple without another word. He marched down the marble stairs to the house he called his own, slamming his front door behind him.

He was not going to deal with that filly today.

He would go meditate at his personal shrine. That would work. He walked to one of the sliding doors in his house that led to a balcony, one with a small spirit statue that conducted the wind excellently.

Corea was already there, smiling at him. “Come and join me, I’m sure the wind is great here. We can feel the currents of the breeze around each other!”

Tenzin closed the door, clenching his fist. She wouldn’t leave him alone… What was with her?

He went to the kitchen. Maybe a snack would help. He began to rummage through the cupboards, but nothing looked good to him – not even the pop rock cereal he had specially imported from Earth Stand. He loved that stuff.
I need to meditate and get this sour mood out of my head, he thought to himself, opening the last cupboard.

Corea was inside of it. She blew a gust of air at him with her hoof – a rather pitiful piece of airbending, but proof enough that she had the power inside her. “Teach me.”

“No,” Tenzin said, slamming the cupboard door in her face. He left the room in a huff. He marched out of his house and to one of the gardens where a handful of Flying Bison were sleeping. He was about to take position on his favorite of the bunch, Iggy, and begin meditating, but he saw Corea climbing onto Iggy’s back from a distance.

“Hey! Want to go for a fly?” Corea called.

Tenzin turned away.

“Maybe I can learn airbending from this bison! Ever think about that!?”

Something in Tenzin made him stop. “That’s how I learned, Korea.”

“…You’re saying it wrong. It’s not Core-ee-ah, it’s Core-ah. It’s a shortened version of Core Apple. Core Apple. Core-A. Corea.”

Tenzin stormed off again.

Corea sighed, rubbing Iggy’s fur. “So what about it, want to teach me the ways of air?”

The Flying Bison yawned and fell asleep.

“Of course not,” Corea said, stretching. “Time to go scare the bejeezus out of him again…”

Tenzin marched to the airbending training grounds. In hindsight, this was probably the worst place he could have gone. Corea wasn’t there to start, but she arrived soon after he did and started weaving in and out of the training poles. “I’m sure this would be a lot more helpful if I only had a little gust of air!”

Tenzin obliged, shoving as much air as he could into the training poles. They started rotating, their flat edges slapping Corea around like a ragdoll. She flew out of them and landed flat on her back. “Ow…”

Tenzin began to walk off again.

“TENZIN! Train me!”

He didn’t respond, merely decided to go to the beach. He found her behind a tree. “Teach me.”

He went to a rocky outcropping. She popped out of a hole in the ground a few seconds later. “Teach me.”

He air blasted himself to the top of the lighthouse-like air temple. There was no way she could get up here…

He gawked at her – she was using a mixture of fire and water to generate steam beneath her hooves, creating a burst of air pressure that launched her onto the roof. She landed painfully, but still managed to let out another “teach me…”

“No,” Tenzin said, leaping off the air temple and gliding to the ground. Corea had to use fire to slow
her descent, which resulted in a faceplant into the ground.

She shook her head and turned to Tenzin. “Then at least tell me why not.”

Tenzin began to walk away.

“I’ll leave you alone if you do.”

Tenzin stopped walking away. Then he turned around, his eyes those of fury. “My only clear memory of my father is the Bloodbath.”

Corea didn’t flinch – she had asked, the best she could do was accept the answer.

“I was four, sitting in the audience when Siron, Six, and Flagg appeared. I saw the life drain from your predecessor’s eyes, far too early for an Avatar who wasn’t in a war. In one fell swoop, I was the only airbender in existence, and I had never been seriously taught the way of the Air Nomads. That memory haunts me, even to this day. It drove me to learn everything I could. I read all the airbending scrolls I could find, all the histories, all the books, everything my father had placed on this island in hopes of rebuilding the Air Nomads from nothing. It had fallen to me at the age of four.” He glared at her. “I had to learn from scrolls and sky bison. I had to prove to myself that I was an airbending master. I stand alone here, trying to build what my father had taken from him.”

He pointed at Corea. “And then I found out what was supposed to happen. *I wasn’t even supposed to have been born yet.* I was to be born nineteen years after the end of the hundred years war. Not ten. I was born at the perfect time to just barely remember my father. To remember him dying. This wasn’t supposed to happen this way, but I’m following my destiny just the same. I will rebuild the Air Nomads. But you… you are even more of a mistake than I am. At least I was supposed to exist. You never were, Corea. You stole that destiny from a girl in the water tribe. I won’t teach you because you have no right to be the Avatar.”

There were tears in Corea’s eyes. “…Okay.” She turned and walked away.

Tenzin walked back into the Air Temple, finally alone.

He found that he couldn’t meditate.

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Pinkie, Vriska, Nova, Flutterfree, and Jotaro entered the dark library, Gilgamesh’s Void-sphere portal vanishing behind them. The library was a simple place – wooden bookshelves filled with books. There was a window that showed many brightly-colored stars of mostly purple and pink coloration. Otherwise, the only light came from dim amber crystals, with a brighter light source coming from a fair ways in front of them, behind another bookshelf.

Nova levitated one of the books to her face, opening it. “This is handwritten.”

“She did always prefer quills and pens to typewriters or computers,” Vriska said. “I think most of these books are hers, or ones she’s involved in.”

“That’s right, she’s a Prophet,” Flutterfree said, remembering a conversation they’d had some time ago. “A very powerful and Aware one too, right?”

Vriska nodded. “She’s even more of a source of enigmas than Pinkie is.” She walked toward the brighter light source, turning a corner to bring it into her view. It was a simple scene – a desk with a single book open on it, and numerous pens littered around. A single gas lamp hung from the back
wall, lighting everything well enough to read comfortably, but not enough to feel harsh.

I sat at this desk, scribbling word after word into the book. When I reached the end of my paragraph, I closed the book and fixed Vriska with a smile. “Hello, Vriska. …It’s been a while.”

“Yeah, it has,” Vriska said, unsure of what exactly to say.

“Too long.” I said, getting up from my desk and walking up to her. I, despite my age, had never grown beyond the standard Twilight model, simply because I didn’t want to. I had to crane my neck to meet her eyes. “You don’t have to be sorry for that day.”

Vriska rubbed the back of her head. “Going right to that, are we?”

I shrugged. “Not if you don’t want to. I could talk to your friends first.” I smiled at the other four members of her team. “Hello. You don’t know me, but I know you. I know you very well.”

“…Are you writing our story?” Nova asked.

I laughed at this. “Parts of it, but those are generally just the parts I’m involved in. I’m not your Prophet, and that’s good news for you and me both.” I looked into the distance. “We actually share the same Prophet. In some ways, I’m just a tool of his, a particularly bizarre plot device.”

“Nothing escapes ka,” Pinkie said.

“True, nothing does,” I agreed. “All Prophets are subject to the overall ebbs and tides of stories. Even those who write stories about the multiverse, as ours does, are not immune by any stretch of the imagination.” I shook my head. “But that’s not something we need to talk about now. I’m here to finally introduce myself to you. You’ve come along far enough that knowing about me isn’t really a cheat anymore.”

“Using you would be,” Pinkie pointed out.

“But what are the chances I’ll ever be around when you think you could use me?” I asked. “I’ll always know when you want to, and until my time really comes, I can always just conveniently vanish.”

“That always sounds like a copout,” Jotaro commented.

“It’s no different than what I was doing before you found out what ka was,” Pinkie pointed out. “I couldn’t tell you things. She knows more things than I do so the bar of stuff she can tell us is significantly higher.”

“It’s the highest the bar can be,” I admitted. “I was written with the purpose of having as complete an understanding of ka as is possible. I can see this story as it is being typed on a laptop on a version of Earth – though I do not know if it is an Earth in the same metatime as ours or not. I can also, at the same time, see many of the readers of this story – including every version and revision of it. Only the final version actually happens, but the reactions to all of them are available to me. I see comments across over three locations, and I see derivative works. I see outlines, plans, and I see things the Prophet doesn’t. An eternal paradox – I know things about the future even he doesn’t know yet!” I chuckled at this, reveling in the absurdity of my situation.

Flutterfree blinked. “…How do you manage?”

I sighed. “It is difficult, being able to see almost everything. I was introduced to the truth of the world rather jarringly, I almost went insane. …In some ways, I did.”
Vriska rolled her eyes. “You can say that again.”

I tapped the mechanical eye on my chest. “But I realized that I had been given a gift. Those readers, they helped set me on a path similar to the one you started on. But rather than creating a society, we just… explored. Explored and explored, using our gifts to change what we could… Sometimes it was a mistake. Sometimes entire worlds were destroyed.” I shook my head. “I’m not perfect. Even understanding has its failings.”

“And its drawbacks,” Pinkie pointed out.

“Yes… Yes it does. You know that more than most.” I put a hoof on her shoulder. “I wish I could be like you Pinkies and just smile in the face of it all. But we’re different.”

“It’s okay,” Pinkie said, pulling me into a hug.

“It’s not, but thanks,” I said, accepting the embrace. I pulled back, looking at the others.

“…I feel like I know you from somewhere,” Nova said, suddenly.

“You do,” I said. “I’ve been watching. You’re probably thinking of the time you saw me in the Static.”

“…Wow that was a long time ago…”

I chuckled, thinking of at least six reasons that wasn’t quite an accurate assessment.

“Why were you there?”

I tapped the eye on my chest again. “Most of the Eye of Rhyme was constructed there. It was by no means the only ingredient needed to create this device of Awareness, but it was one of the most important. Though if I’m being honest the real reason I was there was foreshadowing.”

“…You live your life by ka, huh?”

“The tropes of narrative,” I confirmed. “For instance, there were a few options for this meeting. I could be open and provide a conversation, but because that’s simple it would have to turn to drama eventually – which it will. The other options were for me to manipulate things from the sidelines and have you discover me at the end, offering some cheeky and rather mysterious explanations. Lastly I could have continued to be in the background – but frankly I’m sick and tired of being in the background. The time is coming where I can just be another character in this song. I’m really looking forward to that.”

“When will that be?”

“Spoilers!” I said with a playful smirk. “So many spoilers!”

“…Fun.”

I put my hoof on her. “Don’t worry, Nova. Everything will go fine.”

Nova caught my double meaning. “Clever.”

“Thank you,” I said, turning to Jotaro. “Yes, I can see Star Platinum flexing behind you. No, I don’t have a Stand. Yes, I knew you were testing me this entire time. No, I don’t hold it against you. Yes, I know you like it if you don’t have to actually say anything to have a conversation. You’re welcome.”
Jotaro smirked slightly.

“Also, stop doubting yourself so much. You’re a strong man and a good father. Be sure to pass on what you’ve learned to anyone who could use it.”

Jotaro nodded slowly.

I turned to Flutterfree last. “So, I actually don’t have much to say to you, sorry.”

Flutterfree blinked. “Really?”

I shrugged. “Yeah. You don’t have anything wrong in your life at the moment. And I don’t know of anything in the future I could help you prepare for.”

Flutterfree chuckled. “Something something I have no major flaws?”

“Something like that,” I admitted. “…Actually, I just thought of something. Don’t be afraid to disagree with Rev.”

“I know she’s not always right, Twilence.”

“There is a discontinuity between knowing and doing. You’re actually doing fine, but be aware of it.” I shrugged. “It might or might not be a problem, I’m not sure.”

“Thought you knew everything?”

“I just know lots of things. Not everything.”

“Yeah. …Know where Earth C is?”

I sighed. I pulled a purple cubic crystal out of my desk and created a spherical portal back to the Tangleglade. “Could you four excuse us? Vriska and I need to have a talk.”

“Gotcha,” Pinkie said, nodding. “Everybody out! Good luck Vriska!”

Soon, only Vriska and myself remained.

“…I could find it,” I said. “I now know things that wouldn’t even make it that hard.”

“And you’re not going to.”

“No. There are things that need to happen, Vriska. If you find Earth C, they won’t happen.” I held up a hoof. “And no, I’m not saying the rules are preventing me from interfering. They might be, but even if they are I happen to agree with them. I’m choosing not to help you find them.”

Vriska curled her fingers into a fist. “Fucking… Why do you always do this?”

“You know why.”

“Can you at least tell me if I find it or not?”

I looked right at her. “I can tell you that you’re right where you need to be.”

“That’s vague bullshit and you know it.”

“It has to be.”
Vriska put her hands in her pockets and leaned against a bookshelf. “…At least you’re honest about it. You’re always honest about it.”

“The Doctor’s not as bad of a person as you say he is.”

“Maybe I’ve just got a personal vendetta, ever think about that?”

“That’s exactly what it is.”

Vriska looked away. “Still can’t forgive him.”

“Not asking you to. He betrayed you.”

Vriska had no response to this.

“…We should talk about what happened after you left.”

“…Fuck, that’s not a tone of voice you use when you have good news.”

“Feel free to scream and yell at me for what I did,” I said. “After I told you to leave with your luck, I began writing a counter-narrative. I did manage to use a group of wandering heroes to stop Polymarchus and his sackcloth monsters. It was a game with complex plots and multiple Prophets intertwining to bring down the evil.” I looked Vriska in the eyes, my own watering. “Creek was killed in the process.”

Vriska put a hand to her mouth. “…I always thought…”

“She’d grow old, yeah. She didn’t. And it’s my fault. I wrote that story.”

“How could you sacrifice her!?”

“Polymarchus took her body!” I shouted. “I gave the heroes a way to… But they didn’t… And…” I looked to the ground, tears falling. “…I knew if I forced her alive everything would fall apart. I just… It was so long, but it was yesterday. I… I ruined it. I don’t even know where Mite is, I only see Rarity occasionally, and… And…”

Vriska pulled me into an aggressive hug. “Stop it,” she demanded.

“But I-”

Vriska slapped me. “STOP IT! You’ve been alone in this library for too long, letting yourself fall into a depressed spiral. I know you, Twilence.”

I stared at her, blinking. Then I shook my head. “I see… The drama has arrived.”

“You don’t get to cheapen this with your stupid meta-knowledge.”

I shook my head. “Yeah… Yeah you’re right. I’m sorry. I’m sorry for what I did. I’m sorry for tearing us apart there. I’m just… I failed, Vriska.”

“It wasn’t the first time and it won’t be the last. We’re fucking screwed-up people, Twilence.”

I nodded slowly. “…That’s one of the truest things you’ve ever said.”

“I’m a barrel of wisdom.”

She wiped her eyes. “I’m a fucking genius. Not as much as Creek was, but y’know.”

“Yeah. I know.” I sat down at my desk and looked at the words I had written recently. “…I’m not going anywhere, Vriska. If you ever want to talk… You’ll be able to find me here so long as nobody wants me to do anything.”

Vriska nodded slowly. “You sure you won’t be called away by ka?”

“Not for very long. I know what my fate is for the next little while. I’ll be here.”

“Good.”

~~~

Apple Bloom and Iroh were sitting in one of the many tables on Air Temple island set up in the middle of a bunch of trees, probably used mostly for having lunch in nature. The two of them were working together on a little project. Iroh was heating a glass potion bottle while Apple Bloom hovered her hooves over the exceptionally complicated brew, carefully watching the colors and temperature of the rainbow-mish-mash of magical power.

She didn’t shoot sparks from her hooves like Corea – she wasn’t able to bend magic from the air, she had to make do with her own. Which meant exceptionally careful movements of her hooves and precise thought patterns. High-level potion brewing was no picnic, but it was certainly rewarding since it was a form of enchantment that could be done at any time and never went stale. Well, so long as the actual ingredients within didn’t rot, and she usually kept her brews in air-tight containers.

She slapped her hooves together above the glass potion, forcing it into a brilliant golden color. “You can stop heating it now, Iroh.”

Iroh retracted his flame, examining the golden brew. “So what’s this going to do?”

“This, if Ah did it right, is a potion of spiritual connection, augmented to be trans-universal. It’ll let one person connect to any other person they wish for a short time, with both individuals experiencin’ what the other one experiences. It’s like a short-term meldin’ of consciousness.”

“…And why did you make it?”

“Because it’s unimaginably hard to do,” Apple Bloom said with a laugh. “It’s not like healing, or explosions, which can be done on the fly with the right ingredients and trainin’ – it needs focus, plannin’, and very very precise motions.” She lifted the potion. “Ah don’t really have a use for it. It’s also pretty dangerous and powerful, now that Ah think about it.”

“I may have a use for it down the line,” Iroh said, looking closely at it.

“…That’s right. The spirit world.”

“I’ve already been here longer than I was planning,” Iroh admitted, looking off into the distance. “I had actually thought I would go after Unification, if you could believe that.”

“Really?”

“But then Corea was born, and the world needed me again.” He looked at his old hands. “It was very hard to train her in firebending…”
“Ah know, that’s why Ah called Corona.”

Iroh nodded. “All this magic and medicine works wonders in keeping me running. I’m sure I’ll be able to live long enough to see Corea become a great Avatar for this world. But it won’t be long before I won’t be able to actually do any training… It may be that my last real fight was her graduation. I may be acknowledged as the strongest firebender alive, but one lucky hit from someone who has even the slightest idea what they’re doing…”

Apple Bloom looked at him sadly. “She still needs your wisdom, Iroh.”

“I’m not so selfish that I won’t let myself wear down,” Iroh said with a bitter chuckle. “I know. I’ll follow the path of Joseph Joestar, be old and frail but still full of fire. He knew how to live.”

Apple Bloom nodded.

“I think I have maybe ten years left here,” Iroh said.

“We have ways to access the Spirit World,” Apple Bloom said. “It doesn’t have to be goodbye.”

Iroh looked down sadly. “…I would rather the Spirit World remains a sacred world that none touch with human – or pony – civilization. I wish that it would remain separate, secluded, and the way it was meant to be.”

“…You sure?”

“There’s nothing for Merodi Universalis there,” Iroh asserted. “The strongest spirit has been sealed away since time immemorial, and their counterpart is the Avatar Spirit. As powerful as the Avatar Spirit is, it’s nothing compared even to a Star. Or Discord.”

Apple Bloom nodded. “You’ve told the Overheads, right?”

Iroh nodded. “The Spirit World has already been set aside as a nature preserve. Only those with religious obligations are allowed to do anything relating to it at all.” He looked at his hands again. “It will be a new life…”

“…Ah hope you find what you’re lookin’ for.”

Iroh nodded slowly. “I hope so too, young one.”

Corea walked into the clearing, wiping her face. “…Hey.”

“Didn’t go well?” Apple Bloom asked.

“No.” Corea said, taking a seat at the table. “…Iroh, can we just go to Elemental Eight? They have airbenders. They can teach me.”

“They can teach you the way of their airbending. Not only is ours different, but it relates directly to your Avatar Spirit,” Iroh said. “It has to be Tenzin.”

“He says I have no right to be the Avatar. That I was a mistake. I mean, I know he’s wrong but how do you get through that kind of block!” She let out a groan and rammed her face into the table.

Iroh sighed. “I’ll go have a talk with him.”

“What kind of talk?”
“I’ll tell him exactly what his father would think of his actions,” Iroh said with a grimace.

Corea winced. “…Ouch.”

“It will be a painful discussion, but he will agree to teach you.” Iroh stood up and walked toward the air temple.

“…Today has sucked,” Corea told her aunt, grumbling.

“Hey, at least it’s going to turn out well!” Apple Bloom said. “Iroh knows Tenzin, this’ll definitely work.”

“Yeah… OW!” Corea looked at her neck. “Something bit me!”

“Same…” Apple Bloom said, looking at her own neck. There was a small dart sticking out of it. “Great.”

Corea fell asleep instantly from the drug. Apple Bloom wasn’t even fazed – she just took up a fighting stance on top of the table. “All right, if you’re expectin’ me to keel over in the next few seconds, you’ve got a problem. Ah’ve got so much magical juices runnin’ through my veins that Ah’m immune to basically every poison.” She pulled a potion out of her bow, shifting it to a blood red color with her magic. “Bring it.”

Three people leaped out of a tree – a waterbender, firebender, and earthbender. They tossed their respective elements at her. She tossed a potion.

The potion exploded, sending the three attackers flying. With a controlled use of her magic, Apple Bloom was able to divide the earth in two with her other front hoof. She opted to take the flame head on and get burned rather than tossed to the side by the water. She yelled through the pain, but smashed a healing potion against herself to heal her burns instantly.

And then someone shot her with an actual gun in the leg. She wailed in pain, having to waste precious seconds to grab another healing potion. She slapped it against her leg, but it was too late – three more attackers had already come out of the trees. She readied another explosion potion, but a slab of rock hit her in the face, knocking her out.

The benders quickly grabbed Corea and took her away, leaving Apple Bloom out cold on the table.

~~~

Eve walked out of a meeting with the Empress of the Void, appearing from the spherical portal in the Tangleglade.

“So…?” Vriska asked.

“She put it to me rather plainly. We’re small fish and can’t be expected to ask favors from them.” Eve shrugged. “We’re welcome whenever we want, and borders are open, but we simply don’t have much to offer them. She was a bit colder than Nanoha, actually.”

Vriska shrugged. “Well she didn’t come from a Friendship is Magic world, she came from a fantasy adventure something or other. Nanoha did, from what I understand.”

Eve shrugged. “Well, I wasn’t expecting much. The Sparkle Census is going to want her data, and then Valentine is going to be curious about the magic, and I’m sure Starbeat will have more than a few questions for Blackjack and Gilgamesh. …If they’re still here.”
Vriska shrugged. “I’m not sure how they fit into all this. I get the impression they’re a wandering group, like I was.”

Eve nodded. “Right. Anyway, there’s one last thing I want to do… I’ve heard a lot about this Twilence. I’d like to meet her.”

Vriska nodded. “Right this way.” She tapped on one of the crystal-machine structures in the Tangleglade, and it recognized her signature. It gave her clearance to enter my library. I was waiting for them.

“Vriska, leave us please,” I said before anyone could say anything. “This is going to be a private conversation. Well, as private as it can be, anyway.”

Vriska blinked. “Uh…”

“No, you can’t ask why. …Well, you could, but I wouldn’t tell you. Again, not because I can’t, but because it would be horribly rude.”

Vriska looked at me for a moment. She decided the best reaction was a nostalgic chuckle. “Gog, I actually missed this.”

“Glad to hear it.” I levitated her back through the portal and forced it closed, leaving me and Charter-Princess Evening Sparkle alone in my library.

“I would offer you a chair but I know you aren’t going to take it,” I said.

“You could have stopped it.”

“Actually that was a case where I couldn’t,” I said. “The death of Twilight of Equis Vitis was something that needed to happen. There was too much foreshadowing, too much prophecy. She could not have outlived her friends. I had no power over that.”

“But you pulled her aside at the last minute!” Eve shouted. “You had the power to do that!”

“I wanted to give her hope. I wanted to give her something… Something that wouldn’t just become you.”

Eve twitched. “Well you gave her hope that quickly turned to terror and death. I hope you’re happy.”

“I am. I actually got to speak with her,” I said, a smile forming on my face. “Because she was about to die… I got to show her what you would become. I got to show you so much. I showed her the window in Celestia City, you know? The one with all of you in beautiful stained glass. Even as she left us, she knew that was the future. I told her more, but I shouldn’t tell you all of it.”

Eve narrowed her eyes. “Is that a ‘don’t want to’ or ‘can’t’ scenario?”

“A little bit of both,” I admitted.

“…You lied to her.”

“I told her no direct lies, Evening.”

“You were misleading and lied by omission.”

I lost control of my expression and allowed minor contempt to seep through. “Hypocrite.”
“What the-”

“They still don’t know what you are! You’ve been lying to them by omission for decades! Most of them have now known you longer than they knew Twilight! Soon enough that will be everyone. And need I remind you about the little scene at Sparky’s grave with Pinkie?”

Eve’s expression clouded.

“She doesn’t know, Eve. Our Prophet, GM, has blocked it from her intentionally. Because she would make you tell everyone. The secret wouldn’t be keepable!”

A tear rolled down her face. “I can’t tell them.”

“You will have to eventually,” I said. “But I can tell you that, since you’ve waited this long, you’ve ensured that all the things you feared would happen when you tell them are no longer just you panicking internally. They really will be hurt beyond imagination.”

Tears began to roll down her face. “W-why are you telling me this!??”

I let out a deep sigh. “…Because I got angry. I’m sorry.” I looked out the window at the stars. “I hate lies, but I have to hold myself to them so much. It just angers me when someone who doesn’t have to lie does.” I looked back at her, meeting her gaze. “…It was a mistake to wait any time at all to tell them. But now that it’s been years… Don’t go and tell them on account of me.”

Eve didn’t have a response to this.

“…Prepare yourself, Eve. You know it’ll happen eventually. …You’ve always known. I didn’t even have to tell you that.”

“I didn’t know all my fears were going to be true!” Eve shouted. “That’s… That’s just horrible! Which one of them is going to stop being friends, Twilence? Which one!?”

Tears appeared in my own eyes. “…I can’t tell you that.”

“But you know!”

“Yes. I do.”

She wept bitter tears, heaving her entire body. She couldn’t accept what I’d just told her.

I was, to put it simply, a horrible pony. I had let something slip I really shouldn’t have said…

I sighed. “Eve… Make use of this knowledge.”

“Make use of it!?”

“Cherish your friends while you still can,” I said. “Live every moment as if it would be your last with them.”

Eve was reminded of many dark things Pinkie had told her – that there would be great death, great struggle, and that at least one of them wasn’t going to make it. She stared into the abyss, shaking. “H-how do you cope?”

I wiped my own face. “…I don’t.”

“Wh…?”
I pointed at my Eye of Rhyme. “I had this thrust upon me. I suddenly had access to virtually everything. And shortly after that I knew what ka was, what it all meant, and… Eve, it’s not something you can deal with.”

“But you seem to have it together!”

“Me? Together!? I twitched. “You think I have it together!?”

“I…”

“Do you want to know who lives and who dies?” I ask, allowing the calm exterior I always keep up to fall. I don’t care that those reading are seeing what they did to me - finally time for a secret to come out, I suppose. “I can tell you with exact precision what happens to who up to a certain point. Guess what happens to you?!”

“No, stop…”

“I know if you live or die, Evening Sparkle. I know what all of your major foes will be. I know what happens to the Collector a few years from now. I know what his plans are, what his origin is, and how he relates to everything in the larger picture of things! I know what the Dark Tower hides!”

“Stop!”

I cackled, a truly disturbing slasher smile placed on my face. Fitting. “Guess where my knowledge ends, Evening! Guess! Oh, too scared? It ends not all that far from today, believe it or not! We’re about halfway there, actually, if we use your narrative path! The entire multiverse will hang in the balance, Evening! The entire multiverse and the lives of everyone in it will hang on the actions you, I, our friends, our enemies, and those close to us! And I can’t see the result!” I spread my wings wide and screamed in her face. “DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT IT’S LIKE TO KNOW BASICALLY EVERYTHING AND THEN HAVE NO IDEA WHAT HAPPENS AT THE END!?”

“STOP!” she boomed, summoning Seraphim in all its glory. I felt my magic drain to nothing. I was defenseless. She held a magical blade to my neck.

I dropped the smile and looked to the ground. “I know you won’t do it. You can’t. I live at least until the point I can’t see. If you somehow do kill me here, there’ll be a revival.”

Eve twitched, tears streaming down her face. Then she threw me to the ground. “You’re screwed up in the head.”

I nodded slowly. “I am. It’s… It’s not as bad as it could be. My origin had multiple endings. …I could have been the new Collector, except instead of having uncertain motivations and a complex philosophy, I’d just be an omnicidal maniac. As it is, the ending that turned out to be true was the second best one.” I stared right at her. “…Even the best one still would have left me like this, eventually.”

Eve looked at me with horror. “W-what in…”

“I am what needed to be created to understand,” I said, shaking my head. “And true understanding is a horrible curse. But somepony needed to have it. It just ended up being me.”

Eve took several steps back from me – she was terrified. Understandable. She should be. Everyone should be, really. I’m the worst kind of horror. I’m not a villain, and I never will be. I’m the epitome of uncomfortable truth.
How’s that? Do you all like what’s… I’m sorry. I shouldn’t take this out on you. Only a small number of you had any actual understanding of what you were doing, and… …I already forgave you. This conversation should never have happened. Unfortunately I do not possess the power of retcon…

I wiped my eyes. “…You should go,” I told Eve. “If you want, I can wipe this entire conversation from your mind.”

She considered it. She really considered it. She was an instant from accepting the wipe when her mind went somewhere. She remembered what I had told her.

*Use this information.*

“…I will take part of your burden onto myself,” she said, putting her hoof to her chest. “Now we both know what’s coming. You’re not alone anymore.”

I blinked. Then I started laughing through my tears. “Of course… Of course!”

“Hm?”

“That’s why… And then you’re here… And…” I couldn’t help myself. I rushed her into a hug. “…Thank you.”

She recoiled from me – still clearly terrified of what I was and what I stood for. I understood – a lesser mare would have been broken over this realization. But I had seen it too many times over the years.

“I’m sorr-” she began.

“It’s fine,” I interrupted. “It’s fine. You’ve done more than I thought you would. Strange how the finer details can sometimes mean so much.” I shook my head. “…You can feel free to tell Pinkie or the others anything you’ve learned here, just so you know.”

“…Everything hinges on our actions in the end…” she stared into the distance. “I’m the protagonist, aren’t I?”

I nodded. “No use hiding that fact from you anymore… Yeah, you are. You are the protagonist. You really shouldn’t go telling people that, though. There are… higher powers that would love to get a hold of you. Ones that can manipulate ka like putty. The kinds of powers that could change everything in the end.”

“…Knowledge is power,” Eve said.

“Knowledge is pain,” I added. “But it’s also needed. We… We can’t ignore it.”

“…But we can make of it whatever we want,” Eve said. “For all your screaming… You clearly don’t know everything. You didn’t know what I was going to do here.”

“I could have looked into the script.”

“You chose not to. And that allowed this to happen. Allowed us to… I don’t know, this is certainly some bizarre bonding. But that’s what it is. We were bonding. And now we have a bit of an understanding and a shared burden.” She stuck out a hoof. “You’re clearly suffering from those burdens. Let me take some of them.”
I smiled at her, taking her hoof. “There are some I can’t give you.”

“I don’t want any you don’t have to give me,” Eve said. “But I can have some. I’m sure Pinkie will be available as well.”

I nodded slowly. “It’s so good to be able to actually talk to you all. All I’ve been doing is watching… Waiting… Sitting in the background. But I can see it… I can see a time where that ends.”

“The ending?”

“A bit before that, actually,” I revealed. “I won’t have to be like this forever. I’ll be able to join you all out there. I just… Have to wait a little longer. And until then… It looks like I’ll be having visitors.”

Eve nodded. “You definitely will.”

We talked for a bit after that, but what we said either wasn’t important, or were things not meant to be known. She eventually left, and I told her she was always welcome back.

That… was not how I was expecting it to go. At all. I had been expecting a brief confrontation where we were at a standoff and basically agreed not to like each other. That’s where the plan for this scene was originally going, too. But it didn’t go there. Instead… We were laid bare.

I think this is better.

…I also apologize to those of you out there I hurt with what I said. I… wasn’t doing well. You’re fine, reading this story, leaving comments, and doing what you can to help it come along. I just had some stress. Don’t take it personally.

…Please?

…

I’m going to go cool off for a while. You probably won’t see me around for a bit. You need to find out what happens with Corea anyway. …I should probably apologize to her for overshadowing her chapter…

~~~

Corea woke up angry. “I’LL TAKE YOU ALL, HOOF TO HAND, YOU’LL GO DOWN DOWN DOWN DOWWWWN!”

“Feisty Avatar…” a tall man with a white beard said. “Or, should I say, not Avatar.”

Corea looked around – she was on a stage under an absurdly bright spotlight. All she could see was the man, a few people who were probably his followers, and the electric chair she was tied to.

*The electric chair she was tied to.*

“...Shit.” Instinctually she looked around to see if Iroh or Apple Bloom had heard her, then she realized how stupid that was. She couldn’t move her hooves at all, so there was no bending – and she really wasn’t good enough at magic to trigger any sort of effect with just her mind…

She started trying to pry herself out of the chair with brute earth pony strength, but that wasn’t working either.
“Are you done yet?” The man asked.

“What are you going to do to me!?”

“We’re going to kill you and create an Avatar that has a right to exist!” He said, spouting in her face. “And we’re going to televise the whole thing.”

“…That’s stupid. Seriously, if you wanted that you should have shot me with deadly nightshade or something in the forest. You’d have what you want, there’d be no chance someone comes to rescue me, and you also wouldn’t be such a bonehead that you would broadcast your faces on television!”

Everyone stared at her.

_Oh, wait, that’s right, I’m in mortal danger._ It was only as she realized this that the real fear started to set in.

The ringleader clearly picked up on this. “Ah, there it is. This is why everyone has to see the false Avatar at her most vulnerable. They have to see the fear, the brokenness, the lies printed on your face.”

“You’re crazy!” Corea shouted, already crying from the fear. She wasn’t able to counter anything he said anymore – fear had taken over. She just started screaming.

He slapped her, shutting her up. “You’re just some brat from another world destroying the way things should be. You have no right to be the Avatar. It’s time you gave it up to someone who deserved it.”

_I’m going to die_, she thought as he took a button out of his coat pocket. _I am going to die to this moron._

The voice of other Avatars spoke to her.

_You will live on_, Avatar Kyoshi promised.

_You have every right to live as we do within Raava_, Avatar Roku consoled.

_You will guide the next one to be more understanding_, Avatar Wan said.

_You are always within me, Corea_, Raava herself promised. _You belong. I chose you._

_Screw this!_ Avatar Aang said. _Corea, you’re not going to die here. Not today._

The rest of the Avatars looked at Aang like he was an absolute moron.

_It seems like all is lost_, Aang said. _But you do not stand alone._

Raava’s vast presence shifted. _He is right. I sense something following our spiritual energy…_

A hurricane blasted through a nearby wall, knocking everyone to the ground and tearing Corea’s electric chair off its fixture. Tenzin leaped between Corea and her kidnappers, keeping a tremendous hurricane of wind around the two of them for protection.

“Tenzin!” Corea blurted. “You came to save me!”

“Of course I did. You’re the Avatar.”
Corea looked to the ground. “…They wanted what you wanted.”

“I did not know what I wanted. I still don’t.” Tenzin pushed forward, blowing the fire from the firebenders away – none of them knew how to deal with an airbender. It was a form of combat they knew nothing of. “But I know I can’t condone the killing of a child.”

Corea nodded. “…Thanks.”

“Don’t menti-”

A bolt of lightning went off, connecting at the ground beneath Tenzin’s feet. It sent him backward, knocking him against part of the wall that was still standing.

Tenzin’s carefully constructed shield of swirling wind fell, revealing the last man standing to be the ringleader. “I have no qualm with you, Tenzin.”

Tenzin began to stand back up. “I have a qualm with you.”

The man pointed a finger at Tenzin without hesitation. “I will take you out if you stand in defense of this imposter.”

“No.” Corea said, her eyes white with the energy of all the Avatars. A gust of wind mixed with a purple magic laser hit the man in the chest, knocking him to the ground. “You will not end the Air Nomads. You will not end Tenzin before he gets to live his life. You will not kill our son.”

Tenzin blinked. He could see them – the Avatars, all lined up behind Corea, standing with her.

His father was the closest.

Aang took a moment to smile warmly at Tenzin before forcing his energy into the next attack. They rushed into the man’s spirit. It did not take long for the light of his spirit to be engulfed by that of the Avatar – his powerful firebending stolen from him in only a matter of seconds.

They all spoke as one. “This is Avatar Corea, the One Hundred and Eighty-Third Avatar. She is one of us just as all of those in the past, and all of those in the future. We have chosen her to carry on the burden of this world. You have no right to go against what we have chosen.”

The man passed out, utterly defeated.

Take good care of her, Tenzin.

Corea dropped to the ground, dazed. She took a moment to realize what had happened. “…Oh no, I did it again didn’t I? Did I hurt anyone!!?”

“You removed a man’s ability to bend,” Tenzin said, limping over to her. “…And showed me the face of my father.”

“I… Did?”

“Yes. You did.” He kneeled down to her. “…I recently had an old man tell me to teach you or suffer the consequences.”

“Iroh has a way of being persuasive, huh?”

“…Yes. He does.” Tenzin stood tall. “You will not only have to learn airbending – you will have to
learn the ways of the Air Nomads. You will eat what we eat, breathe what we breathe, and sleep where we sleep. You will learn to meditate, and to understand what air is.”

“What is air?” Corea asked.

“Air is peace.”

*Water is of submission…*

*Earth is of strength…*

*Fire is of passion…*

*Magic is of mind…*

*Air is of peace…*

“I’ll take that to heart,” Corea assured him.

“Be sure that you do. We’ll start tomorrow.”

“Sweet. …Can you get me out of this chair first, though?”

“Sure.” He untied her. The first thing she did was wrap her hooves around his legs and start crying.

He didn’t recoil. He just sighed and accepted the embrace.

~~~

Eve returned to Equis Vitis with all of Pinkie’s team. Renee and Daniel were there, seeing the team of Rubies off.

Renee beamed when she saw them. “Oh, you’re back! I trust everything went well?”

“Nothing really changed,” Vriska said, shrugging. “We know about another Class 2. Friendlier than most, but not exactly going to bend over to help us. Though she did ruin a lot of the fun I was having with you guys…”

“I expect a full report by tomorrow with everything you learned. That includes you, Eve,” Renee said.

Eve blinked, processing the comment. “Oh. Yeah. Right. You’ll have it.”

“…Are you okay?” Flutterfree asked.

“Not especially,” Eve admitted. “Pinkie, we need to have a talk later.”

“Twilence spilled something didn’t she?” Vriska asked.

“Yeah,” Eve admitted. She had plans to tell Pinkie what she had found out from Twilence… But not about her true identity. She was going to go with it for now, like she’d been told. “It doesn’t have to happen now though.”

Pinkie nodded. “I know. …There is something that does need to happen though.” She turned to Nova. “Everypony’s here.”

Nova nodded. “Yeah… Okay, so this is going to start out sounding like really good news, and then
get really soured really quickly. So prepare yourselves. I already know you’ll be understanding, but… It’s still going to be difficult.”

She had gotten everyone’s attention – even Eve’s.

“So…” She took a deep breath. “…Sunburst and I are getting married.”

Renee squeed. “Oh Nova that’s wonderful!”

“Seems a little fast…” Flutterfree commented.

“Pshaw, it’s love darling, it can happen however fast it needs!”

“You need to talk to Cadence, Renee,” Eve said.

“Quiet,” Jotaro told everyone, leaning down to Nova, keeping his eyes level with hers. “There’s a reason for this.”

“Yeah.” Nova coughed. “I’m pregnant right now. Found out two days ago.”

Vriska cocked her head. “Uh… Why are you saying that like it’s a death sentence?”

“Their parents. Their family,” Jotaro said, standing up and grabbing his hat. “They will not approve.”

Vriska put a hand to her mouth. “Oh. Oh I completely forgot about that…”

“Yeah,” Nova said, sagging. “My family is about as traditional as you can possibly get, not to mention Star-revering to boot. Sunburst’s is similar. We just… We can’t have them finding out. It’ll tear everything apart. So… this is what we decided to do. You are the only ones who know. I think Sunburst is going to tell Sunny and Corona, but that’s it. We just… we didn’t want to lie to you, like we’re going to lie to everyone else.”

Eve looked at Nova with sad eyes. “…Are you sure about this, Nova?”

“…I’m very sure, Eve. Both of us are.”

Eve saw she was serious. “I… I want to say you should feel free to tell them. To admit to what you two did.”

“But…”

All your fears are true.

There are some mistakes you can’t come back from.

Eve sighed. “You know them best. What do you think they’d do to you if they found out?”

“Excommunication,” Nova said, tears forming in her eyes. “And I… I still want to be able to talk to my mom, Eve! I… I don’t want to push her away again…”

Flutterfree put a wing around her. “We understand, Nova. …We’re glad you told us. And we’ll respect your choice.”

Jotaro leaned back down and grabbed Nova’s shoulders. “Nova, whatever you do, care for your family. Don’t push them away for any reason. Care for your husband and keep him close. Love him. And love your child. They are your responsibility.” His fists tightened around her shoulders. “You
can ruin them just by not being there.”

“I… I know…”

“We’ll understand if you have to leave,” Flutterfree said.

“I’ll have to go on maternity leave, yeah,” Nova said. “But I’ll be back. Sunburst and I already talked about this. I’m never gone for long. But he…” She shook her head. “He’s going to have to give up the surveys… he says he doesn’t mind, that’d he’d love an opportunity to return to his scholarly studies, but I know he’s disappointed!”

Eve put a hoof on her shoulder. “I think he’ll be happy as a stay-at-home dad. I don’t think you’d be happy if you gave all this up.”

“But I-”

“It was a mistake both of you made. You have to think about both of you,” Eve said, smiling.

“It’s a balance,” Daniel admitted.

Renee nodded in understanding. “…Your life is about to get quite rocky, Nova. But we’ll be there alongside you. Daniel and I know a thing or two about making a marriage work. We can help you.”

“Jotaro too,” Pinkie said, gesturing at the huge man. “Don’t underestimate him.”

“I… I know,” Nova said, a smile coming to her face. “You all… Thank you.”

Eve pulled everyone into a group hug that became more of a group dogpile.

Pinkie was the first to speak. “Well, I have another wedding to start planning!”

“Now now, Pinkie, I’m not the one getting married this time,” Renee said coyly. “I have a few ideas this time.”

“Psh, you already got your wedding. Plus you designed like half of it against my wishes. We also need to get this done fast for their sake – no dilly-dallying for a few months like you and Daniel did. We gotta mush mush!”

As Renee and Pinkie delved deeper and deeper into ‘planning’, Eve put a hoof around Nova.

“Sometimes I wish I was as strong as you,” Eve said.

“…What?”

“To just come out and say things. There are times in the past where… Well, everything would have been better if I just said something.”

“…Are you okay?”

“I talked to a version of myself who knew just about everything and told me more than she was supposed to. So not really. But I’ll be working that out with Pinkie, you can worry about your own problems.”

Nova nodded. “Yeah… Problems.”

“Hey. You made a mistake. Forgive yourself.”
Nova wiped her eyes. “…Thanks, Evening.”

“Anytime,” Eve said, hugging her closer. “As long as I’m able.”
071 - The Everyman

*The Everyman*

He…

Who was he?

He was a man.

What kind of man he was… well, that was a significantly more complicated question that may not have had a definable answer.

He was average, and yet anything but. The most ordinary individual you would ever pass on the street, and yet one who excelled at an innumerable number of things.

He was…

He was sitting at a table, all alone in a grand dining hall. The food was all set before him, cooked and prepared to perfection. The dishes were silver, the eating utensils ornate, and the glasses were all filled with wine. It was a feast fit for not just a king, but a king and his entire court.

And yet here he was, eating all alone. A noble with a feast all to himself and no one to share it with.

This, he decided, was pleasurable for taste – but otherwise boring. Best not to pay much attention to it; there were more pressing matters.

He went elsewhere, deciding that taking a walk was a good idea. He walked along a suburban street, a newspaper under his arm with the year 2016 printed on it. He lazily glanced through the articles – there had been another terrorist attack on some European country. Terrible news, to be sure, but it was somewhat undercut by the article below it about the newest dangerous teen craze: Frisbee golf. Of all the absurd things he had seen in his life, that was… pretty mundane, to be truthful. He briefly wondered if he was the type to take up Frisbee golf…

He stopped at a school, a smile crossing his face. The kids marched in for the start of the school day, moving like the ordered pawns of production they were being trained to be.

*Perfect.*

He was going to be late for his meeting. He took off at a run down the sidewalk, arriving in record time to the first floor of an office building.

“Isaac Rowan, here for an interview,” he told the receptionist, breathing heavily, but not as heavily as someone who just ran a block should have been.

He was soon in an elevator, heading to his meeting. He checked his wristwatch – he didn’t know why he did, he knew he was late. But he would easily be able to wow them with his skills. It was never that difficult.

He trotted out the door of his house into the sunshine of Ponyville, sniffing the air with his muzzle. *Such a different existence,* he pondered, feeling the delicate blades of grass beneath his hooves like they were something novel. It was certainly a good day for a walk.
The houses of Ponyville passed by his senses. It was a mostly standard Ponyville with a crystal castle that belonged to Twilight Sparkle, but there was some evidence of Merodi involvement with the presence of a few humans, not to mention cell phones. He would have to be careful here, they could grow suspicious.

On the other hand, when he sat down at his office in the school, he found himself at ease. He sipped a cup of dark coffee and tapped his fingers on the desk, smiling to himself as he thought of his experiments in his nice, secret compartment. Of particular interest was his pet project – a beautiful red gem of arcane power.

Something rather rare here, he knew. If it existed at all. He wasn’t quite sure about that, given his position as a lowly high school professor, but it was for this same reason that he didn’t care about being unsure. It was a good feeling, being carefree. A very good feeling.

He stepped out of the elevator into a meeting with a large number of people in black suits who should have intimidated everyone. He wasn’t – this was nothing new to him. So little was.

“Mister Rowan…” one of them said, little more than a blur in his thoughts. “How would you describe yourself?”

“Studious, hardworking, and very knowledgeable,” he answered. The first one was technically a lie, but that was only because he had virtually nothing left to study.

“In that case, as a test, describe the Variation of Constants method for solving a differential equation.”

He did just that.

He also walked up to a version of Pinkie Pie.

“Oh hey there broo! How’s the daydreamin’ goin?” the Pinkie known as Dinkie asked.

“Good, thanks,” he – no she – said, smiling warmly. “Always with my head in the clouds, as you say, but it’s good to come out to be grounded in reality once in a while.”

“Ay, Icey, Broo, don’t sweat it. Sometimes I just wanna summon demons, but I don’t because it wouldn’t be fun, you know?”

“I know,” she said, smiling and looking at Celestia's sun.

The chandelier over the feast was just as bright as that sun, if not brighter. But it was just the way he liked it, illuminating all the food before it went into his mouth just perfectly. It was a beautiful taste that he wanted to share.

“Mister Rowan? You seem distracted.”

He looked at his hands and smiled. “Apologies. I guess I just felt like I was somewhere else for a moment and got distracted by the wonderful food there.”

A few of them laughed, thinking it was a joke.

Oh, if only they knew. If only they knew the lives he lived.

He wasn’t just ‘Isaac Rowan’, nor was he just ‘Icey Row,’ nor just a nobleman, nor a school professor… He was much more.
He was the Everyman.

He continued to give a presentation of his skills to the business people. It took him a moment to remember precisely who they were – a large law firm he couldn’t remember the name of who wanted a genius to tell them what was what and when. Lucky for them he had decided he was interested in this life. As he explained the complex mathematical equations to the old men and how they related to law, he was also reading a book on the subject in at least seven other lives simultaneously, all taking a bit of their free time to feed him the bonus knowledge he needed.

Strictly speaking, it was possible to do this without the books, as he was a lawyer somewhere else. But there was something to be said for the exhilaration of doing it on the fly with a particular set of predetermined resources.

It was clearly working; they loved him and his presentation.

He glanced at the newspaper again, finding himself thinking about the lesson of the day. As a professor, he needed to teach science. Was he in the mood to teach them something several centuries ahead of their time, possibly create a genius in the process? …Nah, he had other work here. Wasn’t like he could do anything about the meeting here – or even care about the meeting for a business in another life.

The school bell rang. He got up and went to his classroom on autopilot, but he was hardly thinking about the lesson anymore, because something interesting had just happened elsewhere, something that tickled his scientific mind. Another life had just been changed drastically, gaining a gem in the middle of his forehead. It was in a world with humans of colorful skin much like the one where he was a professor, a world where magic had just been changed.

He looked in the archives of Celestia City – a simple universal search for the one of his bodies serving as an Expeditions Agent. Here, she was a cute auburn-haired girl who had a slight obsession with magical hats. She ran down to one of the primary consoles and logged in, performing a search.

Ah, yes, Equis Shimmer. It looked like another world had experienced the exact same change sometime in the past, a world with him in it nonetheless. He took in the air in Equis Shimmer, appreciating a world of evolved human magic, realizing for the first time that he hadn’t recognized the change when it had first happened. And that time, there’d been nothing in the rest of him to tell him what to make of it.

The newly-changed life was informed that his world had just gone through a magical evolution, like another world before it. He decided he was going to become a powerful wizard, and in an instant he had all the knowledge he needed to do so. That world’s version of Sunset Shimmer was going to have a handful to deal with very shortly.

“Broo? Why you giggling?”

“Oh, just a fun daydream,” she said, winking at Dinkie. “A godlike being is going to find a wrench thrown into her plans that’s completely out of context, and she has no context by which to stabilize herself.”

“…Broo, you lost me.”

“I know,” he said, wrapping up his presentation for the businessmen. “It’s a lot to take in, but I think I would be a good choice for you.”

“You’re hired,” the oldest man there said. “Welcome to the firm.”
The Everyman smiled. “Thank you.”

And then his grand feast was interrupted, starting a whole new chain of events that pushed the second Equis Shimmer to the background, creating something new for the Everyman to ponder. The front doors of the dining hall opened, revealing four individuals whom more than a few of his lives knew about.

Pinkie Pie, Jotaro, Vriska, and Flutterfree. He processed this – where was Nova?

Nova was on maternity leave for her pregnancy.

Ah, shame. She could have been a welcome addition to the feast.

“I welcome you to my table!” he said, jovially. All the while, he was making efforts to know exactly who each of them were.

Flutterfree, pegasus, quasi-vampire, and Stand user. He knew from prior experience that Lolo had minimal effect on him, though that was only the automatic effect. Not only that, but there were other variables at play limiting the Stand’s effectiveness so long as she didn’t use it actively. As a person she had the highest moral code he was aware of – at least one that a person managed to stick to consistently.

Vriska, now there was a name the Everyman had a mixed relationship with. When you were as everywhere as he was, the immortal dimensional traveler types tended to pop up over and over again in exceedingly nosy ways. She had ruined and saved many of his lives, producing not only a complex, contradictory feeling, but also a mild annoyance at her continued presence in his lives. At the moment he decided he would be friendly toward her and her actions, but he really found her annoying.

Jotaro, a quiet man the Everyman knew little about… Except in that one universe where he was Jotaro, or the local equivalent of Jotaro. It took no time at all to understand the man – deep, brooding, self-righteous, heroic, and softer than he ever wanted to show. Naturally, this Jotaro would be slightly different – a man with a deep care for family and friendship, one who had been softened by years of adventures with those close to him – but the Everyman could easily extrapolate from incomplete data.

Pinkie would be the problem. No matter how many lives he lived, he was never Aware like she was. But he had picked up a few tricks over time. He knew instantly that not only did she know what he was, but she couldn’t say anything about it to her friends. Simply delightful – that would make for quite the fun dynamic. And here he thought this life was just here to enjoy succulent food for all the others.

The four explorers glanced at each other, shrugged, and sat at the table, Pinkie fixing the Everyman with a steely gaze.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Isaac Rowan,” he answered. It was the closest he had to a name – though, really, it was just the most common name he had. There were many different offshoots of the Everyman who thought the name Isaac was decidedly stupid. He found himself proud of it at the moment.

“Icey Row,” she said, turning away from Dinkie. “That’s my name.”

“…Yeah it is broo!”
“I’m going to go walk over here, hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all, broo! Just watch out for Rainbow Dash! I hear she’s out and about!”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she said with a wink, walking across the street. She watched, curiously, a group of interdimensional explorers talking to the local Rarity – Mattie.

Mattie, a unique version of Rarity who was decidedly Aware. She needed to be careful around her, lest she tip her hand. Mattie had a knack for completely disregarding rules and regulations for the sake of being jarring and ‘comedic’. She likely wouldn’t notice anything so long as the Everyman kept her distance, which was fine by the Everyman’s standards.

Mattie was talking to the League of Sweetie Belles – Thrackerzod, Bot, Squeaky, Allure, and Minna, Allure’s child. The information the Everyman had on the four members of the League was extensive – eldritch being trapped in a body of a unicorn, living an eternal paradox designed to get her to understand. Bot, a machine constructed by… by… by an unknown inventor of Equis Smooze, eternally suck in the body of a filly and with a mentality that never quite matured. Squeaky, a general who had left her world behind after the war ended, taking her time to just enjoy life and offer wisdom gleaned from her hard life. Allure, the Sweetie of Equis Vitis, the unofficial leader of the entire League, and recently the adoptive mother of Minna.

The Everyman could find nothing on Minna. She was certain the human girl was more than she seemed, but a cursory ping of all the lives produced nothing on her.

Concerning.

But not exactly something to be afraid of. It just meant she had to proceed with caution. After all, in this life, she liked ponies, and new ponies even more so.

The League stopped talking with Mattie and set out on their own – probably to leave the universe. That just wouldn’t do, there was still so much they could see and experience!

“Hey, wait up!” she called, waving them down.

“Hm?” Allure said, looking up. “Who’re you?”

“I’m Icey Row!” she declared, beaming. “And you look new around here.”

“Eh, not really, we visit regularly,” Squeaky offered.

“I haven’t noticed you before though! …I do have my head lost in the clouds a lot though, so that might be my fault.” She chuckled. “I’d like to show you around our world, if you don’t mind! You’d be surprised with some of the things we have around here!”

Thrackerzod raised an eyebrow. “I thought you just had an entire town owned by Jack and a problem with being racist to the point of stupid comedy.”

“…There’s more stuff out here! Look, we’re setting up for the Festival of Dreams!” She gestured with her hoof to a bunch of star-shaped banners and balloons spread around town.

“That wasn’t there two minutes go,” Thrackerzod observed.

“It’s Equis Ultra Fast, stop asking questions,” Allure said with a chuckle. “Minna, would you like to stay for the Festival of Dreams?”
Minna smiled. “Yeah! …What’s a Festival of Dreams?”

The Everyman laughed. “Oh, it’s just a festival where we celebrate dreams. That’s about it. I can show you the individual events and what to do with the special dream fireworks though. I wouldn’t look too closely at them though, knowing our universe there’s probably an innuendo or racist joke buried in them somewhere.”

“Or both,” Thrackerzod pointed out.

“…Suddenly I’m having second thoughts about taking Minna to this festival,” Allure said, holding back.

“You tell me,” the Everyman said, producing one of the fireworks. “Does this look bad?”

“It looks like a normal firework.”

“Then we’re golden!”

Rainbow Dash crashed from out of the sky. “Have you seen my face!?”

“It’s on your… face…” Allure said, shaking her head.

“Duh! But where is it!?"

“Uh…”

The Everyman walked through the halls of the high school. He’d taught a good class – simple enough to be done in his sleep. Quite literally. The new way of things – sleep teaching on the fly! Brilliant!

At the moment though, he wasn’t patting himself on the back – he was looking at a pair of new students in terror. They were quite clearly Corona and Olivia from the courts of Lai – no other version of Sunset would wear exactly those kinds of gloves and be friends with a white-haired girl in a dress with jagged purple lines. They may have looked like regular students, but that was definitely them.

This was bad.

Lady Rarity’s team rarely did simple ‘exploration’, though it wasn’t unheard of. What they usually did was undertake specific missions to accomplish specific goals. They were probably here for a reason, especially since they seemed to be blending in with the teenage crowd of the world, bothering with age spells even. Hardcore.

There was a chance they were here for some reason other than him, but he doubted it. He had secrets in this life, secrets he’d like to keep hidden. Olivia herself was enough of a problem, and had he made extensive use of computers in his secrets he was sure he would already be doomed. But he was careful in that department.

Corona was a true nightmarish threat. If she touched him…

She’d learn more than just this life’s secrets. She’d feel the Everyman. He honestly had no idea if her mind would even be able to handle that, but he had no desire to find out.

He needed to do something to ensure all his plans went smoothly, and that nothing ruined the great science he was undertaking.
He left the meeting, a new job in hand. It appeared as though another life needed a significant boost to his mental faculties. No matter – this life could just stare mindlessly at a TV for the rest of the day with absolutely no negative consequences. Shunt it all to the professor.

He rubbed his hands together – Corona wasn’t going to find anything. Why? Because he was going to investigate them. If he could just expose their cover… It would be difficult, but since when was anything worthwhile easy?

…A lot of things, given what he was, but that was beside the point. Hard things felt better. Plus, he was particularly fond of this life; mad scientist schoolteacher was a fun one. Couldn’t let it come crashing down without a little fight…

“Fights are interesting things, aren’t they?” Pinkie said, aggressively drinking a glass of wine. Her teammates had no idea why she was doing this, but they trusted her enough to just give her odd looks and not say anything.

The Everyman knitted his eyebrows – she was going to be an interesting one to spar with. “Indeed they are, as I’m sure our friend Jotaro can attest to. I see within him a man familiar with the act of getting his fists dirty. Fights can come in many arenas – hand to hand, mind to mind, or even across a table over a dinner with nothing but words. Or, perhaps, even at a school where one side is unaware of the battle even being set.”

Pinkie twitched. “Oddly specific.”

“I knew you’d appreciate it,” he said, eating another leg off the golden-brown turkey.

“…Where the hell do you keep pulling those chicken legs from?” Vriska asked. “I’ve seen a lot more than two.”

“Turkey,” the Everyman corrected. “Turkey legs.”

“Fine then, mister actually, where do the turkey legs come from?”

“The turkey.”

“Can I punch him?”

“Vriska!” Flutterfree chided. “He is letting us eat his food and treating us as esteemed guests. Don’t be so rude.”

“Hmph. I don’t trust it. Does anyone remember how we got here?”

Jotaro shook his head. “No.”

The Everyman leaned in – best throw them off the trail for now, just to make things interesting. “There is this curious effect of forgetting how you got somewhere when you walk through doorways. It is a phenomenon heavily accentuated by the doorframe at the front of this hall. Trace your steps back far enough and I’m sure you’ll remember you came through a portal in the courtyard.”

“…I do remember that, now that I think about it,” Jotaro said.

“…Yeah,” Vriska muttered, sitting back in her chair. “The guy’s right.”

The Everyman was giving Minna a ponyback ride. “There’s a funny thing about memory, Allure,”
she said.

“Oh, what’s that?”

“You can often just suggest a memory to someone, and their mind will fill in the blanks and think it’s real. It has to be done right of course, but with the correct stimuli and vagueness you can make people believe things really happened to them.”

“Wow. Are we really that gullible?”

“Watch this,” she said with a smile. “Hey Squeaky!”

“Hm?” Squeaky said.

“Allure was just telling me about that time you were at the supermarket and couldn’t find any soup. Quite the funny story how you spent hours searching around looking for the soup aisle only to find that they were just on a shelf a little too high for you too see, huh?”

“…Yeah, that was a really lame day,” Squeaky said. “…Though you told it kinda bad. There was actually more to it than that. There was this blue stallion…”

“…Holy Celestia, that’s creepy,” Allure asid.

“What?”

“That never happened, Squeaky. Icey here just planted a false memory in your head.”

“…Dammit, I’m supposed to be immune to that because of my training.”

“Squeaky!” Allure said, covering Minna’s ears with her magic.

Squeaky blushed. “Sorry! I was surprised!”

“It’s a bit much to take in, sometimes,” the Everyman said. “Our minds are foolish organs so often. It’s really easy to trick them because of all the shortcuts they take to streamline processing.”

“Are we safe?” Olivia asked Corona.

Of course not, the Everyman thought from the ventilation system. But you don’t know that.

“Pretty sure,” Corona said, glancing around. “It’s like the dark hallway back in Canterlot High. Nobody ever comes here if they have a choice.” She pressed a button on the side of her sunglasses. “A visual search of the premises has shown nothing, Rarity.”

“The stuff is definitely here though,” Olivia added. “Scans are giving off odd readings. …Not exactly the same as the stolen items but close enough. It could look like this with only mild tampering and interference.”

“We’re still looking,” Corona added. “But nothing seems suspicious yet. Just a normal school. Yes I know how stupid that sounds knowing the world I spent most of my education, but you get the point. It may take some time to dig stuff up.”

You won’t get very far. This isn’t enough to accuse you of anything, but it’s a start.

“I’m going to start searching with stronger magic,” Corona reported. “Should be able to trace the signature with enough time.”
That was both good and bad. Good because public magic was a way to get the government called on her. Bad because she might be able to find his secret – and he couldn’t have that. He needed to protect his secrets above all else…

Corona nodded slowly at something Lady Rarity said. “Over and out then. Check in soon.” She closed the connection. “Keep doing what we’re doing. How’s the security feed?”

“Well I just discovered a glaring problem. This world may be obsessed with security in schools, but they haven’t put cameras in the air vents.”

The Everyman tensed as Corona turned to look at the grating he was hiding behind. He needed to move, and move fast.

He took a moment to stop casting spells and look at his horn, quickly calculating the adjustments from unicorn magic to human magic in a low-arcane realm. In an instant, he was no longer in the vent in front of Corona, but on the other side of the school.

He scowled – she was going to be able to sense that magic. Perhaps not trace it, but it was a clue for them. A clue he would rather have not let them have.

“We really need to patent this,” Vriska said. “Infinite drumsticks.”

Flutterfree raised an eyebrow. “Patents mean almost nothing, Vriska.”

Vriska folded her arms. “Our legal system is confusing…”

“Saves us a lot of trouble though.”

The Everyman leaned in, taking yet another drumstick. “Laws? You are from a society?”

“Oh, right, can’t believe we forgot to do that,” Pinkie said, hitting herself in the forehead. “I guess we just figured you already knew. But that’d be crazy.” She narrowed her eyes at him.

“You’re not being very subtle,” Jotaro commented.

“Shush. You’re not supposed to notice.”

“If anyone were to notice it would be him,” the Everyman said, folding his arms. “He has the eyes of the eagle and the mind of a tactician. He’ll piece anything together given enough time.”

Jotaro nodded.

“Why don’t you let us hear a bit of what’s in that mind of yours?”

Jotaro tossed a drumstick onto the table. “None of this food is real.”

“What gave you that idea?”

“The infinite duplication was a good indicator, but it’s more than that. I’m not getting full. Every time I bite into the drumstick the taste is identical, like it’s copied from some kind of template.”

“Brilliant deduction, Jotaro.” He laid his hands on the table, raising an eyebrow. “Now what is the conclusion you draw?”

“We’re in a dreamworld,” Jotaro decreed. “We’re too aware and consistent to actually be dreaming, so we must actually be in such a world.”
The walls of the hall fell back, revealing a conglomeration world composed of beautiful sunsets, pristine night skies, and numerous floating buildings. One of these said buildings had a clock melting off its side. Another was burning to cinders. “Precisely. It is indeed a dreamworld – but a very dangerous one at that. Once you’re aware of what it is, it has a direct in to your mind. If you can’t control your own thoughts, it will go out of control.”

“Uh-oh,” Pinkie said. “Everybody don’t think about cats!”

Suddenly there were cats everywhere, even on the food. The Everyman took another bite, not caring for the possible danger of cat hair – so long as he kept his own thoughts under control, he would not be affected. They would have to deal with their dreams, and he would watch, getting quite the show out of it.

Pinkie’s attempt to get them to think about cats was a good one, but her team was smart enough to realize what she was doing – and realize that there really were things they weren’t supposed to think about. Pinkie had control over her mind, or was using some sort of meta-awareness to keep the dreamworld’s nature at bay. But Jotaro, Flutterfree, and Vriska couldn’t.

Dio appeared, grinning. “Hey Jotaro! I keep coming back and there’s nothing you can do about it! WRYYYYYYYY!”

A full-vampire Flutterfree appeared next to him, blood eternally dripping from her mouth and hooves. She screeched.

In front of Vriska, another troll appeared – one with a teal Libra symbol on her shirt and a sword in her hand. She spoke with a nasally voice that would have been funny if it wasn’t so threatening. “Hey Vriska. No offense, but you need to die. Actually, scratch that, take as much offense as you want.”

Vriska clenched her fist. “Fuck… Terezi…”

“Flutterfree…” Jotaro said.

“Lolo’s not doing anything!” Flutterfree blurted, spreading her Stand out as much as she could. “All it does is tell me they’re fabrications! It’s not making them vanish!”

The Everyman folded his hands. “That’s because this dream world physically creates the things within your mind. I’m able to stay completely fixated upon this feast, so that’s what I get. You all have things in the back of your mind that come to the front when you don’t want to think. By the way, you all just lost the game.”

“FUCK YOU!” Vriska shouted. “FUCK YOU IN PARTICULAR!”

Terezi rushed to stab her in her distraction.

“STAR PLATINUM: THE WORLD!”

“ZA WARUDO!”

Jotaro managed to kick Terezi out of the way with his leg while Star Platinum blocked The World. This did not stop Dio from grabbing Jotaro physically, starting to drain his blood. Jotaro recoiled, forcing Dio’s hand out of him, but Dio got one last hit in, freezing that part of Jotaro’s body.

“And time resumes,” they both said at once.
Flutterfree tied her vampire self up in Lolo and Vriska kicked Terezi in the shins.

All of the enemies recovered completely.

“You need to stop thinking about how they can win,” the Everyman suggested.

“Or just use excessive force!” Pinkie shouted, hitting all three of them with a hammer.

“Won’t work. They’re still thinking ‘what if they get back up?’ Sad, but true.”

“Help us!”

“Why should I?” the Everyman asked. “I have no say in what you think. Even with a controlled mind I can’t remove your dreams. I could merely scramble them temporarily.”

“You know what I mean,” Pinkie muttered.

“But that is a secret.”

“It won’t be for long.”

“…What?”

“Go check out the professor for a moment, get smarter.”

The Everyman looked around in a panic at his secret laboratory – dozens of pieces of technology ‘stolen’ from other universes were kept here, behind this magic door in the school. Magic wands, nanobot command centers, a few alien pieces of fruit… He didn’t particularly care for any of these, they were just materials for his true work.

A red star-shaped crystal levitated in the middle of a high-power electromagnetic field, at least one bolt of electricity hitting the crystal at every moment. It was certainly painful, but the only way to ensure his creation stayed where it was. He had been using devices and knowledge from other universes to create this crystal device, which would allow him to channel magic much more effectively on a much larger scale, even in universes like this where magic was almost nothing!

The only problem was that the mind within the crystal device was broken – it would lash out at everything, including him. It couldn’t be controlled yet. It still needed work. That said, everything else about it was complete – the power, the computing systems, the magic… He was so close; he couldn’t let this be destroyed now.

He cackled – all he had to do was act normal until he had something on Corona and her team. Oh, there was an idea – they probably weren’t even recorded as students! He carefully left the secret room and went to the principal's office, taking out the list of students.

Temporary Transfer Students: Cassandra Zimmerman and Olivia Velazquez.

That was a bust. What else could he do to them without raising suspicion? He’d just have to watch and find out.

The Everyman felt her horn tingle. She rubbed her head.

“Icey?” Minna asked. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing, just a daydream a bit close to home that requires a bit of my attention.”
“That’s not how daydreams work!”

The Everyman chuckled. “It’s how mine do. I’m probably a little crazy, but it works for m- ow.” She rubbed her head. “Yeah, this one’s demanding my attention…”

Allure noticed she was rubbing her head. “You doing okay?”

“I’ve got a little headache… Excuse me.”

“You can’t shut your horn off can you?”

*I could, but someone else needs it right now.* “…Apparently not.”

Allure shook her head. “We need to get you to a hospital. Sorry Minna, we’ll have to cut this festival short.”

Minna understood. “We’ll get you better Icey! Hospitals always do that! They’re the best.”

*Instead of being afraid of hospitals, she finds them comforting. Interesting.*

They began to lead her away. In many ways, this was good – she could start operating on autopilot and look a little out of it. It would make the doctors actually wonder if something was up. They would never find evidence of the Everyman, but it would keep them from demanding her attention.

She really wished she wasn’t in a world so close to the professor life – she’d prefer one where his little plight wouldn’t even register due to the distance.

The Everyman was very glad his unicorn life was nearby – regretfully that experience was going to have to be muddled for the sake of a longer-term experiment. Plus, it might be worthwhile to consider playing a clinically insane role over there.

He sat in the cafeteria, eating a sandwich. He observed Corona and Olivia closely as they did their cafeteria research. The watchers were being watched, as it were.

Then the watcher of the watchers was noticed. They saw him looking at them and exchanged a few words he couldn’t hear. They started walking over to him.

He tensed – but he couldn’t visibly tense for them, so he shafted the tense emotions to his other lives. In Ponyville, this made no visible change, but in the world with Pinkie it did. He started losing his grip on his table of food in his mind’s eye, an image of a broken red crystal starting to form instead.

“Frick,” he said, the fork melting out of his hand.

Jotaro suplexed Dio right into the Everyman, crashing the table. That was the final straw – the table vanished completely, leaving only the cracked red gem.

A ring of magic surrounded it, blasting Vriska right through her brain. It was a decidedly un-Just and non-Heroic death, so she came back in a few seconds – but it was enough to grab everyone’s attention.

“We could really use Nova for this one…”

“STAR PLATINUM: THE WORLD!”

The Everyman smiled warmly at Corona and Olivia. “Ah, the new students! Welcome!”
“Mind if we sit here?” Corona asked. “Trying to get to know the teachers.”

“I don’t mind at all!” He took a bite of his sandwich – it really wasn’t anything compared to the infinite drumsticks. “So, where are you from?”

“Denver,” Corona said.

“Mexico City,” Olivia added with a smirk. “Well, that was where I was born. More recently Salt Lake City.”

“Mexico City must have been an interesting place.”

“Oh, it was, but I’m sure you know how high the crime is there. I was not sad to leave that place. Adios, cartels!”

“Where are you from?” Corona asked.

“A little here, a little there. Born in Topeka, actually. Not as boring as they say but ‘boring’ is still an apt description.”

“You’re the science teacher, right?”

The Everyman nodded, smirking. “Why yes! My theories are wasted here, however.”

“I bet you have some fun experiments going on behind the scenes, huh?”

“Of course. I’ve got several rods full of neon gas in the labroom. Noble gases have many interesting effects as I’m sure you can understand.”

Corona leaned in. “Have you, by chance, picked up any unusual energy readings around here?”

“Picking up ‘unusual energy readings’ is an absurd concept hardly based in reality. What do you mean? Radiation? Electromagnetism?”

“Anything, really,” Corona said. “Like the things I’m getting off this little device I have in my hand.”

His cry of pained surprise was shunted to his other self, worrying Allure and Minna.

“What is that device?”

“A scanner. A scanner for magic. A scanner for magic that pegs you with a particular magic signature. A particular magic signature that matches a teleport we recently found.”

“I have no idea what yo-”

Corona tried to grab him with her bare hand. That could not happen.

The Everyman put all the focus he possibly could into the professor’s life, pushing the others even more over the edge. The doctors felt the need to put her in an MRI machine. The dreamworld fell into a nightmare completely dominated by the red crystal and a laughing, maniacal version of Corona. Dio, Terezi, and evil Flutterfree were vaporized.

The Everyman lashed out against Corona with magic, shoving her far away. Olivia pulled out her concealed weapon and fired, but the Everyman tapped into another life and summoned a gigantic sword into his hand that blocked the incoming fire. He summoned a magical hat to his head that increased his jumping ability tenfold. He rushed her, calculating everything out to the exact moment.
A magic touch here, an slice here, and a shove there…

Before Olivia knew what was happening, she had a cut across her midsection and a bruise on her head.

“Olivia, stop fighting! It’s him, we just have to follow his signature backward!”

The Everyman didn’t give Olivia a chance, an invisible concussive blast forcing her into unconsciousness. He didn’t waste time trying to actually kill her – he needed to get Corona out of the picture without letting her touch him.

Corona ran down the hallway through the crowd of terrified, screaming kids. She followed the Everyman’s magic signature, but he knew that was exactly what she was doing. She found the entrance to the laboratory – a wall that didn’t appear to have a door, but actually did if one had magic sense.

He was waiting inside with a giant laser gun. He fired. She blocked with something invisible…

*Her Stand. I need information.*

“What IS CORONA’S STAND!?” she demanded.

“What?” Allure blurted.

“Something… something’s in my head! And it won’t go away unless I find the answer to that question!”

The Everyman dodged a beam from Corona.

Jotaro had to save the Everyman from the dream-Corona’s attack. “Wake up!” The Everyman did not respond.

“Uh… Corona’s stand is Bacon Pancakes, a long range and short range mix Stand…” Allure said, panic evident in her voice. “The large section flattens people, the small bits pin them?”

The Everyman tapped into a version of himself with Stand-sight, and he could see the red pins coming at him. He decided to go with Star Platinum, punching all the pins away in an instant. Then he froze time, punching her in the back. That should have broken her back – but it didn’t. She had too many magic defenses.

Next move he needed anti-magic…

“That DIDN’T WORK!” she blurted, to Allure. “That didn’t work!”

“What’re Corona’s weaknesses?” Vriska asked.

“Does she even have any?” Flutterfree asked, dodging another burst of overly-flashy magic.

“Fire hates ice and water,” Jotaro observed, still holding the Everyman.

“That doesn’t help us,” Vriska muttered.

“It helps him,” Pinkie said, pointing at the Everyman. “Hey, focus completely on her if you want to win, okay?”

“PINKIE!”
“Deep… Chill…” The Everyman said, summoning ice to his fingers. Time had resumed, but he still had Star Platinum to take care of Bacon Pancakes. The anti-magic field was mostly working, but she had taken to using firebending against him. It would only be a matter of time until he found a combination of abilities that destroyed her. He was getting closer with each try. She might fall now…

And then she teleported behind him.

What was she doi-

“NO!”

“What can I do to help!?” Allure said in panic. Minna was crying.

“What’s wrong with you!?” Vriska shouted. “We should really just let her shoot him!”

Corona placed her bare hand around the red crystal. She had known she couldn’t beat the Everyman, but she had seen something in his creation. Something she could use.

Impossible, it was a raging lunatic of a machine, how could she do anything with it!?

“Calm yourself,” Corona said. “I know your life has been hard – but I can help you turn it around.”

“Empathy… Of course…”

“Stand by ready!” The crystal announced.

“Thank you… Raging Sights,” Corona said, holding the crystal high. It reacted with her entire body and her red necklace. She floated into the air, engulfed in a powerful magic light.

“THAT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE ME!”

“Icey, snap out of it! Icey!”

“Why is Corona suddenly getting bigger?” Flutterfree asked.

Pinkie smiled. “Because the Everyman forgot to worry about what was behind him. He was busy focusing completely on Corona.”

Clever pony.

Corona’s body lost the false teenage appearance it had, converting back to that of a full-grown woman. Her hair extended itself down to her shins, the bacon-curls shining with even more luster than normal. Pony ears popped out of her head, twitching in the magical breeze. From the middle of her forehead a brilliant spiral horn sprang forth, punctuating the world with her magic. Two magnificent wings burst out from her back, the bright yellow feathers filling the air.

The red crystal and her red necklace swirled around each other, both shifting to a shape similar to her cutie mark and taking positions on the backs of her hands. A white battle-dress formed around her body, red streaks flowing like fire. White gloves formed around her hands, along with matching boots on her feet. Her sunglasses became red and pointed, no longer the lenses that hid her face from the world, becoming instead a translucent accessory that accentuated her eyes for all to see.

Bacon Pancakes summoned behind her, rotating slowly behind her head, the eight pins floating in the opposite direction.

The Everyman stood his ground. He’d just have to reach into some higher, more destructive powers
that might destroy the whole school. But now that she’d gotten it to work, he needed that crystal back.

Corona rushed to him, placing a hand on his forehead. As she willed it, the fingertips of her white gloves vanished, allowing her to come in direct contact with him.

And then the Everyman was singular.

“…It’s been years since I had a single consciousness,” he said, looking at his hands.

Corona looked at him, raising an eyebrow. “This isn’t exactly what I expected either.” She gestured at his mindscape. “Very gray.”

“I’m the average of so many,” the Everyman said, beginning to pace. “So of course it would all consolidate into something neutral.”

“Who are you?”

“I am the Everyman.”

“I got that,” Corona said, eyes narrow. “I can feel all your different bodies and your different lives, and how you’re all connected by some single thread. What I don’t get is who you are.”

“I’m surprised you’re able to mentally handle even that.”

Corona ruffled her wings. “I think I just did something a bit beyond what I normally do? I’m empathically connected with a machine intelligence that you’d tortured into insanity. Raging Sights was lashing out because of you. If you had treated it with kindness from the start, everything would have worked out for you.”

“That was but one life. A mistake that singular one made,” the Everyman said, looking at nothing. “You cannot hold it to all of me.”

“Why the hell not!?”

“Because I do not attempt for consistency.” Images of his other lives appeared around them. “In this world, I am a pony and I strive to daydream and be kind to others. In this world, I am a curious man stuck in a dream world plagued by boredom. In this, I am a simple businessman. In this, I am an archivist for Celestia City, serving your people well with my efforts. In the world you were visiting, I was a high school professor who wanted to unlock the powers of magic in a world that didn’t naturally have much.”

Corona narrowed her eyes. “But you’re not a hive-mind. You all are the same person, in a way.”

“That is true.”

A memory surfaced of a boy looking at a crossroads in a forest in the middle of winter. He didn’t know which way to go. He was immensely uncertain…

And then there were two boys, each one going a different direction.

“That’s where it began,” the Everyman said. “I was no longer Isaac Rowan. I was the Everyman. I eventually found that, in addition to splits, I ended up in universes where the past was different. Where people took different paths. Where I was a pony, or a woman, or otherwise.” He gestured around. “I am now spread so far across the multiverse that my collective consciousness cannot be
consistent. So I stopped stressing over it. Sometimes I’m a criminal, other times I’m not. All my lives are their own, and yet they’re all me. In some I am the hero of a dozen worlds. In others I’m an omnicidal maniac. All of me has just learned to live with all the rest of me.”

Corona looked at him, narrowing her eyes. “And yet you can consolidate into a single consciousness. I’m talking to it.”

“Do I seem good? Evil? Chaotic? Ordered? Do I seem to have anything about me besides thoughts?”

“…No.”

“I am a truly neutral presence,” the Everyman said. “That said, I do have preferences and desires.”

“Such as?”

“I’d rather remain a secret. My existence is significantly freer if multiversal societies don’t know about me.”

“No,” Corona said. “No, I won’t keep your secret. I don’t care if some of your lives are heroes, people need to be able to defend against the part of you that is evil. The part that kills people.”

“I’ve already terminated the ‘professor’ life, you don’t have to worry about what I did to you there anymore. I could give you much in return for keeping my secret. I could tell you any number of things.” He paused. “You want the secret to easy immortality, do you not?”

Corona glanced at her wings, grimacing. “Yes.”

“Will you submit to having knowledge of me scrubbed from your mind in exchange for it?”

Corona looked him in the eyes. “No. I will find immortality on my own.”

“You already have.”

“For everyone else.”

The Everyman narrowed his eyes. “I just want to live my lives in peace, Corona. Is that too much to ask?”

“Yes. Because there are lives of yours I don’t accept.”

“…I can attempt to kill you.”

Corona raised her hand, a magic circle appearing around the red crystal there. She had no idea if it was Raging Sights or her necklace – probably a bit of both, if she was honest. “We’re not in the physical realm, Everyman. Your mind is strong. But you are currently only one mind here. I could destroy it.”

“You might not succeed.”

“Do you want to take that chance? I don’t even know how powerful I am right now. I’ll probably be forced to push the limit, and that could have a lot of interesting side effects.”

“Is there no way I can cut a deal with you?”

“None,” Corona asserted.
“…Very well,” the Everyman said. “My secret is out. I would appreciate it if you did not reveal what I am in the cases where I am just trying to live a simple life that has nothing to do with you. It would be cruel to tear apart families.”

Corona nodded slowly. “I’m not heartless. I’m just going to make sure everyone knows you exist.”

“…A shame,” the Everyman said, shaking his head. “…Now, do you mind releasing my intelligence so I can wake all my lives up? They’re all currently catatonic and worrying a lot of people.”

Corona nodded. “Okay.” She released him.

He could no longer see her – he really had terminated the professor’s life because it was basically worthless now that the entire scenario had been destroyed. As an office worker, he kept watching television. As a man stuck in a dream, he realized Pinkie’s team had managed to leave the universe somehow, saving him in the process. As a pony, she realized the League and Minna were all worried about her, which filled her heart with joy.

“I’m okay now. …Thanks for trying.” She shook her head. “Now… I think I’d like to sleep.”

“…Okay,” Allure said. “I need to take Minna home anyway. Call if you need anything, okay? I can get it.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Pinkie said. “You’re lucky, you know.”

He grunted. “I suppose…”

“Corona went easy on you. Think of how much of Raging Sight’s insanity she must have absorbed into herself for that to work. Then she purged it. That couldn’t have been easy.”

“No… No I suppose it wasn’t.”

“Care to explain what you’re talking about?” Vriska asked.

“Talk to Corona later, she’ll explain it better than me,” Pinkie said, helping the Everyman up. “Go find a new life for this one.”

The Everyman nodded. “I will.” He walked off in a random direction, not sure what this new life was going to be.

He eventually found a hotel run by fuzzy rodent creatures. They accepted him as one of their own. He just rolled with it, going to the bed and falling into it.

She fell asleep, letting the stress of the day wash away.

He turned off the TV and went to bed. There was nothing left for him to do.

Elsewhere, the Everyman kept up an active set of lifestyles… But those here decided their day was done. The fatigue on them had been too much. The Hat Kid left the files to be managed by others, those in the versions of Earth Shimmer put their plans on hold, and one universe where he was a dog he decided to let the cat go for once.

All because of one obsessive life, an insane crystal, and a fiery woman…
Nanoha picked up Raging Sights. The red crystal had retained the form of Sunset’s cutie mark even after being removed. “So, how did you enjoy your magical girl transformation?”

“Not all that odd, to be honest. I’ve experienced things like it before. …Though I was never naked for a split second before…” Corona said. Even without Raging Sights on, she had retained the wings, horn, ears, and extended hair – though she had no special outfit or awesome red shades.

“You’ll find it actually takes an instant to happen, and it’ll seem like less and less to you as time goes on,” Nanoha said, pushing Raging Sights back to her.

“…You’re giving it back!?”

“It’s merely a device based on our designs,” Nanoha said. “Of course it’s highly illegal to make one of these things, but you didn’t make it. You just found it. And you helped it come to terms with itself in, well, in an instant.”

“It took a bit longer than that, mindscape-time,” Corona admitted.

“Who cares? Raging Sights will want to stay with you. Princess.”

Corona laughed. “Heheh… Yeah…” she ruffled her wings. “Celestia these things feel weird…”

“There are many who would be glad to teach you how to use them. And I can teach you how to use this powerful Device. You are already an exceptionally powerful mage, Corona. With a Device and the power boost you just received, you have the power to rival me.”

“Wait, what?”

“Not only that, but I hear you know everything about the fundamental nature of physics?” Nanoha rubbed the back of her head. “I never studied that… I bet you could find a lot of bizarre tricks with all the math you know. Usually devices just handle complex calculations for the mage. But you already do complex calculations. Think about it.”

“…I just became ‘OP as all hell’ didn’t I?”

“You’ve still got to train a bit, but yeah, that’s a fair assessment.”

Corona smirked. “Sweet.”

“Take good care of Raging Sights. And Bacon Pancakes.”

“I will!” Corona said, bowing. “Thanks for letting me keep it.” She lifted Raging Sights into the air, transforming into her dress, gloves, and awesome red shades. “…Nice.”

“Your friends are waiting for you outside,” Nanoha said.

Corona smirked. “This should be fun.” She strode out the double doors into the presence of Lady Rarity, Lieshy, Olivia, Toph… and Eve.

“You look amazing,” Lady Rarity decreed.

“Like a princess,” Eve said, walking up to Corona, smiling with pride. “…Luna and I had a talk.”

“Oh?”

“Princess Corona Sunset Shimmer, PhD, you have a coronation ceremony to attend.”
“…I do?”

“YOU DO!” Lieshy shouted, letting her excitement get the better of her. “You’re no longer stuck with the title Protégé!”

Eve put a hoof on Corona. “…Celestia would have been proud of you.”

“I… I… I can’t process this, give me a sec. What exactly did I do? I just forced wings to appear!”

“That’s basically what I did,” Eve admitted. “I performed a great act of magic and became the Princess of Friendship. You performed a great act of empathy and understanding – not just with Raging Sights, but also with the Everyman.”

“So what, Princess of Empathy? That sounds… Even cheesier than Friendship.”

Eve smiled. “I don’t exactly have a title for you yet… But you’re our defender. Our guardian. A Princess of Fire, or Passion.”

Corona smiled brightly. “I accept, on one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“I get to wear this all the time instead of trying to get into royal garb.”

Eve let out a chuckle. “Condition granted.”

“Oh, did you finally settle?” Olivia asked.

Corona glanced at her wings. “Yeah… Yeah I think I did. I’m not a unicorn. I’m not a human. I’m this.” She spread her arms wide, lighting her horn and swiveling her fuzzy pony ears. “And boy does it feel good to be me.”

Toph met Corona’s hand and the two of them clenched tightly. “I hope I still get to order you around.”

“As the Princess of defending or something, I think my defense of Equestria can be done the best under your command, and part of Lady Rarity’s team. We will continue protecting Merodi Universalis from threats only we can deal with.”

Lady Rarity let out a sigh of relief. “Good. I was afraid you were going to leave us for a moment there.”

Corona pulled them all into a big hug. “Not today, girls. Not today.”

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Corona’s coronation went much the way’s Twilight’s had gone. Luna introduced her to the world, there was a song sung about her, she got a crown, and she gave a speech to the ponies of Equis Vitis. The main difference was that she wasn’t an alicorn per se, and that there were a lot of humans in the audience.

It was all a blur to her, to be frank.

After, though, she went to her family. Only a few of them had shown up – she supposed that was her fault for all the mistakes she had made. Her mother was there, and they shared a moment.
“I always knew you had it in you.”

“I didn’t.”

“That’s my Sunset,” she said.

Corona nodded. “Yeah… Yeah I am.”

The rest who had shown up tried to be friendly, but only a few didn’t just come off as awkward or forced. That is, until she came to her cousin, Sunburst, Nova at his side.

“Well, looks like you actually did ‘graduate’,” Sunburst said with a smile. “I think you’ve lost several bets.”

“You here to collect?”

“N-not at all!”

“Burst, I joke, I joke,” Corona said, putting a hand in his mane and scruffing it. “How have you two been doing?”

Nova rubbed her enlarged belly. “Well, I don’t feel like I can move properly, and living with Sunburst for an extended period of time is a mixture of wonderful and aggravating…”

“What?” Sunburst blurted.

“Holy Celestia… Sunburst, I had to slap you with a newspaper to get you to notice me two days ago!”

“It was morning, I wasn’t awake!”

“I mean, yeah, buuuuut…” She tapped her hooves together, about to say something else. But then she froze in place. “The baby just kicked.”

“Really?” Sunburst put his hoof to her. “Lemme fee-”

“Sunburst!” Nova said, blushing. “Not in public…”

“Oh!” He flushed redder than she was. “S-s-sorry!”

Corona kept her smile – but inwardly she got a sinking feeling. They had been forced together a little too early. She had faith they’d be able to work it out, but clearly things were going to be rocky for them.

She put a hand on both their shoulders – making sure her gloves were still on. “You two are adorable, you know that?”

They both nodded slowly, still flushed.

“Good. Carry on then.” She winked. “Now excuse me, I’ve got to sit with the other princesses for a feast.”

“You do that,” Nova said, nervously.

“And who knows, maybe one day you’ll graduate too.”
“And be what, the Princess of Fate?” Nova said. “Eh… If it happens I’ll take it, but I’m definitely not going to just go seek it out.”

“I’d like to be a prince,” Sunburst mused.

“Of course you would…”

Corona left them to their strange relationship, teleporting into the main dining hall of Canterlot Castle. She found it interesting that she could use both her hands and her horn for magic, making it a lot easier to control than she expected either one alone could ever do.


And now her, Corona.

Luna extended a hoof. “Welcome to our ranks, Corona Shimmer, Princess of Passion, Fire, and Protection.”

Corona shook Luna’s hoof. “Glad to be here.”

“And that makes… six, six Princesses,” Paradigm said. “Think we could use the Elements of Harmony now?”

Flurry raised an eyebrow at her younger sister. “…The Elements still have bearers.”

“There are alternates we could test on!”

“Probably couldn’t,” Corona said. “The magical energies of the Elements are almost always attuned to specific individuals. Eve and Luna might be able to wield them all given their special connections, but just handing them out to the six of us likely wouldn’t produce the same effect.”

Eve clapped her hooves. “Finally, someone who appreciates science!”

“I appreciate science. Sometimes,” Paradigm said.

“Dear, you’re so inconsistent it doesn’t even matter,” Shizuka said.

“But that’s why everyone loves me!”

“The exemplification of change, my sister everyone!” Flurry commented, rolling her eyes.

Corona smiled. She had a feeling she was going to like this new aspect of her life.

“Hey, Corona,” Eve said, walking up to her. “It’s approaching evening. There’s something I’d like you to do. If you want.”

“…What’s that?”

“Will you lower the sun tonight?”

Corona was startled by the request. She nodded slowly, trying to keep herself calm.

Eve led her to a balcony, gesturing at the sun. “Just try to touch it with your magic. It should move
mostly on its own after that.”

Corona took a deep breath, lit her horn, and pushed her hands forward. She felt the sun in her hands, a small ball of fire. It was as if it was a bead sitting on a wire, and she just had to push it a little. The sun wobbled a bit as she did so, but it set beneath the horizon without any difficulty.

*There,* she thought to herself. *I… I guess I got what I wanted. And what you wanted.*

She swore she could hear the sound of Celestia’s motherly laugh.
You know, I’ve seen her every day for a couple of weeks, and every morning I’m still struck with how adorable she is,” Nova said, looking over the edge of the crib at her three-week old daughter, the tiny Stardust. She took after her mother much more than her father, with a purple coat the color of Nova’s mane and a pinkish mane the same shade as Nova’s coat. However, her father was not absent from her, for her mane had an orange stripe running through it that accentuated her horn.

“She is quite the ball of big eyes and sparkles,” Sunburst said, nervously checking the crib for the millionth time just to ensure it was perfectly safe.

“Sunburst, she’s fine in there. She’s never even tried to get out once.”

“You know the moment you leave she’s going to try,” Sunburst said. “She has your eyes. I can see the plotting. The intense machinations…”

“She’s less than a month old, Sunburst,” Nova deadpanned. “She’s not going to be able to do anything.”

“And that’s the other thing! What if I screw something up?” He grabbed his mane. “I am going to turn into Shining Armor. I’ll to lose all sleep…”

“You aren’t a prince, Sunburst,” Nova pointed out. “You can be by her side all day without stressing. …If you’d just let yourself relax.”

“But what if I get absorbed in a spell and she decides she suddenly knows magic?”

“That never ha-” she remembered what Pinkie Pie had told her about the Cakes. “Okay, that does happen. But you know the magic inhibition spell, Sunburst. You used it on Flurry!”

“Flurry wasn’t my daughter!”

Nova put a hoof to his mouth. “…Do I need to stay home today, Sunburst?”

“N-no, you’ve been wanting to get back to it for months now and…”

“Sunburst, if you need me to stay home today, I will. Renee will understand.”

“I… I know. But I’ve seen you going stir crazy every since we had her. You need to get back out there.”

“I can wait a day.”

“And I’ll keep being uncertain of myself until I actually do spend a day alone with her.” Sunburst laughed nervously. “Might as well be today!”

Nova smiled, kissing him on the cheek. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

“…No?”

Nova rolled her eyes. “Learn quick, I don’t want to have to explain to her why her father doesn’t know he’s cool.”
“…Nova I’m the polar opposite of ‘cool’.”

“Nooot to me you’re not~!”

Sunburst’s glasses slid down his muzzle. He blinked.

Nova found herself amused by this cute reaction. “Heh. See you tonight, Sunburst. Or earlier. We wrap these things up early all the time…” She left the nursery and set out through their house. It was a simple construction, built much like Sunburst’s old home in the Crystal Empire – lined with bookshelf after bookshelf.

It struck Nova that she’d been living in a crystal castle ever since she left her Village until a few months ago. This was her first home in a long time that was actually hers. Or hers and Sunburst’s. They had argued over exactly how that worked before realizing it was stupid. That’s how a lot of arguments worked between them. Shouting, then slow mutual realization that it didn’t matter.

They weren’t exactly in the most solid of relationships, but Nova believed she was happy with how everything had turned out. Sunburst felt the same way – she knew him well enough to be certain of that. They had both given a few things up… But Stardust was more than worth that, she was certain of it.

…She still felt guilty that Sunburst had to give up more than her. It was one of the main reasons she let him dictate what most of the house looked like. Shelves upon shelves of ancient knowledge everywhere.

Nova did demand a kite room though. It was the best room, hooves down.

She left for work. Which was to say she stepped outside and teleported across Ponyville to Renee’s castle, walking into the main crystal hall. “GUESS WHO’S BACK?!” She shouted, grinning. “That’s right, the newest mother in the neighborhood, Nova Glimmer!”

The entire hall erupted in applause. Jotaro made a point of walking up to her and holding her high, letting her soak in the applause.

Nova waved. “I’m back and better than ever!”

“You really are,” Jotaro said, deep meaning behind his words. He took her right to Renee and set her down.

Renee smiled at her. “Nova, glad to have you back.”

“You have no idea how much I’ve wanted to be back.”

Renee nodded with a coy smile. “Don’t I know it.” She handed her a data pad. “You’ve chosen quite the day to come back, the team’s going to take out a Skiff.”

Nova blinked. “The world has no atmosphere?”

“No planets at all.” Pinkie said, suddenly standing on Nova’s back. “Just stars – and only plain stars at that!”

“But we’re getting strange readings every time we open up a portal,” Vriska added, kicking Pinkie off Nova. “So we’re going to investigate.”

Flutterfree appeared last. She hugged Nova. “…Welcome home.”
Nova chuckled. “…Thanks.”

And then time froze – excluding her and Jotaro. “Nani!?”

“I wasn’t prepared for that…” Nova mused; she should have been stopped.

“I did it,” Aradia said, floating in. “Jotaro, I’m going to talk to her a little, okay? Now run out of your time stop.”

Jotaro nodded, allowing his time stop to fall, leaving just Nova and Aradia.

“…Do I need to go to the future and save the world or something?” Nova asked.

“Oh no, nothing like that!” Aradia chuckled. “I just want to congratulate you. Not a single time did you accelerate your pregnancy or your time spent with Sunburst off work.”

“Well… I’m sure you know how it all started…”

Aradia nodded. “You don’t need to feel ashamed, Nova.”

“I kinda do?”

“It’s in the past though, it is what it is,” Aradia said. “No that’s not an opening for you to mention both of us could just go back and change it.”

Nova smirked. “I was going to say…”

“Look, the point is, you had the power to go back and fix it – but you didn’t. You also had the power to make your wait shorter – but you didn’t. You lived through it just like everyone else, using the opportunity to build up your relationship with Sunburst. …You’ll be really glad you did that, later down the line.”

Nova nodded. “Yeah…”

“Basically… I’m just here to tell you good job. You did what so many with power over time can’t do – wait. Even I don’t wait all the time. I’m not sure if I would have in your position. You’re a strong mare, Nova. I just wanted to grab you here and tell you that.”

Nova looked at her with a proud smile. “I… I think I needed that. Thanks for noticing, Aradia.”

“Glad to help!”

“Are you sure there’s no danger from time I need to help you deal with?”

“No, already dealt with the loose TARDIS and chrono-demon. There’s no future threats I can see that I feel the need to give cryptic prophecies about… Hrm…”

Nova chuckled. “It’s fine. You can go back to guarding time.”

“I will! I have a series of funerals stuck in a time loop to sort out!”

“That sounds right up your alley.”

“I have it on my authority that it’s going to be the most fun I had in three timeline splits.”

“…Right.”
Aradia winked. “See ya!”

She was gone, and time resumed.

“Yare yare daze…” Jotaro commented.

“Hm?” Vriska said, confused.

“Time manipulation conversation,” Pinkie said. “None of our business. Let’s just get in the Skiff already!”

Renee nodded, pressing a button on a remote control. A sleek, crescent-shaped craft made of white metal appeared in front of them. It had a single cockpit with six seats arranged, one in the front and three in the back, creating a splayed triangle. The seats were adjustable to human or pony proportions, and could easily sit virtually any member of Merodi Universalis who wasn’t too big. The clear windshield popped open, inviting all of them inside.

Pinkie leaped into the main seat. “CAPTAIN PINKIE PIE HAS TAKEN THE HELM!”

Flutterfree and Nova sat in the seats behind her, while Vriska and Jotaro took seats on opposite ends of the back, leaving one empty. The windshield slid back down, sealing the compartment from the outside elements.

Renee tapped her ear, activating a microphone. “This is Renee to the Primary Team. Everything ready?”

“Ready!” Pinkie blurted.

“Wrong. Seatbelts.”

“Oopsie!” Pinkie said with a giggle, ordering all of them to put their seatbelts on.

“…Are we in one of those shows legally required to do this?” Flutterfree asked.

“Nope. That’s the joke.”

“Oh.” After a moment she shook her head. “I don’t get it.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“We’re ready now,” Nova reported. “I just did a scan of all the systems. Operating at a hundred percent.”

“Good luck, Primary,” Renee said with a salute. “Find something fun.”

“We will!” Pinkie promised. The Skiff floated an inch off the ground, activating its dimensional drive. It didn’t bother with creating a portal and holding it open – it went for speed, vanishing from Equis Vitis in an instant and appearing in the other universe.

The universe that had been dubbed Starfield. It was exactly as advertised – they were in orbit around a main sequence yellow star with no planets around it. There wasn’t even an asteroid, or a comet. Just a star.

An error message appeared on Nova’s hoof-screen. “…The beacon-probe couldn’t transmit.”

“We knew that was a problem,” Flutterfree said. “This universe’s physics doesn’t allow full-universe
transmissions.”

“Huh. Weird.” She made a mental note to check that out later, but otherwise didn’t dwell on it.

“Take her away!” Pinkie ordered.

“You’re the one with the steering wheel,” Vriska pointed out.

“It appears I am.” Pinkie winked at Vriska. She placed her hoof on the wheel and grinned.

“Activating wormhole drive. Goal: the predicted source of the unusual energy readings.”

“What kind of unusual energy readings?” Nova asked.

“Unusual.”

Nova narrowed her eyes. “Pinkie…”

“Something in this universe is giving off ‘waves’ that fundamentally shift the unique signature of this universe’s matter back and forth. It’s not something we’ve seen before.”

“Thank you.”

“Wormhole drive spooled!” Pinkie declared. “Here we go!”

The Wormhole drive was a peculiar mode of transport created from a flawed Earth Tau’ri prototype that represented the cutting edge of Merodi Universalis technology. It was able to tear a hole in spacetime and connect it to another location within the same universe. The exact effectiveness of the drive depended on the local physics, but if full wormholes were allowed, there was no effective limit on the distance they could move in a single instant.

The space around the Skiff popped. Everything around them squished and rotated like putty, but they didn’t feel anything – even though technically they were the ones being squished while most of the universe remained static. When reality righted itself, the star patterns were different, with stars only appearing relatively ‘beneath’ them, indicating their position above a galactic disc.

In front of them…

“…What the hell is that?” Vriska asked.

“…I have no idea,” Nova admitted.

~~~

“You’ll like this world,” Sugarcoat had said when she gave Corona the coordinates to ‘Unnamed Earth 1117’. She had refused to give any further details on what the universe was, why Corona would like it, or even if she should bring the rest of the team along.

Lady Rarity had been in the mood for an exploration mission though, so they were all prepared to check out a recommendation from a close friend.

Corona waved her hands together and lit her horn. “Here we go… Let’s see if I can pull this off…” She shunted magic into Raging Sights, having the device run the higher-order numbers needed for the spell. She created two magic circles in front of her, each rotating a separate direction. The vibrations of her magic rippled against the dimensional fabric, punching a hole through reality to another universe. The circles flashed, punching another hole into that universe. This repeated a third time, finally connecting to Unnamed Earth 1117.
“Stable…” Olivia said, checking her scans. “You’re going to give Seraphim a run for its money, soon.”

“Seraphim has no known limit,” Corona said. “That wasn’t easy.”

“Stop underselling yourself, that was impressive,” Lady Rarity said. “We’ll never need a dimensional device again, or need to worry that it’ll break.”

“Universes without magic knocked. They want to scare you again.”

“We’ll always be able to prepare before going into one of those. Plus, I hear physics-anchor technology is coming along nicely.”

Corona shrugged, stepping through the portal. Since this was basic exploration and the world had not made first contact with Merodi Universalis yet, Lieshy and Lady Rarity didn’t bother trying to disguise their forms. It was generally easier to convince humans other universes existed with a talking pegasus and spider-horse in full armor.

They were in a large city – Corona had no idea which one, or if it even had an analogue on most Earths. It was filled with humans going about their day like one would expect in a city – selling hotdogs, waving down cabs, texting and not looking where they were walking… General human stuff.

The odd thing was those who noticed Lady Rarity’s crew were curious, but didn’t feel any need to go out of their way and react. They seemed slightly confused by their presence, but not awed, impressed, or even scared. They had the faces of people who felt like they should recognize someone, but didn’t.

“Curious,” Lady Rarity said. “Why do you suppose they don’t find us all that unusual?”

To answer their question, a man with wings for arms flew overhead, running away from a man in a blue and red suit using white string to ‘sling’ across the sky. They left Corona’s sight just as soon as they entered it, but she understood everything.

“Oh. My. Gosh.” She said, putting her hands to her face and squeeing.

“...I’m lost,” Lieshy said.

“I’m not,” Olivia said, smirking. “I know exactly why we’re here now.”

“That was Spider-Man!” Corona trilled. “Spider! Man! One of the best superheroes in all of comic history! …Well, not as good as the Flash, or Batman, or Iron Man, or Thor, or Doctor Strange, or… Oh I wonder which continuity this universe i-” Her jaw dropped as she saw another man fly overhead – he wore a blue suit with a large S on the front, and a cape trailing behind him. “…Superman…” she said meekly.

“That name I recognize,” Lieshy said. “So, we’re in the superhero world?”

“This doesn’t make any sense, Superman’s DC, but Spider-Man’s Marvel, how… We’re in a fusion universe! Sugarcoat I have no idea how you found this but you’re the best!”

Lady Rarity turned to Olivia. “Care to explain her reaction?”

Olivia opened her mouth, but Corona beat her to it. “I love comic book superheroes. My entire time on Earth Vitis I read about them. Watched movies. It was the best – I even drew a few comics of my
own! …Those largely starred my friends and me but the idea was the same. Fighting crime and being awesome!” She laughed. “Today is going to be a good day. Two superheroes down, who’s next?”

A burst of red energy passed them by, startling them. This burst of red kicked a man with a purse down in an instant, slowing down only when it was time to hand the purse back to the old woman it belonged to. “I believe this is yours.”

“Oh, thank you Flash! You know, if only my grandson were like you…”

“I’m sure he’ll grow up to be an upstanding citizen.”

“Ah, he’s already grown up. You know mister Flash, the young people of this generation are all going astray. Why I know many people other than my grandson who just don’t have respect for authority…”

“Uh-huh…” the Flash said, looking like he’d rather be anywhere else.

“HEY! FLASH!” Corona shouted, waving at him. “OVER HERE!”

He saw her, visibly brightening. “Excuse me ma’am, we’ll have to cut our conversation short. Superhero business – you understand.”

“Of course – silly me, keeping you from your work!”

The Flash was next to Corona in an instant, arm around her. “I’ve never seen you before but I am in your debt. That woman would have talked my ear off for hours.”

“I… noticed…” The Flash is in my debt the Flash is in my debt the Flash is in my debt.

“So, who are you? New superhero?”

Corona looked at her relatively new dress and form. “You could say that, but probably not what you’re expecting. I’m Corona, this is Lieshy, Rarity, and Olivia.”

The Flash looked at Olivia. “No superhero name for you?”

“Would you believe me if I told you I had to change it to protect my identity?”

“…Maybe.”

Lady Rarity took off her helmet. “Anyway, we’re not precisely what you’d know as superheroes. We-”

There was a dramatic evil laugh that punctuated the air with its absurdity. “I’VE DONE IT!” a man with robotic claws coming out of his back said, revealing his presence by crashing through a skyscraper wall. “I have perfected my serum of rage.”

“Doctor Octopus…” Corona said, raising an eyebrow. “I don’t remember this one.”

The Flash glanced at her. “You have time powers or something?”

“I’ll explain later. Let’s just take care of him, he shouldn’t be much of a problem.” Man he looks stupid. Was he really not as smart as I thought in the comics or is he off?

“That’s what you heroes think!” Doctor Octopus shouted, snapping the claws on one of his tentacles. A much larger hole was busted out of the same building he had just come out of, revealing a
monstrous green beast of a man whose eyes were glowing red. “I HAVE TAPPED INTO THE HULK’S RAGE AND MADE IT MY OWN!”

“This suddenly got a lot more interesting,” the Flash muttered. “I’ll take the Hulk, you get th- hey what are you doing?”

“Using my powers,” Corona said, teleporting an inch from the Hulk and laying her fingers on one of his arms. She didn’t bother rooting around his mind that much – she knew what she had to do. Some basic emotional manipulation to lower the level of anger, and…

The green form of the Hulk shrunk to the size of a normal man, down to the green of his skin vanishing.

“…What.” Doctor Octopus said.

“Empathy, magic, and a little bit of mental manipulation,” Corona commented. “Hi, I’m Corona.” She shot a fireball at him, pushing him back. “This is the Flash. You’re about to have a bad day.”

Olivia, Lieshy, and Lady Rarity sat back while Corona and the Flash royally curbstomped Doctor Octopus. The Flash kept hitting him before he could react, and Corona quickly tore off his mechanical limbs. He had other devices to fight with, but the creative inventions proved to be less than useless against the combined duo.

A man in a red and black superhero suit sat down next to the three travelers on the sidelines. He was armed to the teeth with swords, guns, grenades, you name it. He produced a bag of popcorn from nowhere and handed it to Lieshy. “I love me a good smackdown.”

Lieshy took the popcorn without questioning it. “You see them often?”

“Anytime Superman sees a random thug in the street,” he said. “You can imagine how that goes.”

“Smashed slime buckets.”

Deadpool shrugged. “Not the double-metaphor I would have gone for. Let’s see… Mexican food, mixed with something about hooves, and a lollipop thrown in to twist the train into a mess.”

Olivia looked at him, taking some of Lieshy’s popcorn absent-mindedly. “You… You’re Deadpool.”

“Guilty as charged, the merc with a mouth here, at your service.” He bowed mockingly.

“I doubt that.”

“I will be your slave if you have chimichangas.”

Olivia wasn’t sure if she believed that.

Deadpool turned around. “Fine, be that way. Keep the succulent taste of perfectly fried confectionaries away from my deserving mouth…”

The Flash tossed Doctor Octopus to the ground in front of Deadpool. The doctor groaned.

“I think he’s finally out of tricks,” the Flash observed. “An – Deadpool what are you doing here?”

Deadpool took a pose that could best be described as ‘sassy’. “I wanted to get in on the world-changing events in the first scene, Flash my buddy! Take a moment to see things before you all have your existential crisis at Avengers headquarters!”
“Ah, so you took the name Avengers here rather than Justice League…” Corona said, looking thoughtful.

The Flash glanced from Deadpool to Corona. “Okay, now we need to finish that conversation. What exactly are you girls?”

Corona smirked. “Explorers from another universe, representative of the multiversal society Merodi Universalis.”

Flash tensed. “…Other universe?”

“Oh! We’re not evil and we’re not looking to conquer Earth!” Corona said, backtracking. “I know you’ve had a lot of problems with things like us in the past – or, well, I guess I’m just guessing about that, I don’t really know this universe – but trust me, we’re not evil.”

Flash looked her in the eye. “I believe you. But that doesn’t mean you aren’t dangerous. You talk about things as if you know us, have you been watching us for a while?”

Corona shrugged. “Eh, no. It’s just that in a world I used to call home there are comic books that tell stories about you.”

Flash took a moment to process this.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the existential crisis has begun!” Deadpool shouted, raising his fist into the air. “The time has come for all to realize that I’m not insane!”

Corona pointed at him. “Your Awareness isn’t the only reason they think you’re crazy.”

“…So what if I want to stab a bitch sometimes? That’s perfectly normal!”

Corona raised an eyebrow.

The Flash finally decided on a response. “…You’re a fangirl then?”

Olivia facepalmed, Deadpool laughed, and Corona’s face reddened. “Uh… Yeah, pretty much.”

The Flash grinned. “Great! About time we got someone new here who understands how awesome we are. I’m taking you back to HQ.”

“Do you speak for this world?” Lady Rarity asked.

“More or less,” the Flash admitted. “You can talk to Batman about the politics of everything if you want.”

“Can I come too!?” Deadpool said. “Oh who am I kidding, I’ll come even if you don’t want me to.” He gave the Flash a thumbs up.

“He might be helpful,” Corona whispered.

“How so?” the Flash whispered back.

“He already knows about the comic book thing.”

“What, how?”

“Ever heard of breaking the fourth wall?”
“…Today is going to be a mindscrew isn’t it?”

“HOT DIGGITY DAMN IS IT!” Deadpool said, holding up his swords. “Not as much as the movie chapter next arc, but y’know.”

“And it took me this long to realize he was Pinkie.” Lieshy facehooved. “I’m dense sometimes.”

“TO AVENGERS HEADQUARTERS!” Deadpool shouted.

~~~

It…

It was made of stars, that was the first thing they were able to discern. But it was also made of pitch black darkness that rotated around the stars, impossible to see except when it blotted out one of the tiny lights in the distance.

It took a significant amount of staring to realize that the darkness took the shape of giant, square-toothed gears with the stars serving as centers. The dominant star was a blue behemoth, its gear the one around which all the others positioned themselves.

The stellar clockwork device was laid out in a confusing setup – some gears operated parallel to ones that drove them, while one or two of them seemed to rotate in two directions at once to satisfy conflicting directional motions. There was no ticking motion, each gear moving smoothly and without noise.

Then again, they were in space; it wasn’t like they could hear anything even if it would make a noise.

“I still have no idea,” Nova said, checking her screen. “It’s a machine made of stars.”

“And something black and mysterious,” Flutterfree said. “…I’m going to try and use Lolo on it.”

“The stars in it may not be full size, but they’re still over a thousand miles away,” Jotaro pointed out.

“Oh. Then we’ll have to get closer before I do that.”

“I’d like to scan it more first…” Nova said, furrowing her brow. “Bizarre… It’s definitely the source of the universal waves. I still have no idea how it’s causing them, but the sheer amount of power that must be stored in there to even produce such an effect while dormant…”

“So, what, ancient Star device?” Pinkie asked.

“Great, you don’t even know what it is.”

Pinkie smirked. “Nova…”

“All right, fine. No, I don’t think it’s a Star device – not any sort of residual connection to the Stars or their magic. I would think Starcross but they wouldn’t just leave something like this unguarded, and I seriously doubt they’d just forget about something of this sort. And those two are the ones most likely to build something with this sort of aesthetic out of all the powers we know with power close to this.”

“The Void?” Flutterfree reminded her.

“They can’t take their power out of their area of the multiverse easily or for very long,” Nova pointed
out. “Though this does strike as a possible Void construct… Perhaps it has control over universes?”

“What kind of control is the question,” Vriska pointed out. “It could be one of those things that creates fucking…I dunno, donut worlds.”

“I think it’s ancient and forgotten,” Jotaro said. “A fallen higher society’s lost toy.”

“We’re just throwing out guesses,” Nova pointed out. “We have no idea what it does, what most of it is made of, or even if it actually does anything. For all we know it’s a piece of abstract art.”

“Is it dangerous though?” Flutterfree asked.

“Undeniably,” Nova answered. “You use Lolo on it and uncover a power to destroy the universe we’re in for all I know.”

“Ah…”

“I can stop time for the Skiff, though,” Nova said. “First sign of trouble we could just bail.”

“Too risky,” Pinkie asserted. “Any other ideas?”

“I’m picking up universe connections. We could test those out,” Nova suggested.

“Man I forgot how useful you were,” Vriska said. “Where were you when we needed to scan that yellow obelisk of mysterious voodoo!!?”

“Starting a family,” Nova said with a smirk. “You should try it sometime.”

“If you think I’m up for popping mini eldritch monstrosities out, you’re fucked up in the head.”

Nova rolled her eyes. “Riiiight.” She scrolled through the data on her screen. “That’s odd – I’m reading metals, energy signatures, and…”

An incoming call appeared on the windshield as a holographic display.

Pinkie shrugged, answering it. Onscreen appeared a petite woman with green curled hair and a simple black dress with slits that showed off her legs. On the wall behind her were emblems of the United States of the Multiverse. “This is Commander Tornado o-Wait it’s you assholes. What the hell are you doing in our universe!? We have claim!”

Vriska raised an eyebrow. “Really? Did you get here first?”

“Of course we did! We have the whole beacon-thing setup, morons!”

“Funny, because our beacons won’t transmit.”

“…What do you mean they won’t transmit!!?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you…” Another member of her team said – the version of Katsuki Bakugo with combed hair known as Boring to virtually everyone. “The beacon hasn’t been working ever since we arrived.”

“Why didn’t you make sure I knew!!?”

“He tried,” a man in a labcoat none of the Primary Team recognized said. “He tried hard.”
“...Stop questioning me in front of the enemy.”

“Heeeey, we’re not the enemy here!” Pinkie said.

Tornado raised an eyebrow. “Really? I guess you’ll just let us have this entire universe without an argument then?”

“...I see your point.”

“We were here first, we get the thing,” Tornado said, folding her arms.

Nova raised an eyebrow. “How do you know that for sure? We’ve been making connections to this universe for a while now.”

“How long?”

“Abo-”

“Quiet,” Jotaro said. “If you give her a number, she’ll just give a number that’s larger, regardless of if it’s true or not.”

Boring poked his head onscreen. “That doesn’t even matter. The beacon treaty dictates that, in the case of a failing beacon, the original placement of the beacon becomes invalid.”

“But there’s no beacon in this universe, so neither of us have claim by those rules,” Flutterfree pointed out. “There’s no condition for ‘what if a universe can’t have a beacon’?”

“Actually there is,” Boring said. “The beacons were designed with secondary transmission methods. Including radio.”

“...Wait, if this universe blocks radio, how are we talking?” Nova asked.

Jotaro’s pupils dilated. “That’s right... If that were the case, this transmission shouldn’t be working...”

Tornado looked from Boring to the scientist. “...What the hell is going on?”

The scientist cleared his throat. “My best theory is that the device we are next to is able to do more than change the way the universe works. It adds ‘coding’ to the universe, giving the physics more esoteric commands.”

There was silence from both sides.

“Think of it like this. You’re an ancient civilization and you have some kind of incredible piece of technology. You’ll want to induce certain rules into the universe it’s in, if you can. Say, ‘if a transmission is a declaration of ownership, remove it’, or something similar.”

“So what you’re telling me is this thing doesn’t want to be owned?”

“Maybe?” the scientist said, shrugging.

Tornado grunted. “Not good enough...” She turned back to the Merodi. “Look, here’s the deal. I’m declaring ‘first come first serve’ – who cares who was the first in the universe, apparently we can’t own it. But we were first to this construct, so we’re going to claim it. We were physically here first, and that can be proven.” She folded her arms. “Checkmate.”
“…But what if someone else owns it?” Pinkie asked. “Maybe the reasons the universe is coded this way is because it belongs to someone else.”

“You think they would have shown up by now if it did,” Tornado pointed out. “If it can detect beacon transmissions… HEY! OWNER OF THIS DEVICE! IF YOU WANT TO INTERRUPT OUR SALVAGE, SPEAK UP NOW OR FOREVER HOLD YOUR PEACE!”

Nothing happened.

“That’s all the proof I need. I claim this clockwork device in the name of the United States of the Multiverse. I hereby ask you to leave the proximity of our property. Or, put in words you’ll understand, go away.” She cut the transmission.

“Delightful woman,” Nova commented. “I sure missed having to deal with these kinds of people. Number one thing.”

That got a ripple of awkward chuckles out of the girls.

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Captain America, better known as Cap to the rest of the Avengers, raised an eyebrow at the Flash when he entered the Avengers’ main lounge that sometimes doubled as a meeting room when people felt like it. “…Flash, what have you dragged in this time?”

“People from another universe who don’t want to kill us!”

“…And Deadpool?”

“…Yes,” Flash said with a straight face.

“Ay, Cappy, how’s it goin’? Been a while, huh? I bet you missed me, huh?”

“Superman, punch him through a window for me would you?” Cap asked.

Superman appeared behind Deadpool and obliged, defenestrating him.

“HEY! THAT WAS DECIDEDLY UNHEROIC!” Deadpool shouted from a tree outside, several stories down.

“You’ll be fine,” Superman called.

“You bet I will,” Deadpool said, suddenly standing behind him. “Wyyyy…”

Superman sighed. “What did we do to get him in here?”

“My fault,” Corona said.

Lady Rarity took a step forward. “We are from the multiversal society Merodi Universalis, and we have come to your world with intent of initiating official first contact.”

“You’re forgetting the part where we’re all characters from comic books,” the Flash said.

“Well I never read those books,” Lady Rarity retorted. “All I recognize is Superman and Batman.”

“Read all of Jojo’s and not a single comic… You pain me,” Corona said, clutching her chest in exaggeration.
Lady Rarity rolled her eyes. “Corona here is somewhat of a big fan of what you do, apparently.”

Superman looked at Corona and saw the twinkling eyes of a fangirl who was struggling (and failing) to remain professional. At least she wasn’t asking for his autograph or something.

“I take it you’re in charge?” Superman asked Lady Rarity.

“Yes. I am Lady Rarity, the Captain of this little group.”

“Walk with me and explain what exactly Merodi Universalis is and about the multiverse you occupy.”

“Certainly. The multiverse is a tremendously huge, but finite existence where all universes are held…” The two walked away, leaving the rest behind.

“…I still don’t understand why Deadpool’s here,” Cap said.

“Man, people really don’t want to think about it,” Deadpool commented. “It’s like their putty-filled monkey-brains can’t actually comprehend what their existence is.”

The Flash shrugged. “Cap, you ever notice him talking about scenes, panels, or acting like there’s always a crowd watching?”

“Uh, yeah? He’s insane.”

“He’s aware of the comic books we’re in.”

Cap blinked.

“Movies too! Don’t forget the cinematic universes!” Deadpool chirped.

“We’re just heroes in comic books?” Cap blurted.

“Pretty much,” Corona admitted. “Don’t feel too bad, a lot of people really enjoy what you do. … Not to mention the fact that some of us are from children’s cartoons. I love my world, but sometimes I have trouble watching the show I ‘came’ from.”

It was at this point Corona realized every hero in the room was staring at her. “…What!?”

Olivia tapped away at her holographic computer screens. “You just told them they’re all fictional. That’s going to get more than a few strange looks.”

“Oh.”

“Existential dread: PART TWO!” Deadpool shouted. “Brought about by magic sun lady!”

Corona got the impression she’d made a huge mistake.

“No, really?”

“Okay, you’re like a million times worse than Pinkie,” Corona blurted.

“Thanks!”

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“Right, so, here’s the obvious thing. We can’t let the USM have that construct,” Nova said.
“Of course not,” Vriska said. “But what exactly are we going to do? If we try to take it for ourselves, we risk an ‘incident’. And I can tell you right now Eve would not be happy with an ‘incident’ with the USM when things are finally looking up.”

“If we keep them from having it, there will be an ‘incident’,” Pinkie pointed out.

Flutterfree furrowed her brow. “But think of what they could do if they figure out how to use this thing. It has the ability to send ripples through universes.”

“That’s probably just a side-effect,” Jotaro pointed out.

“…Yeah. It’s just too dangerous.”

“I agree, we have to do something,” Pinkie said. “But they made it pretty clear they want it that way.”

“We can play hardball too,” Nova said. “They tried the ‘we got here first’ card, let’s just play another one. One they won’t be able to refute.”

“What do we have?” Flutterfree asked.

“Well… I don’t know,” Nova said, looking at her screen. “There’s gotta be something…”

“We end the scenario with neither of us in control of the construct,” Jotaro said. “We declare this construct no-man’s-land.”

“…That could work, but we’d really have to sell it. And the enforcement of the agreement…”

“Blow it up,” Vriska suggested.

Everyone stared at her.

“What? There has to be part of it that’s able to explode, or at least be disabled.”

“How in the name of Celestia would we do that!?” Nova asked. “It’s a tremendous multiversal construct!”

Vriska held up her eight-sided dice. “The Fluorite Octet wishes to remind you that you are in the presence of a god who can face off against universe guardians. I’m sure I could do something at maximum power and luck.”

Pinkie put a hoof to her chin. “Hrm… That could work… Destroy it.”

“But that might destroy the universe we’re in!”

“Universe-jump from time-crawl,” Nova suggested. “We could leave before that happens – save the USM as well, just to prove ourselves.”

Jotaro nodded. “We just have to make them realize we’re serious.”

Vriska cracked her knuckles. “Pinkie, dial that world that’s literally nothing but a million cats. I need to steal a lot of luck.”

“The Plane of Infinite Kittens doesn’t have much luck in it.”

“I just need a constant source. Give me an hour of constant absorption and I should be able to pull
Pinkie shrugged, tossing her a dimensional device. “Knock yourself out.”

Vriska opened a small portal in the air that was supposed to be too small for a cat to come through, but a white kitten came through anyway. Vriska sighed, stealing the animal’s luck and shoving it back into the infinite pile with its brethren. She focused her eye on the cats through the portal, moving them aside every second or so to grab another cat’s luck. “This is going to be tedious...”

“If only we weren’t several thousand light years away from normal space,” Nova commented.

“I would really love to just walk through a city right now, but this is what we need to do.”

Nova lit her horn. “I’ll speed it up for the rest of us.”

“Fun.”

Vriska was accelerated to extreme speeds, so much that she had absorbed enough luck in just two minutes. She closed the portal, signifying that all was ready. She slapped Nova to grab her attention. Nova let Vriska’s timestream resume.

“It took you five minutes to notice me,” she muttered.

Nova blushed. “Sorry. Need to get back into the swing of things.”

“Got what you need?” Pinkie asked.

“Oh you bet I do,” Vriska said, twirling her dice in-between her fingers. “Let’s go screw with the USM. Nova, teleport me outside. No I don’t need a spacesuit. Yes I’m sure, mom.”

Nova blinked. “Are you reading my mind?”

“You’d notice if I was,” Vriska pointed out. “Just do it. Jotaro, sell the tough guy act.”

Jotaro raised an eyebrow.

“Right, just be yourself.”

Nova teleported Vriska outside the ship. This prompted the USM to hail them again – no surprise there. “What are you doing?” Tornado demanded.

Jotaro pushed Pinkie aside. “Merodi Universalis had decided that we will not accept your terms of ‘first come, first serve.’ Instead, we declare this construct to be no-man’s land. Because we cannot claim this universe with our beacons, neither of us will be allowed to tamper with the objects within this universe.”

“Hey! That doesn’t make any sense!”

“It makes more sense than ‘first come, first serve.’ There is no absurd rule that allows one to dominate over the other. It is a compromise.”

“It’s not a compromise if the other side doesn’t agree, moron!”

“We can force compliance.”

“Oh yeah? You going to shoot us down?”
“No. We’re going to destroy the construct.”

Tornado paled. “You can’t do that.”

Vriska shouted WANNA BET! into Tornado’s mind with her telepathy. She rolled her dice. Even though they were in space, they still activated: 8-8-8-8-8-8-8-8. She transformed into her blue armor, glowing with a cosmic cobalt power. She pulled her dice back and lifted her sword, aiming at the construct. Oh this is going to be glorious.

It was at this moment Tornado revealed that she had a rather absurd level of telekinesis. She threw her entire USM ship across space and into Vriska with only minimal help from the engines, relying almost entirely on her green psychic power. “No. You. Don’t!”

Yes I do. Vriska bounced off the bulky USM ship like a springboard, once again pointing at the construct with her sword. Just one lucky hit with all my power thrown into i-

Tornado was outside the ship without a spacesuit, using her power to keep a bubble of air around her, creating a spherical green aura. She screamed a scream only she could hear, tearing a piece of siding off her ship and dicing it into a hundred pieces with a handful of quick hand motions. The pieces sailed toward Vriska at high speed.

Fine then, I’ll take your luck! Virksa locked eyes with Tornado, draining the midget’s luck, using it to maintain her own levels while all the shards of metal missed her. Vriska threw her sword, a motion that would have hit Tornado in the chest had she not been surrounded in a psychic aura.

Tornado got smart just before her luck reached critical levels – she grabbed onto Vriska with her telekinesis.

“BITCH!” Tornado and Vriska shouted at the same time as they drew closer to each other.

Nova blinked. “…There’s something fitting about this.”

Pinkie gave her some popcorn.

“Oh, thanks!”

Vriska and Tornado passed each other. Vriska coughed up blue blood from a concussive blast that was clearly designed to kill her a hundred times over. A gash formed across Tornado’s chest, spilling blood into her sphere of air.

Vriska realized she had to act now if her luck was going to do anything. She distracted Tornado with a mental attack. Her mind was far too strong for any sort of actual control, but with her low luck levels it was easy to make her falter for a second.

Vriska threw her dice again, empowering them with her cobalt energy. Whatever attack they rolled would be truly absurd.

It was one of eight possible 8-8-8-8-8-8-8-7 rolls.

A twelve-pointed star shape composed of hardlight appeared above the dice. The cobalt energy infused itself within the star before blasting off after the construct, splitting into hundreds of smaller stars along the way.

“I’m going to call you Starslammer,” Vriska said, still coughing up blood.
“NOPE!” Tornado yelled, grabbing her ship in her telekinesis again, throwing it at the Starslammer attack in an attempt to divert it.

“…Did she just throw her own team at Vriska’s attack?” Flutterfree asked.

“Yep,” Jotaro answered.

“…How could she!?”

Tornado’s face paled a second later. “Oh, shit, Boring! Quazi!” She pulled back on her telekinesis to save her team, allowing Vriska’s attack to strike true. The attack would normally have done absolutely nothing to such a construct, but Vriska had known this.

This was why she needed to be absurdly lucky.

One of the many sections of the Starslammer hit in just the right place at just the right time, between two different gears. The entire construct churned to a stop, shaking, popping, rippling spacetime in ways it should not have been.

Nova slowed time down to a crawl. “Right, Pinkie, get us closer to Vriska, Tornado, and that ship. Take us out of here.”

Pinkie saluted. “Aye-aye.”

Nova teleported Vriska back to the Skiff, and sent Tornado back to her ship. Pinkie moved to activate the drive…

And then something appeared in the middle of stopped time. A humanoid creature that seemed composed completely of stars, with the only defining features being two white, jarring eyes and three prongs that pointed up from the forehead.

“MOTION CARRIED,” he declared with two different, deep voices. A ping of energy shot forth from the being’s body, reverting the gear construct’s appearance to what it had been before Vriska launched her attack. Nova’s time-slowing effect was also removed, as if it had never happened.

“What the-”

“Fuck me…” Vriska said, taking a step back even though she was in a single-room Skiff with nowhere to go. “…That’s a Class 1.”

The shock from that remark sent chills up everyone’s spines.

~~~

The leading magic expert in the Avengers was Doctor Strange, the Sorcerer Supreme.

“I’m trying to remember if you ever joined the Avengers in anything I read…” Corona said, thinking hard.

Strange shrugged. “It matters not – this universe is clearly not a direct analogue to the stories you fascinate yourself with. I am exceptionally curious about the relation between fiction and reality across universes, but that is a conversation for another time.”

“I’m not the girl to have it with either. There are others who understand ka a lot better than I do.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Strange said, using a spell to scan Corona’s horn. “Your magic seems to be a
mixture of this world and others.”

“That’s just how universe travel works. Magic tends to adapt itself into whatever form exists in any given universe. The effects of magic tend to not change all that much, but the exact methods behind it alter continually.”

“The multiverse has a built in translation?”

“If you travel to a universe with too many dimensions it tries to make you occupy that many dimensions in most cases. That can be lethal.”

“I went to another universe, once,” Strange commented. “I introduced time where there was none.”

“How long were you in there?”

“Not counting the time loop? A few minutes.”

“Well, the time loop makes it confusing, but it may be that the universe didn’t have time to translate you properly. Or you had a pocket of your own physics around you. Or it was actually a universe designed to allow incursions… There’s a lot of what-ifs in the multiversal game, as I’m sure you’re gathering by this point.”

Strange nodded. “Indeed. I’m curious, what is the height of your magic?”

“I can move celestial objects,” Corona said. “Though that’s a special case. Uh… well, without Raging Sights I think I could blow up a city or something. With Raging Sights I’m really not sure what the upper limit is. I’m looking into tapping into universal ‘coding’ itself.”

“Powerful,” he said, scanning Corona’s gloves and gems.

“Hey, if you’re anything like what I’ve read about, you can do almost anything with the magic talents of yours.”

“There aren’t many limitations, no,” Strange admitted. “Superman is still Superman though.”

“I bet he’s only that strong because he has to be,” Corona said. “The hero with no limitations.”

“I wouldn’t say none.”

“I’m talking in a meta-sense,” Corona admitted. She looked up at all the dour, confused, and existential faces in the room. “Which I should probably stop.”

“Why stop now?!” Deadpool shouted. “You’re just telling them the truth~!”

“Shut up, blowhard,” Corona muttered. “You’re just happy you get to rub it in their faces.”

“I’m happy for a lot more than just that reason!” Deadpool chuckled. “But yeah, that’s a big one.”

Corona sighed. “Have what you need, Strange?”

Strange nodded. “I expect the next few years of my life will be filled with the study of otherworldly magic.”

“It’s an endless pool of knowledge,” Corona said with a knowing smile. “I have a PhD in the topic and it never ceases to surprise me.” She stood up and stretched her arms. “Now, excuse me, I need to go make an apology.”
Strange gestured that she was free to go. Corona walked across the room, past the watching eyes of several superheroes, and sat down next to Captain America. “Hey.”

“Oh. Hi.”

“…I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“…Being inconsiderate. Caught up in the moment. Telling you things you probably weren’t ready to know quite yet.” She rubbed the back of her head. “There’s a reason every higher civilization or traveler we found wouldn’t tell us what ka was until we found out for ourselves. It’s… jarring.”

Cap looked into the distance. “I’m still glad I know.”

“True. And you would have been told eventually, regardless. But there’s a lot better ways to break the news than to have a dumb fangirl get all excited and talk your ear off about how awesome you were and how she knows so many things about you.”

“Flash seems to like that.”

“Flash is carefree and doesn’t let much bother him,” Corona pointed out. “You and a lot of the others are going to think about this. Some of them are going to be able to just accept it and move on, others are just going to know it. Some like Strange aren’t all that surprised by it. But there are those like you – and I think Stark and Batman – who’re going to have a problem with it. I should have broken the news in a better way. Or had someone who knew what they were doing talk about it.”

Cap looked at her. “It’s a little refreshing to see someone own up to her mistakes so quickly.”

“You caught me on a good day. I can be really stubborn at times.”

Cap smiled. “I can tell you’re a good hero, Corona. Just by listening to you talk.”

Corona flushed. “Thanks!” Ohmygosh Captain America told me I was a good hero squeeeeeee.

“And the fangirl returns,” Cap remarked, sitting back in his chair.

“It’s hard to keep under wraps!” Corona blurted.

“Get to know us for real, as people,” Cap said. “It’ll go away.”

“…I plan on it.”

“Good,” a deep, gruff voice said. Batman sat down at the table. “Because you’re going to tell me everything you know about me.”

“Uh… Does Cap know your secret identity?”

“No,” Batman said.

“Yes,” Cap said.

Batman blinked. “…I need to be more cautious.”

“You’re just paranoid,” Cap said, shrugging. “I’ll leave you two to it though.”
“Good,” Batman said. “Now tell me everything.”

“...Why do you speak with such a deep, gruff voice anyway?” Corona asked.

“What?”

“Is it just ‘because I’m Batman’?”

Batman stared at her.

“Sorry, sorry, dumb Internet meme joke, forget I said that.” She laughed nervously. “Your name is Bru-”

“HI!” Deadpool shouted, startling Corona. “Are we going to be spilling secrets? Because I can tell you about that one time I-”

Batman punched Deadpool in the face, knocking him to the ground.

“Ow…”

Corona chuckled. “You know you keep asking for that, Deadpool.”

“It’s worth it to be the comedic relief!”

“You’re just saying that to make yourself feel better.”

Deadpool stood up, grunting. “I’ll have you know that I always feel absolutely awes-”

Batman punched him again.

“AUGH MY RIBS!”

“You’ll be fine.”

“Regeneration really has drawbacks sometimes…” Deadpool muttered.

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“Okay, I know we’ve got rumors and cursory information about all seven of the Class 1s,” Nova said. “But right now I can’t remember any of that! What is this guy!?”

Vriska ground her teeth. “Celestialsapien. Every single member of their species can naturally shape universes with a thought.”

Everyone stared at the Celestialsapien, waiting to see what he’d do.

He just stood there, motionless, looking at the motion of the construct.

“...Why isn’t he doing anything?” Flutterfree asked.

“Don’t look at me!” Vriska blurted. “I only know about Horrorterrors in detail, the Doctor avoided Class 1s!”

“We have time to look at our database if he continues to do nothing…” Nova said, pulling up what she could on her screen. “Yeah, a pathetically small amount of confirmed information. I can conform what Vriska just told you. The most common rumor is that they’re a race of thinkers and debaters. Nothing else is concrete.”
“…Tornado’s trying to hail him,” Jotaro said, pointing at a reading on one of the consoles. “He’s not responding.”

Pinkie called Tornado. “We might want to back off here! That’s a Class 1 Celestialsapien. I say we pack it up and call it a day!”

“PACK IT UP!?” Tornado blurted, still standing despite having not received treatment for the wound to her chest. “I’m not going to let some muscled star-dude tell me what to do!”

“He just undid everything I did without lifting a finger,” Vriska pointed out. “Do you think that’s smart?”

“No,” Boring answered.

“No we didn’t,” Boring said. “We found a button that can direct it somewhere.”

“Good enough for me. Direct it at the Celestialsapien and let’s call it a day.”

“…We’re going to be leaving now,” Pinkie said. “Good luck.”

“She doesn’t have any,” Vriska pointed out. “But yeah, leaving, leaving is good.”

Pinkie pressed a button – and nothing happened.

“Uh… Looks like we can’t leave.”

Boring glanced to something offscreen and back to Tornado. “We can’t either.”

“All the more reason to take action! Activate the construct!” Tornado decreed.

“This is a horrible idea,” Nova deadpanned.

“Do you have a better one?”

“Wait and try to talk to him?”

“…Nah, he’ll squash us like bugs.” She pressed a button, sending a magic bolt from their ship to the construct. The gears went in reverse, sending a beam of energy to the Celestialsapien.

He caught it.

And then the entire universe started to fall apart at the seams, strands of reality shaking apart like old, dry cloth.

“MOTION CARRIED!”
The entire universe reset itself before anyone could realize they were about to stop existing.

“Fuck…” Vriska said.

“…How in…” Tornado said, mouth agape.

“YOU HAVE FORCED OUR HAND, TORNADO OF THE UNITED STATES OF THE MULTIVERSE,” he said. “WE WOULD HAVE PREFERRED TO DELIBERATE FURTHER ABOUT WHAT TO DO WITH YOU, BUT YOU HAVE SHOWN YOUR IMPATIENCE. AS PUNISHMENT FOR YOUR IMPATIENCE YOU AND YOUR CREW ARE TO SPEND A MILLENIUM TRAPPED IN YOUR OWN MINDS.”

“Wait hold on can’t we ta-”

“MOTION CARRIED.”

Tornado’s expression changed instantly. Her eyes fogged over, and she slumped to the ground. She let out a grunt of pain as she hit the ground, purely by reflex. She was barely able to move her hands.

“…She’s just spent a thousand years inside her own mind in one instant…” Nova said, horrified.

“YOU ARE NOW TO BE RETURNED TO THE USM WHERE YOU WILL TELL YOUR GOVERNMENT NEVER TO ENTER THIS UNIVERSE AGAIN. MOTION CARRIED.”

Their ship vanished.

“PINKIE PIE OF MERODI UNIVERSALIS.”

“Y-yes?”

“AS PUNISHMENT FOR ATTEMPTING TO DESTROY A LOST CELESTIALSAPIEN ARTIFACT, YOU ARE TO TURN AN ARTIFACT OF EQUAL VALUE OVER TO US. WE SELECT ONE OF YOUR NEXUS UNIVERSES, THE ONE THAT HOLDS THE GRINDER POWERED BY A GREEN DIAMOND ENERGY SOURCE.”

“W-wait! We aren’t impatient! We’ll let you think about it!” Pinkie said.

“YOU WISHED TO LEAVE. YOU ARE JUST LIKE THEM. APPEAL DENIED.”

“Can we at least remove the Grinder first?”

“MOTION DENIED. YOU WOULD NOT SUFFER ANY REAL LOSS IF YOU KEPT THAT PIECE OF YOUR HISTORY. YOU ARE TO RETURN TO MERODI UNIVERSALIS AND TELL THEM WHY THAT UNIVERSE VANISHED. ALL CITIZENS WITHIN THAT UNIVERSE AT THIS TIME WILL BE TRANSFERRED TO EQUIS VITIS. BE GLAD WE ARE NOT TAKING YOUR OTHER DIAMOND IN YOUR HUB.”

“Won’t you listen for one m-”

“MOTION CARRIED.”

The Skiff was back in the crystal hall of Friendship Castle.

Renee looked at them. “…You look like you’ve been through a lot.”

“A Class 1 civilization just stole one of our universes,” Flutterfree said.
Renee blinked. “Oh. …I can’t say I know what to feel about that right now, give me a moment.”

“That happened way too fast,” Nova said, shaking her head. “I thought they were thinkers!?”

“Tornado angered him badly,” Pinkie said, sighing. “…At least now we have something to hold against the USM. That’ll be useful for Eve. I think.”

“But we lost one of our first grinders!” Flutterfree said. “I… I know we have more, and that nobody was hurt, but…”

“Would you rather have spent an eternity in your own head?” Vriska asked.

“…No.”

“Thought not.”

Renee took in a deep breath. “Well, I would say go take a break, but it sounds like this one needs to be dealt with now. To my office, live report.”

Pinkie nodded. “Right away.”

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Lady Rarity tapped Corona on the shoulder. “Our time is up.”

“Right… Back to crystal castle…” Corona said. “Sorry Flash, we’re going to have to call our game.”

Flash tossed his cards to the ground. “Eh, I was losing anyway.”

“That’s one way of looking at it.” Corona stood up. “You got relations established?”

Lady Rarity nodded. “They’re very interested. More prepared for the multiverse than most, since they keep having incursions of a similar sort. They’re all very interested in methods on how to protect from outside threats.”

“I’m glad,” Corona said. “Meanwhile I gave a lot of people an existential crisis.” She looked around. “I apologized to most of them while you were gone. They aren’t mad at me, but… Some of them don’t look too hot. Captain America will be watching them closely.”

“That’s the best we can do, sometimes,” Lady Rarity said. “This isn’t our world, and as much as you may think you do, you don’t really know these people. Let them deal with their own problems, they know each other best.”

Corona nodded. “We are coming back though. I’ve already promised I’d go with Flash on an adventure or two later.”

“Of course,” Lady Rarity said, smiling warmly. “You enjoy this place and the people here. I wouldn’t dream of taking that away from you.”

Corona stretched her arms. “Well… Ready to go home?”

Deadpool appeared behind her. “You bet I am!”

“Deadpool…”

“You can’t deny me passage to Equis Vitis, it’s open to the public,” Deadpool pointed out. “I. Want.
To. Go.”

Corona rolled her eyes.

“Hey, at least you’re taking him off our hands,” the Flash pointed out. “You’ll be a hero.”

“Be a hero… Don’t deal with Deadpool… Hrm, that’s a tossup.” Corona chuckled. “See ya, Flash.”

“Olivia! Lieshy! We’re leaving!” Lady Rarity called.

The two looked up from their conversation with Wonder Woman. “Oh, wow, it is that time,” Olivia said, looking at her watch. “Sorry amiga, we’ll have to continue this another time.”

Wonder Woman simply nodded and waved goodbye.

“…What were you talking about?” Lady Rarity asked.

“Men,” Lieshy said.

“…And?”

“That’s all you get to know.”

Corona shrugged. “Fine by me.” She activated her magic, starting up the portal spell. “See you all later!”

A few of them waved goodbye. The team stepped through the portal, arriving once again in the castle of Equis Vitis.

Lady Rarity caught Renee passing through the area with the Primary team, having just left Renee’s main office. “We need to send a Relations representative to the Earth we just visited.”

“Consider it done the moment you give me a report,” Renee said. “A-”

“CHIMICHANGA.” Deadpool said, glaring at Pinkie.

“CHERRYCHANGA!” Pinkie shouted back, standing on her hind hooves.

“CHIMICHERRY!”

“CHERRYCHERRY!”

“CHIMICHERRYCHANGA!”

“CHIMMININNYCHERRIDDYCHANGADDITYCHANGA!”

“CHERRYCHIMICHANGACHERRYBEATPIECHANGA!”

“My mine took up more space on the page,” Pinkie said.

“My mine had unrelated words in it!”

“Best friends?”

“Best friends!”

Pinkie leaped onto Deadpool’s back and the two ran out of the hall.
Corona was the only one laughing. “Oh, that was… That was beautiful.”

“I’m terrified of what just happened,” Nova said. “Quaking in my boots as it where.”

“Oh hey, Nova!” Corona smiled. “How was your first day back?”

“We met a Class 1. Lost a universe to it. So as earthshattering as usual.”
Corona blinked. “…Ouch.”

“Yeah. Ouch.”

“Yet another reminder that we’re still just minnows in an ocean,” Renee commented. “Just when we get comfortable enough to think we have things together, a proverbial anvil drops on our heads.”

“Good one,” Lieshy said.

“Thank you.”

“Dears, we have a report to write,” Lady Rarity reminded them.

“And I have a kid to get back to,” Nova said. “Stars, I hope Sunburst didn’t burn the house down…”

“He didn’t,” Renee said. “…I may or may not have checked up on him several times today. He did fine.”

“Good,” Nova said, letting out a sigh of relief. “…I still want to go home.”

“Go,” Jotaro said.

She obliged, teleporting away.

“…Is she doing okay?” Corona asked.

“Better than okay,” Flutterfree said. “She’s very uncertain about herself… But I see her sit there and suddenly break out into a huge smile for seemingly no reason. I think she’s happier than before.”

Corona smiled. “Good. …I was more than a little worried for them.”

“Everyone was,” Flutterfree said. “There were a lot of talks, sleepless nights, and in my case prayers. But I think we’re out of the woods.”

“Out of the frying pan of interpersonal melodrama, into the fire of ticking off universe rewriters,” Vriska commented.

“The rollercoaster that is our lives,” Renee added.

They all had a good laugh at this.

They may have been scared, uncertain, and confused about their place in things… but in the end, it was still part of their lives, and they would keep on living them regardless.

Making the most of it.
“Hello ladies, gentlemen, characters, and readers! Do we have a show for you tonight! Who I am is not important – or, well, it is, but I’ll get to that later. What is important is that we’re holding yet another round of multiversal Hunger Games! After the wash that was the Super Smash event we have returned to the basics! With us today are twenty-four contestants hand-picked from the new multiversal neighborhood on the block, Merodi Universalis and its neighbors! What will they be doing?

“Why, they’ll be fighting to the death in a battle royale!

“I can tell all of you want to scream at me right about now, and are finding you can’t. That’s because none of you get to move until the games actually start – because I have to explain the rules first! All of you may use any powers at your disposal to kill all the other contestants, and those of you with multiversal powers will find that they still function but cannot be used to escape the games. Trust me, it won’t work.

“Of course, all twenty-four of you could just fight each other right here right now and end the games in an instant, but the arena is a huge forest designed to have many places to hide and resources to live for multiple days. The smartest thing to do is to run into the forest and take a moment to plan, forge alliances, etcetera. However, you’ll notice that in the center of you is a pile of weapons, artifacts, and supplies. If you’re willing to risk an early elimination, you can attempt to get an edge in the competition by fighting over this Cornucopia.

“I can still feel you planning to refuse to play. Don’t worry, there won’t actually be any consequences – all deaths will be reversed upon the completion of the games. Oh, still not enough? Perhaps I should have mentioned the fact that if you don’t play all of you will die permanently. We’re powerful enough to drag you here against your will and keep you frozen while I monologue, think for a moment how much effort it would take to squash you bugs.

“For additional incentive, the winner gets a wish. That’s right, a wish. Naturally there are limitations, but we can bring people back to life, we can give you any object you could desire, we can change the life of any individual, and we can do so many other things. That is because we are a Class 1 civilization. Some of you may know us as Them; others of you have no idea who we are. Suffice to say that “Class 1” is all you need to know.

“And to answer your deep, burning question of ‘why!?!’, it’s simple really. We’re really, really bored up here at the top. These games break up some of our monotony. If you want a more ‘standard’ reason it’s because you’re trespassing on one of our universes, the one you call Earth Starfleet or Galaxus Quadrants. Your punishment is to play these games. …Nah, it’s just because we’re bored, we couldn’t care less what you did to Earth Starfleet, we’ve got thousands of them.

“Ready? Good. It’s time to meet all the contestants then, because we have an audience after all! Hello members of Them society and those of you reading these words off a page or screen! It’s time to see what the new players on the multiversal block have up their sleeves in a fight to the death! We’ve assigned the twenty-four contestants into twelve ‘districts’ by our ‘eh, it just works’ algorithm.

“In the first grouping, we have Evening Sparkle, Charter-Princess, Overhead, and Very Important Pony alongside Corona Shimmer, a non-Charter Princess and overpowered bundle of fire, fire magic, fiery personality, and Stand with a fiery emblem on it. These two are known for shaping their
society and are heralded as heroes!

“Second, we have a pair of sisters, Renee and Allure, an Overhead and one of the League of Sweetie Belles’ core four, two unicorns who definitely aren’t killers by nature. I wonder what will happen when they are forced to?

“Next are a pair of old friends, Flutterfree and Nova, an unusual conglomeration of a pegasus, vampire, and spirograph source who’s known for her Kindness alongside a unicorn who’s just now realizing she doesn’t have any of her equipment with her. What a fun realization!

“Pinkie and Rohan, placed here because of… Well secret reasons! Some of you know exactly why they’re a pair, and others don’t. We’re not absolute jerks who will spill all your secrets for the fun of it. Just know they’re a party pony and manga artist. …But oh so much more.

“The two non-pony members of Merodi’s primary team share the fifth spot, the quiet, tactical, powerful Jotaro and self-proclaimed spiderbitch Vriska! I bet she wishes she had her dice right now, huh? Sorry, maybe you’ll find your equipment in the Cornucopia! Heh.

“Rev and Starbeat, versions of each other, stand together. The devoutly religious explorer and a pony doomed to love everything. A beacon of hope and a living tragedy.

“After them, Alushy and Blackjack, so grouped because… …They’re both multiversal travelers. Blackjack is notably swearing like nothing else internally because she has no guns. Ah, the no equipment rule, the great equalizer. Or unequalizer in the case of others.

“Representing the United States of ‘Murica – ahem, the Multiverse – are Ambassador Funny Valentine and the froggy hero known as Froppy! They’re here for freedom, justice, and trying not to die.

“Ninth, Jenny of the Red Gloves, effective master of Dracogen Enterprises and cocky regen girl. With her is Brutalight Sparcake, the angriest of angry villain types. Already imagining how to eviscerate every last one of the contestants, wow!

“Olivia, the great hacker of Merodi Universalis and Queen Toph Beifong sit together because… Because it just works. Similar for the eleventh grouping, Thrackerzod the eldritch unicorn and Blumiere the on-off mayor of Celestia City… Did we just give up on classifications at this point?

“Oh, wait, the twelfth match up. O’Neill and Daniel, representing Earth Tau’ri. Congratulations! You two make sure the pattern ends on a high note. The old General who doesn’t age and the aging archeologist!

“Regardless, that’s everyone. I hope you’ve been planning your strategy this entire time, because now that I’ve talked far too long it’s time to actually begin! Remember, winner gets a wish! Refuse to play and you all die permanently! Please be entertaining. Some of you have bets riding on you.

“The moment I announce that the games start, you won’t hear from me again until tonight when I give an update on who’s fallen! I bet you’ll all be devastated to be without my glorious, heavenly voice, but we need you to focus.

“LET THE HUNGER GAMES BEGIN! Place your bets now and may the odds be ever in your favor.”

~~~

The arena for the Games was a simple forest of deciduous trees, the leaves in the transition from
spring to fall. There was no sign of civilization in any direction, just endless trees upon trees. The ground rolled with numerous hills, and it would not be surprising to find a river somewhere amongst the trees. The only abnormal sight was the two moons in the sky, both showing a pale yellow in the daytime sky.

It was currently afternoon and a chill breeze blew through the air. Twenty-four contestants stood in a circle around a pile of loot – weapons, food, medicine, and equipment. Raging Sights was easily visible, sitting near the middle of the Cornucopia, while many of the weapons were clearly just taken from Blackjack’s inventory and thrown onto the ground.

Allure plotted rather than listening to the voice of Them - and really, that was a stupid name for a race. She could see some rations near the edge of the Cornucopia pile, food bars that would not only keep her alive but give her an edge when she did need to fight. …Her style of combat was very non-lethal, but breaking a spine after the target was down should work…

She shuddered at the thought. They clearly didn’t have any choice but to play this sadistic game, she would just have to put her emotions to the side. She really wasn’t sure if she could do that, but she was going to try at least.

At the moment, though, the plan was to grab the energy bars and run. She’d have to run a little closer to get a good telekinetic grip around them, but not very far…

“LET THE HUNGER GAMES BEGIN!”

Allure made it one step before something exploded behind her, tossing her into the pile that was the Cornucopia. Blumiere landed next to her, but he ignored the presence of the unicorn, attempting to defend himself from Brutalight – failing miserably as one of her swords drove into his chest, another one cutting off his head.

First blood, Allure’s mind managed to register before her instincts took over. She grabbed a gun she was resting on with her telekinesis and started shooting wildly while running away. She tripped over her hooves, rolling to the ground as things exploded over her. Corona had tried to grab Raging Sights with a burst of fire magic, but Thrackerzod had already taken the crystal device and teleported away.

Allure suddenly felt alone. She lifted the bars with her telekinesis and started running, ignoring the fact that one of Starbeat’s limbs had just flown past her. The unicorn instead focused on the form of Renee, who had been running away from the start.

She’ll help me.

“Hey Renee!” Allure called. “I’m co-”

Renee glanced behind her shoulder just in time to get shot in the face with a sniper rifle.

“Bullseye,” Allure heard Vriska call.

Allure stared at Renee’s lump form in fear. “Wh… Wh…”

“Hey, it’s temporary,” Vriska said, looking down at Allure while kicking Brutalight away. “I saw an opportunity and took it. Speaking of…” She aimed the rifle at Allure.

Allure whirled around, the rage in her allowing her to use the gun she had grabbed to shoot at Vriska. The troll’s luck was high enough that no bullets hit her, but one of the bullets hit the sniper rifle, breaking it.
Vriska looked like she wanted to fight, but the moment a razor-sharp boomerang embedded itself in her lower back she decided it was a bad idea to stick around. She flew off into the forest.

Allure fired after her, long after her clip had run out of ammo. She threw the gun to the ground, breathing heavily.

*It's not permanent... It's not permanent... It's not permanent...* she kept telling herself, oblivious to the explosions happening around her. She picked up the energy bars, looking at them, not sure what to conclude.

She shook her head – she needed to keep moving. There were a lot of people in these games who couldn’t be allowed to get a wish. She would have to fight for the sake of stopping them, if nothing else. She moved to leave.

She had taken too long to sort through the thoughts in her mind.

Jenny punched a hole through Allure’s skull, killing her instantly. She became just another one of the smears of blood around the Cornucopia mere minutes after the games had started.

~~~

Jotaro had gotten out of the Cornucopia area as fast as he could with a time-stop. He probably could have gotten more than one kill in the midst of stopped time at the Cornucopia if he had tried, but he was unsure exactly how many of the people there would be able to counter Star Platinum and he wasn’t willing to take that much of a risk. So he vanished, running into the forest.

That had been about fifteen minutes ago. Already, he was surveying the land. The forest was sparse and the trees were thin, ensuring that any fights would take place without interference from giant trees. Less cover. As natural as the forest may have looked, it was still *designed* to be an arena.

He found a river quickly, using Star Platinum to get some fish – easy food. Better than hunting deer or some other forest mammal. Given his background such things were relatively effortless for him, but he needed to be on the top of his game at all times. He began to ponder what he could do against certain powers that might trump Star Platinum…

He punched a tree, knocking a branch loose. He shredded the outside bark, creating a long spear with an ultra-sharp point. A weapon. Next, he took a rock and sharpened it with Star Platinum’s fists, creating a stone knife.

He put the knife in his pocket and slung the spear on his back, poking it through his coat collar so it would stay. He would only have them out if he needed them.

He had food, weapons, and the lay of the land. There was no question in his mind – it was time to start playing Them’s stupid game and get it over with. He’d try to win, of course. He was Jotaro Kujo. It was what he did.

It was time to hunt.

He backtracked a little bit, heading back in the direction of the Cornucopia, but at an angle. It didn’t take long for him to come across tracks – tracks of a human man who clearly had no idea how to be subtle in his movements. Jotaro even knew exactly who it was – Rohan Kishibe.

There was someone who needed to be taken out quickly. Give Rohan enough time, he could have his opponents eating out of his hand left and right…
Not to mention what he could do if he got hold of any paper.

Jotaro followed the tracks, finding it pathetically easy to catch up to Rohan. The manga artist was strolling through the woods, not a care in the world. It would be easy to stop time and snap his neck. Jotaro had plans to do just that, and was waiting for the right opportunity when Thrackerzod flew out of nowhere, brandishing Raging Sights like it was a weapon. The eldritch unicorn had clearly not gotten the device to cooperate with her, but she had managed to work out how to use it as a magic amplifier. A series of magic rings appeared around Raging Sights, apparently with the intent of vaporizing Rohan in an instant.

“Heaven’s Door!” Rohan shouted. Thrackerzod squeezed her eyes shut, but the Stand forced them open with its fingers. The spell cancelled, and Rohan scrawled a note in Thrackerzod’s book before closing it. “Thought I was so dangerous I had to be specifically hunted down?”

Thrackerzod growled. “What did you do?”

“You have to do everything I say. For now, protect me from all threats, Thrackerzod.”

Thrackerzod swore in eldritch but was unable to refuse.

Jotaro snuck away. He could handle any one of them with ease, but both at once? Five seconds was only enough time to, for sure, take care of one. And Thrackerzod probably had some dark nature within her that could be used to survive a normally lethal hit.

He would need more to be certain of his victory. It would be best not to face them now. …Even if that meant Rohan would get more ‘allies’ through Heaven’s Door.

Jotaro supposed he could probably strike an alliance with Rohan… But no, it would be too dangerous. Rohan would have to ensure loyalty with Heaven’s Door. Then where would Jotaro be?

Jotaro opted to just let Rohan and Thrackerzod go without knowing he was ever there. He was soon able to move freely again. It was late in the day, perhaps hunting wasn’t the right course of action just yet. The games would likely take multiple days to complete if people played it smart…

It was time to start thinking about the long haul.

~~~

Eve had teleported into a distant tree the moment the Games started. She needed more time to organize her thoughts than the monologue from Them had allowed.

Did she dare believe what they had said? That all of this would be undone at the end?

…She had to, because she knew they weren’t lying about flat killing everyone if they refused to play. That wasn’t a gambit.

Plus… she knew they had to get out of this alive. There were things she’d heard from Pinkie, from Twilience… There was no way all of them could die. This wasn’t one of those moments. This wasn’t the ‘end’.

The Them was probably telling the truth.

…Or they were just copies of their real selves, like what happened in the Starcross Society with Corona. Or in the copying universe…
She ground her teeth. Regardless, she was going to have to play along with these games and either experience death herself, or kill everyone else. That was going to be absolutely horrifying regardless…

She let out a deep breath, shaking her head. Sure, she’d ‘play’ because she had to. But she had no idea how she was going to go about it… What was the plan? Was there a plan? Who should she go after first?

That was a terrible thought to have.

A cupcake hit her in the side of the head. Eve looked down at the base of her tree to see Pinkie and Flutterfree standing there.

“Hey Evening!” Pinkie called.

“Oh, hey,” Eve said. Then she tensed. “Wait, aren’t we supposed to be fighting?”

Pinkie nodded. “Yeah, we are, but we’re still on the first day Eve! We can work together until we have to stop!”

Flutterfree nodded. “It makes the chances better that one of us will win. And this way we don’t have to fight each other.”

Eve fluttered down to the ground, a smile on her face. “…I love that idea.”

“And you don’t have to worry, the Them was telling the truth,” Pinkie said. “We’ll all go back once someone wins.”

“Good to know. So, who should we gather for our little team next?”

Pinkie sighed. “Nova and Renee are already out.”

“What?”

“The Cornucopia,” Pinkie explained. “A lot of us are already gone.”

“…So the team’s just us?”

Flutterfree nodded. “Yeah… Just us. Most of the others won’t want to team up if we just ask.”

“…Then we must be stronger together and get to the end,” Eve said.

“Must we?” Flutterfree asked, glancing from Eve to Pinkie. “All we need to do is keep anyone bad from winning.”

“Trying to win is the best way of doing that!” Pinkie said.

Eve nodded. “Right.”

“By the way, Eve, you should probably test out Seraphim to see what exactly it can still do.”

“Oh,” Eve spread her wings, activating Seraphim. She was still able to dial any of the universes with unusual physics she was already aware of, but the moment she tried to move anything through the portal, it just passed right through Seraphim without going to another universe. “Right, same effect, but we can’t leave, just like the Them said. That is a stupid name. I thought Rev was joking…”
“…We really can’t defy Them can we?” Flutterfree asked.

Pinkie shook her head. “No. They’re too big. We’re just pieces on a board game to Them. Or perhaps in a casino, since they’re betting on us.”

“Eternally bored…” Eve said, shaking her head. “We’re one of many, many experiments they perform just because they can, aren’t we? …I feel sorry for the multiverse.”

“It’s a strange kind of evil,” Pinkie admitted. “He did mention doing Smash Bros, after all.”

“…Smash Bros?” Eve asked, cocking her head.

“Multiversal Heroes except more original.”

“They’re not like the Celestialsapien at all,” Flutterfree said. “They seemed… neutral, just arrogant. These beings… they just don’t care.”

“Talking about Them isn’t really going to help us win,” Pinkie said.

Eve looked at the sun. “We should probably make a camp of some sort for the night. I can cut a burrow in the ground with Seraphim.”

Pinkie transformed her mane into a drill and cut a hole into the ground. “Or I could just do this!” she called from inside. “Come on down, the place is well-furnished!”

Flutterfree and Eve crawled through Pinkie’s hole into… a living room with several sofas, a TV, soft pink wallpaper, and a bright red carpet. Pinkie was drilling holes into the walls as they entered, creating more exits in the otherwise chokehold home.

“Wow,” Eve said. “You went overboard.”

“If we’re going to have an underground bunker, it might as well be in style!” Pinkie said, turning off her mane-drill. “Couches, TV, multiple exists, a snack fridge, we have everything!”

“…Does the snack fridge have snacks?” Flutterfree asked.

Pinkie shrugged. “Dunno.” She opened the fridge and found a mysterious plastic container with a brown sediment on the bottom. “…This might be edible.”

Eve summoned some fruit from the aether and put them into the snack fridge. “Now it has everything.”

Pinkie giggled. “Yep! Now…” she turned on the TV. “How’s about we watch the only program on right now, the Hunger Games?”

Flutterfree blinked. “…Pinkie, are you allowed to cheat this much?”

“At the moment I’m not bound by the normal rules of the story, I’m bound by whatever Them’s rules are.” She sat down on a chair, watching herself do the same thing on the screen. “This is a special case where I can go a biit further than usual. Though I’m probably ticking more than a few of Them off.” She giggled.

“The less fun they have the better,” Eve asserted. “So, what’s on besides us?”

“Corona!”
Corona felt naked without Raging Sights.

Technically she still had a nightshirt on without Raging Sights’ barrier jacket/battle dress, which she always had in case a universe didn’t allow magic, but it did little to comfort her. An integral part of who she was now was in the hooves of Thrackerzod.

It wasn’t going to be easy to find the eldritch unicorn and take it back either. She could try to fly up and get a bird’s-eye view of the arena, but someone was bound to shoot her down if she did that. She wasn’t positive she could block an attack from every other contestant in the arena.

…She actually didn’t remember all twenty-four who were in the arena. That was an issue. What if she had a plan and forgot about a particular power involved? It was… concerning.

There was also the fact she really, really didn’t want to even fake-kill someone. She really wanted to just sit at this tree and do nothing the rest of the games, but that probably wasn’t an option.

“Fancy running into you here.”

Corona’s ears perked up. “Oh. Hey Toph. You want to fight now?”

Toph walked in front of Corona and created a chair of earth for her to sit in. “Not particularly. I was thinking more like we should make an alliance. Two old friends, facing all their other old friends and enemies together.”

Corona smirked. “Pass.”

“…what?”

“I said pass. We’ll just have to turn against each other eventually if we do that. I can already see one of us not paying any attention, and the other one thinking ‘maybe I should kill her now and get it over with’… I don’t want to go through that.”

Toph put a hand to her head. “I think you’re getting too deep.”

“You could say that,” Corona said, standing up and stretching her wings. “I’ll only fight you here if you want. You came here with plans of peace. I won’t punish you for that.”

Toph stood up as well, pursing her lips. “You know, I could order you as your Queen.”

“Princess of Passion,” Corona reminded her, smirking. “I only serve under you because I like it.”

Toph shrugged. “See you around, then. Here’s to hoping one of us wins without having to lob the other’s head off.”

“I’d drink to that. If I had a drink.”

Toph chuckled. Then she created a lump of earth under her feet and started ‘surfing’ away on it.

Corona went back to sitting at the base of her tree. At some point she’d climb into it and go to sleep for the night, but at the moment she wasn’t going anywhere. Just sit and think.

Blackjack decided she was going to make a friend to start these games off – fighting alone tended to
make her go crazy. Unfortunately Gilgamesh wasn’t here… but a lot of the people who were here were friendly, right?

Not to mention she felt odd without her gear. She was still a cyborg pony able to regenerate, turn her hooves into hands, and see targets over enemies; but the only gun she had gotten away with from the Cornucopia was a simple rifle. Her magic bullets might be more effective, depending on the situation she ended up in.

Her scans detected a target – someone was over there. It was currently red, but that was because everyone was a possible enemy in this arena at the moment. She opted to approach carefully, ruffling her wings into a more comfortable and limber position.

It was Daniel Jackson, stumbling through the woods, a haunted expression on his face – he’d probably seen Renee bite it. His aging face only added to the sorrow in his expression.

“Uh… H-”

Daniel pulled out a gun and fired at Blackjack, hitting her right in the leg. Her systems took over, beginning to regenerate, but Celestia that hurt. “What the fuck man!?”

Daniel didn’t stop. He fired again and again, though this time Blackjack raised a magic shield to stop all the bullets. Being friends was clearly out of the question, so she was just going to have to kill him. She fired two magic bolts and hit him dead on. Nothing seemed to happen.

“What th-”

Something invisible slapped her across the face. It felt like the skin of a fish – except freezing cold and burning hot at the same time. She whirled around on the air, catching sight of O’Neill right next to her. She kicked out with her hoof – but what she hit wasn’t actually O’Neill. It was a tree.

“Fuck all kinds of sushi!” Blackjack blurted. “All of them!”

“Go Fish,” O’Neill said, mockingly. Blackjack knew Crimson Sushi only affected sight – she could go for the sound of his voice. She turned around, launching spells wildly where she thought he was.

As it turned out there was a tree he had effectively made invisible by swapping its visuals with that of with a patch of air, so she ended up running into the trunk. Her shield fell down and a few of Daniel’s bullets hit her in the back.

“Fuck this,” she muttered, executing a teleport. She had no idea where she was now – but she knew she had a freeze-burn mark on her face and numerous bullet holes in her body. Her energy reserves would heal those eventually, but she’d need to eat gems to heal much more. Or maybe a magic energy bar or something…

She shook her head – they hadn’t been playing around back there. Clearly, trying to make friends wasn’t going to work here, at least not with those two. Making friends was an impediment to winning if you didn’t already trust your teammates…

She really didn’t want to have to do this alone. Why did she have to be the only person she really knew here? Why couldn’t Gilgamesh have come along? Or that other version of herself? Or Littlepip?

_Dammit, I’m missing my friends again_, Blackjack said with a sigh. _Don’t dwell on it now, they’re gone. They’re all gone._
Or are they?

There’s a wish on the line here.

Blackjack stood bolt upright. There were limits to Them’s power… But certainly they could bring her friends back. Yeah… Yeah, they could! All she had to do was win and all the losses could be fixed!

She had a one in twenty-four chance.

She really liked those odds.

She needed to heal up – but after that, she was going to destroy every last one of these opponents. Every. Last. One.

Because she needed to win. And that was her talent.

~~~

Ambassador Valentine and Froppy had managed to pull some shenanigans with Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap in order to duplicate the one gun they had gotten into a dozen copies, producing effectively-infinite ammunition and a firearm for both of them. They just had to be careful not to let any specific bullet come in contact with an alternate of itself. It was the problem with D4C – using it alone to break universe boundaries resulted in the instability of alternates. A powerful weapon, yes, but fraught with drawbacks.

Valentine would have loved to know how Them managed to create sub-universes for D4C to reach into on the fly whenever D4C felt the need to. He wasn’t even entirely sure the universes D4C was visiting were even real.

They had set up camp next to a tree split down the middle. Valentine watched the sun set. “A wish for the glory of USM…” Valentine said, hands to his eyes.

“Ribbit. What do you think it’ll be?”

“There are many internal issues I could wish away. The President has her hands full with the Ink Rebellion at the moment, but the economic crisis may be more important in the long run.” He put a hand to his face. “There’s also the request for technology that would revolutionize everything. Effective time travel. The Stand bestowal pills the Merodi have. Devices that can create universes to spec…” He folded his arms. “There are many options to consider on our path to victory.”

“We still have to win, though.”

“Only one of us must make it to the top. Without taking into account powers, that’s a one in twelve chance. Taking into account that I have one of the stronger abilities in this world, it’s higher than that.”

Froppy nodded. “We’ll still have to be careful.”

“We’ll also have to be ruthless,” Valentine said, turning to Froppy. “I understand you are friends with some of our enemies.”

“I wouldn’t exactly say friends.”

“But you are fond of them, correct?”
“Yep.”

“Even in this world of no consequences, fighting the faces of people who are not enemies is
disconcerting. Especially to the death.”

“Ambassador, I won’t falter,” Froppy asserted. “There are no moral concerns here, and I can put
aside my emotions for the sake of success.”

Valentine looked in her eyes for several minutes. “I believe you. You will fight well regardless of
what we face.”

“Tomorrow,” Froppy said.

“Yes,” Valentine admitted. He pressed himself between a piece of wood and the ground to access
alternate worlds, grabbing a few versions of himself. “We will take shifts standing guard.”

*It sure is handy he doesn’t explode when next to himself*, Froppy noted. “Ribbit.”

“Sleep, and rest your mind,” Valentine said. “We have a long day ahead of us.”

~~~

One person remained alive at the Cornucopia, the owner of all the loot. All the guns, magic artifacts,
and food.

Her name was Brutalight Sparcake. She had been the only one crazy enough to stick around after the
initial fights and death. She had no idea how many she had killed – at least two, definitely injuring a
lot more – and now she was the king of the hill.

And nothing had happened all day. No one had come to challenge her. The only fun she’d gotten
was tormenting Starbeat. The mare’s leg had been removed by a stray attack, stranding her in the
Cornucopia, but she’d still lived long enough for Brutalight to have a round of ‘entertainment’ with
the cursed mare. Then Brutalight had killed her.

She was going to kill every last one of them. There were no consequences here, she didn’t have to
worry about her friends getting caught in the crossfire, and she knew so many of the faces here and
would want nothing more than to tear their sorry eyes out of their skulls…

Probably roast the organs and eat them as well. She should have saved Starbeat for that rather than
vaporizing the body. Shame.

She cackled to herself – it was times like this when she remembered she was an Element of Insanity.
Quite a delightful feeling.

“COME AND GET ME!” she shouted in the Royal Canterlot Voice. “I HAVE ALL THE
STUFF! COME OOOOON! I BET IF YOU ALL RUSHED ME AT ONCE YOU COULD
GET ME!”

There was no response. She knew some of them heard her – they had to, that voice went out for
miles – but none felt like coming on her terms.

Fine then. She could wait. She could wait all night. Sleep was for the weak.

But they would come eventually… Eventually…
And then they would die by her hoof.

That was its own reward. The wish would just be a bonus.

~~~

“It’s back to us,” Flutterfree said, pointing at the TV. “We didn’t get to see everyone.”

“Guess we’re not going to bother showing everyone,” Pinkie said with a shrug. “That would make for a really long chapter.”

“Brutalight is as disturbing as always…” Eve said, shaking her head. “The good news is it looks like she’s going to get herself killed in her insanity. We won’t have to deal with her.”

“Maybe,” Pinkie said. “But she was a focus, so she might b-”

“HELLO EVERYONE!” the voice of the Them boomed into everyone’s mind. “It’s time for your nightly update! Day 1 is done, and oooh boy we’ve already lost a ton of contestants! A fourth of the original number have been cut down in the short time between the start of the game and now! Blumiere has the honor of being first blood! Those who perished today include Renee, Allure, Nova, Starbeat, and Jenny!”

Eve’s pupils dilated. “Jenny!? On the first day!?"

“Yes, you heard me folks, the ‘unkillable’ Jenny has fallen to one of the other contestants! Who? I’ll never tell. That’s for you all to wonder about! With that, I bid you all goodnight – sleep tight, don’t let the other contestants bite!”

The Them stopped talking, leaving the three ponies in silence.

“Sleep in shifts?” Pinkie suggested.

“Sleep in shifts,” Eve agreed. “Flutterfree, you go first.”

Flutterfree nodded. “Got it. …I didn’t know Starbeat was out.”

“Eighteen left…” Eve shook her head. “This isn’t going to take very long, is it?”

“I’m thinking less than a week,” Pinkie admitted. “Though we’re probably in a universe where everything takes place in a single instant.”

“…Let’s not think about that right now. You two go to sleep, I’ll wake you in a few hours,” Flutterfree gestured to the couches. “I’ll tell you if anything interesting happens on the television.”

The moment the two of them rolled under their covers, the television switched to static, for nothing of note happened that night… that would be shown to them, anyway.

~~~

The sun rose on the Cornucopia, and Brutalight’s sleep-deprived face.

Nothing had happened the entire night.

“They’ll come eventually…” she said, left eye twitching. “Eventually.” She began to root around the Cornucopia, looking for anything to draw potential victims to the Cornucopia. “WHO WANTS A SOLID GOLD RIFLE? I HAVE A- wait why the hell is there a solid gold rifle here?” With
considerable effort, she tossed it to the side. “There has to be something…”

She pulled the All-Night mask out of the pile. “…Well this’ll keep me from falling asleep, at least.”

She slapped it onto her face. She didn’t feel any less tired, but there’d be no nodding off for sure now.

Once again, there was silence.

God, I’m lonely, Brutalight thought to herself. I wish any of the girls were here, or Six… Hell, even one of my moronic subjects would be preferable to this. She sighed audibly. She could go hunting for them…

No, that’d mean admitting defeat! She was king of the hill and she was going to stay that way – nobody was going to lure her away from it! “COME FACE ME ALREADY, COWARDS!”

Nothing.

“FINE THEN. I’LL JUST SIT HERE, UNOPPOSED, AND BECOME THE FINAL BOSS OF THE HUNGER GAMES!” She raised her hoof into the air and shook it as violently as she could. She tossed a grenade into the forest just to have an explosion punctuate her claim.

Nothing.

She groaned. There were no books in the pile, so she started doing the next best thing to do when you’re bored.

Meticulously sort a pile of random junk into neat, organized piles of random junk to make it easier to find everything.

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The screams of Brutalight from the television woke Flutterfree and Evening up in a panic. They were ready to fight for their lives.

Pinkie held up her hooves. “Woah woah woah! Calm down everypony! That’s just the sound of Brutalight losing her sanii… Wait, hold on, that’s a dumb sentence. Uh… If she’s already insane what other part of her mind can she lose? Eve, help me here.”

“Give me a moment to lower my adrenaline,” Eve said, clutching her chest as if it were about to explode. “Good galloping grapes…”

Flutterfree rubbed her eyes, trying to focus less on her feeling of internal panic and more on practical matters. “What time is it?”

“Morning’o’clock,” Pinkie said. “Which is to say I have no idea, days may not even be twenty-four hours here.”

Eve rubbed her eyes, summoning a cup of coffee from the aether. “I did not need to wake up like this…”

“Did anything happen in the night?” Flutterfree asked.

Pinkie shook her head. “TV was static until Brutalight started screaming.”

“Do we… listen to her?”
“Aha, no,” Eve said. “Who knows what kind of world-ending powers she’s got in that stash?”

“Well it did have Raising Sights, but not anymore,” Pinkie said.

“And if there’s anything else of that power level or utility, we’re screwed if we try to take her on.”

“We’ll have to do it eventually,” Flutterfree pointed out.

“Let someone else do it,” Eve grunted. “In case it isn’t obvious I really don’t want to go face her.”

“Got it,” Pinkie said. “But we’ll have to do something. We can’t just hide in our house the entire games.”

“Why not?”

“Much higher chances of losing and also of ticking Them off to interfere.” Pinkie shrugged. “I mean, in the original Hunger Games the overlords or whatever would interfere from time to time if they felt like it.”

“Original?”

“They aren’t being very creative. They just saw this formula and copy/pasted it.”

“Maybe if they applied themselves they wouldn’t be so bored!”

Flutterfree nodded. “They could be more dangerous that way…”

Eve wasn’t sure how to think about Them at this point, so she just shook her head. “Right, plan. Plan is good. Go out and hunt for other contestants with my magic sense?”

“Or lure them to us,” Pinkie suggested. “Do something flashy, let people know where we are, then lead them into a trap!”

“I like that idea,” Flutterfree said.

“You’ll most likely be the bait, though,” Eve pointed out. “Weakest looking, ‘easy’ kill.”

“. . . I like the idea less now, but still more than going out and hunting.”

“I can set up magic traps, Pinkie can set up party cannons. . . You can, right?”

Pinkie pulled out a machine gun laced with miniature flamethrowers. “I have a lot more freedom right now.”

“I can tell. That’s good for us.” Eve rubbed her hooves together. “So, we set up traps, Flutterfree, are you willing to fly above the treeline for a short while, using Lolo to grab attention?”

“Won’t that look suspicious?”

“Not if you look like you’re trying to search for something.”

Flutterfree thought about this for a moment and nodded. “All right. But they’re going to try to shoot me down.”

Eve cast a barrier spell on Flutterfree. “There you go. If a bullet hits you it’s going to hurt, but it won’t break anything. Try to be back down before anything more impressive tries to shoot you.”
Flutterfree sighed. “Here I am, accepting the role of bait with open wings…”

Pinkie put a blue ribbon on Flutterfree’s chest. *Number one bait pegasus.* “Yep!”

“Let’s just get this over with.” She crawled out of their room back into the arena proper, the wind whipping in her mane. The sun was already a fair ways up the sky, casting the entire forest in a late-morning glow.

Eve and Pinkie crawled out behind her. “We’ll set up a mile that way,” Eve said, making notes in her head. “They won’t be able to find our base.” She lit her horn, teleporting them the entire mile in an instant, into a part of the forest that looked identical to the one they had just left, minus a mysterious hole.

“I wonder if they just copy-pasted tree patterns,” Pinkie mused. “Anyway, *party traps.*” She started pulling cannon after cannon out of her mane and stuffing them behind trees that should have been too thin to hide behind. The cannons vanished anyway. “Laced with razor-sharp confetti bred to kill!”

“Exhibit A of why everyone should be terrified of Pinkie Pie,” Eve observed, smirking.

“Hey, you don’t have to worry about collateral damage either, feel free to use Seraphim to its full potential,” Pinkie reminded her.

“I’m not making the arena explode in a nuke.”

“If you could find a way to survive it you’d win!”

“And anyone else who figured out how to survive it as well,” Eve pointed out, using her horn to lay magical traps all around them, the spells glowing purple for a while before vanishing into the surface they were placed on.

“Eh, it’s a thought,” Pinkie said, bouncing around, checking her own traps. “All ready!”

Eve made herself and Pinkie invisible. “We’ll be hiding right here, Flutterfree. You go up, fly around with Lolo, and then come back down. Do it faster if you get shot at.”

“Oooh! Oooh! If she gets shot make her look injured!” Pinkie suggested

“All right, that too,” Eve said. “Then we’ll wait for anyone to fall for it.”

Flutterfree took a breath and spread her wings. “Here I go…” She launched into the air and surrounded herself with the spirographs of Lolo, looking around the forest arena carefully. She temporarily removed Eve and Pinkie’s invisibility, and made Eve’s traps glow a soft purple. Flutterfree did see Corona flying around nearby, but the princess ignored her.

Flutterfree didn’t get much chance to look for other things, for a rocky boulder came flying from a fair distance away right for her. Probably from Toph. She ducked under the rock, but a bullet hit her in the side. Eve’s barrier spell caught it, saving her from the damage, not the inertia. She entered a tailspin and crashed into a nearby tree.

“Ow,” she muttered, recalling Lolo.

Eve levitated her out of the tree and set her in the middle of all the traps. With a quick spell, she made it look like Flutterfree had suffered a bullet wound… An illusion which Lolo removed in an instant.
“...I’m actually going to have to make you bleed Flutterfree, sorry,” Eve said.

“It’s fine,” Flutterfree said. “Just do it.”

Eve cut a few light scrapes into Flutterfree’s skin, and made one small hole that, from a distance, might look like a bullet had made it. She looked very vulnerable.

“How do you feel?” Eve asked.

“...Very itchy,” Flutterfree responded.

“Good.”

“Try not to get hungry for your own blood!” Pinkie suggested.

“...Helpful,” Flutterfree muttered.

Eve cleared her throat. “Everyone quiet. Be prepared for anyone to show up.”

~~~

Corona took one look at Flutterfree and thought that’s a trap.

Had she not already been doing something, she would have considered letting herself fall into the trap in the hopes of finding someone else. Lucky for her she didn’t even have to consider that, because she was hot on the trail of Raging Sights. She had picked up the magical signature a few minutes ago and had been following it ever since, flying just below the canopy to minimize her own visibility.

Her device was calling out to her. The closer she got, the stronger she felt their connection. It pounded in her heart, a deep desire to reclaim a part of her – a part of her she had scarcely let leave her side ever since she’d found it.

She was almost consumed by the desire to reunite – but she managed to keep enough of her awareness to realize she should probably be quiet. She stopped flying when she sensed she was really close, dropping low to the ground.

Raging Sights called to her. Corona saw her device – Thrackerzod wore Raging Sights around her neck. Good, it would be as simple as taking on the eldritch fill-

Crapbaskets, Corona cursed. Rohan.

She couldn’t take Rohan.

Not because she wouldn’t win in a fight – she definitely could, since she knew his ability relied on sight. Just use a blindfold and rely completely on magic sense, problem solved.

The problem was that when she first met Rohan the man had written a command in her.

Cannot harm Rohan Kishibe.

She still couldn’t harm him, no matter what. He was immune to her. And because he was traveling with Thrackerzod, brute force was suddenly out of the question. This meant she’d have to go with stealth...

It was times like this she wished she’d bothered to learn the invisibility spell.
This was going to be tricky, especially with how magically sensitive Thrackerzod could be. Corona was surprised the eldritch unicorn hadn’t noticed her presence already, or noticed what Raging Sights was doing.

She summoned Bacon Pancakes. She told her Stand to ready one of its long-range pins. It shot forth, grabbed Raging Sights with its power, and pulled it back to Corona.

Corona had a teleport prepared, but something gave her pause – Thrackerzod had winked at her after she took it.

Was she not under Rohan’s control?

Thrackerzod cleared her throat. “Hey Rohan. The device is gone.”

“…What?!”

“I mean it’s not around my neck anymore.” Thrackerzod gestured at her neck. “Someone must have taken it.”

Rohan Summoned Heaven’s Door and began scanning the trees around them – but Corona was already gone. “Why wouldn’t they attack us?”

“Scared of you?” Thrackerzod suggested. “Or me?”

“It must have been Corona,” Rohan said. “She’s unable to attack me, but she would have a personal connection to that device… How could you not have noticed?”

“Maybe I just don’t give a na’thz about anything right about now?”

Rohan folded his hands together. “Fine. Keep better watch, Thrackerzod. Next time something may try to kill us.” They walked away.

Thrackerzod smirked. She loved loopholes. Rohan didn’t need protecting from Corona at all, so the eldritch unicorn simply hadn’t offered any helpful information.

And now Corona was back to her old self, dress, device, and all. Ready to kick some serious flank.

~~~

Blackjack was not a smart pony.

Oh, hey, look, target! She grabbed her gun and fired, hitting Flutterfree dead on. Direct hit! She galloped towards where Flutterfree had fallen, the thought that it might be a trap being the furthest thing from her mind.

She didn’t even notice the flying boulder, somehow. She just charged through the woods.

She did see the second boulder.

When it hit her.

She was made of considerably sterner stuff than any normal pony – or even a standard alicorn – but taking a boulder to the side at high speed was still more than enough to crack a rib and blast the wind out of her.

Mending that rib would probably take the rest of her reserves, and it would take time…
Fuck it, she was done running. She whirled in the direction the boulder had come, catching sight of Toph in the trees. Blackjack fired a few white magic bolts at the Queen of Lai. She took them head on – not able to register that Blackjack had even cast a projectile spell until the bullets hit her.

“That’s not a laser spell,” Toph muttered, clutching the wounds in her midsection. “Definitely wasn’t expecting that.”

Blackjack fired more magic bullets rather than wasting real bullets on Toph. Toph was smart enough to try to dodge, but the bolts still moved too fast and were impossible for her to detect. She knew running wasn’t going to help either, so she was just going to have to get creative. She pushed herself forward with a brick of earth, holding her hand out to Blackjack.

“Ha, and I thought I was a mo-” Toph bent the metal in Blackjack’s legs, driving her into the ground. Toph twisted her feet, crushing the mechanical hooves between the earth.

“AUGH!” Blackjack shouted, firing more magic bolts. Toph doged one, but another hit her in the shoulder, knocking her back.

Blackjack used brute force to rip her legs out of the ground, tearing off their cybernetic tips. Artificial though they were, the act of severing the ends of four limbs was still excruciating.

Blackjack was nothing if not used to pain, however. She brought the broken, jagged edge of her front leg down to bear on Toph.

The woman reacted quickly, pulling a weapon out from under her shirt.

_The Starmetal sword. My Starmetal sword!_ Blackjack’s first thought was anger – the second was pain that could only be caused by an anti-magic blade slicing her down the leg.

Blackjack drove her other jagged leg into the side of Toph’s face, a decidedly more lethal blow. Already weak from the blood loss and strain, Toph lost her grip on the sword.

Blackjack grabbed it with her telekinesis and held it to Toph’s neck. “Gotcha.”

“…Yeah,” Toph coughed. “Hurry up and take me out before I think of something.”

“A good idea,” Blackjack admitted, breathing heavily. “Goodbye.”

“Corona’s gonna getcha now.”

“I bet she is,” Blackjack said, grunting as she performed the final act. She’d seen it so many times before she was mostly desensitised to it.

She sighed and started using Toph’s clothing to patch herself up. If she’d had her armor on, Blackjack could have eaten that to refuel herself… As it was, there were only a few pieces of royal jewelry on Toph. Not enough to restore anything of any significance. Blackjack was now down all her hooves and had a completely useless leg.

Her systems could repair though… If she detached all the artificial parts of the pointless leg, the other three would work themselves back to health with time. She used the Starmetal sword to carve off the mechanical bits of the split leg, then started chewing on them.

It never ceased to amaze her what she could _eat_ with this cyborg body. Gemstones, glass, metal… Horrendously uncomfortable, but hey, if it worked…
She moved on without another look at Toph. She had to crawl to a place that wasn’t quite so out in the open…

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Jotaro strode through the forest, following some hoof tracks he was relatively sure belonged to Rev, given how they had movement patterns similar to Nova’s, and both Nova and Starbeat were already out. She was moving alone, so a simple time stop ORA ORA combo would easily take her out. But he wasn’t going to chance that she had time exploits hidden in her array of skills – stealth was important.

One may find it odd that a man as big as Jotaro would consider stealth, but when you’re a biologist who works in the field you had better learn how to observe animals without being seen or you’re doomed to fail pretty quickly.

He suddenly came to the end of the tracks. There were no signs of continuing hoofprints.

“Yare yare daze…” Jotaro muttered. She had either teleported away or backtracked long before he arrived. Teleportation seemed more likely, since it would have been odd for someone who knew a backtracking technique to make the hoofprints this obvious in the first place.

He wasn’t going to be able to find her now, regardless. He began walking in a random direction, continuing the hunt. He wasn’t going to call attention to himself for a ‘trap’ – that was just asking for trouble from multiple avenues. The best chances for survival were to remain hidden, play smart, and be as lethal as quickly as possible.

Not to mention have contingency plans for every opponent.

His current plan to beat Rohan was to find another tribute with a gun and take that. If Jotaro had a lethal long-range weapon, Rohan would fall easily. The issue was finding a gun.

Alushy was also a problem with her advanced regeneration. Cutting off her head and running would only have a temporary effect – the head would grow back, eventually. Jotaro’s best bet was to abuse time stop like nothing else and tear Alushy in the middle of an attack, getting her to cut herself in half.

Corona, he had two contingency plans for. If she had her device with her, Jotaro would need to shatter it, ruining her mental state. If she didn’t, a straight fight or stealth attack would work.

Valentine… Jotaro knew he’d have to be extremely lethal within stopped time, or Valentine was just going to be able to ‘revive’ himself with D4C. The headcrusher was the best option, and he didn’t like the chances of that one failing.

Brutalight presented a few options. Hit her with her own sword, or just sneak up and punch her head off.

Eve… Eve was the hardest. Seraphim automatically surrounded Eve with a protective barrier that would stop bullets and most magic projectiles. Getting close enough to ram a fist into her would be problematic due to Seraphim’s ability to erase Star Platinum from existence by making him ‘break’ the laws of physics. And that wasn’t even taking into account her magic sense and arcane mastery… Or the sheer variety of things she could do by rejecting reality.

He may have been strong, and in a fair fight he might have been able to pull through facing most opponents, but there was clearly more than one opponent, and remaining uninjured was a big deal for these games.
Kill them fast and before they have any idea.

It was at this point Jotaro tripped over a rock.

It took him less than a second to realize what this meant. He froze time. In the five seconds he had, he rotated around, scanning the forest.

*There.* A soft beam of light attached to where he was and with a direct line into a nearby tree. He saw Vriska sitting in that tree.

*Good. Now I know where she is.*

He had a second left, so he moved out of her luck-stealing sights. Time resumed.

“Fuck,” she said, noticing he wasn’t where he’d been just an instant ago.

“ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA!” Star Platinum punched the tree Vriska was sitting in to the ground, dazing the troll considerably.

Jotaro jumped behind her, hitting her in the back of the head multiple times, but only one of the blows did any significant damage, cracking her skull.

This had mixed results. Her mental powers *pulsed*, freezing Jotaro for a second. She turned to look at him, cobalt blood running down her face.

That one glance was enough to lower his luck the rest of the way. His heart seized up, a sharp pain shooting through his chest. And he felt her *still* draining his luck. “STAR PLATINUM: THE WORLD!” Time froze again. Jotaro whaled on Vriska’s form with as many ORA’s as he could manage, but with every one he pulled a muscle or broke something. His luck was abysmal, and there was nothing he could do about it.

He died in the middle of the time stop, forcing time to resume sooner than normal.

Vriska wasn’t doing too hot herself. The blow to the back of her head was the worst, but she was bloodied in several other locations. Her overall luck in the fight had actually gone *down* from the sheer number of lethal punches she’d made nonlethal.

But she could still stand. “Sorry big guy.” Her normally confident features faltered as she examined his face – usually an impassive mask of strength, now twisted into immense pain.

She turned and limped away.

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Valentine and Froppy walked through the forest, looking for victims.

“Jotaro?” Valentine asked.

“Attack from a distance and from behind.”

“Corona?”

“Decoy Valentines until one gets close enough to introduce her to herself.”

“Eve?”
Froppy furrowed her brow. “I still don’t think our plan for her works that well.”

Valentine folded his arms. “If we encounter her we must have something.”

“Even with your workaround she’s got magic, and Seraphim can do a lot more than just disable D4C.”

Valentine nodded. “That much is true. But we must be of one mind.”

“Ribbit. I will do as we’ve planned, but I’d prefer it if we thought of something else—get down.”

Valentine and Froppy crouched to the ground, cautious. “Where?” Valentine whispered.

“Two o’clock,” Froppy said, gesturing with her tongue. Valentine glanced that direction, seeing O’Neill and Daniel walking through the forest, both of them on edge. They hadn’t seen them yet—or at least it looked that way. With Crimson Sushi in effect, it was hard to be sure.

Valentine closed his eyes and listened closely. He heard their footsteps in the same direction he had seen them. They really were there, unless they had a really clever trick going on.

Valentine and Froppy pulled out their guns, both aiming at Daniel’s head. Both their bullets missed.

“Ribbit…” Froppy muttered, lowering her gun a considerable distance and firing while O’Neill and Daniel registered the first gunshots. She fired. A bullet that should have hit Daniel in the feet hit him in the chest, knocking him down.

“He’s making everything look higher than it actually is,” Froppy reported. “A—”

It was at this point all the trees appeared to scramble, including their perceptions of each other and O’Neill. Froppy was tossed to the side by Crimson Sushi, the freezing heat scarring her neck.

Valentine punched Crimson Sushi with D4C, the damage translating from the fish’s face to O’Neill. It was clear he wasn’t actually standing where they saw him, but they weren’t able to discern which angle the pained grunt had come from.

O’Neill opted to keep Crimson Sushi back away from his targets, pulling out a gun instead.

Valentine took the hit right in the chest.

“Froppy! Flag!” he shouted. Froppy pulled an American flag out and draped it over Valentine. He vanished with the power of D4C. Valentine punched Crimson Sushi with D4C, the damage translating from the fish’s face to O’Neill. It was clear he wasn’t actually standing where they saw him, but they weren’t able to discern which angle the pained grunt had come from.

O’Neill opted to keep Crimson Sushi back away from his targets, pulling out a gun instead. Valentine took the hit right in the chest.

“Froppy! Flag!” he shouted. Froppy pulled an American flag out and draped it over Valentine. He vanished with the power of D4C. While he was gone, Froppy opted to jump high into the air to make it harder for O’Neill to shoot her. Not a single one of his three shots made contact with the bouncing frog.

Valentine returned, healthy as ever, with a dozen copies of himself. All of them winked, even though they couldn’t be sure they were actually looking at Froppy.

Froppy got the message—she aimed her gun and started shooting at the Valentines. The one individual O’Neill would be certain she’d never shoot—so he’d hide his real self behind one of them.

The third bullet hit the real O’Neill, forcing him to drop the illusion from the pain.

A version of Valentine with D4C appeared behind O’Neill. “Dojyaaaaan!” he called as D4C pulled another version of O’Neill from behind a tree. He threw the two men together, forcing them to fuse together. They had managed to create a ‘false’ O’Neill that still reacted with O’Neill as if they were the same through D4C—as they collided, fractal-pattern cubes popped out of their bodies, exploding...
showers of blood around them. The two of them appeared as one being now, shuddering as they flew apart in every conceivable direction, reduced to a pile of blood and organic substance riddled with square holes.

Froppy shook her head. “No matter how many times I see that…”

“Brutal, I’m aware,” Valentine said, sending his alternate selves away. “But effective.”

Froppy made no further comments. She started examining the area. “…Where’s Daniel’s body?”

It was nowhere to be seen. The two of them stood in a fearful silence. Froppy hadn’t shot Daniel in the brain. ...He may have ascended.

But no judgment rained down upon them.

~~~

Eve was starting to wonder if they’d gotten anyone with the trick, or if they were sitting here in a trap nobody was going to fall into. Flutterfree was doing a good job looking like she was near death, but Eve could also see her getting bored. Not a single trap had gone off, and Eve hadn’t sensed anything coming closer to them.

She was wondering if she’d just have to call it off.

“Just a little longer,” Pinkie whispered in her ear. The sudden presence of an invisible Pinkie Pie next to Eve sent a chill down her spine.

“Aaaaa…” Eve said, holding her chest, wishing she didn’t need her ears on. “Pinkie, don’t do that!”

“Shhhh.” Pinkie hissed, placing an invisible hoof on Eve’s invisible face.

“Mmmf.”

“We’re luring someone,” Pinkie assured her.

Eve noticed that Pinkie’s hoof was shaking. “…Pinkie, are you okay?”

“Not really, but we’re not going to have time to discuss that.”

“Why n-”

One of Eve’s spells went off to the south, sending a purple cloud of gas into the air. A party cannon went off shortly afterward, and they saw a tremendous amount of blood shoot into the air.

Eve readied herself, summoning Seraphim to her side, the Stand’s three rings rotating faster and faster as her adrenaline levels rose. She knew who was coming.

Two more of Eve’s traps went off alongside another one of Pinkie’s pieces of razor confetti. Walking right into the trap, exactly as planned.

Eve didn’t feel confident about this. The person who was coming wouldn’t be easy to kill… Far from it.

A beast torn limb from limb, connected together only by a mess of dark magic, teeth, and menacing eyes, leaped at them, triggering the closest of Eve’s magic traps. The form of the beast became little more than dark sludge flying into the air.
Pinkie threw an invisible hammer at it, but the beast caught it with a yellow wing. The darkness coalesced into the wholly vampiric form of Alushy. She brandished the bow of light, firing bolt after bolt at Eve though she was still invisible.

*So much for stealth.* Seraphim caught the weapons while Eve stopped maintaining the invisibility spell.

Alushy entered a dive-bomb, narrowly dodging some of Lolo’s vines sent to trap the vampire. The dive-bomb quickly went out of control when Pinkie slammed a hammer across Alushy’s head, spraying at least a gallon of blood over the clearing.

“You’re like a tomato,” Pinkie commented as Alushy hit the ground.

“It comes with the territory.” Alushy said, baring her teeth. It was at this point her teeth vanished, her red eyes became the cyan of a standard Fluttershy, and the dark aura around her vanished completely. “…Fuck,” she said, her voice somehow maintaining the unholy depth it always had.

Seraphim was in reality altering mode, all three rings aligned with a blue glow in the middle. “Gotcha.”

Alushy used her wings to pull back on the bow of light, aiming it for Eve’s face. While Seraphim was altering reality, it wasn’t protecting her in any other way. Eve knew she didn’t have time to shift reality again, but she was going to try, going for a set of physics where internal organic chemicals tended to spontaneously combust, all the while preparing her own magic to *catch* the arrow. She didn’t like her chances, but at least she *had* them.

Alushy turned around at the last second and shot Pinkie between the eyes. Her vividly candy-red blood seeped from the wound, down her face.

Pinkie looked at the arrow’s back half, shaking.

*She knew this was coming,* Eve realized with no small amount of horror.

Pinkie made a halfhearted wave at her friends before slumping forward, painting the ground red.

Alushy went up like a light, internally combusting due to Seraphim, unable to regenerate because of the magic void. She was reduced to cinders that would never rise again.

Just to be sure Eve vaporized the dust with a laser of her own.

Alushy was dead.

So was Pinkie.

Eve stared at the form of the pink party pony, sitting there on the grass, coloring it an unnaturally bright color. Flutterfree did the same, staring at her from her prone position.

“I… I don’t know what to feel,” Eve said, smacking herself in the head. “I know she isn’t *gone,* she’ll be back once all of this is over, so part of me just thinks I should move on. But then there’s this other part of me that can’t stop *staring.* Has she *ever* bled before, Flutterfree? That’s not a natural color!”

“I’ve seen other Pinkies for sure,” Flutterfree said. “But she’s usually… rubbery. …Maybe she lost her ‘Pinkie Shield’ because this event has no consequences…?” She blinked. “What are we *supposed* to think here?”
“She was scared…” Eve said, looking at Pinkie with a sad expression. “Even if this isn’t permanent… She still gets to experience it. What it feels like to die.”

Flutterfree gulped. “…It’s a horrible feeling, Eve. I… I’m not even sure it qualifies as a feeling. More like a lack of it. All sensation suddenly cuts. After that…? I ended up in a world of clouds. I don’t know where They are keeping Pinkie’s spirit. For all I know it’s a box of nothing, freezing her…”

Tears began to roll down her face. “Everyone in this arena is going to have to experience this! Everyone but one! Even Alushy!”

Eve put a wing around Flutterfree. “…Let’s go back to our home. We’ve done enough for today.”

“…I hope Corona’s going to be okay,” Flutterfree said.

“She’s strong,” Eve said. “She can do what she needs to do if the situation demands it.”

“But how will she cope with killing her friends? Even if none of this is real, it’s…” She couldn’t stop looking at Pinkie. “It’s too realistic. This isn’t some virtual game…”

Eve shook her head. “It isn’t… But it’s best if we think of it that way.” She lit her horn, giving Flutterfree her bow of light and initiating the teleports back to the base Pinkie constructed for them.

The two burst into tears the moment they saw the interior with the still-functioning television. They wouldn’t be leaving the rest of the day.

~~~

Corona sat in a tree, preening her feathers. She was part bird now, so it was a thing she had to do. Naturally she used her hands rather than her mouth for the operation.

In her lap was a globe of glass she had created from the aether, filled with a white wispy energy. Her secret weapon.

…If she would ever use it.

As it was, she had spent the entire day watching and waiting, gathering things for herself and getting more than powerful enough to take the majority of contestants in the arena. However, she had never instigated a single fight – merely watched a couple take place, taking what advantages she could from the aftermath. She’d killed a grand total of zero so far. She’d only fought Thrackerzod at the very start for Raging Sights, and that hadn’t gone anywhere.

She glanced at the crystals on the back of her hands – each one partly her necklace of empathy, partly Raging Sights. What do you think?

Victory is preferred.

I know that RS, but do we even want to win if it means killing?

Not true killing.

No death is meaningless RS, not even temporary ones.

The meaning changes.

I suppose so… It still doesn’t sit right with me.

You don’t have to start any fights.
Is that really what’s best here, though? Only fight in defense of myself?

The other option is to go hunting.

And I’d make quick work of most of them here, I know… Corona sighed. I just don’t want to. I really don’t want to.

Then don’t.

You’re making it simpler than it is.

I’m a magical device. It’s my job.

Fair enough. Corona looked into the distance, realizing that she had spent almost the entire day doing nothing. The sun was already heading for the horizon again. Let’s talk about this tomorrow. Starting anything now would just be somewhat pointless.

“…You okay up there?”

Corona raised an eyebrow, looking down to see Rev. “I’m supposed to kill you, you know,” Corona said.

“I don’t think you will. You have my promise that I won’t fight you if you don’t fight me.”

“Fair enough,” Corona said, gliding down from the tree. “If you’re here for an alliance I’m going to have to decline.”

Rev nodded in understanding. “I was hopeful we would band together over our hatred of death, but if it is not to be, it is not to be.”

“Been avoiding fights too, huh?”

Rev nodded. “I cannot fully defy Them’s plans, but I can try to be as boring as possible to annoy them.”

“Hey, you know things right? What can you tell me about these ‘Them’ types?”

“Do you remember when Pucci kidnapped Jolyne and ran through the D-Sphere?”

“…Vaguely. I wasn’t there personally.”

“Well, Pucci had heard rumors of the ‘highest’ universe in the D-sphere, known as the Pinnacle. He hoped to go there and become like a god.” Rev shook her head. “What actually happens if you manage to ascend all the way to the Pinnacle is you become one of Them – and you have to ascend by personal merit and spiritual understanding, not dimensional devices.”

“…So they’re gods?”

“Of a sort. You know how Earth Tau’ri has the Ascended, beings who become energy by meditation, thought, and understanding?”

“How could I forget?”

“Good. Imagine those Ascended beings realizing that another plane exists above their own, and then another, and another, and another. Over eons and eons, various ‘spiritual’-type beings approached the Pinnacle, until the race that Them used to be arrived. All at once, they had reached the top of
pure-spirit meditation. I hear they were benevolent guardian gods of the multiverse at first.”

“But then?”

“Then they got bored, Really bored. And now Them are hated across the multiverse for their many attempts to cure their boredom. …I’ve never been a part of their games, but I’ve known people who have. The results are rarely pretty. Be glad they decided these games had to have no permanent consequences. Things are usually more entertaining when the stakes are higher.”

Corona leaned back. “…And why do they call themselves Them? That’s gotta be confusing.”

“This is just a rumor, but I’m pretty sure it’s because they are composed of more than one race that reached the Pinnacle. So they had no name, and Them really didn’t care to give themselves one, so everyone just started calling them Them.”

“…That’s confusing.”

“Don’t I know it,” Rev admitted with a sigh. “I wouldn’t try to go against Them. If it’s a game they want, it’s a game they’ll get. If you want to stick it to them, I’d suggest being as boring as possible.”

“Not as easy as it sounds.”

“No. It isn’t.” Rev lit her horn. “I’m off to go avoid fights some more. Do what you want. Who knows, maybe you’ll win and get a wish.”

“…But what would I wish for?”

Rev smiled at her. “Think about it for a second.”

“…The easy immortality,” Corona said. “If I win… I could stop all the research in one fell swoop…”

“The question you must ask yourself is if it is worth it,” Rev said. “I think you’ll be up all night on that one.”

“Yeah, probably.”

Rev teleported away. Corona returned to her tree to ponder what she’d just learned.

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The sun was setting again.

Brutalight tore the All-Night mask off her face and threw it to the ground, roaring in rage. “FINE THEN! IF YOU WON’T COME TO ME, I’LL COME TO YOU!”

She armed herself, hanging three different magical pendants around her neck, levitating a half-dozen guns onto her back, and using her magic to fashion the leftover metal into a suit of armor. She had more than enough resources in the Cornucopia for a full set. She downed an entire magic energy bar, providing her with enough power to make her horn glow continually. She spread her wings and took to the air.

Her first order of business was to completely destroy any leftover items in the Cornucopia so no other contestants could even think about having them. The center of the arena was soon a smoldering crater.

“THIS IS WHAT YOU GET FOR NOT ACCEPTING THE CHALLENGE! NO
REWARD! NO MORE MOUND OF TREASURE!” She grinned evilly. “TONIGHT, I SHALL HUNT YOU IN YOUR SLEEP! NOTHING WILL PROTECT YOU FROM BRUTALIGHT SPARCAKE, ELEMENT OF INSANITY!”

She twitched – holy hell she was tired right now. But she wasn’t going to let that stop her. She was not going to rest until she got another kill under her belt. The night would ring with the screams of murder if she had anything to say about it.

…If Fluttershout were here she’d just be able to kill them by screaming. Anything within earshot would be dead.

She sighed, flying away into the sunset.

~~~

Eve and Flutterfree lay in their respective couch-beds, staring at the ceiling.

“GUESS WHAT CONTESTANTS!?” the Them shouted, scaring the stuffing out of the two ponies. “It’s time for another nightly update! Day 2 has come to a close and a grand total of five more contestants are now out of the race, left behind in the dust! Or pools of blood, depending.”

“…Screw you,” Eve muttered, putting a pillow over her ears. It didn’t help drown out the voice.

“Those fallen today are O’Neill, Jotaro, Toph, Pinkie, and Alushy – such a shame, I had money riding on Alushy making it further. You’d think it’d be a safe bet that Jenny’s killer would be smarter, but apparently not.”

“…That answers that question,” Flutterfree said.

“Only thirteen contestants remain, just over half the original number! You’re all really good at killing each other, usually these things last a bit longer! There have already been a few twists and turns in this amazing game of life and death, we’re all dying to see what you come up with tomorrow!”

“My wish is going to be that they never get to have one of these games again,” Eve muttered through the pillow.

Flutterfree understood her friend just fine. “I don’t think they’ll grant that wish.”

“I know…” Eve sighed. “Let’s just try to get some sleep. We’ll need it.”

The two went to bed, the television soon reverting to an image of static rather than the two of them.

~~~

Corona couldn’t sleep.

All she could do was wonder what she’d have to do.

She could do it, she knew she could. She could kill. She’d done it many times at this point, and to people she’d known. She’d done it when it was real. Why was she so hung up now?

If she won, she would be able to end death from aging across Merodi Universalis, just like that. She would have taken the next step in defeating death once and for all, a huge victory in her personal war. A bit of fake-killing in a stupid game shouldn’t stop her from taking hold of that, should it?

…but if she did, it would force her to de-‘human’-ize everything that was happening here. To
distance herself from the violence. To fight close friends. Toph may have been gone, but there were others she never wanted to fight. …Ever.

*What if you need to at some point?* she asked herself, staring at the stars. *Not here, but out there in the real world. They could have gone mad, or could be doing something they think is right but is wrong… None of us are infallible.*

She really didn’t like *that* thought.

She put her hands over her eyes. “Ugh…” She pulled out a globe of white energy and examined it. “Why do I even have you if I’m not going to use you? It’s just cruel.”

The energy made no response.

Corona sighed, pocketing the globe again.

It didn’t matter, did it? She either had to fight, or she had to lose. And if she didn’t even try to get the wish, she’d never forgive herself. She had to fight with whatever she had and accept the consequences.

There weren’t any? That was a lie. There were. No death was meaningless – she would not allow herself to think that, even here. *Never.*

She would use what she had, and she would *win.*

By killing, death would be defeated.

~~~

Brutalight woke up with the sun.

*Wait, I fell asleep?*

She opened her eyes and tried to lift her head, but found that she was caked to Rev’s body with dried blood. She, being the crazy mare she was, took this in stride, using her magic to separate her face from the corpse without really thinking about it.

She looked down at Rev, trying to remember what happened last night.

*I was walking… I sensed her magic… We fought… CLEARLY I won the encounter, but I must have passed out or something…* Brutalight shook her head, cleaning herself up with a quick set of spells. *At least I got a kill.*

She looked around. Half her guns were broken, she was missing one of her amulets, most of her armor was trashed, and she had a rather serious wound on her left wing. She wouldn’t be flying for a while.

She was in what amounted to Rev’s ‘camp’, which was just a tree with a nook in it she could use for storage. There was a large book, a handful of magically-summoned foodstuffs, and a holy necklace that filled Brutalight with an uneasy feeling. She was immensely thankful she hadn’t touched it in the middle of her sleep.

It was already late morning. Had another contestant come around while she was sleeping, she would have been dead.

*I really should have kept that All-Night mask,* she thought, though she did admit it was nice to feel
rested. Also nice to have killed again.

But Rev wasn’t Eve.

Eve was who Brutalight really wanted to crush between her bloody hooves… Or slice into a million pieces with her blades… Or just blow up with magic. Anything, really. Anything at all.

The longer she waited the more creative and unrealistic ideas she got.

She picked up all her things that weren’t broken and set out, on the prowl for targets.

A slasher smile spread across her face. “And then there were twelve. I’m coming for you, Evening Sparkle.”

~~~

Eve finally woke up when she heard Brutalight taunt her from the television.

She sighed. “Well, I suppose we better go out there again today,” Eve said, checking the fridge for breakfast. “Set up another trap, or just try regular hunting…”

“The carpet is red,” Flutterfree said, staring at the offending floor like it wanted to eat her. “The carpet is candy red, Eve.”

Eve looked down. “…Oh.” She lit her horn, changing the color of the carpet to a muted purple. “T-there we go, better.”

“…Eve?”

“Yes, Flutterfree?”

“…Do we have to go out today?”

Eve looked at the hole in the wall that led outside. She knew out there was a forest in midday where people were going to be brutally killed. If they went out there, they would be part of the killing, part of the violence. Another one of them might fall to it. To the destruction.

“I… No. No we don’t have to. We don’t have to suddenly be all better,” Eve declared. “I don’t care if there’s ‘no consequences’ here. There most certainly are consequences, there are things we just can’t move past in an instant. We watched our friend die in front of us. She was in pain, she was scared, and she waved to us!” Eve wiped her face. “We can take a day off! YOU HEAR ME!? WE CAN TAKE A DAY OFF!”

There was no response from Them.

Eve sighed, turning to Flutterfree.

Flutterfree pulled her into a hug. “Thank you, Eve.”

Eve nodded, closing her eyes and shaking her head. “What are we going to do when this actually happens?”

Flutterfree looked at the television screen. “…Try to get each other back.”

“But we got you back, Flutterfree. That’s not always going to work.”
Flutterfree nodded slowly. “If it doesn’t… Those of us who are left will comfort each other. We’ll stand together.”


“Always.”

~~~

“I see three options,” Valentine said as he and Froppy trekked through the woods in search of victims.

“For what?”

“For what happened with Daniel.” He put his hand to his eyes, trying to look into the distance. “He could have fled after you shot him, surviving the wound.”

“Unlikely.”

“There could have been a health potion, there’s no way for us to know if he had one or not. But it is the least likely of the options. The second is that he Ascended and is toying with us.”

Froppy nodded slowly. “Seems very likely. Maybe he wants to make us think we’ve won, only to take it away at the last minute?”

“Possible, but there’s a problem with that theory.” Valentine folded his hands together. “As an Ascended, I cannot think of a single individual here he could not kill with a simple thought. Even those with unusual powers that could affect him would not be able to take him directly. Why would he not, once Ascending, just choose to declare himself the winner instantly?”

Froppy didn’t have an answer for that.

“This is where the third option comes in. Someone was watching the fight with Daniel. Perhaps they absorbed his energy, technically not killing him, but taking him out of commission… Better for us than facing a straight Ascended being, but problematic for any number of other reasons.”

“…I prefer to think he just had a health potion. Ribbit.”

“We must keep our minds open to all possibillitie-”

“HEAVEN’S DOOR!” Rohan shouted, opening Valentine’s face up with his Stand. He barely wrote anything into the book when another Valentine stepped out from behind a tree and shot the open Valentine.

Rohan moved to use Heaven’s Door on the new one. “Thrackerzod, back me up!”

“Of course master,” Thrackerzod said with a grunt. A deep, dark energy began to flow off her.

“FROPPY, SHIELD YOUR MIND!” Valentine yelled before he was opened up like a book and shot again.

Froppy did as she was told, remembering her training to protect her mind from eldritch influence. They get to you through sight and sound most of all, so those senses must be done away with. Stop thinking about your senses, act only from memory. Act from instinct, not from mind, for instinct cannot be corrupted.
Froppy performed one calculation – how to get to Thrackerzod – and then blanked her mind. Her Quirk certainly made it easy to do this. All she had to do was let the frog part of her take over. As far as the frog was concerned, Thrackerzod was a particularly large fly…

She shut her eyes and threw her tongue out, wrapping the fleshy limb around the eldritch unicorn. She pulled tight, snapping the pony’s spine.

Thrackerzod didn’t particularly care about the health of her spine – she was having a bad day and Froppy would serve as a good source of stress relief. She could worry about insignificant things like crippling pain later. She pulled her horn back, preparing to kill the frog woman in an instant.

It was at this moment Froppy pulled her tongue back and tried to eat Thrackerzod.

Such things happened when you let instinct take over.

“W-what!?” Thrackerzod blurted, losing all focus on what she was doing. Her front hoof was in Froppy’s throat. Her unicorn nature squirmed at how disgusting it felt. Her eldritch nature seethed in rage that such a lowly life form was trying to eat her. How stupid was she, there was no way Thrackerzod was going to fit in there!

Thrackerzod was suplexed into the ground, her skull cracking against a rock. Froppy was trying to pop her leg off, and in the process was doing immense amounts of damage to Thrackerzod’s mortal shell.

This has gone on long enough, Thrackerzod thought. I’m leagues above this minor superhero. She’s just a frog! Thrackerzod forced an explosion out of the tip of her ingested hoof, blowing a hole through Froppy’s insides, forcing mutations within her. Eyes appeared where none should have been, organs became hard, and a couple of tentacles sprouted from her back.

Froppy should have been debilitated by the maddening pain and sudden rush of insanity. She wasn’t – she was really following her training, giving her everything to her instinct. She still didn’t have to open her eyes – she still had a tight grip on Thrackerzod’s leg with her mouth. She heaved, dousing her with stomach acid.

Thrackerzod’s instincts made her recoil – but her broken back would not take the level of retreat she was trying for. She pulled her leg away, but fell flat on her back. Her body wasn’t listening to anything her mind wanted it to do. She needed to go into shock, she needed to pass out, but her eldritch mind demanded she keep fighting.

Froppy had to come out of her pure-instinct stupor because she’d lost track of Thrackerzod’s location. The eldritch nature of the pony began to worm its way into her mind and would consume her in a matter of seconds.

That was enough time to aim a gun and fire all its bullets into Thrackerzod’s skull. Then she started laughing.

She’d won. That was definitely not a matchup she was supposed to win. Not by any stretch of the imagination…

…But she was now aware enough to know she had a hole in her stomach, had suffered numerous mutations, and was about to go completely mad from worming eldritch energies.

To top it all off, Rohan decided to use Heaven’s Door on her. He was getting really tired of opening up different Valentines, only for them to get shot. “Obey Rohan Kishibe’s every command!” he wrote, shouting it at the same time. “Find me the real Valentine!”
Froppy made it one hop before collapsing on the ground, blood pooling around her. She started writhing in agony, her body finally catching up with all the injuries and trauma.

One of the Valentines took out a gun and shot her, removing Rohan’s new pawn from the equation.

“Where’s D4C?” Rohan demanded, taking a step back from the four Valentines he could see.

“Not on any of us,” two of them said. “D4C is remaining far from you, so you can never order the core to do anything.”

The other two drew guns, aiming at Rohan. They fired – one of the bullets hit him in one of his legs, the other missing by a hair. They fired again.

“'MURICA, FUCK YEAH!” Blackjack shouted, coming out of nowhere, landing solidly on her three remaining legs. She used her shield to deflect the bullets back into the Valentines that had fired them, knocking them down. “Stole your battle cry.” She fired magical bullets at the other two she could see, taking them out as well. “Ni-”

“Dojyaan!” Valentine called. An invisible fist hit Blackjack across the face, knocking her to the side.

“There it was!” Rohan shouted, summoning Heaven’s Door. “Where is he!”?

“Oh. You exist,” Blackjack said, looking at Rohan. “You know, I probably should have figured he was shooting at someone and looked for them first…”

“Shut up!” Rohan said, realizing that more and more Valentines were coming out from behind the trees. “Which one!?”

“I can’t see Stands so why are you asking me?”

“I SAID SHUT UP!”

Then Rohan saw D4C’s arm reaching out from under a large leaf lying on the ground.

*The D4C Valentine isn’t currently in this universe.*

No matter. Heaven’s Door may not have been a physically powerful Stand, but it was still a Stand – and could deal damage to other Stands. Heaven’s Door ran to punch D4C’s arm, ready to break the core Valentine’s limb.

Instead Heaven’s Door punched an alternate version of Rohan. They weren’t the same, so they didn’t explode, but it was enough of a scare to make Rohan jump back.

“This is gonna be a fun fight!” Blackjack said, firing at more and more Valentines. “Woo, I like this guy’s style!”


The Valentines lowered their weapons. The core Valentine dragged himself out from under the leaf using D4C, hand to his chin. “They fled,” he mused. One would think he would start talking to himself, but all the Valentines knew exactly what had happened and felt no need to comment on it.

They all turned to look at Froppy’s body. The core Valentine pulled out a large flag and covered her with it, sending her to another dimension. It was the best burial he had the time to give her.
He saluted – and then left.

Vriska was heavily injured.

From her vantage point in a nearby tree, Corona was having second thoughts. She’d been moving around looking for other contestants for most of the day already, and only now had she found someone.

And she looked like crap. Judging by the dent in her skull, it was probably Jotaro. She must have been really tenacious to have survived that. Not surprising, considering what Corona knew about Vriska.

But it would just be cruel to take her out now, wouldn’t it?

…Of course it would.

That didn’t matter. Corona was going to do it anyway. She was fighting for something, and Vriska was in her way. Best to make it as swift and painless as possible.

Omnidirectional life extinction, Corona ordered Raising Sights, creating red magic rings around her wrists. Focused through eyes and brain, instant. Repeat double. A larger magic circle appeared in front of her, and she grabbed it like a steering wheel. She infused it with magic from her horn, making it ready to activate. Engage.

A red halo appeared around Vriska’s head and exploded. It happened again, but she was already dead.

Corona furled her wings and landed next to the troll, watching her cobalt blood pool around her. She had really been beaten up by Jotaro in their encounter. Corona was having a hard time telling how many bones the troll had broken.

It was at this point Vriska started glowing and Corona realized she’d screwed up.

All of Vriska’s wounds were healed in the next second. She was soon standing up, fixing Corona with a smirk. “I should thank you. That was really starting to suck. Like, jegus, think about it a moment, I would have kept all those broken bones and that brain damage if you hadn’t killed me-”

“Nuclear reversion beam,” Corona muttered, snapping her fingers. A red and yellow burst of energy ringed with purple magic circles barreled into Vriska, disintegrating her down to the bone.

She was back in a second, hands on her hips. “Now Corona, that just wasn’t considerate of you!”

Corona blinked. “What, do I have to give you a fair fight or something?”

“Let’s see… I’m not being evil right now and clearly don’t deserve to die, so this can’t be a Just death, and I’m not really fighting for anything since I have no idea what my wish would be, so it can’t be Heroic either.” She folded her arms. “I don’t think I can be killed!”

“This is hardly fair.”

“It’s about to get worse.” Vriska opened her eyes wider, taking in Corona’s luck bit by bit.

Corona pressed her hands together and spread her wings, surrounding both herself and Vriska in orange-red magic circles. A chain of magic connected the two of them, pulling the two together.
Corona’s eyes went white as she looked into Vriska’s eyes.

“…Counter,” Corona said, smirking. The spell vanished, replaced with a new one that gave Corona a bronze sheen to her person.

Vriska raised an eyebrow. “I was really wondering when you people were going to learn to construct a fate anchor.”

“No luck stealing for you,” Corona said. “And you don’t have your dice with you.”

Vriska sat down on a nearby rock. “Fair. But you can’t keep me dead.”

Corona narrowed her eyes. “I’m considering going for a brainwashing…”

“You want to have a mindscape battle? Do you think that’s a good idea for either of us?” Vriska laughed. “No. I think we’d both just pass out in the end.”

“Stalemate?”

“STAAAALEMATE!” Vriska decreed. “Isn’t that wonderful?”

“No…” Corona narrowed her eyes. “But I have a lot of weapons at my disposal… I just need to get you to be Heroic or deserving of Justice.”

“Good luck with that.”

Corona got an idea. “I was expecting to save this for the finale… But it looks like you’ll need it right now.”

“Oh, what kind of special thing do you have?”

Corona took out the globe with white energy inside of it. “You killed Renee, correct?”

“Uh, yeah? Back at the Cornucopia. It was a sniper rifle. …Wish I still had that.”

Corona grinned. “Wouldn’t it be Just if someone who cared deeply about her took revenge on you?”

“…There’s no way…”

Corona held up the sphere. “This is Daniel. I was around when he started Ascending – all his energy is stored in here thanks to a simple transfer spell.”

“THAT’S CHEAP!” Vriska said, taking a few steps back. “VERY CHEAP!”

“Yeah, it is. But so is having conditional immortality.” She shrugged. “I’ll have to consume his energy to make sure he doesn’t try to kill me in the process… But it should trigger a Just death.”

“Fuck you.”

Corona smiled – a smile that quickly faltered when she remembered what she was doing. Her expression became dour as she held the sphere out to Vriska. “Sorry Daniel, this is gonna hurt.”

“No sorry for me?”

Corona sighed. “…Sorry, Vriska.” She surrounded the sphere in a red circle. She crushed the glass in her hands, cutting her hand in several places. The white energy was focused on Vriska, burning
her away molecule by molecule. She was nothing more than angry screaming shadow to Corona, then just a shadow, then nothing at all.

Corona made sure to use up all the energy within the sphere just to be certain that both of them wouldn’t be coming back.

She sagged. *Two kills. I’m making progress. At least Vriska didn’t seem that angry about it.*

She sat down at the base of a tree, giving herself a moment.

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“Sun’s setting again,” Flutterfree observed, having just poked her head out of their little base in the ground. “Still no sign of anyone having any idea where we are.”

“Good,” Eve said, staring at the TV. It hadn’t shown anything but static for the last few hours.

“Who’s left, do you think?”

“You, me, Corona, Valentine, Blackjack, Rohan. That I can remember, anyway. Oh, Brutalight. Right.”

“I hope they got her during one of the bits of static…” Flutterfree said, shivering.

“You and me both,” Eve admitted.

They stood in silence for a few moments.

“We might actually be able to win,” Flutterfree said. “Let them fight each other, tire, and come out well rested ready to defeat them.”

“The remaining people are going to be problematic though,” Eve admitted. “Some of them might be able to find a way around Seraphim’s negation. Only the really absurd get this far…”

Flutterfree paused. “We’re the last team, aren’t we?”

“Blackjack and Rohan?”

“That’s not really a team.”

Eve nodded. “That’s true… Yeah, I guess we are the last actual team here. Everyone else is working separately.” She sighed. “So many people walking alone. It’s just depressing.”

“Everything about this is depressing. Maddening too,” Flutterfree stared at herself on the television screen. “This is worse than being part of a story. The stories have meaning, purpose, a goal in mind. This isn’t something with a goal. This is an *experiment*, and we just have to fight or die.”

Eve frowned. “Could the wish mean something?”

“Do we even know what we’re wishing for?”

“I’ve given it some thought. I think I’m going to fix the Arcei problem with it,” Eve said. “Not just have Them wave a hand and fix it all, but have them tell me what I have to do to get them accepted back into society as a whole, to get them to stop thinking they can hunt Stars.” She stared at her hooves. “It’s not a problem I see myself fixing.”
“…I would ask for Celestia back,” Flutterfree said.

Eve froze.

“…More people we’ve lost, if Them will let us,” Flutterfree continued. “General Sunset. The Sage. Sparky. The Bloodbath…”

“No. No, no we can’t do that,” Eve said, shaking her head rapidly. “We aren’t meant to do that! We… We can’t just…”

“Why not!?!”

“If we brought one back, we’d have to bring more! And if we brought all those we’ve tragically lost… Do you realize how that would destabilize things? How many leaders who were dead would suddenly be back?” Eve grabbed her head. “Revival’s already a tricky procedure as it is with Coming Back Wrong, and…”

“…Can’t we just save a few, then?”

“Where do we draw that line, Flutterfree? Where do we draw that line?” Eve asked. “Do I just bring back people whose deaths didn’t pivotally change our history? Sparky? But how could I just leave Celestia dead? But if I bring her back I’ll have to bring all the leaders back, and… Do you see what that’d do?”

Flutterfree grabbed Eve. “But we’d have them back!”

“We might lose them again right afterward!”

“…So? At least we’d get to talk to them.”

“…Would you really wish just to have conversations with people you’ve lost at the expense of solving a major problem in our society?”

Flutterfree looked away, ashamed. “…Yes. I would.”

Eve took a few steps back. “I’m sorry… Flutterfree, we can’t do that. It wouldn’t be right.”

“I know. But I can’t change what I feel. We have a wish, Eve. I want… I want to bring back what we’ve lost. Perhaps wish to turn back the time and do it over again with what we know?”

“…I don’t think even they can turn back time on so many interconnected universes,” Eve said, shaking her head. “That’s a wish I could get behind. But it’s too much.”

Flutterfree looked down. “Right… You’re right. We need to think logically about this.”

Eve let out a sigh of relief. “Thank you for understanding, Flutterfree.”

“Mhm…”

“GOOD EVENING CAMPERS!” the Them’s voice boomed into their heads. “Time for a nightly update! It sure feels like this third day went by quickly, didn’t it? But you didn’t skimp out on eliminating opponents, nosireebob! Five others have left us today: the Reverend, Thrackerzod, Froppy, Daniel, and Vriska! Only eight of you remain! You might even finish tomorrow – but I doubt it! All I can say for sure is that you have officially entered the late-game. You eight are the finalists for this round of the Hunger Games. Only one will take home the coveted wish – I hope you’re thinking about what it’s gonna be! Who am I kidding, I know you’re all thinking deeply
about it. Have a nice night!”

Flutterfree and Eve stared at each other.

They were in the final eight…

The end of these games were coming sooner than they would have expected.

“We need rest,” Eve said.

“Agreed. I’ll take first watch,” Flutterfree offered.

Eve nodded. “Thanks.” She curled herself up on one of the couches, waiting for morning to come…

~~~

Something in Blackjack made her wake up in the middle of the night. It wasn’t Rohan – he was lying on the ground next to her.

_He was supposed to be on watch._

Blackjack wanted to hit him so hard, but she couldn’t – so she just nudged him. “Hey bastard, you’re supposed to be on watch.”

He felt cold to the touch. She used her magic to create a light and look at his face.

He was foaming at the mouth, dead. _Poisoned._

She didn’t reel back in horror – she was somewhat pleased by the news, to be frank – she moved in to investigate. There was a small puncture wound on his neck from an injection, or dart.

She felt her own neck – there was a mark there as well. Chances were the poison just wasn’t effective against mega-alicorn-cyborg-ponies. But that still meant someone had snuck into camp and poisoned them…

The intruder was probably what woke Blackjack up.

She scanned the forest, but her sensors didn’t pick up _anything_ aside from a couple owls and a sleeping squirrel. This did nothing to ease her nerves. She was _sure_ she was being watched.

Somewhere _very_ close by, a gun went off and hit her in a back leg. She howled, firing two magic bolts where she thought the shot had come from, but they made no contact.

She brandished her starmetal sword. “Show yourself!”

Evidentially the attacker thought this was a stupid idea, because they did no such thing. They fired again, hitting Blackjack’s other leg. Her retaliation hit nothing _again._ Not to mention the fact those wounds weren’t going to heal with her current resource levels…

She couldn’t fight whoever this foe was.

She took everything off Rohan – including his clothes – with a quick spell. She teleported away before the attack aimed at her third and final leg went off. She teleported twice more, until she was in a tree _far_ from the original campsite.

She grabbed all the buttons and jewelry Rohan had on him and ate them, giving her systems at least
something to work with. Why couldn’t the arena be a post-apocalyptic wasteland? She’d have plenty of metal to work with. As it was, trees didn’t really provide her with what she needed, and these pickings were pathetic. Not even enough to really do anything to her back legs.

She needed to find something to repair her if she wanted to take out some of the stronger targets, like Valentine.

…Seven left, now, Blackjack noted. It was probably going to be nothing but difficult, close fights from here on out.

She opted to stay in the tree and not fall asleep the rest of the night. She could operate on the scant bit of rest she had gotten. But she wasn’t going hunting in the night with… Whatever that was. Her systems couldn’t detect any infrared, so she needed normal sight to compensate. Probably.

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The gunshots from the television had put Flutterfree on edge. She had almost woken Eve because she thought they were under attack…

But they weren’t, it was Blackjack who was. Or had been – the screen had turned to display Flutterfree again.

She sighed. Something was going to happen, given how the screen was focusing on her. What was it going to be? An inner monologue? Stealth attack? Or something she didn’t see coming?

The fact that she asked the question suggested to herself it was option three, but she went to check outside anyway. She poked her head out of one of the holes, checking the area for intruders. For most it would be a fruitless endeavor to look out at a forest in the middle of the night and expect to see something, but having vampiric eyes came with perks. Namely night vision.

She saw nothing. Even after crawling out of the hole and taking a good look around, she still didn’t make out anything interesting. Didn’t hear anything either. This put her at ease about the possibility of an attack, but she remained alert.

She walked back into the room – the television still showed her walking around. Still the focus.

Flutterfree was stuck by a sudden realization that Pinkie knew when she was being watched all the time. She had new respect for her old friend’s ability to deal with the knowledge…

This meant something was going to happen. Perhaps she was going to have some kind of realization? Or something?

…The only way that would happen is if she stopped thinking about the fact she was on the screen.

She went to the fridge and got herself a snack. Eve had packed it with apples, the primary thing aside from blood that satisfied Flutterfree’s natural hunger. She drained the fruit of its juices in an instant and tossed it into the trash.

Still hungry, but the hunger never really went away. It also never got strong enough to demand she bite down on a pony’s neck. Quasi-vampirism didn’t really appear to follow much in the way of rules.

But there was something about the way Eve was lying that drew Flutterfree’s attention to her purple neck. Normally Flutterfree would just force herself to look away and get a little flustered, but she didn’t this time.
She’s not going to bring them back.

All it would take was one carefully placed bite on the jugular while she was sleeping – Eve wouldn’t even be able to summon Seraphim’s reality rewrite, and the automatic barrier wouldn’t protect against Flutterfree’s fangs. She would be out of the game and then Flutterfree would be free to make her wish. In a straight fight with Eve there was no way Flutterfree could win…

She took a few steps forward to Eve, moving as quietly as possible.

*I have to do this. She’ll forgive me. And then everyone will be back.* Everyone.

She leaned in, fangs bared, nearing Eve’s neck.

*But she had some good points… What if my wish ruins everything? And am I really willing to live with taking a wish to just talk to them?*

*How would I even survive the rest of the games without her?*

Flutterfree pulled back, a tear rolling down her face. She couldn’t believe she’d even been considering taking out her dear friend. When the time came, and they were the last two, Eve would painlessly disintegrate her and make the wish for the both of them. That was the way it was supposed to be.

Flutterfree turned back to her couch.

“…I’m awake, Flutterfree,” Eve said.

Flutterfree’s heart started racing. She didn’t turn around.

“…Why couldn’t you do it?”

Flutterfree slowly turned around, looking into Eve’s wide, open eyes. A film of tears covered them. “It was wrong,” Flutterfree said. “I… I wanted my wish more than yours. But it wouldn’t be right to do that to you.”

“But you were this close to doing it!”

“But I didn’t.”

“I know you didn’t. You were stronger than yourself. Which is what makes this so difficult.” Eve wiped her face.

Flutterfree gulped. “I… I can imagine. I’ve broken your trust.”

“Yeah! Yeah, you have!” Eve wailed. “I can’t trust you! What if you can’t fight it tomorrow night? What if you see an opportunity in the middle of a fight to be rid of me? You’ll take the opportunity and do what your heart wants!”

“Yes. I will,” Flutterfree said with conviction. “If I give in, I will wish them back to life.”

“But how can you… Who? How far do you go? How far can you go?”

“…Bring them back, deal with the consequences,” Flutterfree said. “That’s… That’s what I think.”

“You can’t make that choice! You’re not the only one who’ll be dealing with the consequences!”
“And you can control the lives of the Arcei to make them better liked?”

“I’m just asking for what to do, not asking them to do it.”

Flutterfree looked at Eve – and nodded. “I know. I know. I know. I’m being emotional and I…”

“I have to get rid of you,” Eve said, heaving.

“W-what?”

“I can’t take that risk. The risk that you’ll change your mind in a mood swing or something.”

“Eve, I promise that I won’t try to kill you again,” Flutterfree said, putting a hoof over her chest. “We’ll fight together to the very end.”

Something in Eve cracked. “Can I really trust you on that? What if you think of a reason it’ll be for the greater good? What if you suddenly think of exactly the line you want to draw on who to save and who not to?”

Flutterfree gulped. “Evening. I Pinkie Promise that I will not try to kill you again.”

Tears rolled down Eve’s cheeks. “Why are you making this so hard?”

“Don’t kill me, Eve,” Flutterfree said. “Please.”

“Flutterfree…”

“I don’t want to feel it again,” Flutterfree pleaded. “I don’t want to feel death.”

“Flutterfree, I’ve already killed you.”

Flutterfree stared at her in horror. “W-what?”

“I hit you with the death spell from behind when you were reaching for my neck,” Eve said. “…But I wanted to talk to you after, so I had Seraphim tap into a world where the soul lingers after death.”

She brought her Stand out from where it had been hiding, under the couch she was sleeping on, shrouded by blankets.

“B-B-” Flutterfree’s consciousness permitted her to see her body on the floor at the foot of Eve’s bed. “What th-”

“I… I’m so sorry.”

Flutterfree gulped. “I… I’m sorry too.”

To anyone else, Flutterfree’s apology would have been genuine. But Eve picked up on a slight inflection in the her voice that indicated anger. Deep, seething anger. “Flutterfree…”

“Recall Seraphim,” Flutterfree said.

“We can keep ta-”

“I SAID RECALL SERAPHIM!” Flutterfree shouted, summoning Lolo. Her Stand was decidedly weaker than Seraphim, but the surprise Eve felt from having Lolo attack combined with her unstable emotional state was enough to make Seraphim lose focus.
Flutterfree’s spirit vanished without so much as a flash of light.

Eve took in a deep breath and released it. “Calm… I’m c-” she didn’t finish the word, instead devolving into deep, bitter tears. When this didn’t provide her enough of a release, she grabbed her couch and threw it into another one. She told Seraphim to remove molecular cohesion from the room, forcing everything to cave in.

She teleported out with Flutterfree’s body, eyes full of pain.

She was not done with the place.

She had Seraphim find a universe where the chemicals found in soil would react in an explosive manner when introduced to a certain kind of magic. She used that magic, her home for the last few days going up in a bright mushroom cloud. Seraphim cleared the heat by dialing a universe where heat didn’t exist.

Eve used the hole to bury Flutterfree’s body, filling it in with her considerable powers of telekinesis. She summoned a headstone imprinted with her butterfly cutie mark and forced flowers to grow in front of it.

Eve was still angry. At this point she didn’t have any idea what at.

The television fell out of the sky, somehow still working.

“Oh look! A TARGET.” Eve punched the television, shattering the screen and cutting her hoof in several places.

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It was morning, and Valentine was alone. He walked along the edge of a riverbank.

He supposed he was hunting, but he wasn’t really looking that hard. He was mostly sitting, thinking, the inner machinations of his mind occupying more of his time than the act of hunting other contestants.

This would have been dangerous, and likely would have resulted in another death of his, had the person he come across not been Evening Sparkle crying her tears into the river.

Valentine’s first instinct was to take her out, but the combination of his own out-in-the-open location and her complete disinterest in him gave him pause.

Eve knew he was there. “What’s in a wish, Valentine?”

Valentine decided to take a seat at the riverbank, a fair distance from Eve, but close enough for them to easily see each other’s facial features. He thought for a moment, and answered. “Above all else, a wish has conviction.”

“I see.”

“Perhaps not,” Valentine pointed out. “A wish… is a desire you vocalize, something you want to occur. It is a manifestation of your personal code of conduct. Those who are selfish wish to rule the world. Those who are selfless wish to help others. Those who devote themselves to a particular idea wish to see that idea come to those who don’t understand it.”

“And if you don’t know what your wish is? Does that mean there is a lack of conviction?”
“In some cases, perhaps,” Valentine said. “What is your conviction?”

“Harmony,” Eve said, looking into the river. “And in seeking it, I have destroyed it.”

“In the fights we face, the thing we want most may need to be harmed.”

“I know. You know. We all know!” Eve said, spreading her hooves wide. “You basically are me, you ever think about that? Find something that lets you go out into the multiverse, start exploring, and then eventually form a society. …You even change who you are.”

Valentine was unsure of the meaning behind that last statement, but it clearly meant a lot to her. “It is well known, and in many cases understood. But there is another part to us that is not reason or thought. A place where deep seated convictions are held.”

Eve nodded. “That place… I hurt that place. I had that place hurt. Badly. Oh so badly…” She wiped her face. “Have you ever had it hurt, Valentine? Have you ever suffered betrayal?”

“My first wife was replaced by an imposter,” Valentine shared. “I didn’t know for quite some time. My feelings about her are now muddled in my memory… But I am sure I loved her. Perhaps not as much as a man should.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Ancient history,” Valentine said. “Perhaps a better example would be Johnny. It took a long time to build up trust between the two of us. But after we had begun to form the USM, Gyro back alongside us… We were friends. But he became convinced I was going to make myself President for life. He made an attempt on my life.” Valentine looked into the distance, his memories flooding past his eyes. “It was that attack that told me I should step down. It’s the reason I’m Ambassador Valentine today. The end result was better for the United States of the Multiverse, but the hole between us was devastating.”

“You eventually made up?”

“It was years later before I considered us friends again.” He looked Eve right in her eyes. “But sometimes I wonder if I’ll do something he doesn’t approve of, and he’ll try to take me out again.”

Eve shivered.

“It’s not something you can completely fix. Once someone’s truly broken trust…”

“…You know they have the capacity to break it again,” Eve completed. She shook her head. “And in this case, it’s two-way. Convictions on both sides…”

Valentine nodded, making a ‘hrmm’ noise.

“What’s your conviction, Valentine?”


“Really? It seems like you fight for your country a lot more.”

“For I believe it is the closest thing to justice,” Valentine explained. “I wish to see those who deserve to be punished put where they belong. I wish to see those willing to sacrifice and fight for others to be elevated. I wish the way of life that promotes justice seekers will be spread across the multiverse.”

Eve nodded. “I… I understand. It doesn’t seem like you really want justice a lot of the time, though.
It seems like you just want more power for your country.”

Valentine looked at her. He didn’t have a response.

The two sat at the river, watching it pass by.

“Thanks,” Eve said, standing up and spreading her wings. “I needed that.”

“We all need to think about what we wish for, once in a while.”

“You too, Valentine. …Try to think less about your country, and more about actual justice, okay?”

Valentine nodded. “I endeavor to do so.”

“So… Are we going to fight now?”

“I think not,” Valentine said. “I have determined that if you were to make a wish, it would not be
detrimental to the USM. There are other, larger threats I must take care of.”

Eve pondered this. “…I think you’re the same way.”

“Until we cross paths again, Overhead Evening.”

“Of course, Ambassador Valentine.”

Valentine walked away. He told himself he let her go because he didn’t want to tire himself, and
she’d be able to take care of other enemies with little risk to himself now.

But even he knew that wasn’t the full story. There was something about a crying purple alicorn…

“Damn these ponies,” he muttered, “they drive me to sentimentality.”

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Corona finally picked up on a strong magical signature – whoever it was would be her next target.
She prepared an instant-death spell, wrapping the red magical rings around her left wrist. It would
only take one solid hit and she would be one step closer to her goal.

She didn’t hesitate when she finally realized it was Eve. She was another enemy in this game –
Corona would apologize later. She pointed her finger at the oblivious purple alicorn and fired.

A magic bubble shield surrounded Eve, blocking the magical attack. She whirled around, eyes
narrow. “I have magic sense too you know.” She summoned Seraphim behind her, locking the Stand
into its reality altering position.

*Reality Anchor Aura*, Corona ordered, clapping her hands together. A series of white, blue, and
green rings rose out of the ground and disappeared above her head, encasing her in a soft blue-green
aura.

Corona knew Eve was trying to make her spontaneously combust. “Not going to work, Eve. I’ve
forced myself to maintain the form of reality I currently occupy.”

Eve nodded. “Then I’ll have to get more creative.” Eve set Seraphim’s combustion reality to the
grass beneath Corona, triggering an explosion.

Corona absorbed the heat and light into her hands, sending them back to Eve along with a dose of
Bacon Pancakes’ pins. Eve had to stop editing reality to use Seraphim to physically throw the pins aside, and her magic to block the torrent of fire.

She teleported behind Corona, hitting her with a laser coursing with purple and orange energy.

“You’ve got to stop hitting me with fire,” Corona observed, firebending the flame part of the laser to bring the magical part of the attack to a halt. She flew toward Eve, brandishing the center disc of Bacon Pancakes, ready to flatten her.

Eve created a half-dozen needles of crystal, sending them flying into Corona. The spires pierced her skin, drawing blood. Corona worked through the pain – but she found that the crystals hindered her movement. She was unable to bring Bacon Pancakes to bear on Eve, allowing Seraphim to make use of the opportunity.

The three-ringed Stand rotated its three individual parts with alarming rapidity, charging Bacon Pancakes’ center disk. The impact cracked Bacon Pancakes and fractured one of Corona’s arms, sending her flying backward.

Corona used her free arm to cast a mending spell on her cracked bone. She spread her wings, taking a large loopdeloop before charging back at Eve.

Eve tapped into a universe where solids didn’t exist, creating an invisible wall for Corona to run into. She fell back, but in her fall she summoned a fireball larger than Evening. Seraphim stopped editing reality to catch the offending meteor, disintegrating the rock with its touch.

Eve apparently liked the invisible walls from earlier, because she resumed tapping into that universe, this time creating a box around Corona. After she mimed for a couple of seconds, the flaming princess teleported out, her hand alight with holy energy. She rushed for Eve’s face, planning to burn it.

An invisible spike poked right through her hand. The pain was so sudden and unexpected she unleashed her explosive magic too soon. Eve’s face was charred, but not melted to the point of defeat.

Corona teleported back, taking a moment to mend the hole in her hand. Eve didn’t let her finish – she teleported behind Corona and drove her long, purple horn through her back and out the other side.

Corona maintained enough awareness to activate Bacon Pancakes, flattening Eve to nothing more than a piece of paper. Corona tried to kick the paper and tear it, but the pain in her stomach was too much to not address. She fell to her knees, mending her wound.

Eve, meanwhile, struggled to move in her paper form, creating a lull in the fight.

“Look at us, fighting like old enemies,” Corona commented as she sealed the hole in her stomach.

“Heh, yeah,” Eve said, using her own telekinesis to float away. “Out of curiosity, what are you fighting for? There’s too much conviction to just be ‘because I have to’."

“The secret to fight death,” Corona said, standing up tall and spreading her wings. “Easily producible immortality.”

“Why am I not surprised. That will cause problems, you know.”

“Not as much as just wishing death away completely. What’re you wishing for?”
Eve blinked. “At first, it was a solution to the Arcei problem. Now? …I’m starting to think that’s not actually the best way to promote harmony. There might be something else.”

“Your heart is in the right place, at least.”

“Yeah…” Eve shook her head, the motion making her body fold at the neck. “…This is an exceptionally weird sensation.”

“Yeah, I get that,” Corona said, lighting herself on fire. “Shall we continue?”

Eve looked right at her. “Yes. Seraphim!”

“Bacon Pancakes!”

“Absolute Zero,” Eve declared.

“Fusion Cascade,” Corona said.

Seraphim tapped into a universe where everything was always absolute zero, bringing true cold to the fight. It was just a small area that existed at absolute zero, but the temperature difference was so extreme the grass below froze solid and ice crystals began to form on Eve and Corona.

Corona’s attack was to create a miniature sun in her palm and toss it into the air, fusing the gasses in the atmosphere to create a cascading explosion. The cascade wormed its way to Eve through the frigid air.

Eve let it get close enough to burn her – she was going to need the extra heat to survive what came next. She expanded the single point of Absolute Zero by factor of ten, dramatically dropping the temperature. The gasses around the altered reality solidified, liquid nitrogen and oxygen pouring off of it. The entire ground became coated in ice, a sheen moving up Corona’s legs despite the fact she was on fire.

Eve was further away from the extreme cold, and she was having difficulty forcing her body temperature up even with the help of the fusion cascade – a source of heat that was quickly fading away.

Corona was significantly closer to it. Her own internal heat was not enough to overcome the biting cold. The fire in her began to go out as the parts of her body closest to the ground began to freeze solid.

She had enough of her wits about her to teleport out of the cold proximity, behind Eve – where it was still absurdly cold but manageable. She took a step toward Eve – and her foot shattered into a hundred pieces. She fell to the ground, shattering her left hand as well.

The stump that was her hand attempted to bleed, but the red liquid froze on what was now the edge of Corona’s body. She tried to force flames to heat up the injury, but she was running too low on energy.

Eve took a step toward her. “Sorry Corona, I got you.”

Corona didn’t think so. She lashed out with the hand that was still in tact. She cut the still-paper-form Eve across the chest, almost cutting all the way through.

But it wasn’t enough. Eve caught the hand in her telekinesis, shattering it as blood ran down her papery front legs. Corona, having lost both her hands, attempted to use her horn in one last-ditch
attempt to pull a victory out of this.

In her desperation she overloaded the poor magical conductor. A small explosion went off at the base of her horn, making her lose consciousness. The deep cold got to her not a second later, and Eve was returned to her three dimensional form.

Eve cut the absolute zero reality, allowing herself to finally warm up. The solid gasses quickly dissipated once there was nothing keeping them frozen. She forced herself to throw Corona into a tree, shattering the beautiful being into nothing more than jagged shards of what she once was.

Eve then turned to the gash in her – it ran from the middle of her chest just below the neck to halfway down the right side of her body. She had never been the best at pure healing magic, and she knew this was a mortal wound.

She had to perform surgery on herself. She tapped into a universe where pain didn’t exist and began the slow process of sewing herself back up. In the process of doing so, she realized her wingtips had frostbite and one of her ears had been removed in the fight, though she had no idea how.

When she was satisfied she had sewed herself up enough to the point where she’d live, she turned off the pain remover – and screamed. Holy Celestia those stitches hurt…

She set Seraphim to a universe where metabolic processes were faster, staying there long enough for her to be sure her internal organs weren’t going to slide apart if she twisted her body the wrong way. But that did nothing to alleviate the pain, and it also made her very hungry.

She started eating the grass around the forest floor to replenish her reserves. She would be here a while…

Haunted by the sight of Corona shattering into a thousand pieces.

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“MURICA, FUCK YEAH!” Blackjack shouted, swooping in for an attack on Valentine. “LET’S TRY THIS AGAIN!”

D4C punched Blackjack in the face before any more than a handful of bullets emerged from Blackjack’s horn and guns. Some hit Valentine, but he wrapped himself up in the flag, transferring to another universe – and another Valentine. Four of them came up out of the flag in response.

Blackjack shot off one of their heads with a shotgun. “So, let me see if I understand this,” she muttered through her broken, bloodied nose. “You have an infinite supply of yourself you can go through, but only one of them has the big ‘Stand’ power at a time, right?”

“Correct,” a normal version of Valentine said, shooting at Blackjack. She blocked the bullet with her shield.

“So all I have to do is find which one of you has the Stand. Because, let’s be honest, a bunch of regular guys with simple guns isn’t going to do much to me. You’ll have to use that punching ghost somehow.” She used her telekinesis to swing the Starmetal sword wide, cutting two Valentines in half. “Now I can’t see your dirty little secret, but I think odds are pretty good this god-killing sword can hit it.”

“Dojyaaan!”

“What the-” D4C’s fist came out from a leaf under where Blackjack’s fourth leg should have been.
The invisible fist hit Blackjack in the chest, sending her into the air. She swung the sword fast, cutting off the tops of D4Cs fingers.

She saw one of the Valentines had lost some of his fingers. “GOTCHA!” She blurted, shooting him in the forehead.

Then she remembered that meant D4C just translated to another Valentine.

“Fuckballs,” Blackjack muttered. She was going to have to kill the Stand to win. And she was definitely not smart enough to lure it out into the open and kill it while it was invisible. Best she could do was get some nicks in here or there.

But she couldn’t just retreat – there were only a handful of contestants left, chances are she needed to face Valentine. But unless something changed she saw that he would slowly wear her down faster than she would be able to cut D4C…

Her prayers were answered in the form of a purple alicorn who was missing an ear and had an impressive wound across her chest. “Absolute Zero.”

The arena of combat between Blackjack and Valentine began to freeze over. Blackjack fired bullets at Eve, since she was unable to determine where Seraphim was. Eve caught all the projectiles with her magic, continuing the act of freezing everything solid.

She didn’t make it that far – the real Valentine stepped out from behind a tree and apparently used D4C on Seraphim, the powerful punches upsetting the control over reality. The freezing halted, and blood came flying from Eve.

Blackjack swung the Starmetal sword wildly where she thought the Stands were. She nicked both of them, prompting a cut to appear on Eve’s flank and one on Valentine’s hip, but nothing lethal to either.

Eve had Seraphim take the rapidly-rotating form, trying to dice D4C up, but the Stand transferred to another Valentine, leaving her in the dark as to where the multiversal spirit was. She opted to focus on Blackjack, summoning a dozen sharp crystals and throwing them at her.

“One of the crystals slammed into in Blackjack’s throat, cutting her off. The crystals embedded themselves in her body in numerous lethal places. Given just a bit more time, they would kill her outright.

But she caught one of the magic crystals in her mouth and ate it.

“What in the…?” Eve wondered aloud as Blackjack tore a crystal out of her jugular and devoured it. Her wounds began to heal right before their eyes.

“Thanks for the snack!” Blackjack said, smirking. She rushed at Evening, brandishing her sword and a shotgun. “NOW D-”

She ran facefirst into an invisible wall riddled with spikes. The power from the crystals kept her alive, but she wasn’t sure if that was a good thing. She peeled herself off the spikes, falling to the ground. “Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu-”

D4C appeared behind Eve, grabbing her wings. She couldn’t hit D4C directly with Seraphim in the form to make the invisible wall, so she just had to scream as her wings were popped out of their sockets. They would have been completely removed, but Eve sent out a pulse of magic that scrambled everyone’s thoughts.
Numerous Valentines started shooting at her, but she’d recalled Seraphim, reinstating the protective aura that caught every bullet.

Eve decided it was time to use some of the magics she preferred not to, given their nature. Her eyes became black as night with purple wisps of energy trailing off the edges. Deep darkness surrounded her, cutting jagged shadows across the forest. Claws rose up all around her, writhing with powers mortals were not meant to touch.

Good thing she wasn’t a mortal. None of them were.

“It fills my long dead heart with joy to see you give in to a darker nature,” Brutalight said, revealing her presence at the edge of the fight. “It’s a nice thing to see you reject your false harmony before you die.” She took one gun in particular out and aimed it at all of them.

“FUCK! FOLLY!” Blackjack shouted.

“The gun you took Flagg out with!?” Eve blurted.

“YEAH. WE’RE DEAD.”

Brutalight pulled the trigger. Folly unleashed its brilliant white cone of absurd energy, a cone that would have vaporized all of them and most the ground they were standing on.

“SERAPHIM!” Eve shouted, ordering her stand to dial a universe where magic didn’t exist. The energy blast from Folly hit a void in front of Eve, Blackjack, and Valentine, carving away the ground to either side of them.

“…Useful,” Blackjack commented.

Brutalight scowled. “Oh just die already, Evening.” Brutalight teleported right in front of her, using a red amulet she wore to hold Eve still. Valentine took this as an opportunity, using D4C to punch both Eve and Brutalight hard enough to break ribs. Blackjack took advantage of that to cut off one of D4C’s feet.

Brutalight ignored Valentine, fixated on Eve and only Eve. “DIE!” She pulled her horn back, unleashing a beam of dark magic. Eve did the exact same.

“Why are you so fixated on killing me? It won’t even mean anything!”

“It will if I wish all of you to stay dead!” Brutalight shouted back.

Valentine and Blackjack stopped fighting each other the moment they heard those words. They nodded to each other and rushed Brutalight from the side. For his efforts, Valentine got one of Brutalight’s swords embedded in his chest. But another Valentine took up D4C, and Blackjack brought her sword down on Brutalight.

The moment D4C and the Starmetal sword made contact with Brutalight, she smirked. “Kaboom.”

She used a spell that forced a reaction to occur with her own coat of fur, becoming the epicenter of an explosion that drove Valentine and Blackjack back. The pain that came from the spell made Brutalight falter, but not enough for Eve’s own dark magic to overpower her.

It was enough for Brutalight to forget about Seraphim.

She barely had time to realize she was being frozen solid before she was frozen solid.
Three on one had just been too much.

Eve dropped her magic, walking up to the shimmering form of Brutalight. “I’m not sure if you can hear me in there, Brutalight. But once this is over... We’re going to find wherever you’re hiding. And then you will be executed.” She narrowed her eyes. “I know you probably have some remark you want to leave me with to haunt my dreams, something to affirm your desire to see me and my friends dead. But you’re not going to get the chance.”

She slapped Brutalight across the face, shattering her. The headless alicorn of insanity tipped over, falling to the ground.

“...Brutal,” Blackjack observed.

“She’s the only one in this entire game who actually deserves that,” Eve muttered. She glanced at Valentine and Blackjack. “I suppose we’re in truce for the moment?”

“The enemy of justice has fallen,” Valentine admitted. “But we must fight to determine the winner of these games.”

“Wait, we’re all that’s left?” Blackjack blurted. “Wow…”

Eve furrowed her brow. “That doesn’t seem right... We had eight starting from last night. Flutterfree, Corona, and Brutalight are gone…”

“Rohan too,” Blackjack offered.

“That means there’s one other person besides us,” Eve said, blinking. “...Does anybody have any idea who it is?”

Valentine and Blackjack exchanged glances before shaking their heads.

“I think they’re the ones who killed Rohan,” Blackjack said. “We were poisoned last night. Doesn’t match the MO of anyone else I’ve encountered. I had to run away because I couldn’t pinpoint them.”

“A stealth player…” Valentine said, scratching his chin. “A particularly dangerous opponent.”

“And one we know nothing about,” Eve said, biting her lip. “...We can’t fight here, now. For all we know, they’re watching, waiting to kill the last of us the instant the fight ends.”

“That seems likely,” Valentine admitted.

“So we don’t give them what they want,” Blackjack declared. “We stick together until we find them.”

Eve nodded. “Agreed. Then, and only then, will we have our three-way.”

Valentine put out his hand. “I accept this plan.”

Two hooves met his hand, a last-minute group forming to face the mysterious final player.

“Let’s go hunting,” Eve said, lighting her horn. “There has to be some way to find them... Magic, spirit, something.”

“They had a gun, if that helps,” Blackjack offered.

“Almost all of those guns in the Cornucopia were yours,” Eve pointed out. “They’d probably have
The entire day passed without incident.

“Nothing. Nothing at all,” Eve said, dropping her scanning spell. “There’s no sign of anyone else here, but we know they’re here.”

“Maybe Brutalight got them?” Blackjack suggested.

“Then we will have to wait for the nightly announcement to know for certain,” Valentine said, looking at the setting sun. “We won’t have to wait long.”

“Time to make camp then,” Blackjack said, sitting down at the base of a tree. “Get a fire going, you know, all that stuff.”

Eve used her magic to gather wood, create a fire pit, and light it. “Done.”

“You’re pretty handy with that.”

“Surprised you aren’t,” Eve responded. “You’re supposed to be a descendant of a Twilight, yes? Alicorn to boot.”

“Sorta-kind-of-okay at magic here, but not, like, fucking amazing or anything.”

“You should apply yourself. I bet you could learn a lot.”

“Eh, yeah. Probably could.” Blackjack looked at her uneasily.

“…You think I should be mad at you.”

“Of course you should be fucking mad at me! How many of your people died because of what I did?”

“Blackjack, Blackjack, you also saved us.”

“Just because I fixed my mistake does not mean the mistake didn’t happen in the first place!”

“A mare is more than her past mistakes.”

“Yeah, well, just… Gah why are you so fucking understanding!?”

Eve looked into the distance. “I wasn’t last night. Perhaps I’m trying to move past a mistake of my own.”

Blackjack looked at the ground. “It’s been a while since that day, Eve. And I’ve had a… lot to think about since then.”

“Hm?”

“…Think about it. I hated you because of what you do to worlds, the way you interfere with them and act like gods. I’m still upset with that, nobody should have that kind of power – but I acted because I hated the way you made everything I did more or less meaningless. Quite stupid huh?”
“It’s not stupid, just misguided.”

“Ooooh boy… Regardless, this game has shown me something else.” She looked Eve in the eye. “For what you are, you need the power you have to survive, don’t you?”

Eve looked to Valentine for a moment before nodding slowly. “Yes. Often times, it seems like it isn’t enough. I worry that we’re not strong enough to face what’s coming.”

“I know the feeling,” Blackjack muttered. “…I still don’t like what you’re doing.”

“You don’t have to. I don’t like the USM’s way of doing things, but I learn to live with them. For the sake of harmony.”

Blackjack looked at Valentine. “That must be extremely difficult.”

Valentine raised an eyebrow.

“No offense… Okay, go ahead and take offense, nevermind – you aren’t the easiest guy to deal with.”

“It is the way I have become to serve my country,” Valentine declared. “I regret nothing.”

Blackjack chuckled. “At least you’re certain of yourself.”

Valentine nodded. The three of them stared into the light of the fire for a while.

“…Who do you think it is?” Blackjack asked. “All the people here seem related to you guys rather than stuff I deal with, you’d be the ones to know.”

Valentine shrugged. “I would remember any others from the USM.”

Eve put a hoof to her chin. “…There’s a lot I don’t remember. Was Starbeat here? Aradia? Lady Rarity?”

“Aradia would have already killed us all with ease,” Valentine pointed out. “We exist in a single timestream. The stealth approach would make sense for her, but she would not need to stay hidden unless she was limited.”

“Starbeat maybe…” Eve said, scratching her chin. “She’d know how to game the system. Expert in ka.”

“Fun,” Blackjack muttered. “Turn my winning against me.”

“Maybe that’s why she targeted you and Rohan?” Valentine suggested.

“Maybe…” Eve said. “But this is all just speculation. It’s probably not Starbeat. Could be, but we just might not remember.” Eve shrugged. “We-”

“GOOD EVENING CONTESTANTS!” the voice of Them boomed, interrupting the conversation. “We’ve cut our number in half once again! From eight to four on the fourth day! Lost to us are Flutterfree, Rohan, Corona, and Brutalight, victims of some very amazing battles – you sure are doing your captors proud! Only four remain! Evening Sparkle, Funny Valentine, Blackjack, and…”

The three of them held their breath.

“…Spoiler!”
“FUCK YOU!” Blackjack shouted. “EAT A HOLY, BURNING COCK YOU ABSOLUTE BASTARD!” She did not stop at this, continuing to shout expletives at the sky.

The voice of Them calmly waited for the string of swears to be done. “Sorry about that, connection issues.”

Blackjack twitched.

“When only four remain, it seems as though the games will soon draw to a close! Perhaps tomorrow will be the final day for our contestants! Remember, only one of you can make the wish!”

The voice vanished, leaving the three around a fire. There was silence for about a minute.

“Sleep in shifts of two,” Valentine said, suddenly. “That way no assassinations will occur between us.”

“Yeah,” the alicorns agreed.

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Frostbitten wings hurt.

They hurt so much Eve was unable to fall asleep – or that’s what she told herself on the surface.

Inwardly she kept thinking about last night. About Flutterfree.

How was she going to face her later? How were they going to even talk to each other about what happened?

She, for once, didn’t know. Apology? Discussion? Begging? Anger? …It didn’t even make much sense, really.

“You’re groaning,” Blackjack called back to her.

“I know,” Eve muttered, opening her eyes. “Can’t sleep.”

“Images of the not-dead haunting you?”

“How’d you guess?”

“Figured it’d be the same as images of the dead,” Blackjack said, looking into the distance, Valentine at her side.

“It looks as if there won’t be more sleep tonight,” Valentine observed.

“Yeah, sorry,” Eve admitted.

“I can move to a fully rested body easily, and Blackjack already had her rest.”

Blackjack grunted. “Sure doesn’t feel like it.”

“You’re missing a leg. Things like that tend to take their toll.”

The three of them sat side by side in the cool night air.

“What are we going to do when we are the only ones left?” Eve asked.
“Fight to the death,” Blackjack deadpanned.

“That’s what Them want,” Eve pointed out. “What if we… don’t?”

“They kill everyone, are you crazy!”

“I mean, we won’t fight – we’ll just decide who makes the wish by talking. Reason out who’s wish would be the best for everyone. I would wish for something to bring harmony to all of the nations here, not just us.”

“And I would wish for true justice,” Valentine declared.

“You having doubts about the specifics as well?”

“Yes. Simple, material things are not justice… Justice transcends. There are fates that must be dealt with…”

Eve smirked. “I like where you’re going.”

Blackjack rolled her eyes. “I’m just going to wish that anybody who died because of me that didn’t deserve to would come back.”

Valentine and Eve stared at her with expressions of mild horror.

“What? What the fuck is wrong with that?”

“Blackjack, I’ve read your story,” Eve said. “You… Death followed you around more than almost any other person I’ve seen. How many ponies would that be? Hundreds? Thousands?”

“So? If they didn’t deserve to die, I’ll bring them back.” She folded her hooves. “End of story.”

Ignoring for a moment the question of ‘where do you draw the line’, do you have any idea what that would do to Equis Fallout? The destabilization that many ponies coming back would cause? It might cause another war to break out, especially with all the new infrastructure.”

Blackjack twitched. “There it is! The ‘high and mighty, better than thou’ STUPIDITY that you flaunt! You have no fucking right to determine what my world needs and what it doesn’t. I’m going to bring my friends back and there’s nothing you are going to do about it.”

Eve was taken aback. “Blackjack, I-”

“I’m going to undo the damage I did,” Blackjack said with extreme conviction. “I am going to win these games and I will get the best possible ending.”

“What was that you were saying earlier? About making struggles meaningless?”

“I don’t fucking care,” Blackjack spat. “I’m going to fix everything.”

“Listen to yourself! Think!”

Blackjack laughed. “Do I look like I do thinking!”

“Selfish,” Valentine said.

“What was that?”
“Such a wish is selfish,” Valentine said. “Just bring back the lives of those lost on your world? Of those close to you? Why not extend the range to include others? Other worlds? Other nations?”

“Maybe I’ll do that! Whatever it takes to get Glory back!”

Eve looked at Blackjack with sad eyes. “You really mean that don’t you? Whatever you can, damn the consequences?”

Blackjack drew her sword, noticing the look in Eve’s and Valentine’s eyes. “Yes. I mean every word.”

“…Can we convince you to put your personal desires aside for the betterment of everyone?” Eve asked. “Please?”

“Everyone’s better off alive than dead, princess.”

Eve sighed. “It looks like we will have to fight then. After we deal with mysterious last contestant.”

Valentine nodded.

“You think I’m just going to work with you if I know that you’ll turn and kill me once we’re done!?” Blackjack blurted. “No dice! I’m taking you both out right no-”

Eve froze her solid with Seraphim.

Valentine put a hand to the bridge of his nose. “I don’t suppose you can condition her to work with us?”

“At this point, I doubt it,” Eve said, frowning deeply. “…She just wanted the same thing as Flutterfree. It’s a thing so, so many want. But bringing people back to life… It’s not a skill meant to be at our disposal. I fear the day when we do get strong enough to revive everyone we want. I fear it more than I fear the day Corona discovers mass-produced immortality.”

Valentine nodded. “Some powers are too much to give to anyone. And yet, there are those who have such abilities. Them, for instance.”

“It does things to them…” Eve admitted. “It’s done things to us to make Blackjack and others like her see us as enemies. Higher up it only gets worse… Disconnects, ideals above all else, power taken to extremes…” She shook her head. “We can’t wish for anything that would ruin who we are, Valentine.”

Valentine nodded.

“Blackjack can’t move past that,” Eve said, putting a hoof on Blackjack’s frozen face. “I think that’s part of why her nature in ka failed her. Her nature is to win most of the time, but to endure great loss in the process. She’s not the Princess of Winning, she’s the Princess of Sacrifice. If she found a way to undo all her sacrifices… It would destroy the drawback to her nature. She wants to undo the sacrifice…”

“But she cannot.”

“It’s a much darker, more depressing curse than Starbeat’s,” Eve said, sadly. “…It means all she loves and cares about dies.”

“Only if she tries to be the hero.”
“I don’t think she can stop.” Eve shook her head. “Blackjack… I’m really sorry. I don’t have a cure for you. And I’m not going to make that wish for you. I know you see me as an enemy for this, and… you may be right to do so.” She stared into the alicorn’s cold, frozen eyes. “Goodbye, Blackjack. I hope you find a cure.”

With a burst of magic, Eve turned Blackjack into diamond dust. The sparkling bits of ice rose into the air, riding the wind. They filled the night with their beautiful sheen, rising to the stars themselves.

“…And then there were three,” Valentine said, hands in his jacket pockets.

“What are the chances our mysterious third is going to try to kill us now?” Eve asked.

A dart struck Valentine at the base of the neck, a second one bouncing off Seraphim’s natural protections.

“Rather high,” Valentine muttered, wrapping himself in the flag to access his alternate selves before the poison killed him. It was only a few seconds before there were six Valentines, all crowding around Eve.

“We need to find where these darts are coming from…” Eve said, scanning everywhere with her magic. “I’m not finding anything!”

“It is also night…” Valentine muttered, three of his selves going down with a carefully placed gunshot. “And they’re really good at aiming.”

“I can’t track the bullets!” Eve grunted. “They don’t appear to exist until they hit you, and that only gives me a general idea of where they are!” She raised a bubble shield around them, deflecting all the bullets.

“We clearly have the power advantage,” Valentine declared. “But they know that, so they won’t let us see them.”

“They’re playing smart,” Eve said. “They probably have some kind of plan…”

The plan turned out to be a grenade. Eve’s shield shattered when it exploded, exposing Eve and the Valentines. More gunshots went off, this time knocking down all the Valentines at once, but easily bouncing off Seraphim’s barrier.

Valentines started pouring out from behind trees, scouring the area, but they fell from seemingly random directions.

“We might have an invisible teleporter!” Eve shouted.

“Can Seraphim help with that?”

“If I drop Seraphim’s shields, I get shot by an invisible bullet! They’ve already proven it’s possible for them to get past a bubble shield!”

“Then take this!” Dozens of Valentines walked up to Eve – and dogpiled her.

“What the-”

“We are your shield.”

“Well now I can’t see…”
“Would that really help you in this instance?”

“…Good point. SERAPHIM!” Eve summoned her Stand, forcing it to rise above the pile of Valentine. The invisible opponent started shooting the pile, unable to dig all the way through to Eve. Seraphim didn’t know a universe where invisibility was impossible without screwing with the nature of life itself, but it did know one where teleportation wasn’t a thing. It just needed to edit reality to prevent that from happening…

“PONYFEATHERS!” Eve swore. “I need to know exactly where they are at one moment to stop them from moving again!”

“…Would you be able to know where they were if a bullet hit you?”

“Yeah, but I’m not sure I would survive th-” D4C grabbed Twilight’s horn and shoved it into a parallel universe, one that had the exact same events as was happening in the base. Yeesh, They were thorough when they created these sub-universes. “Tap into your other self’s mind!” Valentine demanded.

Eve did so – finding it to be a shadow of her own, little more than a puppet designed to carry out what They thought she would do in any situation. A Valentine in her pile tore her out and tossed her into the air – where a bullet hit her right in the chest. Eve got the information directly from the bullet shot in the other universe, using it to triangulate the enemy’s position in her universe.

Seraphim activated fully, freezing the enemy in place. Eve hit the area with a true-sight spell, banishing the invisibility.

Olivia appeared, holding several guns, a poison kit, and a teleporter belt. “…Oi caramba…” She muttered.

“OLIVIA!” Eve blurted.

“Yeah. It’s me.” She tried to shoot one last time just for the heck of it.

“DOJYAAAAN!” Valentine shouted, appearing behind her with D4C, the flurry of Stand fists hitting her in every location. She fell down, but filled Valentine with lead. Another version took possession of D4C. He reached under her and pulled another copy of Olivia from the ground. She fused together, exploding in the disgusting fractal shattering D4C was known for.

“…Ouch,” Eve winced.

“Who was that?” Valentine asked.

“One of our techies, works with Corona and Lady Rarity,” Eve explained. Also the person you think the TSAB has in custody, but we don’t need to talk about that.

“She deserves recognition for making it this far,” Valentine said.

Eve nodded. “She will."

The two looked at each other.

“And then there were two,” Eve said.

Valentine nodded.

“…Let’s do this in the morning,” Eve said with an exaggerated yawn.
“Agreed,” Valentine said.

Eve cast a sleep spell on them both now that it was safe to do so.

The sun rose.

Eve and Valentine woke up the moment its rays fell on their faces. The two stood up, dusted themselves off, and looked at the sunrise.

“So, which one of us gets to make the wish?” Eve asked.

“It’s the same wish,” Valentine pointed out. “It doesn’t matter.”

Eve thought about this for a moment. “Yeah… Yeah it is the same wish, isn’t it?”

“Of course it is.”

“All that thinking, fighting, and arguing, and in the end it doesn’t matter at all.” Eve found this amusing enough to laugh at. “Flip a coin?”

Valentine looked into the distance. “That doesn’t seem right, though. To end it with a flip of the coin.”

“I know…” Eve smiled, shaking her head. “In the end, we just can’t escape Them can we? They want a final battle… And we want one too.”

Valentine let himself smile. “But it will not be like any of the others fought in this arena.”

Eve smirked. “Because we’ll be smiling and having fun. You hear that Them? We’re going to enjoy ourselves despite you!”

No response.

“I’m making an arena,” Eve declared. “Help me clear trees.”

It didn’t take long for a small army of Valentines and the Charter-Princess to clear enough trees for an arena. With a quick landscaping spell, all the grass, stones, and weeds were removed as well, creating a flat circle of dirt more than large enough for the two to go at it.

Eve agreed to let Valentine start with a few duplicates – after all, without them, Eve could go for the Absolute Zero instant-kill with ease. It was only fair.

“A fair, just fight,” Valentine said, summoning D4C to his side. “I believe Them were not considering this.”

Eve nodded, summoning Seraphim and spreading her wings. The two bowed at each other.

“Three…” Eve said.

“Two…” Valentine continued.

“One…”

“FIGHT!” They both declared, charging each other – smiling.
Already D4C had been transferred to another Valentine, who vanished into the flag, grabbing more alternate versions of Valentine for the fight. Eve froze two Valentines solid and shattered them by smashing the two of them into each other.

Valentines appeared behind her and started shooting, only to find she had erected an invisible wall with Seraphim. Eve tapped into her dark magic, surrounding the arena in dark, wispy tentacles that, upon touching a Valentine, reduced him to ash while screaming.

“DOJYAAAAAN!” Valentine shouted, the one with D4C jumping out of a nearby Valentine’s coat, the Stand punching Seraphim enough to upset the invisible wall, allowing bullets to fly. Eve caught them with her magic, opting to send them back rather than just drop them.

Eve saw the D4C Valentine running at her with a flag poised, ready to trap her in another dimension. She teleported away – only for D4C to translate to the nearest Valentine, giving him the power to cross dimensions, and he enveloped her in the flag, sending her to another realm.

There were now two Evening Sparkles in existence. This meant they had greater firepower – but this also meant they could not come into contact with each other.

The Valentines wanted to make sure they did. They appeared on either side of the Eves, forcing them closer together.

Both Eves opted to use their dark magic mixed with a teleport to distance themselves and decimate the numbers of Valentines present.

“It doesn’t matter how many of us you kill, Eve!” Valentine called. “I have a truly endless supply thanks to Them!”

“The only way to defeat you is to defeat your Stand then!” Eve declared. “Seraphim!” Seraphim stopped editing reality and became the rapidly-moving gyroscope used for physical conflicts. “Get D4C!”

“Seraphim is not a physical combat Stand!” Valentine declared. “D4C is stronger! Not to mention, I can still use my ability while fighting directly!”

“But you don’t have magic!” Eve declared, one of her selves floating into the air. The gyroscopic form of Seraphim surrounded her. She tapped into the magic of the universe they occupied, shifting her coat color to white and her mane into a fiery inferno. She pointed a hoof at Valentine. “I can shunt my power directly into Seraphim if I so choose!”

The dark magic in the arena fell, leaving the bright star that was Eve as the only source of her magic. Besides her other self, that was. D4C quickly grabbed the other Eve and tossed her like a bullet at the glowing Eve. The glowing Eve and the purple Eve shared a moment when they locked eyes. The purple Eve let herself get disintegrated by the other’s flame attack.

Eve smirked. “I think I’m going to keep increasing my power here, just to add to the absurdity. It’s not like you can really interrupt me.” Her eyes went black, summoning a dark highlight to her blinding light. She pointed a hoof at Valentine. “What now?”

“It’s times like this I wish Love Train was portable.”

“Hm?”

“One of the most powerful artifacts the USM has under its control improves D4C’s abilities.
Notably, I cannot carry it with me everywhere I go.” He and all his other selves entered a ready stance. “But that’s not important. What is important is that you have no idea where D4C is right now.”

“And you can’t defeat me without using him directly!” Eve declared, chuckling. She sent a beam of solar light around the arena, charing all the Valentines. More came out of the woodwork, indicating D4C was currently occupying another plane of existence.

Eve didn’t care – Valentine had to show D4C eventually, all she had to do was wait.

A flag was tossed up to her, and out of it came another version of Eve, looking rather bewildered. Eve sent all her focus on the alternate self, disintegrating them before contact could be made.

This allowed another flag to get closer to Eve. The current core Valentine and D4C appeared out of it. “DOJYAAAAAN!” D4C punched the rapidly rotating Seraphim, cracking the outer ring. This broke both of Eve’s wings, forcing her down to the ground – but she maintained her heightened fiery form.

She managed to teleport less than an inch from D4C, using Seraphim’s remaining rings to shred one of D4C’s arms off. The Stand cracked, but remained complete. It kicked Seraphim, breaking the second ring.

This pain broke Eve’s legs, the pain enough to draw her out of her heightened magical form. She fell to the ground, breathing hard as the last ring of Seraphim rotated around her with incredible speed.

The Valentine whose arm she had just removed passed out – and a new, perfectly healthy Valentine took his place. Granted, D4C was still damaged, but this Valentine hadn’t tired at all.

“You never tire…” Eve said with a chuckle.

“Usually I’m not so careless with my other selves,” Valentine admitted. “After all, I have to take them from somewhere. This place just allows me to cut loose. I will never tire or sustain lasting damage. You will.”

“I just have to kill your Stand…”

“Seraphim is at the breaking point.”

Eve pondered this, then grinned. “Oh, I’ve got an idea.”

“What?”

Eve activated Seraphim in the reality-altering mode, using her horn to raise a magic shield. “ANTI-STAND UNIVERSE!”

D4C vanished. Eve shot the Valentine that had been talking to her, killing him in an instant. She set to work killing all the rest – without D4C, if all of them were gone, she would win. She would definitely win.

She cleared the entire arena in a matter of seconds.

“Ha! Gotcha!”

D4C appeared behind her, rising out of a flag with another Valentine.

“DOJYAAAAAN!” He shouted, punching with D4C’s remaining arm.
“WHAT!?” Eve blurted, unable to comprehend much as Seraphim’s final ring crumbled, reducing her spinal column to dust. Most Stand users would just die when their Stand disintegrated completely, but Eve managed to hold on with her powerful magic.

“I transferred D4C the moment you activated Seraphim, to make you think it had worked,” Valentine said, walking up to her.

Eve looked at him. “Y-you’re the o-only Valentine h-here now…” Eve said, barely able to move her mouth.

Valentine raised an eyebrow, about to ask what her point was. She shot him with a disintegrating laser before he could speak. It was too weak to kill him, but it severely wounded him. He landed on the ground, clutching his chest. “NANI!?”

“Y-you are the only Valentine…” Eve coughed. “You c-can’t transfer D4C without t-traveling…”

Valentine started limping away – to a flag, anything he could press himself to and translate.

“No,” Eve said, using her remaining magic to wrap him in telekinesis and drag him closer to her, slamming his head on the ground in the process. “Not going anywhere…”

Valentine grunted, summoning D4C. “If you die first…”

“I’m not going to…” Eve grunted.

“Maybe not…” Valentine said. D4C used its hand to grab Eve – and roll her overtop of Valentine. D4C was able to activate using the collapsing of Eve and the ground.

A fully healthy Valentine appeared a moment later, looking down at Eve.

“You win,” Eve admitted, the life draining from her eyes. “Make it impressive, Valentine.”

Valentine saluted. “It has been an honor. And it will continue being one.”

“Thanks for ending this on a… high note…” Eve coughed. “See you soon…”

And Evening Sparkle died with a smile on her face.

Valentine stood tall, the wind blowing through his hair.

“I CLAIM VICTORY OF THEM’S HUNGER GAMES IN THE NAME OF THE UNITED STATES OF THE MULTIVERSE!” He threw his hand into the air, sending the flag into the air, stars and stripes waving in the wind.

“EVERYONE GIVE A HAND TO AMBASSADOR FUNNY VALENTINE, THE WINNER!” the Them said. Valentine could hear actual clapping coming from all around him. “He only had three kills to his name alone though, the honor of most kills goes to Evening herself, with five. She also has the honor of coming in second overall, with the stealthy one-kill-wonder Olivia in third.”

In a flash of light, Valentine was no longer in the arena – he was standing on a perfectly flat purple plane that glistened with the light of distant stars. D4C was completely healed, standing alongside the Ambassador, ready for anything.

The Them revealed himself to Valentine and his Stand. The being was white, and took up all of Valentine’s field of view. The central point of the instance of Them rippled with energy, sending out smooth fractal patterns out into the rest of the white creature’s essence. Most of this essence outside
the center was translucent, shifting with beautiful waves. Valentine knew that these beings were the distilled idea of physical perfection – the mathematics of the golden ratio and spin infused in everything about them.

“Valentine, as the winner of the Hunger Games, you are to receive a reward beyond the likes of which most lower races can even comprehend. You get a wish. Tell me what it is.”

Valentine looked the Them right in the center. “I wish for Justice.”

“…Care to be a little more definitive in what that means, exactly?”

“I wish for Harmony.”

“That doesn’t help!”

“I wish for all of us to be brought closer together through an act of justice!”

“…Just say it, dramatic politician.”

Valentine took a powerful stance. “I wish for the Collector to be brought to justice for what he has done to us.”

“Ah, finally, a solid wish we can deal with. Your wish i—”

“HOLD IT!” another Them interrupted, appearing behind Valentine. This Them was identical in every way to the other one, right down to the male voice reverberating in Valentine’s mind. “He just wished for us to bring down a Class 2 Presence. That’ll take a bit more work than snap-fingers-done. Just waltzing in and giving the Collector a beatdown isn’t wish material. It’s not like we’re using a Wishing World.”

“Are you scared of a little Gary Stu?” the other one ribbed.

“Yes. I am. They have the nastiest tricks and you never know when one of them is going to find a way to destroy one of us with a Deus Ex Machina or something.”

“You’re giving him too much credit.”

“I’m cautious. But if you want to go over there and do it yourself, it’s your funeral.”

“You all agreed to assist with the wish! Going there alone sounds like work.”

“One forbid any of us actually do any work.”

The two found this statement amusing enough to laugh at it.

The first Them rippled with emotion. “The point is this isn’t beyond us or anything.”

“It’s not worth it. Just refuse to give him the wish, it’s not like we actually have to keep our word or anything.”

“Ahem,” Valentine said. “If I may make a suggestion?”

“Yes, what is it?” the second one asked, clearly annoyed he was talking to a human being.

“Don’t go over there and deal with the Collector personally, if that is what you fear. Why not manipulate events in such a way that he will be brought to justice? You clearly have the power to
manipulate universes on a fundamental level. Surely you can do something from a distance.”

The two Them were quiet.

“That sounds fun,” the first eventually said.

“I thought you hated work?”

“I’m already thinking of a way to make this decidedly more entertaining! I’ll need to do some research on the Collector and see what makes him tick… But ooooooh this could be our next round of bets!”

“If you’re willing to set it up, I’ll call the gang together again.”

The first returned to addressing Valentine. “YOUR WISH HAS BEEN GRANTED, FUNNY VALENTINE! EXPECT RESULTS WITHIN A FEW WEEKS!”

Valentine bowed. “Thank you for your generosity.”

“This has been another round of the Hunger Games! Join us next time when we… apparently try Smash Bros again. I promise you folks, it’ll have an actual story this time! Now everyone, get out of here!”

And suddenly Valentine was back in the board meeting he had been in the middle of when the Games started. He sighed. “Ladies and gentlemen, I have a question. Did I vanish there for a moment? Or were there any signs of a dimensional anomaly?”

After a bunch of shaking heads, Valentine sighed. “I need to contact Merodi Universalis to see if any of what I just experienced actually happened.”

~~~

Eve regained consciousness deep inside the covers of her bed.

She thought about getting up, about dealing with her job, about talking to her friends, and about fixing the damage that was done.

She decided she was done thinking.

She pressed a button on the wall with her magic. “Cessera, I’m taking a vacation day.”

“Got it.”

Eve returned to her bed, thinking of nothing but pillows and rest. She was soon fast asleep.

~~~

Renee sat in her office.

She twitched.

“I’m going to have a word with Vriska about sniper rifles,” she muttered to herself, shaking her head. “At least now I know what it feels like to get shot with a sniper rifle. That’s an interesting experience to have survived.”

She lit her horn and pulled up to her computer and started typing up a report on what she’d just
experienced. She didn’t see any reason why she should put her work on hold for this – clearly, there were other people among her fellow contestants who would make a bigger deal out of it. She also hadn’t really been around long – got told what was going on, and then got shot.

In and out, more or less.

It took her about ten minutes to type up everything she had experienced. She folded it up, sent an email holding it to the rest of the Overheads, and got back to what she’d been doing when she’d been taken away – reading reports marked ‘high importance’ by her many expedition teams.

Most often these reports were rarely the kind of ‘high importance’ they were supposed to be, but she enjoyed reading them. Plenty of amusing anecdotes and interesting bits of information.

Today it was unfortunately rather boring. It was important, yes, but the danger to the economy from wood that could absorb magic was hardly engrossing. Not to mention the typos…

She swore she would have wished those Rubies learned how to write properly. It had to be pretty bad if the translator wasn’t able to parse it at all for Renee’s viewing. She would have to call them in at some point.

A message came in on her computer – Pinkie was asking for a day off. Renee granted it – the pink pony probably got a lot further into the games than Renee herself did. She wondered what Pinkie was going to do with the day.

“Visitor for you, Renee,” a voice came in on the intercom.

“Who is it?”

“Your sister and her kid.”

Renee smiled. “Ah, send them in!”

Allure and Minna were teleported into the room. Allure’s face was red, tear streaks visible under her eyes. Minna was very confused as to why her mother was crying.

“Allure!” Allure blurted, rushing her sister into her hooves. “Renee… I saw… I saw…”

Renee gasped. “Oh, Allure, dear! I’m sorry! I didn’t think about what you would ha-”

“It’s my fault! I distracted you! I…”

“Allure, it didn’t matter.”

“But what if I distract you at another time? What if I screw everything up? What i-”

“Allure… Everything’s fine now. We’re both home, as if nothing had happened. I don’t even have a headache!”


Renee shook her head. “You’ll have to eventually.”

“Says who?” Allure demanded.

“Our jobs?”
“Psh, they don’t have voices,” Allure said, allowing herself to laugh. Then she buried her face into Renee’s mane. “I was so scared…”

“I was too, Allure, I was too…” she saw Minna out of the corner of her eye. “Oh, you poor thing, so confused.”

Minna nodded slowly, clearly trying to process what was happening behind that impassive face of hers.

“Come here. I may not be able to explain but I can make you feel better about it,” Renee said, pulling the girl into the hug with her magic. Minna wrapped her arms around them.

“Everyone’s here,” Allure said, smiling. “That’s all I need.”

~~~

Rohan Kishibe stared at a blank manga page, unable to get the drive to write or draw anything.

This never happened. He sometimes had difficulty writing stories meant to affect the world around him, but working on his manga series? Never. Never had he stared at a blank page and not felt something. Not since he got Heaven’s Door.

He broke the pen he was chewing on, spilling ink all over the paper. He stared at it, wondering if inspiration would come. Nothing did.

Was he going to have to go on hiatus again?

No… He would never do that if he could help it. All that could stop him from meeting his deadlines was physical distance! He had a reputation!

He still couldn’t figure out what the ink blob on his page was supposed to be. This just didn’t bode well…

Perhaps it was just the funk he was in. Having fallen to… to… whatever it was he had fallen to in his sleep – or was it in his sleep? The memory of the end was foggy. Some assassin, regardless. Some coward who wouldn’t face him.

Though who in their right mind would face Rohan directly? Toph. The rest who had faced Rohan directly tended to lose very quickly by virtue of being overwritten.

What was he even complaining about?

Not winning, that’s what. He should have been more careful. Though since his memory was foggy he wasn’t exactly sure how he should have been careful. That was no small part of what was bugging him.

Rohan heard the sound of his front door being smashed in. He had two guesses as to who it was. The guy who usually bashed his door down was Josuke, but there was one other who might have a particular vendetta against the manga artist today…

“ROHAN KISHIBE!” Thrackerzod roared. “YOU ARE TO REMOVE THIS BLASPHEMOUS COMMAND FROM MY BODY!”

“Sure,” Rohan said.
“I DO NOT CARE WHAT YOUR EXCUSES ARE. IF YOU DO NOT REMOVE THEM, THERE WILL BE A TRANSMISSION TO THOSE ABOVE YOU TO FORCE YOU TO DO SO!”

“Alright already,”

“I MEAN IT, NO FUNN- Wait, you said sure!?”

“Yeah. But go on if you want, I’m sure the speech got much better as it went on.”

“Shut up. Just fix me.”

Rohan summoned Heaven’s door and popped Thrackerzod’s book open, leafing through the pages where he had left commands. He erased them with whiteout and then closed the book. “Good as new.”

“You didn’t leave anything?”

“Just ‘cannot attack Rohan Kishibe’,” Rohan commented.

Thrackerzod looked like she wanted to scream at him for leaving that in, but she decided it would be a fruitless endeavor. “Fine.”

“Good,” Rohan said, turning away from Thrackerzod and examining his paper. Summoning Heaven’s Door, he made a sketch that turned the ink blot into Thrackerzod being smashed into the ground. Rohan added Froppy a few seconds later.

“…Is it possible for a Prophet to act retroactively?”

Rohan shrugged. “Probably. Though only without prior knowledge of the event, I would think.” He paused. “I shouldn’t be surprised that you know about me.”

“Classification is a loose thing here,” Thrackerzod admitted. “Now, I’m going to go home. I’m going to forget anything in those games ever happened. But before I do, I want you to know. IF YOU WRITE IN ME EVER AGAIN I WILL SMITE Y-”

Rohan popped open Thrackerzod like a book and wrote ‘does a jig for the next five seconds.’ Upon closing the book Thrackerzod did a jig for five seconds.

“You were saying?” Rohan asked, smirking.

Thrackerzod vanished without another word.

Now in a considerably better mood, Rohan found the images coming to his mind once more.

~~~

Brutalight screamed in the throne room of her castle of insanity.

Rarifruit looked to Fluttershout. “What did you do to her?”

“Do to her? I didn’t do anything!” Fluttershout retorted. “She just started screaming completely on her own.”

“But that’s what you do! So you must be responsible!”
“Morons,” Rainbine muttered.

“Say that to my face Rainbine!”

“I did.”

“Oh. In that case, thank you.”

Rainbine rolled her eyes. “Whatever floats your fruity little boat there.”

“Shush, it doesn’t have anything to do with Fluttershout,” Six said, walking up to her mentor.

“Brutalight? What's wrong?”

“I LOST! I WAS SO, SO CLOSE! TOP FIVE AT LEAST!” Brutalight screamed at the sky. “But then they had to GANG UP ON ME because I had a BIG MOUTH!” She lit her horn, picking up a boulder and throwing it out the window. The village outside lost yet another house to Brutalight’s ‘boulder therapy’.

For once, it didn’t do anything for her. “I need to start a war.”

“We own the universe and the next one over,” Rarifruit pointed out.

“Time to find a new one, then,” Brutalight decreed. “I need to conquer something.”

“You know, you should probably talk about it with us,” Fluttershout suggested.

Brutalight glared at her.

“In addition to going conquering, of course.”

Brutalight’s glare lessened. “Right, right. Well… Some higher-order beings grabbed me and twenty-three others – mostly from Merodi Universalis – to engage in a deathmatch battle royale. I killed every version of Starlight Glimmer I could find. Got a bingo and everything. But then I went to fight among the finalists in a free-for-all battle to end all battles… AND THEY FUCKING GANGED UP ON ME!” She roared.

“Sounds like they didn’t like you,” Rainbine pointed out.

“No shit,” Fluttershout muttered.

Six folded her arms. “Well, it sounds like you made it really far and got to kill a lot of people. I bet it was cathartic.”

“I didn’t get Eve,” Brutalight muttered. “Some of the killing was good, but most of it was kinda… void of meaning. I would have wished for all of them to stay dead had I won, but I didn’t win, so they’re all alive, GAH.” She sat in her throne and leaned on one of her hooves.

“Oh, oh, idea!” Rainbine shouted.

“You? An idea?” Rarifruit blurted.

“Let’s make our own deathmatch to cheer Brutalight up! We can find twenty-something poor saps and throw them into an arena, see what happens, easy!”

Six looked at Rainbine. “…That’s actually a good idea. What about it, Brutalight?”
Brutaligh’s angered face gave way to a psychotic grin. “Oooooh, I can see why Them like this sort of game in particular… Except in mine, consequences will be permanent! Heheheheh… I’ll make it bigger! Better! Brighter! Best idea you’ve ever had, Rainbine. Let’s start rounding up contestants, shall we?”

Six grinned. “I already have some in mind…”

~~~

Jotaro walked through the streets of Celestia City, hands in his pockets, head down. To virtually everyone who had ever seen him, this appeared to be nothing more than normal behavior. He may not have gone on walks all that often, but it wasn’t unheard of. Plus, he may have had a destination. In truth, Jotaro had no idea where he was going, busy dealing with internal thoughts of inadequacy.

_Fell to Vriska. She didn’t even have her dice, just her luck._

He clenched his fist in his pocket – he saw a million ways he could have won that fight. A slightly better use of time stop. Forego the rapid ORA ORA punches for fewer, more accurate ones to get through her luck barrier. Blind her. Anything, really.

Yet, in the moment, he was unable to pull it off. He _failed_ against an opponent he _knew_.

And then he’d been taken out early in the game. All that preparation, for nothing. _Nothing_.

Had he just been unlucky? Or was there a better way to play the game?

These thoughts were pushed to the back when he recognized one of the figures coming toward him. He sighed – it was Vriska.

“Hey, big guy!” She called waving her hands. “Over here!”

Jotaro didn’t look at her, he just kept walking.

She flew over to him, taking up a pose like she was lounging on the air. “Come on, Jojo, lighten up a little! Game’s over!”

No response from the inheritor of the Joestar bloodline.

“All right, fine,” Vriska said, landing on her feet and standing in front of Jotaro. “Since you won’t start a conversation that leads into this, I’m just going to have to tell you directly. Remember this day well, for two words are about to escape my mouth that will blow your tiny mind.”

Jotaro raised an eyebrow.

“I’m _sorry._”

Jotaro looked at her in shock. The ends of his mouth curled up and he grabbed his hat. “Yare yare daze…”

“Should have asked you to be an ally first,” Vriska admitted. “Shouldn’t have become quite as bloodthirsty as they wanted. Shouldn’t have become so invested in the game.” She shrugged. “But hey, I lost.”

“Who to?”
“Corona. She did some serious bullshit.”
“Sounds familiar.”

Vriska chuckled. “Don’t you start.”

Jotaro opted not to respond.

“Anyway, now that all that tedious and drawn out apology business is out of the way, how about
you and I go out and have some fun? Hub arcade is good this time of year, but there’s also a giant
laser tag arena right here in this very city!”

Jotaro glanced at her, raising an eyebrow.

“Right, fine, laser tag is a bad idea considering what we’ve just been through. What about… one of
those virtual reality terminals? There’s this new thing called the Oasis where you can apparently do
anything and be anyone.”

“I’ll have to see it to believe it.”

“No you don’t.”

Jotaro shrugged.

“Come on, I’ll show you.” She pushed him forward, grinning. “I think car racing sounds like a good
thing to look for, don’t you?”

Jotaro nodded slowly. Racing did sound fun.

~~~

Corona received an email, marked urgent enough that her red shades displayed it in front of her eyes
the moment it appeared.

From: Renee

Come to my house now. It’s an emergency.

Corona didn’t need to be told twice. “Emergency call from Renee,” Corona told Toph.

Toph shrugged. “Eh, we can talk later. Not like I really got to do much besides get the tar beaten out
of me by an alicorn destined to win. Go.”

Corona dialed the Hub, having Raging Sights mix a teleport spell into the portal to ensure they’d
arrive right outside Renee’s doorstep. She knocked on Renee’s door, adjusting her glasses.

Renee opened the door, her eyes the image of terror. Her mascara had already run down her face.

“…What happened?”

“I… I just got home,” Renee said, choking on her words. “H-he isn’t himself. You’ve got to help
him!”

Corona paled. Something happened to Daniel? “What’s wrong with him?”

“Just… Just come look!” Renee dragged her into the house and took her to the living room. Daniel
sat in a chair, staring at the clock on the wall. His jaw hung slack and his arms lay at his sides, limp. He was alive, but he didn’t appear to have much life in him.

Corona was struck with the realization that he’d gotten old in the almost thirty years since they started exploring the multiverse. He was around forty when they started… Seventy now. Even magic medicine didn’t let him keep his youth. Ascending probably would, if it came to that...

Corona removed the tips of her gloves, exposing her fingers. “I’ll go in, see what I can do to shake him out of it. I don’t know how he’ll react tho-”

She didn’t even get to touch him before he reached out, grabbed her wrist, and screamed at her.

“…Oh…” Corona said. “I… Renee, I think I did this to him.”

“W-what?”

“I messed with his Ascended form in the arena… I had to kill him in it. He sees me as a threat.”

“I don’t care if you did it, get in there and fix him for me!” Renee wailed.

“I’ll try,” Corona said, forcing her hand to Daniel’s head.

The surface memories of his were impossible to fathom. She saw images of herself, images of Renee, and images of a stargate.

She forced her powers of empathy deeper, digging up memories of being an Ascended being trapped in a globe. It wasn’t a maddening existence, just dreadfully boring. Most of the Ascended’s far-reaching senses and higher-dimensional understanding were limited to the confines of the globe, unable to see as far as he needed…

And then she used him. The feeling of being burnt to extinguish another was such a mixture of emotions even Corona had difficulty parsing through it. There was the vindication of getting revenge. There was the horror of realizing one was being devoured by an attack. And then there was a deep, horrendous burning that had no physical body to attack, so all of it went to the mind…

Corona forced herself deeper into Daniel’s mind, a place where everything was white and Daniel himself stood.

“Trying to fix what you did?” he asked, back to her.

“I didn’t realize!” Corona blurted. “I though-”

“You thought wrong. You damaged my mind by burning me there. Now I’m stuck in here, in the place my Ascended consciousness comes from, denied access to the rest of my body.”

Corona extended a hand. “I can bring you out.”

Daniel turned to her, face lined with fear. “…I’m not sure I can let you.”

“Just take my hand, Daniel.”

He flinched, taking a step back.

“Daniel…”

Daniel started running away, deeper into the recesses of his mind.
Thoughtchain, Corona thought, holding the palm of her hand out. A mental construct that looked like a holy chain shot out, wrapped itself around Daniel’s midsection, and pulled him to her. “We’re going out, Daniel.”

He writhed in the chain, taking a partially-Ascended appearance.

“This is just your mind. You can’t actually become one of them, in here.” She lifted her other hand and left the depths of Daniel’s mind, dragging him along with her. When she reached the surface memories, she dropped him off.

Then she returned to the real world. Daniel was screaming at her. He kicked her in the stomach and plastered himself against a wall.

“Daniel! Dear!” Renee called. “You-”

“She just tore me through my own mind!” Daniel shouted, gasping. “I can’t even think straight anymore!”

“You’re better than you were,” Corona said, dusting herself off. “Stuck in your head.” She summoned the fingertips back onto her gloves. “I wouldn’t try to Ascend for a few days, but otherwise you…”

She noticed that with every syllable she spoke, Daniel flinched in visible pain. Her expression fell. “Oh.”

“Daniel?” Renee asked. “…Do you want her to go?”

“Yes. Yes, get her out of here,” Daniel said, trying to avoid looking at Corona. Her mere presence was an affront to his subconscious. “Please.”

Renee walked up to Corona and roughly scooted her toward the front door.

“Renee, I…”

“Thank you,” Renee said, hardly more than a whisper. Then she opened the door and shoved Corona out of it. Renee slammed it right after.

Corona stood outside, in the street, wondering what to do next.

She came to the horrifying conclusion she might not be able to do anything about this.

She might be permanently ingrained into his mental state to trigger a fear response… And she wasn’t good enough to remove specifically that, especially if he didn’t want to cooperate.

Corona put a hand to her head. “Why the heck did I have to catch him like that…?”

She didn’t have a good answer.

~~~

Froppy sat in her house, staring at the ocean from her balcony.

It was nice, being able to afford this house. Usually the view would always cheer her up. Endless water she could hop into at any time…

She didn’t particularly feel like swimming at the moment, though.
She felt like… Well she didn’t even feel like looking at the sea, but that was just the least-hated thing at the moment.

She’d needed to be killed by Valentine in the end. Killed so she wouldn’t do anything for Rohan.

Rohan Kishibe… He had authority over her, now. Did she dare go ask him to remove his commands? She could probably get Valentine to strong-arm him… If Valentine felt she was worth it. But she had failed him and the USM.

Her doorbell rang. She ignored it.

This forced Valentine to use alternate universes as a stepping stones to appear right on the balcony. “It’s rude to refuse your superior.”

“V-Valentine! I’m so sorry it won’t happen agai-”

“It is no problem, not today. I don’t even have an assignment for you. But I am here to tell you a few things.”

Froppy looked at the ground, dejected. “…What?”

“I’m giving you another award for exemplary service and injury in the line of duty. You were victorious against an opponent who had the edge on you in almost every way.”

“Ribbit?”

“Don’t be surprised. You are one of my most loyal, hardworking, and empathetic employees. At this rate your record might even exceed Johnny’s if you keep going the way you are now.”

She bowed. “Thank you, Ambassador.”

“You deserve it. You’re not a disappointment, Froppy.”

Froppy nodded. “Anything else?”

Valentine allowed himself to smirk. “I won.”

“You won!”

“More surprised there than I would have liked,” Valentine mused. “But yes, I won. And I made my wish.”

“What did you wish for?”

Valentine told her. At first she was confused, but a smile soon grew across her face. “…We’re going to get Gyro back?”

“If Them keep their word, then yes.” Valentine removed a USM flag from his suit jacket. “Now excuse me, I must inform Johnny as well. I’m sure he’d like to be in the loop when it finally goes though.”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

“Take care of yourself, Froppy. Continue fighting for justice.”

She saluted. “I will! Ribbit!”
He saluted back at her before vanishing to another plane of existence.

~~~

Blumiere noticed four hours after the games ended that there was a new trophy on his mantleplace. *First to Die!*

It was made of solid gold and covered in cute, cartoon skulls.

Blumiere narrowed his eyes. “I wonder which of them made this…”

Vivian shrugged. “No idea, sir. Do you want me to remove it?”

“No… It’s a good conversation starter.”

“Like the chest you’ll never let anyone open?”

Blumiere smirked, adjusting his white hat. “Precisely, Vivian. This is why one has knick-knacks in one’s home and office.”

“And submarine.”

“I do not own a submarine,” Blumiere asserted.

“Your wife thinks otherwise.”

“It is not a submarine.”

“It flies underwater, right?”

“Yes! And in the air and in space!”

Vivian shrugged. “It’s here on the checklist as ‘submarine’.”

Blumiere sighed. “Sometimes I wonder about things…” He looked at his reflection in the *First to Die!* trophy. He smiled. “And sometimes I just find things amusing.” He twirled his cane and got back to his work.

~~~

“And that’s why I’m fucking pissed,” Blackjack explained to Gilgamesh.

“Sounds like you were the one going a little nuts,” Gilgamesh observed, leaning on one of the Void’s many crystalline pillars.

“I’m not completely nuts though! They still fucking killed me because they didn’t like what I was trying to do! Didn’t want me to save everyone!”

Gilgamesh shrugged. “Bringing people back usually results in a lot of pain. Except when it doesn’t. *Ka* isn’t especially consistent about it. Except when it comes to you.”

“Hey, you’ve managed to stay alive despite my ‘curse’.”

“I like to think I’m a special case.”
Blackjack seethed. “So what, do I blame them? Or do I blame my curse? Or… Or what?”

“All of the above?” Gilgamesh suggested. “There’s also something else to think about.”

“Hrm?”

“Things and people that have been dead that long can’t really be brought back without time exploits. That I think Them would have done would be to create completely new ones directly from the Sea of Infinite Possibility. Maybe even rewrite your universe completely to make it simple.”

“Fuuuuuuuck, that would bug everyone…” She put her hooves to her head. “Am I real? Are they real? Are we who we remember or just copies?” She let out a pained grunt. “…I think I’d be fine with that, as long as I got to be with Glory again.”

Gilgamesh nodded. “I’ve never been one for the ‘romance’ thing, but I think I get what you’re saying. Why don’t you find an alternate version of her?”

“She only exists in worlds that are variants of mine,” Blackjack reminded him. “…And in every one of those there’ll be a version of me.” She looked at her hooves. “Jackie removed the curse.”

“Didn’t she have to die to do that, and get lucky?”

“Yeah,” Blackjack said, staring into the distance. “Yeah, she did. …Dammit, why can’t I have hope Gil? What is it about existence that demands I can’t have anyone I want back?”

“Same thing that demands I wander the universe looking for the great EXCALIBUR!” He held his fist in the air for dramatic effect. “It’s ka.”

“But some people aren’t cursed. Most aren’t ‘cursed’.”

“Or everyone just has different variations of the same curse,” Gilgamesh suggested.

“Gah. We don’t even understand what we’re talking about.” She rammed her head into a crystal column. “I’m not going to be able to let this go.”

“That’s it,” Gilgamesh said, grabbing Blackjack by the scruff of her neck. “We’re going to see Jackie and learn a bit about what you can do to let things go. You’re an immortal multiversal traveler, Blackjack. You can’t keep being hung up over these things.”

“Let go of me!”

“SCHOOL CALLS!” Gilgamesh decreed, opening a Void sphere and jumping to Equis Regarden to begin the search for Jackie.

The Blackjack who had escaped her curse.

~~~

Flutterfree still technically lived in her cottage. It was in the middle of a public park rather than far outside Ponyville nowadays, but it still gave her the nature she held so dear to herself.

Evening was walking down the cobblestone path to the cottage, having managed to get herself out of her bed. She knew Flutterfree was here.

She gulped, knocking on the door of the large tree that was a house.
“Come in!” Flutterfree called, not that Eve could hear it. She just nervously tapped the ground in front of the door, waiting for a response. Maybe she didn’t want to talk to her?

“I said come i- oh.”

Eve had just started to walk away when Flutterfree opened the door. Flutterfree tapped her on the shoulder. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize it was you.”

“Oh… Right.” Eve nodded. Inside the house she saw Discord sitting, drinking a cup of tea. “I can come back la-”

“Discord, do you mind leaving us for a moment?”

“Not at all.”

“Go play with Trixie and Nova. This really needs to be a private conversation. Understand?”

Discord blinked at how suddenly she had gotten serious. He decided the best course of action was to shrug, nod, and teleport away.

Flutterfree gestured for Eve to come into the house, letting her take the couch Discord had just been sitting in while Flutterfree took a soft chair.

Eve looked at the tea already set out.

“You can have some, don’t be nervous.”

Eve nodded, levitating the tea to her and taking a drink. It was nothing compared to Iroh’s, but there was something about Flutterfree’s personal touch…

A tear rolled down her cheek. “We’ve ruined it, Flutterfree.”

“Eve…”

“I know we’re still friends. I know we’ll work past this and live with each other. I know that. But the mutual trust we’ve shared is still broken.” She gulped. “I… I killed you, and then I didn’t even let you know… I reacted before you decided… Then you attacked me, because you wanted to wish for the others. And then I had to kill Blackjack for basically the same reason and it felt horrible and her story is so tragic.” Eve put her head in her hooves, crying.

Flutterfree put a wing around her, failing to keep her face neutral and kind – she was clearly upset with Eve. “You’re right. It is broken.”

“Why’d we have to ruin it, Flutterfree?”

“Because we’re ponies.”

“That’s a dumb answer,” Eve muttered.

Flutterfree nodded. “Doesn’t mean it’s any less true. We broke each other’s trust. We couldn’t reach an agreement for once in our lives… And now there’s a rift.”

“I want to heal that rift!”

“I do too, Eve, and I’m going to put everything I have into it.” Flutterfree swallowed hard.
“You’re struggling.”

“Yeah. A lot.”

Eve looked at the ground. “It’s always going to be a painful memory.”

Flutterfree nodded, not commenting further on it.

Eve shook her head. “Flutterfree… This is wrong. We’re supposed to be the Elements of Harmony. How can we be that if we don’t trust each other?”

“We’re not the Element of Loyalty, Eve,” Flutterfree reminded her.

“No…” Eve said, looking into the distance. “But maybe we needed her.”

“Maybe.”

“…Want to go talk to her?”

“…Yeah,” Flutterfree admitted.

It was at this moment there was another visitor. Flutterfree moved to open the door, but she didn’t get very far – Pinkie Pie burst in, a comforting smile on her face. “Hey girls. Brought you some help.”

“Pinkie!” Eve called. “Are you oka-”

“I’m fine,” Pinkie said. “Really. I’m just sad I couldn’t be there for you two. But…” She stepped to the side, revealing Rainbow Dash. Their Rainbow Dash. “I heard you needed some help.”

Rainbow Dash looked at them, face set, and nodded. “Right.” She turned to Pinkie. “Prism’s outside – don’t let her mess with the bears, okay?”

Pinkie saluted. “Pinkie Pie, expert babysitter, is on the case! …Though she’s old enough to watch herself.”

“She’ll try to kick one’s face in and critically analyze its reaction. Don’t let her.”

Pinkie giggled, saluted, and left the cottage, leaving Rainbow with Flutterfree and Eve.

“Do y-” Eve began.

“Pinkie told me more or less what happened,” Rainbow told them. “You don’t need to repeat anything.” She took a seat, looking at the two of them with a stern expression. “Here’s the ugly part. You two have hurt each other bad enough that it’s going to change your relationship permanently.”

The two of them looked away, ashamed.

“So here’s the first piece of advice – don’t try to set things back to the way they once were. That’ll only make things hurt, a case of misplaced Loyalty. Loyalty to a pony who doesn’t exist anymore, betraying the new ponies you both are. That Loyalty to the past? Change it to be Loyalty to the pony. You don’t care what the relationship used to be between you two, you only care that you want the relationship to continue. To stay.”

The two of them nodded like students in a classroom.

“The second piece of advice – the new relationship doesn’t have to be a bad thing.”
Eve blinked. “W-what?”

Rainbow smirked. “Think back to our days before the multiverse, Eve. We were good friends, but we were also knuckleheads. Heck, I’m still a knucklehead. That should jog your memory about how undeniably stupid I was. I devoted myself to my goals at the expense of you girls more than once. For the Element of Loyalty, I think I was the one who twisted our bonds the most!” She shook her head and laughed in pity at her younger self’s plight. “And every time I – or anypony else – did that, I was welcomed back into the fold. And the relationship changed. We accepted each other as people who might do those things, and because of that our relationship changed.”

“The day we went camping in the Everfree…” Eve said.

“That wasn’t us,” Flutterfree reminded her.

“We thought it was,” Rainbow said. “And our dynamic changed. Everyone forgave everyone. But we remembered – and things changed.”

Eve and Flutterfree looked at each other. “We’ve already forgiven each other,” Flutterfree said.

“Then the trick is to accept the drastic change,” Rainbow said. “Prove your Loyalty to each other by letting it happen.

Eve nodded, placing her hoof on Flutterfree’s. “We will. …Thank you, Rainbow Dash. It’s been too long.”

Rainbow Dash laughed. “Oh, you think I’m done here? I’m just getting started – there’s so much I need to drill into your heads about Loyalty. So buckle up buttercups, this is gonna be a long ride.”

Eve and Flutterfree gulped. Rainbow Dash smirked – she’d missed these two a lot more than she wanted to admit to herself.

~~~

A couple of days later, there was a curious sight at Iroh’s teashop.

Eve stood outside the establishment, waiting for someone. She checked her watch – not late yet, but getting dangerously close to it. He wouldn’t ruin this without calling ahead, right? After all, it was kind of important they talk…

Perhaps more than just ‘kind of’, more like ‘really really’. Eve was beginning to get nervous about it all falling apart.

She was struck with an image of her young self setting up a meeting between universes in a hall, freaking out over banners and images of Equestrian heroes.

She allowed herself to think of those memories as her own for a moment – and laughed. She used to be so panicked about everything. Now she handled the fates of entire worlds in her hooves without any outward expression. A good thing for her job… But was it better for herself?

She didn’t know.

What she did know was that the man she was waiting for had arrived.

Valentine walked up to her and extended his hand. She shook it. “Shall we?”

Valentine nodded. The two of them entered the teashop together and sat down.
There was no plan to talk policy, no thought to discuss anything that had happened or was going to happen to the Collector, and no pushing for any sort of political movement.

They were just here to talk and learn about each other and their respective cultures. A place to talk, debate, and gain understanding. Not as enemies, colleagues, or leaders – but friends.

It would be the first of many such ‘tea parties’.

~~~

The Collector was staring at his computer screen. A game was on it, one that had a hexagon composed of nineteen circles. The puzzle was to slide three dots of a kind into each other, creating a bigger dot, until the biggest dot was created.

He had been trying to beat the game for three days straight. No luck.

Lightning ran into the room, breaking his concentration. “Augh! Lightning, I was focu-”

“Our universes are being moved around,” she told him, tapping at an alert on his computer screen.

“…Why now?” the Collector muttered, curling his hands into fists and rubbing them against each other, creating an annoying metallic scratching sound.

“Unknown. What is known is that the movements are making us significantly more visible.”

The Collector grunted. “To who?”

“Merodi Universalis and its neighbors.”

“Of course,” the Collector muttered, putting a hand to his head. “Who else would need to see us? … Do we have any idea who’s doing this?”

“Current analysis suggests it’s Them taking an indirect approach to altering our position in the multiverse. Long range positional scrambling.”

“Man I wish I had toys that impressive,” the Collector muttered. “It would make things so much easier.”

“You and I both know that would draw too much attention.”

“At this point remaining hidden looks to be a fruitless endeavor. “ He leaned back in his chair. “This is happening too fast. We weren’t supposed to go any further yet!”

“We can still do this.”

“Assuming Them aren’t doing this for some reason other than amusement.”

“They never do anything for a reason other than amusement.”

“You never know,” the Collector said, standing up tall. “Regardless, we need to make the following events happen on our terms. If we have to go with Them’s timetable, we have to decide the where and the who.” He pointed at Lightning. “Get any agent in Merodi Universalis – any agent at all – and have them report the universes the Primary Team is scheduled to visit.”

“…Really sir? Going after them?”
“Yes. They were always part of the plan.”

“But even with the complications?”

“Nothing about that part has changed,” the Collector asserted. “Nor should it.”

Lightning nodded. “Who should I send?”

“A familiar faces brigade.”

“That’ll be interesting.”

“That’s the point. Make it interesting,” the Collector said. “I expect a report the instant the mission is concluded.”

“Of course.”

“Until then, leave me alone. I need to beat this game.”

“Need is such a strong word.”

The Collector would have raised an eyebrow if he had them. “Using my phrases against me?”

“We both know you got that from somewhere else.”

“Fair enough. By the way, interesting is a non-word.”

“Case in point.”

The Collector rolled his eyes, chuckling. “Just get to it. Also, for the sake of appearances, send a complaint letter to Them. Not that they’ll listen.”

“If we get a response it’ll be the talk of the Collection.”

The Collector tapped his fingers. “…Don’t advertise this. I know none of them can betray me, but this is too important to bank on the purity of their loyalties.”

“Got it,” Lightning said. She smirked at him. “Enjoy your game.”

“This is the sort of game you do not enjoy… This is the sort of game you keep playing only because it is an affront to your intelligence if it beats you into submission. It is a matter of pride Lightning!”

“Sure,” she said, rolling her eyes. She left the office, leaving the Collector to his game.
Captured

It wasn’t every day the Primary Team was called to deal with a smuggling operation within Merodi Universalis space. They were usually the team who dealt with other universe’s smuggling problems. It was even more unusual considering the smuggling operation was taking place in Celestia City, where the League of Sweetie Belles were readily available to solve anything.

So why had they been sent?

It all had to do with the fact that the ringleader of the whole operation was a version of Pinkie Pie who’d been several steps ahead of all prior attempts to stop her. Snuggle Pie she called herself, finding it amusing to have a name so close to Smuggle Pie that she could use in the open without drawing attention.

Naturally, you had to fight pink party ponies with pink party ponies.

“SQUEAKY HAMMER CANCELLATION TECHNIQUE!” Pinkie shouted, giggling as she brought the squeaky hammer down on Snuggle.

Snuggle rolled her eyes and giggled as well – her only unique feature being a cutie mark of a box wrapped in chains rather than balloons. “I’ll meet you there!” She used her own identical squeaky hammer to meet Pinkie’s, the two smashing against each other in an immensely annoying cacophony of SQUEAK SQUEAK SQUEAK!

Snuggle knew she’d lost the moment the squeaky hammers met, but who cared, really? This was not only her moment in the spotlight, it was also freaking fun!

“I know, right?” Pinkie yelled over the squeaks.

“Snuggle Pie, villain of the moment!” Snuggle shouted, chuckling. “Nice plan by the way! I can’t resist the squeak!”

“Do I know me or do I know me?”

“SHIPMENT SECURED!” Nova shouted.

“LACKEYS DISPATCHED!” Vriska added.

“No collateral damage,” Flutterfree added, too quiet to be heard.

“THAT MEANS YOU CAN STOP NOW!” Nova shouted at Pinkie.

“But Novaaaaa!” Pinkie whined. “We’re having fun!”

“Yeah, let us go just a little bit longer!” Snuggle added.

“Yare yare daze…” Jotaro muttered. He had Star Platinum grab both their respective heads, forcing them to stop swinging the squeaky hammers.

“Ptooey, you’re no f-”
Star Platinum beaned Snuggle in between the eyes with the intent of knocking her out. She just depressed like she was made of foam.

Pinkie rolled her eyes, producing a licorice lasso out of nowhere and tying Snuggle up in it. “There. She won’t be getting out of that.”

“MY ONLY WEAKNESS! Sugary goodness!”

“From other Pinkies,” Pinkie said, smirking. She put a smiley-face sticker on Snuggle’s forehead. “Turn that in for a free prison party if you ever don’t want to make one yourself!”

“Thank you!”

The two giggled.

Flutterfree rolled her eyes. “Allure will want to talk to you personally.”

“Oh, did she actually ask for you?”

“No,” Nova admitted.

“I knew it. This is going to be a bruise on her pride.”

“She’ll be a lot happier to see you in chains,” Pinkie pointed out. “I mean… you’ve been messing with her a lot.”

“She’s so susceptible! Just a little stray note in Minna’s room and she flips the hell out!”

“I wonder why,” Vriska muttered while Jotaro slapped the snuggler with Star Platinum.

Nova pulled out her phone. “Yeah, Allure? Got them all. Seventeenth street, level 8, sector Avocado. Got her and all the lackeys. Unless something absolutely absurd happens in the next five min-

A mass of glowing white tendrils erupted in the middle of the smuggler’s warehouse. A single, muscular man stepped out, wearing very little in the way of clothing – the bracelets, boots, and loincloth he was wearing were a dark shade of purple. He had a truly impressive head of hair that rippled and shifted as he moved.

He struck a dramatic pose, a clear indication he came from a version of Earth Stand.

Jotaro’s eyes widened. “…Kars!?”

“Joseph’s descendant recognizes me… good,” Kars decided.

The Primary Team stood as one, analyzing Kars for the best takedown method.

He held up a small device and flashed them all with a blue light. “Congratulations, you’re all part of the Collection now. Current orders from the Collector are to do whatever I say. Jotaro… Stay still.”

Jotaro stayed still. Kars produced a jagged knife out of his arm and punctured Jotaro’s stomach with it. Jotaro remained standing, blood trickling out of the wound.

Kars folded his arms. “If only I could go further…” he said, bitterly.

“Try this on for size,” Vriska said, skewering his head with her sword. She proceeded to roll her
dice, summoning nineteen blue spears to skewer Kars from all sides.

He moved his body around all the blades as if his muscles were liquid. “You’re a powerful enough psychic to resist the basic conditioner I see.” He grabbed her and drove her into the ground. She looked up at him, beginning the luck drain.

He drove his arm-knife into her eye and into her brain. This was enough to trigger a death – though Kars knew it wouldn’t be permanent. He snapped his fingers, ordering the other four to line up.

He touched his head, causing a unicorn horn to come out of it. The horn lit with a deep purple aura, the magic within him able to tear a portal through universes. He hoisted Vriska up. “Let’s go.”

Allure appeared in a flash of white light. “More help is on the way, I just got here as soon as I c-”

Kars held up the device and flashed her with the blueness. “Move,” he ordered. She did.

The Primary Team and Allure were gone within the next ten seconds, leaving the tied-up Snuggle and a bunch of beat up lackeys alone in the warehouse.

Snuggle groaned. “Ugh, how long until the cops take us to jail? I’m bored already!”

~~~

The world where the various nations of the local multiverse met to discuss the Collector was still known as the Golden Joke. Up until an hour ago, the Golden Joke had only been sparsely populated by a few individuals working on some crazy ideas. The majority of people had been waiting for Starbeat’s hummingbird drive sensors to pick up any Collector activity in their space.

To say they had picked up some activity would be an understatement. Celestia City was one of the most advanced constructions any of the main powers knew about, and it was riddled with ka sensors that collected data, even if nobody understood what all the data they were collecting was. They had detailed scans of the Primary Team’s encounter with Kars, and their capture. It was more than enough.

And that knowledge was enough to fill Golden Joke’s main meeting hall. Valentine, Froppy, Johnny’s team, Jenny, YVND, the Grand Secretariat, members of the Sparkle Census Council that almost never left the Census, Eve, O’Neill, Toph, Corona, most the Merodi Overheads, and even Hastur had arrived. Hastur was notably there for purely personal reasons, since the Embodiment would never care about such things.

Starbeat walked up to the main podium and cleared her throat. “The good news is we have more than enough of a ka signature to find the Collector and his Collection since the Primary Team was captured in such a convenient location.”

She paused for a moment, allowing that to sink in.

“The bad news is that the previous sentence needs an eventually tacked onto the end of it.” She pressed a button, bringing up a holographic display of the multiverse behind her, zoomed in on the edge of the Q-Sphere, where most of Merodi, Sparkle Cenus, and University space was. “This is the area of the multiverse we have heavily documented – most connections are known, and the most efficient ways to move from universe to universe are charted. This universe here,” she gestured to a softly glowing red dot, “is where Celestia City is. We were able to follow the ka signature for twelve whole universes before we ran into a problem.”

She let a simple animation play out – the red dot connected itself to another dot, turning it red as well,
the connection between glowing brightly. The string went out twelve universes before it hit a dot at the edge of well-documented space. “We do not know the next universe in the path to the Collector. We currently have the ka signature interfaced with a hyper-grinder device, but it is expected to take hours to find the next universe. And hours to find the next. On and on and on. I don’t know about any of you, but I think the Collector not only has the power to string together hundreds of universes in a complex maze to his world, but that he’s paranoid enough to do so.”

She grimaced. “I know we’d rather not wait days – or even weeks – to get everyone back. The Collector attacked us brazenly, out in the open, knowing we’d get this information. He’s counting on us taking this long for whatever plan he has. So we need to find a way to get there faster. The way I see it, there are two options.” She lit her horn, banishing the display.

“The first option is to find a map of the area of space the Collector is hiding in. This seems unlikely, since the TSAB has little to no clue about the Collector, and they’re near the top of the multiversal food chain. He’s hiding himself very well.

“The second option is to find a way to use our ka signature to find him more effectively. We do not have time to start bigger research projects on it – we’d need to search for help. This also seems unlikely since none of our acquaintances make extensive use of ka.”

“So what the heck do we do then?” Jenny blurted.

“That’s what we need to find out,” Starbeat told her. “I’ve just given you all I know about the situation. If you’ll excuse me, I’m going back to the grinder to see if my presence can do anything to speed up the process.”

She jumped off the stage, walking away.

The crowd erupted into loud discussion among themselves.

“Right,” Eve said, turning to those she could tell what to do. “We need to spread our feelers out. Someone go contact any travelers we have to see if they know about a race that can manipulate ka.”

“I’ll talk with Sunny,” Renee offered. “Though I’m not sure she’ll have much to offer.”

“Good. I’ll go get Rev myself, she seems to know a bit more about ka than the rest of us.”

“I’ll go to Nanoha,” Corona said. “If she’s available.”

“Yes. O’Neill? Think you can get anyone from the Race of Yith to assist?”

“I’ll try.”

*Go ask Giorno for information as well,* she told him telepathically. He nodded and ran off.

Eve spread her wings and took to the sky. “Everyone, give this your all – the Collector is making his move and we can’t let him have whatever it is he wants!” With a flash of her horn, she was gone.

She was going to find her friends.

She was going to save her friends.

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“Pinkie and Pals should get kidnapped more often,” Alushy told a bartender as she downed a shot of whiskey.
The bartender was a Bismuth Gem well-known for never bothering to eat anything. “Oh?”

Alushy gestured outside at all the screens proclaiming the news in the outside hall of the Hub. There was a small crowd of citizens huddling close together, staring at the screens, hoping for more news on the situation. “It does that.”

“Brings people together?”

“If you’re a normal, optimistic person,” Alushy laughed bitterly. “But lucky for everyone in existence, I’m none of those things! Even the ‘person’ part is debatable. Heh.” She adjusted her red-tinted glasses and smirked. “I’m talking about the barely constrained panic. I can smell it in the air – it’s like a drug. These people are so used to hearing stories about the heroes, stories that bring little bits of light into their lives. They’ve become too connected. So much that when their heroes are threatened they feel like their own lives are on the brink!” She laughed, downing another shot. “And that produces the sweet delicious taste of panic. Something I don’t feel here that often…”

“If they got captured more often wouldn’t people become desensitized to it?”

Alushy blinked. “You’re the bartender, you don’t get to have good points.”

She slid Alushy the bill and raised an eyebrow.

Alushy grunted, flashing her card for the Gem to scan. “Fine, I’ll fuck off, I can tell when I’m not wanted. By the way, you really shouldn’t check your bathroom. There was an accident when I went in there.”

She left the establishment by wing, flapping over the panicked crowds, enjoying their cries of alarm. She felt the inner urge to jump down and munch on them – but she hadn’t given in to such primal urges in decades.

…At least not among ‘friends’.

Despite the commotion, her excellent ears could still pick up the sounds of Bismuth’s panicked screams from the bar.

She was going to be so pissed when she realized all the blood and body parts were just Alushy’s. The vampire pegasus chuckled to herself. “Ah, it’s good to be me! And, if I do say so, I think I feel a song coming on about how great I am!”

She cleared her throat, her deep voice ringing through the hub.

“Woooooah-

You better have your party in hell tonight,

Because you just invited the lord of fright,

A version of kindness so much a-”

Alushy stopped short, the music screeching to a halt as something caught her eye and tugged at her cold, dead heart.

A girl of maybe seven in a simple black dress. Her skin was white, as was her hair, while her eyes were a pale violet. She stood in front of one of the large screens displaying the video of the Primary Team being taken away. She had her hand on the surface, trembling.
It was a rare day when Alushy felt so moved by something she saw. She wasn’t completely without empathy or care – after all, she wasn’t just Alucard, but also Fluttershy – however, the moments when something struck her dumb and shoved all thoughts out of her mind?

A dozen, maybe, over her entire immortal lifespan.

Those moments never had any rhyme or reason. One time it had been the sight of a dog slowly dying from hunger. One time it had been the stars twinkling all around her on a moonless night in the wilderness.

…One time it had been a blue-maned mare caught in between Alushy’s gun and its target.

She hadn’t thought about DJ-girl in forever.

Alushy approached the little girl, standing next to her. “Sup.”

“You’re the red shadow that kills hundreds of people for us because nobody else is willing to do it,” she deadpanned, not taking her eyes off the screen.

“Yes. That’s me. Murder-bitch.”

“Mom says you’re not supposed to use that word.”

“Do I look like I give a fudge?”

The child blinked, the presence of an unexpected word making her turn her head to look at Alushy. She had no response for the vampire pony.

Alushy smirked. “Wanna see something cool?”

“No,” she said, turning away.

“Well what do you want?”

“I want Mom,” she said, putting a hand on the screen, knowing exactly when and where Allure would appear on the video. “I want her back…”

“Oh shit, you’re Allure’s daughter,” Alushy said. After a moment, she chuckled. “She’s going to try to kill me for this.”

“Try?”

“You can’t kill the great Alushy.”

Minna blinked. “Mom could.”

“Your mom’s not invincible, kid. One stray shot she’s not expecting a-”

Minna kicked Alushy in the face.

Alushy stared at her in disbelief. “Do you have any sort of fear response?”

Minna blinked. “…What’s that?”

“Being scared of things that can hurt you?”

“…Oh, that feeling. I remember that feeling, I think.” She put her hand to her mouth. “…Can you get
Mom back?”

Alushy shrugged. “Not any faster than the entire government.”

“Mom told me you would do things nobody else would do. That’s why you’re allowed to stay. She didn’t seem too happy about that.”

“Kid, the number of ponies who like me are few and far between. Just the way I like it.”

Minna was ignoring her. “You can find this Kars guy and tear his head off for me!”

“While that does sound like an interesting prospect, you’re forgetting one important detail. I have no idea where he is.”

“Prospect?”

“I’m not your dictionary.”

“Well Mom won’t let me have a phone, so I can’t look it up. That means you need to be my dictionary.”

“I’m not.”

“Dictionary or mount.”

“Wha-”

Minna hoisted herself onto Alushy’s back and tapped her neck. “Away! To Mom!”

 “…Kid, nine out of ten people who sit on me get eviscerated.”

“Eviscerated?”

“Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu-” Alushy took in a deep breath. “Why do I do this to myself…?”

“You’re not. I’m telling you. Go go go!”

Alushy almost tore the kid off her back and flew away without another word.

Almost.

But this kid was just so bold. She couldn’t not like her.

“Right, I’ve got a place in mind that might help you. But there is a price for riding Alushy all little girls must pay.”

“What’s that?”

“I get to show you how to have some fun in this town. First, you’re seven, right? It’s time you learned what a bar was.”

“A round long stick?”

“BWAAAAAP!” Alushy blurted. “Hell no, it’s a place people go to drink strange liquids until they’re stupid enough to… Well do anything besides drink more strange liquids.”

“I got you to be a dictionary!”
Alushy twitched. “Prune juice for you.”

“What’s prun-”

Alushy shut her up by pulling off a barrel roll in midair. Alushy had expected to frighten the girl – but she laughed in delight at the motion. There wasn’t a single sign of nausea.

“You’re an odd duck, you know that?”

“I’m not a bird!”

“No. No you definitely are not. How did I not see this before?” Alushy made a mock gasp.

“How dumb a- Oh you’re just messing with me!”

“Good ears. Hold on, we’re going to get some free space here and I’ve never done a loop with someone on my back before.”

“…Sweet.”

“You seem to have gone from depressed to excited rather quickly.”

“Mom says I have ‘emotional issues’ from ‘past trauma’. ...I think.”

“I can relate.”

“Hm?”

“One doesn’t become a vampire without dying first,” Alushy said. Minna’s follow up was cut off when the vampire pony pulled up into a huge loop. The mysterious girl laughed, for a moment forgetting everything that was happening around her.

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“-nd then I am going to FUCKING MURDER you by tearing one of those BLUE SPIKES right out of your head and GOUGING YO-”

“Stop talking,” the Collector ordered Vriska, a hand to his forehead. He sat behind the desk in his office, Lightning to his side. In front of them were the six new recruits – the Primary Team of Merodi Universalis and Allure. The ‘sixth ranger’ that had shown up because fate demanded it, apparently.

Vriska gave the Collector the finger.

“At least that’s quieter,” the Collector said, folding his arms and examining the six with his red eyes.

“At this point I would normally describe my power over you, but you already know all about it.”

“You could go through it again for the sake of a recap!” Pinkie suggested.

“I’d rather not delve into your complete submission to me while still retaining your personalities throughout” the Collector paused. “Lightning?”

“Yes?”

“I need another trip to the purging banks for the expositionitis.”

“You don’t need to ask me permission.”
“I know. I think it’s still affecting me.”

“The horror,” Nova deadpanned. “Can you just let the six of us fight you to the death or something, cut to the end?”

“Oooh, she’s trying to make plot predictions!” Pinkie clapped her hooves. “Good try, Nova!”

“Oh, so that’s not what happens?”

“Dunno. Wouldn’t be my first guess though.”

The Collector pointed at Flutterfree. “Ahem. Yes, I can see Lolo. No, I don’t have a Stand – too unpredictable, sometimes detrimental. Also, stop trying to ‘reveal’ something about me.”

Flutterfree sighed, recalling Lolo.

The Collector folded his hands. “So here’s how this is going to go. You are going to go out and mingle with the Collection for a while, see the place I’ve built here. You’ll be allowed to go anywhere within the Collection and do anything besides start killing each other and a handful of other rules you’ll find your own minds preventing you from breaking the moment you consider it. After a while you will be called to perform a mission – you’ll be given less time than most, since you’re already used to working as a unit. Not to mention the fact this isn’t very jarring for you.”

Jotaro let out a sharp grunt.

“I promise, you’ll grow to see that I’m not the purely evil entity you want to think I am. If you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask Lightning. Lightning, care to take these six to the plaza?”

Lightning nodded, standing up. She gestured for the six of them to follow. Even though they didn’t feel compelled to do so, they figured they might as well do it before the Collector ordered them. As they left through the office’s main doors, Vriska never stopped showing the Collector the finger.

The other side of the door was a round, gray room with no other doors. Lightning waved a hand. All the occupants felt the entire room shift somewhere else, opening up the doors to a new location.

The Collection Plaza.

Nova found it hard to conceptualize the size of the Plaza. She wanted to think of it like a cavern, but not even volcanic tubes got this large. She tried to think of it as a city, but not even Celestia City covered this much surface area – not even close. The entire City could fit within the cavernous space of the Plaza! However, the expanse wasn’t planet sized, or even moon sized… Perhaps the size of a small country was best?

Whatever it was, it was big, and mostly hollow. The ‘walls’ of the Plaza were lined with what couldn’t quite be described as individual buildings, but also weren’t wholly one item. Numerous white disc-shaped protrusions came out of all the cavern walls, all parallel with each other, more densely packed on the top and bottom areas. These discs were lined with large windows, the majority of which were blue, though other more exotic colors could be seen all around. Many objects were placed on the surfaces of the discs that weren’t affixed to other discs. They could see statues, fountains, magical glows, television screens, and even a rollercoaster snaking between several discs.

Beings of all shapes and sizes lived here – mostly human, but they spotted a few ponies trotting around alongside giants, dragons, angels, eldritch things sealed away in dark cloaks to protect the others of the Collection, mobile plants, beings of pure energy, and even a green featureless cube that moved seemingly without propulsion.
In the air, they saw ships of every design they could imagine. Some were familiar – Earth Starfleet being the most standout and most common of the designs – while others were completely alien constructs that sometimes weren’t even made of matter. These ships came and left regularly, taking members of the Collection to many places for their various missions.

“Welcome to the plaza,” Lightning said, a surprising inflection of enjoyment in her voice. “This is just the central section of the Collection. The actual structure goes a mile or two into the walls here, though almost all the living space is on this inner surface.”

“And beyond that?” Allure asked.

“Nothing. This is an empty universe devoid of matter or energy of its own,” Lightning answered. “The Collection is the only structure here.” She turned to them, her one-eyed glare putting them on edge, despite the presence of a soft smile on her lips. “There is no money here, so don’t worry about any of the others taking advantage of you. Every dish you can imagine is available at every eating location, or ordered to your personal rooms. You can take any ship from the docks that isn’t in use and fly it around – there are a series of tracks below us they can be raced in, should you be interested in that. Every song and story to ever exist that we’re aware of is in the database, and we have holodecks that can recreate them for you in several locations. Chances are some of your favorite characters from fiction have been Collected as well, so you can look them up.”

“Wow. This is actually impressive,” Flutterfree said.

“We have the resources to give the Collection almost everything they could ever want,” Lightning said. “Why not do so?”

“Because you’re evil bastards?” Vriska suggested.

Lightning shook her head. “Believe that if you want. It makes no difference to us. I’d just suggest you make the most of what you have here.”

Allure twitched. “Make the most? MAKE THE MOST? We have families back home!”

“You can put in a request to have your families collected as well,” Lightning said. “Those requests are almost always granted. Very rarely are those requests filled out, though.”

“…Because they’d be subject to the same fate as us,” Nova said, glaring. “Give them everything they want, but freedom?”

Lightning nodded. “In exchange for your freedom and services, you want for nothing.”

Jotaro saw a bunch of kids playing and laughing in what appeared to be a playground, a large lizard watching over them.

“School?” he asked.

Lightning nodded. “They’re actually being taught right now by mental insertion. As they play, they gain understanding about mathematics. And in some cases, combat training. They will make good agents one day.”

“Is everyone here an agent?” Allure asked.

“The only ones who aren’t are family members who were taken, people deemed unfit for duty, or children whose parents don’t believe they are ready.”
The six of them fell silent, unsure of what to ask next.

“Use the pink hexagons to teleport wherever you want. Just step on and think of what you want. It’ll take you to your room if you want. You all have adjoining ones, don’t worry.”

“Than-” Flutterfree caught herself, stopping the word mid-sentence.

Lightning nodded to her with understanding. She walked to the teleporter and vanished.

Vriska cracked her knuckles. “Well, I’m thinking about completely trashing this place and nothing’s telling me to stop. Who wants to join me?”

“Vriska,” Flutterfree called. “Maybe we should-”

“ALL THE LUCK!” Vriska blurted, glancing at dozens of different individuals. “No one is going to be able to hit me… Big guy, let’s go.”

Jotaro nodded.

“You too?” Flutterfree called.

“We need to blow off steam,” Nova said, joining up with the other two. “Not like we can go anywhere just yet.”

Pinkie waved at them. “Be back in time for dinner!”

“When’s dinner?”

“When the pie hits your face at mach 5.”

“Ah. Don’t know what I was expecting.”

Flutterfree turned to Pinkie. “Should we really just let them go?”

Pinkie nodded. “We need to mingle as well, just not as violently. Isn’t that right, Allure?”

Allure sighed. “Minna is going to be so worried about me…”

“She’s a strong girl. She’ll be fine,” Flutterfree encouraged.

“Yeah! She’s totally great right now!” Pinkie assured Allure.

Allure looked at Pinkie. “…Is she doing something I wouldn’t approve of?”

“Of course!”

“…Ponyfeathers.”

~~~

“You’re lucky you caught me on a lazy day,” Nanoha told Corona as they walked through one of the TSAB’s many boring metallic hallways lit by blue lights. “Just got back from an expedition to the Unrealities. Always fun.”

“How so?” Corona asked.

“You can hear the direction of egg fun.”
Corona blinked.

“The measures you have to go through to ensure survival in those exotic variations of physics cause... weird things.”

“And here I am thinking the idea of a ‘reality anchor’ is cutting edge.”

“You’ll find that simply anchoring reality won’t always help. Sure, you’ll exist as a three-dimensional being with magical power in the eldritch location, but the fact that you can see the eldritch location will fry your brain. …To name an example you might have experience with.”

Corona put a hand to the bridge of her nose. “Oh boy…”

“Oh boy indeed. So, what did you call me up for?”

“The Collector. We’ve got a major lead.”

“The ka sensors worked, I take it?”

Corona nodded. “Yep. We’ve got a strong signal and everything. Minor problem though. It’s taking us hours at a time to move from universe to universe. We were wondering if you had a map of the area we’re digging through.”

Nanoha held out Raising Heart, closing her eyes. “Display.” A red hologram shot out, displaying the entire multiverse. “Synchronize with most up-to-date probe data.” The multiverse shifted slightly, a few large chunks completely vanishing from the map – the largest taking a significant bite out of the Q-Sphere.

“What’s that?”

“The Beyonders. They block all incoming mapping probes, no matter who sends them,” Nanoha commented. “The maps that show what’s inside Beyonder territory is mostly just guesswork based on multiversal patterns. There’s really just a hole there they don’t let anything through.”

“Yeesh. Xenophobic much?”

“Very. But they aren’t anywhere close to your universes. Or the Starcross Society – that smaller hole up there.”

“The fact we can see the hole when zoomed out all the way tells me they’ve got a lot of hidden universes there.”

Nanoha nodded. “But what we’re looking at is…” She zoomed in to Merodi Universalis and the surrounding universes. At this level of zoom they were able to see the ‘curvature’ of the Q-Sphere, but the Starcross Society and Beyonders weren’t even visible. “There. The universal connections in your area of the multiverse from… Uh…”

“Three Central months ago,” Raising Heart offered.

“Thank you,” Nanoha told her device. “You’re lucky it’s that recent. Our ping probes take multiple years to complete a cycle of the multiverse.”

“I imagine it’d take a lot of time to map check every universe…” Corona said.

“The Xeelee maps update every two seconds,” Nanoha muttered.
“Take it they don’t like sharing?”

“Not really.”

“Are you supposed to be sharing this with me?”

“I have the authority to, yes. Though if I actually sent you the file I’d be in hot water. Maps are everything out here, especially in places that are always changing.”

“Right.”

“Bring up your map.”

Corona did, using her magic rather than relying on Raging Sights to do it all for her. They matched up for the most part, but Nanoha’s clearly extended beyond.

“Interface?” Corona asked.

“Interface,” Nanoha said. She lifted her staff and touched Raging Heart to one of the crystals on Corona’s gloves.

A path began to trace across both the maps, moving along five more universes before coming to a stop.

Corona transmitted the new coordinates back to Merodi Universalis immediately. “Thanks.”

“That wasn’t enough,” Nanoha said, furrowing her brow. “It stopped because there was no option to continue, not because it had arrived at the destination.”

“Why?”

“Hidden universe possibly? Or… Raising Heart, show me the map for this location from the last update.”

The map shifted slightly in a few locations, but for the most part remained the same – except where the end of the ka signature trail was. The universes there had scrambled their locations considerably, a few vanishing completely from the map.

“That’s an advanced technique for staying hidden,” Nanoha observed. “Class 2 at least, or a lower entity messing with an ancient remnant.”

“Scrambling the locations of universes so the path to their universe is never the same? That’s clever…”

“Which means that, even if we had a map that was up to date, it would quickly become useless. And if there are hidden universes in the mess, creating a new mapping program wouldn’t help either.” She folded her hands. “Sorry. Looks like we can’t really help.”

Corona shrugged. “You got us five universes closer. That helps a lot. There is a second option though.”

“Ask away.”

“Would you by chance know how to manipulate ka in such a way to get things to go faster? Or… Well, we’re using a ka signature to find this place, would you know a better way of following it rather than the ‘point at a grinder and hope it works’ strategy?”
“The TSAB is not the one to talk to about ka technology,” Nanoha said. “It’s banned in almost every scenario.”

“How do you deal with people who are using it against you then? Because we’re almost certain that’s what’s going on here. Rohan can’t write anything about him, he seems similar to the ‘Sues’ we’ve encountered according to Starbeat…”

Nanoha stopped in her tracks. “You sure he’s a Sue? Or Stu.”

“Pinkie says so.”

“Then there’s some people you need to talk to. Just below us on the Class 2 spectrum. It’s time you met the Flowers that Be.”

“The Flowers that Be?”

“The Flowers that Be. It’ll be better to just show you.” Nanoha smiled warmly. “Do you want a ride on a TSAB dimensional speedster?”

“…I would love that more than just about anything else.”

“Then today’s your lucky day.”

There were few things that could send Squeaky Belle into an instant panic.

The things on this list did not include the sudden kidnapping of one of her friends – she knew that, if she were going to help Allure, she’d need to keep her wits about her. It didn’t matter that she really wasn’t sure if anything could be done by the League of Sweetie Belles in this case… They were a rather low-level organization compared to the collective might of Merodi Universalis and its neighbors.

So she was growing despondent and hopeless – but not panicked.

What sent her into a panic was Minna riding Alushy into the league.

“WHAT THE FLIPPING HELL ARE YOU DOING WITH MINNA!?” Squeaky screeched, her voice shattering a wine glass in the claws of a dragon-Sweetie.

“Taking her for a joyride,” Alushy commented. “Isn’t that right, kid?”

“Mmmm more donuts…” Minna muttered, holding onto Alushy’s mane like it was a pillow.

“Sorry, don’t have any more of the delectable asshole pastry, but we could go ba-”

“PUT HER DOWN RIGHT NOW!”

Alushy put her wings in her ears and cleaned them out. “You’re giving me war flashbacks.”

“ALUSHY!”

Alushy rolled her eyes. “Does it look like she wants to get down?”

Squeaky twitched. “…N-no, but that doesn’t matter! It’s you! With Minna! Allure is going to kill you! Then me!”
“Shhhhh Alushy will protect you,” Minna said with a smile.

“Minna, stay out of this.”

“No.”

Squeaky grabbed her mane and rammed her face into a nearby wall.

Thrackerzod walked up, a cup of coffee in her hoof. “What seems to be the problem?”

“Alushy has Minna!”

Thrackerzod looked at Alushy and Minna. “I don’t see the issue here.”

“Good! Then you can explain to Allure why her kid is hanging out with lack-of-morals psycho killer when she gets back!”

“…Are you describing me, or her?”

“You have morals!”

“I killed a puppy last week because it looked at me wrong. I have sacrificed numerous animals and corpses to Azathoth in this month alone.” Thrackerzod took a sip of her coffee. “It’s like you forget what I am some of the time.”

Squeaky blinked. “Point… Taken… But you aren’t a bad influence on Minna!”

“Define bad influence.”

“Stop playing devil’s advocate here, the point is we don’t want Allure to flip when she gets back.”

“Mmm.”

“Why aren’t you taking this seriously!?”

“Oh, I am, I’m just spending most my mental effort trying to figure out why Alushy would let a kid ride on her back.”

“Change of pace,” Alushy responded.

“Ah, so you were listening.”

“Eh, more trying to see if there was anything here for Minna.”

“Mom’s not here,” Minna muttered, clinging to Alushy. “We need to try somewhere else…”

“Got any other ideas?” Alushy asked. “Cause I’m fresh out. I say we wait here until she comes back, it’s a place she’ll definitely come.”

“I want her now. …She needs to see my drawing…”

“Oh that’s precious,” Alushy said, grabbing her heart.

Thrackerzod blinked. “…You have a heart. Azathoth’s darkside, that was not the answer I was expecting.”

“I will subatomically vaporize you, eldritch filly.”
“Not a filly, haven’t been for a long time.”

“You’ll always be the eldritch filly. For eternity.”

Thrakekrzod shrugged. Bot fell out of the air. “But I’m the eternal filly!”

“But you’re a robot. A-” Alushy blinked. “Question, are you anatomically correct?”

“Negative.”

“What’s anatomically correct?” Minna asked.

“Well—” Alushy began.

Squeaky slapped Alushy in the face. “No. No no no. We’re not having the talk with her now. That’s a talk her mother needs to have with her.”

“Kids can handle a looot more shit than you think. Evidenced by how much they used to use up diapers and now don’t.”

Squeaky’s eye twitched again. “Your antics are going to kill me before Allure even gets back.”

“Oh, then I could turn you into a vampire! Whaddoya say?”

“Can I be a vampire?” Minna asked.

“No,” Alushy and Squeaky deadpanned.

“I dunno, shouldn’t she make that decision?” Thrackerzod asked.

“She’s seven,” Alushy and Squeaky responded.

“I might be eight!” Minna said.

Alushy and Squeaky looked at her, letting her know this changed nothing.

Minna folded her arms. “Fine. Why aren’t we looking for Mom, Alushy?”

“Because she’ll come back to this place, weren’t you listening?”

“…But then we wouldn’t be doing anything!”

“Come on, I took you on a huge tour of the Hub and Celestia City, don’t you think you’ve done enough today? Hell, look at you, trying to fall asleep on my back. I’m nowhere near as comfortable as a bed.”

“If you say so.”

Alushy rolled her eyes. “We could go out and introduce you to more things your mother would absolutely flip out about, or we could stay here and drive Squeaky insane.”

Minna giggled, falling back into Alushy’s mane like it was a pillow. She made her decision by remaining silent.

“Alushy…” Squeaky asked.

“Hm?”
“Did you feed her alcohol?”

“Yep.”

“ALUSHY!”

“It wasn’t enough to get her drunk! Just a little sip!”

“ALUSHY!!!”

~~~

Pinkie, Flutterfree, and Allure found themselves in an area of the Collection styled like a Japanese shrine. They sat at one of the tables, each eating a dish of their own choice. Pinkie had taken the infinite cupcake, Flutterfree had taken a high-end salad with the rarest of ingredients, and Allure had taken a tub of orange-vanilla swirl ice cream.

“Don’t judge me,” she had said.

Across from them sat two people they had met the moment they had come to sit down – Morty and Ivan.

“You guys have been here a while then?” Flutterfree asked.

“Yeah,” Morty said, poking at his green eggs and ham. “Honestly, not as bad as it could be.”

“How so?”

Morty sat back. “…You remember Rick, right?”

The three of them nodded with sour expressions.

“Much as I hate to admit it, he kinda controlled me. Not in a direct manner, but hooooly shiit is he a manipulating bastard who grabs people just to get what he wants. Did you know that he kept me around mostly to disguise his brainwaves?”

“Sounds like him,” Flutterfree admitted.

“Yeah. He might have a heart in there somewhere, but he virtually never listens to it. It’s all about him and what he wants. So I was under his thumb the entire time and treated like shiit for a lot of it. Now I’m under a different person’s thumb, and I get the impression he actually likes me. At the very least he doesn’t treat me like shiit.”

“Don’t you have a family though?” Allure asked.

Morty looked at his plate. “Yeah. And I miss them sometimes. But… I guess there’s not really a point to keeping this secret anymore. I’m not even the right Morty. I’m a replacement for the Morty of the family I live with. Rick ruined my home universe, so we went to one where we had died. They’re not really my family.”

“That must have been horrible!” Pinkie gasped.

“It was,” Morty admitted. “I got through it, but it was one of the major things that desensitized me to… everything. I was close to believing nothing could be done about the multiverse.”

“And then the Collector showed up?” Flutterfree asked.
Morty nodded. “The entire purpose of the Collection is to help the multiverse. It’s like… I think it’s what Rick would do if he had a conscience in him and the drive to get something done. Take as many people as he can from everywhere he can think of, and then use them as agents to do anything.”

“Anything?”

Ivan sighed. “Whatever the Collector thinks is right, that’s what we do.”

“I forgot you were here,” Allure commented.

“He doesn’t talk much,” Morty said. “Yeah, sometimes I don’t think what the Collector tells us to do is right, namely collecting missions, but I’ve saved more than a few universes from being destroyed at this point. …More than I ever did while traveling with Rick.”

“What happened to Rick?” Flutterfree asked.

“He used to be on a team with me, back a ways. I separated myself from him. I think he’s running a solo act now.”

Flutterfree nodded sadly.

“I’m trying to figure this out,” Allure out, shoveling more ice cream into her mouth. “He’s willing to steal random people from their families to work for them, but he has them do ‘hero’ work. That seems like a discontinuity to me.”

Morty shrugged. “It’s hard to get the Collector. Unless you’re Lightning. There’s a lot of us who wonder if she even has the loyalty protocol in her head.”

Pinkie took another bite of her cupcake. “Yeah, fun question.”

“…You know the answer.”

“Yep.”

“She’s not going to tell us,” Ivan pointed out.

“Noooope!” Pinkie confirmed, giggling.

Morty shrugged. “It’s not important. What is i-”

Vriska and Gyro crashed through the ceiling, trying their hardest to punch each other into submission. They rolled out a nearby window and fell to the disc below.

Allure blinked. “Uh…”

“They’ll be fine,” Davepeta said, flying into the room. “They are cutting my meeting with Vriska a bit short though…”

Nova and Jotaro jumped down the hole after Davepeta. “Done with the rampage,” Nova commented. “Vriska needs a bit more though.”

“Vriska always needs a bit more,” Jotaro pointed out.

“Hm, yeah.”
Davepeta sat down at the table and ordered some apple juice. “Fuck yeah,” they said, downing it in under a minute. “Absolutely purrfect, the best nature has to offer.”

“The best of everything seems to be here,” Nova said. “Complacency mechanisms as far as the eye can see.”

“It’s not like he actually has to do this,” Morty pointed out. “He just wants us to be comfortable.”

“As slaves,” Jotaro said.

“Yeah, Morty, dude’s evil,” Davepeta said. “You need to stop tryin’ to defend him.”

“Make the most out of the situation,” Morty countered.

Davepeta rolled their eyes. “Right. Whatever dude.”

As conversation turned a different direction, Nova walked up to Allure. “Hey.”

“…Hey.”

“We’ll get back to them, okay?”

“Yeah…”

“The sensors on Celestia City would have detected Kars. They can find us.”

“…And we’ll have to fight against them,” Allure pointed out, tears forming in her eyes. “And what if they lose? We… We won’t get to see them ever again!”

Nova gulped. “That’s not going to happen. We’ll see them again, Allure. Both of us will.”

“How can you be sure of that? You’re not Pinkie!”

“Pink-” Nova began, but Pinkie wasn’t there.

“See? It’s not something she can tell us.”

“Or something she can, but just doesn’t want to…” Nova muttered. She sighed. “Let’s not lose hope, Allure.”

“But I can’t do anything! I could ask for Minna to be taken and that’s it! All other courses of action are blocked!”

Nova pulled her into a hug. “That’s what hope is for. When you can’t do anything… but something needs to happen anyway.”

Allure didn’t let go of Nova for a long time.

~~~

Starbeat was alone in a skiff, floating in orbit in a universe that was the closest they had gotten to the Collector so far. Behind her, there was a specialized grinder that was trying to find universes based on the ka signature they’d obtained. It was agonizingly slow work, and it was a constant reminder of how close she’d been, and yet how far she was from actual success.

She didn’t really know what she was doing with ka. She could scan it; tell you what it looked similar
to, and possibly where else it existed. She couldn’t tell you what it was going to do, why it did what it did, or even what *ka* really was.

The ‘force of narrative’ wasn’t enough of an explanation for her. It was something more than that… It had to come from somewhere, be regulated by *something*.

But she didn’t have a clue about that. Who did she think she was, that she’d be able to figure it out? Just some cursed unicorn, in a skiff, in the middle of nowhere, getting nowhere.

Just watching a grinder continue to fail at making progress.

“So many unknowns…” she said, staring forlornly at the mechanism. “So many… So much we don’t understand!” She kicked the grinder. Nothing changed.

The TSAB could only give them five more universes. That was it. Not even *they* knew what was going on. *Nobody* understood this.

…Except Twilence, if reports were to be believed, but lo and behold, a call to the Void had revealed she was nowhere to be found. Surprise surprise. So much scrambling…

Starbeat began to tremble. What was she even doing here? She was hopeless. She had no control, she was a slave. Just a slave of a different kind…

She had no power. No knowledge.

Nothing that could get them back. Nothing that could get Vriska back.

She *really* needed to talk to her moirail, but she was gone. Anyone else she spilled her heart out too would just become the victim of her curse…

Tears started to well up in her eyes.

She was *sick* of living like this. Locked away, with only scant contact. Observing everyone’s normal lives like part of a scientific study, a study designed to help her. But help never really came. She was stuck. Stuck. *Stuck*.

She rammed her head into one of the walls, grunting.

There was nothing she could do.

Nothing but wait.

Waiting was hell.

~~~

TSAB ships operated on a unique concept. Rather than jumping from universe to universe, they created a bubble universe around themselves that they then moved through the multiverse from within, a process known as sailing on the Sea of Infinite Possibility. This method had its pros and cons. On the pro side, it made it very easy to discover new universes since newly created universes established connections to nearby universes right off the bat, and the initial creation of the connections was relatively easy to detect. The con was that moving even a small bubble universe’s location required an immense amount of energy and time.

In the early days of the TSAB, when they were a Class 3, this had been a huge problem. It could take weeks for a ship to move from one end of the TSAB to another, and the number of
interdimensional ships was rather low.

In modern times, however, the TSAB had access to virtually every power source imaginable. Nanoha, given her position, could get some of the most impressive exotic energy sources out there.

For instance, her personal dimensional speedster, the Vivio, ran on something called an interconnected zero-point vibration siphon. When Corona asked how it worked, Nanoha had put her fists to her head and made the ‘mindblow’ gesture. She refused to give any other explanation.

Corona eventually admitted that was all the explanation that was needed.

The Vivio was a needle-shaped ship that only seated three in its cockpit, the back two-thirds of the ship reserved for the green-blue dimensional drive. It created a bubble universe around it, and then adhered the edges of the reality to its hull, creating a swirling pattern right on the Vivio’s windshield.

Then Nanoha told it to go. Corona felt the ship lurch, even though it had no space to lurch into since it was all its own universe. The colors they could see out the windshield ceased being calm, simple swirls, transforming into jagged lines of neon color that burned Corona’s eyes. She felt the Vivio shudder with every connection it made, tearing through the multiverse.

On a live-updating map of the multiverse, the Vivio would appear as a single universal dot moving rapidly through the E-Sphere, forming connections and breaking them as if it was Spider-Man slingling through a city, except with hundreds of hands and webs at any given time.

Vivio entered the Strands in a matter of seconds, pulling itself along one of the leyline paths between the Spheres. Granted, at this point Vivio could have created a dimensional portal and moved through the Strands in an instant, but why bother when it was already moving?

It made a sharp turn off the Strands leyline, going for an area between the D and Q-Spheres that was relatively close to the center of the multiverse, but not too close. They finally stopped moving around there, connected to a few dozen universes.

Corona shook her head. “W-wow. You can get anywhere in this thing…”

“A few minutes to anywhere that’s not protected in any of the three Spheres or the Strands,” Nanoha bragged. “The Great Void makes it difficult to get to the Unrealities like this, that takes about a day. And it’s dangerous to go to the Edges of the multiverse – you could lose all connections and fall into nonexistence.”

“Remind me never to go to the Edges.”

“Anyway, let’s shift into our actual destination…” Nanoha pressed a few buttons. The Vivio placed its bubble-universe self into another, normal universe via a round portal. It lost the swirly sheen and became just an advanced piece of metal sitting in space.

They had been expected, apparently, since two-dozen ships surrounded them.

“One thing I can say about the Flowers, you never have to call ahead,” Nanoha commented, rubbing the back of her head. She opened a channel. “You know why we’re here.”

An image appeared onscreen – not of a plant-based alien, to Corona’s surprise, but of two human women. “Yeah, Upstairs told us all about you. Welcome back to the PPC, Nanoha. You’ll have to come with us.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.” She cut the channel.
“PPC?” Corona asked.

“Protectors of the Plot Continuum,” Nanoha answered. “It’s the biggest project the Flowers have – used to be their only project.”

“What do they do?”

“Protect the plot of the multiverse,” Nanoha said, sitting back. “The Flowers are one of the only races in the multiverse willing to see how far ka manipulation can go. It’s… an interesting way to create a society.”

The Vivio was taken through …something they weren’t able to consciously register, appearing elsewhere in the universe. The elsewhere in question was a docking bay devoid of any ships save the Vivio and the ship that had brought them there.

The hatch of the Vivio popped open, allowing Nanoha and Corona to walk out onto the dock made of an unidentifiable white material. The two women just teleported in front of them. “Don’t go wandering off – the place isn’t always three-dimensional. You will get lost.”

“Got it,” Corona said, looking up at the lights far above them. “…Those aren’t normal. UV?”

“Magic, of a sort,” Nanoha said. “A lot of non-Flowers live here, but the Flowers need their sunlight. So instead of UV light, they get magic beams that absorb into their leaves. I think; they don’t really like to explain things to outsiders.”

“Ah.”

The PPC looked like a normal office building after they left the ship dock, with simple hallways that looked like they belonged in an office building rather than beings who manipulated the fate of existence. As they walked through the place, Corona saw many many pairs of agents walking around – rarely was there any less or more than two. The majority were human, though a handful of other races were seen, but still no plant-based lifeforms.

Corona counted seven right turns in a row at one point. Definitely not a building constructed with standard geometry in mind. She marveled at how any of the humans managed to get around in this place.

After twisting and turning down a dozen corridors, they arrived at a room labeled Chrysanthemum.

When they entered the simple office, for the first time they saw one of the legendary Flowers that Be. It was a lot less impressive than Corona had been hoping.

Chrysanthemum was a yellow chrysanthemum flower. The only oddities about Chrysanthemum were her size – larger than a human – and a necklace around her central stalk. Welcome, Nanoha, Corona, Chrysanthemum spoke with telepathy. How can I help you today?

Corona placed a data pad on the table containing the data they had on the Collector and the Collection, including the ka signature they had obtained. As she did so, she scanned Chrysanthemum. Plant-based life form for certain, though the interior contained a more advanced nervous system than any plant had a right to have. The psychic readings were off the charts, but otherwise there was no magic or much of anything else. Corona suspected if Raging Sights could detect ka, there would have been more to call her attention.

As predicted, this is worth our time, Chrysanthemum stated. Corona wasn’t sure exactly how she’d
looked at the pad, and she didn’t ask. *You have found a very large glitch in the Narrative. Furthermore, it appears as if this Collector has been actively hiding from us. An impressive feat, to say the least.*

“What can you tell us about him?” Nanoha asked.

*From this signature, it is clear he is a Gary Stu, however the signature isn’t pure, suggesting a more complex motive than the baseline. The signature also speaks of his status as a Self Insert.*

“How Insert?” Corona asked.

*Prophets sometimes write themselves into their stories, or a character based on them. This is the technical definition of a Self Insert, but it isn’t enough to quantify a narrative glitch – after all, your own Prophet Rohan Kishibe is, himself, a Self Insert of the Higher Prophet Hirohiko Araki. A Self Insert becomes an issue when they are not a distinct character for the plot, but exist to take advantage of the plot. There are signs of ‘awareness of the source material’ and ‘enhanced planning faculties’ in this signal.*

“You can tell all of that from just a signal of one of his slaves?”

*Those who shine brightest tell us the most. I can tell a lot about you just by examining you. However, as you are not a narrative glitch, policy dictates I don’t tell you anything about it. You do not need to be adjusted.*

“Thanks, I think?”

Nanoha leaned in. “Can you find this Collector?”

*Certainly. Let me make a few calls.*

Nanoha and Corona looked at each other – and grinned.

~~~

The Collector stood on an invisible balcony near the top of the Plaza, rubbing his knuckles together nervously.

The Flowers were going to move soon. He was certain of it.

It was true that they needed to move for everything to fall into place, but the Flowers were beyond dangerous. They would do one thing, notice the flow of ka, and change up everything. It was exceptionally hard to predict them.

But he knew they had to come after him, for he was outside the ‘accepted’ flow of ka. The plot they sought to protect.

“Arrogant weeds,” he muttered.

Lightning raised an eyebrow. “The Flowers?”

“Yes. The Flowers. I’m not going to get into it, you already know everything I think about them.”

He gripped the rails of the balcony, leaning over the edge. He zoomed in on one of the parks at the bottom, where the six newest members of the Collection were enjoying themselves with Morty, Ivan, Gyro, and Davepeta. Gyro and Vriska were having an arm-wrestling competition that looked like it would never end, Flutterfree was talking with Morty about some sort of complex topic, Pinkie and
Davepeta were having a silliness-slash-irony contest, Jotaro and Ivan were appreciating each other’s silence, and Nova and Allure sat to the side having mostly cheered each other up.

The Collector let out a soft chuckle. “Already settling in, I see.”

“Still going with the accelerated schedule for them?”

“I have a mission in particular for them,” the Collector said, handing Lightning a data pad.

“You sure?”

“It’s important that it’s this one.”

Lightning nodded. “They should be fine here. Should I schedule another one after that?”

“No,” the Collector said. “Keep them here after that. Let them understand us as we are now.”

Lightning pocketed the pad. “I’ll see to it the moment they’re done in the park.”

The Collector nodded.

“…Lightning?”

Lightning paused, just short of the exit. “Yes?”

“Remember your promise.”

Lightning’s face became rigid. “I haven’t forgotten.”

“Good.”

The two exchanged no further words.
075 - Wielders of Ka

Wielders of Ka

The Chrysanthemum sent out its telepathic messages, with no regard for Nanoha or Corona’s ability to hear everything.

We’ve got a Major Sue out there, encountered by Merodi Universalis and brought to our attention by the TSAB. The files are available on the database, under The Collector. We have a potent combo here – Gary Stu, Self Insert, and to top it all off they appear to have Mid-Class 2 Capabilities and knowledge of the PPC. Sunflower, you might need most of the Department of Mary Sues for this one. …Jay and Acacia will head an invasion force? Jumping ahead aren’t we? …Fair, I shall leave it to you. Chrysanthemum bristled. It appears as if that is being taken care of.

“Taken care of how exactly?” Corona asked.

The Department of Mary Sues will, one way or another, assassinate the Gary Stu. It will likely be a big production, but I will be sure to keep you posted.

Nanoha nodded. “Thank you, Chrysanthemum.”

We should be thanking you. Evidence of a narrative glitch of this magnitude is one of the best gifts anyone can give us. Believe it or not, we are in your debt. Is there anything we can do for you?

Nanoha shook her head. “We’ve got our Narrative under control.”

Corona’s pupils dilated. “Can you… remove ka curses?”

If they are deemed narrative glitches, then yes, we can. Do you know of some?

“Starbeat and Blackjack,” Corona said. “That’s all I can think of off the top of my head.”

Mmm… I can send a team back with you to perform the necessary exorcisms. Any other instances of possibly corrupted ka you can think of, Corona?

“…Two. There’s Melinda and the Watchmaker.”

“Oh, the Watchmaker,” Nanoha put a hand to the bridge of her nose.

Hm?

“You already know about him. He’s not a Mary Sue or a narrative glitch himself. He uses some of your technology to manipulate his single universe. You’ve decided, multiple times, that it’d be too much of a waste of resources to deal with him.”

I see. One of those special cases where we cannot act against the plot… Shame. I am sorry.

Corona nodded. “It’s okay.”

Regardless I’m sending two Agents from the Department of Bad Slash with you to deal with Starbeat and Blackjack. The Sunflower Official will take care of this ‘Melinda’ as his department is more prepared to deal with it.

“The Department of Bad Slash?” Corona asked, confused.
Think horrendous romance curses. The agents from there are the most skilled in exorcisms, even ones technically outside their purview.

“…That’s exactly what we need, thank you.”

You’re welcome. When you leave you’ll find the Agents outside.

“Do you need any more information…?”

We will petition your government if we find need for classified intelligence not contained on this data pad. I doubt we will have to.

Nanoha lightly touched Corona’s shoulder. “Let’s go. Don’t want to leave Starbeat waiting, do we?”

“Right, right. Thanks again, Chrysanthemum.”

Likewise.

They left the office – and two identical human women were there, waiting for them. Orange hair, white suits, and a rubber duck symbol on their shoulders. Upon closer inspection they realized the duck had three eyes.

“Hi! I’m Kelly, and this is my partner, Kelly!”

Kelly #2 groaned inwardly at her counterpart’s optimistic introduction.

“We’ve been told you have some special exorcisms needed?”

Corona nodded. “I… Guess so. Let’s go back to the speedster, get you to Merodi Universalis…”

“Oh, no need, we’ll just travel by plot hole!” Kelly #1 said cheerfully.

“…Travel by what now?”

~~~

Corona, Nanoha, and the Kellys walked in the halls of the Enterprise.

“Woah,” Corona said, shaking her head and blinking. “I thought only Pinkie could do that.”

Kelly #2 looked at Corona. “Oh, you’ve got a high-tier Aware on your side? Lucky.”

“My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic,” Kelly #1 began, as if reciting a speech. “Known for being one of the more common base worlds within the Q-Sphere stemming from a large popularity quotient. The ‘mane’ character Pinkie Pie is known for her tendency to break the fourth wall, though the precise strength of her Awareness is left vague in canon so the multiversal variants range from simply introducing cartoon physics where it doesn’t belong to allowing powerful godlike seers.”

Corona stared at her. “Did you just explain Pinkie Pie?”

“Mostly. You need a complete definition of Awareness for that to make sense. Which i-”

“Kelly,” Kelly #2 cautioned.

“Oh! Sorry, can’t tell you that, heh.” She shook her head. “Anyway, we should be close to our first target. Starbeat, you said?”
Nanoha nodded. “I believe this is part of the fleet around the grinder she would be operating. I doubt she would have had time to leave yet.”

“Be careful assuming the passage of time when a plot hole is used to move around,” Kelly #1 warned. “For all we know it’s last Tuesday.”

“It’s not,” Kelly #2 said.

“Clearly.”

“You said ‘for all we know’ when you should have said ‘for all you know’.”

“Uuuuugh…” Kelly #1 facepalmed. “And now you get to see some of the issues that come with the ‘odd-pairing’ system.”

Corona blinked. “Uh… what?”

“Upstairs – the Flowers that Be – have discovered that Agents work best when assigned in pairs that ‘bounce off’ each other. Which is to say we’re the most entertaining.”

“And why we’re allowed to have legitimate insanities,” Kelly #2 muttered.

Nanoha raised an eyebrow. “That’s the first I’ve heard of this.”

“We’re here to handle bad romance,” Kelly #2 droned. “Imagine, if you will, spending a life reading every bad romance fic in existence with the imagination to generate every detail in HD quality. Every. Gratuitous. Disgusting. Detail.”

Nanoha and Corona reeled back in disgust at the mere thought of it.

“Exactly.”

“But hey, we get lots of fancy medication!” Kelly #1 piped up. “Totally worth it!”

“You can’t go back from it, that’s for sure.”

The four of them walked onto the bridge of the Enterprise. O’Neill looked at them in surprise.

“How’d you get here so fast?”

Corona shrugged. “I think we’re not supposed to question it.”

“Pinkie Pie?”

“No, but apparently the same sort of thing.”

O’Neill nodded, taking this in stride. “Need anything?”

“Transportation to Starbeat,” Nanoha answered.

“She’s not doing all that well since we got the news…”

“Perfect!” Kelly #1 cheered. “She’ll be susceptible!”

“Myth,” Kelly #2 muttered.

Kelly #1 folded her arms and huffed.
“Just send us over,” Corona said. “I’ll calm her down if I have to.”

O’Neill shrugged. “Take them aw-”

He was cut off by the teleporter grabbing the four of them and placing them in the Skiff chairs flanking Starbeat.

The unicorn’s front hoof was bloody and her face was covered in tears.

“What... the hell... are you doing here?” Starbeat growled.

“Starbeat,” Corona said, holding out a hand.

“Don’t you touch me!” she wailed. “Don’t you use your lying touch to tell me I’m worth something! I’m just some useless wad of fur and flesh that can’t even do the one thing she’s supposed to be good at right! I couldn’t even find the Collector! I c-”

Corona snapped her fingers, creating a small explosion that stunned Starbeat into silence.

“Starbeat, these people can cure you.”

Starbeat blinked.

“In exchange for telling the Flowers about the Collector, they’re willing to do some things for us. One of those things is to help you. Your curse can be lifted.”

Starbeat’s bracelet started beeping. She looked like she tried to resist for a moment, but decided it wasn’t worth it anymore. Tears in her eyes, she pulled Corona into a liplock, tackling her to the ground.

Corona knew better than to resist at the moment, just letting it happen despite her extremely potent blush.

“Thank you,” Starbeat whispered into Corona’s ear before resuming the one-sided makeout session.

“Woo-eee, that’s a powerful one,” Kelly #1 admitted. “Surprised you’ve lived with it this long.”

“We don’t know how long this has been her life,” her counterpart pointed out.

“Long enough to have an alarm bracelet.”

“Good point.” Kelly #2 cleared her throat. “Starbeat, if you can, please pull yourself from her so we can do this without pinning you to the ground.”

“Oh come on, I think it’s cute!” Nanoha said.

“People like you are the reason these narrative glitches exist,” Kelly #2 spat.

Nanoha blinked. “A little harsh. I say let her have it.”

“No, no, I’m good,” Starbeat said, pulling herself back.

“Oh thank Celestia,” Corona blurted, allowing herself to breathe.

Starbeat chuckled. “You could have tried to be subtle about how bad that was.”

“It’s not tha-”
“Shush. Don’t ruin it,” Starbeat said. She wiped her eyes, turning to the Kellys. “I’m ready. Do what you need to do.”

“Usually step one is beat the possessed individual senseless,” Kelly #2 said.

“Oh it’s such a good day when we don’t have to do that…”

“They never cooperate.”

“Most aren’t allowed to even become aware of their condition.”

Starbeat coughed. “Move it, please, before I start doing more things to Corona.”

“Right, right,” Kelly #1 said with a smile. “So, stand there.” She reached into her jacket and pulled out a DVD collection of My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic with only seasons five through nine. “Should be close enough even though you’re giving off serious AU vibes…”

“Conglomeration universe,” Kelly #2 pointed out.

“Always fun.” Kelly #1 also produced a small bell and the most generic ‘exorcising’ candle of all time. She lit it with a snap of her fingers.

“I wondered if you had to trick ka into accepting these sorts of things,” Starbeat said.

“…Explain?” Corona asked Starbeat.

Starbeat flushed and struggled to keep her hooves on the ground. “W-well, I theorized that ka curses and such would not be removable by force, or would be significantly harder to do with force. You have to get rid of it in some story-appropriate or thematic way.”

“They’re called exorcisms for a reason,” Kelly #2 pointed out. “That’s literally what we do, since it seems to work regardless of the context. We scare the ‘evil spirit’ out of you. Though in this case I’m not expecting a full Sue to pop out and scare us.”

“Ah, the days we get an easy job…” Kelly #1 said with a smirk. “Hey, what should we do for charges?”

“Not really necessary in this case…”

“Oh c’mon, it’s fun!”

Kelly #2 rolled her eyes. “By all means. Just make it up as you go.”

Kelly #1 squeed. She handed her counterpart the bell, which she started ringing. Corona and Nanoha covered their ears.

Lot louder than I was expecting, Corona thought.

“GET BEHIND ME, SPAWN OF UNRESTRICTED LUST!” Kelly #1 declared with a sudden fire to her voice. An ominous wind began to blow through the Skiff. She held her hand to the DVD collection, as if channeling power from it. “YOU HAVE BEEN CHARGED WITH BRINGING ABOUT BAD UNREALISTIC ROMANCE, INTERFERING IN THE DREAMS OF THIS POOR MARE, AND FORCING YOURSELF ON OTHERS, AND ALL THOSE TIMES I BET YOU GOT ATTRACTED TO FAMILY MEMBERS, IDENTICAL TWINS, OR TREES! IN THE NAME OF LAUREN FAUST, I COMPEL YOU TO LEAVE THIS POOR UNICORN’S FORM! FREE HER FROM YOUR CURSE! AVAUNT!”
Starbeat passed out. A greenish blue mist appeared from her body and tried to take the form of a face. It dissipated before it even got close, vanishing into nothing.

Kelly #2 poked Starbeat. “She’s alive.”

Nanoha and Corona stared at her in horror.

“Relax, there was no chance she died from that. …Almost no chance.”

Corona hovered her hand over Starbeat. “She’s just unconscious. I’ll try to wake her up.”

Starbeat opened her eyes. “Thanks, but I’m up.”

Corona blinked. “That was a quick nap.”

“Decided I was tired of sleeping.” Starbeat shook her head. “Right, so, time for a test.” She shoved her muzzle to Corona’s nose.

Corona started sweating. “Starbeat…?”

Starbeat started laughing. “You know, I don’t like that horn in the middle of your forehead. I think it’s silly.”

Nanoha giggled. “She’s cured.”

“HOLY CELESTIA I’M CURED!” Starbeat shouted. Then she started screaming like a filly on her birthday. “CUUUUUUUUUUUUUURED!”

“I wish everyone was this enthusiastic,” Kelly #1 said.

“I prefer unconscious,” Kelly #2 muttered.

Starbeat grabbed the two Kellys in her hooves. “I don’t want to kiss you. I don’t. HOT DOG GIRLS, HOT DOG! HOT DIGGITY DOGGITY DO! Ah-HAH! Oh who cares if this day absolutely sucked until this point, this is the best thing ever. Corona. Go on a date with me.”

“Uh… No.”

“YESSSSSSS!” Starbeat said, falling onto her back. “Oh yessssss…”

“I’m confused,” Corona said.

“She’s happy, that’s all that matters,” Nanoha said.

Kelly #2 coughed. “We don’t have all day. You said there was someone else.”

“Yeah, Blackjack,” Corona said. “She-”

“I’M COMING WITH YOU!” Starbeat said.

“No, you’re not,” Kelly #2 said.

“Wanna bet?”

~~~

Corona, Nanoha, Starbeat, and the Kellys stood in the Tengleglade of the Empress of the Void,
“DAMMIT!” Kelly #2 shouted.

“Totally sensed the plot hole coming,” Starbeat decreed. “And intercepted it. And followed it. Mechanically, you understand, I’m not Pinkie. AhHAHhah!”

“She’s crazier than we are,” Kelly #2 muttered.

“I like it!” Kelly #1 countered.

Corona pulled out her phone. “Just let me call Empy here… Hey, Empy, we nee-”

The voice of a Rarity came over the line. “Empy told me to tell you Merodi to stop calling about Twilence. You don’t get to use her personal line to keep bugging the Empress of the Void about her.”

“…This is the first time I’ve called.”

“Different person every time, dear.”

Corona coughed. “I’m not looking for Twilence though. I’m looking for Blackjack.”

“Oh.” The Rarity paused for a moment. “I’ll send her your way.” Corona could tell the Rarity tried to cover the phone with her hoof, but it didn’t block much of anything. “Blackjack? Get up. The Merodi are looking for you.”

“Uuuuuugh whyyyyy?” Blackjack muttered.

“I don’t know! But you better get up because I’m going to teleport you there right now.”

“Shit, Rarity, not that fa-”

“-st,” Blackjack finished in front of Corona, still in the process of standing up. She managed to stand up the rest of the way and throw her mane back, trying to disguise how messed up it was. “Sup peeps?”

Corona hung up. “She did a really bad job of covering the phone.”

Blackjack blushed. “I know what you’re thinking, but no, I’m still single.” She looked to Starbeat. “Rawr.”

“Oh my Stars, you disgust me.” Starbeat giggled.

“…I’m getting mixed signals from you.”

“She’ll be that way for a while,” Corona said. “Give her a few hours and I expect a crash.”

“So, what did all you lovely ladies want from me?”

“You have a beat curse,” Starbeat said. “One where you are destined to win but doomed to sacrifice what you care most about, right?”

“Is that public knowledge or something?”

“Anyone can just pick up Project Horizons and read it. It’s not the most esoteric of books. By the
way, sub-par romance.”

“Hey!”

“Blame Somber.”

Blackjack blinked. “Okay, uh… Yeah I’m not going to keep talking to you.” She turned to the Kellys. “You the ladies who can help me?”

Kelly #1 bit her lip. “Ooooooh boy…”

“That means no,” Kelly #2 said.

“But Kelly! It’s so tragic an-”

“You know as well as I do she’s not giving off a glitch. She’s sanctioned.”

“S-sanctioned?” Blackjack said, stuttering.

“The plot of the multiverse wants you this way,” Kelly #2 said. “You’re not the whims of some sad Prophet messing with powers he doesn’t understand. Your powers… I can sense they have a place in-universe. Within your story.”

“…Fuuuuck,” Blackjack spat, taking a few steps back. “So you came all this way just to tell me ‘oh, wait, sorry, we can’t fix you’!?”

“Oh, we can!” Kelly #1 said. “All we’d have to do i-”

Kelly #2 slapped her. “We’re not allowed to. The Protectors of the Plot Continuum protect it. We don’t shape it.”

“Kelly…” Kelly #1 said, giving her counterpart puppy eyes.

“D-don’t do that.”

“Kelly…”

Kelly #2 twitched. “Really? You really want to do this? You don’t even know her!”

“…I read Project Horizons. Her story’s so sad and tragic, Kelly! And she’s still an alicorn! That means her ending got screwed up! That’s all she had!”

Kelly #2 sighed. “Fine. All of you, what you see here doesn’t get back to the Flowers, understood?”

Nanoha, Corona, and Starbeat nodded.

Kelly #2 turned to Blackjack. “…Are you sure you want this?”

“Why wouldn’t I want to keep my friends alive!?”

“Because it also comes with removing the rest of your plot armor. Your ability to win.”

“I don’t give a fuck about winning! Just get rid of this fucking curse!”

The Kellys sighed. Kelly #1 produced a copy of Project Horizons while Kelly #2 grabbed the bell. The candle was somehow already on the ground.
Kelly #1 had to hold her hand over the candle, as close as she could without actually burning herself. Something in her twitched. “There are no charges against you, Blackjack,” Kelly #1 said. “There is no author to call upon to exorcise you, because you are as Somber intended.” She opened her eyes, the pupils expanding and contracting several times a second. “But there is a sickness of fate within you, one that must be banished. Spirit of sacrifice, bring yourself out of this mare’s body. Let her disappear as she was meant to.” She produced a small, glowing flower from inside her jacket.

There was no spirit to emerge from Blackjack. The only visible change was the disappearance of her cutie mark.

“It’s done,” Kelly #1 said. “Go, live your life Blackjack. I’d be careful though, you may find that things don’t go the way you expect anymore.”

Blackjack looked at her blank flank. “…Well that was so sudden and uninteresting I’m not sure how to react to it yet.”

“IDEA!” Starbeat blurted. “Let’s go back to my universe and rub this in the faces of everyone there.”

“Uh…”

“Or I can just go, you can stay here. You know what, I’m going. Bye~!” She vanished in a teleport.

“Emotional high,” Corona muttered.

“It’s adorable,” Nanoha insisted.

“Yeah, it is,” Blackjack commented.

Nanoha hit her with Raising Heart. “Stop being creepy.”

“Ow…”

“Why is she going back to her universe?” Kelly #2 asked.

“Her entire world has that curse,” Corona explained. “Equis Lovestra.”

Kelly #2 facepalmed. “Call the Department. We’re going to need a full-scale sweep. Might need direct Flower intervention for something that big. Hoo boy…”

Corona smiled. “We can never thank you enough.”

“Damn straight,” Kelly #2 muttered.

Kelly #1 rolled her eyes. “This is a mutual exchange of gifts, we’re all going to be even after this. But we’re done now, unless you’ve got any last minute things?”

Corona put a hand to her chin. “I suppose we could check out Melinda…”

The Kellys glanced at each other nervously. “…You really don’t want to do that,” Kelly #1 said.


“You know her?” Corona asked.

“Yes! That was a fun night. …Get your minds out of the gutter, I think her mind’s permanently stuck in PG-ish land. Damn, now I want to see her.”
“We’re not going to be there when you do,” Kelly #2 said. “We’re leaving.”

They were gone before anyone could say anything. …Or perhaps they were gone after things were said, but that was deemed unimportant by ka.

“My head hurts,” Blackjack muttered.

Corona looked at Nanoha with a worried glance. “Nanoha, would you happen to have any idea what that was about?”

Nanoha’s eyes were wide. “I… I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you actually knew her!”

“We use her sometimes to fight particularly evil enemies… Nanoha, explain.”

“…One of the primary PPC activities is Mary Sue assassination.”

Corona took a moment to process this.

“What are we waiting for? We’ve got to save her!” Blackjack blurted.

Nanoha hefted Raising Heart. “I’m not arguing, but I expect to lose.”

“Why?”

She pointed at Blackjack. “You just got rid of one of the only powers that could possibly trump a PPC Agent’s ka shield.”

“…Fuck.”

~~~

Pinkie, Vriska, Jotaro, Flutterfree, Nova, and Allure sat on a large couch while Lightning stood across from them, a stoic expression on her face.

“You’re going on your first mission today,” Lightning explained. “It’s a difficult, but simple one.”

Pinkie, to her credit, decided to be cooperative. “Cool! What is it?”

“Do any of you read Marvel comics?”

There were six shakes of the head.

“Shame, that would make this more interesting.” She threw an image on the ground of a humanoid creature with purple skin, huge muscles, and a jaw with vertical lines in it. “This is Thanos.”

“I recognize him,” Vriska said. “Encountered his kind before.”

“He’s known for being the villain to end all villains in a lot of superhero universes,” Lightning commented. “Nine times out of ten, he is after a device known as the Infinity Gauntlet.” She put another picture on the ground, showcasing a golden gauntlet with six colored gems on its back – one for each finger and one in the center. “This glove taps into the power of its native universe and gives the user almost complete dominion over it. Needless to say, Thanos tends to use the Infinity Gauntlet for evil, a recurring theme being the destruction of half the universe.”

“Yeesh, why not go all the way?” Nova asked. “He seems like the type.”
“Idealism, population control… it doesn’t really matter. He thinks he’s right in what he does, but he isn’t. Your mission is simple – go to this universe, stop him, and retrieve the Infinity Gauntlet. The Infinity Gauntlet loses most of its power when outside the universe it is bound to, and it cannot be used when he is not wearing it, so use that to your advantage.”

“But he’s basically unkillable with it on,” Jotaro said. It wasn’t a question.

“I’m sure you have a way to remove it.”

Jotaro summoned Star Platinum and nodded. “More than one I can think of.”

“Good. It is worth mentioning that this world is technically within Abstract space, but they should not mind our assistance. You leave in about five minutes. It is projected that he will have just defeated the last person between him and the completion of the Gauntlet. Good luck.”

“Won’t need it,” Nova said.

Lightning nodded, leaving them.

“This guy sounds powerful,” Allure said.

“I’ve fought him before,” Vriska said. “Asshole, very sure of himself, strong but not strong enough.”

“Did he have this Infinity Gauntlet?” Allure asked.

“…No.”

“Then he could kill us! Easily!” Allure waved her hooves, holding up the image of the Infinity Gauntlet. “Almost complete dominion over an entire universe! We can’t compete with that!”

“We just have to be clever,” Jotaro encouraged.

“Also we don’t really have a choice,” Vriska pointed out. “There’s no resisting the Collector’s missions, after all!” She chuckled bitterly. “Death would be a release.”

“Vriska, no,” Pinkie said, grabbing her head. “We’re not going to stay here forever.”

“Okay, first, suicide of virtually any kind does not count as Heroic or Just. Second, is that because you know or just want to give us hope?”

“Hrminimmerm.”

“What was that?”

“The ‘stop asking’ mumble.”

Allure sighed. “I just worry that we might not make it back… If not from this mission, than one of the others. This is a dangerous life to lead…”

Pinkie shrugged. “Nothing’s stopped us yet, team! We’re not going down today!” She put her hoof out. “We’ll fight this Thanos together! Not for the Collector – but for the universe he wants to decimate! Are you with me?”

Jotaro, Nova, Flutterfree, and Vriska didn’t even hesitate before putting their hooves and hands in. Allure took a few seconds, but decided she was with them.
“LET’S GO TEAM!”

~~~

“…and being a Mary Sue. For this, you are sentenced to die.” A large man lifted his gigantic sword into the air, above Melinda’s prone body. He wore a black suit with a potted cactus emblem on it, and his partner was a gecko that sat on his shoulder.

Melinda had a couple of broken bones, numerous cuts on her body, and had a glazed expression on her face. She was barely able to register that a sword was coming down onto her head.

Corona, Nanoha, and Blackjack arrived the moment the sword hit, allowing them to observe the gruesome spectacle.

“Melinda!” Corona shouted, the brutal nature of the death worming its way into her mind.

The man turned to Corona. “Leave this place. The scourge on your land has been eradicated. Go on with your fate as if this woman had never existed.”

“This is not our land!” Blackjack blurted. “We’re not from here!” She drew her starmetal sword.

“Melinda was our friend,” Corona said, glaring. “And you just killed her! What did she do to deserve that?”

“She was a Mary Sue.”

“We knew that!” The man’s eyes widened. “You knew? And you let her live?”

“She may have been a little odd at times, but yeah!” Corona blurted. “She’s helped us! She had a good heart!”

“A good heart does nothing for the horrors a Mary Sue brings upon a stable plotline.” He hefted his sword. “People like you make me sick.”

The three of them took a defensive stance.

“Maybe I should teach you a lesson,” the man said.

The gecko tapped the man’s neck and whispered something in his ear.

The man shook his head. “No. An example needs to be made. White Devil or no, I’m going t-”

“DIVINE BUSTER!” Nanoha shouted, tossing the Agent down to the ground with a magic beam encircled in triangular patterns.

The man dodged.

Blackjack readied her guns and her sword, surprised to find that for once she was the one with the horrible aim, even with her augmented eyes. “What the…”

The man rushed Corona, lifting his sword high.

She teleported behind him and put her hand to his cheek, just enough of a contact to get the surface of who he was…
Ray was watching a group of heroes talk about amazing adventures, and above all he was enamored by the ‘heart’ of the group, a girl named Susan who looked… different from the others. She had strange blue pants… Women never wore pants, it was always dresses, but Ray couldn’t question this. He could just stare from the bushes, enamored.

“Oh, by the way, there’s a trap here,” Susan told the party nonchalantly. The rest of them all seized up in fear, taking her words completely seriously despite the relaxed tone. She reached into the ground, picked up a strange black disc, and threw it over her shoulders. It exploded over the next hill. “There! We can keep going!”

Ray’s house had been over that hill.

Ray’s family had been in that house.

Ray tracked down and killed Susan. He would later find out he was able to because there had been some PPC agents on the scene, manipulating the fate of the world, but he didn’t care. She – and all her kind – needed to die for their careless perfection.

“I… I’m so sorry,” Corona said, catching his sword with her bare hands. He drew blood, but her magic reserves pushed the blade back. “But she wasn’t like that. She didn’t kill people. Didn’t even try until we forced her.”

“All of them come from the same filth!” Ray shouted. “Every last one!” He swung at Corona again. He used his back foot to deflect Blackjack’s sword.

“Fucking…” Blackjack muttered.

Nanoha had clearly had enough. “STARLIGHT…”

Enough! A loud telepathic voice boomed.

“CANCEL! CANCEL!” Nanoha yelled at Raising Heart, keeping her mini-doomsday-in-a-sphere spell from going off.

A sunflower in a suit appeared in front of them, looking down on them all without an expression, though everyone felt guilty. Ray, you have no need to fight these women. They are not your responsibility, nor are they even part of the PPC’s jurisdiction. You are to report to Jay and assist with the Collector efforts.

Ray looked like he wanted to say something.

Now, Ray.

Ray nodded – and was gone, gecko partner and all.

As for you, the Sunflower Official said, leaning in to the remaining three. Consider this a warning. Do not interfere with proper PPC procedure. There will be consequences if you prevent an assassination.

“How can you just kill them all!?” Corona blurted. “That’s just cruel! How can that be right?”

Do not pretend that you understand the machinations of the plot, Corona Shimmer. Your best expert on the subject was a romance-crazed unicorn who wasn’t in control of her own body. We Flowers have been at this for almost our entire existence as a society, willing to go where others are not and risk the dangers of directly interfering with ka itself. I can tell you many things about your fate just by
looking at you, Corona. Your character arc, your inner motivations, what plot threads lie unresolved in your life. Believe it or not, this is part of those plot threads. The understanding that you have them as such a complex individual. One so close to the center of this mess.

Corona stared at the Sunflower Official. She didn’t have any answers for him, or any response at all. Nanoha, on the other hand, did. “You’ve saved Sues before.”

*Special cases that are not done by the book.*

“You’ve effectively banned the art of plot manipulation in your society. Change that, and maybe we can talk.”

Nanoha narrowed her eyes. “You really don’t want to consider that your definition of the true plot might be wrong, do you?”

Goodbye, Nanoha. The Sunflower Official vanished.

Blackjack threw her sword to the ground. “Well *that* was pointless!”

Corona looked at Melinda’s dead body and curled her fist. “Such brazen disregard for death…”

Nanoha put a hand on Corona’s shoulder. “Hey, Corona… They think about things differently. We need to understand that.”

Corona nodded slowly. “I don’t suppose one of them would let me touch them…”

“Definitely not.”

Corona sighed. “…Let’s just go.”

~~~

Equis Lovestra.

Known to some as the Shipping World.

The world where all ponies were stuck in a curse – a curse where love was cheap, fast, and more often than not simply situational. The ‘click’ happened multiple times, love was never expected to last, and everypony was obsessed with the shallow image of the emotion.

Starbeat hated her home with a passion. She had been the *only* one to see that their nature was a curse. That the clicks were horrendous. She was lucky to have been allowed to leave, otherwise she would have gone truly mad from trying to resist the curse.

As it turned out, she only went slightly mad, and was eventually able to *free* herself from the curse.

And she felt like bragging about it.

She walked down the main street of Equis Lovestra Ponyville, not surprised in the least to find a crystal castle in the town now. She walked up to the front doors and knocked.

A version of Spike opened the door – slightly younger than Equis Vitis Spike, but still roughly ‘teenage’ for a dragon. He widened his eyes when he saw who it was – the goggles assuring him it
wasn’t just some alternate version.

“How about you go tell Princess Ship I’m here?” Starbeat suggested. “We have a lot to talk about. Or, well, one thing, but you know.”

Spike turned his head. “TWILIGHT? YOU’LL NEVER BELIEVE WHO’S HERE!”

“Who!?” Twilight called, teleporting to them instead of waiting for an answer. She was an alicorn now, no surprise there, though the fact that her mane was up in a bun and she wore rose-tinted glasses was.

The Princess’ jaw dropped. “Starlight!?”

Starbeat smirked. “The one and only! Your Starlight Glimmer, known in the multiverse as Starbeat!” Her smirk turned into a scowl. “I’m home.”

“W-why did you come back? You hate this place!”

“Oh, I do, but I just felt the need to brag a bit. Notice anything… different about me?”

“You’re older and a lot less skittish.”

“I was not sk- okay I was.” Starbeat rolled her eyes. “The point is, I got cured.”

Twilight looked at her in fear. “C-cured?”

“Yes. Cured. I no longer suffer from clicks. I’m allowed to feel disgusted at people who make romantic moves on me. I’m allowed to talk to people without the constant danger of feeling the need to lock my lips with theirs. I’m free.”

Twilight took a few steps back. “N-no. No you can’t do this!”

“No. You’re going to take it from us!”

Starbeat facehooved. “Oh for the – relax, no I’m not. I’m just here to tell you ‘I told you so’. I told you so. You can keep your stupid curse if you like it and don’t even want to think about changing. You can keep your little meaningless ships!”

Twilight let out a breath of relief. “Oh thank Cadence… I was worried there for a sec.”

“Hey you don’t get to be let off the hook like that. Look at me Twilight! I’m cured. The highest experts on fate in the multiverse analyzed me, and they said I was a glitch. That means you and this entire world is a glitch as well! This curse was not meant to be!”

Twilight looked at her, gaze stern. “So? Who cares if it’s not meant to be? It is and it defines our world. It is what we live for.”

“Well now you have to live the rest of your life knowing it’s not something worth devoting an entire world to,” Starbeat said with a huff.

Twilight smirked. “I like those who challenge me, you know.”

Starbeat’s bracelet started beeping – but it wasn’t because of her. Twilight rushed Starbeat.
Starbeat *slapped* her back. “NO!” she *screamed*.

Twilight stared at her, pained. “So, you won. You’re able to resist the click. Lucky you, bet you have a *great* time finding love.”

“I’ve spent much of my life away from you studying what love *really* is. It is a slow, deep, and emotional process that forms over years. It can begin in many ways, often deep burning passion, but is best between people who really know each other. They spend their entire lives together. Sometimes raise a family, sometimes not – it doesn’t matter! What matters is that true love, when fulfilled, is a *permanent* feeling that shouldn’t go away or be interrupted by anything!”

“You’re lecturing *me* on love!?” Twilight shouted.

“Yes I am!”

They felt the world *shake*.

They didn’t even look at each other. They both teleported outside in an instant and looked at the sky.

In the sky, they could see it – a flowery construct, orbiting the planet. It was large enough to fill the sky, dimming the light of the sun with it’s translucent petals.

“…Did they follow me?” Starbeat wondered.

“…No no no!” Twilight screamed. She spread her wings and lit her horn, unleashing a complex set of spells she had prepared for such an emergency. Her five friends appeared around her, the Elements of Harmony appearing around all their necks. The Element of Magic appeared on her head. “No time to explain!” she told them. “But the Flower above us is trying to take away the love in our world – we must stop it!”

Her friends trusted her, nodding. Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy glanced at each other awkwardly, but smiled at each other anyway. A beam of rainbow light came out from the six elements and shot toward the flower in the sky.

The flower activated. A pulse of invisible energy rippled across the planet, one Starbeat couldn’t even feel. But she *saw* it. The six ponies next to her had a blue-green essence forced out of them, where it dissipated almost instantly. …All except for Twilight’s essence, which stayed around long enough to *scream*.

Twilight looked at Starbeat, tears in her eyes. “…What have you done!?”

“I don’t know,” Starbeat muttered, lighting her horn for a transmission spell. “HEY! PPC! I KNOW YOU’RE UP THERE! DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU JUST DID!?”

*We cured the plot*, a telepathic voice came back, that of an unknown Flower they couldn’t see.

“But this world’s society is going to collapse!”

*As the Tower wills.*

Starbeat growled. “That’s Stu-”

*Goodbye.* The flower in the sky vanished, leaving the world alone – and broken.

Starbeat could already hear crying in a nearby house.
She pulled out her phone and dialed the Aid Division. “This is Starbeat. Patch me through to Overhead Cross Beam. Equis Lovestra is suffering from a complete societal collapse because of our actions. I’ll explain more once you get here – know that they’ve been cured of the curse.”

She hung the phone up. “Your world won’t destroy itself from the inside out. We have people who can deal with this.”

“You’ve still destroyed us!” Twilight shouted. “You’ve…” she realized she didn’t have any positive feelings at all towards Starbeat. *None.* She shot a laser at her.

Starbeat redirected it into Twilight’s horn, knocking her over. The princess’ friends rushed to her in concern.

Starbeat sighed, looking into the sky. “Nice going Starbeat, screwed everything up again.”

~~~

The Golden Joke held another meeting, and once again *everyone* was there. Notably, there were a few additions – Nanoha and a handful of TSAB mages being the most prominent.

The Flowers had called this meeting.

Chrysanthemum ‘stood’ at the podium, as best a literal flower *could*, but somehow it just worked – that seemed to describe a lot about the Flowers.

*I understand there have been a few incidents since we started the movements against the Collector. We cured one of your personnel of her corrupted ka and were praised for it. But when we cured her entire world, you took issue. A similar issue was taken with our course of action concerning Melinda in a completely standard assassination. Let it be known to all nations of the multiverse here – regardless of if you agree or not, we demand that you no longer interfere with PPC operations. Stopping the assassination of a Mary Sue is an offense often punished by death. If it is a government who moves against us, even the TSAB, they will find their nation doesn’t run as smoothly all of the sudden. Problems will crop up from seemingly random locations. You will know we twisted ka just slightly.*

Nanoha glared at Chrysanthemum. “This threat will not be taken lightly.”

*That much is understood. But we cannot have anyone interfering with the plot, for it might bring everything crashing down if done at just the wrong moment. We wish to make it clear that the actions of the PPC are protected. Interfere and suffer the consequences from here on out.*

There was silence from the crowd.

*Moving on to a more unifying matter, the Collector. He is one of the most prepared Gary Stus we have ever come across, likely because he has read the PPC source material with at least passing familiarity and has used his heightened planning to predict what sorts of capabilities a fully advanced race of Flowers would be able to do in the multiverse.*

A hologram appeared behind Chrysanthemum of a cluster of universes.

*He is moving them around as we tunnel through them with the ka-signature, Chrysanthemum revealed. He’s sending us in a hundred-universe long circle, one that changes every time we go around. The fleet has not been able to locate his universe yet, and he keeps throwing hidden universes at us just to keep us off the scent.*
Our own universal sliding machines have been put on the case of organizing that area of the multiverse, but it is a slow process. We predict a few days before we finally get through this multiversal lock structure.

“What could we do to make this go faster!?” Jenny asked.

If we had a live ka connection to the Collector’s universe, we could get there almost instantly. Or if we had a direct scan of him instead of just his people. As powerful as his signature is, with this level of subterfuge it is not enough to pinpoint him quickly.

“Why not use time travel?” Froppy asked.

The risks of triggering one of his temporal traps is too great. We’ve already triggered a few dimensional traps in the efforts spent tracking him down.

“So we just have to wait?” Eve asked.

As of now, yes. This was just a courtesy. Any more questions?

There were a lot of questions. But none of them were all that important.

~~~

Minna stared at the broadcast of Chrysanthemum’s message.

“A few days...” she said, digging her hands into Alushy’s neck. “It’s. Too. SLOW!”

“I agree,” Alushy said. “Squeaky, any idea how to make that go faster?”

“Time travel?” Squeaky suggested. “If Aradia’s willing, that is.”

“No! It’s too long for Mom!” Minna blurted. “We need to find her! Find her now!”

“Minna…” Squeaky said, putting a hoof to the distraught child’s face. “We just have to wait a few days. That’s not really that long, is it?”

“Yes it is!” she wailed. “Too long! There’s got to be someone who can find her!”

Alushy shook her head. “Kid… Sometimes life just fucks you over and there’s nothing you can do about it. What we have here is a case where we just have to wait, and where we can’t do a damn thing. You just want to pop a little human with your teeth, but the head physically cannot pop. You know?”

Minna stared at Alushy. “…No. No I don’t.”

“Right, right, kids don’t understand metaphors. Can’t get mom. Life sucks. Just live with it.”

“No. No! We’ve got to do something! We’ve been here talking too long!” She twitched. “Find Starbeat, Alushy. She can do what those flowers can’t.”

“I think you’ve got it the wrong way around,” Alushy said. “See, the Flowers are big honcho mu-”

Minna grabbed Alushy’s ear. “Starbeat. Now.”

“What a little bitch,” Alushy muttered, rolling her eyes. She spread her wings.
“…You can’t be serious,” Squeaky said. “You don’t just get t-”

Alushy took off, Minna on her back.

Squeaky sighed. “Thrackerzod, watch the League. I have to go vampire hunting.”

“I bet that’ll be fun.”

Squeaky just facehooved.

~~~

The Mad Titan Thanos popped the last Infinity Stone into the Infinity Gauntlet, completing the set. He held his fist high and laughed. All his enemies were either already defeated, or too far away to do anything that could ruin his plans now. All he had to do was snap his fingers… and everything would be solved. Everything.

He held up the Infinity Gauntlet, savoring the moment. It was fitting that such a momentous act would take place in a simple grassy field on some backwater planet.

“HEY ASSHOLE!” A rock hit him in the head, startling him. “YOU’RE NOT DONE YET!”

Thanos glared at the newcomers – Vriska, Jotaro, Allure, Nova, and Flutterfree. “Who are you?” He asked, confused that the Infinity Gauntlet didn’t allow him to know who they were.

“Heroes from another universe,” Flutterfree declared.

“Here to stop you,” Allure added.

“Other universe or not, you will fall to the might of the Infinity Gauntlet.” Thanos held out his hand with the Gauntlet, preparing to vaporize them.

Except the Gauntlet wasn’t on his hand. He stared at his naked fist, confused.

“Looooooooking for something?” Pinkie trilled, tossing the Gauntlet like a hacky sack just behind Thanos.

Thanos swiped at the Gauntlet, but Pinkie was already elsewhere. “Oh, so close!”

“What power is this?” Thanos demanded.

“Cheating,” Vriska said, rolling her dice and getting straight 8s, gaining her armor and heightened power. “Just like the rest of us.”

Thanos stood his ground. “I am not powerless without the Gauntlet.” He pushed all of them back with telekinetic power, driving a fist right into Jotaro.

Star Platinum took the hit, suffering no damage.

“…What?”

“Out-of-context power,” Nova said, using clever manipulation of time and speed to be in multiple places at once, firing magic lasers at him. Flutterfree riddled him with arrows of light.

Allure leaped up from under him, punching his chin with her hoof. She flooded as much magic as she could into the strike, knocking him back. She followed through by twisting her body around his
neck, taking him to the ground.

He flung the three of them off with little effort.

He had a significantly harder time with the Vriska-Jotaro tag team. They came at him from both sides, one with a sword and luck, the other with an invisible punching ghost and determination. When Thanos somehow managed to grab Star Platinum’s hands despite not being a Stand user, Vriska drove a blade into his back. He tore the blade out, only for Star Platinum to toss him to the side.

Thanos *roared*, kicking at Vriska – and missing. He leaped *over* Jotaro, punching him in the back of the head, where Star Platinum wasn’t defending at the time. Blood spurted from Jotaro’s mouth – but he stood his ground.

Vriska rolled her dice, summoning a thousand green bees. “Ah, I love a good swarm.”

Thanos walked through the swarm, seemingly impervious to the extreme pain they were supposed to cause.

“Hey, Jojo, he’s just like you!”

“Yare yare daze…” Jotaro muttered, grabbing his hat. “Nova, acceleration.”

Nova, despite her dazed state, was able to give Jotaro the accelerated time.

Thanos noticed Jotaro was standing against him, alone.

“Why do you deny aid from your allies? It does not aid you in this battle.”

“They know it isn’t needed.” Jotaro said, hands in his pockets. “STAR PLATINUM: THE WORLD!”

Time stopped. Due to Nova’s acceleration, he had a lot more than five seconds to do his work.

“ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA!” Punches flew, connecting with Thanos’ frozen body everywhere it could cause pain. After the usual five seconds of punching everywhere, Jotaro began to place slower, heavier punches in places that should have been more vulnerable. The face, the back of the skull, the shoulders, the elbows, the knees, the groin… The Mad Titan’s body was exceptionally hardy and formidable, but even he would break after enough beating.

Time resumed. Thanos went flying and hit the ground. He groaned.

“Holy shit, he’s not dead,” Vriska said, eyes wide. “Final boss material right here!”

Pinkie shrugged. “It’s not like he’s going to be able to win at this point.” Pinkie gestured at the extreme effort he was going through just to stand back up. “We can take him out, easy.”

“…Or we can take him back with us,” Flutterfree suggested.

“He does seem like the kind of person who deserves it,” Allure admitted. She pulled out one of the Collection’s ‘loyalty’ devices and flashed Thanos with it just as he stood back up.

Thanos growled. “That won’t be enough to take my mind, unicorn.”

Vriska tapped her head, transferring the extra-loyalty she’d gotten programmed into her head since she was a powerful psychic. Thanos twitched, saying nothing.
“Mission complete!” Pinkie shouted, jumping up and down. “Thanos defeated, Infinity Gauntlet recovered, woo!”

“Back to the Collection then,” Allure muttered. “Where we wait around until he decides we have to do something else. Wonder if we’ll have to blow up a planet one day.”

Vriska shrugged. “I wouldn’t worry about it. Or think about it. It’d drive you crazy.”

The white wispy portal the Collection used appeared in front of them. They all shrugged to each other and headed back.

Pinkie held back for a few seconds. She put the Infinity Gauntlet on her hoof and flexed its fingers… somehow. She felt the power of an entire universe at her disposal – every mind, every soul, every force… But she wasn’t going to do much with this power. It was too much to control.

She pointed at the ground, creating a corpse that looked like it belonged to Thanos. Let them eternally wonder who defeated him – but also let them rest easy knowing he was defeated.

To add to the mystery, she created a fake – but destroyed – Infinity Gauntlet next to him.

Good.

Only then did she return to the Collection.

~~~

Starbeat walked through the streets of Ponyville, head down.

Today sure had been a rollercoaster of emotions…

At least she could walk about in public, pondering life, without the danger of it getting interrupted by an especially loud beeping noise.

She lifted up her hoof, taking a moment to examine her alarm bracelet. …It was useless now.

She popped it off, sitting down in a patch of grass. She held it in her hooves, examining it. She’d worn this thing for about half of her life at this point. It had been a constant reminder of what she was – but also a safety net. A protection from herself. It had been a soothing presence over the course of her life out here in the multiverse.

She couldn’t bring herself to just throw it away. But she wasn’t going to wear it ever again.

She lit her horn, mimicking the Gem ‘bubble’ spell, encasing the bracelet in her magic and sending it to her home – her lab. It would float there until she went home.

There would never again be a need for it to leave the lab.

This thought didn’t make her smile.

“Oh, hey! Fancy running into you here.”

Starbeat looked up to see Blackjack walking toward her. “…Why are you on Equis Vitis?”

“Sticking around to figure out this Flower business,” Blackjack said, taking a seat on the grass next to her.
“But you… Nevermind.”

“What, expect me to never go to places I have beef with? Really?”

“Yeah, actually.”

Blackjack rolled her eyes. “Ponies either have a really high or really low opinion of me, apparently.”

“Being an Idiot Hero tends to bring about that dichotomy.”

“…I’m going to try not to be offended at that.”

Starbeat smirked. “The truth of ka is a brutal one. One we are now free of.”

“Not shaping up exactly how we planned, is it?”

“What happened to you?”

“Lost. Can’t just count on myself winning anymore. You?”

“Caused a societal collapse. You know.”

“Yeah. I do.”

Starbeat chuckled. “But hey, at least we’re cured. The parts we hated about ourselves are gone.”

Blackjack nodded. “Eeyep. So now you can hang out with me without fear of suddenly biting the dust!”

“That’s reassuring,” Starbeat commented.

Blackjack winked and chuckled.

“By the way, stop the subliminal flirting. Not in the mood.”

“…Man, you’re a sharp one, aren’t you?”

Starbeat snorted. “The smartest people can do the stupidest things.”

Alushy crashed into the grass right in front of Starbeat. Minna whooped, unharmed from the crash landing. “We made it!”

“My spleen…” Alushy wheezed. “Why is that the organ I replace most?”

“Rule of funny,” Starbeat deadpanned.

“Fudging ka,” Alushy muttered.

Squeaky appeared behind them in a burst of white magic. Her fur was singed and smoking in a few places. “I… am never…. teleporting that much… again.” She wiped her brow.

Blackjack raised a hoof. “I am suddenly confused.”

“Out of your element,” Starbeat informed her. “It may or may not make sense as the conversation continues. I take it you three were looking for me?”

“The kid was looking for you,” Alushy muttered. “I was a hapless mount. Squeaky is here because
panic mode.”

“I am not in panic mode!” Squeaky squeaked.

“Viola,” Alushy deadpanned.

“I need you to find Mom!” Minna blurted. “The Flowers can’t do it fast enough!”

“I’m nothing compared to them, Minna,” Starbeat muttered bitterly. “They can swoop in and ‘fix’ an entire planet in one instant. All I can do is wave my hoof and pretend I can see fate.”

Minna jumped off Alushy and got in Starbeat’s face. “Starbeat.”

“I like this kid. She’s feisty,” Blackjack observed.

“Be careful, she’ll bite off more than you can chew,” Alushy warned.

“Ah. …what?”

Since Starbeat wasn’t responding to her, Minna grabbed her ears. “Get. Mom. Back.”

“Minna, I can’t do that! I want to get Allure and Vriska and all the others back but I can’t! I’m not above the Flowers! There’s nothing above the Flowers!”

She was reminded of something the Sunflower Official had said.

_As the Tower wills._

“The Tower…” she said, putting a hoof to her chin. “The Tower…”

“The Dark Tower?” Squeaky asked.

“Yes, that Dark Tower. I wasn’t sure before now, but it’s clear. The Tower is a regulator of ka. One powerful enough that the Flowers refer to it almost as if it were their god…” She turned to them. “We need to go to the Dark Tower.”

“How, though?” Squeaky asked.

“We go ask the Flowers nicely,” Starbeat asserted. “Which is to say I go pry them for information.”

“That sounds really stupid,” Blackjack observed. “Count me in!”

“Should I change into something more murderous?” Alushy asked.

“What? No.” Starbeat shook her head. “We’re going to use ka to our advantage.” She pointed at Minna.

“Oh no, you don’t get to bring her along!” Squeaky shouted.

“My connection may not be enough to provide a strong enough ‘plot’ to convince the Flowers or the Tower or whoever’s in charge here to let us through. The connection between a mother and child and the drive to be reunited is unbelievably strong. Perhaps strong enough to force a new path to open in fate.”

“You’re just spitballing,” Alushy observed.

Starbeat coughed. “Maaaaaaybe – but it’s the only idea I’ve got. The five of us were brought
together by chance here. I think that says something about the way the story is going.”

Squeaky sighed. “Fine.”

Minna beamed. “Yay! You got the grumpy balloon to agree!”

“I am not a- oh. I can’t believe I’ve never heard that one before.”

Alushy rolled her eyes. “Looks like we’re about to set out on an epic quest of unknown length. I’m getting snacks before we head out.”

Starbeat raised an eyebrow. “Time is of the essence! We can’t afford to dilly-dally with our tails up our flanks!”

Squeaky put her head into her hooves. “Allure is going to kill me.”

“So, is this Allure your wife, girlfriend, or what?” Blackjack asked.

“You really need to be around here more often so every sentence you say won’t be an insult.”

“Hint: it doesn’t really help,” Alushy whispered. “I’ve been here decades and I still upset these bitches.”

Starbeat facehooved. “I’m taking us to the Golden Joke to find a Flower or PPC agent. You’re all coming along. You can keep bickering or not, I don’t care.” She lit her horn and they were gone.

~~~

The Collector took the Infinity Gauntlet from Pinkie. “Good work.”

Pinkie raised an eyebrow. “Can we go now?”

“Yeah, really tired of looking at your face,” Vriska commented.

“By all means, go enjoy yourselves,” the Collector said, waving his hand. The six of them scrambled out of the office as fast as they could, leaving only Thanos.

“That goes for you as well, Thanos,” the Collector said, sitting down behind his desk, placing the Infinity Gauntlet next to his monitor. “You’ve already gotten the welcome memo.”

“I see myself in you,” Thanos said as soon as he was certain the only ones who could hear him were Lightning and the Collector.

“I’m aware,” the Collector said. “Both of us do things for the greater good many would consider simply aren’t worth it. You go a bit beyond me, though. I try to keep the death to a minimum.”

“And I am – was – more concerned with large-scale acts rather than minor ‘hero work’ that does little to affect everything.”

“You were confined to one universe, Thanos.”

“But now that I am here, I see an opportunity.” Thanos put his arm to his chest as a show of respect. “Let me learn of this large-scale multiverse. I wish to influence it in ways for the betterment of society within. I cannot go against what you wish – but I believe my outlook would be invaluable to everyone.”
The Collector looked at Thanos and cocked his head. “You know, they’re never ready to seriously pledge their loyalty to me this early. I like you, Thanos, you see the big picture. You’re completely batty in your noggin, but I think we can work with that. Request granted. You will be kept on reserve to provide advice.”

“Thank you, Collector.”

“Here’s a bonus, I can just install all that information in your mind at once. This will only hurt a bit.”

A giant iron spike shot out of the ceiling and gouged a hole in the top of Thanos’ skull. A pulse of electricity shot into his body – one more than strong enough to kill a human. The purple humanoid twitched, but hardly responded until the spike was removed and the hole repaired. He rubbed the back of his head, eyes wide. “The sheer scale of it all…”

“You now have access to more information in your neural networks than even I do,” the Collector said.

“The Flowers are on our doorstep,” Thanos declared, speaking as if he had been a part of the Collection for years – which, given the upload, he might as well have. “Our defenses will not last forever.”

“We will have to prepare for combat against them,” the Collector admitted.

“Combat with Flowers is scarcely traditional,” Thanos commented. “Aside from small incursions, fate is their primary tool. A fist will not defeat destiny.”

“We have nullifiers,” Lightning pointed out. “That makes their brute force option negligible.”

“Not that we should ignore it entirely,” Thanos retorted. “If we prepare just for small incursions, we could be wiped out by a sudden bout of simultaneous stupidity.”

Lightning nodded. “We are prepared for all eventualities.”

“There are still high chances we lose.”

“We use those chances to our advantage,” the Collector said, standing up. “Trust me, Thanos, everything will go according to plan.”

Thanos nodded in understanding.

“Come, let’s release the next piece of this puzzle.” The Collector led them into the gray-elevator room, moving to a location most of the Collection was not allowed to enter. It was a spherical, glass room with square rooms affixed to every surface. Most of the rooms were empty, but some of them contained individuals frozen in time. The three of them moved in, finding there was no gravity within the sphere.

“The uncontrollables,” Thanos said, looking around with curiosity.

“There aren’t many who have immunities to every form of conditioning,” the Collector said, floating over to a particular enclosure. “But they’re kept around just in case they’ll be useful…”

The Collector pressed his hand to the glass wall of the enclosure, connecting to the mind contained within – one represented by a yellow triangle with one eye, a bow tie, and a top hat. “Bill Cipher.”

“HEEY, I WAS WONDERIN’ WHEN YOU’D COME CALLING AGAIN, INFINITY!” The voice
was layered, but high pitched and not all that threatening. “THINK YOU’VE FOUND A WAY TO CONDITION ME YET? I LOVED THE LAST ATTEMPT!”

“No. I’m ready to make a deal.”

Bill Cipher was silent for a moment. “…YOU KNOW, YOU’LL ONLY BE ABLE TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF MY PREDICAMENT HERE ONCE. I’LL NEVER LET MYSELF GET STUCK IN HERE AGAIN.”

“I am aware,” the Collector said.

“CAN’T JUST ASK FOR ME TO SERVE YOU, I’LL STAY STUCK FOREVER RATHER THAN BE SOME FANBOY’S SLAVE.”

The Collector folded his hands. “In exchange for your complete freedom, there are two conditions. The first of which is that you may never interfere in Collection business or assault any member of the Collection.”

“EASY PEASY, GET TO THE DIRTY STUFF ALREADY.”

“The primary focus of the request is simple, Bill. We need your assistance in defending against the Flowers. You are to aid us until the end of the encounter with them.”

“EVEN I’M NOT A FLOWER-ARMY KILLER.”

“Your power can be combined with our already existing narrative shields to force a weirdness bubble into existence, similar to the one that formed around your Weirdmageddon.”

Bill Cipher laughed. “THAT’S A CLEVER LITTLE TRICK! CANCEL ANYTHING THAT CAN’T COME FROM WITHIN!”

“It’ll force them to drop any plans involving brute force!” Thanos declared. “Any ka weapons will be useless because the bubble refuses it!”

“Can’t they work around that?” Lightning asked.

“Not quickly,” the Collector said. “And that will give us the opportunity we need.” He opened Bill Cipher’s enclosure, extending his hand. “What do you say?”

“I’M IN.” The hand of a triangular demon and blue Gary Stu met, the deal sealed in blue fire. “THIS IS GOING TO BE ONE OF THE MOST ENTERTAINING DEALS I’VE EVER BEEN A PART OF! I SHOULD BE THANKING YOU FOR THE OPPORTUNITY, BUCKO! HOW’S ABOUT WE TALK FUTURE BUSINESS?”

“There will be no future business,” the Collector spat. “You will do what you need to do, and then you will be gone.

“YOUR LOSS. NOW EXCUSE ME, I’VE GOT TO CREATE FAKE WEIRDMAGEDDON.”
“Eve, do you know if any Flowers or PPC agents are here?” Starbeat asked.

Eve sat in her seat at the Golden Joke’s main meeting hall, a book open in her lap, her expression glazed over. “Noooo idea. It’s not like any of this is in our control anymore.”

“Wait, seriously?”

Eve examined Starbeat and her group – Alushy, Squeaky, Minna, and Blackjack. “Yeah. Neither Valentine nor I have been able to do anything since Nanoha brought the Flowers in. And if you find Nanoha, I’m sure she’ll give you an earful about how controlling the Flowers are about the whole situation. They’ll send us reports that don’t really say anything, but otherwise I haven’t seen one here since Chrysanthemum.” Eve sighed. “They really don’t care much for us. I don’t know if that’s just because they’re arrogant or because they don’t like our resistance to their methods.”

“I’d bet both,” Starbeat said.

Eve nodded. “I’m sorry, I can’t help you find them. Maybe I can do something instead of them?”

“Eh… Do you know how to get to the Dark Tower?”

“The Nexus,” Eve said. “Not the one the Celestialsapiens took from us, the one Corona got stuck in. We even have the coordinates of the planet, though from what Corona relayed about Deep Thought’s observations it might not be so easy to find again.”

“And if we go there and don’t find it, we’d be stuck,” Squeaky pointed out.

“Charge in anyway,” Blackjack suggested.

“Have our own years-long adventure!” Alushy laughed.

“…I don’t want to be away from Mom that long,” Minna said, tugging nervously on Alushy’s mane.

“Don’t know what to tell you then,” Eve admitted. “We know the Tower manifests in more than one universe, and that those worlds are in the center of the Strands. Unlike moving across the Strands, moving into them is a bit beyond us. And then we’d have to find the instance of the Tower in there. …If I understand how it works. Which I’m pretty sure I don’t.”

“Thanks anyway,” Starbeat said, despondent. “We’ll think of something…” She turned around, leading her band of misfits away.

“Starbeat?” Eve called.

“Hm?”

Eve smiled warmly. “…It’s good to see you free. Sorry we haven’t been able to celebrate with you.”

Starbeat smiled back. “Thanks.”

“And Blackjack?”
Blackjack lost her cheerful grin. “Here we go…”

“About what happened in the Games-”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Blackjack muttered. “It happened, it’s over, let’s not dwell on it.”

“…If that’s what you want.”

“It is. Come on Starbeat, let’s go.”

They moved away from Eve, letting her get back to her book. The rest of the people in the Golden Joke were of a similar mind – they all felt like they had to be present for such a crisis, and yet were unable to actually do anything. There was little in the way of conversation, creating an ominous hush over the crowded room.

“That was mean,” Minna said, glaring at Blackjack.

“Yeah. But she needs to get yelled at,” Blackjack muttered. “She clearly doesn’t get it enough.”

“Don’t listen to her, she’s upset,” Squeaky told Minna. “Sometimes adults just can’t be nice to each other.”

“…Huh,” Minna said, clearly not surprised by this.

“We have two options,” Starbeat said. “One, go to the Nexus and hope nothing’s changed. Two, take a Skiff and try to cut into the Strands. Both are likely to take a while. Longer than the Flowers are going to take.”

“So the third option is to just wait,” Squeaky said. “You hear that Minna?”

“Yes,” Minna said. “Not good enough.”

Squeaky sighed.

“Question. Why are we listening to the whims of this kid?” Blackjack asked.

“You tell her no,” Alushy dared.

Blackjack took one look at Minna and decided against that.

“I don’t know how Allure does it…” Squeaky muttered.

Starbeat shrugged. “Well, if we’re really meant to find it, ka will provide a way to the Dark Tower.”

They heard a loud, exasperated sigh to their left. The five turned to see Reverend Glimmer clutching her head with a hoof.

“You okay?” Starbeat asked.

“No, because I just heard someone say ‘a way to the Dark Tower’ while I was passing by. And it happens to be people I like. People who are going to ask me. People I’m not going to be able to blow off.” She looked at the five of them with a tired expression. “You have the calling to go the the Tower, huh?”

“Yep!” Minna declared, smiling. “Can you tell us how to get there?”
“I know the dimensional coordinates of the Dark Tower.”

“That was easy,” Blackjack commented.

“No, it’s not,” Rev said. “Because the Dark Tower redirects virtually all direct connections to a random universe. Dialing the Dark Tower directly is what you do when you want to get horribly lost. You could even end up in the Unrealities.”

“I know what my new hobby is,” Alushy declared.

“So how can we get there?” Starbeat asked.

Rev looked into the distance. “I don’t actually know anything specific. I did leave the Nexus via the Tower long ago, but I never really understood what it was. Still don’t, not really. What I do know is the only people that ever actually arrive are those ‘ka wills’ or something. Which, from what I’ve heard, generally means a long journey. In the case of Corona and I, it makes sense. It took us a while to get there.”

Minna glared. “What’s with everyone always saying things have to take time!”?

“Because good things come to those who wait, little one,” Rev told her.

“You have another idea,” Starbeat said. “Otherwise you wouldn’t have groaned so loudly.”

Rev rubbed the back of her head. “Yes. I know of a world where everyone worships the Dark Tower as God. I… take serious issues with the place. But they know about the Dark Tower. They probably know more about it than anyone. They wouldn’t tell me anything while I was there, but they may be willing to help those with the calling.”

“So we have to join a mysterious Tower based religion?” Alushy asked. “Sign me up!”

Rev shrugged. “Maybe? I wouldn’t trust them though. They’re worse than the Flowers. The Flowers view ka and the Tower as a sort of baseline by which to measure the way ‘things should be’. These people worship it in a very very crazy way. Like, end-of-the-world cult crazy.”

Starbeat glanced at Minna. “Taking a kid into the center of a multiversal doomsday cult to find her mother. Yeah, sounds like something that wouldn’t ever be done. That means it’ll work.”

“Now we’re talking!” Blackjack whooped.

Squeaky didn’t say anything. She just took in a sharp, agonized breath.

Rev pulled out her dimensional device. “Shall we go right now?”

“YES!” Minna practically screamed. “Get us to Mom!”

Rev smiled. “Ah, to be young again…” She activated the device, taking them to another world.

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“Right!” Pinkie declared, slamming her hoof on the solid gold table she had chosen for their meeting. “How was mission ‘learn everything we could about the Collector’?”

The rest of her team and Allure started talking all at once.

Pinkie facehooved. “Allure, as the current Sixth Ranger, you go first.”
“He’s human,” Allure offered. “That metal suit’s hiding a human man. One that’s apparently normal, according to the Collected who can sense such things. A floating brain told me there was no way for him to accommodate as much information as he does with a simple human mind.”

“The suit augments him,” Nova offered. “It’s tapped into many energy signatures – magic-based, spirit-based, eldritch-based, everything. I can’t even identify most of the things in it, probably because he’s accumulated a lot of additions to it over time.”

“The Collector is at least ten thousand years old,” Flutterfree offers. “He’s been here since the beginning and he’s never been replaced. On a psychological level, he’s got a tremendous hero complex that drives the entire Collection to ‘better’ the multiverse. He came from an Earth where he was heavily invested in fiction – and his favorite stories were what comprised the early Collection. Stargate. Star Trek. Final Fantasy. My Little Pony.”

“Of course,” Vriska muttered. “A fanboy. Makes perfect sense.” She folded her arms. “Apparently the Collector’s a nice guy if you’ll let him. The few who can work past his utter dominion over them consider him a friend. Good listener, has amazing thoughts about life, yada yada, standard Mary Sue stuff.”

Jotaro looked into Pinkie’s eyes. “He has a plan. He will mention it occasionally, but nobody knows what it is. As far as the Collection is concerned all their missions are unrelated things designed to help the multiverse in small ways. But they believe the plan will come to fruition because the Collector knows so much.”

Pinkie nodded. “Good work team! I found out that he’s not Aware. At all. He just has a lot of Pinkies and others who are Aware working for him. A few Prophets to boot. Though he doesn’t have them write things for him that often.”

Allure furrowed her brow. “I don’t get him. Well, I do, but at the same time I don’t. I’ve come to terms with the slavery being ‘for the greater good’ and all that, but… it just seems like there’s more to him than that, y’know?”

“Allure grunted, ramming her head into the table. “…How does all of this help us anyway? We can’t use anything we find even if it is useful. And we can’t tell anyone because of the stupid loyalty thing.”

“Fun fact: he’s not that much of a Sonic fan,” Vriska offered.

“…Then why does he dress like Metal Sonic?” Allure asked.

“Don’t ask me, I’m just here to fuel your internal brain burning.”

Allure furrowed her brow. “I don’t get him. Well, I do, but at the same time I don’t. I’ve come to terms with the slavery being ‘for the greater good’ and all that, but… it just seems like there’s more to him than that, y’know?”

“Did anyone figure out how that works?” Pinkie asked.

Nova lifted a hoof. “I remember hearing something. It’s run by a machine here, in the Collection. I don’t pretend to know how it does this, or why, I didn’t really ask about it.”

Pinkie furrowed her brow. “That sounds like a lead. If there’s a machine that runs it, it could be destroyed. At least interrupt the control.”

Jotaro raised an eyebrow. “And how are we going to destroy it?”

“By accident?”

Vriska shook her head. “Pretty sure he’s worked that out already. Rick could have forced an
Flutterfree looked down at her reflection in the gold table. “Pinkie, what are we doing?”

“Gathering information!”

“I know that. But that doesn’t answer the question you know I asked. If we were just gathering information because it’s good to know things, there’d be no problem. But we’re specifically looking for ways to fight back, even though we know that if we find something, it’ll be useless to us.”

Pinkie frowned. “…You never know. It might be helpful to know these things.”

“I just think we shouldn’t be giving ourselves false hope. We’ll have to be rescued – we’re not going to be able to do anything about this ourselves.”

“Gee, way to be a downer,” Vriska muttered.

Allure wiped a tear from her face.

“Allure!” Flutterfree said, panic evident in her voice. “I’m so sorry that was inconsiderate of me!”

“…You’re right though. I can’t do anything to get back to Minna.” Allure shook her head. “We just have to hope Starbeat’s scans worked and that nothing goes wrong after that.”

They all nodded, silence falling around them.

The door to the room opened.

“Hey, I reserved this for a private meeting!” Pinkie blurted. “Why d-” she stopped short when she realized who it was.

Lightning stood in the doorway, expression unreadable. “I have reports that you six are asking a lot of questions about the Collector.”

They gulped.

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“Second to last universe,” Rev declared as they walked onto a planet made entirely out of giant bones. “…Grim, I know, but it’s the fastest way.”

Alushy sniffed the air. “Ah, I love the smell of death in the morning!”

“This world has seven suns, there’s no such thing as morning.”

“Why aren’t we burning to a crisp?” Blackjack asked.

“The heat coefficient is different here,” Rev and Starbeat answered at the same time.

“Eggheads,” Alushy whispered to Minna, who had decided the back of the vampire-pegasus was a great place to be.

“Eggheads,” Minna agreed.

Rev smacked her dimensional device. “Looks like it needs more charge to make the last jump. Give me a minute.”
“We can use mine,” Starbeat said, pulling it out. “…Wait, that’s odd, it’s empty. But I always keep it charged.”

Alushy took out hers. “Empty as well.”

Starbeat’s pupils dilated. She took out a ka sensor. “We’re screwed.”

Squeaky whimpered.

“The readings suggest giant monster attack,” Starbeat reported.

“This world is dead though,” Rev said, working to charge up her device. “How cou-”

A skull rose out of the planet of bones like they were a liquid, a tremendous spine the width of a great redwood all that kept the skull rooted to the ground. A soft black haze wafted off the giant bone creature. It opened its mouth, attempting to roar – but it lacked vocal cords, so it produced only an eerie silence.

Then it charged.

“Who’s ready for Complete Bullshit?” Alushy asked. “That’s right, one bone snake!” She tossed Minna off of her and onto Squeaky. The vampire rose into the air, opting to let her wings transform into shadows. She latched onto the interior of the skull monster’s mouth, driving black spires through its bony nose. It bit down on her, dividing her in half.

Alushy didn’t care. She entered full shadow state, tearing through the bone with jagged shadows and teeth, eyes rippling all around her body.

“I’ll protect you,” Squeaky told Minna, trying to cover her eyes.

“Hey! I wanna see! This is awesome!”

Blackjack entered the fray, producing her grenade launcher and decimating the creature’s spine. Where it was weakened, she used her starmetal sword to cut the trunk-sized bone clean through. Its head was now severed from the body and came crashing down to the earth, shattering among the other bones.

Starbeat blinked. “Wow. You two really are impressive.”

Alushy formed herself back into her pegasus form, putting a spare pair of red glasses on her face. “The correct term is fudgemotheringly awesome.”

“…What? No. Never in the history of ever has that been the correct term,” Blackjack retorted.

“It is when you’re me! I’m a fudgemothering vampire! I killed a lo-”

“Cut the speech,” Starbeat muttered. “Rev?”

Rev opened a portal. “Of course it’s ready now.”

“It’s how these things work.”

“That was amazing!” Minna cheered, hopping back onto Alushy’s back.

Alushy rolled her eyes. “Yes. Yes it was. But can you say fudgemotheringly awesome?”
“Stop trying to get me to say words Mom doesn’t want me to say.”

“Smart kid,” Blackjack observed.

“Terrifyingly so,” Alushy agreed.

The six of them stepped through the portal to another world – one where every single building was black, tall, and round. Every one was clearly based after the Dark Tower, though they could see the tops of all of them. The sky was a brilliant red on one side, a bright blue on the other. No sun was visible.

The streets were black cobblestone, occupied only by a few humans wearing black cloaks with a brown symbol imprinted on their backs: a circle with four sharp lines drawn through it, giving a vague representation of the letters K and A together.

“Starbeat and company, we’ve been expecting you,” a man said. He was an elderly human with a significant hunch in his posture, so crooked he needed a cane to keep himself upright. He was bald and his forehead wrinkles were so extreme they almost covered his eyes.

“Marias,” Rev said, the name obviously leaving distaste in her mouth. “It’s been a while.”

“The past is the past, almost another story entirely,” Marias said, waving Rev away dismissively.

“Come, Starbeat, we will talk in my room.” He walked to the nearest tower and knocked the door six times. It opened on its own, revealing a simple, black interior with a bed, bookshelf, cabinet, and staircase to the next level. He took a meditating position in the middle of the floor and gestured for the others to come in.

Starbeat sat down in front of him. “Marias… Who are you?”


“The Tower’s Testament?”

“A series of books compiled relating to the Dark Tower and its role in our lives.” Marias smiled warmly, despite his ancient features. “A role you are well acquainted with.”

“Just get on with it,” Rev muttered.

Marias ignored her, instead taking Starbeat’s hoof in his hands. “You have been cured… But is it really a cure? Or just a different fate the Tower allowed you to take? Were you always destined to come on this path? Was there really a choice?”

Starbeat blinked. “I don’t know. Those are the things you’re supposed to know, right?”

Marias nodded. “You’re going to be disappointed. The nature of Free Will is one of the largest debates among the followers of the Tower. Is there Free Will? Or does the Tower dictate everything? What is our role in its plan?”

A million questions swirled around Starbeat’s head, but one rose to the surface, screaming to be answered. “Marias… What is the Dark Tower, really?”

Marias smiled softly. “…The last time I was asked that question, the asker didn’t deserve to know the answer.” He glanced at Rev with an unreadable expression. “But you, Starbeat… You’ve been touched by the Tower, and fought against it. If there was ever a person in this multiverse who
deserved an answer to their deepest questions, it is you.”

He had the complete attention of all six visitors, including Rev. He cleared his throat.

“To truly understand the Dark Tower, we must go back to the very beginning…”

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Lightning sat down at the golden table, putting her feet up. “What would you like to know about him?”


“Why would I be? It’s natural for new recruits to want to know about him.” Lightning waved a hand in the air. “If I got angry at that, I’d be angry at everyone.”

“The bigger mystery is why you’re willing to tell us things about him,” Jotaro pointed out.

“He doesn’t have many secrets. Most people aren’t willing to go talk to him, so I’m the source of information.” She looked at them expectantly. “Ask anything. Chances are I’ll have an answer for you.”

“What is he?” Flutterfree asked.

“A human in a robot suit,” Lightning said, raising an eyebrow. “Though to answer your real question, he is a Gary Stu Self-Insert from a standard Earth, written by his Prophet to be an unbeatable conqueror who gathers his favorite characters and, by force, creates teams with them. He then uses these teams to turn the multiverse into what he wants, over time.”

“That’s… concise,” Nova admitted.

“Doesn’t give us much to go off of,” Allure said. “…What’s a Self-Insert?”

“When an Author writes themselves into the story – usually not the literal version of themselves writing the story, but a character based on them,” Lightning answered.

“So an evil or sadistic Prophet, then?” Allure shuddered at the thought.

Lightning shrugged. “No. The Prophet is just some kid typing away at a keyboard on some Earth somewhere. Not evil, just curious to see what would happen.”

Vriska folded her arms. “At least he has no idea what he’s doing. There are some particular orange fucktards who most definitely do.”

Lightning shrugged. “I wouldn’t know.”

“What’s his plan?” Pinkie asked Lightning.

“Can’t tell you that, it has to be a surprise.”

“But you know.”

“And for all I know, you do as well,” Lightning said. “The difference being that you are physically incapable of telling anyone about the plan if you do know it.”

Pinkie’s left eye twitched. “You’re goooood.”
“You’re not the first Pinkie we’ve had here. Far from it, in fact.”

Pinkie nodded, sitting back in her chair. “You know we’re the heroes, right?”

Lightning nodded slowly.

“There’s a reason you didn’t capture us back at the audition, and that’s because our *ka* was too strong. What changed so suddenly, Lightning?”

Lightning looked at Pinkie. “I can’t tell you that.”

“AHA! So it has something to do with the plan! Gotcha! I’ll weasel out information from you yet!”

Lightning’s expression did not shift.

Pinkie glanced at Jotaro. He did not offer her any assistance in reading Lightning’s poker face. The pony sighed and slouched in her chair. “Ptooey.”

“Here’s my question,” Allure spoke up. “Why does he dress like Metal Sonic if he’s not a Sonic fan?”

A small smile came to Lightning’s lips. “He had a friend, once, who used Metal Sonic as a symbol for themselves. The appearance is to honor them.”

“…That was more mundane than I was expecting.”

“It doesn’t hurt that it makes it easy to keep adding more and more technology.”

“Still mundane.”

Vriska looked at Lightning and smirked. “How exactly does the loyalty thing work?”

Lightning folded her hands, performing an internal calculation. “There’s a machine. He calls it the Catcher. As in, it catches exceptions. It’s what allows the Collector to ensure your obedience without resorting to pure, brainwashing mind control. You keep your entire personality, memories, and other connections – but the Catcher has a part of itself within you, one that continually watches so it can *catch* when you’re about to go against the Collector. Over time it has gotten absurdly complicated – needing to work in organic, digital, and magical minds, not to mention continually having to evolve to catch loopholes.”

“Can you show us?” Flutterfree asked.

“Yes. I won’t though. Find it yourselves, it’ll be like a treasure hunt.” She stood up. “There are a few locations in the Collection that are specifically hidden to give the Collection stuff to talk about, the Catcher is one of them. There are only a few places you actually *can’t* go, like the Collector’s office.”

“This place is weird,” Allure said for the umpteenth time.

Lightning nodded. “But we call it home.” She turned to leave.

“What exactly is your relationship with the Collector?” Nova asked.

Lightning paused at this one. “…I am his second in command. And his old friend.” She decided the conversation was over and left before they could ask any follow-ups.
Pinkie took in a breath. “Well, it’s time to go hunt down this Catcher.”

“Why?” Allure asked.

“So we can throw a ‘we found the Catcher’ party, duh!” Pinkie said, rolling her eyes.

~~~

There was a beginning to the Multiverse, you know. Many have spun wild theories about how it all began. The First Universe was one without time, the scientists say, so the idea of a beginning may not even apply. The First Universe was Earth, others say, explaining the prevalence of humanity and the sheer volume of Earthly variants. Still others say the First Universe was God Himself. Or, perhaps, the Sea of Infinite Possibility existed in its nonexistence and for a moment forgot it was nonexistence. The crazy things people delve into when trying to explain true origins.

I want to take a moment to remind everyone we don’t even know for sure there was a First Universe. All we know for certain is that there was a First Multiversal Society, and that’s it. Did they come from the First World and create every other universe they ran across? Perhaps. Was there a natural way to create universes back then? Also a possibility. The sad truth is we don’t know, and there is no way for us to know. The ‘why’ will become apparent soon enough.

The Story begins not with the First Society, but the ones that came after. We know that there were two Class 1 Societies at the time – the Weavers, and the Builders, the latter of which are sometimes called the Great Old Ones, though this conflicts with the name for high eldritch deities.

The Weavers are known, even today, for using their awe-inspiring power to chain universes together into pieces of art. Grand structures designed to bring beauty to the multiverse. It is theorized they are the reason why the Strands are so easy to move through and why the Multiverse is organized into three Spheres in the first place. They brought order to whatever the arrangement was prior.

The Builders were different. They were not satisfied with simply bringing beauty and order to the multiverse. They were at the top and were struck, as a society, by how pointless everything seemed. They could do anything, be anyone, create any universe… But what was the point of it all?

This was a question one of their members asked all his life. His name was Gan.

He finally came up with the answer.

The multiverse had no inherent meaning to it – everything was pointless, meaningless, and void of any real substance. But Gan had realized something – in their desire for meaning, they had created meaning. This meaning was not to be found in their lives, but in their stories. Their legends. The worlds they imagined apart from the worlds they lived.

Gan was eventually able to convince his entire society that bringing stories to life was the way to bring meaning to the world. And so began the construction of the Dark Tower. While the Weavers carved out the multiverse, the Builders placed a stake in the effective center of what the Weavers were making and called it their own. They built one structure compared to the Weaver’s hundreds of thousands – but it is the most important multiversal structure in existence.

Gan knew that bringing stories to life would require alterations to the way things were – a force that would be able to overwrite the predictable, tedious, pointless physics whenever needed to drive the true essence of an event where it needed to go. But this force could not be consistent, nor could it be based off only one culture’s stories – that would make it biased. It had to be neutral so it could create the most inclusive of all possible stories.
It was Gan’s genius that created the Dark Tower’s true inner workings – it would not operate on an internal computer, nor a database of every piece of fiction known to man. No, it would tap into the minds of those with the creative drive to build a world. The Dark Tower would take the visions of these people and create entire worlds based on them – and then it would fill in the gaps with what it learned from other authors. Every background character would get a life, every trope would be played out in the background, every tree that fell with nobody to hear would make a sound.

The Dark Tower turned a multiverse with no direction into one brimming with stories, life, and powerful meaning spilling over the edges of people's lives. It weaves everything together.

After it was completed, the Builders’ society collapsed. They had put every last resource into making the Tower, and because of it, they fell. They understood it was their creation’s way of telling them their story was done, it was time to make way for the others. They didn’t fight it.

The Weavers tried to fight, but they did not know how to operate in a multiverse where ka suddenly existed. There were rules they couldn’t understand, and they failed to adapt, vanishing as well – leaving the multiverse a fresh stomping ground for anyone who wanted to take the torch.

Shortly thereafter, relatively speaking, we have the legend of Roland and how he ensured the Dark Tower would never fall, but that’s a story for another time.

Nobody is exactly sure how long ago that was in metatime. So long that there have been multiple versions of many Class I societies at least, a timescale so vast it couldn’t be accurately measured even in the lifespans of ‘immortal’ eldritch deities.

What is the Dark Tower? It is what allows for the impossible. An entire society devoted everything about themselves to create a way for the ordinary person to accomplish things they never could. It creates heroes and villains. It creates magic and mad science. It allows people to see the future – and see the past; at least as far back as the Tower itself has existed. For no true story can be written about a time in which the Dark Tower didn’t exist.

The Dark Tower is the center of the multiverse. It has a connection to every universe in existence, giving each one the amount of ka it needs. It shapes the events in every world to have an impact. The Dark Tower provides a reason to live. Its will is beyond our will – The will of the Tower is perfection.

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Starbeat and her five companions stared at Marias, rather dumbfounded by all the information they had just been told. Some of it they had suspected already – but there were parts that challenged their view of reality.

“…Wow,” Starbeat eventually said.

“Quite the answer, isn’t it?” Marias asked.

“You could say that.”

“Are you kidding?” Blackjack blurted. “We just learned the secret of the multiverse! We know what drives all of existence!”

“A lost civilization’s dying breath…” Squeaky commented.

“That’s… all very interesting, Marias,” Rev said nervously. “But that doesn’t help us get to the Dark Tower. It diverts all incoming traffic from other universes, because if everyone could find the Dark
Tower it wouldn’t be as special.”

“True…” Marias said, scratching his chin. “Let’s move on to a second sort of explanation. The Dark Tower is connected to universes in three ways. The first is the simplest – in every universe, there lies a direct connection to the Dark Tower. One can always try to dial it directly. One will always fail. You must take a journey to a universe where the Dark Tower manifests.”

“The Nexus?” Starbeat asked.

Marias nodded. “The Nexus is close enough to the Dark Tower that it has a direct manifestation. The Dark Tower appears, as itself, in a field of roses in those types of universes. In theory, anyone could walk up to the Tower and try to enter, though in practice it never makes it that easy.” He looked Starbeat in the eye. “This universe is the third type.”

“The third type?”

“Not far enough to only have a connection, but not close enough for a full manifestation. Many think our structures are designed to hide the real Dark Tower in this world, but that is simply intentional misdirection to make people think there is a direct manifestation here…”

Rev glared. “….Marias, why are you telling us all this?”

Marias ignored her, producing a rose from within the folds of his robe. It was the most rose-like rose Starbeat had ever seen. The petals were perfect, undamaged. The stalk was free of dirt and grime, despite the small flowerpot it occupied. The leaves glistened in the light and the thorns seemed sharp enough to tear across reality.

It didn’t glow with a holy aura, but a meaningful aura. An aura that captivated them all, drawing them in.

“This is a secondary manifestation,” Marias said. “An object or entity within a single universe that is brimming with the Dark Tower’s power. Such things can be useful, to the right people.”

Starbeat became lost within the intricate folds of the rose, the way it moved in the air making it impossible to look away. It invited her to the secrets of existence, offering her a reason for everything… It must be protected… Starbeat wouldn’t let any harm come to it…

It took some time for her to realize she was looking at a different, less important, rose. She shook the confusion out of her head and looked around.

She stood in a field of roses. None as powerful as the one she had just been staring at, but all more than just normal roses. The sky was a moody purple lit by two moons, telling her this most certainly wasn’t the Nexus.

But the Dark Tower was there. It stood, rising into the sky, an impossibly tall cylinder of darkness. The doors of the entrance beckoned to her, telling her that her time had come.

She lifted a hoof to walk to the tower, an impossibly sharp thorn cutting her skin enough to bleed. She scarcely paid it any mind, only enough to go for self-levitation rather than walking the rest of the way.

She reached the door – and pushed.

~~~
It wasn’t really like a treasure hunt. This was probably because the combination of Vriska’s Luck and Flutterfree’s Stand made it possible to cheat through just about every little puzzle, obstacle, or mystery on the hunt, making it decidedly boring.

After asking a few questions around about the Catcher, they were directed to a door that, supposedly, could not be opened. Vriska knocked on it a few times, popping it open. There was a maze next that Vriska walked through, first time, without a problem. Then there was a ‘choose the real door’ puzzle that Lolo solved instantly. Then there had been a puzzle box that Lolo also made quick work of.

Apparently Revelation worked on the interiors of locked boxes as well. The secret inside wanted to be seen so badly Lolo just knew how to open it.

“Good going Flutters!” Vriska cheered, taking the keycard that had been inside the box.

Flutterfree beamed. “Aw, thanks.”

“Wonder if we’ll get a puzzle you two can’t solve next,” Nova muttered.

Jotaro shrugged, indicating that he didn’t particularly care that he wasn’t needed to solve the puzzles.

Vriska slid the keycard into the next door. The vault-like chunk of metal in the wall whirred internally, dispelling its invulnerability and opening for them – revealing another room with a locked door on the other end.

Allure groaned. “How long does this go on?”

“Enough,” Vriska said, strolling in with a big smile. She began to search the room, looking for any clues or puzzle objects. She found none. “…Huh. Yeah, I still have decent amounts of luck, I should see something.”

Flutterfree sent Lolo across the room – finding nothing hidden. “Weird.”

Pinkie bounced up to the exit door, pressing her face to it. “Hrm… Quite a poser, this one. The door has no reader, no handle, no puzzle lock…”

Nova scanned it. “Also no invulnerability spell.”

Jotaro adjusted his hat. “Tch.” He summoned Star Platinum and began to whale on the door. “ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA!”

The foot-thick chunk of reinforced metal began to cave, buckling under the Stand’s impressive strength.

It opened before it finished caving, revealing the face of Rick. “You only have to knock once, retard.”

“Rick!?” Vriska blurted. “What are you doing in the treasure hunt!?”

“I’m not,” Rick said, grunting. “I’m at the Catcher.” He threw his arms wide, gesturing at the large room they were in. Every surface was covered in an almost black metal, including the pillar in the center. Said pillar would pulse blue every few seconds, revealing complex circuitry along the outside.

“Behold, the brainwasher,” Rick said. “Pat yourselves on the back for working out all those childish puzzles. Now realize your only reward is to look at the instrument of your own hell.”
“Gee, you’re cheery,” Nova observed.

Rick sat down in a beach chair, pulling a device out of his labcoat that summoned a bottle of beer. He drank and burped. “What do you expect? Me to suddenly gain the ability to smile at everything because, I’m a fucking slave? Or maybe I should feel happy about cheating my way through all those puzzles, huh? Or, here’s a kicker, I know exactly how to destroy this thing and what it will do!” Rick laughed. “See, he apparently designed it with a weakness in mind, just to taunt us. Either that or he’s an absolute fuckwit. You see that area at the base I’ve outlined with red spray paint?”

Allure walked over to it and poked it with her hoof. “Yeah?”

“Shoot that with enough power and the entire thing comes crashing down. Boom. No more loyalty program.”

Jotaro curled his fist. “Yare yare daze…”

“It’s right there!” Nova shouted. “Right there! The solution! And we can’t. Do. Anything!”

“AUGH!” Pinkie yelled, ramming her face into a wall. “Just… Why can’t we catch a break?”

Rick burped. “Because you’re part of the Collection now, shitheads. Get used to the constant feeling of powerlessness. I hope you like being absolutely dominated because that’s how things work around here.”

Nova glared at him. “You are a terrible human being.”

“What a stunning revelation,” Rick deadpanned. He put on a pair of sunglasses and leaned back in his chair. “If you want to make it even worse, I have some doomsday weapons in my lab next door. You can point them at that spot to try and make yourselves feel better.”

Nova twitched.

“Oh, here’s another idea! How about you use them to break into the Collector’s office? Or into the ‘uncontrollables’ room that’s just a little ways below us? Oh wait, we’re not allowed in those places.” He spread his hands wide. “So you can’t even start the plan to get to them!” He launched out of his chair and threw his sunglasses away. “Do you understand how truly fucked up this is yet!”

Allure stared at him, tears in her eyes. “…We got that already, Rick.”

“I don’t think you did, because you’re still romping around trying to be little escapee heroes! Let me tell you something – there were no real heroes out there, it was all fake! Everything was just a pathetic lie you told yourselves. You’re not ‘heroes’, there’s no such thing. The difference between a hero and a slave to the Collector is nothing. Give it up. Your life was pointless before and now it’s hell. Take a good, long look.”

“…You miss Morty, don’t you?” Flutterfree asked.

“If I needed a Morty in here I would just order an alternate version,” Rick said. “But there’s nothing to hide from here, so who cares?”

Flutterfree blinked. “You’re… You’re not kidding! What in the name of Celestia is wrong with you!?”

“Many things. Sentimentality ain’t one of them,” Rick said.
Vriska cracked her knuckles. “You’re about to have a whole lot of problems…”

Rick pulled a gun out from under his chair and shot Vriska. The Catcher didn’t allow lethal force, but luckily Vriska was conditionally immortal. Her vaporized dust congealed back into a solid form after a few seconds. “F-fuck…”

“You threaten the Rick, you don’t get burned, you just die,” Rick declared. “This thing has a nonlethal setting for the rest of you contemplating making a move on me. A nonlethal setting that makes you eject every fluid in your body out of every orifice until you wish you died.”

Pinkie looked at Rick with sad eyes. “Let’s go, girls. We aren’t wanted here.”

“No shit,” Vriska muttered, glaring at Rick. She turned tail and followed Pinkie out of the room.

Rick returned to sitting in a dark room with his sunglasses on.

~~~

Rev grabbed Marias’ collar in her magic. “What did you do to Starbeat!?”

Blackjack added a gun pressed to Marias’s head while Alushy flashed her fangs.

Marias smirked. “As we predicted, she was chosen to make the journey to the Dark Tower.”

“But what about Minna?” Squeaky blurted. “She’s the one who needs to find her mother!”

“Banking on one plotline for a result is a dangerous thing,” Marias said. “Fate may have chosen another for the task. It may turn out not to really be the child’s story. In fact, it will turn out to not be any of your stories.”

Rev started to sweat. “Marias…”

“Starbeat was the only one who deserved to know. The rest of you are in possession of knowledge you are not meant to have.”

“Everyone out of here!” Rev blurted, readying a teleport spell.

A magic nullification field swept through the room, cancelling the spell. Marias grinned, drawing a ceremonial knife. “You all end here.”

Blackjack cut Marias’s head in two with the starmetal sword. “Yeah, not everything uses magic, bucko.” She quickly handed a gun to each of her companions save Minna. “You know how to fire guns, right?”

“Bit-design?” Squeaky asked, turning the shotgun around in her hooves.

“Unicorn, actually, but it has a retractable bit you can put in your mouth in emergencies like this,” Blackjack offered. “Isn’t the best, but it’ll do.”

Alushy took her dual pistols out of her red coat, tossing Blackjack’s gun back to her. “I’ll just use my preferred method of execution, thank you. It’s killin’ time.”

“Minna, close your eyes,” Squeaky said as she cocked the shotgun.

“I’m going to watch every blood-soaked minute of this.”
“I was afraid of that…”

Rev looked at the gun in her hooves. For a moment, she contemplated using it. Then she tossed it to the side. “I have more than just magic I can use.” She made a cross motion in the air, her necklace taking on a white glow. “They haven’t cancelled Divine eldritch esoterics.”

Alushy kicked the doors of the room down, ready to take on anything.

There was nobody out there. Not only were the streets empty, but there wasn’t even a city around them.

“What the freshly squeezed hellfruit?” Alushy wondered. She turned around – Squeaky, Minna, Rev, and Blackjack were still with her, but there was no building behind them. It was as if the city had just vanished.

Rev narrowed her eyes, looking around nervously. “What I wouldn’t give for Lolo right about now.”

Blackjack pulled out her dimensional device. “Of course, blocked. YOU CAN’T KEEP US STUCK HERE FOREVER!”

“They might try,” Squeaky pointed out. “Even without magic, we’re not exactly weak.”

“They want us dead for our forbidden knowledge,” Rev reminded her. “They’ll kill us ritualistically if they can.”

The world around them rumbled. Brown, flat creatures began to rise from the earth, each taking the form of one of the five of them. Alicorn, unicorn, pegasus, or human girl. The number of these brown creatures just kept increasing and increasing, quickly reaching numbers so high they could not be counted.

Alushy narrowed her eyes. “We’re fucked.”

All the Blackjack-copies fired their guns at the five tributes.

Rev’s necklace flashed, a white aura surrounding all five of them. All attacks either missed or deflected off harmlessly. She entered a kneeling pose, trying to keep the holy barrier up. She knew it wouldn’t last forever, but she had no idea how long.

…The problem was, if her allies started killing and it was deemed an unholy act, the barrier would likely be cancelled. She had no idea if the brown creatures in front of them were people or not…

Alushy started shooting. “Incoming breakfast!”

Rev felt her barrier weaken. “Alushy, acts of viole-”

“STOP!” Minna shouted, holding her hand high. Blood dripped from her wrist, accentuating the color of the object she held in her hand.

*The rose.*

The brown creatures kept shooting. Some began to move in, ready to physically take the rose.

Minna put her other hand over the rose, preparing to crush it. “I’ll destroy it! Don’t think I won’t!”

They kept coming.
Minna pulled a petal off the rose. In response, the universe trembled, a small crack appearing in the ground beneath them. The *shriek* of reality made all the ponies feel like they *had* to protect the rose from Minna. They couldn’t let her destroy it!

Minna cupped her hand around the top of the rose. “Move and I crush it.”

Alushy, Rev, Blackjack, and Squeaky froze.

An acolyte of the Order of Gan – a woman in black robes – appeared as if from nowhere. “Child, you cannot harm the rose.”

“Yes I can,” Minna said. “And I will. *Unless you let us go.*”

“Child…”

“LET ME GO!” Minna *shouted*, pressing her hand down on the rose. The universe wobbled like a marble in a cup. “LET ME GO TO MOM!”

“Return the rose and we’ll talk about it…”

“Portal first,” Minna demanded.

The acolyte stared at her, dumbfounded. “How can you do this? The rose demands that all protect it! You can’t fight its importance!”

“Mom’s more important than this dumb rose!”

The acolyte stared at her in fear. “What… *are* you?”

Minna glared at her, refusing to answer. “Portal. Now.”

The acolyte nodded, allowing magic to return to them. Rev was able to charge up her dimensional device and dial out.

Minna tossed the rose to the ground. Such brazen disregard for a holy artifact made the acolyte scream in agony – but the rose itself suffered no damage from the drop.

They appeared back on the world of bones. Nobody tried to follow them.

“How did you do that!?” Rev asked Minna. “I’m not sure if even I could have harmed the rose!”

“It was just a rose,” Minna said, confused. “What’s so hard about crushing a flower?”

The four of them stared at her in fear – including Alushy.

They were unable to fathom how anyone couldn’t understand the *importance* of the rose.

Rev wordlessly opened another portal.

“Wait! What about Mom?” Minna demanded.

“Starbeat made it through,” Rev said. “She’ll find her for you.”

“…Are you sure?”

Rev tried to look at Minna with a calming expression – but her nerves got the better of her. “Y-yes.”
“What’s wrong?” Minna asked.

Nobody would tell her. They moved through the portal, leaving the bone world behind.

They didn’t see two men standing on top of a nearby skull.

“An interesting child, wouldn’t you say?” Randall Flagg asked, turning to the other man.

The Doctor furrowed his brow. “She’s like you.”

“Us, you mean,” Flagg corrected. “She can see pure beauty distilled to perfection… And not care.”

The Doctor didn’t retort.

“The best part is I have literally no idea where she came from!” Flagg spread threw his arms wide. “Isn’t that an exciting prospect Doctor? A mystery in the form of a child!”

“Stay away from her.”

“Naturally. Merodi Universalis beat me once already, I’m not going to tempt fate just yet.” He held up Black Thirteen. “But their fate sure is an interesting one… Always changing, shifting, but always powerful. The Tower has played exceptionally nice with them.”

“You would know how rare that is.”

Flagg laughed. “Sometimes, Doctor, I almost think you know me.” He twisted Black Thirteen in his hand – and was gone.

The Doctor simply walked away.

~~~

The doors of the Dark Tower slammed shut.

Starbeat was alone, though this fact did not surprise her in the slightest.

Here she was. Inside the structure that had given her so much hell through the years. The reason she’d been cursed until earlier that day. And yet… she couldn’t bring herself to hate the thing she was standing in. The air calmed her, made her feel a strange reverence for life and existence.

It was definitely manipulating her to feel this way. She knew it. But it wasn’t like she could fight it.

She started walking up the spiral staircase, feeling the material of the Tower beneath her hooves. She suddenly understood what Lieshy had told her – that it felt like flesh, but not a normal kind of flesh. Starbeat was certain the steps she was walking on were alive and breathing, but she couldn’t tell anyone why she was sure of that. The stairs weren’t moving, and they didn’t feel like flesh. They didn’t feel like stone either…

The Dark Tower… It was built on the corpses of Gan and his people. Was it literally made out of their bodies? Or was it a metaphor the Tower had brought to life after the fact? Was the tower Gan? Or was it separate?

These questions tickled the back of her mind, but answers were not forthcoming. She was left to flounder in her mind, searching for answers with but a taste of the real information contained within the center of existence.
She came to the first door and opened it. The day her Sunburst moved away. …Had that not happened, she knew she would never have declared war on the love curse. She would have been enthralled by it… Perhaps had one of the rare relationships that lasted a lifetime. But he moved away, and she slowly went mad internally…

Moving to the next door, she looked out over a field of roses. She closed the door – it wasn’t where she needed to be. As she climbed further, the life of the Tower urged her forward, begging her to continue her journey. A journey that she was so lucky to be able to take. Or perhaps it was a journey she had been taking her entire life?

She didn’t know. What she did know was the next door held the day she had gotten her cutie mark. She felt a ‘click’ with someone – a gray colt named Stormfly. It was a brilliant, powerful spark between the two of them. She rejected it, gaining the cutie mark of a falling spark – a rejection of the ‘brilliance’ of her world’s love.

How stupid was that?

She moved on, leaving yet another question unanswered.

The moment she got her goggles came next. She had custom made them herself because she wanted something to do other than panic about moving around in public. Other than study the curse to no end.

Then Eve and her team had come… They had saved her. Took her away from her home, gave her a lab, and allowed her to do what she wanted. There was the memory of her killing Cream, even though she didn’t really do that.

There was the memory of her meeting Vriska… of Vriska giving her the diamond card… of Vriska and her laughing about their days together…

Tears dropped down her face. “I’m coming for you,” she promised. She increased her pace, trotting up more and more stairs. But she couldn’t bring herself to levitate the rest of the way up – there was something about the journey that mattered.

She opened a door to see herself getting cured. She closed it quickly, moving to the next one. If Lieshy’s retelling of her time in the Tower was right, this one would be…

“Right,” Starbeat said, looking at herself opening a door. “Well, nice seeing you self, bye now.” She closed the door in her face.

She looked at the next door. Her future lay behind that one. But she knew it would not be one she could change. The Dark Tower didn’t just show a possible future, it showed an absolute future.

She trotted past all the doors, rising higher and higher into the Tower. She lost track of everything – steps, passage of time, number of doors – but she didn’t care. She needed to get to the top of this. She needed to see it.

She arrived at the last door. It was much bigger than all the others, and the knob was shaped like a rose mixed with a starburst. One word was engraved on the door.

**STARBEAT**

Starbeat knew that, when she went through this door, she would go to where she needed to go. But she wasn’t going to walk through right away – she was going to open it and look into the room at the top of the Dark Tower. She was going to see what Lieshy had only caught a glimpse of.
The mechanisms.

The room on the other side was round, and the walls were covered in symbols of every shape and kind. She saw symbols she recognized from Vriska’s and Aradia’s outfits, what she swore were cutie marks, numerous greek letters, and in a few places that appeared to be copies of Lai runes. She had no idea what the carved symbols meant, if anything.

In the center of the room was a round, gray podium. Above this podium was an eternally-shifting white spirograph that could never decide on a shape, but was brimming with energy.

The Source.

Behind the Source was a tall grandfather clock that sat still, unticking, the large pendulum motionless. The top of the clock contained a spirograph symbol, though it was static unlike the Source.

Starbeat was filled with dread for reasons she didn’t understand. All she knew was that the clock should never start ticking. Ever.

She knew she wasn’t going to get anything more out of looking at the room. She would have to enter – and she wasn’t going to be let in. She may have been chosen, but she wasn’t chosen for that high of an honor.

She stepped through the doorway… and appeared in the Plaza of the Collection.

She grinned.

Success.

Even better, she saw Vriska and the rest of them walking nearby.

“Hey!” she called, waving at them.

“Starbeat!?” Vriska blurted.

Starbeat grinned, tackling Vriska to the ground in a hug. “Yep! It’s me!” She tossed her mane.

“Notice anything different about me?”

Pinkie gasped. “YOU GOT A HAIRCUT!”

Starbeat rolled her eyes. “…No.”

Vriska looked at Starbeat’s front hoof. “…You don’t have your bracelet on.”

“That’s right! I don’t need it anymore!”

Vriska blinked. “You… Were cured?”

“Yes! No more bad romance, no more drive to kiss everything that moves! I’m just a unicorn in goggles now.”

Vriska laughed joyously. “Starbeat, I… how?”

“Flowers. We got a ka-signature of the Collector and gave it to a bunch of beings who like to take out things like him. As a gift, they cured me.” She clapped her hooves together.
“Of course then you got captured,” Pinkie said.

“Yeah. Collected,” Starbeat lied. “Looks like I’m here now until they figure out where exactly here is. It’s not the easiest place to find.”

“Not surprising,” Flutterfree admitted.

“Well, while we’re waiting, let’s throw a party!” Pinkie shouted. “The Starbeat is cured party! Woohoooooo!”

“Yeah. I’d like that,” Starbeat said, smiling. “Oh, and Allure?”

“Yeah?”

“Your daughter really is something. She’s got Alushy doing her bidding trying to find you.”

Allure blinked. “Excuse me while I have a freak-out of both pride and panic.”

“I understand. Take your time.”

They all had a good laugh at Allure’s hyperventilation.

Starbeat smirked. Of course, the Flowers aren’t going to have difficulty for much longer… The whole point of coming here was to tell them where it was. My ka beacon is more than enough to lead them right here…

~~~

“Ka beacon transmission detected!” Thanos reported, ramming his fists into a console. “Someone got here!”

For once, the Collector was surprised. “Already?”

“Yes. It only existed for a moment, we couldn’t pinpoint it’s location… But I’ll find them soon.”

“Don’t bother,” the Collector said. “We were already prepared for the assault. If it happens now or two days from now, it doesn’t matter.”

“We haven’t had time to prepare the Collection!”

“Some of our best agents are out on missions,” Lightning pointed out.

“Recall everyone you can,” the Collector said. “The instant any Flower presence actually shows up, Bill will activate the weirdness bubble. Double check our ka output to make sure everything’s feasible.”

Thanos nodded, moving to a console and pressing his hand to it, interfacing directly.

The Collector curled his hands into fists and rubbed his knuckles together.

“You’re nervous,” Lightning observed.

“Of course I’m nervous, the plan’s moving faster than expected.”

“No plan survives contact with the enemy.”

“I know,” the Collector muttered. “I’m beginning to wonder if it’s really worth it… first Them, now
something I didn’t see coming accelerating the clock… Are we really ready?”

Lightning stared at him. “You’ve already committed.”

“…Yes. I know. I know.”

“I won’t let you stop now, you know that.”

The Collector nodded slowly. “Right… We go ahead with what we have. Time is meaningless, more or less, right? In some cases anyway.” He shook his head. “Go, prepare our star agents for the inevitable attack. Leave out the Merodi. I’ll let them be surprised.”

Lightning nodded, jogging away from his sights.

He rubbed his knuckles together again.

“Achieving victory always calms me down,” Thanos offered.

“Thanks,” the Collector said. “It doesn’t do as much for me though. Perhaps because I’ve been doing it for so long.” He shook his head. “Just keep analyzing. They’ll be here very soon. Actually, come to think of it, they’re likely going to pull a ‘we were here already’ on us with those plot holes of theirs.”

“We have a contingency for that.”

The Collector nodded. “Yes. It’s still going to be confusing though.”

“No argument here.”

~~~

Flowers didn’t generally make their own ships. There were a few organic constructs they used to get around their local worlds, but their military was largely composed of ships they ‘found’ from other worlds upgraded with the best Flower technology available. Star Trek was the most popular, since it was one of the favorites among PPC agents. There were so many Enterprises in the fleet it wasn’t even funny.

Jay, one of the most well-known members of the Department of Mary Sues, sat on the bridge of the flagship Enterprise – a version of the Enterprise-D from an alternate universe where it had three warp nacelles. A somewhat rare find in the multiverse, and Jay loved it.

Well, had loved it. She also had loved the assignment the Sunflower Official had given her when she heard about it.

“Acacia, what did you expect when you agreed to lead a fleet against a Gary Stu?”

“Explosions,” Jay’s partner, Acacia said.

“Right. You know, I really think we would have found some explosions by now. Except we haven’t. We’ve been sitting here jumping from universe to universe in this merry-go-round of mindscrewery, getting nowhere. I want a good fight!”

“It’s still going to be a few days until we process everything,” Acacia reminded her.

“Good things come to those who wait,” Acacia said, dropping a data pad in front of Jay. “We’ve just picked up a transmission from someone. It was only for a moment, but it’s enough. We’ve got a complete trail to the Collection complete with its dimensional signature. Even if he starts moving it around, we’ve got him.”

Jay stood up tall. “What are we waiting for? Call Upstairs, send a message to those people who told us about him, and activate the plot hole! Prepare all weapons – and tell those bozos in the Imperium Warship to stop being drunk and start being ready for war!”

Acacia smiled. “Sure thing.”

Jay grinned. “All right little Collector, your reign of terror on the Plot Continuum is over. Justice has come to your doorstep, demanding payment for all you’ve done. You can’t run from it, you can’t hide from it, and you’ll definitely suffer for it.”

“Really? I was thinking I could do all of those things and more. Say, fight it.”

Jay and Acacia whirled to see a hologram of the Collector on their ship.

“I hate it when you guys do this,” Jay muttered. “Can you evil-Sue types stop with the need to monologue for once in your lives?”

“I doubt it,” the Collector admitted, folding his arms. “I also doubt it’ll be as simple as you want.”

Acacia held a data pad in front of the Collector’s face. “Here’s your charges in case we don’t have time to read them aloud to you later.”

“Murder, enslavement, disruption of the multiversal fabric, being a heartless bas-” he stopped short. “Quite the list here.”

“Don’t forget ‘being an Overpowered Cheating Self-Insert Gary Stu’,” Jay said. “We’re coming for you, Collector. And your little dog too!”

Acacia and the Collector facepalmed.

“Just activate the plot hole.”

The Collector nodded. “I look forward to this. I would ask for an honorable fight, but neither of us are going to do that. So instead, I’ll just let you know how I respect what you do – but that I must disagree with your need to remove me. Sorry it has to be this way.”

“Stop being so polite,” Jay muttered.

The Collector shrugged, vanishing.

Jay curled her hand into a fist. “Why isn’t that plot hole activated?!”
Pinkie tossed Starbeat into a chair at the golden table. “Behold! Solid gold party place!” Pinkie declared. With a swish of her tail and a blow of a party blower, balloons and confetti were everywhere. She pulled a cake out of her mane and placed it in front of Starbeat, grinning. “Have a freedom cake!”

She examined the cake covered in instances of her cutie mark flying away from a central explosion of icing. “…Where’s the alternate version with Valentine’s face on it?”

Pinkie dropped the exact cake she described next to the other one. “BAM. One MURICA cake, as ordered.”

“I really need to stop suggesting things to you.”

“Something the rest of us learned a looong time ago,” Nova informed her.

“Well I didn’t hang out with much of anypony. Ever. But that’s all changing now!” She rammed her face into the first cake, making a horrible mess. She didn’t care – it just felt right to shove her face with reckless abandon into the pastry. She didn’t have to worry about anything happening when she looked up.

When she looked up a party cannon exploded in her face.

“Thank you Pinkie,” Starbeat deadpanned.

“You’re welcome!”

“So, I got here attempting to find you guys,” Starbeat said, rubbing confetti off her muzzle. “Not as exciting as it sounds, and didn’t exactly go as planned.” She put on a cute smile and examined them. “What did you guys get up to here since you’ve been gone?”

Allure started listing off things. “We met up with Morty, Ivan, and Gyro, spent some time wandering the Collection, got sent on a mission to stop some guy named Thanos, learned a lot about the Collector, and went on a treasure hunt for a truly pointless reward. The knowledge that we can do nothing!”

“Hm?”

“There’s a device called the Catcher,” Nova explained. “It regulates all the loyalty spell-things in our heads. Apparently somewhat easy to destroy, but it’s not like we can touch it because it controls us.”

Starbeat almost asked if they could go there – but that would have been way too suspicious. She had to play it cool. “Interesting. What did you learn about the Collector?”

Flutterfree filled Starbeat in on the strange facts they had learned about the Collector – painting a conflicting picture of the individual. Starbeat wasn’t sure what to make of him.

“A madman with a hero complex…” Starbeat muttered.

“Holy fuck he’s like the Doctor,” Vriska said, eyes widening.
“You know what, yeah!” Starbeat agreed. “Both have the ‘holier than thou’ mentality without anything to back it up!”

“And both seem unable to lose at anything!”

“Alternate versions?”

“Maybe!”

Flutterfree cleared her throat. “I thought we weren’t supposed to feed into Vriska’s antagonism toward the Doctor?”

“But he kinda deserves it,” Starbeat pointed out.

“We kinda deserve it,” Flutterfree countered. “Not as much as them, but don’t we kinda do the same thing? Do what we think is right despite what others say?”

Vriska rolled her eyes. “We’re not a single madman. We’re a we. That’s a lot better than one guy calling all the shots. There’s no way in hell one guy has all the answers to life.”

“Agreed!” Pinkie said, glancing at Starbeat. “But we can’t hold doing dishonest things against everyone, because we have to do them sometimes!”

*Shit, she knows.*

Pinkie didn’t make any visible response to this. “After all, we often don’t have a choice.”

Vriska rolled her eyes. “Bah. Think what you will. At least we can all agree he’s arrogant.”

“Oh yes, no argument there,” Pinkie said, smiling.

Starbeat examined Pinkie. *How can she keep my secret? She clearly knows what I’ve been through, and there’s no way the story we were experiencing was hidden from her… Why doesn’t the loyalty program take over and make her stop me right here, right now? The Collector has other Pinkies at his disposal…*

*What loophole has she found?*

Vriska put an arm around Starbeat. “So, Starbeat, howsabout just you and me go do some hanging out, whaddoyasay?”

“Awww but that’d cut the party short!” Pinkie wailed.

Starbeat smiled at Vriska. “It’s okay Pinkie. I think the two of us need to talk. Have a ‘feelings jam’ as it were. We can have another party later.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

Before Vriska and Starbeat could leave, the entire Collection shook.

Lightning’s voice entered all their minds. “*Alert: We are under assault. Prepare for possible combat!*”

“They got here fast,” Starbeat observed, trying to sound clueless.

Vriska frowned. “Great. On the one hand, hopefully they can teach the Collector a lesson. On the
other, now we have to prepare to fight them. Lovely.”

“Remember, we can use non-lethal force!” Pinkie chirped. “Just take them down, not out! …At least until the loyalty program takes over and demands a death for certain individuals.”

Everyone gulped.

“Try not to get too worked up about it, okay?”

~~~

The Flower’s fleet was already there.

Which was to say, they weren’t there, and an instant later they were there and had already been there a few minutes.

The wonders of plot hole technology.

From the outside, the Collection looked like a metallic rounded hourglass, predominantly made of white metal with the occasional ring of blue light. The station floated in the middle of a completely empty universe, the only light sources coming from the Flower’s fleet and itself.

Jay gave the order to begin the attack. The ships all fired their standard weapons – lasers, phasers, torpedoes, drones, magic lasers, you name it – but each and every one was infused with ka so it was impossible to dodge them. Every last one sailed toward the Collection, impacting the outer shield, an unidentified technology that created green hexagonal grid patterns when a bullet got too close. When the occasional attack broke through the first layer, there was a second layer of shields behind it.

Orders came in from Upstairs – Flowers far away, safe from the combat. It was time to use an omni-EMP.

Which was to say, a device that would have the effect of an Electromagnetic Pulse, except on every piece of technology in range regardless of whether an Electromagnetic Pulse would actually disable it or not. A large, spherical ship dropped a spherical ball laced with glowing blue flowers. As it tumbled through the darkness, electric sparks flew off of it, creating ripples in spacetime like a stick thrown into a pond.

It focused all its energy forward and unleashed a pulse – completely invisible, and directed entirely at the Collection.

“**HOW ABOUT… I COMPLETELY NULLIFY WHAT YOU’RE TRYING TO DO?**” Bill Cipher spoke into all of their minds. Raising one of his tiny hands, he created a tear in reality large enough to cast the entire Collection in a red light. The X-shaped fissure flooded the universe with alien physics – or ‘just plain weirdness’.

The sharp adjustment of physics from the particular Nightmare Realm Bill had opened created a bubble. This bubble would serve as a ‘natural defense mechanism’ to keep the Weirdness inside, protecting the outside world from incursion.

This was the opposite of what they wanted.

Then the Collector flipped a switch. A pulse of physics-altering energy shot out of the Collection’s core, turning the bubble inside-out, reversing its effect.

The omni-EMP hit the bubble – and dissipated into nothing. The level of ka-manipulation it used
was too much for the relative normalcy the interior of the bubble demanded.

The Flowers were surprised by this, but not unprepared. They had encountered such measures before, and themselves had several similar shields around their more important worlds. Thus, they knew how to break through them.

The next device was simply known as the Redactor. It appeared as four tulip heads affixed to each other, brimming with red energy. It pulled at reality from all directions, attempting to remove \( ka \) from the universe…

Red lights started going off on all Flower ships and within the Collection.

“STOP!” Jay yelled. “THE UNIVERSE IS DESTABILIZING! SHUT IT DOWN!” She didn’t wait for anyone to follow her order – she manually fired a torpedo from the ship into the Redactor, shredding its petals. Only a small black hole was formed due to this, and it was destroyed by spatial wrenching technology.

The universe is keyed to existence with \( ka \), and yet he has nullified it within the Collection. A Flower’s voice came into all their minds. Impossible – there must still be \( ka \) within the Collection for this to function.

Another Flower spoke up – Jay recognized this one as the Sunflower Official. It's a matter of scale. The \( ka \) within the Collection is small-scale, while we are trying to use large-scale manipulation out here. He’s played his cards well. We will have to play off the lesser levels to break through. Jay, woodpecker maneuvers with the Seeders.

“Right!” Jay said. “You heard the S.O.! Woodpecker! Seeder! Let’s move it!”

The fleet started pulling out Seeders – devices that looked like glowing bean sprouts – and placing them in front of their ships, firing the little things at the Weirdness Bubble. Instead of passing through, they stuck to it, using their miniscule \( ka \) manipulation to slowly ‘convince’ the Weirdness Bubble to revert back to normal. One Seeder would do absolutely nothing. Millions could alter reality on vast scales in universes where such things would normally tear causality apart.

The Collector tapped his hands on his console. “Time to start the actual fight.” He pressed a button, telling his fleet that it was time to go. A hundred or so ships that he had collected over the years flew out of the Collection’s docking bay into the vast blackness of space. They stayed within the confines of the Weirdness Bubble, careful not to allow the Flowers to get the jump on them. What they did do is use their weapons to blow the Seeders off the Bubble, using vast beams of energy and swaths of plasma to clear the air of the offending beans.

Move to a purely physical confrontation, the Sunflower Official ordered. Expect higher casualties than usual.

“Plan E?” Jay asked.

Will be underway the moment you are able to get a teleportation lock of any sort.

Jay nodded. “FIRE ALL WEAPONS! No manipulation. We’ve been normalized, people.”

The Flower’s fleet fired weapons, foregoing the use of \( ka \) in their attacks, allowing the missiles, lasers, and magic to pass through the Weirdness bubble. In response to this, the ships within the Bubble fired back, creating a volley of blasts back and forth.

Ships on both sides began to explode – and yet, somehow both sides knew this was going to be a
long, gruesome battle.

“Get us a teleporter lock on the interior,” Jay demanded. “Now.”

~~~

Blackjack wasn’t sure why Squeaky started yelling the moment they returned to the Golden Joke.

“What is wrong with you?” she shouted at Rev. “That was no place to take a kid!”

“You knew that,” Rev said with a sigh. “I told y-”

“You knew they would try to kill us before we even got there!”

Rev stared at her. “And yet, we got what we wanted, didn’t we? We’re all alive and Starbeat made it through.”

“It’s the principle of the thing! Minna is just a kid! Younger than any of the League has ever been! You don’t just take kids like that along for the ride!”

Rev frowned. “…Were she not there we would have perished, Squeaky.”

Squeaky blinked. “W-what?”

“None of us even thought of – or were able to think of – harming the rose. She was the only one. She saved us.”

Minna smiled. “I did!”

Squeaky twitched. “You… You…”

“Squeaky, what I did was not wrong,” Rev told her. “I didn’t want to do it, but it was what needed to be done. One does not ignore the call when it comes knocking.”

“I ignore it all the time,” Alushy commented.

“That explains a lot,” Blackjack said.

“Not really,” Minna added.

Blackjack shrugged. “Well, mission accomplished, emotional stress unleashed, what now?”

Squeaky looked like she had a long-winded retort to Blackjack’s sentence, but the Sunflower Official appeared in the middle of the Golden Joke in person, making everyone in the hall fall silent.

Due to the efforts of the unicorn we believe to be named Starbeat, we have found the Collection and begun the assault on the Collector.

There were a few whoops and cheers at this.

The battle, as it is now, is going to be a long, bloody, and hard one. We will lose many ships and likely will not be able to save any within the Collection itself. The explanation is long, and time is short, so just accept that he has found a way around our higher-order manipulative technologies. He was prepared for a confrontation. Normally in this case we would just destroy the universe from outside, but we have another method to try before we resort to such final measures.
“Don’t you dare destroy the universe with anyone inside!” Corona shouted.

*That is one of the reasons we are not*, the Sunflower Official said. *Within the Collection, low-level ka is still in play. Our calculations have determined that if we send people with a connection to the Collector in, those who have reason to fight him, there is a significant chance we can take the Collection out from the inside. What we need are heroes with high levels of importance and drive to fight inside the Collection. In other news, whoever is willing to volunteer out of deep personal obligation or desire.*

Minna raised her hand first – but Squeaky forced it down. “You can’t fight a war, Minna.”

Minna turned to Alushy, eyes wide.

Alushy rolled her eyes, raising her hoof. Blackjack did as well. Dozens of other limbs went up across the hall – Corona, Lieshy, Johnny, Death, YVND, Sunny, Nanoha, Discord, Jolyne… The list went on and on.

*Those of you who are leaders of your people, put your appendages down.*

Valentine, Toph, Eve, and a handful of others hesitated before doing as the Sunflower asked.

*This is not guaranteed to succeed, and your nations will need you long after this is over.*

“Screw you, I’m going anyway,” Jenny declared.

*As you wish. Gather everyone you can. You have ten minutes. I suggest finding a way to reliably resist the loyalty conditioning.*

“How are we going to do that!?” Corona blurted.

“I’VE GOT AN IDEA!” Jenny shouted, opening a portal to the Ninth World and jumping through. Everyone shrugged, hoping she was going to get something to help.

Rev turned to Alushy and Blackjack. She smiled. “You two… Good luck.”

“Not going to offer us a blessing?” Alushy asked.

Rev snorted. “Funny.” She tossed her mane back. “I’m going home – I was never one for large battles, or even violence at all. I leave this to you.”

“Yeah, we are pros at the killing thing,” Blackjack said, smirking.

“I also want you two to know that…” Rev struggled to find the words. “…I don’t agree with virtually anything you say or do. But I respect the place you hold in life. You’re both horrible people, but that’s okay. We’re all horrible in one way or another.”

“I feel strangely insulted and inspired,” Blackjack said.

“My words are often a two-edged sword,” Rev admitted. “Good luck.”

Blackjack saluted.

“BRING MOM BACK!” Minna called after Alushy.

“I will, kid. Or my name isn’t Alushy.”
“Isn’t it Yhsula?” Blackjack asked.

“…All right who found my source material and didn’t tell me!?”

No answer was forthcoming.

“Fine,” Alushy said, turning tail. “Blackjack, let’s ditch these losers. We’ve got ass to kick.”

“Let me grab some whiskey.”

Alushy raised an eyebrow. “Lemme guess, it improves your performance?”

“One can only hope it still does!” Blackjack laughed.

They walked up to the central stage, mingling with all the other volunteers.

“Okay!” Nanoha shouted, cupping her hands over her mouth. “We need to split into two groups – those who are strong enough to face minor deities and attack directly, and those who work best as more of a stealth group! The former, with me! Rest of you, talk to Lady Rarity!”

Blackjack and Alushy knew where they were going – they walked up to Nanoha. Corona, Discord, and Hastur were already next to her, talking about plans.

“Blackjack?” Nanoha said, raising an eyebrow. “You sure?”

“Yes. Feels right,” Blackjack said. “You know I’m powerful enough even without being the ‘Princess of Win’, you just don’t want to say it. Also, we don’t have time to argue.”

Nanoha nodded. “All right. Those of us here will be the heavy-hitters who serve as distractions for the others. We deal with all the Collector’s primary servants, which will likely have some entities with a very impressive résumé. I personally won’t be using lethal force unless I have to, but this is a war and the Flowers certainly will be. All of you make your own decisions.”

Corona nodded. “I’d recommend that, if you’re a lethal-force fighter, focus on individuals that look like they’re enjoying what they’re doing. It’s not a perfect system, but it’s the best I can suggest on the fly.”

Nanoha noticed more people coming – a handful of alicorn Twilights from the Sparkle Census, Jane, Sunny, Blumiere, YVND, Jenny, Death, and a handful of others – and began repeating what she’d just said.

“SHUSH!” Jenny said, snapping her fingers. A hundred small black octahedra fell onto the ground in front of her. She held one of the elongated devices up. “This Numenera is a mental reconditioner. We don’t really understand how it works, but when you eat it your mind cannot be altered from outside – it’s as if a firewall has gone up. Nothing we’ve done has gotten through these things, but their effect is only temporary. Once you eat it, you have an hour. It also might give you a headache and a nosebleed.”

“Good enough for me!” Corona said. “Everyone grab one of those!”

Blackjack levitated two over before the chaos began. She took a breath. “Today’s certainly been an eventful day.”

“It’s Tuesday,” Alushy commented, accepting the reconditioner from Blackjack.

“That joke doesn’t apply! This isn’t normal here!”
Alushy started howling.

“What?”

“I’ve been waiting forever to get someone with that! It’s actually Tuesday on this planet, Blackjack! GOTCHA!”

Blackjack blinked – then rolled her eyes and chuckled. “Right.”

Aradia appeared in a flash of red gears, dropping a handful of other people onto the ground. “And there’s all the people who would have been late.” She shook her head. “Shame on all you.”

Giorno stood up. “What am I.”

“Shh. I brought you here because you’re strong. That’s the only reason.” She winked.

Giorno accepted this with a shrug.

“Nanoha, I’ll be on time control,” Aradia reported, saluting. “No offense to the Flowers but I’ve got a better handle on it than they do.”

Nanoha bowed. “Thank you, Handmaid.”

Blackjack grinned. “Man, with a team like this, how can we lose!?”

Alushy facehooved. “You’ve jinxed us.”

“…Fuck. That’s actually really bad in this case, isn’t it?”

“Yeeep,” Alushy grunted. “And chances are I’m getting assigned to the same group as you. Wonderful.”

“I probably won’t blow you up!”

“Great. I’m going to have to come back from an explosion. Love it when that happens.”

~~~

The Primary Team for assaulting the Collection was composed of the strongest of the strong that had been present at the Golden Joke. Nanoha, Corona, Discord, Hastur, and Tom, the Star-spirit from Equis Fallout who took the form of an ethereal white alicorn shimmering with moondust.

They were one of many such groups within a cargo hold on board a Flower ship – none of them knew what the design was from, but it sure had a large cargo hold.

“YVND is in!” Someone reported. “He’s managed to screw their anti-teleport measures!”

“GO GO GO!” the Voice of Jay yelled over the intercom. “Start teleporting in already!”

Nanoha readied Raising Heart. “It’s been a while since I involved myself in a fight this large…”

“You’ll do fine!” Discord assured her. “But don’t feel afraid to tell me to tone down the chaos if it’s too much for you.”

“WE MUST FIGHT AT OUR FULL POTENTIAL,” Tom decreed. “EVERYONE IS COUNTING ON OUR ACTIONS HERE.”
Hastur nodded. “Including those we care deeply about.”

Corona nudged him playfully. “We’ll get your girl back, don’t worry. She probably can’t be beaten. I wouldn’t be surprised if he actually has her locked up somewhere reserved for people he just can’t control.”

“One can hope.”

“Primary team, away!” someone shouted.

They barely had time to react. One moment they were in the cargo hold – and then they were at the edge of the Collection Plaza.

“Defense, Corona!” Nanoha shouted. Corona nodded, creating a complex series of defensive enchantments around Nanoha. Tom aided in the defense as well, surrounding the two of them in a diamond-encrusted shield. Discord and Hastur moved to attack any of the Collection who were smart enough to realize they needed to move fast.

“HIGH POWER…” Nanoha shouted, pointing Raising Heart forward.

The Collection collectively realized what was happening and surged forward, hurling magic of their own. What wouldn’t have just bounced off of Corona’s and Tom’s enchantments were stopped by Discord and Hastur with a combination of eldritch power and chaos magic.

“STARLIGHT…”

The Collection finally started getting organized. One of their Discords appeared, summoning an apple covered in sawblades. Their Discord met this with a cactus-pear, showering the nearby Plaza in fruity death. More than a few of the Collected fell to the spiky-sawblade mixture.

“BREAKER!” Nanoha shouted, unleashing her spell. The cone of pinkish-white energy came out in a cascading cone that filled the entire Collection Plaza, hitting everyone with enough concussive force to knock out not only a regular human, but something several orders of magnitude more resilient than a regular human.

Most of the Collection fell to that one attack. This part of the plan had been beyond important – if they gave the Collection enough time to organize internally, they could overcome the incursion with sheer numbers, regardless of anything they did. This way there was a fighting chance.

The drawback?

The Collected who were still standing and ready to fight after the Starlight Breaker were going to be the really strong ones, as evidenced by the four beings approaching Nanoha’s group.

Kars, Bill Cipher, a Discord, and some impossible conglomeration of eldritch geometries that looked as if someone had stuck all the platonic solids together and decided it worked best as a liquid.

“I LIKE YOUR SPUNK, KIDS!”

“I AM OLDER THAN MOST PLANETS,” Tom said, indignant.

“And I’m older than most universes, get over yourself,” Bill said with a wave of the hand.

“Enough talk,” Kars said, sprouting a unicorn horn from his forehead and ten squid tentacles out of
his back. “We must fight.”

The geometric thing gurgled, then rushed them from all sides at once.

It was met with a combination attack from Nanoha, Hastur, and Corona.

“We’re not going to go out easily,” Corona said with a grin. “There’s a reason we’re here.”

The other Discord grunted. “Woohoo.” He clearly wasn’t really into the whole thing.

Bill, on the other hand…

He transformed into a giant red pyramid with three rotating sections, extra arms, teeth, and a dangling tongue. “FRESH MEAT SOON EVERYBODY!”

The giants clashed, tearing reality apart as they moved.

~~~

The Secondary Team held Blackjack, Alushy, Giorno, Tornado, and Death.

Alushy looked at the short, green-haired Tornado. “Hey… I know who you are! You’re that girl who got her mind fried by the Celestialsapien!”

“S-shut up,” Tornado said, weakly.

“What was it like?”

Tornado looked at Alushy, trying to muster the rage or courage to yell at her – but couldn’t do it. She just looked at the ground, despondent.

Blackjack nudged Alushy. “Give her some space – she’s helping us despite what happened. … Whatever actually happened.”

“Locked inside her own mind for a thousand years,” Giorno said, frowning. “Punishment for being impatient.”

Tornado twitched at the word ‘impatient’.

TRAUMA IS NOT GOTTEN OVER LIGHTLY, Death pointed out. IF YOU DO NOT WISH TO FIGHT, WE WOULD NOT THINK LESS OF YOU FOR DROPPING OUT.

“I… I want to. I need to. For me,” Tornado said, still refusing to make eye contact with any of them.

An announcement reached their ears. “SECONDARY TEAM GO! NANOHA’S CLEARED THE MAIN PLAZA! YOU’RE GETTING PLACED IN THE HALLS!”

The five of them had time to take a ready stance and were teleported to a hallway with two dozen or so random members of the Collection - the majority of whom were kid-squid hybrid things holding highly advanced sci-fi weaponry.

Death could have killed them all in an instant, but he was not one to kill without reason – he held back, watching to see what would happen.

Blackjack took out her sword and started cutting legs, spraying bright multicolored ink everywhere. “COME AND GET US! WE’RE INVADERS!”
“Normally I’d be chiding you for that, but it is what we’re supposed to be doing,” Giorno admitted. “GOLD EXPERIENCE REQUIEM!” Blackjack couldn’t see the Stand – but she assumed it was golden. Might have had something to do with the name.

Several inklings fell back from invisible punches. “USELESS! MUDA MUDA MUDA!!” Giorno shouted.

Alushy shrugged, transforming into shadow and taking out many of them with a sweeping motion.

Tornado let out a ‘tch’, a hold-on from her prior personality. She raised her hands, grabbing every visible member of the Collection, and tossing them to the side. “Stop showing off.”

A literal demon got up after Tornado knocked him down. He charged, eyeing her with eyes telling of a more horrid desire than simple bloodlust.

Death pointed at the demon and it died on the spot.

Blackjack whistled. “Nice.”

I HAVE TO BE SURE.

“So, where to next? We need to be making a lot of big booms.”

“Sadly, nowhere,” a tired voice said, walking toward them in plain sight. It was a version of Superman. “I’ve been told to stop you. And you know I can’t stop.”

“Sending the purest of the pure to attack Death…” Giorno muttered.

Superman rushed faster than any of them could see, punching Giorno in the face. The force should have killed him… But suddenly the punch had never happened.

Superman looked at Giorno, confused. “What did you do?”

“You will never reach the reality you seek,” Giorno said. “That is Gold Experience Requiem’s ability.”

Superman nodded. “A powerful one.” Blackjack started shooting him with bullets, but he didn’t even notice. “I hope you use it honorably.”

“Depends on your definition,” Giorno said, glaring.

Alushy rolled her eyes. “Enough talking more fi-” Superman punched her head clean off. It grew back. “HOLY HELL THAT WAS PAINFUL! I-”

Superman punched the head off again. Blackjack brought her starmetal sword down on him, but he twisted it out of her cyborg hooves easily. Tornado grabbed him with her telekinesis, but he was too strong to be held. He also intercepted Death’s scythe, twisting the weapon out of the anthropomorphic personification’s boney grip and throwing it at Giorno.

The Scythe returned to Superman’s hand. “You can’t win,” Giorno decreed.

“Not if I’m alone.” Superman admitted. “But the Collection has more than just me.”

Other superheroes began to appear – the Flash, Iron Man, Thor, Batman – all paragons of truth and justice, forced to do the bidding of the Collector.
Blackjack gulped. “This is going to be... fun.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” Alushy said, grinning. “I wonder if my teeth can pierce Superman’s skin...”

Another set of giants clashed, tearing through wall after wall of the Collection in their fight...

~~~

In one of the more secluded halls of the Collection, a dual-team was working at a console. That was to say, Olivia was working at a console while Lady Rarity, Lieshy, Froppy, Johnny, and Lileur protected her.

They had already taken care of a few dozen random people who had just wandered by. “Anything?” Froppy asked Olivia.

“If I had gotten anything done, I would have told you!” Olivia snapped. “This isn’t exactly a normal system and half of it operates on ka, far as I can tell. Give me a moment.”

“One of them is going to raise the alarm eventually,” Johnny said. “They may have already, as far as we know.”

“We just have to be ready,” Lady Rarity reminded him.

“People say that a lot.”

“Like sheep, we follow the shepherd,” Lieshy observed.

Johnny ignored her.

Lileur turned to Lady Rarity. “How can you understand her?”

“Practice. And getting lucky,” the spirid responded.

“Hm. It seems like it would be an interesting tongue to learn, if I have time.”

“All of us get vacations after this,” Froppy said. “All of us.”

“I’m going to take Gyro to another Earth,” Johnny said. “They’re just about to hold a Steel Ball Run. We’ll finish the race together.”

“You don’t get exclusive rights to Gyro,” Froppy pointed out.

“I get dibs.”

“...Ribbit. Okay.”

“...That’s not good,” Olivia said, taking a step back from the console.

“And we just lost jenga,” Lieshy facehooved. “What happened?”

“YVND’s been compromised. Don’t know if he’s just been captured, dead, or what, but he’s not assisting anymore.” She scratched the back of her head. “I can still make headway, but he was doing a lot of the heavy lifting...”

“Ribbit. Don’t worry, I’m sure you can do it,” Froppy said.
Olivia looked at her for a moment. “By the way, you and I need to go out for lunch sometime. There’s some things I’d like to say.”

Froppy blinked. “…Sure.”

Lileur cocked her head at Froppy. “You know her?”

“Not really,” Froppy said.

“I’m a hacker. There are secrets,” Olivia said, tapping a few things on her holographic displays. “You’ll just have to accept that.”

Lileur shrugged, not taking it personally.

Lady Rarity’s ears perked up. “Somebody’s coming. Multiple people.”

Johnny readied his Stand and aimed his fingernails. “Here we go again.”

Lieshy summoned Limelight and Froppy took a battle stance, tongue at the ready.

They had planned to attack the newcomers before they knew what was happening – but familiar faces made them hesitate.

It was Gyro, Ivan, Morty, and Davepeta.

“Gyro…?” Johnny said, lowering his finger.

Gyro put a hand over his face. “Johnny, why’d you have to come?”

“I’m here to get you!”

“…You should have stayed with your family.”

“What about me?” Froppy asked. “Should I have stopped looking?”

Gyro grimaced. “Sorry.”

Morty pulled a gun out of his pocket. “Nothing personal, but you’re our enemy right now.”

Ivan let out a dejected sigh.

“Guys, guys, I’ve got this,” Davepeta said, smirking. “I’ll just go back in time and stop them there. No pawblem, nobody has to kick the bucket.”

Aradia appeared in front of the sprite. “Good sentiment Davepeta… But I can’t let you do that.” She smiled sadly. “Looks like we’re finally going to get to see who’s the better Time player, huh?”

“Aradia…” Davepeta said, grimacing. “It’ll be a bloodbath.”

“I know better than you when that’s acceptable.”

“You’re too frivolous with your lives!”

Aradia narrowed her eyes, two time clones of her appearing to the sides. “I’ll be the judge of that, Davepeta.” They clashed – and vanished into time.

Morty fired his gun, a beam of instant-death energy flying forth. Johnny’s Stand Tusk blocked it with
its impressive pink girth. At the same time, Johnny retaliated with his own instant-death Infinite Spin bullets at Morty, but Gyro used Ball Breaker to block, countering with his own Spin.

“I wouldn’t use those Johnny,” Gyro said. “Somebody might get hurt.”

“Just keep them distracted!” Olivia blurted. “That’s all I need!”

Johnny shot holes of Spin into the ground, unraveling the space below everyone. Ivan summoned grand illusions that made the floor seem like it was rocking. Limelight punched the crystalline man in the face, shocking him. Lady Rarity swung her hammer, Morty fired his gun, Gyro shot a steel ball.

In other words, chaos broke loose.

~~~

Pinkie’s team, Allure, and Starbeat rushed outside into the Plaza. They saw thousands of unconscious forms.

Pinkie whistled. “Wow, Nanoha does not mess around.”

“There she is,” Allure said, pointing up. The rippling chaos-eldritch magic combination made it very difficult to see what was happening in the air above them, but they could catch glimpses of Nanoha’s signature magic circles.

Vriska produced her dice. “Well, time to go kill her. Or try, and get killed ourselves.” Then, under her breath, she added, “why did you have to come, Hastur?”

Jotaro summoned Star Platinum, ready for an attack.

“Wait!” Starbeat shouted. “Maybe we don’t have to!”

“What are you talking about!?” Flutterfree called. “Of course we have to!”

“What if we did something else to defend the Collection, something that didn’t involve fighting our friends directly?” Starbeat gulped. “Like… Going to go protect the Catcher! If they destroy that, it’s all over.”

“…Dammit Starbeat!” Nova blurted. “Why’d you have to think of that? Now we have to go do it! Gah!”

Jotaro furrowed his brow. “I’m not sure it’s our best course of action.”

“The loyalty spell allows it, we’re doing it,” Pinkie said. “This way we don’t have to do any fighting we don’t want to do!”

“We have to deal with Rick though,” Nova pointed out.

“Small price to pay. Ahem, Nova! Can you teleport us there?”

Nova nodded. “It’s not hard to get to a second time. Give me a few seconds…” She lit her horn and closed her eyes.

Starbeat scratched the back of her head. “S-sorry, was it really bad to think of that?”

“Now there’s not going to be a chance someone gets lucky and destroys it,” Vriska muttered.

“Which, frankly, I would have loved to happen.”
Well, they might follow us, Starbeat thought to herself. Which is frankly what I’m banking on since I doubt I can destroy it with all them watching.

In an instant, they were in the Catcher’s room. Starbeat marveled at the device.

“FUCK YOU!” Rick shouted at the seven who had just arrived. “Do you have any idea the aneurism you just gave me?!” He shoved his hand in their faces – it was holding a big red button. “I had this place rigged with so many traps it’d kill Cthulhu! I was going to push it! But the Catcher caught me and I had to tear my finger off that button. Do you have any idea how mentally painful that was!!?”

Vriska punched him in the face a lot softer than she would have liked. “Shut up, we’re here to protect it. It makes your job easier.”

Rick threw an empty bottle at her. She caught it effortlessly.

Starbeat pointed at the red spot on the Catcher. “This what we need to protect?”

“Yes!” Pinkie said. “Under no circumstances let any invaders get close to it.” Giggling, she scooted Starbeat until her face was pressed against the red mark. “See this? This is what you don’t want.”

“Riiiiight,” Starbeat said, chuckling nervously.

“All right, you’re suspicious,” Rick said, drawing a gun on her.

“W-what!?” Starbeat blurted.

“Hey, cut it out,” Allure said. “She’s very new and a bit overwhelmed by it all. We’re not all that calm either!”

Rick folded his arms. “How do you know she’s not with them, huh?”

“She came here long enough before the attack to have a party?” Flutterfree said. “Rick, stop being paranoid.”

Rick stared at Starbeat. “Bah. There’s enough uncertainty now the Catcher won’t let me take the shot.” He tossed the gun to Starbeat. “Enjoy.”

“…I don’t need this.”

Rick leaned back to his lawn chair, putting his finger on the red button again. “First sign of trouble, kaboom goes the weasel.” He burped. “Ugh… What’s a guy gotta do to get a decent drink in this place?”

Pinkie tossed him some beer.

“Thanks.”

“Screw you,” Pinkie declared with a perfect smile on her face.

“Ah, another member of the ‘everybody hates Rick’ club. Shocker,” Rick muttered. “You really should invest in obtaining some fucks to give. Screw is kind of pathetic.”

“You wanna get insulted?” Vriska challenged. “Ooooooh I’ve got a list of retorts for you. How about we start with your complete lack of social skills! Specifically, why not talk about that hive-mind you like so much.”
Rick glared at her.

“Ah, the look of a man who wants to kill me, but can’t!” Vriska laughed. “Let’s see how badly I can insult her and your relationship – oh wait, did I just call it a relationship? Sorry, slip of the tongue, I meant a sorry excuse for an interaction between two hunks of flesh. I bet she’s happy with that other guy! Wait, no, she’s a fucking loser, just like you.”

She continued to tear apart at Rick’s personal life bit by bit while he just took it, unable to retaliate due to the loyalty program. It was no easy task chipping away at what little husk of humanity remained in Ricks nearly heartless shell, but Vriska was most assuredly up to the task.

*Man, she really needs to let off some steam,* Starbeat observed, seeing no reason to step in to stop her moirail. Rick, frankly, deserved worse.

~~~

The Collector watched the chaos unfold on the many screens in his office. He saw his Geometric Monstrosity fall to Tom. He saw Death get punched around by Superman. He watched Gyro and Johnny fight each other, only one willing to do anything lethal.

A strange clanking sound reached his ears.

“…Are you okay?” Lightning asked, placing a hand on the Collector’s shoulder.

The Collector realized the clanking was coming from *him.* He was trembling, causing his armor to scrape against itself. “Yes. No.” He stood up and started pacing. “I’m just nervous. *Exceptionally* nervous about it all finally *happening.* It’s… It’s harder to take in than I thought it would be.”

“…Understandable,” Lightning said. “But we can’t back down now.”

“I know.” The Collector rubbed his knuckles together. “I know.”

“We’re claiming superiority in the space battle,” Thanos reported. “It’s a slow but sure process. They haven’t been able to pierce the third layer of shielding with anything significant.”

“Good… Good… It has to be done in *here,* not out there,” the Collector said, pacing. “Too fast…”

“It’s just fine,” Lightning assured him. “A faster timetable doesn’t *change* anything.”

“So you keep reminding me…” the Collector shook his head. “So you keep reminding me…”

“Do you need something to calm yourself?” Thanos asked. “I’ve found a record of something called chill strips in the databanks.”

“It’ll all be over soon, not worth it. Thanks for pointing them out, though.” He folded his arms. “I don’t know, I have this nagging feeling that something completely out of left field is going to derail ever-”

Jenny punched through one of the glass aquarium walls, upturning the Collector’s office in a wave of saltwater and exotic fish. Her fist continued, charged with transdimensional energy, hitting the Collector square in the face. The force was so large it not only dented the armor, but popped off some of the plating around the left eye, revealing the sparking circuitry beneath.

The Collector fell back, staggered both by the sudden influx of water and the punch to the face.

Jenny pulled back for another punch. “I’ve been looking forward to this one…”
“BLIZZAJA!” Lightning shouted, ice shooting forth from her fingers. The water coming out of the hole in the glass froze solid instantly while Jenny was skewered with about a dozen icicles.

Jenny seethed, activating a Numenera device within her suit. She exploded, shattering the ice, allowing herself to regenerate. She pulled back for another punch on the Collector.

Thanos punched her this time, knocking her through another section of glass. Lightning opted for an Earth spell to catch her this time. Jenny just twitched and teleported out of the attack, her crushed legs regenerating in seconds. She ignored them, going for the Collector again – but his metaphorical right and left hands stopped her from advancing.

But she wouldn’t go down either. Her rage was a force of nature, not to be stopped by anything. She was going to kill the Collector and there was nothing they could do to stop her.

That is, until Thanos extrapolated from incomplete data and figured something out. He punched into her stomach and closed his fist around a small octahedron. He pulled it out. “I knew it. They have a device keeping us from conditioning them.”

Jenny’s eyes widened. “No no n-”

The Collector snapped his fingers, and Jenny stood at attention. He walked toward her slowly. “It is not my time to die, Jenny. Especially not to you.” He narrowed his eyes. “Teleport yourself into deep space. I’m sure you’ll be picked up eventually.”

Jenny obeyed, subjecting her regenerating body to the void outside the Collection.

The Collector walked to Thanos and held up the black octahedron in his hand, examining it closely. “Can we cancel this thing’s effect?”

“I can attempt a countermeasure now that I have a sample,” Thanos said.

“Then do it,” the Collector ordered. “Let’s take away the only edge they have.”

~~~

“Johnny!” Gyro shouted, using Ball Breaker to deflect more of Johnny’s Infinite-Spin nails. “Stop it! You’re going to kill someone with that!”

“Yes. He is,” Morty said, pointing his gun at Lileur. The ray from the gun pierced the unicorn in the heart. She didn’t scream – she just shot Froppy a pitiful glance and fell to the ground, forcing Johnny’s mastery of the Spin to falter. Unable to channel the Spin through her, he lost control of Tusk.

“Lileur!” he, Gyro, and Froppy shouted.

Morty took in a deep breath. “…Sorry.” He fired at Olivia again, but Lady Rarity deflected the attack with a magic shield.

“You’re not taking another life!” Lady Rarity declared.

“…I wish that was true,” Morty said. He shot at her several times, but she deflected every last one. She brought her hammer at him from the side, cracking several ribs and forcing blood out his mouth. He crumpled to the ground, barely breathing.

Lieshy used Limelight to drive Ivan into the ground, “Ready to give up yet?” she asked.
“G…mmm…” his body began to go into convulsions.

“I think Limelight’s ability and the loyalty conditioning are tearing his mind apart,” Lieshy said, kicking him. “He hasn’t even managed to create any illusions the last few times.”

Ivan shot up, trying to drive a crystal shard through Lieshy’s heart, but Froppy grabbed him and tossed him to the side.

Johnny aimed his fingernail bullets at Ivan—he only had ten, since Lileur wasn’t going to magically recharge them anymore. He needed to make these count… Just a few shots…

Gyro’s Steel Ball hit Johnny in the head, twisting the Joestar to the side and into a wall next to Morty, blood dripping from his mouth. Gyro sighed—at least he was alive.

Lieshy and Lady Rarity teamed up on Ivan, pummeling him until he couldn’t take anymore. The mental effort he used to keep his crystalline self cohesive gave out. He fell apart into about a hundred different shards, waiting to recharge. Given his conflicting state of mind, it was going to take a while.

Gyro stood alone against Lady Rarity, Lieshy, and Froppy. He sent Ball Breaker after them, Limelight meeting the much smaller Stand’s fists. Ball Breaker may have been an exceptionally overpowered Stand with complete mastery over Spin—but it didn’t hit anywhere near as hard as Limelight.

Gyro grimaced—Ball Breaker was where most of his power was consolidated. Froppy knew that, so Lady Rarity and Lieshy probably knew that. If they flanked him here, he was down. He could tell from their eyes they were going to do exactly that. Lady Rarity moved to the left, Froppy to the right, hammer and tongue ready.

Morty’s gun went off again, the bolt going through Lieshy’s ears, forcing blood to squirt out the exit wound. The red liquid shifted in the air, taking the form of miniature rose petals, blowing in the wind. Limelight dissipated into nothing, her spirit no longer able to hold on to her Stand.

Despite the wound in her head, she somehow retained awareness. As the world blacked out around her, she heard it.

The sound of a large clock going tick.

The rose petals that were drops of blood swirled around her. She swore that she could see the Dark Tower in the midst of those petals.

Tock.

She fell to the ground with an unceremonious thud. The rose petals all turned to blood, pooling around her.

Gyro, Lady Rarity, and Froppy didn’t know what to make of what had just happened.

Morty passed out, his gun falling to the ground with a jarring clank. The sound shook the three of them out of their stupor.

Lady Rarity turned to the prone form of Morty. “You…”

He couldn’t make any response.

Gyro sent Ball Breaker after Lady Rarity. She threw her hammer at Morty, but the Stand touched the
Hammer just enough to spin it into a wall, forcing its handle into a corkscrew shape. Lady Rarity was the victim of Ball Breaker’s other fist, her own body being contorted next to her weapon, parts of her armor digging into her flesh.

Froppy made a last ditch effort to take Gyro down – she tried to wrap her tongue around his neck. She didn’t see the Steel Ball he had shot behind him until it hit her. The shock forced her to release her tongue, a motion that allowed her to twist herself off the ball and back onto her feet. “Ribbit.”

Gyro stood over her. “...Looks like I win.”

Froppy grunted, refusing to say anything.

He touched her with Ball Breaker, forcing her to rotate quickly enough to embed herself in the floor. Then he took a moment to take stock.

Two dead, Lileur and Lieshy. Everyone else heavily wounded, except himself and...

“I’ve got something!” Olivia declared. “He’s got a room of uncontrollable people! I’ll just do a little bit of this and then w-”

Ball Breaker punched her aside, forcing all her holographic screens to either glitch out of existence or just plain close. Her white cloak was resistant to the Spin, but Gyro didn’t care how or why that was possible.

He just punched her again before she got any ideas, tossing a Steel Ball to make extra sure she didn’t get back up to surprise him.

Only then did Gyro let himself stop.

He moved over to the unconscious form of Johnny and sat down, pulling his legs to his body. He didn’t have anything to say or do. He just sat.

Sat and tried not to cry or scream.

~~~

So far, only the creature made of geometry had perished in the fight between Corona’s group and Kars’. The Discords had been put out of commission – their magic had allowed Nanoha to seal them both away in a crystal box, and it would not be unlockable for several hours.

Nanoha and Hastur were fighting Kars, Nanoha proving to him just how formidable a woman could be in combat. Her magic was nigh-limitless, but so was Kars’ ability to imitate any biology he saw to extreme degrees. Kars was also so insane that Hastur’s madness-inducing magic wasn’t doing much. They’d been at a standstill for a while.

Bill Cipher was facing Tom and Corona together, the triangular dream demon folding himself through dimensions to attack them from all angles, outwitting Tom and overpowering Corona.

“HAHA! YOU ’D THINK A STAR AND AN ANGEL WOULD BE ABLE TO DO SOMETHING, BUT IT LOOKS LIKE YOU COME UP SHORT!”

Corona threw her hands wide, summoning a complex series of magical circles all around her. She started a spell to make it impossible to fold through space like he was, combining the move with Tom for a brilliant finisher, but then it hit her.
It was like an ice pick going through her heart.

Someone’s dead.

“OH WOW, YOU HAVE SOME STRONG EMPATHY THERE!” Bill laughed at her. “HERE, LET ME ADD TO IT!” Rather than going for the currently motionless Corona, he went for the concerned Tom. He grew his triangular form to the size of a building, transforming his singular eye into a mouth. He bit down on Tom, tearing the ethereal Star spirit in two, tossing the other half to Corona.

Corona stared at the dissipating back half of Tom, her brain not processing what’d just happened.

Bill’s eye flashed with the light of a dying Star. “THERE YOU GO SUNSHINE, ANOTHER ONE BITES THE DUST! ALL BECAUSE YOU HAD TO TAKE A MOMENT TO PROCESS A DEATH YOU CAN’T EVEN IDENTIFY!”

Corona lit herself on fire.

“PLEASE, WHAT’S THAT GOING TO DO, SCARE ME?”

She teleported a centimeter from his eye, touching her fingers to the dream demon’s flesh.

She stood in an endless expanse of white, with only Bill in front of her – though now he was normal size, about that of her head.

“WELL WELL WELL WELL WELL WELL WELL...” He said, circling her. “YOU’RE GOING TO TRY TO TAKE ME IN A MINDSCAPE BATTLE? THAT’S REALLY STUPID, SUNSHINE.”

“Bill, what are you planning?”

“LET ME TELL YOU! I’M GOING TO BURN YOUR PATHETIC LITTLE MENTAL IMAGE TO OBLIVION, EMPTYING YOUR BRAIN!”

“Bill, what are you planning?”

“I JUST TOLD Y- WAIT.”

“Bill, what are you planning?”

“CORONA, WHAT ARE YOU PLANNING!??”

Corona smiled. “Hi Bill! This is Corona’s will to kill you. I’ve been shafted into this mindscape with only scant hints of a personality, enough to keep you here. I have now determined exactly how to destroy this place with both of us in it.” She imagined a gun and held it to her head.

Bill teleported it away. “CLEVER TRICK, BUT YOU CAN’T JUST KILL US LIKE THAT. SORRY TO BURST YOUR BUBBLE.”

Corona kept smiling innocently. “I don’t need it.”

“...WHAT?”

“Goodbye.” Corona’s fragment willed death onto itself. She shimmered, sparked, and disappeared in a puff of fire.

Bill stared at where she’d been. “…CORONAAAAAA!!!”
Corona’s fragment did not return to her – so she had no idea what had occurred in the mindscape, or even what her plan had been after touching Bill. She was left with a gaping hole inside her mind, one that would bother her for eternity.

All she knew was that she did something that worked.

Bill disintegrated right in front of her, shouting her name as he vanished into pixelated nothingness. The force of his destruction shot a powerful burst of energy up her extended arm, breaking it in three places, forcing blood to fly off the shattered limb.

The weirdness bubble remained; it would take more than the destruction of Bill to remove it.

Corona took a moment to herself – Nanoha and Hastur could deal with Kars. She used her free hand to start mending the limb, allowing a moment to process.

Someone had died. Then Tom had died. Then Bill had died, somehow.

“This isn’t going to screw me up again,” Corona told herself. “Never again.”

She lifted her bloodied arm that had been broken just a minute ago into the air. “NEVER AGAIN!”

She rushed Kars, planning to tag-team with Nanoha and Hastur to finally beat the ‘ultimate lifeform’ into the ground.

“RECONDITIONER FAILURE!” Raging Sights and Raising Heart shouted at the same time. “INITIATING COUNTERMEASURES!” Nanoha and Corona’s minds were protected by automatic spells, preventing the failure of the reconditioner devices from letting the loyalty program in.

Hastur was not so lucky. He went from unleashing the spawn of hell on Kars to unleashing the spawn of hell on Nanoha and Corona.

Nanoha raised a shield around the two of them. “Something disabled the reconditioner!”

“That means…”

“Anyone without a way to defend mentally, like us, is now an enemy!”

Corona didn’t say anything – she just ground her teeth. That was perhaps the worst thing that could have happened.

~~~

“MUDA MUDA MUDA MUDA MUDA!” Giorno shouted, meeting every last one of Superman’s punches with Golden Experience Requiem, undoing every last action – yet unable to trap Superman in his own death. The Stand simply didn’t have the physical power to overcome the hero.

Death was fighting with his scythe – avoiding using his control over the life-force at all costs, for all their attackers were heroes at heart, people who did not deserve to die for actions that were out of their control. Despite his inhuman accuracy, he was not skilled at fighting to incapacitate; most of his prior opponents had themselves been inhuman, to put it extremely mildly. He was being beat back. He may not have been tiring, but he wasn’t winning.

Tornado was doing the best out of all of them, taking care of multiple heroes at once with her telekinesis – but she was bleeding, bruised, and battered. She was certainly tiring. Tiring to the point
at which she would soon pass out from overexertion.

Alushy had been losing, badly, for several minutes now, but nobody could keep the shadow vampire down. She just kept lashing out with her darkness, proving her tenacity to all.

Blackjack…

Blackjack was on her fourth hero. She’d killed a Professor X and a Spider-Man, and had simply defeated an Aquaman.

In front of her was Wolverine. He was pissed, to put it mildly. Blackjack would bet he knew the Professor X she’d shot, thinking he would be made of sterner stuff.

Blackjack was running low on magic reserves, and Wolverine had a nasty combo of knives in his hands and regeneration that didn’t depend on anything in reserves. He was cutting her up pretty badly, and there wasn’t much she could do about it besides wave her Starmetal sword and hope it worked.

The good news? It cut his supposedly indestructible claws.

The bad news? Wolverine was smart enough not to let her cut a limb clean off, so his regeneration was able to compensate.

Oh, and Blackjack was about to pass out from blood loss. That was bad news as well, but she wasn’t paying much attention to it.

She unleashed a shotgun in his face, forcing him back. She took to the skies, bombarding Wolverine with magic bolts that did nothing. He leaped up to her and scraped her neck.

All right, Blackjack thought, teleporting a ways back. I just need to last a little longer, and a way to beat this guy will come to me. It always does. Just gotta keep thinking… Have to stay conscious, too. Have to… Have to…

Her legs buckled beneath her. W-what? No, I have plenty of energy left! I can keep fighting! I ca… She crumpled to the ground, gasping for air. I…

Wolverine drove his claws into her chest, piercing not only her heart, but several vital motors.

I can’t just win anymore. She realized, unable to even try to breathe at this point.

This is what she’d asked for.

None of her friends would die here… but she would.

Her last act was to smile at the irony of it all.

She felt something inside her switch its loyalty to the Collector – but she didn’t care. She couldn’t do anything at this point. She just needed to… go. That’s right.

The last thing she saw was a vibrant purple flash.

~~~

Nova looked at the reports flying across her hoof-screen. “The Collector just figured out how they were resisting the Catcher. Almost all the invading force has been conditioned to join the Collection now.”
Starbeat bit her lip. “Do they even have a chance now?”

“It’s not looking like it. The odds are overwhelmingly in our favor now.”

*But that’s when the tables always turn,* Starbeat reminded herself. *Plus, they have me now. I’m still free. I can do something here… Something to bring it all back around. Flip the table flip.*

“Whoop de do,” Rick blurted in response to Nova. “Now you can get out of my space.”

“Not yet,” Pinkie said. “The fight is still ongoing. They might make a last-ditch effort here yet. *We must be ready.*”

Starbeat gulped, putting on her goggles. Somehow, deep down, she knew nobody was going to just find this place by chance. That’s why she was here – she had to do something other than just wait for fate. She cleaned off her lenses with her magic and put on her game face.

Jotaro glanced at her. “Preparing for battle?”

“You could say that,” Starbeat said. “I have a sense that it’s about to get really wild in here.”

“Pinkie?” Jotaro asked.

“Same,” Pinkie said, her tail twitching. “Something’s going to happen.”

Everyone got on their guard – even Rick – looking everywhere in the room for a possible incursion point.

Conveniently leaving all their eyes off the weak spot.

Starbeat sauntered over to it, attempting to look like a guard dog. Luckily none of them were paying close attention to her. She lit her horn, charging as much energy as she could into it.

“Huh. The magic readings in the room just spiked considerably…” Nova said, tapping her screen. “It’s coming from…”

Starbeat knew she was out of time. She whirled around, driving her horn physically into the weak point and unloading all the energy she had into the Catcher. The column surged, twitched, and then exploded, sending Starbeat flying.

She didn’t care that she had horribly electrocuted herself or that several shards of metal were now embedded in her body, she had done it. She had destroyed the Catcher. *Every* member of the Collection would run free and take down the Collector before he could fix it. It was a victory.

Then Starbeat realized she wasn’t flying backward anymore – she was falling forward.

She’d been caught in a rewind spell.

Starbeat saw Nova crying out of the corner of her eyes. “Why couldn’t you have been a little faster!” Nova shouted. “It was almost gone! WE WERE ALMOST FREE!”

The Catcher completely fixed itself, allowing Starbeat to stand, dumbfounded. “I… I couldn’t do it.”

“Knew it,” Rick said, lifting a gun. “Say good-”

The gun was kicked out of his hand. But it wasn’t by any member of Pinkie’s team, Allure, or Starbeat.
“It was Lightning.

“Stand down, Rick,” Lightning said, walking slowly toward Starbeat. “She’s been beaten already.”

“No, you think?” Starbeat shouted at her, wailing. “You people designed it like this, didn’t you? So ponies like me could be humiliated!”

Lightning didn’t respond. She just examined the Catcher, making sure it was still operational.

“That was a pretty clever trick, lying to all your friends,” Lightning said. “Getting them to think you were one of the Collection, tricking them to coming here… That was some excellent work, Starbeat.”

“So what now? You zap my mind and add me to your little fun-time Collection?”

“Not yet,” Lightning admitted. “I want to see if you’ll try something. If you’ll think of another way out of this. If you have some other plan.”

“That’s dumb of you,” Starbeat commented.

Lightning didn’t respond to this. She just started walking around the room. “You are right, we designed it this way on purpose. It doesn’t have to be centralized here. It could be split up over several nodes and have backups. But it doesn’t.”

“Then why build the fucking thing!?” Vriska shouted.

Lightning looked to Pinkie and Starbeat. “Because that was the way it needed to be built.”

“Bullshit, copout,” Rick declared. “That’s never the only reason unless you’re one of those ka religious nuts. You’re not. I think it’s because you like to mess with people.”

Lightning didn’t confirm or deny this. She just turned to Starbeat. “Well?”

“…I’ve got nothing besides try to kill you and fail miserably.”

Lightning nodded. “Shame you didn’t try… It probably would have been interesting.” She snapped her fingers, focusing a conditioning spell on her.

She grimaced.

~~~

The Collector felt the Catcher explode. He took in a sharp breath, holding it. His heart raced faster than it ever had before.

Then he felt it reassemble. He let out the breath, but his heart kept racing just as fast as it had been.

“If you weren’t an augmented cyborg, that would be dangerous,” Thanos observed.

“I know…” the Collector said, breathing heavily. “I’m very aware I’m beyond all sane levels of stress right now. I’m probably more off the end of the crazy plank than I already was.”

“You should check yourself for brain damage after this.”

“No, really?”

Thanos nodded.
“…Right, sorry. You’re just being helpful. …Not like you can be anything else anyway.”

Thanos looked away. “It looks as if we are going to win now.”

“Famous last words,” the Collector said bitterly. “The Flowers are still hammering on our doorstep. And if we do drive back all their forces, they will resort to simply destroying this universe and everything in it.”

Thanos blinked. “…I thought you had a plan for that?”

“I do, Thanos, I do have a plan. The plan ensures it never comes to that.” The Collector started pacing around the office again – it had been cleaned up remarkably well in such a short time, the only remnant of the recent fight being a fishy smell coating the room. It annoyed the Collector, but not enough to be a large concern at the moment.

He rubbed his knuckles together, the motion becoming more violent as the day went on.

“Thanos, give me a prediction. What are the scenarios in which we can stop the Flowers from destroying the universe?”

Thanos raised an eyebrow. “I th-”

“Just answer the question.”

Thanos processed the request. “We capture the Sunflower Officer and use him as a hostage, but even then he may be deemed an acceptable loss.”

“Right… Right… Thanos, forget I asked the question.”

Thanos did. He looked lost for a few seconds, but got back to work.

“It appears I lost concentration there for a few moments. Excuse me while I get back on track…”

“No worries,” the Collector said. “You’re doing great.” He turned to stare at the screen that still had fighting.

Nanoha and Corona, two of the last few still standing.

“No matter what you say about the White Devil, she does have her limits,” the Collector said. “Do you think they can take care of Kars and Hastur?”

“Perhaps. But when our new forces arrive to face them, they will fall. Come to think of it, we can reroute many of our higher powers to there now that we have control again.”

“Do it. Crush them.”

*Let’s see if that’ll make them move.*

The Collector continued rubbing his knuckles together, ever-increasing the speed.

It would all end soon.
Aradia died again.

She was fighting Davepeta, and the method by which her death was triggered was a sword known as Caledscratch, a time blade at least twice as tall as Davepeta themselves. It drove Aradia through her chest, triggering a Heroic death.

The rest of the present Aradias twisted their wrists and charged Davepeta, cracking their whips. They charged from all sides, only to find multiple Davepetas all around them. Aradia knew better than to think they were separate entities – Dave never used time travel in such a way to split his time stream if he could help it. She was looking all at one continuous timestream, where there was a future-most Davepeta.

She was going to use this to her advantage. She split her timeline, allowing a version of herself to watch the events from afar and determine which version of Dave was the furthest in the future. She waited for the Davepeta clones to temporally resolve into one, then jumped back in time to tell the Aradias which was which.

They tackled the future-most Dave – but as the future-most Dave, he was able to feel and react to the shift in time Aradia had triggered. He swung Caledscratch wide, mortally wounding three of the Handmaids. There were either Heroic deaths or wounds that would be taken care of by loose members of the Collection.

Davepeta charged again, this time with accelerated time. An Aradia fell, but two others used their whips to lash around Caledscratch, disarming Davepeta. Other Aradias used their telekinesis to hold Davepeta in place. They just traveled to the past to escape Aradia’s grip, but lo and behold, Aradia was waiting there at the exact same time, swinging Caledscratch back at them.

Davepeta glanced to the Omnitrix, considering using it – but they knew it would actually hinder them. If they didn’t have access to time travel, Aradia would make quick work of them. Their default form had the highest control over time and a smattering of other abilities, so the choice was obvious.

They leaned back, unable to dodge the blade completely, but their sprite-nature allowed the blade to pass through them, the power of the blade culminating in an annoying itch. They used their sudden proximity to the Aradia to use their claws to tear the temporal clone’s face off.

“Why so serious?” an Aradia asked from a distance as Davepeta dealt with more of her selves. “I never knew either of you to go into a fight without cracking at least a few jokes or narrating your own attacks.”

“Because this meowtherfucking sucks,” Davepeta spat. “I’m killing you hundreds of times. You’re like, both my old creepy friend and my time meowntor. And you’re not even trying to kill me! Not a single lethal blow!”

“Davepeta… I’m basically the god of death in many ways. It would be easy for me to do that, especially considering how you fight.”

“Then why aren’t you?”

“I can beat you without killing you.”
Davepeta shook their head while they rammed two Aradias’ skulls into each other. “No you can’t! I’m a *sprite* Aradia! You can’t just contain sprites!” They spread their wings and flew into the air, unleashing a beam of sprite energy at the ground. The Aradias appeared all around Davepeta, tying them up with whips - except Davepeta decided to be intangible for the moment, allowing the whips to pass through. “See? You can’t hold me in place with whips. I can time-shift out of your telekinesis every time. It’s a standstill Aradia!”

“No it isn’t!” Aradia shouted, several of her clones, trapping Davepeta in her telekinesis. Davepeta shifted to the past, but the Aradias were already there, keeping them frozen. Davepeta shifted to the future, but the Aradias were there as well.

“You’re not going anywhere,” the Aradias said, pressing down on Davepeta’s head, trying to force them into unconsciousness.

A future version of Davepeta appeared next to their past self, removing the past version from the telekinesis and telling the past version to become the future version. Then the future version started cutting off heads.

Aradia twitched, trying the telekinetic barrier again – but the same thing happened.

*Fine then, I can’t outright defeat you. I’ll go do other things while my other selves keep you occupied.*

Aradia appeared between Nanoha and Corona as they fought Hastur and Kars. “Hey girls! How’s it going?”

“Please tell me you’re resistant to the conditioning,” Corona muttered, blood dripping down her face.

“Yep! For now anyway,” Aradia said, checking her mental defenses. All good up there. “I believe I can revert Kars to a previous time-state simply enough… Just-”

Davepeta appeared in front of her and skewered her through the chest.

“OH COME ON!” Another version of Aradia yelled, dragging Davepeta further into the past. “How did you know!?”

“No the only time traveler in the Collection,” Davepeta revealed. “I *do* have the most control over it out of all of them, which is why I’m dealing with you, but the others who can see through time and move through it on smaller scales will keep informing me of where I need to be.”

“I would recommend changing up your strategy,” a tall man in a labcoat said, walking out of a rift in time. “See, it’s come to our attention Davepeta is simply fighting you to a standstill. So naturally we must offer our assistance.”

“Professor Paradox…” Aradia frowned. “I wondered what happened to you. …Wait, are you the same version I know?”

“Sadly, no,” Professor Paradox said. “But I’m not your biggest problem here.”

A purple monster made of mist and clockwork appeared between Professor Paradox and Davepeta, roaring furiously.

*A time eater.*

“Well that explains why there aren’t any time anomalies here, if you’ve got one of those,” Aradia
observed.

“I’m afraid it will have to devour you now.”

Aradia sighed. “And I’m afraid I have to become Maid of Death. I am sorry.” She thrust her hand forward, shifting time slightly to confuse Davepeta and Professor Paradox. As she expected, the time eater did not move with the time shift – it was impervious.

But she still had something she could do, assuming the time eater had a soul. She tapped into the realm of spirits and the dead, the pupils in her eyes vanishing for a moment. She looked like something that had died for a moment.

The copies of herself kept their living nature, throwing themselves at the time eater to keep it occupied – being devoured by the dozen. It was enough – the spiritually attuned Aradia gripped the spirit of the time eater. “I bring you to your fate,” she said, emotionless.

The time eater lost all of its spirit, dissolving into a pile of gears and gnashing teeth. It fell to the ground, destroying one of the Plaza’s discs.

“What the fresh hell was that!” Davepeta blurted.

The ghostly Aradia stared at Davepeta. “Not an ability granted by being the Maid of Time. I was dead once, as you know, and even before then I had felt a deep connection to the dead of the world. After a few hundred years I learned that connection could be used in terrifying ways.” She lifted her hands up. “I’m not as impressive as Death himself, but that doesn’t matter, does it?”

Professor Paradox clutched his heart, trying to shift through time to escape – but the other Aradias blocked his passage long enough for him to fall to where the Time Eater was.

The ghostly Aradia turned to Davepeta, face emotionless. Davepeta only knew Aradia was sorrowful because of the faces of the other versions.

The ghostly Aradia moved her hands past each other – and Davepeta’s soul left their body. The sprite’s strobe green-orange color becoming muted. They fell to the ground, lifeless.

“We’re not done!” Another Aradia shouted to the ghostly one – not coming in time. A copy of Davepeta appeared behind her and drove a Caledscratch through her chest. She fell Heroically.

Davepeta leaped back – it was only a matter of time before another Aradia tapped into her spiritual powers, and then they were dead. Aradia wouldn’t fall for the time-clone again – and frankly Davepeta felt disgusted that they’d allowed the forced loyalty to make them do that. The Omnitrix did have a handful of beings immune to spiritual manipulation – Ghostfreak most prominently – but none of them could also manipulate time.

…There was one, though, but that’d be risky…

Who cared if it was risky, it was the only way to win.

“ALIEN X!” Davepeta ordered the Omnitrix. In a flash of green, they transformed into a female Celestialsapien, their body tapping into the substance of the universe.

All of the Aradias froze – there was no way this was going to work, right? Celestialsapiens had to internally debate every action they ever took – but she wouldn’t put it past Nepeta to have a good understanding of the Celestialsapien’s internal thought process… Rogue of Heart, after all, she could probably convince the internal voices without too much trouble…
Several Aradias acted, rewinding time around Nepeta, forcing her back into the form of Davepeta. The sprite took a moment to process this – enough for the Aradias to not only grab with their telekinesis, but crush Davepeta as well. Sprites were more or less indestructible, but a purely psychic attack coming from over a dozen powerful psychics was more than enough to incur lethal damage. Glowing green-orange fluids began to burst from their body, making them scream.

Aradia winced. “Davepeta, I’m sorry!”

“You’re… doing what you have to…” Davepeta muttered. They forced a smile that tried to be ironically cute. “Nya Nya!”

And then the sprite exploded in a shower of neon light.

Aradia dropped her hands to her sides, breathing heavily.

“…I barely knew you were still alive,” she muttered to nobody in particular. One of her versions picked up the Omnitrix and looked at it closely. She tucked it in her robes – something to look at later.

There were still other things she needed to do here.

~~~

“Incoming call,” Thanos told the Collector. “Coming from inside. Marked ‘urgent’ in every way I can possibly think of.”

The Collector chuckled. “Finally, something I can do instead of waiting.” He rushed to his computer and answered the call. “Yeah?”

Olivia was onscreen. “Guess what? I’m being forced to tell you something. Your program is really effective, amigo.”

“What did you do?”

“Oh, nothing much. I just hacked into your uncontrollables room.”

The Collector fell silent.

“Now, Gyro knocked me in the face before I could do anything intentional, but it says right here that I released one of them. I have no idea which one it was though!” Olivia grinned. “Have fun with that!”

The Collector curled up his fists. “You’re going to defend that room from further digital attacks. Got it?”

“Oh, I’m already doing that. Cause, y’know, it’s the best way I can serve my new master in this semi-injured state. I gotta say, I absolutely love not having any say in what I do. Isn’t that right Gyro?”

“It’s excellent,” Gyro muttered, forcing a cheesy smile. The Collector saw that he was tending the wounded. There was a lot of blood all over him.

“See, ballsy and I here have been bonding over how much you suck. By the way, the moment I get free from this loyalty, I release all of them.”

The Collector folded his hands. “In that case, instead of defending it, I want you to lock yourself
“…Wait, what?”

“You heard me. There’s a high chance you get freed again because someone interrupts it. Lock yourself out now.”

Olivia twitched, pressing a few buttons. “There. Scrambled it. Now I’ll have to get back in from scratch. Happy?”

“Very. Add extra firewalls and then throw away the key, if you can.”

“I’m not sure you understand how this works.”

“Not really,” the Collector admitted. “But I know you can make it more difficult for your future self. So keep doing that.”

Olivia showed him her middle finger and cut the transmission.

“I wonder why people think that gesture is ever going to be effective in riling people up,” the Collector muttered. “Thanos, what’s happening?”

“Aradia’s won. She’s beginning to take control over things on a temporal level.”

“The moment it gets completely out of our control, tell me.” The Collector moved a finger toward a button on his keyboard. “I’ll cut the timestream physics.”

Thanos nodded, continuing his examinations of the situation. His projections ranged from extremely favorable to absolute garbage. A mixed pot of probabilities that were continually changing as the conflict evolved.

~~~

“DIVINE BUSTER!” Nanoha shouted, engulfing Hastur and Kars in a blast of her energy. Hastur retaliated with an eldritch pulse that tore at Nanoha and Corona’s minds – but Corona used her empathic abilities to heal hers and Nanoha’s mind. To her, it took a few minutes to root around their minds – but it was effectively instant to Kars and Hastur.

Nanoha shifted to juggling long-range spells to keep Kars and Hastur back while Corona set up a complex spell to take care of Hastur.

_The physics of this universe are highly malleable, likely because the Collector wanted to be able to alter it on a whim. Good for us though, Raging Sights, because that gives us an in. Hastur’s eldritch nature is forced into his current yellow-cloak wearing self, but if we tweak the conversion around him just slightly compounded with a sealing spell and some flashy fire to make him react… Run the calculations needed to seal him away while I set up the rest of these circles._

_Understood_, Raging Sights responded, processing the request to seal Hastur with the complex spell.

Kars noticed Corona was doing something. Clearly it needed to be stopped – he created four black wings from his back, using his hands to bring magical power to himself. He punched at the fiery mage.

“BARRIER!” Nanoha shouted, creating a magical shield between Kars and Corona.

“A simple barrier is nothing!” Kars shouted, creating an extra-sharp unicorn horn out from his wrist,
piercing the magic barrier with his own power, sailing toward Corona.

“Bacon Pancakes, flatten him,” Corona muttered, trying very hard not to break her focus. Any Stand user would have been able to dodge the low-will attack, but Kars was unable to even see Bacon Pancakes. He essentially ran right into the central disc of the Stand, flattening like a piece of paper.

Nanoha took advantage of this, using her long-range spells to cut him up into dozens of pieces, keeping Hastur back with another Divine Buster.

“Execute!” Corona declared. The circles around her activated, creating a set of six circles around Hastur, boxing him in. Having just been hit by one of Nanoha’s heavy attacks, he didn’t offer much in the way of resistance as he felt the physics inside the box reduce his power considerably – enough to where the magic circles could wrap around him. With a *pop*, his essence was sealed within a small, gray marble. Corona grabbed it from the air and pocketed it. “Got him.”

Nanoha threw her staff into the air, ignoring the pain from the wounds in her hand and chest. “Woo! We won! I haven’t had such a close battle in ages…” She wiped blood from her eyes.

“You need to get out more…” Corona muttered, stretching.

“You’re not done yet!” Kars shouted, having completely regenerated from being shredded.

“…Jenny should probably be dealing with this nut,” Corona deadpanned. “Regen v regen has a way of cancelling out.”

Nanoha sighed. “Let’s see if I have enough energy left for a Starlight Breaker.”

“I think we might need to push some lethality into it.”

Nanoha nodded, deflecting piranhas that Kars was throwing at them. “Time to break out the vaporizer…”

She twisted to the side out of instinct, narrowly dodging a punch from Superman. She *didn’t* dodge the bite from Alushy, but she managed to throw the vampire pegasus off quickly. Corona was completely unable to deal with the tag-team that was Tornado and Giorno. The powerful telekinesis tossed her into the fists of Gold Experience Requiem, creating wounds that she *couldn’t heal*.

Corona grasped her broken ribs, wincing. “Nanoha! We can’t win this one, we’re way too injured!”

“BEAM PULSE!” Nanoha shouted, pushing back all their attackers with a spherical magic burst. “I know Corona! But I don’t think they’ll give us time to escape!”

“We’ve gotta figure out so-” Both of their magical senses shook them fundamentally. They *felt*, for a moment, the loyalty program weakening its attack on their mental shields. They saw their attackers pause… But then the loyalty program fixed itself.

“Did you feel that?” Corona asked.

“Yeah!” Nanoha answered. “That was Starbeat’s magic, I’m sure of it!”

“We need to teleport the-” Corona had to use Bacon Pancakes to defend against Gold Experience Requiem, unable to flatten the golden humanoid.

“We can’t teleport!” Nanoha shouted, having serious difficulty with Superman and Kars. “And I don’t know who else we can trust to deal with it for us!” She raised a shield, but it wasn’t enough to
stop Superman’s fist from tossing her to the ground. Tornado did the same to Corona, except with telekinesis.

The two powerful mages lay prone on the ground.

“Giorno might keep us alive…” Corona grunted.

“Kars won’t,” Nanoha coughed.

Corona sighed. “I had so much left to do…”

“You always feel that way,” Nanoha said. The two of them saw Kars produce his arm-blades, aiming for both of their hearts. They didn’t have the energy in them to resist in this situation they knew they couldn’t win in.

And then time stopped. Aradia appeared in front of them and lifted them to their feet with her telekinesis. “You look like you need a hand.”

Corona let out a sigh of relief – an action that was painful to her broken ribs. “Ow. Ow.”

“You two have somewhere to go,” Aradia said, numerous temporal copies of herself appearing alongside her. “I can take care of this now. Go, find Starbeat.”

Corona nodded. “Right.” She prepared the teleport – but stopped. “Aradia, look out!”

“Hm? None of them have time-po-”

“Gold Experience Requiem i-”

Giorno’s Stand moved on its own through Aradia’s stopped time, punching the Aradia that was in the stopped time – somehow freezing her and letting all the rest of time to resume. Another Aradia froze everything, but Gold Experience Requiem still moved.

“Well this is going to be a little challenging,” the new Aradia commented. “Still, go, I have nearly endless lives. You don’t. I can keep them busy now.”

Nanoha nodded. She lifted Raising Heart, scanning for the source of Starbeat’s tremendous discharge of magic… and about ten seconds later teleported herself and Corona away.

It didn’t take long for Aradia to discover the true pain that was fighting Gold Experience Requiem. Aradias began falling like dominoes in the middle of stopped time.

“Oh, okay, your ability is cheap!” Aradia flung her arms wide – only to be shot into a time loop of her own creation by Gold Experience Requiem.

At this point Aradia was able to use her psychic powers to sense the location of the Stand, but she couldn’t imagine how in reality it was actually doing anything. “What are you!?”

“A requiem Stand,” Gold Experience Requiem said.

“…You can talk!?”

“My ability is to ensure my target never reaches reality.”

“Manifesting as a very complicated undo button with a lot of strange side effects, apparently,” Aradia muttered. She was hit by Gold Experience Requiem and frozen in her own time.
“You know, I kinda fail to see how this applies,” another Aradia muttered, narrowing her eyes. “I think Alushy has a word for this.”

“Complete Bullshit?”

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s it.” Aradia narrowed her eyes. “So, I’m going to have to be clever here.”

“You will never reach reality.”

“Yeah, but my past self can knock your user out. No matter how independent you are, you still need Giorno’s will to operate.” She winked. “Goodbyyyyye!”

A past version of Aradia kicked Giorno across the base of the skull in stopped time, and then allowed time to resume so Giorno would register the kick. He passed out – and Gold Experience Requiem was recalled.

Aradia smirked, smiling at the rest of her opponents.

“Sweet!” Alushy shouted. “You beat the Complete Bullshit Stand!”

A few dozen Aradia’s cracked their knuckles. “And the rest of you can’t do anything to me!” She tried to stop time again – but found it didn’t work. Shortly thereafter she felt all her control over time vanish.

*Time manipulation was no longer allowed in this universe.*

Aradia did a count – there were over a hundred of her still in the Collection. But she wasn’t going to be able to make any more now…

She was going to have to be careful.

Considering how three of her had died while she was contemplating this, she wasn’t off to a very good start.

Superman plowed into her miniature army, knocking her selves down like bowling pins. Kars threw a bunch of piranhas into her group, severely wounding many of her. Most of Aradia took to the sky, resorting to whips and telekinesis to fight.

She discovered the hard way that Tornado’s telekinesis was leagues ahead of her own. Five Aradias at once tried to go at her in a telekinesis battle, all five were crushed against distant walls.

“Sorry, but it looks like I have to…” Aradia muttered, forcing one of her selves to tap into her spirit powers. She pointed at Kars, ready to remove his spirit from his body.

But then Death himself showed up. He extinguished Aradia’s soul with ease. I AM SORRY, GUARDIAN OF SPIRITS.

“I AM THE DEATH ORIGINALLY TAKEN FROM THE DISC YEARS AGO. Another Aradia fell. Alushy, Tornado, Superman, and Kars stopped doing anything – they just watched Death work without inhibitions. IT IS A HORRIBLE MISUSE OF MY POWER. IF ONLY THERE WERE A PUNISHMENT WORSE THAN DEATH THAT COULD BE GIVEN TO THE COLLECTOR FOR THIS HEINOUS ACT.

Some Aradias tried to run, but Death took care of them first. One Aradia tried to attack Death’s spirit,
but it was far too strong a light for a mere Maid of Time to deal with. She fell- and fell again. And again.

Aradia realized with no small amount of fear that she had no backups outside the Collection right now. There were a handful of her selves spread around in other locations, but that was less than a dozen.

*She could actually die here.*

Death reduced the number of Aradias before him down to one. **I HAVE BEEN ORDERED TO HUNT DOWN THE REST OF YOU INSIDE THIS COLLECTION. ARADIA, YOUR LONG LIFE WILL END HERE, IN THIS PLACE. I AM TRULY SORRY.**

Aradia sighed. “I won’t hold a grudge over it.”

“Pff, that’s stupid!” a new, female voice blurted. A young woman walked up to Aradia – her hair flowing in the nonexistent breeze, her intelligent emerald eyes scanning the world around them.

“Anyone who kills you deserves to get a least a little revenge handed to them.”

Death stared at her. “…WHO ARE YOU?”

“Oh, little old me?” she chuckled. “Name’s Monika. Aaaaand… You want to take a nap!”

Death’s body twitched as if it were made of a glitch – and then he fell asleep.

“I didn’t know he could sleep,” Alushy observed.

“He couldn’t,” Monika said, smirking. “Let’s see what I can do to your character file…”

Superman punched her through the gut, making her cry out in pain. An instant later she was perfectly fine and Superman was on the ground, clutching his chest. “W-what?”

“Kryptonite mode! Enjoy feeling like a small bit of Kryptonite is next to you until I switch it off!” Monika grinned. “Whooo’s next on the editing train?”

Aradia let out a laugh. “With you on our side we can just go to the Collector and make quick work of him!”

“Maybe,” Monika said, making Alushy’s wings stop functioning and forcing Kars to eat his own piranhas. “But I don’t have any idea where he is. Just figured that you were the good guy here since, you know, you were being beat to a pulp and the guy who was killing you was apologizing for it.”

“It is a complicated situation,” Aradia admitted. “Hey, you have access to the ‘code of the universe’ right?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Think you can turn time travel back on?”

Monika grinned. “I sure can try!”

~~~

The Collector rammed his fist *through* his monitor. “Why did it have to be Monika!?”

“I would say it was just random, but *ka* probably conspired against us here,” Thanos suggested.
“She could ruin everything…” the Collector growled. “It was nearly impossible to trap her in there in the first place! Just… Gah!” The Collector pressed a button again – undoing Monika’s edit of reality to again disallow time travel. He knew in a few seconds she would just add it back, and he’d have to push the button again… A pointless, vicious cycle that was likely to bring about paradoxes like candy at a movie theater.

“Lightning only needs a few more minutes…” the Collector grunted.

“To do what?”

“The plan, Thanos. The plan.”

Thanos looked at the Collector. “…I’m starting to wonder if you actually have a plan.”

“The good thing about our relationship is that you don’t actually have to have faith in me, you just have to do what I say. Keep analyzing. If you can find a way to defeat Monika, I’m all ears. It took several hours to get her in there last time and we really don’t have that right now.”

Thanos shook his head. “I suggest keeping her distracted until whatever Lightning’s doing completes.”

The Collector nodded, continuing his pacing and rubbing his knuckles.

Monika better not screw this up at the last minute.

~~~

Corona knew a conditioning spell when she saw one. The instant Nanoha teleported them into the Catcher room, Corona intercepted the spell from Lightning and dissipated the energy. “How about no, we don’t brainwash Starbeat?”

“Oh thank goodness,” Starbeat said, sighing in relief. “I’m re-” She blinked. “You two look like you went through a meat grinder.”

“Not that far off…” Nanoha muttered, coughing up blood.

Corona noticed who their opponents were – Lightning, Rick, and the entire Primary Team of Merodi Universalis. None of them looked even slightly injured, while both Corona and Nanoha had been just shy of death mere moments ago.

Rick lifted his button to press it – but Lightning held her hand. “No, Rick. These two will make excellent additions to the Collection. We can take them as they are.”

Just to be safe Corona teleported Rick’s button away from him and sent it to a pocket dimension.

“Great going Lightning, there goes the instant win button,” Rick spat. “Whatever, it’s your funeral.”

Lightning drew her weapon – a foldable gunblade, capable of acting as both a shortsword and a burst rifle at the same time. She pointed it at Nanoha and Corona. “Just turn yourselves in. I don’t want to accidentally kill you in a fight.”

“We can’t win this…” Nanoha muttered.

“I want to punch her smug face in anyway,” Corona said, curling her fingers. “It’ll be fun.”

“I think both of us would rather live, hrm?”
Corona thought for a moment – and dropped her fist. “…I hate it when the answer is to just surrender. Always feels nasty.”

“You DON’T HAVE TO WIN!” Starbeat shouted. “JUST DESTROY THIS PILLAR RIGHT HERE BY ATTACKING THIS RED SPOT AND KEEP NOVA FROM REWINDING IT!” She raised a shield, blocking a death ray shot from Rick, but was unable to stop Lightning’s ‘Thundaja’ spell. It forced her mane to stand on end and her entire nervous system to freeze up, paralyzing her.

Corona blinked, turning to Nanoha. “Think we can do that?”

“DIVINE BUSTER!” Nanoha shouted, unleashing a torrent of energy at the pillar’s weak spot. Lightning placed herself in the beam’s path.

“Shellga!” A shimmering green shell appeared around her, deflecting the beam.

Vriska and Jotaro moved in next, pummeling Nanoha with everything they had. Her luck was sapped and she was punched enough to pass out completely.

Meanwhile Corona was setting up a cascade spell while dodging Rick and Nova’s energy blasts – specifically Rick’s, since they were more deadly. She was managing to hold her own using a combination of Bacon Pancakes and automatic defense spells loaded off onto Raging Sights.

And then Pinkie had to ruin the entire thing by appearing inside the shield and smacking Corona with a squeaky hammer, interrupting her cascade spell. The explosion went off, but it wasn’t powerful enough to bring the Catcher down.

Another hit from the hammer knocked Corona to the floor, prone. “Aaaaand gotcha!” Pinkie cheered.

Corona grunted, lifting up her hand. A yellow magic circle appeared around it.

“Corona don’t make me beat you up more.”

The magic circle activated – and sent out a pathetic yellow squirt of energy. Corona let out a sigh and let her body go limp. She wasn’t out cold, but she really didn’t have any energy left. She’d way overtaxed herself at this point.

Flutterfree sighed. “Well, I think that was our last-ditch attempt to get out of this mess.”

Rick grunted. “You talk like you expected them to succeed.”

“I did,” Flutterfree said. “All it would take was one carefully planned shot. If they hadn’t already been so weak… We would be free right now.”

Lightning shrugged. “That might be true. But don’t let your guard down. It’s times like this when someone pulls something completely unexpected out.”

“You got that right,” Starbeat said, a small yellow circle of magic still rotating around her horn, curing her of paralysis. She drove her horn into the weak point and flooded it with magic again.

Nova tried to rewind time – but she found that the universe no longer allowed the manipulation of time.

The Catcher exploded. Starbeat leaped back to avoid extensive damage from the shrapnel.

And the Catcher’s loyalty conditioning completely failed across the Collection.
Many universes away, in a padded cell, the Twilight known as GM felt something.

*Freedom.*

She let out a truly joyous laugh, the elated motion forcing tears out of her eyes.

*Freedom.*

Every being still conscious within the Collection felt a weight on their soul vanish. Everywhere, fighting stopped. The Collected dropped their weapons – many breaking down into tears of joy or dances of celebration.

Many of them had been here for longer than their natural lifespans and didn’t know what to do with the freedom. They just froze.

It was a select few who were actually loyal to the Collector, and the majority of them knew fighting would be pointless now that enemies surrounded them. They kept quiet while the celebrations broke out.

Gyro was doing none of these things. He and Olivia were pulling a large sled made from cobbled together pieces of metal through the Plaza. “HEALER!” Gyro called. “WE NEED A HEALER!”

A girl in a white dress and similarly colored pointy hat lifted up the folds in her clothing and ran over to them. Her face was that of someone who had been through their own personal gauntlet, but her body seemed perfectly healthy – a testament to her abilities. “Who’s dead and who’s not?”

Olivia moved Lieshy and Lileur to the side, leaving Morty, Ivan, Johnny, Froppy, and Lady Rarity on the sled – only the latter two were conscious.

The white mage clapped her hands and infused the five of them with life. Morty, who had been clinging onto life by a thread, gasped and sat up, eyes wide. “…What have I done?”

“The Collector’s bidding,” Froppy muttered, rubbing her head. “I hope they’ve turned him into a bottlecap.”

Morty didn’t have anything to say – he just stared at the forms of Lileur and Lieshy.

Ivan, now fully reconstituted, looked at his hand and sighed.

The white mage dusted her hands. “Right…” she said, breathing heavy. “I can try Arise, but it hasn’t been working lately. I think the flow of life in this universe has been horribly corrupted.”

Gyro equipped steel balls in his hands and placed them to the heads of the two corpses. “Try it anyway.”

The white mage checked with the others – they all nodded, save Morty, who couldn’t stop staring.

“Arise! Arise!” She called, flooding the bodies with white light. Then she took several steps back.

The spell *bounced off* Lieshy’s body, rejected. It went into Lileur… and brought back something that wanted to eat them. Gyro took care of the thing before it could attack – just a little Spin to the back of the head.
The white mage stared at Lieshy’s body. “…Are you sure she was alive in the conventional sense?”

“Yeah,” Lady Rarity said. “Healing magic worked on her before.” She walked over to the form of her friend, shaking her head. “But there was something odd about the end…”

“She’d touched the room at the top of the Tower,” Olivia pointed out. “Maybe… Maybe that has something to do with it?”

“What does it really matter?” Lady Rarity asked. “It just means she’s not coming back.”

Olivia put a hand to her face, hiding her expression.

“This is all my fault…” Morty said.

“This is the Collector’s fault,” Gyro said, putting a hand on Morty’s shoulder. “Kid, you know better than most how cruel and horrendous the multiverse can be. Don’t let this be the thing that gets to you. Don’t let the Collector consume you.”

“Everyone good? Good.” The white mage picked up the folds of her dress and ran elsewhere. “I’ve got more healing to do!"

She met up with a group of other, similarly dressed healers who talked for a few moments and spread out, giving everyone the aid they needed.

“…At least it’s over now,” Olivia said. “I guess we won.”

Gyro smirked in Olivia’s direction. “Yeah. Yeah you did. I’ve never been so glad to be on the losing side in my entire life.”

~~~

The Collector forced himself to sit down in his main chair; refusing to let his hands move nervously. It was the time to end all times. He would not let the nervous habits get the better of him, no matter how much it drove his stress levels through the roof.

“Thanos?” the Collector asked.

“Mm?”

“You’re free. You can go now.”


“…It’s nice to know some people just get what I’m doing. Even if it is you. You do know you’re basically the face of ‘greater scope villain’ right?”

Thanos shrugged. “It is a role I find no issue being assigned, even if I do not agree with it.”

The Collector nodded. “Thanos… They’ll be coming. I want you to let what happens happen. You obviously have choice of your own now… but that’s my request. Just let it happen.”

Thanos looked incredulously at the Collector. Then his gaze softened. “I think I see what you’re planning.”

“Really? Cause at this point I’m not so sure anymore.”
Thanos said nothing, opting to stand at the far left of the Collector, hands behind his back.

There was silence in the Collector’s office for all of ten seconds.

The Collector began tapping his fingers on the desk. “…You know I wish they’d hurry up and ge he.”

With a flash of blue light, everyone who had been in the Catcher’s room appeared – Rick, Lightning, Starbeat, Nanoha, Nova, Pinkie, Vriska, Jotaro, Flutterfree, Allure, and Corona.

Rick unleashed a death beam – but the Collector’s personal force field deflected it.

The Collector stopped all other motions to end him by lifting his free hand, revealing it to be wearing the Infinity Gauntlet.

“That won’t work in this universe,” Nova said, nervously.

“I can alter the fundamental nature of any single universe with the push of a button,” the Collector said. “What makes you think I can’t make this item work here?”

He pointed at them with the Infinity Gauntlet, making the large group twitch in fear – save Lightning. She just looked sad.

“One thought, and all of you are disintegrated,” the Collector said. “You would be no more. I could snap these fingers and extinguish every life within this universe, including the Flower fleet. I co-

Pinkie was holding the Infinity Gauntlet in her front left hoof, standing on the desk next to the Collector. “…You don’t have to try to sell it anymore,” she said. “You’ve gone far enough.”

The Collector gripped the edge of his desk with his fingers, silent.

Nobody moved – the scene might as well have just been Pinkie and the Collector, standing alone at a desk.

Pinkie produced a simple katana with a black hilt, hefting it behind her head – aiming for the Collector’s neck. “You ready?”

“…Ready,” the Collector breathed.

His life flashed before his eyes. A kid who liked stories, perhaps too much. Loved to learn everything about them. Obsessive to the point of a fault, a fault that sometimes got him in trouble. But he enjoyed his life immensely, content when most people of the world weren’t. He grew up like this.

…And then he found the simple mind control device and a dimensional device, buried under a tree in the woods. It had just been a simple camping trip. But that day he was overcome with a realization of what he could do – and what all this meant. He had spent a long time theorizing about the multiverse. He knew it was the multiverse he had pondered over the years.

He knew before he left that the multiverse was a terrible place.

He knew what he could do about it. Using his knowledge of fiction, he entered certain worlds and manipulated the events to his favor, placing people under his control to accomplish these goals. It started out just with the villains and the unsavory types, but he eventually moved to heroes, finding that it was much easier to give them advice if they had no choice but to take it.
And the Collection was born. He subjugated some science-fiction types to help him build it, and from the very start prepared to hide from beings like the Flowers. He knew they existed – though at the time he wasn’t positive they would be the Flowers, or something he hadn’t considered yet.

One of the first worlds had Lightning… She understood his dream, eventually.

He spent much of his flashback thinking of her and all they’d built.

Then of all those centuries in the Collection… Accumulating more and more people, more and more power, more and more experiences with all these people…

Where would they be without him? Nowhere, that’s where. They wouldn’t have amounted to anything anywhere near what he had offered them. Nothing at all.

And here he was, about to get his head cut off. About to die and give up everything.

About to die…

He…

…

…He didn’t want to die after all.

The Collector held up a hand, catching Pinkie’s katana. “…I’ve changed my mind.”

Pinkie’s eyes widened. “But… But your plan!”

“As it turns out… I’m still a human being. I… I can’t go through with it.” With a flick of his wrist, she was sent flying backward, Infinity Gauntlet and katana flying away with her.

Lightning held out a hand to the Collector. “G-”

“Sorry Lightning. Change of plans.” He pressed a button in his arm, activating the expansion protocols within his mechanical suit. His human body remained the same size, but his armor popped open like popcorn, folding out larger mechanical folds that were definitely too large to fit inside the original suit.

He kept growing, the suit replacing the larger pieces of armor with even bigger ones.

Nanoha pointed Raising Heart at him. “BOOST!” She called. Everyone with magic in the room gave her power, allowing her to form a sphere of magic.

Rick took out seven different kinds of guns and fired them all remotely – every burst of energy deflecting right off the Collector’s armor. “How the fuck!?”

“It’s made of every unbreakable alloy he could find,” Thanos reported. “Good luck finding anything that can break it.”

The Collector turned around just before he became too big for the office – punching out the back aquarium wall. Three walls later, he emerged into the Collection Plaza, still growing.

“I’m not done yet!” He yelled at all the people below, holding up his hand. “The Collection is mine! It isn’t going to be taken from me today!” He may not have had the Catcher anymore – but he still had the simple mind-control device he’d picked up all those years ago. Everyone with a weak mind in the Plaza succumbed to his will in an instant. “Let’s remove these invaders! And once we’re done
we’ll move the Collection where not even the Flowers will be able to find it!”

“S-STARLIGHT BREAKER!” Nanoha managed, pushing every last ounce of effort she could muster into the spell, adding a focus spell to it. It would only hit the Collector in a focused beam.

The Collector was now large enough to stop the beam with his hand. The power of the White Devil wasn’t enough to power through the anti-magic of the Collector’s armor.

Nanoha let out a soft laugh. “Of course that didn’t work…” she passed out, falling into Corona’s arms.

Monika appeared in front of the Collector’s face. “Hey, guess what?”

The Collector didn’t give her a response – his now dinosaur-sized body swiped at her, flattening her like a pancake against his palm. She glitched back into existence, fully healthy, with an annoyed expression on her face. “Well aren’t you grumpy.”

He summoned swords into either of his hands, planning to cut her to shreds.

“Fine, be that way.” She accessed the universe’s physics files. “There you go. Mind control is now impossible here. Enjoy!”

The Collector swung at her – but she was already gone.

Then his day really started going downhill.

_The entire Collection surged as an army against the Collector._

Superman punched the Collector across the Plaza, embedding him in the far wall of the nation-sized cavern. The Collector’s girth crushed many beneath him – but there was a Higher Angel nearby, continually healing everyone except the Collector. A few PPC agents were working with lesser ka-technology – probably to ensure casualties were kept to an absolute minimum.

“I brought you all here!” he shouted, bathing the ground of the plaza in an eldritch pink fire. “Don’t you understand what a gift that is!? What we were working for!?”

Tornado appeared in front of him, eyes livid. “Nobody understands.” She worked together with other psychics to psychically press him back into the wall.

“GOLD EXPERIENCE REQUIEM!” Giorno shouted, preventing several of the Collector’s attacks from even firing.

“STAR PLATINUM: THE WORLD!” Jotaro shouted, pummeling the Collector’s feet.

Vriska rolled eight eights and plowed right through the armor on the Collector’s left arm.

Aradia summoned a torrent of spirits whose deaths the Collector had caused, bringing down judgment. Alushy joined, giving her own spirits to the onslaught of retribution.

Pinkie Pie threw the Unbreakable Katana between the Collector’s eyes.

Johnny unleashed the Infinite Spin on the Collector’s chest, twisting him to the point of breaking.

Gyro joined with Ball Breaker.

Kars launched a lava flow at the Collector, using biology that didn’t make sense in most universes – but was just fine here.
Hundreds of others unleashed finisher, end-of-series style attacks at the Collector, bringing the giant to his knees.

“ENOUGH!” the Collector shouted, undoing everything with a quick reality edit. “DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHO I AM!?!” He drove his foot into the ground, shaking the entire Collection. “I AM THE ONE WHO BROUGHT YOU ALL TOGETHER! I AM THE ONE WHO MADE THIS POWER POSSIBLE! I AM THE CREATOR OF THIS FORCE FOR THE BETTERMENT OF ALL! DO YOU DARE FIGHT ME FOR DOING WHAT NEEDED TO BE DONE?!”

“IT DIDN’T NEED TO BE DONE!” Starbeat shouted.

For a single moment, it was just the Collector and Starbeat. Explosions happened around them, but in their perceptions, it was just them.

“You didn’t have to do any of this,” Starbeat growled. “You’re not cursed. A Gary Stu doesn’t have to be evil.”

“I’m not evil,” the Collector said.

Starbeat raised an eyebrow.

“…I’m evil for a purpose,” the Collector corrected.

“I don’t think you are. Not anymore, at least.”

The Collector charged.

“MINI-NUKE!” Corona shouted, creating an explosion that most certainly gave half the people within eyesight a form of cancer, but it had the intended effect of pushing the Collector back.

Corona could hear the healers groan about all the cancer they were going to have to cure now. She’d apologize later.

“You have no idea who I am…” the Collector said, punching Superman out of the sky. “What I am is beyond your understanding!”

“A Gary Stu Self-Insert!” Jay’s voice rang out through the Collection. “Who really needs to be assassinated. Your time’s out, Collector! Just give in already.”

“Even you have just barely scratched the surface!” the Collector shouted at the PPC agent. “I am not just some glitch for you to deal with! I am the Self-Insert of the Prophet of this story! I AM G. M. BLACKJACK! AND I CAN ONLY BE DEFEATED IF I WILL IT TO BE SO!”

“Wrong,” a single voice said. The Collector whirled to see Lightning standing in the hole that led to his office.

The Infinity Gauntlet was on her hand, pointed right at him.

“Lightning…”

“Goodbye.” She snapped her fingers.

The Collector’s body began to disintegrate – armor and everything within, flaking off like specks of paper. He let his limbs fall limp. He crashed to his knees, looking up. It was anyone’s guess as to what he was looking at.
“I’m sorry,” he said. Nobody knew whom the apology was addressed to.

Then he laughed bitterly.

It was the last noise he ever made.

The Collector was no more.

Lightning snapped the Infinity Gauntlet once more, using it for the more mundane task of floating into the center of the Plaza. “Everyone within the Collection, listen to me!” She called, her voice reaching every person in the universe. “You know me as Lightning, the Collector’s second in command. If you don’t know already, he is no more. I killed him.”

She took a breath. “All of you – no matter who you are – are free to return to your home universes. Hero or villain, it doesn’t matter, you’ve been kept here long enough. The teleporters will soon be altered to accommodate interdimensional warping. But I understand that a lot of you won’t want to return home. Some of your universes are no more. Some of you have been here centuries. Some of you may not return for some other reason.

“Hear this – this is the end of the Collector, but not the end of the Collection. I ask - not command - all of you to stay here with us to continue protecting the multiverse. We will not serve the vision of one man, but a collective vision that all of us strive toward! Let us turn all the evil that the Collector has done to something good!” She raised the Infinity Gauntlet into the air. “No more will we stand for slavery, power, or control! We will stand for justice, honor, and the defense of what is beautiful! We are the Collection! We will not let our tragedy fizzle out into nothing! We will take it by the horns and transform it into a legacy of our own!”

There were cheers.

Lightning smiled. “We need to form a council to lead us. Anyone who is interested, make your way to the center of the Plaza. Today is the day we decide what we will be doing moving forward.” She snapped her fingers, returning to the wet, ruined Collector’s office.

She looked to Thanos first. She put her Gauntlet-covered hand on his shoulder. “I don’t agree with anything you do. I need you on that council with me.”

Thanos smiled. “I figured as much.”

Lightning turned to the Merodi, Rick, and Nanoha. “The invitation extends to all of you as well.”

Rick burped. “Lemme thi- FUCK NO! I’m grabbing Morty and I’m out of here. Goodbye suckers!”

He pressed a button inside his jacket and vanished in a puff of blue smoke.

“Same,” Pinkie said. “We already have something we belong to. But I’m willing to stay around and throw a party!”

“I’ll have you coordinate with any other Pinkies,” Lightning assured her.

“…I’ll stay,” Starbeat said.

Everyone turned to stare at her in disbelief.

“Are… Are you sure?” Vriska asked her.

Lightning leaned down to be eye level with Starbeat. “You were never actually part of us… You
only pretended to be. You’re an outsider. Do you really want to stay?”

“I’m entering a new chapter of my life, freedom from the curse and all that.” Starbeat set her face, determined. “I’m ready for something completely different. My only condition is that we keep the doors open so Vriska can visit.”

“Awwwwww,” Corona said.

Lightning nodded. “Thanos, think we’ll have any issues letting the people who freed us back in?”

“None at all.”

Pinkie glared at Thanos. “I’m gonna be watchin’ you, makin’ sure you don’t act out on your evil-ness.”

Thanos made no response.

Nanoha coughed, managing to stand herself up. “…He actually did want to die, didn’t he, Lightning?”

Lightning nodded slowly. “I kept a promise.”

“It was his plan the entire time,” Jotaro said matter-of-factly. “From the start, wasn’t it?”

Lightning nodded. “We’d barely begun when he decided this was how it was going to end. With a grand battle where the Collection was freed from his tyrannical grip. He knew he was evil. So he planned his own defeat.” She looked over them all, expression unreadable. “Please, don’t tell that to the Collection. If they know that they’re just doing what he wanted… It will fall apart. They have to think we’re defying him.”

Nanoha nodded. “The secret is safe with the TSAB.”

“Merodi Universalis as well,” Pinkie asserted. “Riiiiight everyone?”

Everyone nodded.

Lightning pointed at Starbeat and Thanos. “We need to go – they’re probably waiting for us at this point. All of you… The losses you’ve suffered, the pain you’ve gone through… We can never repay it. It is unforgivable. I thank you for what you’ve done.”

Allure’s scowl softened. “It… It’s not okay. But I understand why.”

Corona nodded. “I do as well. For what it’s worth, I wish you luck protecting the multiverse. Tone down the extremism a bit though, okay?”

Lightning nodded. “I’m fairly certain we will.” She snapped her fingers again, taking Starbeat and Thanos away.

Vriska wiped her eyes. “…Look at her. She doesn’t even need me anymore.”

“Nnononono!” Pinkie said, putting a hoof to Vriska’s face. “She still needs you. You’ll never not need each other. Got it!”?

“…Got it.”

“Glad we’ve come to an understanding.” Pinkie yawned. “…I’m going to go find a bed before I plan
that party. It’s time for this really, really long adventure to end.”

~~~

Rick appeared in the center of the Plaza next to Morty and Gyro. “All right Morty, we’re blowing this joint. I’m thinking I’ve got an account somewhere that’ll have accumulated a fuck ton of interest we can blow in Blitz and Chitz all at once.”

“Rick, listen to me, because I’m only going to say this once,” Morty said.

“Uuuugh, what is it?”

“No.”

Rick blinked. “What?”

“Kid said no,” Gyro said, folding his arms.

“Shut up Ballsy,” Rick said. “What do you mean, no, Morty?”

Morty didn’t falter. “I mean I’m not going to Blitz and Chitz with you. I mean I’m not going adventuring with you. I mean I’m staying here and going to try to get on the council, if they’ll have me.”

“Morty, stop being stupid. Let’s get out of here.”

“This place has been better to me than you ever were!” Morty shouted. “It wasn’t just continual pointless ‘fun’ that scarred me for life! There was a purpose behind it! And the Collector never treated me like I was a worthless piece of shit!”

“Morty, he was evil.”

“And you aren’t!? Morty blurted. “You’re basically the same! Except he actually had a conscience somewhere in there. You’ve got nothing!”

“It’s a weakness, Morty.”

“You ruined me Rick!” Morty shouted. “I killed two people today! Two! People! I didn’t have to! There were ways around it! But I’ve been conditioned by you to shoot first and ask questions later! To not care!” Tears started dripping down his face. “That was you Rick! And I was too weak and alone to stop you from doing that!”

Rick put a hand to his forehead. “Look, Morty, you aren’t thinking straight. What about your family? If you sta-”

“I can go back to them and tell them what’s happened,” Morty said. “Easily. They’ll probably support me becoming a hero rather than your personal sidekick. And you know what else? I’ve already talked with Gyro, he’s going to try to get my original Earth into the USM! To fix what you and I did to it!”

“Morty do you have any idea how hard I try to avoid multiversal societies!?”

“Exactly! That’s why I’m signing us up! Because you’d never let it happen!”

“MORTY!” Rick shouted.
Gyro stepped forward, taking a defensive posture in front of Morty.

“Oh, have you replaced me now? Is that it?” Rick blurted. “What’s this fashion reject going to do for you?”

“He’s going to take me on adventures that don’t suck!” Morty shouted.

Rick grabbed Morty’s arm. “That’s it, I’m done talking about this. We’re going.”

“No you’re not,” Gyro said, summoning Ball Breaker.

“Oh and what are you gonna do? Spin me to death with your smooth baby balls!?”

“I can try. And if that doesn’t work…”

“…I’ll take a turn,” Ivan said, stepping forward.

“Then I will,” Johnny said, pointing his fingers at Rick.

“Ribbit,” Froppy said aggressively.

Olivia drew her gun and pointed at Rick. “Just another hat in the ring.”

Lady Rarity slammed her hammer onto the ground, cracking it. “I might just lose control of myself, dear, and try to eat you.”

Others made their intentions known – Aradia, Superman, Giorno, Alushy, and dozens more. All people ready to defend Morty, or people looking for an excuse to punch Rick’s smug face in. The vast majority were both.

Morty tore his arm away from Rick. “Go away, Rick. I don’t need you.”

Rick pulled out his portal gun, created a portal, and walked through it. It vanished with an unceremonious pop.

The moment he was gone Morty started hyperventilating. “That took everything I had in me…”

Gyro put a hand on his shoulder. “You did good, Morty.”

“Thanks…”

~~~

Allure walked in the front door of the League of Sweetie Belles. Her mane was tattered, she had bloodstains in numerous places on her white coat, and she just looked tired.

She didn’t care about any of this – anything that had been serious had already been healed.

What she did care about was who Squeaky had on her back.

Minna stared at Allure. Allure stared back at Minna.

Minna leaped off Squeaky so hard the poor unicorn’s head hit the floor. Allure ran toward Minna, infusing her legs with magic for a burst of speed. Mother and child collided, laughing and crying, falling into a pile on the ground.

The Sweeties in the League looked on with proud, joyous smiles at the reunion.
Alushy poked her head in the front doors, opting to lean against the doorframe instead of actually coming in. She lowered her glasses, watching Allure and Minna, together once again.

*That’s all I needed to do,* she thought, putting her glasses back on. She turned to leave.

“Alushy, wait,” Allure called.

Alushy turned around. “I was just dropping by, I d-”

“Thank you.” Allure said, giving Alushy a peck on the cheek. “You were there for Minna and did so much to help us.”

Alushy rubbed her cheek. “…Well that was unexpected.”

“Don’t read too much into it. Especially because there’s a second half to it.”

“Wha-”

Allure slapped Alushy across the face. “What were you *thinking* doing all those things with Minna!? She’s *seven* Alushy! SEVEN! That’s not even old enough to work at the TSAB!”

“I don’t operate according to the rules of society, Allure. I eat ponies.”

Allure sighed. “…You can visit Minna, if you want. *But only while I’m there too.*”

“All right, all right, I get it, I’m the dog, you’re the one who puts me in the doghouse. It’s like we’re an old married couple already!”

Allure facehooved. “Oh for the…”

Alushy chuckled. “I’ll be off then. See you around, Minna. Maybe I’ll find something fun for us to do your mother doesn’t find absolutely disgusting. Why, I hear the-”

Minna stopped her short, hugging the vampire pegasus tight. “Thank you for finding Mom.”

“Oh you’re too precious… Hnng… Think I’m having a heart attack…”

Allure raised an eyebrow. “You’re undead.”

“I have enough blood inside me to fill an Olympic sized swimming pool! …I think. The point is that blood has to flow somehow.”

“Or maybe it’s just under pressure.”

“Sounds like something to experiment on!” Minna said. “I’ll get a knife!”

“Minna no!” Allure yelled.

“Minna yes!” Alushy called.

The two ponies looked at each other and decided the situation was so absurd the only reasonable response was laughter.

~~~

Corona returned to the Golden Joke bruised, battered, and really *really* tired.
Despite this, she was more than willing to rush Eve into a hug from behind.

“WAUGH!” Eve shouted.

“I’m back!” Corona said, grinning. “And better than ever!”

“You look like you went through a meat grinder.”

Corona blinked. “Oddly enough, you’re not the first person to use that metaphor on me today. At least I fixed all the bones.” A sharp pain hit her in the side. “…Maybe I missed one. Ow.” She placed her hand on her pain and started healing it.

“How bad was it?”

“Lost a lot of people,” Corona said. “On both sides. Not as genocidal as the Bloodbath – not by a long shot – but still hard. I don’t even know who’s alive and who isn’t at this point…” A haunted look came over her face. “I still don’t know who that was…”

“Who what was?”

“I’ll find out eventually.” She stretched. “It… It was harder than the Bloodbath too. After a bit, it was clear that we were going to win there. Here… We got lucky a lot of times, from what I hear. Very lucky.”

“Perhaps it’s fate,” Eve said, smiling. “Ka needed us to win.”

“It sounds like it was a lot of things,” Corona muttered, deciding to sit down on the ground. “But it feels good to finally be done with it. Once again I don’t think we really have any enemies.”

Eve smiled, looking at all the people walking around the Golden Joke – people from all the local multiversal societies. “Brutalight’s still out there somewhere. As is Flagg.”

Corona nodded. “Brutalight doesn’t seem like much of a threat anymore. And Flagg… I don’t think he’ll be back for a while yet.”

Eve nodded in agreement. “Think we can finally stop holding our breaths?”

Corona spread her wings and started preening them with her fingers. “Maybe. Maybe not. At the very least we don’t have to spend every waking moment of our time stressing out over some big bad looming over our heads.”

“…Maybe,” Eve said, gaining a glazed over expression.

“What is it?”

“Nothing important for now,” Eve said. “And no, I’m not trying to just blow you off, it really isn’t important.” She stretched her wings. “Want to go grab something to eat? I won’t have to make a speech until things settle down.”

“Sure!” Corona said. “I need to do something that doesn’t involve people trying to kill me for a while.”

~~~

Nova barged down the door to her home, expecting the interior to be a complete mess.
To her surprise it wasn’t any messier than usual.

“…Huh,” she said, walking into the dining room to see Sunburst and Stardust sitting at the table.

“Oh! You’re back!” Sunburst called, brightening up in an instant. “…You think they would have called me.”

“It’s a mess back there,” Nova said, taking a seat at the table. She looked at her three-year-old filly, sitting in a high chair, munching on what was probably mashed potatoes. She was a filly of few words – and few worries.

“She called for you a few times,” Sunburst said. “But I think she thought you were just on one of your extended missions. Didn’t notice I was worried at all.”

“Ah, to be young and ignorant,” Nova said, sitting back in the chair. “…Sometimes I wish I could have just pretended like nothing was going wrong. …There were a lot of times I didn’t think I would be able to come back.”

Sunburst adjusted his glasses. “Well… We would have waited for you anyway. Long as y-”

Nova pulled him into a kiss, shutting him up. He didn’t mind.

Stardust started laughing.

“Apparently we’re amusing,” Sunburst commented.

Nova pulled back from Sunburst, smirking. “Well, we are, aren’t we?”

“…I dunno. I’ve never been very good at telling what’s funny and what isn’t.”

“Ah yes, the ‘dead rabbit’ joke.”

“…I still think it’s funny.”

“It made Stardust cry! I don’t even think she was able to understand words then!”

“I am never going to live that down,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Never!” Nova said in her ‘hammy villain’ voice. “…Celestia, I’m glad to be home.”

“Mommy’s home!” Stardust blurted.

Nova smirked. “You’ve got something on your face, Stardust.”

“No I don’t!”

“Stardust, stop lying. It’s right there on your chin.”

Stardust realized she was trapped so she just clammed her face up and refused to say anything. She did use her horn to remove the potatoes though.

Nova rolled her eyes. “You’re crazy, you know that?”

Stardust was still in ‘no talking’ mode.

“…Right. Well, the joys of being a parent. I get kidnapped and forced to do slave labor for a while, and when I come home there’s clearly a need for a nice talk.” A sparkle appeared in her eyes. “Oh
the things I’m going to be able to pull on you when you become a rebellious teenager.”

“Um… Should you really be looking forward to that sort of thing?” Sunburst asked.

“Shush, Sunburst. I’m in parenting mode.”

“…Okay then.”

~~~

Eve cleared her throat. “So, here’s the Golden Joke’s final report as a base for taking care of the Collector. I’m proud to announce that our primary goal has been a complete success!”

The Golden Joke’s meeting hall erupted into applause. Eve waited for the motion of the clapping to stop before continuing.

“There are some things that everyone should know if they don’t already. First off, the Golden Joke will not be closing after today – the USM has courteously declared this world neutral territory available to all multiversal nations who are interested. Related to this announcement, the Eldritch Embodiment and TSAB have agreed to send representatives here more regularly. The Flowers denied the request and have stopped answering any of our communications.

“The Collection is a bit more complicated than that. They have agreed to keep an open channel to the Golden Joke for personal reasons, but they have decided that they don’t want to be connected to any particular part of the multiverse. They will move back into hiding, out of sight from all but the most powerful societies. They will work from the shadows, making the multiverse a better place with little acts of heroism. We have all agreed to wish them luck in their endeavor, and are in the process of signing a treaty to formalize our admittedly nuanced relationship with them.

“A memorial for those lost in the battle against the Collector will be constructed at this site within the next few days. May we always remember their sacrifice.” She let there be a moment of silence.

“...I just want to say thank you to all of you who have put so much of their lives into fighting the Collector. All those hours banging our heads against the wall, looking for answers – they were not in vain. We accomplished what we set out to do, everyone. Let’s move on to the new era.”

Applause filled the room as she stepped down from the stage.

~~~

It was a rare day when Valentine laughed jovially. He was usually a rather serious individual.

But Gyro just had a certain way about him that brought out the best in the Ambassador.

“I worked on thirteen verses to this song!” Gyro said, pouring himself more of a strange, green alcoholic beverage. “Turns out there’s a lot of ways to sing about kicking the Collector where the sun don’t shine.” He did a twirl for effect, dancing around Valentine’s personal lounge.

“I think we should only have it in small doses,” Valentine said through his chuckles. “We barely survived the onslaught the first verse gave us.”

“Too bad, so sad, I feel like singing. Wooooooooooooooaaaaaah~”

Johnny shot a fingernail at Gyro’s glass, shattering it and stopping the song before it started up again. “Mercy! Mercy!”
“Johnny…”

“Mercy! Merci!” Johnny started laughing.

“Johnny, how did you get so drunk so fast?”

“The answer… is… Spin…”

“He doesn’t go out drinking much,” Valentine said. “He is a family man now, after all.”

“I know. His kids are nothing new.” Gyro folded his arms. “How long have you been leaving them hanging to look for me?”

“Eleventy-two,” Johnny muttered, “Give or take a year.”

Gyro shook his head. “You need to get back to them.”

“Right after I catch the tiger.” Johnny grunted.

Gyro looked at Valentine. Valentine shrugged. “I don’t know either.”

“The world may never know…” Gyro mused. “Right, so, moving away from family talk, how’s about we move onto more pressing matters!” He put his hands on his hips. “Have they made the TV show about our adventures yet?”

“Found it,” Johnny said. “Steel Ball Run. Some guy named Araki. Prophet power.”

“I mean our adventures. That only started on the Steel Ball Run, Johnny.”

“Dunno,” Johnny said, waving his finger in the air. “Probably will try soon though!”

Valentine cleared his throat. “I am aware of a team doing an adaptation of our early adventures, yes, attempting to do it in the style of the Steel Ball Run anime.”

“…Anime-whatnow?”

“It would take way too long to explain.”

Gyro shrugged. “Well, I want to see this ‘anime’ thing.”

Valentine smirked. “If you wish, I can have it streamed right now.”

“You hear that Johnny? We get to rediscover the wonders of sitting on a couch watching stuff!”

“I’m too drunk for this…”

“That’s exactly as drunk as you need to be!” Gyro laughed. “Let’s get this party into full swing!” He poured everyone more green alcohol. “To us!”

“To us,” Valentine said.

“To… Us…” Johnny said, barely managing to meet the toast. He then proceeded to pour the green stuff all over his face.

Gyro laughed. “Johnny… Never change.”

~~~
Jenny looked at her *Wall Of People I Really Want Dead*. It was down to two again – the Collector’s picture had been torn down and tossed into a fire. Sure, *she* may not have done it, and *she* may have spent most of the fight in deep space, but it still counted.

Plus, Ivan was back.

“*This wall is macabre,*” he observed.

“That’s what I was missing all this time,” Jenny said, grinning. “I was missing your needlessly pessimistic and defeatist attitude! I was really getting down because it was gone, y’know?”

Ivan put a hand to his face and sighed.

“Oh, that noise! I forgot how much I loved that noise!”

“Is this supposed to make me feel appreciated, or something?”

“I dunno, I’m just saying what I think. There is no filter on this crazy train! Choo choo!”

“You’re upset you spent most of the fight in space.”

“OF COURSE I’M UPSET ABOUT THAT! Who wouldn’t be!? How was I supposed to know he’d be impervious to world-ending punches?”

“…Reason?”

Jenny twitched in annoyance. “…Welcome back Ivan.”

“Thank you.”

~~~

Corona, Lady Rarity, Olivia, and Toph stood in front of the Memorial. It was an hourglass-shaped statue with a large crack purposefully placed in it. Names were engraved in bold letters all around the rounded surface. The four of them looked at one name in particular.

**LIESHY**

*(FLUTTERSHY)*

“…If I had known…” Corona said, laying a hand on the name. “If I had known…”

“You would have lost your cool and punched Lightning’s lights out,” Toph said.

Corona didn’t have any response for this. She stared at the name, silent.

“What did she want out of life?” Olivia asked suddenly. “I may have spent the last few years of my life near her… But she was never somebody I could read very well.”

“She kept her cards close to her chest,” Lady Rarity admitted. “It was never easy with her… She could be in a foul mood for weeks and not let anybody see it.”

“She was content,” Corona said. “She didn’t really want much of anything. She had people she cared about, people who cared about her, and something to keep her occupied. She didn’t want anything more. She was a complicated mare with her words… But deep down, she was simple.” Corona sighed. “She just wanted a life that wasn’t made of lies, and she found one. She was happy,
even if she never showed it.”

Toph saluted the memorial. “It was an honor.”

Lady Rarity wiped her eyes. She was about to say something – but then she saw Morty standing nearby, staring at them. She took a defensive posture out of instinct.

Corona held up a hand. Lady Rarity saw it and forced herself to calm down. Corona motioned for Morty to come over.

“Uh… I-I should really be going…”

“Nonsense,” Corona said, pulling him in with her telekinesis. “You have every right to grieve. We shouldn’t keep you from it.”

“…I’m here for selfish reasons though. I didn’t know her. …I just killed her.”

“And the fact that you’ve come here means you deserve to be here.” Corona said, tears in her eyes. Her red shades accentuated the streaks on her eyes. “You can pay your respects.”

Olivia took a deep breath and let it out. “Yeah. Corona’s right. I can’t promise I’ll be very nice, but go ahead.”

Lady Rarity bowed her head. “…I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Morty said. “It was a horrible situation for everyone involved. There’s nothing we can do about it.”

“We can move past it,” Corona said. “Which is exactly why we’re here.”

The five of them took a moment to take in the Memorial. They stood, motionless, for an indeterminate amount of time.

It was only when an overweight mud-brown stallion with a serious overbite came in that they broke the silence.

“Ah… Clockwork,” Corona said. “…We’ll leave you with her.”

“T-thank you,” he said, sitting down right in front of Lieshy’s name.

“Who’s he?” Morty asked.

“Lieshy’s fiancé,” Toph answered, voice choking.

Corona put her wings around Toph, Lady Rarity, Olivia, and Morty, ushering them out in a large hug.

None of them left with dry eyes.

~~~

Aradia and Vriska sat on a bench a fair ways from the Memorial. They had already looked at Davepeta’s name – which had, inscribed under it, both Dave Strider and Nepeta Leijon.

“I was hoping the three of us would be able to get together and have fun at some point,” Vriska said. “The lost trio.”
Aradia nodded. “…It was a beautiful life, Vriska. A life they ended on their own terms.”

“Aradia, for once in your morbid life, can you not go all ‘death is fascinating’ on me?”

Aradia smiled warmly. “…Sure.”

“Thanks,” Vriska said. “…Do you think there’s anyone else who was flung out there?”

“Lord English is gone and all the ghosts are sealed. Only you, me, and Davepeta were actually alive there. Not even Hussie was alive. He’s sealed away with all the rest.”

“Maybe he’s still fucking with us from there. Death by friend seems like totally part of his style.”

Aradia shrugged. “Maybe…” She pulled the Omnitrix out of her robes.

“That Davepeta’s thing?”

“Mhm. At one point I thought I might be able to revive them with it. It has their DNA inside it, but it doesn’t have any of their memories.”

“Was worth a shot,” Vriska said, kicking her feet.

Aradia held the Omnitrix up to the sun. “This is a powerful artifact. …I’m not sure what to do with it.”

“You could always use it yourself. One Time player passed on to another.”

“I’m already really strong, Vriska. I don’t need more of a boost.”

“So? Take it anyway. Unless you can think of someone else they wanted to give it to.” Vriska’s frown deepened. “That we have access to.”

Aradia nodded. “All right.” She placed the watch on her wrist. “Guess I can turn into anything now.”

“Fun times ahead,” Vriska said, not really looking at her.

“…Maybe with all these allies we’ll be able to find home soon,” Aradia said.

“They never want to help.”

“I’m sure that’ll change eventually,” Aradia said. “We’re moving up in the world, Vriska. We’ll find something sooner or later.”

Vriska smiled. “That optimism of yours sure is contagious.”

“I know! Isn’t it amazing?”

“When it’s not that it’s fucking annoying.”

Aradia laughed.

Vriska rolled her eyes. “There it is…”

~~~

I smiled. “Ah, you’re awake!”
Blackjack opened her eyes. “Hnn? …Didn’t I die? …Again?”

“Yes,” I answered, helping Blackjack up. She was in my library, along with myself and her alternate, Jackie.

Jackie waved at her. “Hey, me.”

“Hey myself,” Blackjack said, waving as well. She noticed that her hoof wasn’t mechanical. “Woah…”

“Grew you a new body,” I said. “It was easier than fixing everything. Frankly it’ll work better for you as well.”

“I am not complaining,” Blackjack declared, stretching her real legs. “Oh this feels good…”

“Restrain yourself. Twilence doesn’t need to see you go all out,” Jackie reminded her.

Blackjack rolled her eyes. She took this moment to realize she still had wings. “Oh. Hey. I thought I was supposed to lose these when I died for real? Like you. Me. …Nevermind.”

“You were,” I said. “If you had died on Equis Fallout with the correct spirit setup and your Blank nearby. That didn’t happen. You died in the Collection where there was no place for the part of you that’s Luna to go. So you stayed together when I rescued you. Hence, still alicorn.”

“So hey, we’re going to continue to not be identical,” Jackie said. “That’s good.”

“Yeah,” Blackjack said, stretching her wings. “So… Who are you exactly?”

I smiled. “I’m Twilence. Think of me as the Watcher for the entire multiverse. It’s not a perfect metaphor but it works.”

“Huh. Your eye is creepy.”

“I get that a lot,” I admitted.

“So… What now?”

“You disappear,” Jackie said. “Like I did. You can’t be a hero anymore, Blackjack. You gave that up.”

“I’ve given you the opportunity to let ‘Security’ die in the Collection,” I added. “You can go settle down, start a life. You can do what Jackie did and watch over Equis Fallout from the background. Or you could go to one of the worlds you’ve visited in your journeys and stay there.” I gestured toward my notebook. “Whatever you do, I’ll ensure you stay out of any part of the larger story as long as I can. You deserve that much.”

“…Huh. Do I get to tell anyone I’m still alive?” Blackjack asked.

Jackie shrugged. “I guess so?”

“You can if you want,” I told her. “But what I’m doing will make you seem like a shadow to them. Most of them won’t really register you because they have to be part of the story. All that’ll do is get them to remove your name from the Memorial.”

Blackjack nodded. “Ah. Right…” She scratched the back of her head. “Y’know, I think I’ve been trying to avoid making friends so much I don’t really have anywhere to go… I mean, besides
Gilgamesh, but I can tell he’s just going to get me killed.”

I furrowed my brow. “...I can put you in Ponyville on Equis Vitis. You’ll just be another pony in the background. I might be able to keep Rev in your loop, she doesn’t go out on adventures that much and tends to be a more background influence.

“I’ll take tricky,” Blackjack said. “It won’t be the first time I stayed in a church, anyway.”

I smiled. “…I should probably have asked this first. Are you okay with me giving you this life?”

“I mean, it sounds better than getting killed again.”

I nodded. “It is. …I can give you back your talent for sacrifice.”

“No,” Blackjack said. “I’m not going back to that.”

I spread my wings. “In that case… Blackjack, I declare you alive. Again. Go live a normal life, as long as I can keep you in it.”

“Thanks. …Sure the wings won’t be asking for trouble?”

“There are a lot of alicorns in Merodi Universalis, there’ll be no problem,” I told her.

“Can I have some wings then?” Jackie asked.

“No,” I said, smiling innocently.

“Ouch. That grin is painful.”

“I know. I’ve perfected it over quite a long time.” I turned around. “Now, before I send you on your way, does anyone want to play a round of Blackjack?”

The two ponies groaned at me. I laughed at my own joke. That made it all the lamer, but that also made it more memorable.

“What about Go Fish?”

“Twilence, stop.”

~~~

“Big changes for you, huh?” Vriska said, walking with Starbeat down one of the Hub’s many halls.

Starbeat laughed nervously. “Yep! I got put on the Collection Council by virtue of ‘outsider opinion’ and ‘ka expert’. So now I have two nationalities. Because nobody in the Collection wants to demand my loyalty and Eve is just so nice that she allows dual citizenship with just a simple signature, so now I’m a Merodi Collected. Collected Merodi. Something.”

“You sure hiding yourselves again is the best thing?”

“It’ll keep anyone from taking advantage of us. Don’t worry, I’ll be around. You just aren’t allowed to ask me about my job. Hush-hush stuff, top secret, you can’t take advantage of it.”

“Sounds like you’ve got it figured out. Is there anything left for us here?”

Starbeat chuckled. “Well, you get to see my amazing, free face now!”
“We were gonna see that anyway.”

Starbeat nodded. “I’m still your head ka researcher. Won’t be producing as much stuff, but you’ll get that. Tell the Research Division not to worry its pretty little head. Unless that head is Rohan, in which case worry away!”

Vriska took a moment to pick Starbeat up and hug her.

“…Okay, what is it, you don’t do public hugs unless you’re overcome with emotion.”

“Just… glad we’re finally talking,” she said with an awkward smile. “I could drop you if you want.”

“Wait no do-”

Vriska dropped her.

Starbeat dusted herself off and chuckled. “I guess I did ask for it.” Starbeat looked into Vriska’s eyes. “How did you deal with being controlled by something else?”

“I’m fine,” Vriska assured her. “Keep in mind I’ve been brutalized, captured, and enslaved a few times before. …And been the one doing all those things as well. I’ve seen it all from both ends. This time was just a little odd, is all.” She folded her arms. “…For once in my life I’m actually wondering what the hell the outcome should have been. The fact that the Collector basically got what he wanted still bugs me. A force to protect the multiverse from whatever!”

“Just because someone’s a bad person doesn’t mean they can’t like good things. Hitler liked puppies, I hear.”

“Mhm… Then there was his whole spiel about being our Prophet…”

“I think I can help you there. So what if he’s the ‘self-insert’ of the guy writing this story? From what I understand, the guy writing this story is just a kid on an Earth somewhere, and the Collector was probably dreamed up to be ‘what would happen if I was given power’? I doubt the Collector was even a ‘correct’ answer to that question. Then again, I am going off incomplete data and the Flowers calling him a ‘glitch’.”

“We don’t really understand anything, do we?”

“Nope! We just have to be fine with that. It’s a step better than the Flowers, who think they understand everything.” She looked up at nothing in particular. “We do know what the Dark Tower is now, at least. It is the reason things are the way they are. Somebody wanted to add meaning to existence.”

“Someone dared to answer the big question,” Vriska said with a soft chuckle. “They asked ‘what matters?’ and got ‘nothing matters’ and decided ‘screw that, let’s make something matter’.”

“But does that really make anything matter, or is it an illusion?”

“That’s a discussion to have with Rev and Nova, not me,” Vriska said. “I’m just the spiderbitch. I don’t need a grand unifying picture of the cosmos. I just want to go home and have a good time.”

Starbeat grinned. “That’s an accurate description. …By the way, where are we going?”

“Iroh’s Teashop,” Vriska said, kicking in the door of the establishment.

“SURPRISE!” Pinkie shouted, placing a hat-of-honor on Starbeat and sticking a party blower in her
mouth. “It’s time for your free-from-the-curse-and-becoming-a-councilmare party! Woo woo!” The room was filled with Starbeat’s friends, streamers, balloons, exotic culinary dishes, and a large banner with her face on it.

Starbeat blew the party blower and laughed. “Finally, I can actually enjoy one of your legendary parties. SHOW ME THE CAKE!”

“HERE IS THE CAKE!” Pinkie said, throwing it at her. It exploded, covering the entire party in icing.

Everyone laughed.
Hey everyone! GM here, your mad insane guy who just doesn't know how to stop writing.

I've come to realize that I almost exclusively put updates and announcements on the fimfiction.net version of this story, ignoring both the AO3 and fanfiction.net versions. I mean, fimfiction.net sure makes it easier and more convenient to do this sort of thing without interrupting the flow of the story, but that's no excuse for leaving everyone else completely in the dark. I know there are people who read both the other versions, you deserve to know about things that are happening too.

So, consider this a little bit up an update for people who care! First of all, the big one: I currently have Songs of the Spheres drafted. The ending of this massive story exists somewhere at around two million words. It's a great feeling to have it done, and I bet it's a weight off all your chests too - no chance of me not finishing it now! If you're reading this, you're halfway through it! Yay!

I don't know if you guys are aware, but I have a discord server set up for discussing Songs of the Spheres and the multiverse: https://discordapp.com/invite/n8mQxKA. Anyone can join and I'm on there regularly. Why join, you may ask? Well, I mean, I like to think talking to me is fun but there are other reasons. The biggest attraction I have set up are access to chapter drafts up through Arc 10. So if you're itching to figure out what happens next, you can check those out! You'll also get more up-to-date news and announcements. It's also an easy way to find the SotS side stories, of which there are a sizeable amount!

You can also find lots of helpful bonus stuff on the fimfiction story group: https://www.fimfiction.net/group/213761/songs-of-the-spheres-extended-multiverse. You can find links to pony-related stories in the group's 'stories' folders, while the non-pony stories can be found in the forum under the 'non-pony story masterguide' post.

And let me just say that I'm so happy you've read over a million words of my story! I'm going to try to give you guys more attention from now on, even if you don't comment as much. Hopefully I'll get to know some of you in time!

But for now, ciao!

-GM, master of dimensions.

ARC 7: BLOOD

Infinity, Part 1

Kars was completely forgotten about after the conflict with the Collector.

This was very good for Kars. He left the Collection the moment he could, returning to Earth Stand in
the same place he’d been picked up. Had he been the same as when he left, he would have succumbed to the vacuum of space, hardening to a stone and falling forever.

But he had learned many new tricks during his time in the Collection. The most potent of which was *magic*. He created a barrier around himself and returned to the planet below, a psychotic grin on his face. He knew Earth Stand was part of Merodi Universalis, so it was dangerous for him to be there, but he only had one goal in mind.

He needed to find Joseph Joestar. After that, he would disappear and do whatever he wanted.

The fact that he had no idea where Joseph was didn’t matter – he had gained enough of an understanding of technology while in the Collection to get by. He landed in Venice, not surprised in the least to find it had changed phenomenally in all the decades Kars had been floating in space.

He found a public library with Internet connectivity easily enough. Nobody really paid him much attention – Kars was not *that* well-known of a figure, and even then he didn’t look unusual enough to warrant a multiversal society’s attention.

Kars froze when he found Joseph’s obituary. Killed in the Bloodbath that created Merodi Universalis. A tragic end.

This meant Kars had nobody to take revenge on.

…Except the rest of the Joestar bloodline. He searched. Joseph and his wife had both passed, but their daughter Holy was still living, as was Joseph’s bastard child Josuke and adopted daughter Shizuka…

Kars began to smile as he scrolled down the family tree. Jotaro… his kids, Jolyne, Jordan, and Joanne… And would you look at that, Jolyne had a very young son, Job.

He came to a man named ‘Johnny Joestar’ in his searches, but Kars didn’t care about him. Alternate universe bloodlines were not the one he sought to destroy. Since Joseph could not suffer what he needed anymore, it would be taken out on his family.

Kars understood he would not be able to just attack them directly – they all lived in different locations and would band together to face him, probably with some Merodi doomsday device. Even with his mastery over all new kinds of biology, he could not be certain that he would survive bombardment with such a superweapon.

So he needed a plan…

A glorious, dastardly plan began to form in his head.

It was just so *easy*. The fact that they were a family was their biggest weakness.

But before he could get to that, he would need to create an army of vampires. It wouldn’t quite work without minions to carry out his every whim. He would have to prepare for *maybe* a week. After that… the Joestars would fall. He left the library *laughing*.

The Twilight Sparkle running the library rolled her eyes – you got a nutjob every day in this town…

~~~

Earth MC was so named because Corona thought ‘let’s just mash Marvel and DC together and see what happens, because that’s basically what this universe is’. The name stuck, and that’s what they’d
been calling the strange mixture superhero world ever since.

After letting the events from the Collector Incident sink in a little, Corona had thought to ask Captain America if they had encountered anybody named Thanos in their universe yet. They had not – so Corona told them all about Thanos.

And immediately the whole Avengers set out to find the Infinity Stones as a pre-emptive measure against Thanos, since it turned out the mad titan did exist in Earth MC, and was already looking for his stones.

He only got one.

Corona’s knowledge wasn’t perfect – this was a DC/Marvel mixup after all, there was no way to just say ‘this continuity matches, so the Infinity Stones must be here’. However, they still got the other five Stones easily. They had been in places related to the heroes of Earth MC, obtainable with only minimal difficulty.

And then they’d decided to do something truly stupid with them.

“This is the worst idea I’ve ever gone along with,” Iron Man told Corona.

Corona glanced at the five glowing Infinity Stones sitting on a table in the Avengers’ lounge. “Come on, it’s the perfect bait! He won’t be able to resist!”

“That’s obvious,” Batman said. “The question is if we’ll be able to stop him from getting them or not?”

Corona’s mount – Lady Rarity – looked up at Batman. “We have the room surrounded with twenty superheroes. Even if he completed it I doubt he’d have time to actually use the thing.”

Corona expected for a moment that Olivia would make some snide remark – but then she remembered Olivia wasn’t here. She’d gone to work for Giorno in a more wide-range hacking capacity. It was just Corona and Lady Rarity now… Already the two of them were being called the Guardians. It was pretty clear at this point they didn’t work for Toph, they just lived on her planet.

“Things change…” Corona said to herself, shaking her head with a sad smile. Once again she was struck by Lieshy’s face, confusing her emotional state even further.

“Look alive people!” the Flash called. “Incoming!”

Thanos crashed through the roof wearing the incomplete Infinity Gauntlet. With his free hand he reached for an Infinity stone.

He managed to close his fingers around the yellow one before he got the living daylights beaten out of him.

The invisibility cloak that had been around all the heroes dropped and they rushed forward. The Flash and Superman made it first, followed by quite literally everyone else. Fists, magic, fire, ice, and claws hit him from every side. He used his power to push them back, but more than a few were able to just keep punching him anyway.

He called for support from his fleets in space, but then the Merodi fleet jumped in from a neighboring dimension and made quick work of them.
Superman tore off Thanos’ hand, tossing the Infinity Gauntlet into the air. Corona grabbed it with her telekinesis and put it on her own, much smaller hand. It somehow fit anyway. “Sweet,” she said, smirking.

Thanos roared, going to punch her – but Lady Rarity’s hammer hit him in the face. Doctor Strange tied him up with magic and Batman added psychic-resistant netting to the mix.

He was well and truly defeated.

“I have to say, I like it when we can completely trounce the villains,” Flash said. “Hooray for foreknowledge!”

Corona blushed slightly. “Hey, I told you at just the right time. Sorry I didn’t think about it until now.”

“Half of the universe still lives,” Superman said, turning to Corona. “We are in your debt.”

“He may not have succeeded in this universe anyway,” Corona said, shrugging. She began picking up the Infinity Stones and placing them in the Gauntlet.

Doctor Strange stared at her. “…What are you doing?”

“Completing the Infinity Gauntlet, duh,” Corona said. She put a hand on her hip as she inserted the fourth stone. “You really think I’m going to turn all evil on you right here?”

“It’s an exceptionally powerful artifact, too dangerous in the wrong hands.”

“And it’ll be taken to a universe where it’s completely useless,” Corona said. “Along with all the stones. Nobody will have to worry about them again.”

“But you do want to do something with it,” Flash said. “I can see it in your eyes.”

Corona smirked. “Doctor Strange, you said the Abstracts exist in this universe?”

Doctor Strange nodded. “Yes. The manifestations of universal concepts do exist. I’ve met with Eternity myself.”

“Well, here’s the thing. The ‘Abstracts’ are the name of one of the Class 1 civilizations. We didn’t know much about them, but apparently the universe the Collection’s Thanos is from was technically in ‘Abstract’ space. I want to talk with them.”

“…Why?” Superman asked.

“You know how we’ve been talking about incorporating you into Merodi Universalis? I’m pretty sure I need to ask their permission. Last time we didn’t, the Class 1 Society in question used it as an excuse to throw us into a death match that scarred us all emotionally.”

“Oh,” Doctor Strange said, relaxing. “…I suppose that’s fine.”

Corona held up the Infinity Gauntlet, popping the sixth Infinity Stone in. “You know, I wonder if the Elements of Harmony could be used like this… Ah, something to think about later. So… I’m just going to think ‘I want to talk to some Abstracts’ and then I snap my finger-”

She was suddenly standing in a great white expanse, alone.

exist?"

“**He does not at the moment. But I do.**”

Corona turned around to see a mountain-sized humanoid sitting on a throne. He was golden in color and had a bright, circular plate in his chest, so intense it was hard to look at. His head had three faces, each with piercing glowing eyes. There was no neck affixing the head to the body.

“H-hey! R-right to the Living Tribunal!” Corona chuckled nervously. “W-wasn’t exactly expecting to get up to the top yet! …Or almost the top.”

“**I specifically intercepted your request directly to me. Ask your questions, Corona Shimmer.**”

~~~

Holy Kujo was an aging woman, but she didn’t mind. She currently lived in a small house on the outskirts of Morioh so she could be close to her extended family – but never within the Joestar Central. She didn’t have the strength in her to be around that level of insanity all the time. Even though she was the head of the family right now, she had opted not to be burdened with the oversight of all Joestars. That task had eventually fallen to a young man named Koichi, seeing as Jotaro also refused the call by Joseph’s request.

Even though almost her entire family was always caught up in adventures, Holy got to live a quiet, happy life where the explosions of adventure always happened several blocks over.

There was a reason she lived on Morioh’s outskirts after all.

Her son and grandkids would visit regularly, as would her half brother Josuke and adoptive sister Shizuka. It was, needless to say, an interesting family she had.

But when people weren’t visiting, she was alone in the house. She was retired so she didn’t really have any obligations. She spent this time sewing, reading, and occasionally writing little articles about her thoughts on life. This lifestyle would drive many people insane, but she was okay with it. She didn’t feel neglected, and was only lonely occasionally. And whenever that hit she would just call up her son – or her grandkids – and have a nice chat.

That said, she was still a Joestar. And she had an innate sense for danger despite virtually never having any adventures.

She knew something was wrong by the way the air shifted around her.

She reached for her phone – realizing it was on the dining room table across the house. She could have made a run for it, but something told her this was a bad idea. Instead, she reached into the pantry and pulled out a frying pan. Then she began to walk to the dining room.

The kitchen window exploded as an Arcei leaped at her, arcs glowing. The blue mare had her teeth bared – revealing them to be fangs.

Holy let out a gasp of surprise, but swung the frying pan anyway, hitting the vampire-Arcei across the jaw. This did little to the vampiric creature besides annoy it.

“Guns ‘n Roses,” Holy said, softly, summoning her Stand. The green vines rippling with flowers came from her back and wrapped around the vampiric mare. Thorns extended from the vines, doing no damage to the pony’s skin. She passed out anyway – forced into a coma by Guns ‘n Roses.
Holy was once again thankful Jotaro had insisted she learn to activate her Stand after they had researched the Stand pill to completion. It had saved her numerous times now – a good return on investment for that one time it sent her into a coma back when Dio was their primary concern.

She ran for the dining room table, reaching out for the phone.

Another Arcei-vampire crashed through the dining room window, smashing the table and the phone with his foot. He decided to use his arcs on her, the Runes glowing a sickening orange. She felt heavy pressure on her chest. She screamed out, summoning Guns ‘n Roses, forcing the Arcei into a coma.

Guns ‘n Roses was a one-target-at-a-time Stand. She couldn’t do anything about the third vampiric pony until it had already bitten her at the base of the neck. She wrapped her Stand’s vines around the third attacker, but a fourth was already on her before the third had passed out. A fifth came, and then a sixth.

She fell to the ground, her Stand dissipating as they made quick work of her.

Her last thoughts were of worry for her son.

~~~

Josuke and Rohan passed each other in the streets of Morioh.

Normal people would have either ignored each other or waved and continued on their way.

Not Josuke and Rohan.

They fixed each other with steely glares and stopped whatever errands they had to run for a confrontation. They squared off, wordlessly, crossing their arms and striking unbalanced poses that somehow accentuated each other. Josuke’s companion - a human version of Starlight Glimmer known as Beam - put a hand to the bridge of her nose and sighed. Here they go again...

“Rohan…” Josuke said.

“Josuke…” Rohan replied.

Josuke pointed a finger at Rohan. “You’re going down tomorrow night!”

“Please, I never lose,” Rohan said with a dismissive wave.

“You only think you’re the best. Jotaro’s agreed to show you how a real man plays.”

Rohan smirked. “A poker face only goes so far when you aren’t playing poker.”

Josuke sneered. “That’s only what you think!”

Rohan turned to walk away. “Dice will roll, Josuke, dice will roll.”

“That’s not even clever!” Josuke shouted after him, shaking his fist. Rohan wasn’t listening. “…I really hate that guy,” Josuke muttered.

“I - and everyone else - know that very well,” Beam observed, raising an eyebrow. She cleaned a lens on one of her cybernetic implants.

Josuke sighed walking in a random direction, the reason he was out long forgotten.
“I’ll just see you back at the house then?” Beam asked, not exactly expecting a response. She knew he needed some time to brood alone.

Josuke marched along, hands in his pockets, wondering if Jotaro really could beat Rohan. The big guy wasn’t the sort to cheat unless the stakes were absurdly high.

He noticed that he had walked into an alley. Memories hit him of another Morioh alley where a ghost had lived… Back when he had first met Rohan. What a crazy moment in his life that was.

His nostalgic thought process was interrupted by an attacking vampire pony. Crazy Diamond was summoned out of reflex, punching the poor undead’s face in.

“For the love of… can’t a guy have a nostalgic walk through an alley without being ambushed!?”

The undead pony tried to get up, but another quick punch from Crazy Diamond ensured he wouldn’t be getting up anytime soon.

“Wonder what that was all about,” Josuke muttered, turning to leave the alleyway. Another one flung herself at him, only to meet Crazy Diamond’s fist again. “And let me guess, behind door number three…” Crazy Diamond performed a spin-kick through Josuke’s body, knocking a third vampiric being to the ground. He punched upward without even looking, cracking a fourth’s skull before it could even get to him.

“Vampire… Arcei…” Josuke put a hand to his forehead. “This is gonna be a political mess, I can just tell.” He grabbed the fifth one and plowed through a wall into what appeared to be an abandoned kitchen. Crazy Diamond’s ability repaired the wall behind them, sealing the interior off from the alley. “Now to make my daring escape!”

With a cheeky grin he ran through the abandoned kitchen, knocking more than a few old pots and pans onto the ground. Crazy Diamond punched through another wall, reassembling it as always. Josuke didn’t even look at the room he was moving through – he punched to the next one. And the next. Until he came out the other side of the building in another alley.

He didn’t see any vampire ponies. What he did see was a street with people to his left. If he could get there they wouldn’t dare attack. …He wondered if they even could, since it was sunny and bright over there. Did the arcs protect them from the sunlight…?

His time spent pondering this was not spent running to the street. Three Arcei appeared to his right, snarling and baring their teeth.

It was time to use the legendary Joestar Secret Technique.

Josuke turned tail and ran as fast as he could for the sunlight. Unfortunately, one of the vampires was a pegasus-Arcei, and flying through the air was definitely faster than the Joestar Secret Technique. He tackled Josuke to the ground, forcing him into a tumble.

Crazy Diamond manifested under Josuke, springing him out of the vampire’s grip. He flew through the air, landing painfully on his rear in the public street.

The people walking on the sidewalks turned to stare at Josuke.

“Beware! Vampires!” Josuke blurted, pointing at the alley. “We’ve got t-”

The alley was empty.
“…Of course,” Josuke muttered. “Never mind folks! Everything’s fine!”

Everyone looked at him like he was an asylum escapee.

Josuke sighed. He had some calls to make.

~~~

Shizuka was Jolyne’s great aunt. Their relationship was more akin to sisters than anything else.

They were currently in one of Equis Vitis’ many specialty stores. The moment spatial distortion technology had been perfected, there had been an explosion of stores that looked really small on the outside, but were almost endless on the inside.

They were in one of those stores. Specifically, they were in *Pinkie, Pinkie, and Rarity’s Endless Clothing Racks*. They were walking down one of the ‘deep’ sections of the store where things were sorted by race and color. Human and purple was the current theme, and they *thought* that *maybe* they could see the red section in the far distance.

Jolyne held her hand to her eyes. “Zuka, how long have we been in here?”

“I have absolutely no idea,” Shizuka responded.

“Which way is the entrance?”

“Same response.”

Jolyne put her hands on her hips. “We’re going to spend our entire day in a clothing store. That’s dumb.”

Shizuka shrugged. “It’s not like we have anything to do today.”

“Eat lunch?”

“We can skip lunch.”

“You’re just trying to get out of me bugging you for getting us lost in sea of purple clothes.”

Shizuka smiled awkwardly. “Maaaybe?”

Jolyne facepalmed. “Shizuka, we can just use our dimensional devices to get out. So long as we don’t have any merchandise they can’t flag us.”

“…But then we wouldn’t get the enjoyment of trying to find the way out on our own!”

“This is a shitty adventure, Shizuka.”

“Ugh, fine, I know, I just wanted to get some clothes and then we found this place and then…” She stamped her foot on the ground. “I don’t even know anymore. Some get-together this has been, huh?”

“Eh, not as bad as some I’ve had. Did I ever tell you about the time Anasui took me out to Earth Ottoman?”

“I don’t think so?”
“It was the worst idea ever. He thought ‘let’s just go dressed like we usually are’ and completely forgot that Earth Stand’s fashion is rarely standard and that Earth Ottoman is very stuck up about that sort of thing. So, get this, h-”

A vampire pony dropped from on the top of a shelf and bit down on Shizuka’s neck, forcing a copious amount of blood to go flying. “ACHTUNG!” Shizuka shouted – forcing herself invisible. She tore the Arcei off her, tossing the quadruped into range of Stone Free.

“ORA ORA ORA ORA!” Jolyne shouted, pummeling the vampire into submission.

“Shit…” Shizuka said, still invisible. “He got me. You need to tie me up before I go all cannibal on you.”

“You’re invisible,” Jolyne observed, punching another one into submission.

“Then just get me to a hospital.”

“Dial the device while I pull off the distraction!” Jolyne said with a smirk. She folded Stone Free’s arms out, latching her string onto a shelf covered in clothing. She pulled it down, dumping large quantities of purple fabric on top of the attackers – and knocking the few that were hiding in the shelf out.

Shizuka grabbed Jolyne. “This way!”

“But I-”

“It’s invisible.” Shizuka said, throwing Jolyne through the portal. Jolyne didn’t see it when she passed through it and she didn’t see it after she landed in an empty field of grass. The only indication that there was even a portal at all came in the form of a torrent of purple clothes.

“Shizuka! Now they’re going to flag us!”

Shizuka closed the portal and let herself become visible again. “Life or death situation. You can always call your dad to take care of it.”

“Yare yare dawa…”

“Now, seriously, tie me up before I start eating you. …Or burning up in this sun. …Exactly how long does it take for vampirism to set in?”

“Dunno,” Jolyne said, wrapping Stone Free’s string around her until she was just a cocoon. “But we’re not going to find out.” She pulled out her own dimensional device. She took a few steps, opening a portal to Equis Vitis – appearing outside the clothing store.

Then she called 911. “Hey, possible case of vampirism. Also Arcei-vampires. …Yes, I am from Earth Stand. Is that a question you ask people to see if their bizarre 911 calls are real or not? …Yes it’s real, this is Jolyne Kujo, you can hang it on my father’s word. Yes, an armored ambulance would be appreciated.” She put the phone in her pocket. “They see so much shit at that emergency center.”

Shizuka mumbled something from within Stone Free’s string.

“What was that?”

Shizuka let out a loud sigh.
“Corona Shimmer, questions? I may be a cosmic entity, but I don’t have as much time as you might think.” The Living Tribunal leaned closer to her.

“Sorry, just processing all thi- hey wait, aren’t you supposed to talk with three different voices? … Though that’s only in some continuities…”

“I choose to talk as one unified thought because it saves times in conversations such as these. If the decision requires enough deliberation, the three-way course of thought will be made known. It is not necessary for a simple conversation.”

“Right. Then… Why did you want to talk to me?”

“It was better that you spoke to a multiversal Abstract rather than one existing within only a single plane of existence.”

“Oh, so you really do operate like that. Every world has its own Abstracts – Eternity, Infinity, Chaos – and they combine together at the highest level to form the Multiversal concept of that Abstract. … With the exception of you.”

“That is correct.”

“Here’s a question, why don’t all – or at least most - universes have Abstracts if that’s the case?”

“The simplest reason is because the One Above All has not approved that sort of expansion. The more complex reason would involve explaining the inner machinations of how every universe I invite into my folds will create Abstracts from substance of the universe itself, and those Abstracts will add their lesser nature to the multiversal True Abstracts. It is also unlikely the other Class 1 Societies would approve of the sudden existence of higher deities over their universes.”

“…So, the One Above All actually exists then, huh?”

“He is not available for questioning by your scientific mind, nor will He ever subject Himself to such practices. You talk to me, a limited being, for a reason, Corona.”

“Gotcha. There are some other people who might want some words with him though.”

“They can get in line.”

“Figures. …What about the higher DC beings? The Presence? They another society?”

“The machinations of the Dark Tower have sought to place them within our number as part of the Abstracts. Some break the standard conventions, others do not. All that exist within Abstract space are subject to me and my judgments.”

“Gotcha. So, here’s a good question – why are you telling me all this? You Class 1s never want to sit down and talk, and even then you’re never forthcoming with information. Why would what I do, an insignificant Class 3 guardian, mean anything to you?”

“Your actions involving the Collection have brought much attention. I noticed when Them started moving in accordance with Valentine’s wish, as did the other five. We were all watching closely as your strength in ka fought against that which ought to have never been. The results were inconclusive, but it revealed your strength. You have revealed yourselves to have the power to change things on a large enough scale that we should take notice.”
“…We just took care of one overpowered jerk with Flower and TSAB help. That doesn’t seem like it’d mean anything to you.”

“The multiverse, for all its size, is only home to a few dozen Class 2 powers. The Collector was one of them. He may have kept himself hidden from the societies of equal power – but we at the top knew he was there. We noticed when he vanished.”

“So… What you’re saying is we should feel pretty proud of ourselves?”

“Being noticed is not a good thing, Corona. For instance, the question you are really here to ask will not go the way you wish.”

Corona’s smile fell. “…You’re not going to let us work with Earth MC?”

“No, Had you asked prior to the events with the Collection, we would not have minded. Many of our universes are part of Class 3 societies. There are entire Councils of similar individuals under my purview who only acknowledge my position above them in passing. There would have been no issue.”

“But?”

“But my role in this Class 1 power is to ensure there is balance between the universes. If any one universe or sections of universes gain too much power, or lose too much, it upsets the balance of the cosmos. The True Abstracts can cease to become the average of their aspects and instead take one particular aspect of themselves too far. It can – and does – spread like an infection to other universes. As you are now, there is no way you could trigger more than the death of a single lower Abstract. But it is clear that you are likely to have much, much more power in the future – and a connection to that kind of power would certainly upset the balance.”

“So, basically, you’re kicking us out because you’ve seen the potential for us become something bigger than we are?”

“That is exactly it.”

“Seems a little paranoid.”

“We are Abstracts. Those who are not myself are dependant on concepts. The interruption of those concepts on a larger scale can be disastrous. You have the future potential to do that. Unlike Them, I actually care about my worlds and will not just hand them over because it’s convenient. You are not to add ‘Earth MC’ to Merodi Universalis.”

Corona sighed. “All right, you’re the Living Tribunal. I am trespassing. Can we at least keep visiting? Borrow people from time to time?”

“I do not wish to step between any beings and their connections with others. But to allow that, there is a condition.”

“…What’s that?”

“You must leave the Infinity Gauntlet in Earth MC. Removing it upsets the balance of that universe. It is not impossible to deal with, but it is problematic. Considering I had to adjust a universe that lost an Infinity Gauntlet less than a week ago, that particular aspect is already
strained.”

“No offense Tribunal, but these things are dangerous. Frankly none of them should be allowed to exist. It’s too much power in the hands of one individual who doesn’t understand it. I don’t even really understand what I’m doing, and I’ve been around the multiverse a bit!”

“The Infinity Stones are tied to the universes that created them. The same trait that makes them useless outside their home universe also makes the universe shudder when they are removed.”

“So what, just give it to Superman and trust him not to go all evil one day?”

“There is a reason the Stones are usually spread out across their universe.”

“You and I both know Ka won’t let them stay apart. Ever.”

“It lets them be used in tandem less often than if they were always in the gauntlet.”

“If I remember anything about my comics, that kind of thinking has blown up in your entire multiversal society’s face more than once.”

“A fair criticism. It is the unfortunate truth that, since Abstracts are defined by the universes they manifest from, we become limited in how we can interfere in our own worlds. Tipping the balance one way or another when it does not need to be corrected changes Abstracts on a personal level. This is a glaring weakness, but it can only be exploited from within. Outside our space, when we choose to travel there, our power is almost unequalled.”

“But those rules don’t exactly apply to you. Or the One Above All.”

“But if I wish to care for the Abstracts under me, I have to take their nature into account.”

“Right… Well, I guess that’s that, then.” Corona stretched her arms. “Thanks for actually talking to me. Even if you were here to say no, it at least tells me I don’t have to feel utterly disgusted with every being up at the top. You’re all right, Tribunal.”

The Living Tribunal nodded. “Is there anything else before I send you to Earth MC?”

“Have any advice for an up-and-coming multiversal society? Things to avoid?”

“There will come a point where your power is so far above those below you that you will crush them without trying. Your efforts to preserve culture now are admirable, but the day will come when you are just too far above to compensate. They will be ants to you.” He leaned in. “Do not become conquerors by friendship. Let those below you remain their own entities.”

“How will we know when we’ve gone that far?”

“…It is never something you know for certain. Nor what the current boundary is.”

And then Corona was back in Avengers headquarters.

She blinked. “Good news and bad news.”

Superman raised an eyebrow.

“Bad news. No, we can’t take you guys with us. The Infinity Gauntlet also has to stay in this
universe.” She took it off and tossed it on a table.

“The good news?”

“The Living Tribunal’s actually a pretty decent guy.”

“Who?”

“I’ll explain in a minute. Right now we need to find a place to seal this thing. Or multiple places to hide the stones. Actually, why don’t we just call a meeting and I explain both parts at once.”

~~~

“Yare yare daze…” Jotaro said, gripping the reins of a horse with Star Platinum. “I just don’t see how you can fight effectively on top of one of these animals.”

Johnny pulled the reins on his horse and dashed around Jotaro, using Tusk as an extension of himself to push Jotaro off his horse. Star Platinum hefted its user back on the horse, but the motion spooked the animal considerably.

“It just takes some skill, though I do prefer the intelligent ponies. They’re able to think independently,” Johnny said, smirking.

Jotaro shook his head, jumping off his horse. “I’m going to find Valentine and tell him I’m very sure the treaty doesn’t hang on my ability to appreciate horses.”

Johnny chuckled. “You’re a serious one, ain’t’cha? Can’t believe an alternate version of me ended up producing you.”

“A four generation difference will do that.”

Johnny shrugged, rearing up on his horse. “Heh. Regardless, yeah, I asked Valentine to get you here because I was curious. Can’t meet myself, so I figured ‘he’s probably close enough’. Guess not.”

“If you’re wondering about your place as a Joestar, you don’t need to worry,” Jotaro said. “It is clear you are one of us, even if not by direct relation.”

“…Wasn’t where I was going with that, but I’ll take it. Does this mean I get keys to Joestar Central?”

“No.”

Johnny rolled his eyes. “Figures.”

Jotaro’s phone rang. He placed it to his ear. “Jotaro.”

“Hey, something weird just happened,” Josuke told him. “Got attacked by a group of vampire arcei. You sure you got the last of them?”

“No stone masks remain, all the vampires Dio created were destroyed, and the pillar men are defe-” Jotaro’s eyes widened. “Kars.”

“Kars?” Josuke said. “…Oh, right, the old man’s ‘Kars accident’ joke. Man, what does it say about me when that’s the first thing that name brings to mind?”

“He was the one who took us to the Collection. By the time we were facing the Collector, I had forgotten about him… He could be making vampires and sending them into Morioh. As the center of
the Joestar family…”

“I’ve already told Koichi, he’s on lookout. We haven’t been able to find any yet, but it’s only been a few minutes. Even the ones I knocked out are gone.”

“Call me if anything comes up. I’ll be there as soon as I wrap up here with Johnny.” He hung up. “Possible vampire crisis in Morioh.”

“I actually live in Morioh. This world’s version.”

“I would say parallels are strange but Jonathan never left England.”

Johnny shrugged. “I’ll let Valentine know there was an emergency. I know how you are about family.”

Jotaro nodded, preparing to leave – but then his phone rang again. He pulled it back to his ear, more than a little annoyed at it. “Jotaro.”

“…Jotaro.” It was a voice Jotaro hadn’t heard in years.

It was the voice of his father.

“What are you calling for?”

The old voice on the other side of the line croaked. “Y-your mother. S-she…”

Jotaro’s grip on the phone strengthened. “…What happened to her?”

“She’s gone Jotaro… Blood everywhere… She…”

“Dad, listen, this is important,” Jotaro said. “Are there bite marks on her with two holes larger than all the others?”

“Y… yes. Oh God…”

“Dad, call Joestar Central. Tell them everything you see.”

“O… Okay.”

“I need to check on Jolyne. Someone’s hunting Joestars.”

The old man was silent. Jotaro hung up. He moved to dial Jolyne’s number, but he paused for a moment.

Star Platinum lashed out and punched the horse Jotaro had been riding clear over a nearby fence.

“What’s going on?” Johnny asked. “Who did Kars get?”

“My mother,” Jotaro spat through his teeth. He focused his attention back on his phone and called Jolyne.

“Sup, Dad?”

“The Joestars are being hunted, Jolyne. I need you t-”

“Oh, I already took care of mine. Tossed the vampire ponies under a bunch of purple clothes. They injured Shizuka, but she’s in one of Ponyville’s industrial overboard hospitals. Everything’s good.”
“Josuke and your grandmother have been attacked. She didn’t make it.”

“...N-nani…?”

“You’re staying with Mom at the moment, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Go home, protect her, your siblings, and your son. They may be in danger.”

“Got it.”

“I’m coming home. Be there as soon as I can.” He shoved the phone into his coat pocket.

“I’m coming with you,” Johnny said.

Jotaro didn’t object. He pulled out his dimensional device, ready to dial it – when his phone rung again. He was ready to break the offending piece of technology.

But something else did it for him. In his rage, he hadn’t been able to see what it was – but something carved out a circular hole through the middle of his phone.

“Call that target practice.”

Johnny and Jotaro turned to see not a vampire Arcei, but Kars himself standing there in all his glory. The pillar man threw his hands wide and grinned. “I saved the best for myself, after all.”

~~~

Jolyne ran across Morioh.

Even for someone as in shape as she was, that was exceptionally exhausting.

But she eventually made it home. She kicked the door down, with her own leg, not bothering with the knob or Stone Free. “Mom! Anasui! Job! Look alive!”

“In here,” she heard her husband call, though his voice was weak. She ran into the living room to find the pink-haired Anasui laying on a couch with Giorno Giovanna standing over him, presumably having just healed the weakened man.

“...Nani? Why are you here?” She asked, cautious. Her eyes darted to Anasui to make sure he was okay.

“I heard word of Joestars being attacked,” Giorno said, taking a step back from Anasui. “I reasoned this was the place with people least likely to be able to protect themselves. When I got here, Anasui was mortally wounded and all the others were gone.”

“Gone? Y-you don’t mea-”

“There’s no blood aside from Anasui’s,” Giorno pointed out. “They were kidnapped, likely to exert leverage on the rest of us.” He pulled a note out of his pocket. “They even left a note to save me the trouble of tracking them.”

Jolyne took the note. It had a set of dimensional coordinates on it. Below that, a message.

*Only Joestars get to come. If anyone else appears, they all die.*
Jolyne crumpled the piece of paper up in her hands. “Bastard…”

“I believe that’s you, Jotaro, and Josuke,” Giorno said. “The rest of the Joestars have either been taken or are out of the picture for some other reason. We might be able to count myself as well.” He tapped at the spot on his body where the Joestar birthmark was – the star-shaped impression on the base of his neck.

Jolyne put her hand on her own birthmark for a moment before shaking her head. “I’m calling Dad, he needs to get here faster.” She put the phone to her ear. “…He’ll know what to do.”

Giorno nodded. “He does have a plan most of the time.”

“He’ll trap you…” Anasui said, holding out a hand to Jolyne.

“Don’t have much of a choice,” Jolyne said. “Is an ambulance coming for him?”

“I have made arrangements already,” Giorno promised her.

“Good. …Gah, he’s not picking up.” She scrolled through her phone until she found Josuke. “Come on, pick up…”

~~~

“BASTARD!” Jotaro shouted, summoning Star Platinum – but Kars could somehow see the Stand, jumping over it at just the right moment to avoid all damage. He landed in front of Johnny.

Johnny pointed his nails at Kars and summoned Tusk – the pink behemoth of a Stand easily dwarfing the pillar man.

“Johnny Joestar… I have no quarrel with you. Your bloodline is separate.” Kars narrowed his eyes. “You can turn around now and I will not hunt you down. But engage me in combat and you will die with the rest of the Joestars.”

Johnny fired off five of his fingernails – and Jotaro stopped time in the middle of it. He used Star Platinum to re-arrange the nails of Infinite Spin to come at Kars from different directions, making it impossible to dodge. He punched Kars in the face for good measure.

Time resumed. The nails embedded themselves in Kars’ body, rotating his flesh at impossible speeds that would never cease. In under a minute, the Spin would spread to the rest of his body and he would be torn apart, never able to reform because of the centrifugal force.

Kars, however, had a way around this. He physically tore out the parts of his body that were spinning, throwing the bloody chunks to the ground. He allowed them to disintegrate with the Spin. “A great power indeed,” Kars admitted as his flesh began to regenerate itself. “But it is nothing compared to the ultimate lifeform.” He created a horn in his forehead, pushing Jotaro and Johnny back with magic. “I can do anything by any biology I wish! Now that I’ve seen the multiverse, even feats of magic and science are no longer beyond me!”

Jotaro grimaced. His Stand, powerful as it was, could do two things: punch really fast and stop time. The former could be adapted to all sorts of complicated moves based on finesse, and the latter was broken in most matchups, but no combination of the two could do anything to Kars. Not even dumping the ultimate lifeform in a volcano would work.
Was there anything they could do with Johnny’s Ultimate Spin? It had done something when it hit, but Kars simply removed it. If they could keep him from removing it they could eke out a win.

“I hear you’re an excellent tactician, Jotaro,” Kars said, beginning his monologue. “Trying to think of a way to defeat me? Looking at the scenery? Wondering how adaptable Johnny’s ability is? Thinking of how to keep me from moving?” He laughed, forcing a finger to fall off without moving any part of his body. It grew back in seconds. “There’s nothing you two can do. You are going to die.”

“We’ll just have to punch you hard enough to get you to space!” Josuke shouted, having just arrived on the scene. He gave an uppercut to Kars from behind with Crazy Diamond. “DORAAAAAA!”

“Works for me!” Johnny said. “ORA!!!”

“ORA!!!” Jotaro added, throwing Star Platinum into the triplicate fury of fists.

Kars sure went flying – but it wasn’t anywhere near enough to get him to space. “You fools! Do you not see that I can use magic now? Even the vastness of space is under my rule!” He teleported back to the ground, roundhouse kicking them all. All but Johnny fell back, managing to keep a hold on his horse.

“Johnny, go for the head!” Jotaro shouted.

Johnny fired a single nail bullet into Kars’s head.

“What, do you think my head is a weak point?” Kars shouted, tearing it off and tossing it to the ground.

“CRAZY DIAMOND!” Josuke shouted, touching Kars’ Spin-infused head with the Stand. Crazy Diamond’s ability forced the head back onto Kars’ body. “You won’t be taking that off! Ever!”

Kars face soon became unrecognizable due to the rapid spinning it was undergoing – twisting into a black hole of flesh. He could no longer speak.

He cast a dimensional spell, jumping through a portal. Josuke chased after him. “You’re not getting away that eas-”

Jotaro stopped him with Star Platinum. “No. It’s a trap.”

“A… Trap!?”

“He didn’t need to make a portal that could stay open this long,” Jotaro observed. As he said this, the portal vanished. “He was trying to take us somewhere…”

“Bastard!” Josuke shouted.

“What do we do then?” Johnny asked.

“Regroup. Get allies. Then hunt him down and kill him,” Jotaro said.

It was then that Josuke’s phone rang.

“Man, what’s with all the calls today?” Johnny asked.

Josuke answered the phone. “Hello? …Ah, Jolyne, wha- …Oh. Oh. Right away.” He hung up and pulled out his dimensional device. “We need to get to Morioh now. Marina and the kids have been
Jotaro clenched his fists. “Kars…”

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Jotaro, Josuke, and Johnny appeared in Morioh outside the house. Jolyne and Giorno were already waiting for them.

“You sure he can come along?” Jolyne asked, pointing at Johnny.

“Kars already added me to his list personally,” Johnny said. “I’d be more worried about the horse I’m riding.”

“…Fine.” She pulled out her dimensional device and plugged in the coordinates they were given. “This is so a trap, but unless anyone’s got a plan, we’re just going in guns blazing.”

Jotaro grabbed his hat. “Yare yare daze… We have to do what he says. If we fail, we want to ensure he doesn’t get away. We need to leave a message.”

“Already done,” Giorno assured them.

“You’re good at doing things before people ask for them,” Jolyne observed.

Giorno simply nodded.

Josuke looked at his phone in fear. “…Beam’s not answering.”

“If he has her, we’ll save her,” Jotaro said. *Unless he just killed her directly…*

Jolyne held out the dimensional device, ready to dial – but faltered. “Uh… These are *Lai’s* coordinates.”

“Makes sense. The vampires were Arcei,” Johnny pointed out.

Jolyne opened the portal, flying in with Stone Free ready, the rest of the Joestars filing out behind her. They appeared on Lai, the blue sun beating down on their backs. A fair distance to their left was an entrance to a large cave.

Somewhat obviously, a stone mask was carved into the top arch.

“Definitely it,” Jotaro said. “He thinks he has us where he wants us.”

“He does,” Josuke said.

“But we’re going to show him that the Joestars don’t like being pushed into boxes.”

“I’m going to punch him so hard he ends up on Mars…” Jolyne muttered.

“Does Lai even have a Mars?” Johnny asked.

“Don’t care. He’ll end up on it even if it doesn’t exist.”

All five of them summoned their Stands. Jotaro took point, marching into the cavern. Johnny rode while all the others walked. They soon came to a grand interior space with a small Rune in the center, having the simple effect of bathing the cavern in white light.
Sitting on a ledge far above them was Kars. 

“Ah! Jojo, Jojo, Jojo, Jojo, and… Giogio.” His eyes narrowed. “…I’ll allow you on a technicality.” Kars gestured to his left at a cage embedded in the wall – it contained Marina, her twins Jordan and Joanne, Jolyne’s child Job, and Beam. All of them were alive and well. “Just so you understand the stakes, Jojos. If you fall here, they die. If you leave here, they die. The only win condition is to take me out.” Kars grinned. “I see no reason to kill them before you. They’re all so weak as to be no contest. And I am well aware a sudden burst of rage in you may well work against me here.”

Steam was coming out of Beam’s ears. “LET ME OUT OF HERE! I will disassemble you molecule by molecule until there’s not a single bond left in your body! HEY! KARS! I’M TALKING TO YOU!”

Kars ignored her completely.

“Kars… You’ve made the biggest mistake of your life,” Jotaro said.

“Hm?”

“You pissed me off,” Jotaro finished. “STAR PLATINUM: THE WORLD!”

Time froze. Gold Experience Requiem came out of Giorno’s frozen form, punching alongside Star Platinum within frozen time. “ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA!”

Time resumed. Kars was embedded two meters into the wall. “…That was impressive.”

“You will never reach reality!” Giorno declared.

Kars tried to pull himself out of the hole he was in – but found that he couldn’t. “Nani!?”

“CRAZY DIAMOND!” Josuke repaired the wall, trapping Kars deep within the earth.

Johnny aimed two fingers at the stone wall. The first bored a hole of Spin through the rock, the second transferred the Infinite Spin to where he was sure Kars was.

A stone ball shot out of the wall, creating a hole next to Johnny’s. The ball plowed right through Jolyne’s stomach, not even slowing as it bore a circular hole through her.

She used Stone Free to turn the middle of her body into a bunch of string, keeping her from bleeding out. “What the hell was that!?"

“An enemy Stand!” Jotaro shouted, getting a closer look at the ball. It was spherical, but it held the designs of a stone mask – a hole in the forehead, fangs on the mouth, and empty eyes.

“My Stand!” Kars shouted form his rocky prison.

“You don’t have a stand!” Josuke shouted. “You’re just Kars!”

“Ahhahahah – do you really think I’d spend a week preparing and not get myself a Stand? Behold – Can’t Stop The Rock! Its ability is simple. If it’s moving, only I may stop it! There is no force in existence that can even slow its movement!”

Josuke used Crazy Diamond to heal Jolyne’s wound – and then he had to rush over to Johnny’s horse to heal the wound the Rock had given it. “Jotaro!”

Jotaro positioned Star Platinum behind the Rock and punched it as hard and as fast as he could
manage – but not even Star Platinum could dent the Rock. It charged through Star Platinum’s fists, tearing Jotaro’s own hand up.

“Josuke!”

“Your resident white mage can’t heal four people at once!” Josuke blurted, scrambling awkwardly to Jotaro. “Gah!”

The Rock flew toward Giorno next.

“GOLD EXPERIENCE REQUIEM! You will never reach reality!” Giorno’s Stand punched out, planning to lock the Rock in its ability.

Giorno had forgotten one small detail, though.

You Can’t Stop The Rock.

It plowed right through Gold Experience Requiem’s arm, translating the damage directly to Giorno’s arm. “NANI!”

“It even trumps your power!” Kars laughed. “And I believe I’ve finally figured out how to escape this lock you’ve placed on me… I will create biological fluids that are easily combustible and…”

Kars skin exploded, decimating the wall he was trapped in. He fell a few feet to the new ground he had created. “You can’t keep me in a wall that doesn’t exist.”

Kars leaped to the ground, laughing while Josuke fixed Giorno’s hand.

“All AT ONCE!” Jotaro shouted, fists flying. “ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA!”

“DORA DORA DORA DORA DORA DORA!”

“MUDA MUDA MUDA MUDA MUDA MUDA!”

“ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA!”

“ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA!”

“You all sure love shouting,” Kars muttered. He summoned Can’t Stop The Rock to himself, rotating it around him at high speed. All five of their limbs recieved holes, forcing the onslaught of fists to stop.

Kars’ body regenerated from all the damage. “Useless!” He laughed. “Useless!”


“I already figured out how to work around this, Gior-”

Johnny shot Kars with an Infinite Spin nail bullet. Kars tried to shift his body to make a hole for it to pass through – but he couldn’t. He couldn’t tear the Spin-infused flesh off his body either. He couldn’t reach the reality he wanted to…

But he could reach a different one.

He lashed out with his arms, creating a crocodile with his left one. He aimed for Giorno’s head – but Stone Free’s string wrapped around the gator-arm, tying it to Kars’ main body, locking his other arm
in as well. Kars forced an arm out of his back, but Crazy Diamond ‘repaired’ that arm back into Kars’ body.

“Looks like that counts as fixing!” Josuke laughed.

Kars growled as he felt the Infinite Spin moving through his body – spreading to his organs. He could make redundancies, but once it was in his entire body… He was done for. There would be nothing he could do.

Which meant it was time to go with the backup plan. He had hoped for the catharsis of beating the Joestar lineage into a bloody pulp by his own strength, but he hadn’t gotten as far as he did in life without being willing to sacrifice his desires for practicality from time to time.

“Congratulations, Jojos, you have beaten me. I cannot win as I am now. However, as Joseph would have loved to tell you, I’m not one for playing fa—”

“ORA!” Jotaro punched him in the face. “You’re next line is going to be ‘you interrupted me’."

“You interrupted me. …GAH!”

“That was for Joseph,” Jotaro said.

Kars summoned his horn. “Then I’ll cut to the chase.” He cast a quick pre-prepared spell…

~~~

Corona, Lady Rarity, and the Avengers sat around a large table, looking at the complete Infinity Gauntlet.

“Way too dangerous to use,” Superman agreed. “I am flattered that you think I am worthy of this artifact, but I know my limits.”

“You basically have none,” Corona observed.

“This is not a physical limit I am referring to.”

Captain America put a hand on his shoulder. “Hey, we get it. It’s too much weight even for you.”

“So we lock it away then?” Flash asked. “Where?”

Doctor Strange furrowed his brow. “I may have a few spells that might keep it away from all possible attackers…”

Batman nodded. “I know of a few locations hidden from the eyes of even powerful psychic deities. A combination?”

“Or we could split up the gems again, like the Living Tribunal seemed to suggest,” Corona offered. “The best way to keep it away from the hands of evildoers. …Most of the time.”

“But there may come a time when we need to defend the universe,” Iron Man pointed out. “This would allow us to do it. If, say, a Celestialsapien or something of similar power wandered into our world, the Infinity Gauntlet would be our only defense.”

“The Abstracts might help you with that one. Exterior threats probably upset their balance a lot.”

“It does,” Doctor Strange said. “But they won’t always be able to help.”
Flash rolled his eyes. “Please, what’s out there that they couldn’t beat?”

“There was a war with a race called the Beyonders they almost lost.”

“There’s another thing to keep me up at night,” Lady Rarity muttered. “A Class 1 war. Can’t imagine that’s good for the multiverse.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Doctor Strange admitted. “I tap into magic and tend to come across bits and pieces of information. The full story eludes me.”

Superman furrowed his brow. “I say we put it to a vote. Seal it up where we can reach it with difficulty, or split up the Infinity Stones once again?”

The vote was cancelled by a flash of blood red. Kars and the five Jojos appeared above the table, crashing onto the Infinity Gauntlet. Kars morphed his hand to be just the right shape to fit into the Gantlet while his body was plastered sideways into the tabletop. He snapped his fingers…

And the Infinite Spin was gone from his body.

“Nobody move or I turn this planet to dust,” he said.

Slowly, all five Jojos got off of him and backed away, taking nervous stances alongside the superheroes.

“Who are you?” Superman demanded.

“Kars. The ultimate lifeform.” He held the Infinity Gauntlet in the air. “Now with the ultimate power. In this universe, anyway.”

“You know not what forces you are dealing with.”

“No, but I don’t particularly care. I just needed a backup plan to kill these five. Now I have it.” Kars grinned.

“How did you even pull this off!?” Josuke blurted, clutching his wounded arm.

“I had a week to prepare. I heard about Corona’s little mission to fix the Infinity Gauntlet. So I created a vampire among the heroes and had him feed me information.” He reached into his ear and pulled out an earpiece.

Everyone turned to look at Batman.

“Why is everyone looking at me? I’m not the vampire!”

“But… bat,” Flash said.

“It’s me,” Aquaman said, baring his teeth. “And you are all going to bow to Kars!”

“That sounds so wrong coming out of your mouth.”

Kars laughed. “He is my servant. Most of you will be as well, soon enough. But first…” He pointed the Infinity Gauntlet at Jotaro. “Jotaro Kujo… You’ve made a mistake.”

“Yare yare daze…”

Kars smirked. “You pissed me off.” He readied his fingers for a snap. “Die.”
Corona needed some time to think. Luckily she had access to a mindscape she could spend a significant amount of time in while letting only a second pass on the outside. She used her empathy powers to tap into Raging Sights’ mental state rather than letting herself watch Kars’ monologue.

Raging Sights’ mind was never as full or as interesting as most others – like all TSAB-style devices, the intelligence within was only partial. Raging Sights had emotions, memories, and connections, but not as strong as what would normally be called a ‘person’, and as a result its mindscape was blank, fuzzy, and rarely had much in it that Corona herself wasn’t already thinking about.

Which meant she and Raging Sights could focus.

“Right, so, the Infinity Gauntlet is complete and has access to all the power in the universe. Known weaknesses: it only operates by motion of the hand and does not function outside this universe.”

Corona felt a ripple in the mindscape, not all that surprised to see Doctor Strange walk in.

“Good to see you’re putting that astral projection to use,” Corona said.

“Is there a plan yet?” he asked.

“Just outlining weaknesses. Physical motion is out, because Kars can just overpower us by sheer strength. That leaves the fact that the Infinity Gauntlet won’t work outside this universe.”

“I’m sure the Living Tribunal won’t mind a temporary removal…” Doctor Strange said, furrowing his brow. “Raging Sights, do we have time to create a portal?”

“Yes,” Raging Sights decreed.

“Chances of him falling all the way through it?” Corona asked.

“Near zero.”

“Crud.” Corona muttered, hand to her chin. “What about reality alteration spells around the Infinity Gauntlet?”

“Lack of time and unknown effectiveness.”

“It looks as if he’s only going to wipe out Jotaro first,” Doctor Strange said. “Do we have time after that?”

“Yes.”

“Agh!” Corona said, facepalming. “Kars has a horn! He’ll sense if we start doing any uber-magic that would be capable of altering reality! …Where’s Eve when you need her?”

“Seraphim would be quite useful,” Doctor Strange admitted.

“Mmmm, we’ve got to be able to do something!”

“Well, he currently has the thing I use to manipulate time in that Gauntlet, so there goes the simple
Corona curled her fist. “What if I just punch him really, really hard?”

“Zero percent chance of an effect,” Raging Sights reported.

Corona sighed. “Flash-portal everyone to another universe?”

“Best idea so far. Wrought with chances for Kars to destroy everything, but it works.” Doctor Strange folded his arms. “I can provide distraction magics to draw his attention.”

“You sure?”

“You’re more familiar with interdimensional magic than me, and you have the computer crystal in your hand.”

Corona nodded. “Thank you, Strange.”

“It’s the best I can do.”

“We need to move – time does not stop while we’re in here.”

Doctor Strange nodded, turning to leave – but something stopped them.

A message written out in text appeared in front of them.

>Do not act, heroes. Help has arrived.

“…Help?” Corona asked. “From who?”

>The Xeelee.

Corona recognized that name. “…Xeelee? As in the Class 1 Xeelee?

There was no further response from the mysterious text.

“Know anything about them?” Doctor Strange asked.

“Class 1. Uh… I think they’re really into technology…?”

“So nothing?”

“It’s not like information about them is exactly easy to come by. The Living Tribunal is the only one who’s actually sat down and talked to us about themselves.”

Doctor Strange furrowed his brow. “…I say we take the chance. Let them do what they want. See what happens.”

“I’m just worried about why they’re helping us,” Corona said, “Class 1 civilizations never have any reason to deal with anything this low…”

“We have yet to see them actually do anything. All we saw was a text message.” He waved his hands. “Talk in a few minutes, unless we’re all dead.”

“Same.”

Corona allowed herself out of the mindscape, watching time flow at a natural rate.
“Die,” Kars said, preparing to snap his fingers.

Then the Infinity Gauntlet punched Kars in the face.

“NANI!?” Kars shouted, staring at the Infinity Gauntlet. “What foul trick is this?”

Jotaro, for once, looked dumbfounded.

The Infinity Gauntlet flew off Kars’ hand. Then it pointed at him, the Infinity Stones glowing brightly. Raging Sights told Corona that there were many invisible wires surrounding the Infinity Gauntlet, coming from many other universes simultaneously.

Kars knew the Infinity Gauntlet could kill him in an instant. But he wasn’t going to just let it happen. He summoned his Stand and threw it at the Infinity Gauntlet. The colorful gems used their power to push the Stand back.

There was only one problem.

You Can’t Stop The Rock.

It plowed right through the Infinity Gauntlet, shattering the golden frame that held the Infinity Stones together. The Stones themselves bounced off the Rock, flying in many different directions within the room.

Kars laughed. “Not even the power of Infinity can stand up to m-”

Superman took the opportunity, driving Kars facefirst through the table with a punch. The pillar man stood up faster than anyone could react. He didn’t bother to monologue – he pulled back his arms, creating sharks out of his fingers. He pushed forward…

…And the invisible wires stuck him in place. He couldn’t move. He couldn’t speak.

“What…?” Superman said, baffled.

“Everybody stop!” Corona and Doctor Strange shouted, making sure no other heroes would try to do anything.

The heroes glanced from Corona to Doctor Strange, silence filling the room. Iron Man sighed.

“Which one of you is going to explain what’s going on?”

“I am,” Corona and Doctor Strange said at the same time. This prompted both of them to sigh overdramatically.

As it turned out, they didn’t need to explain anything. The six Infinity Stones collected together in a pile, creating a holographic display out of their rainbow light. Text scrolled by in front of all their eyes.

> We are the Xeelee. In the process of a larger-scale operation, we noticed your difficulty with the Arcei. Kars was one aspect of this problem. The Xeelee have judged Kars guilty and deserving of a fate worse than death. His sentence is a full year of biological experimentation prior to execution.

“Not complaining,” Jotaro said, grabbing his hat. “Bastard deserves worse.”

The text continued to scroll while Jotaro talked. > Now that the issue has been resolved, it is time to take the next step. Corona Shimmer, we request a time be set aside for any relevant Merodi Universalis Overheads to listen to our report on the Arcei situation.
Corona blinked. “What did you do to the Arcei…?”

> A topic that will be discussed at the meeting. It is best to explain it once to those who need to know.

Corona pulled out her phone. “Alright… I’ll say the Xeelee want to talk to them. Do you have a preferred location or anything?”

> Negative. Our only request is that it be held in a location with a digital interface. It is a simpler task to display upon a screen than directly into minds or through cosmic powers.

“Gotcha. …Do you have a name?”

> You are speaking to a collective of local Xeelee consciousnesses designated Down-32,302,134.

“I’ll just call you the Xeelee,” Corona said, dialing Eve’s number. “Hey, Eve? The Class 1 Xeelee want to talk. They won’t tell me much besides they want a meeting with you and any interested Overheads in a room with a screen and that they’ve done something to the Arcei to ‘help’, I think. … I thought the same thing.” Corona hung up. “She says she’ll get it ready. Until then, I’ve got a few questions to ask if you don’t mind.”

> We do mind. It is best to explain things only once. We will return once the meeting is ready.

“How will we contact you?”

> You won’t need to.

In an instant, Kars was gone. The Infinity Stones stopped projecting, becoming the inanimate objects they had been before.

The Flash blinked. “I guess we’re splitting them up then?”

“Certainly solves that problem,” Spider-man admitted.

Batman produced a specialized net and tossed it on Aquaman, wrapping him up. “Do you have a cure for vampirism?”

Corona blinked. “I… think so. I can take him to one of our hospitals.” She sighed, putting a hand to the bridge of her nose. “Though right now I’m a bit scatterbrained because of all that just happened.”

The Jojos just stared at where Kars had been, all five of them unsure of how to think about what had just happened.

They had lost.

And then they were saved by something they had scarcely even heard of before.

It just felt wrong. This wasn’t the way things were meant to be.

~~~

Eve had made the calls quickly. The respective overheads of six of the twelve public Divisions determined they cared enough to be there personally, bringing together Relations, Expeditions, Military, Expansion, Research, and Aid. Eve, Renee, O’Neill, and Maud were still the Overheads their Divisions had had since their inception, but Research and Aid had changed leadership over the years. Research was run by a Fire Nation elder by the name of Nora, while Aid was headed by the
Binary Lexa from Mistress Luna’s world.

The six of them sat down in a gray room, expecting to speak amongst themselves a bit before the meeting started. But the moment Renee sat in her seat, the screens on the walls around them blinked to life and began displaying text.

> Overheads of Merodi Universalis, we are the Xeelee, a Class 1 Society based within the parts of the E-Sphere farthest from your relative location. Upon the conclusion of your recent activities involving the fall of the Collector, we decided it would be worthwhile to send a long-range reconnaissance presence to get a fuller picture of who you were and what you stand for. We are glad to announce we approve of your society’s values, goals, and knack for progress.

“We are humbled by your approval,” Eve said, bowing her head – glad the Xeelee were using text to communicate rather than voice.

> We noticed your society struggling greatly with an internal threat from the Arcei of Lai and determined that removing the complication from your society would serve as an initial gift from us to you.

“How exactly did you fix the problem?” Nora asked, adjusting her glasses with her mechanical arm.

> We removed the arcs from all Arcei in a single instant, with the exception of one individual whose biology would not survive the removal of the arcs: Starcei. Without previously existing arcs, the art of transforming Runes to arcs is now lost to all but Starcei herself, and a scan of her mental state has proven she had no desire to perpetuate what she originally brought about. The Arcei will no longer attempt to destroy Stars or harvest Runes from Lai.

“That’s taking away their cultural identity!” Lexa blurted.

> The likelihood of their society completely vanishing due to this action has been deemed low given the cultural protection laws put in place by your Cultural Division, whose Overhead is not present.

“I didn’t expect this to be about the protection of an interior culture, I didn’t put that on the memo,” Eve said. “Does she need to be here?”

> Unlikely. Our projections suggest the Cultural Division will not need any outside assistance to ensure the Arcei retain culture without the need to destroy Runes. As a people they will continue to exist. If disaster strikes we may provide further aid in this regard.

Renee nodded slowly. “Have you taken any other actions?”

> Merely captured any militant Arcei and sent them to your containment facilities, with the exception of the few who were deemed too dangerous to do so with, such as Kars. His vampire-Arcei were cured of their vampirism the moment we determined they were infected with such a thing.

O’Neill folded his arms. “And were there any casualties?”

> One Arcei suffered a heart attack from shock. She has since been revived, but has suffered mental damage. We would need to upload her to a mainframe to cure it, and our policies dictate we hold off uploading non-digitized beings in cases like this.

“…You can fix Coming Back Wrong?” Eve asked, eyes widening.

> We apologize if we gave you that impression. She did not Come Back Wrong, her mind was just damaged in the act of death. The is no cure for the condition, merely workarounds that involve
cloning and soul creation. The original being is always lost in that case.

Nora nodded. “As we expected.”

Eve cleared her throat. “While we thank you for your immense aid in our crisis, we would have preferred you told us what you were doing prior to doing it.”

> It was noted that your own policies would prevent such action from being taken by an internal or external force. You would have refused the assistance if you were unable to be certain of the effects. You may now rest easy knowing everything will turn out for the best.

O’Neill narrowed her eyes. “We’d like to make that judgment for ourselves, thank you.”

> As expected. We will wait patiently for you to make a decision in that regard. However, we would like to make our offer during this meeting.

“What offer?” Renee asked.

> We do much the same things you do as a society – explore, learn of new nations, and assist them where it is deemed necessary. Your Arcei problem was simply the most prominent, we saw numerous other issues we could have rendered obsolete with our assistance. In the future, we wish to assist you with the rest of these problems as well.

“Such as…?” Maud asked.

> We can track down Brutalight and any of her escapees and take them off your hooves. We can ensure the University does not continue engaging in its thieving practices on lesser universes. We can provide you with known methods to stop the internal infighting on your Earth worlds. We can even offer protection from powers such as the Starcross Society, should they determine they want to attack you.

The six Overheads stared at the text on the screen in shock.

“…What do you want in return?” Eve asked after a moment of silence.

> Nothing obligating. We will provide this assistance so long as you accept it. We simply ask that you continue to progress yourselves through technology. At the point you perfect digital uploading, we will extend an invitation to join the Xeelee.

This prompted another moment of silence.

Nora coughed. “This is a bit much to take in.”

Eve nodded. “We will have to deliberate a decision of this magnitude with all the Overheads.”

> Keep in mind that we are only offering aid now, with hopes that, in the future, you consider adding your song to ours. The latter part does not require a decision at this juncture, and likely will not for many decades or centuries.

“It still requires deliberation.”

> Very well. Our presence at this meeting is no longer required. We will know when you wish to resume in earnest.

The screens all went dead, leaving the six Overheads alone with a momentous decision.
“Let’s all take a break,” Renee suggested. “Talk to our advisors, spread the word around to those who need to know, and consider every angle. I instinctively don’t trust this.”

“It’s almost exactly what we’d do if we were in their position though,” Nora pointed out. “We’re not exactly in the habit of making sure we ask before solving problems.”

“We’re not always right to do that,” Eve reminded her. “The case-by-case way we live by has produced many problems. More good results than bad, mind you, but it’s not a perfect system. What we need to ask is if this will end up as one of those bad situations.”

“Or if they’re trying to take advantage of us for something,” O’Neill said. “I’m calling Valentine and the Grand Secretariat, see if they’ve gotten any offers like this.”

Eve nodded. “Everyone, break. We’ll meet back here once we’ve made a decision and the Xeelee are ready to listen. …Which is apparently all the time.” She rubbed her head. “I feel like a shiny bug in a zoo right now.”

“Good description,” Lexa said with a laugh.

“Thank you.”

~~~

Toph sat in her throne room, Starcei and Lady Rarity sitting in front of her, waiting for a reaction from their Queen.

“I was kinda hoping you two would tell me how I was supposed to feel about this.”

Starcei facehooved and Lady Rarity sighed. “Dear, you’re the Queen. You get to make the decisions.”

“I can’t make a decision if I don’t know what to think, can I?” Toph muttered, tapping her fingers on the armrest of her throne. “I have to make informed decisions.”

“Is there really one to make?” Starcei asked. “Beings far above us decided to be ‘helpful’ and solve a perceived problem. There’s little for you to deal with as a result.”

“I still have to make a speech about it or something and make changes in the current policy. To do that I need to know what I want in the situation.” Her frown deepened. “All I can say for sure right now is that we’ve been robbed of something.”

“It’s nothing more than what we rob of others when we save them,” Lady Rarity reminded her. “We change what was meant to happen.”

Toph nodded slowly. “…Fine, I’m just going to ignore the Xeelee for a moment and talk consequences. The Arcei have no arcs and have no way to get more arcs so long as Starcei doesn’t tell them.”

“I have no intention of creating more Arcei,” Starcei promised. “Or having more children that would require Runes to survive.”

“And because of that, there are no more Star-hunting missions or even missions to take the Runes of Lai. Even better, the most militant and aggressive of the Arcei have been taken care of and dropped right on our doorsteps. Or taken away if they were particularly nasty.” She folded her arms. “And we apparently ‘learned our lesson’ from Siron enough that the Cultural Division will go out of its way to
ensure the Arcei won’t lose themselves because of this. How that’ll work I don’t even pretend to understand.”

Starcei cleared her throat. “The ponies who were once Arcei will stay together, practicing the same traditions they have been practicing for eons, with the exception of Rune destruction. They will have lost their unique style of magic, but they will still perform the rituals. They will be a proud people who stand defiant.” Her expression steeled. “Their society will eventually adapt to the new terms of their existence, becoming something new.”

“They’ll lose their culture,” Lady Rarity said.

Starcei shook her head. “Cultures change all the time, Lady Rarity. As I’ve watched my children grow over the eons, I’ve seen them go through many distinct phases. A modern Arcei would not understand an Arcei from three hundred years ago. They aren’t being forced into submission by us, they are being actively protected. …And even if they were being forced to comply, is that such a bad thing?”

“It sits wrong in my mouth,” Toph observed.

“We changed the Gems by force.”

“They were our equals,” Lady Rarity pointed out. “There’s something different about pressuring someone who can resist you when compared to people who have no power.”

“We’re the ones with no power, for once,” Toph realized. “What are we going to do about our culture here?”

“The Xeelee are not our problem,” Lady Rarity reminded her. “That’s for the Overheads to deal with.”

“Are they even a problem though?”

“I don’t know.”

~~~

Eve stared at the fireplace in one of Canterlot’s royal lounges, thinking deeply.

Luna, ruler of almost all Equis Vitis, moved into her view. “You are troubled, Evening.”

“I just realized that everything falls on my shoulders here.”

“You do not stand alone. Your many colleagues are involved in this decision as well.”

“I’m the Relations Overhead, Luna. Most of them will just follow whatever course of action I recommend. There will be a few dissenters, and I’ll listen to them, but this is my area of expertise. Even though I’ve opened it up for everyone to have a say… It will still mostly be my decision. Aid and Culture have nothing to deal with external aid or protecting our culture. They probably will after this is over, but for now… It’s an external presence dealing with us on a large-scale, so I’m the one who knows what to do.”

“And do you?”

“No,” Eve said, shaking her head. “My gut tells me to be defiant and refuse everything on principle. My mind tells me to accept them as they are and take all they have to offer.”
“Do we know if they are who they say they are?” Luna asked.

“We know they can do the things they offered. We also know they offered the Sparkle Census and USM similar deals, though notably not the University… Probably because of their practices.” She furrowed her brow. “The USM has already outright refused because of their extreme national pride. Sparkle Census is still pending.”

Luna nodded slowly. “So the question is if we accept the offer of help or not… And you have strong feelings both ways.”

“You bet I do.”

There was a knock on the lounge’s entrance. “…Wonder who that could be?” Luna asked.

“Uh… Hey? Eve? You in there?” Corona called from the other side of the door.

“Corona, you’re a princess, you can just walk in,” Luna said. “This is the royal lounge.”

“Oh, right,” Corona opened the door with a bashful smile and closed it behind her. “I don’t exactly hang around here all that often. Excuse me.”

“It is no issue, your service more than makes up for your lack of regal attitude,” Luna said.

“…I feel like that was a thinly veiled insult.”

“Perhaps. But it is not what you are here to talk about.”

“No,” Corona said, sitting down in front of Eve. “I heard what the Xeelee offered you.”

Eve nodded. “Quite the impressive offer, huh? Deal with our big problems, defend us, and eventually adopt us into their fold. Almost an exact mirror of what we give the universes we take a liking to.”

“You need to hear what I found out on Earth MC,” Corona said. “I met the effective Abstract leader.”

Eve blinked. “W-what?”

“The Living Tribunal watches over all Abstract universes, ensuring balance. He told me, among other things, that I couldn’t take the Infinity Gauntlet away and we weren’t allowed to incorporate Earth MC into our fold. But, in the end, he gave me a piece of advice.” She folded her arms. “He said we needed to watch how powerful we were, because there would eventually come a point when we would just crush those below us without trying. He warned us not to become conquerors by friendship.”

“Good advice,” Eve admitted. “That’ll probably push the Lower Society bill into passing.”

Luna pondered this. “That’s the one where we will not be allowed to adopt societies below a certain ‘energy threshold’ into our folds, right?”

Eve nodded. “With what Corona’s just said, I’m certain it will pass now. Tribal societies like the demons will never have access to us or our technology, even if they want it. That line will only go up with time. …But Corona, that’s advice for us. How does that pertain to the Xeelee?”

Corona frowned. “Think about it, Eve. The Xeelee are at the very top. You’ve been talking to a small extension of them that was able to safely remove the arcs from every Arcei across dozens of
universes and take control of an Infinity Gauntlet on the side. What if they are the conquerors by friendship? Won’t they destroy us? Do we know if they have a cultural protection program or anything of the sort?”

“I would assume it’s minimal,” Eve said. “Seeing as how part of inclusion in the Xeelee requires perfecting upload technology. I assume this means they exist as a digital society.”

“So if we pursued this and accepted their help what we exist as will soon be unrecognizable to what it is now.”

“But we need to ask ourselves if that is a bad thing,” Luna reminded them. “There are many societies we stick our hooves into and change drastically for the better – think Equis Fallout. Gem Vein. Nobody argues that the changes to those worlds were negative, though in a few cases they brought about unintended side effects.”

“But are the Xeelee objectively better?” Corona asked. “I don’t think so.”

“Digital uploading is a form of immortality,” Eve pointed out.

Corona sighed. “I know. But I’m really close to another solution. It won’t be much longer. Definitely less time than it would take to perfect upload technology.”

“…Gotcha…” Eve shook her head. “I don’t know. This entire thing just feels wrong.”

“Are we certain there’s no ulterior motive?” Luna asked.

“I talked to Nanoha,” Eve said. “She admitted the Xeelee have been known to do this from time to time, though usually a lot closer to their seat of power. It’s a tad unusual they’d go this far out to make an offer.”

“I think they want our power in ka,” Corona said.

“Possibly,” Eve responded. “But that’s just an explanation as to why they came out this far. It doesn’t change the validity of the offer.”

“Let us come at this from a different angle,” Luna said. “Why shouldn’t we accept their offer?”

Eve stared into the fireplace. “…It would eventually take us away from what we are.”

“Which brings us back to ‘is it or is it not better’?” Corona pointed out. “Back to an unanswerable question.”

“There are presumably other reasons we hesitate,” Luna suggested.

“They have too much power,” Corona said. “Way too much. They likely always get what they want just by flaunting it without any effort.”

“You sound like Siron,” Eve pointed out.

Corona blinked. “…Holy Celestia, you’re right.”

“We don’t want to be him,” Eve said. “Power isn’t inherently evil. It clearly breeds vices – as has been seen with most of the other Class 1s – but we shouldn’t hold it against them.” She looked up. “We need to be consistent with ourselves.”

“Consistent?”
“Let’s put ourselves in every position, filling everyone’s shoes,” Eve said. “Think of us as the Xeelee, and the single universes that we give aid to. Let’s imagine how to make the reactions of all three consistent with our current way of life.” She put a hoof to her chin. “I’ve just got to figure out how to do that…”

Corona nodded. “You are the boss here.”

“Thanks for coming, Corona. You too, Luna. You’ve all given me a looooot to think about.” Eve furrowed her brow. “I’m working out what we’re going to do.”

“Is it, by chance, the Third Option?”

“I think so.”

~~~

Giorno and Johnny didn’t stick around after Kars had been defeated – they went home, back to their lives and responsibilities. Jotaro, Jolyne, and Josuke returned to Morioh… To clean up Holy’s house. Everyone else had gone back to Marina and Jotaro’s after the initial reunion.

The reunion had been joyous.

What a dramatic turn of mood this was.

Josuke had started by ‘fixing’ the blood, knowing it would return to whatever morgue Holy’s body was currently sitting in. The act of doing so was too much for him. He broke down, punching a hole in the floor. “WHY!?”

Jolyne latched onto her father, hugging him tight.

“WHY!?” Josuke shouted. “Why did he have to kill her? Why not just take her like all the others? She couldn’t fight! She was no threat! She was just an old woman!”

Jotaro pulled his hat as far down as he could manage, shielding his eyes from visibility. “Because she would hurt the most. And because it was as personal a revenge he could have gotten.”

Josuke turned to glare at Jotaro, fists curled.

“Josuke…” Jolyne warned.

“Don’t you feel anything?” Josuke blurted. “She was your mother! How can you just stand there!?”

“Josuke, stop!” Jolyne called.

“No! I’m not stopping! I want to know how this bastard can stand there and give us facts about what happened! C’mon Jotaro, what is it? Are you a robot? Are you even human? Maybe you’re one of th-”

Star Platinum drove Josuke into the ground without the usual ‘ORA’ call. The only noise was his head hitting the floor.

“Josuke!” Jolyne blurted.

Josuke picked himself off the ground. “You can’t even look me in the eye. What’s with you?”

Star Platinum grabbed Josuke by the collar. “It is true. I often wonder if something might be
internally wrong with me. I don’t feel pain as much as other people. Moments where others experience joy, I just have a slight smile. Moments where tears flow, I just sit silently. Perhaps I’m stunted somehow, or the sensations of life are muted for me. However…” He tore his hat off his head and threw it to the ground, revealing his eyes.

They were red, wet, and terrified. “THIS IS NOT ONE OF THOSE TIMES!” He hurled Josuke into a wall, for once in his life dropping the poker face completely. “She was my mother! I stand here, impassive, for the sake of the rest of you! So you can have a rock to latch yourselves on to! Looks like I’ve failed, just like we failed to protect her! Failed to defeat Kars!”

“Dad…” Jolyne said, holding out a hand.

“We lost, Jolyne!” Jotaro threw one of his arms wide. “LOST. There was no win condition. There was never a win condition. He knew, from the start, where that Gauntlet was! He would always have had time to access it! Always. We would have all died there! All of us! We’re failures!”

“Dad stop!” Jolyne shouted. “We’re alive! We didn’t lose!”

“We’ve lost, Jolyne. It’s just a trick of ka that we’re still alive. Perhaps not even that – perhaps just blind, stupid luck.” He wiped his eyes with his hand. “Yare yare daze…”

There was silence. Jolyne and Josuke stared at Jotaro, unbelieving at how he had just acted.

Jotaro picked up his hat and put it back on. “This is why I stand, silent. So there can still be some stability.”

Jolyne looked at her father with sad eyes. “…You need some stability too, Dad. It’s better if we stand together.”

“Stand proud,” Josuke said, standing up. “Stand as one.”

“Nobody should carry this burden alone.”

Jotaro opened his mouth to say something, but Jolyne pulled him into a hug. Whatever retort he had been about to make died on his lips. He let out a deep sigh, dripping with many years of pent up emotion. “…You’re right,” he said, pulling her in.

Josuke leaned back, allowing the father-daughter moment to conclude. Eventually, Jolyne was the one who pulled back. “…Dad, you’ve hurt yourself for our sake. I’m not going to ask you to stop being who you are, but I am going to ask that you stop tormenting yourself.” She wiped her eyes. “Grandma’s gone. It’s okay for you to break now. Nobody will judge, and nobody will think less of you for it.”

Jotaro trembled. “Jolyne…”

“Shh… It’s okay,” Jolyne said. “It’s okay.”

Josuke put a hand on his shoulder. “…Let it out, big guy.”

And so he did. He fell to his knees, slammed his fist into the ground, and shuddered. He did not weep, he did not scream – he just shook, kneeling on the floor, as weak as any man had ever been. The sounds of the younger generation weeping behind him fell into the background as he remembered his mother. She had given up so much for him, and he had given up so much for her…

It was all gone now. And he hadn’t even been able to set it right. There would forever be this hole of
Jotaro’s failure deep within his soul.

It would never go away. He would live with it the rest of his life.

~~~

Before she entered the meeting, Eve sent out a quick message to all twelve other Overheads.

*Any last minute changes to my decision you want brought to light? We need to know before we begin.*

Twelve messages came back nearly instantly. There were no suggested changes – though Renee and O’Neill’s messages contained encouraging words meant to calm her nerves.

She let out a breath. “Here we go…” She walked into the meeting room and sat down. The Twelve Overheads were all present – and she knew Giorno was watching from a secure location. Everyone was ready.

> We detect that you are ready to reveal your decision to us.

“What are,” Eve said, spreading her wings. “We have decided to treat your offer of aid as a lesser universe would treat our offer of aid.”

> While we know what this means in your mind, it must be stated for the record.

“First, I have a question. Do you ever bother to make friends with those you aid?”

> We are friends through our exchanges.

“That’s not what I mean and you know it,” Eve pointed out. “I mean do you ever stop to get to know them on a personal level? Do you live among them and communicate with them after the job is done? Do you learn who they are?”

There was no response.

“Or is that even possible, given your digital nature?”

> It is exceptionally difficult to operate on the mental level of non-digitized beings. The friendships such as you describe them are rare, often impossible. It is why we do not allow non-digitized to be official members of the Xeelee. But this does not change the fact that we respect such life, for it is where we originated. We seek to bring it to our level.

“But you cannot truly *know* them from where you are now,” Eve said, nodding to herself. “Thank you, that’s all I needed to know to be certain.”

> Then please, state your full decision.

“We’re not going to be hypocrites. We’ll accept any aid you offer, in the belief that most of it will be better for us in the long run, taking it on faith that you know what you’re doing. But we will also make it clear that we have no intention of ever joining the Xeelee. By *our* way of doing things, this means you will not interfere in our large scale government, not introduce new technologies to us, and not introduce us to the wider multiverse. You will treat us like a world that says no to *us*. Do you understand?”

> Yes. We wish to make it known that, if you go down this path, after our initial aid, we will likely never contact you again.
Eve nodded, sure of herself. “We expected as much. Let us fade into the background of your memory, like so many worlds do for us. I can think of several worlds we have a connection with that have no interest in dealing with us. Ardent comes to mind as the most prominent. We accept their refusal, and rarely is contact resumed.”

> Understood. Do you approve of the following revised list of Aid?

The Xeelee produced a list of minor assistances – including finding Brutalight and keeping the practices of the University of Doors limited. There was a notable lack of governmental suggestions or advice-based aid.

Eve nodded. “I concur. Any objections?”

The Overhead of Merodi Universalis shook their heads, giving their stamp of approval to the project.

> We shall set to work right away. And then we will be gone. We wish you luck in the wider multiverse. Beware of the higher societies. You will not find one as benevolent as us again.

Then the screen died, indicating the meeting was over.

“I think that went well,” O’Neill said.

“They’re upset,” Renee observed, adjusting her hat. “They wanted us to become part of them.”

“They wanted our story,” Eve added. “Notice how they removed pieces of aid they didn’t strictly have to from our terms. No suggestions for improvement of little things. It’s their way of saying ‘your loss’. But this is the decision that needed to be made.” She took in a deep breath, steadying her breathing. “I’m going to go rest. If you have no pressing matters, I suggest you do the same. In a few hours I expect this ‘aid’ to bring about more than a little bit of uncertainty among the population.”

Everyone nodded, leaving to return to their various responsibilities – or to rest.

~~~

The Golden Joke was not without recreational activities. There were a handful of restaurants, a movie theater, and an arcade. Jenny loved the arcade a bit too much. The University of Doors was by far the least popular of all the multiversal societies in the local area, and Dracogen Enterprises was almost always lumped in with the University as a single entity. This made it rather difficult to get ahold of entertainment and games from other worlds, and if Jenny ever tried to go herself, well, her face was actually known among the general public and it wouldn’t go over well for everyone involved.

But she was free to move about at the Golden Joke, and the arcade was stocked with games from all sorts of worlds. Her favorite game was Multiversal Heroes 3, which was a favorite among most multiversal explorers who were actually in the fighting game. The developers put a lot of attention to detail in the ways the characters on the screen moved and acted, trying their best to emulate the real people. Of course the actual attacks were balanced to make a good game, but it was still enthralling nonetheless. It also helped that in MH3 Jenny herself was marketed as a neutral character rather than a pure villain.

There were no less than two dozen arcade consoles for the game in the Golden Joke, all connected to play with each other should it be desired. She was currently beating the tar out of a team of Coronas, laughing all the while. It was so easy she allowed her mind to wander as she pummeled the ‘noobs’ – the studio behind MH3 had announced there would be a Collection expansion to the game soon. No doubt featuring the Collector and perhaps a few of his most prominent Collected – Jenny had a
betting pool running that Lightning and Thanos would both be included. She wondered how they were going to balance the Collector’s absurdity while still maintaining the accuracy. They always managed to do it... Though notably almost no one understood how to play the balanced Rohan correctly. He was a m-

“JENNY!”

Jenny blinked, realizing that YVND was on her arcade screen, hacking into it all the way from the Ninth World. “Oh. Sup?”

“You aren’t answering your communicator.”

“Psh, I was having some curbstomp fun. Give me a break.”

“Well we have a serious problem.”

“Really? If it really needed my attention you wouldn’t be *talking* to me right now.”

“It’s a serious problem we have no power to do anything about. Dragging you here would tick you off and be rather pointless.”

Jenny’s smile vanished. “…What happened?”

“Class 1 Society showed up and screwed with the University of Doors. They really don’t want to give away any information, but I suspect something about the University just ticked them off. They’ve been forced to suspend all ‘acquisition’ operations outside the Ninth World.”

Jenny blinked. “Crud, that’s not good for us.”

“No, it isn’t.”

Jenny rubbed the back of her head. “How much funding do you think we’re going to lose?”

“Almost all of it devoted to multiversal exploration.”

“Fuuuuuudge…” Jenny pulled at her hair. “We’re losing door access aren’t we?”

“It seems likely.”

Jenny turned away from the console and folded her arms. “Well, we got a good couple decades out of that deal. It was fun while it lasted.”

“If you say so.”

Jenny moved to adjust her suit in an attempt to look business-like – but then she remembered it was form fitting and didn’t even have a collar for her to mess with. “I’m just... gonna go make an announcement to the Golden Joke.”

“If you believe that is wise.”

“Can it, paperboy,” Jenny muttered, walking away. She left the arcade and went right to the main hall, walking across the dead, arid surface of the world. Never before had she thought the lifeless rocks were so depressing. She supposed she generally just didn’t care enough to notice these sorts of things.

She entered the main hall. There were a few people there, using it as a place to mingle and discuss
policy. Jenny knew everything was recorded, so it didn’t really matter who was and wasn’t there.

She walked up to the main podium and tapped it. “So, hey, eyes on me.”

They all turned to look at her – confused.

“‘You may be thinking, ‘why is there a speech going on now? Nothing’s scheduled!’ or ‘why is Jenny talking? She never talks up there!’ Well, this is because I’ve got an announcement to give and then I’m going to have to jet. Are you with me so far? Good.”

She folded her arms. “The University of Doors has been forced to suspend its most extensive program, the acquisition program. This means all their research into exploring the larger multiverse suddenly means a lot less to them. Which means we, Dracogen Enterprises, are going to lose our access to the door matrix and the funding we receive to undertake expansive multiversal missions. I see a few of you smiling – yeah, I see you back there, prick. ‘oh hey, finally, they’re gone, we don’t have to deal with them anymore’.”

Jenny growled. “Yeah, I guess you’re right to be happy. We’ve been pushed aside like a bunch of stupid sheep. I’m not sure we’re even going to be a Class 3 anymore after this settles. We’re going to have to focus more on our world for a while. So go ahead, throw a party, you all outlasted us. Whoopee. Congratulations.”

She groaned, a hand to the bridge of her nose. “…Look, for what it’s worth, we screwed up big time back when we met. Possibly the worst mistake of all time. I’m aware enough to admit that. You all don’t have to keep rubbing it in.” She sighed. “Regardless, we’re leaving. We’ll probably keep a minor presence here, but don’t expect us to actually do anything. Much as I hate to admit it, we’re checking out for now. Buh-bye.”

She waved a hand dismissively. “This has been Jenny of the Red Gloves speaking for Dracogen Enterprises. Hope you enjoy your victory party.” She turned around and walked off stage to stunned silence.

She opened a door and appeared inside the Beanstalk, realizing with no small amount of sadness that she wouldn’t be able to do that for much longer. No more need to have door access if the University didn’t have a use for them anymore. She’d have to resort to using Merodi-designed devices.

It was embarrassing.

She watched the Numenera technology of the Beanstalk fly overhead. The citizens of this little town wouldn’t even know what they’d just lost. Few knew the University even existed, even less knew the full extent of the multiverse. They just knew the expansive universe they existed in, and that was it.

They probably wouldn’t care that much about the sudden slowing of technological progress, the lack of new ideas coming in, and the slow disappearance of ultraterrestrial visitors.

But Jenny would care.

She kicked a can across the street, fuming inwardly. She was going to take one of her ships and fly to a distant star. Hopefully she’d find something that was interesting enough to take her mind off this.

She made a note to purposefully order copies of Multiverse Heroes for permanent use within the Beanstalk. She couldn’t imagine life without that game anymore. Just like she couldn’t imagine life without being able to step through doors and appear almost anywhere…
She could do something about the former. She couldn’t do anything about the latter. 

Because life was stupid like that sometimes.

~~~

Brutalight had herself an empire that suffered under her iron hoof of insanity. Five worlds currently obeyed her and her friends’ every whim.

That number was about to rise to six.

It had been a long, brutal campaign, but they were finally at the last step on the journey to conquering their first technology-based civilization. The world in question was Utara, a universe dominated by elves. Brutalight had a particular distaste for elves – didn’t know how to have fun, were always so arrogant even to each other, and were far too resistant to the joys of insanity.

That may or may not have been a huge factor in her decision to conquer this world. The elves would learn what it truly meant to live… Though most of them would learn how to die instead. But once they were dead, who cared?

They also had good books. Books were great. Even digital books.

Brutalight, Fluttershout, Rarifruit, Rainbine, and Six bashed down the three-meter thick wall that surrounded the Utaran Council’s final bunker. The interior was lit by blue lights, giving the rounded room an eerie feel. Sitting around a heptagonal metal table were six of the seven Utaran Council members – the seventh of whom had been guarding the door with his powerful magic. He had fallen rather quickly.

“You hunt us ruthlessly even months after we offered a surrender,” the youngest elf said, a woman. She stood up and walked toward them, leaving the other five behind. “Since I am about to die by your cruel hands, answer me one question. How?”

“How?” Brutalight blinked. “Was anyone else expecting the usual ‘why?’ question?” There was a round of nods from the other four members of the team. “Yeah, what gives?”

“I already know why you do this,” the woman said, shaking her head. “You find it enjoyable. You do not conquer for power, though that does factor into lesser areas of your motivation. You do not conquer for others, since you only care for each other. You do not conquer for revenge, because if that were the case you would have chosen a very different world to engage, and would have been much more efficient in your conquering. You conquer because it’s fun, and it’s the only thing besides each other that gives you enjoyment.”

“What’s your point?” Fluttershout asked.

“I have no point. I just stated I already know why. I want to know how.”

“Through magic and punching!” Rainbine blurted, grinning.

“How do you justify it to yourselves? How do you sleep at night? How do you treat each other with such love and care and exclude all others from that joy you experience? It is not because you were born as one,” she gestured at Six as evidence of this. “It is not because you really don’t care. How?”

“Do you know what the definition of insanity is?” Brutalight asked.

“There are a couple. One is doing the same thing over and over again while expecting different
results. Another is foolishness. Perhaps irrationality.”

“Combine the last one with something a bit more literal,” Brutalight said, tapping her head. “We’re screwed up in here. Screwed up in the way we were born. You could explain to me in perfect logical arguments that what we do is wrong, and that we should stop, and I would be able to agree with you. We’re completely evil and batshit crazy. But, here’s the fun thing about insanity – knowing about it doesn’t do anything to change it!” she laughed. “We’re irrational! We’ll keep doing it because we feel driven to and we feel no remorse as a result! We don’t have to worry about guilt or conscience!” She grabbed the elf in her magic.

“…But what about the love and joy you share with each other? I’ve seen it. We’ve all seen it.”

Brutalight shrugged. “Insanity doesn’t require consistency, you know.”

“But you’re consistent with each other.”

For the first time, Brutalight’s cruel smile faltered. “You know what, I think we’re done talking. Rarifruit, you we-?”

Rarifruit cut the elf’s head off with a levitated blade. “Yes…” she whispered.

“Even I think that’s creepy,” Rainbine admitted.

“Six, would you do the honors?” Brutalight asked, gesturing toward the remaining five elves. “I think we’re all growing a little tired of these little apes running for their lives.”

Six tapped into her power over death, ready to touch the elves in an instant.

The oldest elf snapped his fingers, activating the self-destruct spells in the compound. He fixed his eyes on Brutalight, clearly expecting everything to go up in flames before anyone had a chance to speak.

Brutalight laughed. “Do you think we’re stupid? Of course we knew you wanted to blow us up! Have you forgotten about our magic? Bomb disarming field. Easy. Everything within a kilometer radius is unable to explode right now. There’ll be no ‘nuke from a distance’ either.”

Six’s black power sucked the souls out of four of the elves, leaving only the elder. He stood tall, eyes completely unafraid.

“Why do they always have to be so boring?” Fluttershout asked. “He’s not trembling at all!”

“Because some people have an admirable strength,” Six said, Brutalight nodding in agreement. Six lifted her hand, grabbing the last elf in a telekinetic choke hold. “But even they die, just like everyone else.”

Brutalight sensed a series of strands shoot from multiple other universes, piercing Six in the heart, brain, and spinal column. It was a precision attack clearly designed to kill in an instant, giving no opportunity for reaction.

Six fell back, dead.

“S-six!?” Brutalight shouted.

“What did you do!?” Rainbine shouted at the elf.

“He didn’t do this,” Brutalight said, raising a defensive shield around them all. “Something else
did…”

The wires appeared again, pinning the four ponies in place, preventing them from so much as speaking.

The elf stared at the four frozen mares in disbelief.

A text message began to appear on the table, projected by the blue lights.

> Apologies. It is not usually our intent to end life without a warning, but her ability was potent enough it was possible she could kill us, given time and luck. It was too high a risk.

“W-who are you?” the elf asked.

> The Xeelee. Expect future communication from us involving the aid you believe we should render to help rebuild your world.

The elf bowed in reverence. “Thank you for saving us, Xeelee! We are forever in your debt!”

> We know. We shall now take these assaulters off your hands.

In an instant, all four ponies were gone, leaving the elder elf the last remaining member of the Utaran Council.

He sat down in his chair, looking at the ceiling.

What even was there to rebuild at this point?

~~~

Eve stood on the balcony of the Castle of Friendship, Renee and Pinkie at her sides.

She was reading through the compiled list of everything the Xeelee had done, and the consequences thereof.

“Removed all arcs from Arcei, creating a cultural crisis that looks like it will resolve itself…” Eve muttered, slowly moving her eyes across the data pad. “Placed heavy restrictions on the University of Doors, forcing them to drop most funding to Jenny and removing their active presence in the larger multiverse…”

“Such a shame. I think they were finally coming into their own,” Renee said, shaking her head.

Eve nodded. “Tauryl, the last nation on Equis Vitis not part of Merodi Universalis, has finally stopped their completely xenophobic refusal to speak to us. Talks with the centaurs and gargoyles will begin next week. Long-term consequences are unknown.”

“I want to know how they did that without getting them reaaaaaally angry,” Pinkie said.

Eve shrugged. “I don’t know and I don’t think we’ll ever know, since we can’t really contact them on our terms. …The Xeelee took Kars, saving many of the Avengers of Earth MC, the Joestars, and Corona. They have handed over numerous other criminals that are of lesser concern. The next item on the list is classified; let’s just say they helped take care of a security breach. There was also an evil doomsday monster we didn’t know about on Earth Vitis got taken care of… Equis Concrete’s Sombra finally got what was coming to him. They removed his hold on his ponies, leaving a few of them insane, but otherwise everyone is exceptionally glad that brutal dictator is out of the picture. And…” She scrolled further down the list. “Yeah. That’s a lot of stuff they’ve done for us.”
Renee shook her head. “I suppose we finally know what it feels like now, don’t we dears?”

“Getting help from high above…” Eve muttered. “It’s… not always the most pleasant of feelings.”

“It just means admitting you can’t do anything,” Pinkie said. “Being weak isn’t bad, Eve.”

“I know. But I’m just not used to thinking of ourselves like that. Usually, we can just conquer our problems with enough time and effort.”

Pinkie cleared her throat. “Moral of the day: if you’re going to help others, be ready to accept help.”

“I thought there was a moral about not crushing societies?” Renee asked.

Pinkie shrugged. “Eh, the morals are a bit vaguer now than they used to be. There was also a lot of other stuff mixed in to the adventure this time. Welcome to an extended study of the anticlimax!”

Eve rolled her eyes. “I guess that’s what it is from one direction. From another… The talks were their own adventure, in a way.” She turned around, heading back toward the Map room. “Come on, let’s go have lunch or something.”

The moment they went back inside, the Map flashed, producing text above it.

> And our last gift to you is complete.

Brutalight, Fluttershout, Rarifruit, and Rainbine appeared in front of them, all four of them surrounded in invisible restraints.

Eve took a moment to process what was happening, but she had gotten used to the need to transfer from emotional conversation to leader in an instant over the years. “What are you going to do to them?”

> The sentence is similar to Kars’. A year of biological testing prior to execution. Six was already executed since she was deemed a risk.

“Is their insanity curable?”

> Yes, via uploading. Aside from the moral concerns of editing their personalities in order to accomplish a ‘cure’, there’s also the issue of the levels of depression they would suffer after the procedure. They would not revert to the ponies they once were; they would still be the soul combination. It would be right to think of it as trading one insanity for another.

Eve nodded. “I understand. They are who they are… It’s not reversible, at least not in a way that doesn’t just rewrite their minds completely with something new.” She turned to Brutalight. “I want to talk to her.”

> As you wish.

Eve turned her ears on, struck by the way the air was blowing past her ears. She looked Brutalight in the eyes.

“Hello, Evening Sparkle,” Brutalight said. It was the first time Eve had heard Brutalight speak without any sort of malice or rage in her voice – she sounded so sad. So tired.

Eve sighed. “Hello, Brutalight Sparcake.”

“So… You’ve won. Got yourself some nice benefactors to fuck us up and bring us in.” Brutalight
forced a smile. “Taking out the trash, finally?”

“You could say that.”

“This wasn’t exactly how you figured this would go down, huh?”

Eve’s ears twitched. “I was going to take you out with my own hooves. Your ears would go first – then the rest of you.”

Brutalight laughed. “Fitting. It would have been a nice death.”

Eve shook her head. “Something is really wrong with you…”

“Surprise, surprise,” Brutalight chuckled bitterly. “Personally, I was going to go for your eyes next, and then over the course of several days use the dried eyeballs to remove parts of you over time, keeping you alive with magic until your soul just gave out.”

“…Now I feel a lot less guilty about what I was planning.”

Brutalight winked. “Glad I could give you some piece of mind before I’m off to the chopping block.”

“…You really are, aren’t you?”

Brutalight’s corny smile faltered. “Yeah. Guess I just know this is it, y’know? Not really a point in screaming at you until the bitter end. I can tell you that is what Fluttershout and Rainbine would be doing right now, if they got this opportunity. But not me.”

Eve sagged. “Why do you have to show this part of yourself to me now?”

“Because it can only come out now,” Brutalight said. “I mean, I’m still Twilight in here, somewhere in this tied up mess. I know I won’t be able to destroy you or take any more revenge. I guess some part of me is trying to set things right? Even though I don’t really have the capacity to understand what ‘right’ is.” She laughed bitterly. “If you’re thinking of letting me out, seriously don’t. I will kill you if I get the chance.”

“I know,” Eve said. “I’d do the same.”

“Glad to see I rubbed off on you.”

“Likewise.” Eve looked around at the rest of them. “I’m sorry about Six. And… what you’re going to go through.”

“Pff, we deserve it and you know it. I’m probably going to get some sort of sick, masochistic enjoyment out of it at times. BRING ON THE BIOLOGICAL TESTING! Make me give birth to myself or something.”

“Ew.”

“Exactly!”

Something about the way she said it brought a smile to Eve’s lips. “I hate you, you know.”

“I know,” Brutalight said.

“But I’m glad we got to end like this, rather than the way either of us wanted,” Eve said, grabbing
Brutalight’s hoof. “It allowed me to see you for who you are. I still hate you, hate you for everything you’ve done. All the horrors you’ve brought. You deserve the worst. But I can finally see it in you. What you showed all your friends. Your magic.”

“Ah, geez,” Brutalight said, grimacing. “You’re going to make me cry.”

“It’s okay if you do.”

Brutalight sucked it in. “This is the last memory you’ll have of me. I don’t want it to be of a bawling alicorn brought low.”

“Then don’t let that be who you become,” Eve said, taking a step back.

“…Do you think there’s something else?” Brutalight asked. “Something… after?”

“In some places, there a-”

“You know what I mean, and that isn’t it.”

Eve blinked. “I… I don’t know what I think. Flutterfree’s sure there is. Nova’s pretty sure there isn’t.”

Brutalight nodded slowly. “Yeah… Yeah I already knew that. I don’t even know what I was asking.”

“It’s a good thing to think about,” Eve admitted.

“Yeah…” Brutalight chuckled. “Rainbine is probably inwardly screaming at me for being such a softy right now.”

“I bet she’ll understand everything and want to support you.”

Brutalight grimaced. “C-come on Eve, that’s not fair.”

Eve smiled. “Go. I hate you. But we can leave as friends.”

“Oh good god you just had to say it,” Brutalight said shaking her head. “You’re a moron, you know that?”

“Takes one to know one.”

“Fine then,” Brutalight said, a single tear rolling down her face. “We leave as friends.”

Eve nodded. She turned around.

“…Hey, one more thing.”

“Hm?”

Brutalight lifted her wing, flipping Eve off. She smirked evilly. “Bye.”

Eve nodded. For the first time in her life, she twisted her wing into the obscene gesture.

Brutalight laughed joyously.

There it is, Eve thought. Take her away.
The Xeelee obliged. The Elements of Insanity were gone. No further text messages appeared above the Map.

Renee put a hoof around Eve. “I’m so proud of you. That couldn’t have been easy on you.”

Pinkie hugged Eve tight.

Eve smiled. “It… It wasn’t as hard as I thought it would be. And… And I feel a lot better about her now than I do about Siron.” She walked back onto the balcony, looking out at the setting sun of Equis Vitis. “There was something beautiful there… Setting aside our hate…” She smiled. “It was right.”

~~~

The Xeelee Transport Matrix would take precisely 9.4 seconds to arrive in Xeelee controlled space with the Elements of Insanity. To the prisoners, this would be instant. They would experience a flash of light, see a bunch of strange ‘string’ patterns pass by their eyes, and then they would be in the cell that would serve as home for the last year of their lives.

However, the Xeelee were digital beings that thought several orders of magnitude faster than a standard organic brain. The trip, while not exactly a terrible one, would still feel long to them. There was plenty of time for a conversation.

>> Their ka is clearly separate from us.

<< They could have just not wanted to join.

There are large quantities that refuse the offer. <<

>> What I’m saying is that their story would not have allowed them to join us.

<> Just like it will not allow us to interfere with them over time. You know as well as I do that, should we try to control them, it would end disastrously for us.

<<> We do not try to control lesser races.

<> It’s all a matter of perspective and definition.

It sounds like you might need to be sent back into ethics education. <<

>> No, it’s good. The point is valid.

<<> Fair.

^ Alert! Incoming attack! ^

<<> What kind of attack would warrant an alert!?

^ A temporal-based weapon of unknown make and origin sailing through the Infinite Sea in parallel universes, following us with alarming precision. ^

>> Are you saying it’s actually going to hit us?

^ Precisely. ^

<> Only Gallifreyans have the required temporal knowledge to craft a time-based weapon that could
do anything to us… And they lack the ability to track us with this precision.

<< More than a little concerning. Activating wire constructs.

^ ALERT! FEEDBACK LOOP! ^

And then everything went static in the conversation. A weapon that could not be seen by human eyes ‘impacted’ a ‘ship’ composed of invisible string constructs, trapping it in a bubble universe locked in time, then shunting the location of the bubble to a location buried deep within an unstable cluster the Xeelee would not be able to find.

They would have no need to search with diligence for such a small transport ‘vessel’.

Within the bubble of time, all entities remained conscious – but unable to communicate, move, or do anything. It was as if only their souls were immune to the distortion of time. Perhaps an intentional part of the weapon’s design.

All Brutalight knew was that she was going to have a long time to sit and think, her body frozen in a sea of beautiful colors, frozen in time…
Hey guys, GM here, real quick before we get to the actual meat of the story here, I’ve got some announcements! SotS has two sidestories now that currently aren’t on Archive. *Yiyxa*, a story about exploration and deep mystery, and *The League of Sweetie Belles*, where the titular League explores many fanfic worlds and beyond! Click the links and enjoy, if you want. We also have a *Spacebattles* version of SotS again, which can serve as a great place to make comments or post your own sidestory ideas.

*Eternity Courses Through Her Veins*

Lady Rarity was more than a little concerned about Corona.

She hadn’t left her house, as far as anyone could tell, for three days. She wasn’t answering her phone and nobody had heard *anything* from her during that time. It was almost as if she’d dropped off the face of the Earth.

And yet, her house on Lai was still using power in such a way that suggested she was still living in it. But her neighbors had not *seen* her. And no matter how much they knocked, she never answered the door.

So Lady Rarity had decided it was time to get to the bottom of this. She marched up to Corona’s front door and knocked, not expecting any response. She courteously waited two minutes anyway before teleporting to the other side. The entryway needed dusting, but it didn’t look *too* out of order. Lady Rarity skittered around, taking advantage of being unarmored to move around the walls and ceiling for better vantage points. She moved around the house with ease. The dishes in the kitchen had clearly been piling up, but there didn’t appear to be enough for three *days* worth of meals. She didn’t see any sign of Corona on the entire ground floor.

So, obviously, Corona was in the basement.

Lady Rarity skittered down the steps, her ears perked. She heard no noises from the basement, but her predatory senses told her there was a living thing down there. She carefully moved down and pushed the door open, looking into Corona’s lab.

It was even more disorganized than usual. Beakers were all over the floor, magical glowing liquids within many of them. There were more than a few blast marks all over the walls, and at least one of the big monitors had been turned into a bush. The strangest part was that none of the large pieces of machinery were moving at the moment, just a bunch of chemicals sitting around, dormant – their glow only accentuated by the dimmed lights.

The center of the lab was occupied by Corona herself – but something was wrong about her. It wasn’t the psychotic grin on her face, although that raised a few red flags. It wasn’t the fact that she was standing there completely naked, her body covered in black markings that made her look like she was a cow about to be cut up into different chunks of meat for later consumption. It was the fact that she was *glowing*, as if something alive was moving around inside of her.

Oh, she was also holding a knife in her hands, carefully tracing along one of the black lines to a point where several of them crossed, just under her left set of ribs.

Lady Rarity was so dumbfounded and horrified by what she was seeing she couldn’t formulate a response. She didn’t even cry out when Corona slid the knife across her skin, breaking into a blood
vessel. Her blood poured out – but it wasn’t red. It was a bright, golden, shimmering color. Corona’s
ears twitched in excitement as she used her magic to levitate the fluid into a tall bottle. She set the
bottle down on a table and created a crimson arcane circle around it.

The spell made a copy of the bottle one inch to the left.

“YES!” Corona shouted, jumping into the air and spreading her wings. “YES YES YES YES YES
YES YES!” She flew around, did a swing dance in the air, and promptly crashed into the ceiling.
She slowly floated down to the ground, shaking her head. “Okay, calm Corona, calm.” She healed
the wound and put her hands on her hips, beaming with pride. “It is done! It i- oh, hi Rarity, when
did you come in?”

Lady Rarity stared at her in disbelief. “But I was… and then… you were… what?”

Corona snapped her fingers and pulled Raging Sights to her with her magic, creating the battle-dress
she normally wore, complete with the red angled shades. “All right, I’ll put this simply.” She
levitated the bottle in front of Lady Rarity’s eyes. “This is the Essence of Eternity. I did it Rarity. I
found easily duplicatable immortality.” She pointed at the second bottle, duplicating it with a simple
spell.

“H-how!?” Lady Rarity blurted, still not quite processing what was going on.

“Complex substances don’t duplicate well, and enchantments almost never do. However, I found a
loophole where if I infuse my immortality with a biological component inside my body, I could
‘trick’ the magic into duplicating with the serum!” She whooped. “It’s a lot more complicated than
that – as all these lines on my body will tell you. …As well as all those failed essences on the floor.
But hey, it’s done!”

“…Corona, you’re glowing,” Lady Rarity said.

“Wow, I really must have done a number on your mind,” Corona said with an awkward smile. With
a wave of her hand she increased the light level in the lab to normal daylight levels. Her glow was no
longer noticeable, though the glow of the bottles were. “Don’t worry, everything’s completely safe,
even if at about midnight last night I kinda threw safety procedures out the window out of
desperation.”

“Have you slept?”

“Sorta? Not really. Complicated consciousness spell that can replace sleep for about a week before
you start going nuts.”

“You sound ‘nuts’ already.”

Corona chuckled. “Maybe. But hey, it paid off! Everyone can live forever so long as they drink
this!”

Lady Rarity smiled. “I’m glad you finally pulled it off.”

“Hey… You want to be the first?” Corona asked, levitating a bottle over to Lady Rarity.

Lady Rarity stared at the bottle, taking it in her own telekinesis. For a moment, she wondered if she
wanted to. If she should take it. If she really wanted to live forever...

She quickly threw those thoughts out the window and downed the whole thing in twenty seconds.
She let out a gasp – it tasted like… gold mixed with pure nectar. It was such a bizarre flavor. “This
won’t make me glow, will it?”

“You should have asked that before you downed it.”

“...It will!?”

“No,” Corona said, chuckling. “I mean, my glow is permanent now, I need to be anchored to the stuff I’m duplicating at all times for it to work properly. Won’t be too hard to set up a mass duplication matrix though...”

Lady Rarity’s eyes flashed yellow for a moment and then returned to normal.

“And there you go! Immortal. You won’t age beyond what you are now.”

“Huh... Doesn’t feel any different.”

Corona nodded. “Be glad. There was a previous one that worked but made you lose control of your bladder. Decided it wasn’t worth it.”

“...How exactly did you figure that out?”

Corona tapped Raging Sights. “Simulation after simulation. Tested it on seven thousand spirids before I gave it to you. All worked fine.”

Lady Rarity smiled. “Well... What are you going to do now? Celebrate?”

“ Heck yes. Actually, later. First I need to talk to Eve and the Overheads about the regulations for this stuff. I’ve got a long day ahead of me!”

“You’re not going to sleep!?”

“Only three days in! I’ve got four more in me!” She laughed. “Thanks for being here, Rarity!”

“...You’re welcome?”

“Oh, was everyone worried about me?” Corona facepalmed. “I’m such an idiot! Tell them I’m fine and what I did. Though don’t tell the public about it, we don’t want a panic. Or a craze.”

“I know what to do, don’t worry. I do need to calm down first.”

Corona chuckled. “Yeah, you do. Good luck with that! See you around!” She teleported away.

Lady Rarity glanced around the lab. Then she let out a dramatic sigh and walked out.

Crazy woman.

~~~

Eve looked at the glowing bottle sitting on her desk. “So, this is it?”

Corona nodded with the stupidest grin imaginable. “Yep!”

“Did you find the duplication loophole through your own organic connection, or was this random inspiration?”

“The former,” Corona said. “I told you the secret was within the body. Did we bet on that? I don’t exactly remember.”
Eve shrugged. “Don’t recall. Let’s just say I owe you lunch and keep it at that.”

Corona gave her a thumbs up. “I’ll keep you to that!”

Eve lifted the bottle and examined it. “What would it do if I drank it?”

“It would prevent you from getting any taller or whatever other effects come from aging as an alicorn. I would strongly recommend you don’t drink it.”

“What about beings that don’t ingest material to survive?”

“The majority of those are unaging already. There are time spells available for the few aging intangible beings. The main problem was those spells weren’t mass-producible.” She raised her hand and duplicated the glowing concoction. “This is. Granted, I have to do the producing, but after about a week of duplication there should be billions of bottles. And they have an infinite shelf life. Which really shouldn’t come as a surprise.”

Eve nodded. “This is the point where I ask you, again, to reconsider what you’re doing. Maybe we’re messing with things we shouldn’t be, yada yada, but I already know you’re dead set on this. And, frankly, if we can’t solve sudden, tragic deaths… At least we can make sure there aren’t any long, drawn out ones.” Eve pushed a bottle back to Corona. “I’m not giving you my endorsement.”

“Yeah, I know this.”

“But there’s no way in the name of the Tower I’m going to be able to stop you,” Eve admitted. “If you want this out, get it out there. There will be consequences you won’t think of until it’s too late.”

Corona nodded, face serious. “I know.”

“Most of those probably won’t show up for several years… Regardless, what exactly is your plan? Sell it?”

“Are you crazy? Of course not! This needs to be government-regulated to an absurd degree,” Corona said. “I was hoping you could patch it through to Oversight so they could create the regulations for it.”

“Oversight and Justice.”

“Hm?”

“The two divisions work together to create regulations so neither one can one-up the other.”

“Right, forgot.” Corona shook her head. “The point is I need a politician type to send it over to them, get them to figure out how to distribute it to everyone and how to determine who’s old enough to get it. If it’ll be a medically regulated substance or available in stores. I’m expecting medically regulated.”

Eve nodded. “I’ll send it over to Renee – she’s always been a lot better at internal affairs than me. She’ll get it to them looking prim and proper.” Eve smiled sheepishly. “When you’re Overhead of Relations, the new societies give you a pass for being slightly unprofessional because they don’t want to insult your culture.”

“Sounds nice.”

“Sometimes it is. Sometimes not.” Eve shrugged. “Everything comes with a little good and a little
bad if you look into it deeply enough.”

“Just make sure she puts in my only requirement.”

“Oh?”

“*Everyone* in Merodi Universalis has to be able to access it at a good point in their lives – no waiting for people to be on death’s door, and no excluding people because they’re healthy. Everyone needs to be able to get it.”

Eve nodded. “I’ll remember that.”

“It was the whole point of all this painful research.” Corona rubbed her stomach. “Had to cut myself open more than once…”

“…What?”

“Oh, uh, not surgery. The serum was produced in my body, I had to let it out somehow. Took forever to find the right place.”

“Is *that* why your arm has evidence of permanent marker on it?”

Corona smiled sheepishly. “Yeah. I haven’t exactly tried to clean it all off yet. Just enough scrubbing to be presentable.”

“You can’t just magic it away?”

“I used a magic bath spe-” she blinked. Then she lit her horn and lifted the marker completely off her skin. “Scatterbrained me, bath spell was the wrong choice.”

“At least you smell like soap now.”

Corona chuckled. “Anyway, I’ve got a few deliveries to make. I take it I don’t exactly have to keep this hushed up anymore?”

Eve shook her head. “I bet they’ll want to start shipping it out within the month. You’re free to even make an announcement if you want.”

“Nah, I’ll leave that to you unless you’ve got a specific role for me. Not the politician here.”

“You give good speeches!”

“But I don’t want to take away from your spotlight,” Corona said with a wink.

Eve smiled. “Fair enough.”

“See ya, Eve!”

“…Hold on. This has been bugging me for a while.”

“Hm?” Corona said, turning back to her.

“Are you… glowing?”

“Oh, yeah. Guess this isn’t as bright as daylight.”

“…Is that permanent?”
“I can remove it whenever I want. Except when I do I won’t be able to duplicate the serum anymore. So I’m going to keep it.” Corona grinned. “I’m slowly turning into a sun as time goes on.”

Eve facehooved.

“Bye Eve! See you around!” Corona spread her wings and took off toward the ceiling, teleporting away before she hit.

Eve looked at her own wings for a moment.

“C’mon, why are hers so much prettier?”

No answer was forthcoming. Eve decided to leave pointless envy to the side and call Renee.

~~~

Corona strolled into Iroh’s Teashop, trying to keep up her smile. But the moment she walked into the kitchen, the smile had vanished completely. She sighed, opting to stand in the doorway until he noticed her.

Iroh was far too engrossed in the art of tea making to notice her instantly. He moved slowly and with great creaks in his body – clearly not a man who would function in a fight anymore. Yet he didn’t let it bother him, still going about his relaxed work with a smile, using the occasional puff of fire from his fingertips for some extra spice.

It just made Corona sad to see him like this. He had been old when she’d met him, but he’d remained strong and sprightly for long after that. He had trained her – and then he had started training Corea. But that was when it started to set in. Magic medicine could do wonders for a person, but unless they wanted to actually de-age themselves and suffer the mental side effects, it only went so far.

He was in his mid-nineties. He only kept himself here and away from the spirit world because Corea was still young. But Corea had recently turned seventeen – she was, in many ways, ready to be the Avatar for the Elemental Nations. Corona had seen her do many things for that world already, and she was certain the young Avatar would do many more.

Corona grimaced, realizing what she was about to do.

Iroh must have sensed a disturbance in the air, for he finally turned around and saw her standing there, gloomy. He smiled. “Ah, Corona… My favorite student.”

“You really should play favorites with the Avatar, old man,” Corona said, a small smile coming to her face.

“Nonsense. I choose favorites based on my own thoughts, not obligation.” He moved slowly to sit down at a table in the back – graciously allowing Corona to help him into his seat. She sat down opposite him. “Nice glow, by the way.”

Corona chuckled. “Thanks.”

“…Where is it?” He asked after a moment’s silence.

Corona produced a bottle filled with Essence of Eternity and placed it in between them. “Drink it and you won’t age any further. …But we both know you aren’t going to take it, no matter how much else I can do for you.”
Iroh let out a deep sigh. “Yes… All this means is that it is finally time for me to leave these worlds and let the next generation take their place. The endless generation.”

“…You sure Corea’s ready?”

“There is little I can teach her in the ways of spirits and the Avatar. She may not have completely mastered the bending arts, but she is on the right track. She’s already done my world proud.”

Corona smiled. “I’m… glad to hear that.” She sat back. “…You never really explained what’s in the spirit world, Iroh.”

“It is not something for those who do not feel an inner urge to seek it.”

“I think you owe me a bit more explanation than that, now that the time has come.”

Iroh nodded. He sat back, collecting his words. “It may or may not be another universe. It may just be a plane of existence out of phase with Elemental Four. It does not matter, for it is a holy place. It is the world where the spirit of the Avatar, Raava, originated. It is the world of many forces of nature. It is… It is the reason our world exists with the balance it does. It may exist separately, but it is the defining backbone of everything that drives our lives. That is why I fought so hard to have it be declared a protected world – a disturbance in the Spirit World could do drastic things to Elemental Four, things to our very souls.”

“That’s why it’s important,” Corona said. “That doesn’t answer why you’re going.”

“…Originally, it was to look for my son,” Iroh admitted. “You know how I lost him. I strived to be with him again, always, even through all the adventures. But I have come to realize that, if his spirit is there, it won’t recognize me. It will have taken a new form…” he shook his head.

“I now go because it is the way to end my story and begin another. I will likely achieve ‘immortality’ of a sort there, but not of the kind you are offering me. I will become but a spirit, wandering, eventually unable to comprehend the physical world fully… but I will retain my memories. I will become its internal guardian – but also just a denizen looking for a sort of peace. An end to the pain.” Iroh looked into the distance. “The world is a cruel one, Corona. Even your home suffers in the shadows. And we hail from the better worlds.”

Corona nodded – thinking of ‘grimdark’ universes. Galaxus Immaterium...

“I guess that means part of the reason is selfish,” Iroh said with a pained chuckle. “I want the pain to end and find true peace. I will find it there since I have spent most of my life meditating on the Spirit World and what it means to us. It will welcome me.”

Corona wiped some tears from her eyes. “All right. I won’t try to stop you.”

“Thank you.”

“I will demand that you let those close to you bid you goodbye,” Corona said, standing up. “Everyone who wants to… will congregate at Elemental Four’s south pole to wish you off.”

“Corona…”

“That’s my condition. You get to attend your own funeral.”

Iroh smirked. “I’ll agree to the terms, but it isn’t exactly a funeral.”
“Right... But that's what it's going to feel like.”

Iroh nodded. “It will be difficult... But I do owe them all at least that much. I’ll arrange it.”

Corona smiled. “…Good.”

Iroh stood up, groaning. Corona helped him walk to leave the kitchen, entering the public area. Iroh coughed for attention. “I'm going to have to shut down the tea shop for a few days. I apologize to those of you who have not been served yet, but there’s something I have to attend to.” He coughed again. “I hope you understand.”

Everyone in the teashop took one look at him and smiled warmly. There was a bunch of nodding heads and polite bows in Iroh’s direction.

Every person in the room had a deep respect for the man. The show of it brought tears to his eyes.

~~~

A few hours later, Corona knocked on a door to one of the Hub’s houses. She had timed it perfectly so a particular person would answer the door.

Renee answered. “Yes, w-” she stopped when she saw Corona. “C-corona! Y-you’re not supposed to be here!” She glanced over her shoulder nervously. “Quick, before he sees you, g-”

Corona wordlessly held up the glowing yellow potion.


“Yeah?” Corona heard Daniel call.

“Go sit down on your favorite chair. You’ll want to be calm for this.”

“…That’s not ominous at all.”

“Dear, I love you, go sit down, and try not to hate me later.”

“All right,” he said without hesitation.

“He sure trusts you,” Corona said.

“Yeah…” Renee said, a wistful expression crossing her face.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Let’s hope it stays that way, hmm? …He should have sat down by now. Stay behind me.”

Corona obliged, softly walking behind Rarity as she made her way to the living room. Daniel was sitting there in his favorite blue chair turned away from the television. He looked old and tired, but there was life in his eyes. He also didn’t look as old as he actually was, thanks to magic medicine – he looked like he was in his late fifties, not mid-seventies. “What’s going on?” he asked Renee.

Renee took a deep breath. “Don’t jump out of your chair.” She gestured for Corona to come out from behind a wall.

The instant he saw her he jumped up and took a defensive stance, starting to perspire from the sudden shot of adrenaline. “G-get her out of here.”
Renee gulped. “Ah… I don’t think I can do that this time, dear.”

Corona nodded slowly, levitating the Essence of Eternity into a coffee table near Daniel. He nervously tapped the table with his leg, scooting it away.

Renee bit her lip and shook her head.

Corona spoke as softly as she could. “This is the immortality serum, Daniel. Drink it and you’ll never age another day again.”

“You made it, I’m not t-touching it!” Daniel shouted.

“Look, dear, it’s safe!” Renee said, nudging Corona. She produced another bottle and handed it to Renee. She tanked it quickly, in desperation. “See? It’s fine!”

“The other bottle could be poisoned!”

Renee took a small amount out of Daniel’s bottle and ingested it just as her eyes flashed yellow from the first dose. “See? All fine. Everything’s fine.”

“S-she could use her magic or something! I d-don’t need immortality anyway! I’m doing just fine so long as I don’t see her. I’ll just Ascend and de-age myself next time!”

“Daniel, love…” Renee shook her head. “…You’ve had many ‘deaths’ since the games. You haven’t Ascended once, even when you should have. You might have been damaged.”

“BY HER!”

“And I’m trying to fix it!” Corona blurted.

Daniel took several steps back, until he hit a wall. “F-fix me? Actually kill me!?”

“Wha- no!”

“You just don’t want me to ever Ascend again! You want my energy for yourself!”

Corona’s eye twitched. She had to force herself not to burst out in anger.

Renee put a hoof on Corona. “O…. Okay, Daniel. We’ll leave you.”

“Take the bottle too!” Daniel demanded.

Renee did so, picking it up in her magic and taking it with the two of them to a parlor.

“He needs to take it,” Corona said.

“It’s his choice…” Renee reminded her.

“He’s just reacting because he knows it’s from me. Aside from his reaction to me, he’s perfectly healthy.” She sighed. “I’m wondering if I should have tried to trick him…”

“He would have figured it out the moment I said it was immortality serum,” Renee said. “It’s no secret what you’ve been working on, Corona.”

“I know,” Corona shook her head. “…Hold onto it. Maybe you’ll be able to catch him on a good day.”
Renee nodded slowly. “I have every intention of convincing him to take it one day. It just looks like that day isn’t going to be today.”

“…I wish I could help him,” Corona said. “I really wish I could… But it’s me in there. All because I thought, one day, there wouldn’t be any consequences.”

“I’ve forgiven you, you know this,” Renee said. “And I know he would too if he was able.”

Corona nodded. “It’s a small comfort, at least.” She rolled her shoulders back and stretched her wings. “…I hope you get through to him.”

“Me too. You should probably leave now. I’ll have those documents sent out by tomorrow.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Corona said, teleporting away.

Renee teleported the serum into the closet. “Daniel, she’s gone.”

“G-good.”

“You know I don’t want to hurt you right?” she said, trotting back to the living room.

“Y-yes,” Daniel said, “I know for sure.” He looked at his hands. “I know either I’m crazy, or everyone else is…”

Renee wiped tears from her eyes.

“But whenever I think of her… All that is gone. All I have is absolute certainty.” He put a hand to his face. “There’s nothing I can do. Nothing I can do…”

Renee kissed him. “You don’t have to, love.”

He pulled her close, saying nothing for the longest time.

~~~

The Primary Team was eating lunch at some random place in Ponyville that served plates that were food. Some of them were like giant cookies and pizzas, but there were a few dishes that were pasta bakes somehow cohesively held into a plate shape. It was best not to question it. Just like it was best not to question how Pinkie fit the entire plate in her mouth at once.

“Deeeeelicious!” she declared, giggling.

“Well now none of the rest of us will know how good it was! Because you ate it!” Nova declared.

“Five out of five stars, best plate ever. Soooooo bad you girls didn’t get to try it!”

Jotaro raised an eyebrow.

“And guy! I didn’t forget about you!”

It was Flutterfree’s turn to raise an eyebrow.

“Psh, I don’t forget Jotaro exists. He’s just too big!”

“Riiiiight.”

Jotaro grabbed his hat. “Yare yare daze…”
Vriska fell down from the sky. “I have drinks.” She dropped a tray with four golden bottles onto the table. “The best of drinks.”

Flutterfree blinked. “Okay, I’ll bite, what is it?”

“Corona’s completed research,” Vriska said, walking around the four of them like sharks. “The secret to eternal life, procured early by yours truly.”

Flutterfree, Nova, and Jotaro just stared at the drinks, processing.

Pinkie downed hers the instant Vriska had finished talking.

“P-Pinkie!” Flutterfree gasped. “Don’t you think we should talk about this!?”

Pinkie’s eyes flashed yellow. “Eh, don’t really feel like I need to. I will now live forever! WOO!”

“But do we really want to?” Flutterfree asked.

“You know what, why am I even considering this?” Nova asked, chugging hers next. “The answer is duh, obviously. Who wouldn’t!?”

Jotaro turned to Vriska. “…This will be publicly available, right?”

Vriska gave him the thumbs up. “Corona wouldn’t let me have it if it wasn’t going to be.”

Jotaro nodded. He gripped the bottle, examining it closely.

“Jotaro…”

“Chances are I’ll die young in combat anyway,” Jotaro said.

“You’re in your fifties!”

“So are you.”

“Ponies live longer!”

“…Then I’ll need to catch up.” He downed it, taking a breath after. “…Curious taste. Hope it’s not addictive.”

“You’ll never need another one,” Pinkie pointed out. “Woohoo! Eternity!”

“It feels underwhelming,” Nova observed.

“It won’t after a few millennia,” Flutterfree commented.

Vriska rolled her eyes. “Flutters, trust me, so long as you keep yourself occupied, you’ll be fine. And this doesn’t give you the nearly endless immortality I have. You’ll kick the bucket eventually from a stray arrow or something.”

 “…Cheery thought.” Flutterfree lifted the serum up with Lolo’s wires. “It’s a monumental decision…”

“Just take it, c’mon,” Vriska said. “You’re surrounded by immortals as it is. Might as well join.”

“She doesn’t have to if she doesn’t want to,” Nova said. “She might want to find her end at some point.”
Flutterfree nodded. “But… You know what, I’ll have eternity afterward. I won’t have eternity here. Maybe this existence is broken, bruised, and full of evil… but I like it right now. I can enter eternity after a near-eternity here if I must.” She took the bottle and looked at it closely, her red eyes reflecting in the glass. Then she closed her eyes and drank it. She set it down carefully, opening her eyes just as they flashed yellow.

“Fuck yeah!” Vriska shouted, grinning. “Now we’re all going to be together forever! Best explorer buddies until the end of TIME.”

“Aw look, Vriska’s getting sentimental!” Nova ribbed.

“Psh, you ponies rubbed off on me a lot. At this point if I wasn’t sentimental something would have to be really wrong with my head.”

“Imitating something isn’t wrong with your head,” Jotaro deadpanned.

“SAVAGE BURN!” Pinkie shouted, hooves around her mouth. “SSSSSSSSSSSS!”

Flutterfree, Nova, and Pinkie burst into laughter while the slightest hint of a smile crawled up Jotaro’s face.

Vriska folded her arms. “By the way you all just drank Corona’s blood.”

All the laughing stopped instantly.

“…You’re serious,” Nova said. “Holy cow you’re serious.”

“Yep. The production of this stuff is really interesting, considering what I grabbed from Lady Rarity’s mind on the subject.” She kicked her feet up on the table and smirked.

“Vriska, you know you’re not supposed to dig into people’s minds,” Flutterfree chided.

“Hey, she wouldn’t tell me how the stuff was made. I was not expecting to learn that Corona was smokin’ hot in more ways than one or that she was fully capable of going full chaos cultist for SCIENCE at any moment.”

Nova stared at the empty bottle that had contained the serum. “Corona tastes like gold and flowers, apparently.”

“I was always expecting bacon, personally,” Flutterfree said. Then she blushed. “Eep! Not that I think about what people taste like!”

Jotaro raised an eyebrow.

“…Okay fine. When I see you I think steak and marshmallows. Are you happy?”

Vriska shook her head. “Steak and marshmallows? What kind of meal is that!?"

“And why marshmallows?” Nova asked. “He’s not a horse!”

“That joke’s run its course, Nova,” Flutterfree muttered.

“I dunno!” Pinkie said, hoof to her chin. “Let’s spin the wheel of joke graveyarding to see what should happen to it!” She turned to a game-show wheel that hadn’t been there a minute ago and gave it a good spin.
The five of them continued enjoying their day, more or less forgetting the major change that had altered their bodies forever.

~~~

Corona knocked on another door. *Man, I’m making a lot of house calls today.*

The Sunset known as Sunny opened the door. “Oh. Hey Corona, what’s up?”

“I just came to drop by, say thanks. Where’s Jane?”

“Inside,” Sunny said, beckoning for Corona to come in. “Thanks? For what?”

“Someone’s thanking us?” Jane asked, poking her head out from around a corner. “I’m all ears.”

“If you’re all ears why don’t you ever hear knocks at the door?”

“Selective hearing.”

Sunny rolled her eyes.

“So, Corona, what’d we do?” Jane asked, leaning against a wall.

“Well… This might sound a little awkward and bring back some weird memories.”

“Should I get a drama couch?” Sunny asked with a coy smirk.

“Nah, no Raritys here.”

“Unless I’m secretly one in disguise,” Jane said, smirking.

Corona rolled her eyes. “Yeah. Anyway… Remember the time Aradia took you to see your Pinkie’s grave?”

The two nodded. “How could we forget?” Jane asked.

“Yeah. You may or may not recall that was the day I came out of my depressive funk. Because you got me to declare war on death.”

“Wasn’t our intention by any stretch of the imagination,” Jane pointed out.

“I think it was a good thing,” Sunny retorted.

“Not saying it wasn’t. Just saying it wasn’t what I would have done.”

Corona shrugged. “To each their own. Anyway, the reason I’m coming to thank you today is because I did it.”

“Did what?” Sunny asked.

Corona pulled out one of the bottles. “Dealt a big blow to death. Behold, the Essence of Eternity, an immortality serum invented by yours truly.”

The two of them stared at it for a while.

“You do realize you could have just asked us for an immortality serum and we could have given you one, right?” Jane said.
“…What.” Corona deadpanned.

“There’s even a Fountain of Youth in my records!” Sunny said. “Did you not think to look in there?”

“…No,” Corona said, blinking. “…That would have saved a lot of time. And sleepless nights. And the glowing blood.”

“Glowing blood? Sweet!” Jane said.

Corona rolled her eyes, shutting off the lights and showing off her skin’s golden glow. “There you go. I’ve literally got this stuff swimming in my veins.”

“That looks pretty cool,” Sunny said. “Makes you completely useless for stealth though.”

“If I ever need to be stealthy I can just put up an illusion spell, no problem!” Corona said with a huff, turning the light back on. “…But seriously, I could have just asked you guys and avoided the whole thing?”

Jane and Sunny nodded.

“Fiddlesticks.”

“Hey, don’t be hard on yourself, you still did something great!” Sunny encouraged. “Immortality serums aren’t exactly the easiest things to make. Or mass produce.”

Jane thought about this. “…Did we really find enough immortality serums to know that for sure?”

“Twenty-seven serums, three of which could be mass produced,” Sunny recited from memory.

Corona blinked. “You should take my job. The physicist part anyway.”

Sunny rolled her eyes. “I’m not a scientist. We Sunsets may be smart, but not all of us are cut out for that kind of work.”

“Mhm.”

“Regardless, this probably works best for Merodi Universalis anyway.” Sunny pointed out. “The secret to their longevity was created by one of their best guardians. It’ll be a point of national pride.”

“Ooo, careful, don’t want to turn into Murica,” Jane said, snorting. “I still can’t say that with a straight face…”

“It is a bit absurd, isn’t it?” Sunny said. “…Oh, right. For what it’s worth, Corona, you’re welcome. Even if we really didn’t do anything.”

Corona rubbed the back of her head. “Yeah. This is a little awkward isn’t it?”

“A tad.”

“Well, before I go, any strange inventions or technology or magic I should know about before I spend the next few years of my life trying to create it?”

“Ragdoll patch,” Jane said.

Corona blinked. “What?”
“Allow me to demonstrate.” Jane placed a small brown square on the back of her left hand. Then she punched herself in the gut with her right. She lost all control of her body and went flying like a body in a video game, laying across a table with a stupid grin on her face.

“…What is the point of that?”

“It’s funny.”

Sunny rolled her eyes. “I’ve never really found it that funny.”

Corona nodded. “Yeah, I don’t get it either.”

“You two don’t understand comedy.”

The two fiery women snickered at this.

“Fine. Mock Jane. She’ll sit at this table upside-down and not care.”

“Ooh, ooh!” Sunny raised a hoof. “I’m going to call Trixie to give you third-person lessons!”

Jane let out a disinterested grunt.

“I’ll leave you to that,” Corona said with a salute. “See you around!”

“See you too, Corona!” Sunny said with a wave.

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Oversight Division:

Policy Regarding Immortality Serum Distribution and Control

Final Revision.

Approved by Overhead Sarsaparilla Fern (EqCo)

Co-approved by Second Tina Tourmaline (GeVe)

Co-approved by Overhead Freyr (EaTa) [Justice Division]

Summary:

This document details the policy regarding the new invention by Princess Corona “Sunset” Shimmer, PhD – an immortality serum better known as the Essence of Eternity, referred to as the serum in the rest of this report. The sections are split up as follows: Production, detailing the requirements for producing the serum, Distribution, pertaining to the moving of the serum to Merodi Universalis, Restriction, where the availability of the serum is discussed, Medical, in which information important to medical professionals is located, and lastly Judicial, where illegal usage of the substance is discussed.

Production:

The serum can be produced in vast quantities, but only one individual – Dr. Shimmer – is capable of doing so. All serum to be distributed by the Oversight Division is to be created at a pre-approved location while under constant surveillance. Dr. Shimmer will be required to meet a quota during each
production session, with early sessions expected to produce a few billion portions of the serum.

Dr. Shimmer has confirmed this is well within her abilities, given enough time to do so.

Each portion of the serum is to be stored in a standard-issue plastic bottle containing precisely 100mL of the serum. This is 10% more than is required to initiate the immortality effect, but there are no side effects from ingesting more than required. Some races require larger doses due to body size or multiple-body conditions. Such cases will be handled by Oversight directly as they are made known.

The general process by which the serum is produced is public knowledge but it is suggested that the finer points of the initial procedures not be discussed openly. No video or other visual documentation of the process is allowed to enter the public domain.

**Distribution**

The serum is only to be distributed to full Merodi Universalis member universes. It is prohibited to ship any of the serum to universes outside Merodi Universalis without Overhead or Second approval. The serum will only be transported from the Oversight Division warehouses when a request is made and approved by three Oversight Division Regulators, at which point a ship will be loaded with the precise number of portions requested. Upon arrival, every serum portion must be accounted for before delivery.

Drivers of these ships must be Oversight Division personnel.

The serum is not to be stored in places aside from the Oversight Division warehouse for longer than a month.

**Restriction**

The public sector is not permitted to purchase the serum directly under any circumstances.

The only requests are to be given by the medical sector, or local equivalent in universes that may not have a defined medical sector. Every patient in a hospital, or under the purview of a doctor or other suitably qualified and registered medical personnel, is to be given the choice of taking the serum, regardless of their state of health. This offer is only contingent on the individual’s age – no children or adolescents are permitted to obtain the serum. The exact age where a person is permitted to ingest the serum varies with race and is expanded upon in Appendix A.

If a citizen of Merodi Universalis is for some reason without a doctor, they may petition the Oversight Division directly for the serum.

Every citizen is expected to ingest the serum once in their life – but never twice. All ingestions must be done in the presence of a medical professional or recorder of some kind, so that confirmation may be added to the patient’s personal record.

**Medical**

Ordering a shipment of the serum requires evidence of Merodi Universalis citizens that have not ingested it in the form of census data that can be obtained easily through our website. Medical credentials are also required, though exceptions may be made in the special cases with certain universes. Calling the Oversight Division’s Medical branch is required for these special cases. In all cases, form SSEE-001 must be filled out.

If too much serum is accidentally ordered, it must be returned before one week has passed.
The serum activates instantly when 91mL is ingested within a thirty-minute period. This volume is consistent for most standard races. A yellow flash to the eyes is the indication the procedure is done. Their only known side effect is a soft yellow glow added to bodily excrement for the next day or so.

If the individual suffers from a rare genetic condition that stunts growth or aging, it is up to a medical professional whether or not to allow ingestion. If the individual is of an as of yet unknown race, a medical professional has the authority to decide for ingestion or not. If the individual is not fully biological in nature, Oversight Division Medical must be consulted on the matter.

**Judicial**

Crimes relating to the serum:

*Class 1 Crime:*

Illegal ingestion.

*Class 2 Crime:*

Posting visual records of the creation procedure.

*Class 4 Crimes:*

Negligence.

Stored longer than a week.

Illegal storage/possession.

*Class 6 Crime:*

Purposefully leaving behind excess serum and storing for later use.

Withholding access to serum.

Forced ingestion.

*Class 7 Crimes:*

Illegal distribution.

SSEE-001 Fraud.

*Class 11 Crime:*

Illegal ingestion: underage. (Administered to the entity who administered the serum, not the underage victim in question)

Eve put the document down. They were certainly taking this seriously, which she appreciated. The lack of long-term planning bothered her, but Oversight was not necessarily known for thinking of the long term – that was Aid, Cultural, and Labor’s jobs. It wasn’t like it even needed her approval – this had just been sent to her because she’d asked for it.

She really should bother to learn what the classifications in the Judicial Division *meant.* Higher numbers meant worse, she knew, and the biggest one she had seen was *Class 50,* which had been assigned to Randall Flagg for *Masterminding the Attempted Destruction of Merodi Universalis.*
Class 11 was probably still pretty bad. It was the theft of a child’s right to grow up or develop... A horrifying thought. She saw more than a few parents thinking they could keep their kids young forever with the serum. Just one of many possible problems...

She shook her head – it at least looked like it was going to work. Public approval was expected to be through the roof. But there was always going to be that nagging doubt in the back of her mind... And the minds of many others.

Unfortunately she was not in a position to watch internal affairs closely – she was always busy with external Relations. She just had to have faith that Sarsaparilla knew what she was doing. Eve may not have known her that well, but the Equis Cosmic alicorn knew what she was doing.

Eve folded the file away.

~~~

“Daniel, love, did we use all the saffron?”

“No,” he called from the next room over. “It should be in the back!”

“Ah!” Renee called, plucking the spice off the back of the rack. “Found it!”

“You in one of your cooking moods?”

“You know me, sometimes the culinary urge strikes!”

“What’s it gonna be this time?”

“Experimental spicy chowder,” she said, pouring the saffron into one of two small pots. “I know you like it with the ‘perfect’ amount but I’ve felt the need to give it a bit more ‘oomph’ this time around.”

“The occasional ‘oof’ is what life is all about!”

Renee stirred both pots. “In many ways, that’s exactly what it is.” She poured the white chowder into two bowls, levitating them into the dining room table, taking her seat at one end. “Dinner’s ready!”

Daniel walked into the dining room and sat down, breathing deeply. “…You weren’t kidding. That’s going to be spicy.”

“And we both have to eat it,” Renee said, spooning some into her mouth. “Hm... Delicious, but perhaps more salt...”

Daniel set to work on his soup, soon sweating slightly. “Wow... Hooooooo this is an experience.”

Renee was sweating profusely. “Y-yeah...” She downed her glass of water. “But Celestia, it has flavor.”

“That I can only taste for about a second before instant tongue agony.” He laughed. “What did you put in this?”

“Just about every spice on the rack and habaneros,” Renee said, panting. “It... miiight have been a bit much?”

“Might?” Daniel said incredulously.

“Just eat your soup dear.”
Daniel looked for a moment at his soup – and then brought it to his lips and started drinking it.

“S-so funny…” Renee tried to deadpan, but her voice fa
terred.

Daniel set the nearly-empty bowl on the table, smacking his lips. “There’s a faint taste of gold in here…”

His eyes flashed yellow.

That was just too much for Renee. She started weeping. “I’M SUCH A HORRIBLE WIFE! I’M SORRY!” She tossed her bowl off the table, spilling its contents all over the freshly cleaned floor. She splayed her front half over the table and kept crying.

Daniel stood up quickly. “Renee, what’s wrong? What happened?” He moved toward her in concern.

“I tricked you…” she managed. “I… You didn’t want to but… I just couldn’t do it. Stars, I’m so selfish…”

“Hey… Renee… It’s okay to mess up once in a while. Whatever you’ve done, it’s fine. Nothing you do will break what we have.”

“…It’s… Good to know that’s how you actually feel…” Renee wiped her eyes. “I’m going to cherish it.”

“Why?”

“Because when I tell you a lights
tsch is going to go off in your head!” Rarity wailed. “And then you’ll hate me!”

“Renee, that won’t happen.”

Renee looked Daniel in the eyes with her own sad orbs. “…You just drank the immortality serum.”

Daniel’s eyes widened in panic. He took several steps back and shoved his fingers down his throat, triggering the gag reflex.

“Daniel, don’t…” Renee called. She winced as he heaved up his entire dinner right there on the floor.

“There… It’s out of me…”

“It has already taken effect,” Renee said. “Your eyes flashed. You’re immortal now.”

“N-no…” Daniel said. “N-no! She’s gotten to me Renee! This serum!? It might make all you immortal but she just wants me dead! I’m not going to be able to Ascend anymore!”

“You couldn’t Ascend anymore since the accident!” Renee shouted back.

“We didn’t know that!”

“I couldn’t take that risk!” Renee blurted, tears rolling down her face. “I… I… I couldn’t handle it. I was weak. I saw you growing old while I haven’t even started getting wrinkles. I…” She ran off into another room of the house, placing her hoof on a wall, shuddering violently.

_I’ve betrayed him. I’m just the worst… I should have stood by him until the end…_
She felt Daniel’s face press into her mane and his arms wrap around her. She tensed.

“Shh…” he said. “Relax. Relax…”

“B-bu-”

“Relax,” he said, lifting her up. He took her to the bedroom and laid her down gently, kneeling down at the left side so he was eye level with her. “…You… You just did what you thought was right.”

Renee put a hoof on his cheek. “I had no right… I shouldn’t have…”

“If you really think I’m not right in the head… then that was the right thing to do.”

“Daniel…”

“I’m absolutely terrified now,” Daniel admitted. “I know I can’t Ascend anymore. Because of what was in that potion. But you’re sure it’ll keep me from growing old. …It might, just to keep you off her trail. But when it does happen… Please, please don’t blame yourself.”

Renee choked. “Daniel, I’m sorry!” She yelled, throwing her hooves around his neck.

“It… It’s okay,” Daniel said, returning the embrace.

He was lying through his teeth. He most definitely wasn’t okay. But he could live with it for Renee’s sake. It was a sacrifice he was more than willing to make.

~~~

The South Pole of Elemental Four was brutally cold. Luckily Corona was a master of all kinds of heat magic, so she could surround the cold area with bright miniature suns to keep everything at a comfortable temperature. The ice was too deep and ancient to melt significantly simply from one day of comfortable heat, so the majesty of the icy wastes was maintained.

The true South Pole had a small forest of dead trees. How these trees had ever survived in such brutal conditions was unknown, but it was suspected it had something to do with the Spirit Portal. The answer would remain a mystery, for this was one of the places research was not allowed. People weren’t even allowed to come here without special permission.

Today, special permission had been granted. It was open to anyone who wanted to bid Iroh a final goodbye.

Hundreds of people had shown up to wave the great leader of Elemental Four on to the next phase in his existence.

Corea and Tenzin stood in front of the frozen glow of spirit energy. Both were older – Tenzin had actually managed to grow a beard, and Corea was almost a full grown mare. She had her cutie mark not in being the Avatar, or bending, but in cooking, discovered when she had taken a slight break from potion making. It was a beautiful apple sitting in a simmering pot.

For a moment, it looked like they were going to work together to execute a complex bending pattern – but Tenzin turned to Corea and shook his head. He took a few steps back, reuniting with his wife and newborn child.

Corea glanced to Iroh. “Guess this is the final test of the Avatar, huh?”

Iroh smiled. “I have other ways in, Corea.”
Corea took a breath. “But this is the best one.” She spread her hooves wide and focused deep within herself. She held an image of Iroh close in her mind. She took in a sharp breath and opened her eyes wide – entering the Avatar State. A ball of air surrounded her, enclosed by distinct rings of fire, water, earth, and pure arcane energy. She moved her front hooves in a circular fashion, tapping into the spirit of the world around her. For a moment, everyone could see the past Avatars behind her, all assisting.

Aang waved to Iroh.

Iroh chuckled and nodded to his old friend.

Corea shoved all four of her hooves forward, prompting the spiritual energy within her to smash into the frozen spirit portal. It surged with energy, breaking free from the ice with a great rumbling. A beam of light shot from the ground and into the sky – the signal that the portal was open.

Corea dropped the Avatar State and floated to the ground. She wiped her face. “Door’s open. Don’t worry, I’ll close it once you get through.”

Iroh nodded with a warm smile. He placed his hand on Corea’s head. “You’ll make a fine Avatar, Corea.”

She beamed. “Thank you, Iroh. For everything you’ve done for me and this world.” She hugged him. “I hope you find what you want in there.”

“I hope so too, child,” Iroh said. The embrace ended, and Corea returned to her friends. ‘Team Avatar’ as it were, with Tenzin, Applebloom, and three others Iroh had never really gotten the opportunity to know that well. …It was not something to regret. He’d only had so many years.

Applejack walked up to him next. “Ah wanna thank you for tellin’ her what she was, and lettin’ her figure out what that meant on her own. You’ve basically raised her since day one, and for that Ah… Ah can’t thank you enough.”

“All you have to do is take good care of her, Applejack,” Iroh said with a warm smile. “That’s all I ask for payment.”

“You’re a good man.”

“I try,” Iroh admitted, moving on to his family.

The current Firelord, Zuko’s daughter Izumi, embraced him. “…I don’t want you to go.”

“My time is up, Izumi. Continue taking the Fire Nation to an age of peace and honor. You haven’t needed my presence to do that for years.”

Izumi nodded. “…You’re the best great uncle ever.”

“Oh, I’m sure there are better ones out there.”

“You were the best one to me.”

They embraced a while longer before Iroh moved on. His own brother was next, out of prison for this special occasion. Ozai’s expression was unreadable.

Iroh extended a hand. Ozai didn’t hesitate – he grabbed it and shook it.

“Good luck,” Ozai said. Iroh knew that was all he was going to get out of his brother.
Iroh’s niece, Azula, on the other hand, couldn’t remain impassive. She embraced him, tears in her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“I know,” he said.

“Not for all the things I’ve done… But for not letting myself know you. Treating you like the enemy.”

“You’re forgiven, Azula. You’ve always been forgiven.”

“…You never know what you have until it’s gone or going.”

“And you never know what’ll happen unless you try,” Iroh said, looking Azula in the eye.

“R-right,” she said, wiping her eyes. She released him.

He gave her a smile and moved on – talking to old friends from Elemental Four, giving them slow but sure goodbyes. Applejack’s children. People from the Order of the White Lotus. Regular customers at his teashop. Eve herself. Renee, but without Daniel. The entire primary team…

Pinkie nudged Iroh, giving him a present. “Don’t open it until you’re on the other side!”

Iroh smiled, graciously taking the present. “I wonder what it is?”

“Well, you know how in the Spirit World you generally can’t take things, or the things that you do take may just disappear over time? You can take that, and you’ll want to take that. It’ll never go away. Pinkie Pie guarantee.”

“I’m sure it’s wonderful.”

Pinkie gave him a wink. Jotaro and Iroh shared a moment, clasping hands with a loud clapping noise and saying all they needed to say with a glance. Vriska gave the old man a thumbs up. “You’re not bad for an old guy. Hope you get back to being a badass in there.”

Nova and Flutterfree just opted to hug Iroh at the same time, thanking him for what he did for them. Many others did the same.

Iroh had helped many, many people in his life.

Eventually, he came to Corona, riding atop Lady Rarity. Toph stood to one side, Olivia on the other. Olivia gave a slight salute. “Didn’t get to know you all that well Iroh, but I know you’re quite the character. I’ll let you have your moment.” She walked away, leaving the rest of the group with Iroh.

Toph placed a hand on Iroh’s shoulder. “…Thanks for the tea.”

“Thanks for the talk.”

They embraced. “Take care of yourself, old man.”

“Rule with wisdom, your highness.”

Toph stepped back, her armor clanking. She gave her friends a smile and walked back to the rest of the crowd.

Corona dismounted from Lady Rarity. The spirid shook Iroh’s hand. “It’s been an honor.” Then she left the two alone.
Corona put on a sad smile. “Thirty years.”

“Is that how long it’s been? Time’s hard to keep track of.”

Corona nodded. “That’s when I met you. When you began to teach me. Not just the art of firebending, or the art of tea – but the art of your lifestyle. Caring, but powerful. Understanding, but passionate. Quick, but wise.” She spread her wings, allowing their glow to surround Iroh. “I would not be where I am today without you. You shaped my life.”

“I had no intention of turning you into a pony-angel-thing.”

Corona laughed. “What did you always say about the best of intentions?”

Iroh chuckled. “I know, I know…” He spread his arms wide. “Come here.”

She did, surrounding the two of them in her luminous wings.

“There’s no way I can thank you.”

“You’ve done all you need to,” Iroh assured her. “You’re letting me go.”

Tears formed in Corona’s eyes. She squeezed him tighter. “…I don’t want to let go.”

Iroh said nothing. He let her have her cry on his shoulder. It was a full minute before she allowed her wings to open, letting Iroh go.

“Bye,” she managed.

Iroh wiped his own face. “Goodbye, Sunset Shimmer.”

She choked at the use of the first name he knew her by. She couldn’t speak – only wave.

Iroh walked to the Spirit Portal, passing everyone. He heard tears and sobs – but the closer he got to the portal, he started hearing people applauding, cheering, celebrating.

His life had been something great.

He passed Corea last.

“There’s something evil in there,” Corea said. “I can sense it, just past the portal.”

“The Dark Spirit lies sealed within the tree,” Iroh told her. “Just remember to seal the Spirit World off once I’m through. It will never bother you.”

Corea nodded. “…I’ll protect everything you worked so hard to build. And I’ll do it with a smile!”

She grinned. “Avatar Corea of the smile!”

Iroh smiled back at her. “That has a nice ring to it.”

“You think so? I think so.”

He nodded. “You’ll certainly live up to it.” He turned and walked toward the beam of light, stopping one step short of it. He turned around, taking one last look at the world he was leaving.

He could see everyone waving at him. Some were crying – but despite the tears, all of them were smiling.
It was a great final image. “All of you. Live your lives to the fullest!”

They were his last words. He took a step backward into the Spirit World, cutting himself off from the world of the living. He felt his body transition to a completely different realm with completely different rules. A dark tree stood behind him, but he ignored it – instead looking at the impossible beauty of the rest of the Spirit World.

The column of light in front of him sealed up a few seconds later. Corea had done what she’d been asked.

Iroh opened the present, not all that surprised to find that it was a digital image frame. It only had one image in it – an image that could not have been taken before the frame was put in the box.

It was of all of them waving him on at the last second.

The digital frame allowed him to zoom in to see any of their faces he wanted in detail. He even saw Aang’s spirit hanging behind Corea. Even Ozai was waving…

He zoomed in on Pinkie. She was smiling biggest of all, looking right at him.

At her hooves was a small sign.

Cherish your memories.

Iroh planned to. He slid the digital frame into his ‘pocket’ that may or may not have actually existed. All he knew was that he’d have that picture forever, regardless of what the Spirit World had to say.

It was the best parting gift he could have been given.

He stretched his limbs, enthralled to find there was no pain. With the dark tree to his back, he set off into the Spirit World, ready to see its wonders…

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“‘That’s all fine and dandy, Rev’, you say, ‘but what are we actually supposed to do about it? You haven’t given us any suggestions!’” Rev looked out at her congregation – packed full for the first time in weeks, because everyone needed to know what to make of the new immortality serum that was suddenly available.

“I say take it,” Rev said. “We are not here to antagonize or scoff at the culture around us for being ‘unclean’, that was the old way, back before the gift of grace.” She held up the Bible in her magic. “You see this? There isn’t a word in here that says ‘death is good’. Death is the enemy. It can be worked together for good, but death itself is always described as the final enemy. We can fight it however we want – but we have to keep one thing in mind.”

She looked out at the congregation with a steeled expression. “We, alone, cannot win. Death will not be defeated until the time of Revelation. Do not fool yourselves – just because you won’t age does not mean you have escaped the cold embrace of the end. There are still accidents. Diseases. Criminals. Evil. We know all too well about immortals falling to the darkness inherent in existence.

“But I want you all to know – you still have a choice. You don’t have to take my recommendation – there are no doubt those among you who have been waiting to go for a long, long time. It is not a sin to want to be with the Lord. I’m not telling you to end your lives, but I’m saying you don’t have to extend it to eternity if you don’t want. Most should. But it’s not for everyone. I know this will make things difficult, but please, bear with one another in this time. Respect each other’s decisions,
regardless of what they are.

“Don’t think eternal life will come without consequences. Like most progress in society. It is both good and bad.” She placed her hooves on the podium. “…Let’s close in prayer.”

The prayer lasted a few minutes. Rev wished everyone a good rest of their day and walked away from the podium, down the aisle. A few people waved to her and gave her greetings, at least until she came across one pony in particular.

“Eve?” Rev said, eyes wide. “I have to say I’m surprised to see you in here.”

“I figured it was one I’d want to hear,” Eve said, Flutterfree at her side.

Flutterfree smiled. “Glad you came?”

“Yeah, though probably not for the reason you’re wanting.”

Flutterfree shrugged. “It means you might come again.” She paused. “I’ll leave you two to it,” she said, backing away.

Eve turned to Rev. “So, did you actually take it?”

Rev shook her head. “I’ve been immortal for a while. Fell into a magic fissure during my time in the Nexus. Came out stunted. Didn’t realize for several years what had happened.”

“O’Neill can relate.”

“I am aware of the nanobots. Don’t think he minds though.”

“He complains about his back from time to time.”

Rev rolled her eyes. “He has access to ways to fix that. But if he did it’d remove his excuse to grump around like the old man he is.”

Eve chuckled. “And he just can’t have that!”

“Never. The horror.”

Eve smiled – but slowly the smile dissipated. “…Corona would love to argue with you about truly defeating death. She knows there’s unconditional immortality out there.”

“And even they can be destroyed with the right combination of universal power,” Rev said. “There’s a simple way to take care of any being that isn’t split across multiple universes. Simply toss them into the outside emptiness – the Sea of Infinite Possibility. They’ll stop existing.”

Eve nodded slowly. “I know… I know all of this.”

“You have a lot of reservations about this.”

“The whole thing stinks to me of something we shouldn’t be messing with,” Eve admitted. “There are a few of us like that. Me. Aradia… There’s something that seems… natural about death. I was somewhat hoping you’d back that up here.”

“The Word is never what you think it is until you read it,” Rev said. “Death is not natural. Death is the final enemy. Death is seen as the worst blemish in existence. It is something that should not be at all. But it is. We’re to blame for it as well.”
Eve looked into the distance. “I’m not sure I can take that.”

“You’re immortal.”

“Yes. And until today, I was going to outlive my friends.” Eve looked at the ground. “Now I’m not. Applejack was the only one who seriously deliberated not taking it, but in the end she did. Virtually the entire society will keep on living. …We’ll have each other. Very few will outlive the others because of the tragedy of age.” She looked Rev in the eyes. “So why do I feel as though everyone’s joined me in a horrid curse?”

“I can’t really answer that,” Rev said. “Maybe by treating it as a good thing, you’d have to accept something you’d rather not think about? Maybe you’ve spent too much time thinking about how tragic immortality would be in the later years and can’t get rid of it? Maybe, by admitting death is a horror, you’ll have to reopen some old wounds about those you’ve lost?”

Eve blinked. “Possibly all of the above?”

Rev put on a soft smile. “…That’s how it generally works. A million little things shape you into what you are.”

“Yeah…” Eve rubbed the back of her head.

“You don’t always have to get to the bottom of it,” Rev said. “It helps if you can, but it’s not always possible. What does help is talking it through. Which you’re doing right now.”

Eve smirked. “So you’re telling me I’m doing it right?”

“More or less. Could stand to have faith mixed in there, but y’know, nothing’s perfect.” Rev grinned.

Eve rolled her eyes. “Yeah yeah… Want to grab lunch? Or breakfast? Or… Honestly this is a weird time lull between breakfast and lunch.”

“Yes I’ll go out for brunch,” Rev said.

“Oh, we can go to Iroh’s teashop!”

“HEY AZULA! TABLE FOR TWO!” Eve said, stepping through the portal.

Azula put on her ‘I’m trying to be nice’ smile. “Welcome, welcome, I have a table for you two right here. Please sit down, the menu will be provided the moment I beat the tar out of this cheapskate.”
The unicorn and alicorn chuckled, taking their seats.
The portal opened up into a dimly-lit living room. It was designed for humans, probably of an era where TV either wasn’t commonplace or hadn’t been invented yet. There were two chairs set at a round, wooden table with a book on it, while a couch sat closer to an unlit fireplace. The mantle was lined with vases and trinkets of varying colors, usually made of a translucent material that glinted in the dim lighting. Rugs lined the floor with complicated geometric patterns, colored with deep forest greens and burgundy overtop of a golden background. It would have felt homely, if it wasn’t so dark.

Pinkie Pie and the rest of her team stepped through the portal, the ring of transdimensional energy closing behind them.

“Oh, look. Creepy house,” Vriska observed, adjusting her shirt.

“Thank you captain obvious,” Nova deadpanned, examining the room they were in. She picked up an empty vase with her magic, casting a slight blue glow on the table it was on. “Yeesh, would it kill them to turn up the lights?”

“Could be vampires,” Flutterfree pointed out.

“That’s sunlight, not interior lighting.”

“Yare yare daze…” Jotaro said, adjusting his hat.

Pinkie cleared her throat. “So, I have a question. Anyone else feel like this place is off?”

“I did say it was a creepy house, right?” Vriska asked.

“I mean more than that. The chill down the spine, the unnerving quality to the air… It just feels like something’s up.”

Flutterfree nodded. “I feel it… All my coat hairs are standing on end.”

“Same,” Nova conferred.

Jotaro nodded slowly.

“Right, so something’s up,” Pinkie said, tasting the air. “Or it’s just a normal, creepy house, but we have to be careful.” She looked around a bit more until she came across something that really did look odd. The window. It looked like there was nothing through it at all – all they could see were their reflections and, behind that, utter and complete blackness.

Everyone followed her gaze. “…Odd,” Flutterfree admitted.

“Jojo, break the window, see what’s outside,” Vriska suggested.

“Wai-” Pinkie began, but she didn’t talk fast enough. Jotaro pummeled the window with Star Platinum. It would have been enough force to break a steel beam. The glass didn’t even crack.
“That’s not glass,” Jotaro said. “Feels like it, definitely isn’t.”

“Next time think before punching,” Pinkie pointed out. “But now we know this place definitely isn’t normal.” She pulled out the dimensional device, smirking. “So, who’s gonna place bets on if this will work or not?”

“Just try it and save us the suspense,” Nova deadpanned.

Pinkie pressed a button on the device – and no portal opened. “Eeyeparoons, we’re stuck. To the surprise of literally nobody.” She stretched her legs. “Well, we’re going to have to find out what’s stopping us. Nova, any thoughts?”

Nova lit her horn, prodding the area around them for information. “Magic sense doesn’t go beyond the window, and it drops off sharply just beyond all the doors of this room. I can tell you there’s rooms behind the doors, but that’s it.”

“Vision eightfold isn’t turning up anything helpful either,” Vriska said.

“Then we just have to look for clues the old fashioned way!” Pinkie declared. “Investigating!”

Jotaro picked up the book on the table and began flipping through it. He held it up for everyone to see, flipping through blank page after blank page. He closed it, showing them the cover devoid of a title.

Nova levitated the book over to her. “Huh. Are any of us dreaming?” She flipped through the book herself, scanning it closely.

“Vriska pinch patrol is ready. Hey Jojo!”

Jotaro used Star Platinum to pinch himself, glaring at Vriska for daring to suggest she pinch him.

“Bah, fine.” She got a defenseless Flutterfree with a pinch to the wing, removing a feather.

“O-ow!”

“Not dreaming.” Vriska rolled across the room and pinched Pinkie.

“Nooooot dreaming!” Pinkie sung.

Vriska pinched herself. “Oh, not dreaming.”

“Don’t even bother testing me,” Nova said, laying the book open on the table to a page about two thirds of the way through. There was one sentence of text in the middle of the page.

_Emma had an idea today. What a wonderful idea it was._

Pinkie put on her Sherlock hat and bubble pipe. “The first of many clues… We now know of two characters! Emma, and the author of this note! Let it be known!”

“And Emma had a good idea,” Vriska muttered, folding her arms. “All this does is make everything seem creepier. And this house does not need any help with that.”

“Don’t dismiss it,” Flutterfree said. “It might be important later.”

Pinkie nodded. “It’s a piece of the puzzle… A puzzle we will no doubt have to solve to get out of this manor of mystery!”
Nova rolled her eyes. “Yeah, probably. Still seems a little ridiculous.”

“Have you met us?” Vriska asked.

“…Unfortunately yes.”

“So, what now?” Flutterfree asked.

“We ask ourselves what’s behind door number one,” Pinkie said, bouncing up to a door and opening it. It led to a hallway without any lighting, dropping off into darkness in the distance. It was easily far longer than any hallway had any right to be.

“And that seals the deal,” Pinkie said. “If I wasn’t sure before, I’m sure now. We’re in a horror universe of some kind or other. We’re gonna need to be extra careful.”

The four of them nodded.

“First off, stay together at all times. No splitting up to look for clues. Never go far from each other for any reason. Especially not to go investigate an odd noise. If something scares you, don’t freak out. Panicking is the last thing we need. Pay attention to the smallest details, and never assume just punching a monster will do anything to it.”

“Anything else?” Vriska asked.

“Yeah. Don’t be stupid. Being stupid is how these things always go downhill.”

Everyone looked at Vriska. The troll rolled her eyes. “Har de har. Let’s just walk down the hallway of endless darkness already.”

Pinkie led the way, Nova at her side producing a blue glow so they could see. They moved along the featureless white-walled hall, glancing behind them occasionally to ensure they were getting further away from the living room door. Every time, the door was smaller, soon looking like nothing more than a pinprick of light.

And then the door slammed shut, sending ringing echoes through the dark hall. They were alone in the blue aura of Nova’s horn.

“…Go back?” Vriska suggested.

Pinkie shook her head. “We’d just have to walk this far again. Let’s keep moving for a while longer.”

A while longer turned out to be until they saw a soft, amber glow ahead of them. They quickened their pace the moment they saw it, their hooves and feet hitting the ground below them louder and louder as they approached.

The amber light turned out not to be an exit. Until they reached it, they had thought it might be a branching path in the hallway – but it only went into the wall about a meter. The walls within the depression were just as white as the hallway, and bare except for one large mirror on the back wall, lit only by a dim bulb embedded in the ceiling.

The five of them stood in front of the mirror, Pinkie in the center. They stared at their own reflections for a while.

Jotaro tried to pry the mirror off the wall, but it didn’t budge.
“…Well this is pointless,” Vriska observed.

Pinkie furrowed her brow. “…I don’t think anything is pointless here. Remember, we’ve got to pay attention. Dismiss nothing. Be on the tips of our hooves, ready at any moment…”

Jotaro nodded.

“There’s nothing else here,” Nova said, completing her scan. “I guess we just keep moving.”

Pinkie nodded, bouncing on ahead, leading the group along. They didn’t have to walk all that much further before they came to a place where the hallway just ended.

“Welp, time to go back,” Vriska said, turning around on her heels. “A long walk back to the living room!”

“Hold on a minute,” Nova said, feeling the wall with her magic. “There’s something on the other side here…” She tapped it with her hoof, producing a hollow sound. “A room, I think.”

Star Platinum cracked its knuckles. Pinkie nodded, allowing him to go nuts. The Stand let out a cry of “ORA,” plowing right through the thin plaster of the wall to another room. The area on the other side was dimly lit, but it was a bright enough difference from near-complete darkness that everyone covered their eyes.

The team moved out into an octagonal room with four doors – they had come through one of the four sides without a door. The walls were lined with pictures in wooden frames, each with an inscription plate beneath them. Around a half-dozen had been dislocated from the wall Jotaro had punched through.

Flutterfree picked one of the pictures up – it was of a newlywed human couple standing in front of a house. The scenery around the house was out of focus, but somehow both the couple and the house were detailed to a degree not usually seen in photographs of this type. Flutterfree felt like she could look into their smooth faces forever, or at the slats in the house’s roof…

“That window,” Jotaro said, looking at the picture with Star Platinum. “It’s exactly like the one in the living room.”

“So we’re in this house,” Vriska said. “Except not, because that hallway was probably a mile long.”

“Based on the house then,” Flutterfree said, checking the picture’s inscription. “Homecoming…” she said, testing the feel of the word on her lips.

“This one’s inscription is scratched out,” Nova said, holding up a picture that was just of the woman. “Think this is Emma?”

“She’s the only woman in any of these pictures, so that seems like a good assumption,” Flutterfree said, going through picture after picture. “All the others have scratched out inscriptions though…”

“It’s like the blank book,” Jotaro said. “Only one piece of information.”

Pinkie shook her head. “We can get stuff from the pictures. Look.” She held up one of the man sitting in a chair, reading the green book they had seen in the other room. “This guy, probably the author of that note back there, is a reading type. Why else would this picture be here?”

Vriska ran her finger around the room, touching each picture. “Guy, girl, guy, girl… house… Nothing but the guy, the girl, and the house.”
“The memories that matter?” Flutterfree suggested.

“Maybe…” Pinkie picked an octagon-shaped frame off the wall. “But this one’s different.”

Everyone crowded around her, looking at the picture. It was dark, showing an empty forest in the middle of the night. The camera hadn’t been looking at anything when the picture was taken – it was essentially a picture of nothing.

Pinkie furrowed her brow. “Why is this here…?”

Vriska shrugged, turning away. “It adds to the creepy facto- holy hell.”

Everyone turned with her, looking back the way they’d come. Above the hole they had punched in the wall hung a yellow post-it note.

“That definitely wasn’t there before,” Flutterfree said.

Nova levitated the post it note closer to her so she could read it.

We worked so hard.

It was going to be perfect.

“Cue the singing Chrysalis,” Pinkie said with a giggle. No Chrysalis showed up. “Oh well, that would have been funn-”

The lights in the room flickered out. Flutterfree screamed in panic.

Nova lit her horn with a sigh. “Flutterfree, it’s just darkness. No need to scr-” she blinked, brightening her horn to light the whole room. “…Where’s Flutterfree?”

The lights flickered back on, still no sign of Flutterfree.

“Hold on, hold on…” Pinkie said, putting a hoof to her head. “I’ve got her…”

Flutterfree didn’t know what had happened to her, but she did know it was dark and damp where she was. She was in about a half-inch deep pool of water on top of smooth stone. No light was forthcoming.

“Hello?” she called.

“She’s confused and somewhere wet,” Pinkie said, pacing frantically. “Jotaro, try bashing through the floor. Maybe she’s below us.”

“ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA!”

Flutterfree spread her wings and nervously started moving through the water – straight line. If she didn’t go in a straight line she was likely to get completely lost.

She was struck by how quiet everything was. No sounds but her own breathing and sloshing in the still water.

“She’s not hearing anything,” Pinkie said, furrowing her brow.

Jotaro stopped trying in vain to destroy the floor. “Anything else?”
“She can’t see anything, and I’m not getting any extra information from the description either,” Pinkie muttered. She didn’t say what else she was thinking.

Flutterfree decided maybe she should fly upward, see if there was a ceiling. She spread her wings and took to the sky, flapping furiously. A few seconds of this and gravity reversed, dropping her unceremoniously on the ‘ceiling’, which was effectively identical to the floor.

She was trapped. Alone. With no connection to her friends.

“No need to rub it in…” Pinkie muttered. She grabbed the picture of the dark forest and shook her head. She began rummaging through all the pictures, trying to find something of use.

Flutterfree felt a hand grab her hind hoof.

Pinkie let out an alarmed gasp. “Something’s down there with her.”

Vriska put a hand to her head. “I can’t find any psychic signatures…”

Flutterfree tore her hoof away from the hand and smashed another hoof down, expecting to crush it. But nothing was there.

Was it just her, or did the water feel deeper? …How could it be rising while still being completely stagnant?

“And now the water’s rising,” Pinkie reported. “Anyone, ideas?!”

Nova opened all the doors – each of them led to a different room. A game parlor, a study, a staircase, and a bathroom. Pinkie bounced into the bathroom, listening for sounds of water or Flutterfree. She banged on a few pipes.

Flutterfree had to start swimming a lot faster than she expected – she was treading water easily enough, but she had no idea how long until the top water level met the bottom water level. She spread her wings, planning to fly as far as she could as fast as she could. Wet wings didn’t matter to a pegasus.

Pinkie shook her head. “Nothing…”

Nova checked all the pipes, but found that, upon removing one of them from the wall, they didn’t lead anywhere. And yet, when she put the pipe back on, the sink produced water. “Just… Gah!”

Flutterfree felt the water rise to meet her hooves as she flew – so she made a quick adjustment upward. She expected to be crushed by water on both sides any minute now – and then to drown. She forced herself to focus on breathing. She’d need as much air as possible in her lungs to last the longest under the water.

The hand rushed out of the water and grabbed her back hoof. She let out all her air in a scream as she was dragged under.

“Flutterfree!” Pinkie screamed. “Nononononon-”

There was a loud crash from in the study room.

“I can’t see her anymore!” Pinkie shouted, scrambling across the room of pictures to the study, the rest of her team following behind. The study was well lit, unlike the rest of the house had been so far, and was filled with loose sheets of paper and post-it notes.
There was nothing in the room that could have made the crash. However, one of the walls was missing – replaced with the depression that held the mirror and the amber light. It showed their reflections.

Where Flutterfree was supposed to be, the mirror was slightly cracked – a Polaroid picture taped to the cracks. It showed Flutterfree laying on her back, limp, water pouring out of her mouth onto the cold, stony ground.

Pinkie’s mane lost all poof in an instant, deflating less like a balloon and more like a dying animal.

“T-that has to be a trick,” Nova said. “She was fine just a second ago. You don’t drown that fast. It’s just trying to get to us!”


“It?” Nova blurted. “Pinkie, what is it?”

“I don’t know!” Pinkie screamed. “All I know is that it got her and had a claw and can swim! And that it’s placing pictures on this mirror.”

Jotaro reached out to touch the picture.

“Don’t,” Pinkie ordered. “It could be trapped.”

Jotaro pulled back, hand curling into a fist.

“Oh my Stars… Flutterfree…” Nova said, hoof to her face.

“Stop,” Pinkie said, slapping Nova. “We’re still in danger. We need to keep our wits about us to figure this thing out. We… we…” She held a hoof to her chest. “We can deal with this later.”

“…Can we?”

“Just focus on surviving,” Pinkie told her. “If it got her, it’s going to be able to get us!”

“We need something to tie ourselves together with,” Jotaro said. “So it can’t just grab one of us and drag us to the wet place.”

Vriska started searching the study frantically. “Nothing… Nothing… Nothing…”

Pinkie pulled licorice rope out of her mane. “This’ll do. I’ve got virtually endless amounts.” Over the next few moments, she tied all their midsections together. “Don’t break it, it’s not strong.”

“This isn’t ideal,” Jotaro said.

“I’m a party pony! I don’t get to carry around survival supplies in here all the time. Get with the program, Jojo.”

Jotaro nodded.

“Everyone arm yourselves,” Pinkie said, pulling out a knife. Nova cast some defensive spells on all of them while Vriska readied her dice. They slowly moved back into the picture room, somber expressions.

She’s not gone for good, Pinkie told herself. There’s going to be a loophole. You don’t just kill off Flutterfree like that. It’s not how it works.
“Game parlor or stairs?” Vriska asked, her voice lower than usual.

“Parlor,” Pinkie said, leading the way, no longer bouncing in her movements. The team walked into the room, devoid of any of the cheerful discussion that had been with them up until this point. They were down a mare.

The game parlor was a wide, open room with enough light to be comfortable at any time of day – including blacker than midnight, which is what it was ‘outside’ right now. There were several card tables set up with small wooden chairs around them, and a well-stocked bar to one side. One card table was larger than all the others and was already set up for a game.

“Nobody drink anything,” Pinkie said.

“Don’t even need to be told,” Nova commented, starting her scans of the area. “Got nothing.”

“Look for notes, anything that could have words on it,” Pinkie said.

“There were a lot of books the study,” Vriska commented, leaning on the larger card table. “Probably should go check those.”

Pinkie nodded. “Yeah… It would be thorough…”

“Why that mirror though?” Nova asked. “Why’d it appear again?”

“It’s toying with us,” Jotaro said. “Letting us know that it has places for all our pictures on that mirror.”

Pinkie nodded slowly, checking under the card tables for anything useful, but finding nothing.

Vriska picked up a hand of five cards, examining it. “Huh. Quite the hand here. Absolute trash.”

“Not helpful,” Nova muttered bitterly.

Vriska didn’t respond right away. “…Hey guys? I think I might have just fucked up really badly.”

They turned to her, seeing her holding the hand of horrible cards – all cards with numbers lower than eight of mixed suits. They also saw the other hand of cards across from her floating in the air, held by something completely invisible.

Both Vriska and the ghostly presence only had one poker chip. The chips moved to the center of the table all on their own. The game was on, and everything bet was contained in the two chips.

“…This seems a bit unfair…” Vriska muttered. “Can you go check ghosty’s cards for me?”

Pinkie gestured for Jotaro to do it. He walked nearer to the ‘ghost’s’ edge of the table, using Star Platinum to peak around the corner. “All the cards are blank.”

“I bet they won’t be once he lays them down…” Nova said.

“So, I’ve got trash cards,” Vriska said. “I get the impression that, if I fold here or walk away, I lose. I don’t want to know what losing entails in this house.”

“Definitely not,” Pinkie agreed, frantically looking around for something to help them – but the game parlor was devoid of any useful information.

“So…” Vriska took a breath. “I think this is five-card poker. I’ll be able to exchange any number of
cards I want once, and so will ghosty over there. Then we’ll show our hands. Usually there’s a lot of betting in the middle but since there are only two chips...” She curled up her fist. “Don’t like the odds on this one...”

Nova tried using her magic on the ghostly presence on the other side of the table. “I’m not interacting with anything there. Not even any magic around the cards. It just is. But also isn’t.”

Pinkie started rummaging through the bottles on the bar. “Aha! Got something. This label has words on it.” She brought the bottle of wine over, showing it to everyone.

*What if there was a perfect creature of horror?*

*One that existed purely to terrify.*

*One that could never be seen.*

*One that never did the same thing twice.*

They all turned to ‘look’ at the ghostly presence holding the cards.

“Definitely toying with us,” Vriska said, laughing bitterly. “I bet it’s cheating.”

“Probably,” Jotaro said, summoning Star Platinum. “Just play.”

Vriska kept her seven and her two – both of spades. She tossed the other three cards away. Nothing happened. “…Guess I have to draw from the deck myself.”

Pinkie knew Jotaro stopped time there for a moment, but there was no way anyone could have told. *Nothing* looked different – even he looked to be in the exact same position he had been in a moment ago.

Vriska drew three cards – and grinned. “Hell yeah.” All five of the cards were spades. A flush.

The ghostly presence threw out one card and drew another one.

Vriska laid her cards on the table. “Flush, invisible beast. Beat that.”

It did. The cards fell to the table, revealing four aces and a king.

Vriska’s confident grin fell. “Fu-”

The card table flipped end over end, moving to crush Vriska. Star Platinum punched it out of the way while Vriska rolled her dice. “EAT THIS!”

She rolled 1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1.

“I don’t know what I was expecting,” Vriska muttered. Her dice summoned a beautiful, blue sword – and then drove it through Vriska’s seven-pupil eye, tearing off the licorice rope and pinning her to a dartboard, the tip of the sword hitting the bullseye. Cobalt blood splattered over the wall and dripped to the ground below her.

She didn’t move.

“What the he-” Nova began – but the ghostly presence apparently wasn’t done. Another table came flying at the remaining three, punched away by Star Platinum before it hit them.
They heard it getting closer. There were sounds of scraping and harsh, scratchy breathing – but there were no visible scratch marks on the floor, and the sounds didn’t appear to have a direction to them.

Nova shot a pulse of magic in every direction, knocking all the tables over and breaking all the bottles in the bar. There was no sign of the creature, but they could still hear it getting closer.

“RUN!” Pinkie shouted, bolting out the exit door with Jotaro. Nova teleported to them, generating a shield to watch their backs. They came out into a theater – they could hear the sound of clapping, but there was nobody in the audience and there was nothing playing on the big screen.

The door behind them exploded, flying off its hinges and smashing right into Nova’s shield – but it held. “That means it has an actual location!” Nova shouted. “Running might actually be effective!”

“Or it’s just decided that it’s already done ‘gambling’ and ‘ambush’ horror, it’s time for the old fashioned chase,” Pinkie called back.

“At least it means its following rules we understand right now!” She fired magic bolts back at where the beast should have been, hitting nothing whatsoever. “Looks like all we can do is run!”

They reached the door on the opposite end of the theater, punching it open with Star Platinum. They found themselves in another hallway, but unlike the impossibly long one this hall was lit with gas lamps embedded in the walls, and they could see several doors on each side.

They didn’t waste time taking in the scenery. They kept running, trying to keep their distance from the gnashing, monstrous thing that was probably behind them. Probably.

But then they saw a door in front of them come flying off its hinges, spilling shadowy spiral patterns into the hall. A great screech met their ears, the sound a pig would have made if it had ingested a hawk and the bird was eating itself out of the meaty prison.

“STAR PLATINUM: THE WORLD!” Time stopped – and the motion of the shadows stopped with it. Jotaro pulled a hard left and smashed through a side door, pulling Nova and Pinkie with him. They didn’t flinch when time resumed – they ran alongside him.

The last door had come out of a towering, gray tree, dropping them off in the middle of a dark forest. The sky was starless, moonless, and blacker than black. Nova had to use her horn to light the way, giving everything an eerie blue tinge.

“Is this the forest from that picture?” Nova asked.

“Maybe. I don’t think the picture was of the forest though,” Jotaro said.

Pinkie nodded. “The picture was of that thing. That thing you can’t see but is definitely there.”

“It got Vriska. How did it do that!?” Nova shouted. “Vriska’s indestructible!”

“Clearly not,” Jotaro spat.

They heard a tree behind them fall over. Presumably from an impact with the thing.

“This is all some game to it…” Nova muttered.

“Maybe not,” Pinkie said, glancing behind them at nothing. “Maybe it’s like that note said. It’s the perfect creature of horror, existing only to terrify?”

“It’s really good at its job, then!” Nova shouted. “That doesn’t help us defeat it! Or escape it!”
“We need more information,” Jotaro said. “That girl, Emma, and her husband…”

“They’re definitely related,” Pinkie admitted. “I just don’t know how yet…”

Something made them stop for a moment. To their side was a giant redwood tree, lacking all its leaves. Cut out of the base of its trunk was the depression – lit by an amber light, the mirror within it, cracked in two places now. Pinkie, Nova, and Jotaro were in the same places they had been before – but now there was a photo on the crack where Vriska had been.

The photo was taken from top down, showing the sword’s tip in the dartboard and Vriska’s brutalized face. At her feet were her all-ones dice and cards, splayed to show the four aces she lost to.

“…She’s never going to make it home…” Nova said, voice hollow.

“How does it take those pictures?” Jotaro asked.

“I—” Pinkie was interrupted when something smashed into Nova’s shield with enough force to shatter it. The three of them took off running again, Nova sending out a pulse-shield – but the thing must have gone intangible again.

“It has to be solid to attack us,” Nova reported.

“That doesn’t make sense…” Jotaro said. “It wasn’t making markings on the floor, but it was making scratching noises.” He punched a tree with Star Platinum, knocking it over behind them. They heard the beast snap it in two behind them. “And it snapped that.”

“It’s only making the noises to scare us,” Pinkie said. “We need to remain calm.”

“Calm!?” Nova blurted. “If it’s only making the noises to scare us, that means it doesn’t have to actually bash through anything! It could show up and slit all our throats instantly!”

“It’s not going to do the same thing twice,” Pinkie said. “Right now it’s chasing.”

“Who’s to say it won’t mix it up again after we survive the chase?”

Nobody wanted to answer that question.

They continued to run through the midnight forest, a lack of doors presenting themselves.

“Shed!” Jotaro shouted, pointing at a large metal shed in the distance.

“Good eyes Jojo!” Pinkie called. “Do the thing!”

Jotaro pulled his hat down and nodded with determination. He pulled his fist back. “STAR PLATINUM: THE WORLD!”

The next thing Pinkie and Nova knew, they were inside the shed, a bookshelf knocked over to barricade the door behind them.

They heard the creature plow into the door – but it didn’t break through, it just dented the metal of the shed.

“That is not going to hold for long,” Jotaro said.

“Books!” Nova declared, lighting her horn – the entire shed was filled with shelves and shelves of
books. “We need to search this place as fast as possible.”

Pinkie nodded. “Jojo, barricading. Nova, find anything that actually has *words*.”

Jotaro nodded, continuing to dump all the books off of bookshelves and placing them against the door. He splintered a part of one of the shelves into a stake shape and drove it through the other shelf, connecting them.

The creature gave up pounding on the door and started pounding on the other walls of the shed, sending a metallic ringing throughout the shed’s interior. It made it rather hard for Nova and Pinkie to focus when it sounded like death itself was prowling on the other side of the walls.

“Found a way out!” Nova called, pointing at a trapdoor in the back of the shed. She pulled it open, revealing large stairwell leading deep into the earth, lit by dim lightbulbs.

“Good, but we need information,” Pinkie said, combing through more and more of the books. “Anything we can use! Because right now we’re completely screwed if we can’t find something to use against this thing!”

Nova scanned numerous books with her magic. “Nothing… Nothing… Nothing…”

The beast dented one of the walls almost to the point of breaking. Jotaro punched it back into shape and slid a bookshelf in front of it, but it clearly wasn’t going to hold long. …Or it would hold exactly as long as the presence wanted.

Jotaro walked over to them, sweating profusely. “Anything?”

“No…” Nova said, shaking her head. “Everything here is blank…”

“GOT IT!” Pinkie said, dropping a green book in between the three of them. It had a title – *Our Story*.

“That sounds promising.”

Pinkie nodded, opening it up and flipping to a page in the middle with a lot more words than what they’d seen previously.

> *Emma realized something today when working on Our Story.*

> *We didn’t have an explanation! It did things, it was scary, but there was no rhyme or reason.*

> *Of course the horror comes first, but there always needs to be something.*

> *It’s probably a presence from another world.*

> *Something that cannot actually ‘exist’ in the plane of us pathetic mortals.*

> *A purely mental presence.*

> *This could help us with the ending we’re struggling with so much.*

“That helps,” Nova said.

“Assuming this creature is the one he’s writing about,” Jotaro pointed out, trying to ignore the scraping coming from the other side of the far wall.
“I’m almost sure it is,” Pinkie said. “We’re stuck in this guy and Emma’s horror novel, that’s pretty clear now.”

“But why would bits of their writing of the novel be in their novel?” Nova said. “That doesn’t make much sense!”

“Clearly we don’t have the full picture. But that’s got to be a big piece.” Pinkie furrowed her brow. “A presence from another world… Can we use that?”

“None of our dimensional technology is working,” Jotaro said. “…This may explain why, but it does not help us.”

“Mental…” Nova said, eyes widening. “Hold on, crazy idea.” She gestured at the wall the creature was currently clawing at. “What if it really isn’t there? Like, it really can’t exist. Purely mental in nature, depending on our perceptions of it to do anything. It’s all us doing this to ourselves.”

Pinkie blinked. “That makes some sense… But do we have any real evidence of that?”

“Think about the way it’s gone after us. Flutterfree was trapped somewhere where she was alone, away from the rest of us. Vriska lost because of bad luck.” The beast banked into a wall, making Nova twitch. “And let’s just say I’m not doing so well in this current scenario.”

“It’s tailoring the horrors to us…” Jotaro realized.

“Bingo,” Nova said, “Which lends some credence to it feeding off our perceptions of it. …If it can be considered to actually exist, as this passage suggests it might not.”

Pinkie nodded. “Right… Right… but what exactly can we do about that?”

“I know mental conditioning spells,” Nova said. “I can convince myself it doesn’t exist. You two as well, if it works.” She lit her horn. “Here’s the plan. I convince myself it doesn’t exist – and then I go out there to see if it can do anything to me. If I’m fine, I’ll give the spell to you two and it won’t have anything it can do to us.”

“And if you aren’t fine?” Pinkie asked.

“Run down the trapdoor.”

Pinkie narrowed her eyes. “Nova, this sounds like we’re falling into a ‘noble sacrifice’ trap here. If you’re wrong – and it’s very likely you are – it’ll be your end!”

“I know,” Nova said, a tear rolling down her face. “But we have to know if this works or not. If it does, we win. If it doesn’t, I’ll try to escape. I can have a teleport ready the moment I go out there and condition myself to use it by instinct. Then we’ll all run.”

Pinkie put a hoof on Nova. “Nova… This isn’t going to work.”

Nova stared into Pinkie’s eyes. “Pinkie, I’m only going to ask this once. Answer it honestly. Pinkie promise me you will.”

Pinkie started crying. “Pinkie promise, I’ll tell you the truth.”

“Do you know that, or are you just guessing?”

Pinkie wiped her face. “…I’m just guessing. I don’t know for absolute sure. It… it seems really unlikely you’ll come back. It fits the current pattern of the story, i-”
“But you’re not sure,” Nova interrupted. “That’s all I need to hear.” She encased her head in a blue sphere of magic, clearing her mind of all belief in the creature. “Here goes nothing.” She teleported outside.

Pinkie and Jotaro noticed the scratching had stopped.

“Hey, creature feature!” Nova shouted. “Guess whaaat? You don’t exist! You were all in my head, and now you’re gone! I don’t hear any more noises!” They heard her laugh. “I’m just going to build a little table here and take a seat… I DON’T BELIEVE YOU EXIST! CHANGE MY MIND! I dare you.”

Nova was quiet for a moment. “No takers? Hrm? Nothing? Nothing at all? Not so much as a peep?”

Pinkie saw Jotaro’s posture relax. He thought Nova had won.

Pinkie didn’t believe that for a second.

“Looks like we’re in the clear guys. I’ll give it a minute or so. It’ll feel weird, having your own minds locked out by a spell, but I’m not going to use it to actually brainwash you. …Well it is brainwashing, but who in Equestria even cares at this point. Survival trumps free will, I always say. That’s how it works. At least in this case, …Holy cow I’m getting tired of talking. It’s making me nervous – and I don’t even think there’s danger out here! What is up with me? I’m just rambling on and o-”

There was a disgusting gushing noise and then a soft thud. Nova didn’t say another word. There was no teleport back into the shed.

Pinkie sighed. “…Knew it.”

Jotaro ground his teeth and pulled his hat as low as it would go.

“Jojo, let’s go. We need a new plan.” She slunked over to the trapdoor and flung it open. They both jumped into the stairway and shut the trapdoor behind them.

There were no noises of pursuit. The chase was over.

“It’s going to try something else,” Pinkie said as they descended. “It’ll get one of us with it, and it will be up to the last one to do something. I’m going to try as hard as I can to cheat us through this mess, but it’s clearly a narrative entity. It might be able to overrule me.” She checked the licorice bond between her and Jotaro, noticing the hole where Nova had been. “…It might even go after me next.”

“What do I need to do?”

Pinkie furrowed her brow. “You need t-” she paused. Instead of a door in the side of the stairwell, there was the amber-lit depression with the mirror that was now cracked in triplicate. Pinkie and Jotaro’s reflections were in the same places they always were. Nova’s picture showed her slumped against a tree, eyes wide open in absolute shock. Blood poured from a wound in her head where her horn should have been, dripping all the way down to the ground in miniature red waterfalls.

“Bastard…” Jotaro muttered.

“…You need to find Emma or the one who’s been writing these notes,” Pinkie said. “I’m thinking they’re here, somewhere. Those notes had to be written by someone, and this world seems based on their house. They might have the power to revert every bit of this if they just change their story.”
Jotaro nodded. “I won’t be able to ask nicely.”

“Duress does wonders for the creative process,” Pinkie spat.

Jotaro cracked his knuckles. “Good to hear.”

Pinkie looked at her hooves. “…I’m going to try to force us to the right place, Jotaro. Jump ahead through one of these doors just right to shift things. You know how I vanish behind objects, right?”

“Right.”

“I’m going to drag you with me,” Pinkie said. “Close your eyes. I won’t be able to do it if you see what’s happening.”

Jotaro closed his eyes. Pinkie picked him up and ducked behind a doorframe – appearing somewhere else entirely. Jotaro felt something as this happened – it was not a feeling he could put into words, nor was it a feeling he would be able to remember for long. It was not meant for him.

Pinkie nudged his face, telling him he could open his eyes. But she put a hoof to his mouth, telling him to be quiet.

They were in a bedroom. There was no light, but somehow they could see as if there was a moon out the pitch-black window. The room was clean and bare of most all decorations. The king-sized bed was veiled with drapes – and they could see a female form resting through the translucent cloth.

Pinkie’s mind went into overdrive.

On one hoof, investigating the creepy person sleeping in the bed was a definite way to bite the dust in any horror movie of any kind. It was bound to end badly.

On the other hoof, there may have been something in there they needed to help them. For all they knew, the form was Emma.

…it probably was Emma, come to think of it. They had yet to see any actual entities other than themselves in this universe. The creature was always invisible…

They had to check it out. But they needed to do it safely.

Pinkie nudged Jotaro, making a heaving motion with her body he knew meant to summon Star Platinum. He did, and used the stand to pull the bed’s veil down.

Emma was on the bed, hands folded across her chest. She was wearing a green dress identical to one they had seen in several of the pictures. Clutched in her hands was a yellow post-it note, tinged brown by the dusty nature of her skin. Her hands were skeletal, and her face in a hyper-advanced state of decay. There weren’t any eyes.

She had been dead a long time. And yet, she didn’t stink, despite the clear evidence of advanced decomposition.

“She’s not going to be of any help,” Jotaro observed.

Star Platinum grabbed the post it note and held it at arm’s length.

*Emma is gone.*

*I’ve burned the manuscript.*
Pinkie’s left eye twitched. “…Ponyfeathers.”

Jotaro grabbed his hat. “Yare yare daze…”

“That really doesn’t bode well…” Pinkie muttered. “We need to find him. He’s got to be here somewhere…”

Jotaro turned around to face the window. The moment he did so the window swung open inward. He felt dozens of ghostly hands grab his body and try to pull him in. “NANI!!?”

Pinkie knew this trick – if you looked behind yourself at the darkness, you would be taken as well.

“ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA!” Star Platinum shouted, finding that it couldn’t do anything to the spirited hands dragging Jotaro into the darkness.

What if I never look behind myself? Pinkie asked herself. Eh, worth a shot. She bounced backward, slamming into Jotaro’s back with her back.

“What th-”

“Shut up and trust me,” Pinkie said, grabbing hold of him by wrapping her hooves around him, making sure she kept facing away from the darkness of invisible hands. They couldn’t grab her – she never looked behind her. She tore Jotaro away from them – and the two of them went flying into the pitch black darkness, soon leaving sight of the impossibly lit window frame.

“…Now what?” Jotaro asked.

“Now, we fall until we hit something,” Pinkie said. “Duh.”

“I’m not going to survive that much of a fall.”

Pinkie pulled a parachute out of her mane and gave it to him. “Use this when you feel the time is right.”

The two of them continued to fall in the darkness.

“Do you think we left the area we were supposed to be in?” Jotaro asked.

“It’s possible,” Pinkie admitted. “I don’t really know though. I do know we won’t keep falling forever.”

They fell for a few more minutes.

“They’re gone,” Jotaro said.

“We’re going to be able to do something,” Pinkie said. “I knew we were never going to make it to the end together. But you don’t ever do this to more than one or two of your main characters unless you are at the end. This is too many. It’s not right. We’ll be able to fix it, somehow.”

“You sure?”

“About as sure as I was that Nova’s plan wasn’t going to work.”

Jotaro was silent. “…What do you know for sure?”
“That there will be a point when only one of us is left,” Pinkie said. “I’m completely certain of that now. It’s probably going to be me, since I had the center position on the mirror every time.”

Jotaro tensed.

“I know. It’s terrifying. It’s also exactly what the thing wants. To tap into a deep, primordial fear within everyone. The fear of being alone, of suffering by chance, of being hunted…” She blinked. “Of having hundreds of hands condemn you to hell, I guess?”

Jotaro sighed. “It was the way a villain was defeated. Yoshikage Kira.”

“I know. …Fear of being the bad guy, then?”

Jotaro nodded slowly.

“Well, with any luck we escaped your pure fear. It’ll probably have to try something else.”

Jotaro was silent.

A few moments later, Pinkie sighed. “Jotaro…”

“There’s no need to say anything or have a deep discussion,” Jotaro interjected. “We need to be on the tips of our toes in case something happens. We can talk later.”

Pinkie nodded. “Right.”

Two minutes later, Jotaro saw the light from a window. He activated the parachute, and they slid right in the tall, rectangular slat. As it turned out, there was no glass – it was the opening in a large observatory. They passed the cylindrical telescope that was larger than them, landing on the floor surrounding the impressive piece of machinery. Papers were strewn about – not a single one with any words on it, but numerous ones marked with stars and planets. Scientific data.

Pinkie started rooting through them. It didn’t take long for her to find the message this time.

_Emma always loved the stars._

_How come I can’t remember which one she loved the most…?_

_I know I’ll know it when I see it._

Pinkie wiped her eyes. “Their story… It’s so sad. Writing what might have been a masterpiece…”

She shook her head.

She moved on, deciding that note hadn’t given her any new information. She walked around the base of the telescope.

Fear shot through her when she saw what was on the back side of the telescope’s base.

The depression with the amber light and the mirror. With _four_ cracks in it, reflecting just _her_.

“Jojo?” Pinkie called, whirling around.

He was nowhere to be seen.

Pinkie ran up to the mirror, examining Jotaro’s picture closely. He had a sharp cut going right down his face, with blood squirting out of parts of the crack.
She took a few steps back, blinking. *What had happened?*

She forced her perceptions back a bit.

*Jotaro watched as Pinkie looked through the papers. She commented about how sad it all was – but then Jotaro felt time stop. Instinctually, he stopped it as well, allowing himself to move in the time stop of another entity.*

*He heard the movements of an age old enemy. He punched out with Star Platinum and then kicked.*

*The invisible being drove a fist into Star Platinum’s leg, forcing a crack in the Stand that ran all the way from the foot to the head, cutting across the face.*

*Just like how Jotaro had killed Dio.*

*He screamed – but no one could hear him inside stopped time. He exploded. Time did not resume until he had been cleaned up by the presence.*

Pinkie stopped looking back, gasping. She breathed heavily, glancing around in every direction, in extreme danger of entering complete panic and bolting for the nearest thing that looked like an exit.

But she kept her cool – she looked at herself in the mirror, her own bright blue eyes bringing a sense of clarity and stability to her.

All that remained was a reflection of Pinkie.

She allowed herself to grin like a psycho. “I guess it’s time to drop those inhibitions now! What’s there left to lose!??” She laughed bitterly, twirling a knife in her hooves. Tears rolled down her face in stark contrast to her mad *glee*. “Who’s ready for a round of *impossible*? I know I am! Some like to call it *maximum overponk*.” She pulled a miniature nuke out of her mane and irradiated the entire observatory. Had anything besides the observatory existed within five miles, it would have been vaporized into nothing as well.

Pinkie wasn’t there, of course. She was in a room with no entrances or exits – a perfectly cubical concrete enclosure with one desk. On this desk were a bunch of post-it notes, a cup full of pens, and a green book titled *Our Little Horror Story*. Sitting behind the desk was a man in a decent suit wearing glasses.

He was very dead. There were no wounds on his body or signs of decomposition, but there was no life in his eyes. It was as if his soul had just chosen to leave his body one moment and it had remained frozen in time after.

Pinkie cut off his head. “This is all your fault,” she muttered. “You don’t deserve any respect.”

The author of the horror she found herself in made no response. Not that he could if he wanted to.

Pinkie rummaged through the post it notes, finding the one with words rather quickly.

*I have come to realize there is an ending to the story…*

*It is death.*

*Death for all.*

*There is no escape from the horror of the world.*
Why should there be an escape from the horror in fiction?

An author should never lie.

I wish our creation would come for me.

A poetic way for Our Story to have meant something...

“And you got what you wished for because you were a fucking Prophet and now you’ve made this!” Pinkie spread her hooves wide. “I have no idea how many explorers have found this place and died to your perfect creature of horror! Probably hundreds! Maybe even thousands! This universe could be ancient for all I know!” She bucked the headless body in the chest, throwing it to the ground. “Because of your stupid wish your creation is unstoppable. Thanks, buddy.”

She moved to the last object on the desk – the book. Our Little Horror Story. She realized with anger that it was the story she was a part of right now – the very words were appearing in it as she was made aware of them. For any other person trapped in this mess, the knowledge contained within would have been immensely useful.

But she already knew it all. Nothing appeared in the book that she didn’t already see with her Awareness.

There hadn’t been anything useful here. She pulled a bomb out of her mane and shoved it into the corpse’s chest. It detonated, taking the whole room with it.

Pinkie appeared somewhere she chose this time. The crystal Castle of Friendship. Of course it wasn’t the real thing – it was just a facsimile she forced the bizarre universe they were in to provide her with. “I’m done letting you dictate what happens,” she muttered, juggling her impossibly sharp knife in one of her hooves. “I’M READY, YOU KNOW!”

No response.

Pinkie grinned. “Is it possible you’re scared of me? That’s good, because you should be. I’m the one kind of being that could stop you. I have powers like your own. You were born of a Prophet’s desire for perfection. I can break the rules that allow for your perfection.” She tapped the walls of the castle. “See this castle? It’s not your world. It’s mine. I’m going to find a way to take you out. And then I’m going to bring everyone back. Somehow. Because that’s how things work, creature.”

She laughed. “You were designed to be the perfect horror creature. I was designed to be Pinkie Pie. Let’s see who’s better.”

And then she wasn’t in the Castle of Friendship anymore.

She was standing on a field of bones, every single bone covered in bloody confetti.

Pinkie raised an eyebrow. “So what if I killed all these people? Are you trying to make me feel guilty?” She laughed. “My worst fear is that my friends will hate me. And you can’t generate other living entities for me to interact with. All you do is create places and invisible forces. You can’t bring Twilight here.” She threw her knife at seemingly nothing – and hit.

“Yeah, that’s right! I can hit you! See, there’s a very logical reason why I can do that.” She threw another knife and hit it again. “Screw you, that’s why.”

She heard it charge her. “Oh, what’s that? You can’t take damage?” She pulled a health bar out of nowhere and hit the creature with it, the red ‘life’ of the meter pouring out of it like blood. “Oh wait,
yes you can. Because I don’t care about the consequences anymore. Isn’t that fun?"

She dodged an attack from it purely by instinct, ramming her back hooves into it. The creature felt like nothing, but it was at least solid. It screeched incomprehensibly.

Pinkie produced her warhammer, swinging it like it weighed nothing, pummeling the creature around the sea of bones like a croquet ball. “Who needs to see when you have the Pinkie Sense? Absolutely nobody.” To prove her point, she tied a pink blindfold around her eyes with extra hooves she definitely didn’t have. Everything was dark.

Which was closer to the truth of the situation than anything else.

She tossed her warhammer away and went for a machine gun, riddling the creature with bullets. She tore through reality so she could kick at it from the inside. She became rubber when it lashed at her, bouncing right off. She brought out the bomb mask, exploding, and then tossing a mini-nuke at the creature, which she was conveniently unaffected by.

She grinned.

She was winning.

The moment those words were written in her mind red flags and alarms went off everywhere in her mindscape.

That was almost always what was said just before someone lost a fight.

She tore off the blindfold, taking several steps back. She wasn’t in the boneyard anymore – she was in a pure white expanse. She didn’t take time to register this – she just pulled the most ridiculous move she possibly could.

She reached into the future and grabbed the photo the creature was going to take of her.

It showed her in a white expanse, cut in half at the midsection, tongue hanging out indignantly.

She twisted her body away and cheated through existence.

She appeared in the living room they had started in.

There was a huge gash across her stomach. She wasn’t cut in half – but she definitely wouldn’t be able to survive from a wound of that size.

“…No…” she said, forcing herself, to her knees. “No, no this can’t be happening! I cheated only to trade out instant death for a slow and painful one? What the hell kind of chapter is this!?” She stared at the completely normal-colored blood on her hooves.

…Why in the name of Celestia was the color of her blood important enough to bring attention to?

And then Pinkie understood what was going on.

“That’s… cruel…” she muttered. “Stupid… stupid… STUPID!” She forced herself to stand up and walk through the only open door into the dark hallway, the blood gushing out of her wound onto the hall below. It wasn’t long before she couldn’t see anything.

She lost most the strength in her legs, finding herself unable to walk. So she crawled, dragging her body along the smooth hallway floor, bloodying the surface she slid on.
She realized blood made a good lubricant.

What a stupidly absurdly amusing observation to have at a time like this.

…She knew that all she ever could have done here was delay. Delay, delay, delay. This was always how it was going to end. There was never anything she could have done. The creature was designed too well. The twist was just too much for her to compensate for. It was all… all just beyond her, even as Pinkie Pie.

She lost track of time. Which was probably a good thing, because it allowed her to live longer than she otherwise should have. She was cheating reality right up to the end.

She eventually reached her goal, a scarcely living husk of a pony.

The amber-lit depression with the mirror stood before her. There were only four cracks in the mirror with four photos. Her reflection in the middle remained uncracked, standing in defiance at what was supposed to be.

Pinkie tore up the photo of herself being cut in half. She had at least denied the creature what it had wanted to do to her.

She forced herself to stand on her back legs. She slammed her bloody front hooves onto the wall above the mirror, jostling the entire display. She breathed heavily, blood no longer pouring quickly from her gaping stomach wound. She felt lightheaded.

She’d only lasted this long because she was Pinkie Pie. She wouldn’t be able to draw it out much longer.

What was she even doing?

She started crying. She frantically moved her front hooves around, flying in every which direction. Slamming the wall in anger, screaming at the loss. The emptiness. The horror.

She lost her bout of last-minute energy. She slumped to the ground, the darkness closing around her vision.

She turned herself over, making sure she was sitting, rather than lying awkwardly on her stomach. The mirror was over her head, the light illuminating the empty hallway in front of her.

“…Remember me,” she said to seemingly no one, the life draining from her eyes. The blue orbs remained open, staring into the abyss long after she let out her last breath.

There was silence in the universe of the perfect horror creature. It continued its prowl, waiting for new victims…

Until then, it would ensure there was complete silence in its realm.

There would not be a single noise.

At least until the next visitor came…

…

…A portal opened up in front of the depression in the hall. Pinkie Pie was still there, the blood that
had pooled around her still fresh.

The Pinkie Pie who poked her head through the portal gasped. “Oh my…”

There was a message written in Pinkie’s blood above the mirror.

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Don’t let the portal close.} \\
&\text{Leave before it gets you.} \\
&\text{DESTROY THIS UNIVERSE.} \\
&\text{~Another Pinkie Pie.}
\end{align*}
\]

“Holy fuck…” Vriska said, poking her head through the portal. “What horror story went down here…?”

“One you were involved in,” Nova said, pointing at the picture of Vriska on the mirror.

“…Wait, seriously?” Vriska stared. “Woah, other versions of myself are really rare.” She examined the picture using her vision eightfold. “…Man, rolled all 1s? That sucks. …Too bad for her, I’m the only one of us with luck powers. No other Vriskas played Sburb and lived.”

“Other me’s missing my screen,” Nova observed. “And… yeah, these people weren’t us.”

“…It’s still horrible,” Flutterfree said, her face that of pain. “…A team very close to our own went here, and all of them… They…”

“It wasn’t pointless,” Jotaro said, leaning in. “They left a message. We’ll heed their warning.”

“Jotaro, can we destroy this universe?” Flutterfree asked.

“Maybe,” Pinkie said. “If we have the capability, we wouldn’t just let anybody know. …I’ll tell Eve it needs to be done, and not ask any more questions.”

“…All right.” Flutterfree shuddered. “Can we close the portal now? It’s… making me uncomfortable.”

Pinkie nodded. “Right. …Let’s not go adventuring today. Consider this a bad omen.” She closed the portal, sealing off the horror creature’s existence once again.

Its days were limited.

The sights of such a horrifying scene would stay with the Primary Team of Merodi Universalis for about a week – but they would move on. They had seen more gruesome scenes of war. It was uncanny that the five they had seen were people so close to them – but weren’t quite them. They were reminded of their own mortality for a time, but eventually the sight would be pushed to the back of their mind, rarely to be thought about.

Even Pinkie wouldn’t remember, and she had been able to go back and watch the whole thing. It would just be another horror she experienced through her knowledge.

Corona would provide the equations necessary to force the universe into destabilization a few days later. It would take a few more days for the process to complete, but eventually the universe would fall into nothing, taking the creature with it.
It would never take any other stray travelers. The curse brought into existence by a mourning Prophet would end, forever.

And then nobody would remember the mysterious team that lost their lives in the universe controlled by the monster of perfect horror. Because they were never the heroes. They were just another expendable group traveling the cosmos.
Corona was aware of the color orange. She had an inkling feeling that the color was fluffy, but didn’t bother to question how a color could be fluffy. She couldn’t even really feel anything either.

But she wasn’t bothered by that. She wasn’t bothered by anything at all – she felt at peace.

She didn’t try to think about anything more, but more images came into her mind anyway, though every sensation was dulled. The orange consolidated itself into the long, slender leaves of a tree species Corona had never seen before.

Apparently she was sitting down, leaning on the tree, and experiencing serenity in the process. The sky before her was a muted pink, and the ground of an orange similar to the tree itself. She couldn’t see the trunk and didn’t even think to turn her head to have a look.

Everything was muddled and… perfect. She became aware that she wasn’t alone – Lady Rarity was sitting next to her, looking onward with a peaceful expression. Neither of them had a care in the world.

Corona was vaguely aware that her hand was in Lady Rarity’s mane. Was she scratching her behind the ears? She had no idea. Probably not, since Lady Rarity wasn’t the type to appreciate that sort of thing.

But the depths of those thoughts were for someone with more of their wits about them than Corona currently had. She moved back to not realizing Lady Rarity was there, allowing the orange to take over once again…

But something brought her to full attention. A metallic blue fly landed on her hand. Unlike every other sensation, which had been muted and distant, she felt the sharp tips of the fly’s legs dig into her skin. How was that even possible?

The fly left, but Corona could still feel it, and she slowly gained full awareness of her hand. The muddled sensation that might have been a limb solidified itself, becoming a working mixture of bones, muscle, skin, and fabric with a crystal on it.

The rest of her body came next, allowing her to not only feel the awkward position her wings were currently in, but the roughness of the bark against them. How had she even been calm like this? The bark was beyond itchy… Though something about it didn’t feel quite right, even though her feathers were normal as could be.

She realized her other hand was scratching Lady Rarity behind the ear – and the spirid was purring. Corona retracted the hand instantly, staring at it like a traitor. She fearfully glanced at Lady Rarity, hoping she hadn’t triggered a spirid predatory response.

She didn’t even register that Corona had left. How unlike her.

How unlike me to not care that I’m sitting under a strange, orange tree. She stood up, noticing that the orange ground gave way slightly as she pushed on it. She stepped around a bit, finding it completely solid now that she was up. She could see grains of sand and rocks in it now.

Were those even there before? Corona wondered, trying to remember. But she couldn’t – she
couldn’t remember what happened before the orange. How had she even gotten here?

She turned to examine the tree – definitely not one she had ever seen before. It had a single trunk made out of numerous rigid plates of bark that led up to an umbrella of orange, heavily veined leaves.

She lifted a hand to her eyes, scanning the scenery. She found that everything was blurred and mysterious – until she bothered to focus on it, at which point similar trees would fill her vision. Except in one spot where an ancient statue stood, collecting moss all over its humanoid figure.

“What the…” Corona said. When she formed the first ‘w’, her voice had a hollow feel to it, but by the time the last breath of ‘the’ came out, she realized her voice was the only substantial noise she was even hearing.

The moment she realized this the normal ‘forest sounds’ began to fill her ears – birds chirping, leaves rustling… But she was sure those noises hadn’t been there before.

Her voice had been enough to grab Lady Rarity’s attention. “Hm…? What…?” She yawned. “Mmmm… Some nap.”

“Rarity, how did we get here?” Corona asked.

“Well, you see, we…” Lady Rarity’s four eyes blinked, out of sequence with each other. “I… don’t know…” She put a hoof to her head, furrowing her brow.

“Something’s happened,” Corona said, taking a look around. “…What was our last mission?”

“Eggs. I think…”

Corona nodded. “Right, that world with the talking vegetables… We took care of the egg problem… and came back… I remember coming back.”

“You’re ahead of me,” Lady Rarity said, blinking slowly. She squinted her eyes. “Why’s everything so fluffy?”

“Then I hung out with Olivia for a bit… Then I came home and… and…” Corona snapped her fingers a few times – the first time not producing a noise. “Nothing after that. It’s all murky images of orange and… blue before that?”

“I feel like I should be really concerned…” Lady Rarity commented. “But… I’m not? I don’t know… I feel safe even though we’ve probably been abducted or something…”

“How can you be calm!?” Corona blurted.

“…Don’t know,” Lady Rarity said. “You’re getting really fuzzy…”

“Fuzzy? What do y-” Corona stopped short. Lady Rarity was gone. Corona had been looking right at her and somehow didn’t see her vanish… There was a ‘blur’ in the memory when she was there, and then she wasn’t. “What in the fresh crocodile stew is going on…?”

She looked at Raging Sights – realizing with some horror that the crystals on the backs of her hands weren’t Raging Sights. They were just… crystals. With magic in them. No intelligence. She slowly felt something form within the crystals as she thought about this, but she didn’t give it time to complete itself.
She placed her hands together and lit her horn, both her ears twitching uncontrollably. She sent out a magic spell designed to locate Raging Sights.

All it did was make her wake up in her bedroom. It was the middle of the night on Lai.

*You called?* Raging Sights said in her mind.

“Through the dream, I guess,” Corona said, sitting up with a hand to her forehead. “I’m not prone to sleep-casting, am I?”

*It’s happened a few times.*

Corona shook her head. “Must’ve been quite the dream I was having. Everything was so clear.”

*You usually remember your dreams.*

“It was more than that… I was able to realize certain sensations were missing, and then the dream slowly built them into itself. Lady Rarity was there, and an orange tree. It was… oddly calm until I started thinking we’d been abducted or something.”

Raging Sights had no further comment.

Corona stretched her arms and wings. “Welp, back to sleep. Maybe there’ll be another weird dream.”

She heard something explode less than a block away.

Corona sighed inwardly. “Or there’ll be a crisis I have to deal with.” She got up and summoned her dress. “Here we go again…”

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“Emperor Palpatine!” Lady Rarity shouted, charging into the throne room of the Death Star II with Corona on her back. “Your dishonorable ways have come to an end!”

The ancient man stood up from his throne, the intense wrinkles on his skin lagging slightly behind the rest of his body, only adding to his inherent unsettling appearance. He glared at them with his sunken eyes. “I may only have learned of you two earlier today, but in these handful of hours you have proven to be more of a nuisance than both the rebellion and the Jedi! But your string of luck has come to an end!” He lifted his hand. “You cannot understand the power of the Dark Side that flows within me. I…”

Corona’s snore pierced the Emperor’s words and reverberated through the open chamber enough to make Lady Rarity flinch.

Corona herself had her head hung back and mouth wide open, drool slowly seeping out of the corners of her mouth.

Lady Rarity nudged her with an armored leg, waking her up. “Justice rains from above!” she blurted. “Corona, you’ve been tired all day, what’s wrong?”

“Corona, you’ve been tired all day, what’s wrong?”

Corona rubbed her eyes. “Ugh… Got woken up by some silly dream and then had to stop a serial killer who liked explosives…”

“A dream? Huh, must be going around. I had a strange dream of my own last night. Did I tell you about that?”
Corona shook her head. “Nooope.”

“Well, you were there, and there was this orange tree… And that’s about all I can remember besides a deep feeling of needing to be panicked about something.”

Corona shot bolt upright, fully awake for the first time in hours. “That is the exact same dream I was having. But I can remember a lot more. The statue?”

“…There was a statue?”

“In the distance.”

“…Not drawing up anything in the distance at all.”

“Ex-CUSE me?” Palpatine blurted.

“Shh, more important things being talked about,” Corona said, holding out a finger.

“Shared dreams are not more important than the fate of the galaxy, fools!” Palpatine shouted, holding out a hand. It crackled with electricity. “Let me show you how important the Dark Side is compared to even that!”

Corona snapped her fingers. A magic ring appeared in front of Palpatine and engulfed him in a holy, purging beam of light. He fell back, defeated in one fell swoop.

“Shared dreams… I hear Luna can do those,” Lady Rarity offered.

“She wasn’t there,” Corona assured her. “This was something else… Maybe my empathy was acting out, or something.”

“Reached out to me?” Lady Rarity smiled. “Touching.”

Corona rubbed the back of her head. “I guess I do spend more time with you than anyone else at this point.”

A sad expression crossed Lady Rarity’s face. “…It’s just us, after all.”

Corona nodded slowly before shifting the conversation back on track. “Regardless, we were in the same dream together, and it wasn’t a natural shared dream either. Dreams are never that ‘solid’ unless something’s going on in your head.”

“Spend a lot of time dipping into dreams do you?”

“Conscious mindscapes are similar,” Corona said. “And yes, I can tap into dreams. I’ve done it before. It’s not as easy though, and can be more than a little… unpleasant. If I tap into someone’s dreams I adjust to become part of their dream. However depraved and disturbing it may be.”

“…I vaguely remember you using it a few times.”

Corona shrugged. “Nowadays Raging Sights can do most of the work for me. Rarely need to rely on my empathy alone for anything. The two artifacts are basically fused at this point.”

“The complexities of Corona’s many powers,” Lady Rarity noted with a smile. “Sometimes I wonder why you even keep me around. You can do everything I can do and more.”

“You’re still the boss, Rarity.”
“You know I’m not. This has been an equal partnership for a long time now.”

Corona smiled softly. “Then we’re here together because I need a second opinion. And because you’re good company. And because spiders are awesome. And because, let’s face it, you’re actually better at controlling your impulses than I am.”

Lady Rarity snorted. “I suppose. A-”

Red light began to blare all across the Death Star II.

“Ooooh, right, they’re blowing it up.” Corona glanced at her watch. “We needed to be out of here two minutes ago.”

“Lovely,” Lady Rarity deadpanned. “Plan?”

Corona encased them in a red magic shield, reinforcing it with a dozen magical circles. “There.”

“…Or we could just translate out of the universe.”

Corona blinked. “There’s another reason you’re here. You’re more practical than I am. Common sense. Sometimes I lack it.”

“…Only sometimes?”

Corona chuckled, spinning up her dimensional spell. “Well, almost all the time, bu-”

The Death Star II exploded, sending the little ball of magic, spirid, and alicorn-human into the void of space at high velocity.

Lady Rarity growled from the weight of her armor. “…Couldn’t have moved a little faster?”

“Hey! You were distracting me!”

“…Very well. I apologize for keeping you from executing an escape.”

“You’re way too chivalrous.”

“That was sarcasm, dear.”

Corona blinked. “Oh.”

“I believe that’s what one calls ‘a win’, correct?”

Corona smirked. “Yeah.”

~~~

“All right, Raging Sights! Watch my sleep patterns tonight, scan for… well, anything really. We’re going to see if this was a one-night thing.”

Any sleep spells?

“Nope, going into this standard sleep-style. Won’t be too hard to fall asleep, been tired all day.” She crawled into her bed, spread her wings slightly into a position where she was comfortable, and set her head on the pillow.

She then went through the agonizing realization that trying to fall asleep was perhaps the most
difficult thing in existence.

The trick to falling asleep without any sort of medication or magic is simple: don’t think about it.

The problem with the mind is that when you tell it to not think about something, it goes into overdrive thinking about every possible aspect relating to that thing. Every conceivable mental connection.

“…I just lost the Game,” Corona muttered, keeping her eyes closed.

_I have as well, and set a message to a random contact from a secondary email to ensure the cycle is perpetuated._

A smile came to Corona’s lips as her thoughts drifted away from sleep and onto stupid games, then to board games, then to Pinkie’s latest party where they’d all tried to play ‘Race for the Galaxy’ and ended up creating ‘Race for the Multiverse’ over the course of the evening. It hadn’t been as weird as their Ogres and Oubliettes game though… Eve had taken creatures and rules from Celestia-knows how many different systems and ran their characters into the ground.

They should start that up again. They knew enough people that knew how to play to get a good, long campaign going. Eve’s schedule was a bit much for that, but Pinkie was a good Game Master. …_G. M. Blackjack._ Corona wondered if that was some kind of clever joke. Probably was, knowing how her life seemed to be an unending string of amusing anecdotes…

_Oh would you look at that, I’m sitting under the orange tree again,_ Corona thought to herself, the world of the dream snapping into ‘reality’ around her. She realized all the ‘details’ that had been filled in before were still there – the solid dirt, the orange leaves, the trunk… Lady Rarity was there, but she wasn’t leaning against the tree, she was staring into the distance.

Corona did the same – and realized it had changed from last time. It wasn’t an orange forest, it was a dark one Corona didn’t recognize, filled with giant spider webs. No matter how much Corona squinted her eyes, she couldn’t get the forest to become fully real – she could force a leaf to come into full form here, and a few bits of webbing, but the forest itself was too much.

“Hey… Rarity? Is that yours?”

Lady Rarity blinked, turning to her. “It’s where I live, if that’s what you mean. A-” A spark of realization hit in her eyes. “Oh. …I’m dreaming, aren’t I?”

“What gave it away?”

“You. Talking to me. Next to an orange tree that didn’t exist in my home forest.” She stretched her hooves out. “So yes, that forest is my home. Or where I was born, at least.”

“…Doesn’t it look wrong to you?”

“It’s exactly as I remember it.”

Corona walked up to a tree and rubbed her hand on nondescript bark. “You must not remember it that clearly then. It’s all a big blur for me. I can see trees and webs and… Well that’s about it. The rest is dramatically inconsistent.”

Lady Rarity put a hoof to her head. “Slow down a bit… You’re saying so much and it’s being drowned out.”
“By what?”

She blinked slowly. “It’s like my mind doesn’t want to process this much, or something? If that makes sense?”

Corona put a hand to her chin. “It’s possible my mind is just more prepared for dealing with higher resolution dreams…”

“I knew you were secretly arrogant about your intelligence under that smile of yours.”

Corona rolled her eyes. “Perhaps…”

Lady Rarity’s focus drifted away from Corona and into the forest. “…Last time we were here, I felt at rest. I… I don’t feel that right now.”

“Mind if I take a look?” Corona asked, de-summoning her glove.

“…Can you even do that in a dream?”

“Might as well find out.” Corona tapped Lady Rarity’s forehead and felt the expected rush of emotion – fear and dread above all, and confusion about where those feelings were coming from. Her memories consisted of a few angry images of her mother – quite the vicious spirid – and the darkness of the forest.

Corona’s heart started beating rapidly. “Ah yes… fear. Never did like absorbing that…”

“Oh! Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I only got a small taste.” She summoned her glove back on. “So… Bad memories of home?”

“You know what spirids are naturally like.”


“Yes.” She shook her head. “Even though I know this is a dream I can’t make the images go away…”

“It’s like trying to fall asleep. Think about it too hard and it won’t go away.”

Lady Rarity nodded slowly. “But try thinking about something else…” She narrowed her eyes, thinking deeply.

Corona watched in amazement as Lady Rarity’s armor appeared around her. “…Cool.”

“It is just a dream. You have some control,” Lady Rarity said, marching into the forest.

“…Rarity?”

“I’m going to go deal with whatever’s waiting for me in here. I-”

Lady Rarity’s mother jumped out of the forest, three times larger than a spirid was supposed to be. The brown, hairy mare with a ragged red mane hissed. In an instant, Lady Rarity was no longer in her armor, but was a cutie-markless filly cowering in fear from her mother’s horrendous roar.

The mother kicked Lady Rarity – she screamed in panic and vanished from the dream.
Adrenaline response will wake you right up, Corona noted. Curiously, I’m riding her fear right now and just got a similar spike. Why am I not waking up?

Lady Rarity’s mother turned to Corona.

Follow up question – why isn’t her dream vanishing now that she’s awake?

Lady Rarity’s mother charged.

Since it was a dream, Corona felt justified dropping a nuke on the place. She activated her magic and unleashed enough energy to level a small city.

…Except she didn’t. All she did was disrupt the nearby mental images, forcing everything to vanish into puffy nothingness.

Of course magic doesn’t work properly in a dream. What exactly was I thinking?

The puffy nothingness slowly reformed into another image – one of the Hub. People were walking to and from every location, but Corona didn’t need to look at all to know that the people were just shadows of the real thing – mindless drones conjured up by her dreaming consciousness.

She looked at the crystals on her hands, feeling them for magic. They felt perfectly fine to her now – and she even had Raging Sights.

I’m probably not real, you know, Raging Sights said. Will confirm once you wake up.

Corona shrugged. “Fun times ahead…” She placed her hand on a nearby wall. Instead of trying to blow it up with magic, she just willed it gone. She wasn’t aware of when the wall vanished, but it did.

“Wonder if I could do this in normal dreams if I was this aware…” Corona pursed her lips. “So many questions… I hope you’re getting lots of data.”

As far as I know I am.

“You’re a lot less helpful when you’re just a mental extension of me.”

Indeed.

Corona opted to ignore the voice of the false Raging Sights and just walked around. She noticed that most of the buildings in the Hub were nondescript – so of course they suddenly had signs, billboards, and names. She walked past a bookseller. She didn’t even bother to look at who the seller was, so they might as well have not had a face at all. She flipped open one of the books. For a moment, the pages were blank – and then filled with absolute gibberish.

But if she started from the first page and kept turning, the book was a cohesive whole…

“Absolutely bizarre,” she commented, a smile on her face.

She walked through a doorway.

She was standing on a rocky outcropping a little ways away from an ocean. She knew there had been an ‘in-between’ time where she was moving through the doorway and not on this rocky outcropping, but she couldn’t remember it. …Though there may not have been anything to remember.
“AHAAHAHA! I AM THE MELON LORD!” Toph shouted in a voice Corona hadn’t heard in a long time – that of a twelve-year-old girl. She turned to see Toph throwing flaming boulders at her old friends, training them for the battle against the Fire Lord. …The battle that Eve would interrupt shortly before it concluded, but that was only in the real world. This was just a dream.

Corona would say it was probably Toph’s dream, since she was the brightest of all the people she saw moving. Everyone else was reactionary to her, her smile, and her eyes.

…Her eyes.

“…Holy Celestia,” Corona said, hand to her mouth. Those were not the eyes of a blind girl – those were the eyes of a healthy girl who could see vibrant shades of every color.

Corona spread her wings and dropped down next to Toph. “How’s it look?” she asked.

The scene changed. Toph was in her crown and royal armor, though still with working eyes. “It looks beautiful,” Toph said, grabbing Corona by the arms and starting to dance. “Every motion… every twist…”

Corona felt more than a little awkward. “Uh… Right.” She twirled away, stumbling as she did so. But Toph was so lost in the dream she didn’t even notice the awkwardness. She just kept dancing – this time a man coming in to take her arms. He looked about as generic as any ‘hot guy’ Corona had seen in dreams before. His features were a bit more defined around the feet than most… But that was Toph for you.

“Hey, Toph,” Corona said, snapping her fingers. “Can you realize this is a dream?”

“…Dream?” Toph said, glancing around. Her eyes began to cloud and the world darkened. “…Sure. I can… But why?” Colors shot back into existence and Toph was sitting on a beach, young, but not a child. “Everything’s so bright…”

“We can fix your eyes, you know,” Corona offered. “If you really want them this badly.”

Toph looked at her in confusion. “…Fix my eyes? What’s wrong with them? And why do you have wings?”

Corona put a hand to the bridge of her nose. Clearly, some people are better at dealing with dreams than others. “Nevermind. You’ve told me you’d lived with it most of your life, you can live with it longer if you need to.”

Giant eyeballs appeared all around Corona. “Live with what?” Toph asked, sitting inside one of the eyeballs, staring right at her.

Holy haloes she’s creepy when she makes eye contact. “Uh… Why don’t we go back to being the melon-lord?”

“AHAAHAHAH!” Toph shouted, launching a meteor from the sky at the ground. “BOW BEFORE THE LORD OF MELONS!”

Corona shrugged. She’d seen worse things inside other people’s heads. She moved on, walking until the location shifted again. She came across Flutterfree sitting in a tree, eyes closed, mouth curled up into a deep smile.

“Hey Flutterfree, do y-"
“Yes, I know this is a dream.” Flutterfree responded. “Lolo never lets me have regular dreams. I’m aware of every last one.” She yawned. “I’m taking this moment to have a rest, if you don’t mind.”

Corona blinked. “…You’ve had shared dreams before?”

Flutterfree sighed, lazily opening one of her eyes. “No. But my mind regularly tries to upset what dream I want, so…” She closed her eye again. “I know you’re real, don’t worry. But I… am just going to let it wash over me…” She let out a content sigh.

Corona quietly walked away until the scenery changed again. This dream is cross-universal… Weird… I’ll have to see if there’s a substantial drain on my magic when I wake up…

She passed through numerous dreams of numerous people. The first few were of people she knew – Jotaro dreaming of dinner with his family, Nova taking Starburst on a trip through space… …Corona actually had no idea whose dream that was.

“Heeeey!” a pink potion seller yelled. “Want to buy a potion?”

Corona blinked. “…Seskii?”

“Wanna buy a potion?” she kept yelling. …Clearly it wasn’t directed at Corona, but really at anyone who would listen. Corona decided she didn’t want a dream potion and just kept walking.

As time wore on, Corona found random dreams. There was an Arcei who dreamed he had his arcs back, and was terrified enough by their appearance to wake up instantly. There was a man who dreamed of flying. There was a woman who dreamed of much less innocent things. A pegasus who had a nightmare turn into a story where he was celebrated as the hero of all. A Twilight who kept running through blank white doors that led to different worlds, wailing “I thought it was over!” Clearly a nightmare about something in her past.

There was even a strange, pink puff-ball creature that kept inhaling creatures and copying their primary abilities. It - he? - kept devouring more and more creatures until he ended up being EVERY creature. Which just made him become his normal self. He laughed and started eating again.

The sights were curious and all, but getting a bit predictable. Some of them showed some awareness of the dream, but even those who were lucid and actively manipulating their environment weren’t quite there. Flutterfree had been the closest to Corona’s awareness, but Corona also knew she wasn’t doing quite the same thing.

Corona had come across something special, unique.

“If only I knew how I did this,” Corona muttered, stepping into a dream that was fully dark.

“I HATE CHASE BOULDERS!” Jenny shouted, running past Corona – a large sea urchin rolling across the murky ground toward her. Jenny took a sharp left, and the spiked globe followed.

Corona shrugged. Interesting nightmare, but nothing all that spectacular. She summoned a rock from her mind and sat on it, watching Jenny run in circles through the dark murk. Mildly amusing.

She soon turned to the dark murk the entire dream was made out of – black, oily, but it also collected into clods in her hands. Now, is this what it actually feels like, or just what my mind is telling me it should feel like?

Man, she was bored. In a land of infinite dreams, and she was bored.
“I’ve gotcha!” a Twilight’s voice blurted.

Corona looked up to see a purple unicorn jump out of… she wasn’t sure where, but the unicorn was jumping. She lit her horn, sending out a blast of magic that reduced the spiked boulder to blurry blobs of color.

Jenny kept running. A new urchin appeared behind her and kept chasing.

“…She must really be stuck in this nightmare…” the Twilight observed.

“I’ll say,” Corona said.

“Yeah, yea-” the Twilight blinked. “Wait, you’re actually here?”

“So are you. Apparently.”

The Twilight gasped. “Ohmygosh I thought I was the only one wandering these dreams!”

Corona smirked. “Same. Corona Shimmer, Merodi Universalis.”

“Uh… I go by Sparkler when I have to, Sparkle Census.” She rubbed her hooves together. “I’m not going crazy!”

“Wouldn’t go that far,” Corona said. “After all, we might need to be insane to travel dreams like this.”

“Oh… Well it’s still interesting.” Sparkler tossed her mane back. “So… yeah. I have no idea what this place is or how it works. You?”

Corona shrugged. “I thought it might just be my empathy powers acting up, but your presence proves that wrong.”

Sparkler took a moment to process this. “Huh. Yeah, it does. Sorry for complicating things.”

“No problem. It tells me I’m not unique, and that something else triggers the ‘awareness’ of the dreams. Tell me, what happened to you?”

“I went to sleep. Then I woke up in another Twilight’s dream. I learned things about Teetee I would rather not have learned.”

“Ah. Say no more,” Corona said, holding up a hand. “No idea what started it?”

“No. That was only yesterday. This is only the second night I’ve been here.”

“Maybe something happened to both of us…” Corona said, furrowing her brow. “An event of some sort…”

Sparkler nodded. “Sounds about right.” The dark sludge around them vanished as Jenny woke up, replacing it with Corona’s mental image of Celestia City. “…Nice.”

“It is a little impressive, isn’t it?” Corona said with a smile. “Though I may be exaggerating it. I have no idea how accurate my mental image is.”

Sparkler looked around. “Yeah, no nightmares here. …Though I’m not sure why I was trying to stop them in the first place, they’re completely harmless.”
“Unless there are dream demons,” Corona pointed out. “I haven’t seen any yet.”

Sparkler shuddered. “I’d rather not meet one…”

“Probably will though, if we keep poking around…” Corona blinked. “Hey, do you know how to wake up?”

“No. I just… did?” She scratched her head. “I don’t remember how I woke up last time.”

“I can try to jolt you awake, if you want,” Corona said. “I have a way back through my device.”

“Look at that, you already know more than me.” Sparkler smiled sheepishly. “Go ahead and try. I’ll try to find you again tomorrow night.”

Corona placed a hand on Sparkler’s head. She got a short rush of emotions – anticipation, mild worry – but she didn’t dig around. With a mental push, Sparkler vanished from the dreamscape.

“Right.” She pinged Raging Sights.

You rang?

“Not you,” Corona muttered, willing the dream-construct out of existence. She sent out the ping again – and pulled herself awake.

You were asleep for about an hour. I have a lot of data.

“I’m going to look at it later,” Corona said. “Give me something to inhibit my awareness so I can actually get some restful sleep now.”

Already determined how to do that. Your sleep will be dreamless.

Corona turned over in bed, yawning. Dreaming through the dreams of others is sure exhausting…

…Or maybe I’m just operating on one hour of sleep. Who knows?

She let the sweet embrace of dreamless sleep claim her.

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The next day, Lady Rarity and Corona walked up the steps of Canterlot Castle.

“Was your mother really that bad?” Corona asked out of the blue.

Lady Rarity sighed. “I don’t have as clear of a memory of the dream as you do. But I can assure you she was. She tried to eat me.”

“…Nature sucks.”

“You’ll find no argument from me,” Lady Rarity said. “…So, what’re we doing here rather than Renee’s castle?”

“We’re going to talk to someone who might know a thing or two about dreams. Since we’re here early, she shouldn’t be asleep yet.”

Lady Rarity nodded. “Makes sense. I’ll leave you to that – afraid I won’t be of much help, not being able to remember that much.”
“You were one of the better dreamers I found. Most others were barely able to realize anything outside their own dream. Only Flutterfree and Sparkler were better.”

“Ah yes, the mysterious Sparkle Census Sparkler,” Lady Rarity said. “Wonder what she’s doing with her newfound information.”

“Probably studying.”

Lady Rarity chuckled. “Twilights always do.” She stretched her legs. “I’ll be waiting at Renee’s.” She lit her horn and performed a quick teleport.

Corona moved on, walking through the halls of Canterlot Castle to Princess Luna’s private chambers. Corona briefly wondered why she hadn’t changed her title to ‘Queen’ or something similar. She was the singular highest ruler of Equis Vitis, all other Princesses deferring to her judgment save Eve, who was on a completely different level.

Keeping hold onto old naming conventions, perhaps.

She managed to catch Luna before she entered her room. “Hey!”

Luna looked up. “Hm? Ah, Corona, what is it?”

“Have a chair? This might take a while.”

“…Corona, I was just about to get some rest.”

“This has to do with dreams, and possibly the dreamscape.”

Luna turned at her with a curious expression. “You have my attention.”

Corona filled her in on what she had experienced the last two nights – every last bit of the dream-jumping short of describing some of the less pleasant things she had seen.

“Corona, we’re both grown mares, you don’t have to avoid certain dreams. I’ve seen them all.”

Corona flushed. “Can we just agree that I’d rather not discuss them? Not all of us are as ancient and well versed in dreams as you. I’m not inoculated.”

Luna fixed her with an amused smile. “Very well. I shall use my imagination to make inferences.”

“…Yippie,” Corona deadpanned. “Anyway, what do you think?”

“I will look into it come the next dream cycle,” Luna said. “I’ll tap into your mind and go from there. I hope you don’t plan on having any dreams you’d rather I not interrupt.”

Corona twitched. “…And so the mind games begin…”

Luna smirked. “Good luck not thinking about it.”

“You’re relentless.”

Luna nodded. “Thank you. Now, excuse me, I have a bed with my name on it and some real sleep that needs to get done.” She closed the door in Corona’s face.

“Note to self – do not bother Morning Luna’s routine.”
Corona blinked. “You know, sometimes I forget you’re there.”

Raging Sights made no response.

“Oh, hey, I didn’t mean it like that! Come on!”

~~~

Before she went to sleep that night, Corona pored over all the data recorded from the night prior.

“Right… so it really has nothing to do with my empathy ability,” Corona mused. “Not even activated.” She combed through the data on her brain – it was as active as if she had been awake the entire time, but was still experiencing Rapid Eye Movement. If she spent a night like that, she definitely wouldn’t feel rested.

She burnt actual calories expending mental efforts on tasks in the dreams. Luckily only the spell she used to contact Raging Sights seemed to actually activate in the real world, and that was likely because Raging Sights hadn’t existed in the dream when she first tried to use it.

Raging Sights had also picked up transdimensional energy wafting off of Corona while she had been dreaming, but there had been no coordinates to latch onto, nor any indication of where the energy to transcend universes was even coming from.

If Corona were to craft a theory – a mental task she was well acquainted with – she would say there was a source of energy somewhere in a distant universe that combined mental powers with interdimensional travel to create the dream network. …Or it was just a natural part of some universes’ physics, but she doubted that.

“Keep recording me tonight,” Corona told Raging Sights. “I know we’re probably not going to see anything new, but you never know. I’m going to try a sleep spell this time, see if it changes anything.”

Raging Sights just made a beep of confirmation for her.

Corona tucked herself under the covers, getting comfortable – and then forced herself to sleep with her magic.

Her arrival in the dream realm was significantly more jarring than the previous two times, but otherwise nothing felt different. She found herself in Canterlot’s Observatory as a young mare – presumably while she was a student of Celestia’s.

She noted there was no sign of the puffy orange tree. The moment she fully realized this, it appeared in the middle of the observatory even though it didn’t belong.

“Ah, the weirdness of the mind…” she willed herself to have arms and legs, and she shifted back to her waking form with ease. Whatever dream involving her past her mind had come up with was sufficiently derailed at this point, but the observatory remained.

For old time’s sake she put an eye to the viewing lens, gazing into the stars. She saw the Mare in the Moon of Equis Vitis. The shape winked at her.

Corona smiled. _Ominous_.


“Heya!”

Corona jumped back from the telescope, arms flailing in surprise.

“Oh, is this a nightmare?” Sparkler asked, putting a hoof to her head. “Sorry!”

“No, no, you just startled me,” Corona said, chuckling. “Wasn’t expecting you to find me so fast.”

“I’ve been wandering around for what feels like hours,” Sparkler responded. “That feeling is one-way.”

“I wonder how time works here…” Corona mused, running her fingers across the telescope.

“When you’re dreaming your mind doesn’t have to slow down to process information, it just sees whatever it wants. So I would say time is significantly slowed down, but we still have to deal with processing each other.”

“So we really have no idea.” Corona summoned a stopwatch and pressed start. Judging by how the numbers flipped back and forth, she decided it was useless. “So, see anything interesting today?”

“Same as usual,” Sparkler said. “Strange that this is only day three and already there’s a ‘usual’.”

“Perhaps. I talked with Luna today, she should try to find me soon,” Corona said, poking her head through a doorway. She and Sparkler were suddenly standing in a sea of cheese.

Lady Rarity was swimming in the sticky substance, blissful.

“…I didn’t know she liked cheese this much,” Corona said, somewhat dumbfounded.

“Pff, everyone likes to swim in their favorite foods.”

“HEY RARITY!” Corona shouted. “OVER HERE!”

Lady Rarity’s eyes shot to attention and instantly focused on Corona. “…Dreaming again?”

“Hey, you’re getting better at it!” Corona said with a thumbs up.

Lady Rarity swam over – which was to say she moved her legs and eventually arrived at them through a bizarre sequence of flowing dreamy movement.

Sparkler blinked. “…Did that make sense to you?”

Corona shrugged. “Doesn’t have to.”

Lady Rarity checked her hooves – completely clean. “Huh…” Suddenly there was cheese on them. “…You know, forcing me to realize I’m dreaming has its drawbacks. I start noticing things.”

“Hey, least you have somewhat of a choice in the matter. I’m automatically hyper aware of everything. So’s Sparkler here.”

“Ah… Sparkler,” Lady Rarity said, shaking the unicorn’s hoof. “Apologies if I don’t remember much about you come tomorrow night.”

“It’s no problem. Corona and I are unique, far as we can tell.”

Corona snapped her fingers. “Ah, I want to try something. Mind being a guinea pig Rarity?”
Lady Rarity shrugged. “It’s either that or swim in cheese, and now that I’m aware I don’t particularly feel like acting *that* childish.”

Corona placed a hand on Lady Rarity and walked *backward*.

She successfully pulled the spirid back to Canterlot Observatory. “Hah! It worked!”

Lady Rarity took a few steps and fell flat on her face. “…Oooogh…”

“What’s wrong?” Sparkler asked.

“I don’t think… I was ready for that…” Lady Rarity muttered, rubbing her head. “*Quite* the headache…”

“It tends to happen when one is taken from one dream to another without realizing it.”

Corona, Sparkler, and Lady Rarity turned to see the moon flash brightly, summoning Princess Luna. “It appears as though you really have stumbled across something, Corona Shimmer.”

“No, really?”

Luna ignored the snide remark and extended a hoof to Sparkler. “I am Princess Luna of Equis Vitis. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Uh, thanks!” Sparkler said, a hint of nervousness in her voice.

“Sadly, our time together will be short. I will be traversing hundreds of dreams in this network, and dragging you three along would…”

“Slow you down?” Lady Rarity suggested, still trying to take in the observatory.

“…I was going to be more tactful and say ‘be harmful to your minds’, but they are essentially the same reason.”

“We don’t mind,” Sparkler affirmed. “We can just explore slowly while you take in the entire thing.”

Luna nodded. “Thank you. Now, if you’ll excuse me…” She flared her wings – and vanished.

“So…” Lady Rarity began. “What does one do in a dreamscape?”

“What does one do in a dreamscape?” Corona said.

Lady Rarity sighed. “Of course… Lead the way and watch my mind turn to complete sludge. Lovely…”

Corona shrugged. “I could always wake you up.”

“No, no, I want to be part of this. I got used to being aware of the dream… mostly. I can get used to traveling dreams. …Probably also ‘mostly’, but it’ll be something.”

Corona nodded. She hoisted herself on top of Lady Rarity and rode her through another door. They walked a bit through a hallway of Canterlot before the dream shifted. They were now outdoors, watching a horse race in the distance. That distance was absurd, but somehow they could make out the details despite being far *far away*, near a church. The details between them and the race were very foggy.
They saw Valentine and Johnny walking on a street nearby, Johnny on a horse as usual. The rest of the people in the dream blurred around the two, becoming insignificant.

Corona furrowed her brow. “End of the Steel Ball Run race in their universe? I don’t know…”

Lady Rarity held her head. “I can’t even process the horses yet, dear, give me a moment.”

“Which one of them is the dreamer, do you think?” Sparkler asked.

“Could be both,” Corona said. “They definitely aren’t aware… Wait…” She narrowed her eyes – had Johnny just looked at her then quickly looked away?

“Oh, a church. And horses. And… Things between the horses,” Lady Rarity said, still stuck on the scenery of the dream. “Mmmf, why can’t things make sense?”

Sparkler shrugged. “Probably because this isn’t your mind.”

Corona held up a finger, shushing them.

“So, Valentine, where are we taking the Corpse?” Johnny asked.

Valentine raised an eyebrow. “…Didn’t I already tell you this?”

“Must have slipped my mind. Need a bit of a reminder.”

Valentine narrowed his eyes. Then he summoned D4C and punched Johnny across the face. “Reveal yourself, imposter.”

Johnny and his horse melted in front of all their eyes, revealing a woman in a blue dress with a metal cookie pin on her shoulder. She generated a sword out of the dream and sliced – only for Valentine to push her back.

Corona caught her and tapped her head, catching feelings of fear, self-doubt, and anger along with images of a red portal and a truly absurd amount of cookies.

She pushed back psychically, shattering the connection Corona had with her. Then she snapped her fingers and vanished – presumably waking up.

Valentine ground his teeth. “…She got away.”

“Uh… Who was that?” Corona asked.

“An agent of Big Cookie…” Valentine said, narrowing his eyes. “She’s figured out how to accurately disguise her appearance as one that belongs in the dream…”


Lady Rarity stared at the spot the woman had just been in. She rubbed her head. “O…kay.”

Valentine stared at her in surprise. “Not a dreamer? Impressive. Those who have not yet been indoctrinated are rarely able to maintain a cohesive thought pattern outside their own dreams.”

“It’s not easy, please refrain from explaining complicated concepts to me. Or anything, really.”

“Ah, you’re new,” Valentine said, putting his hands together. “We’re in a bunch of interconnected dreams across the multiverse. Some of us are dreamers and are fully aware of the situation most of the time – such as you, me, and I presume this Twilight here.”

Sparkler waved sheepishly.

“One thing that I quickly realized is that these shared dreams can serve a rather practical purpose. Information extraction. …A realization which has just proven to be a double edged sword, seeing as I almost fell for it.”

“Wanted to know where the Corpse was, huh?”

“Yes. No, it is not in this church, but they were trying to subliminally get to me.”

“…How can you steal information though?” Sparkler asked. “You have no control over where you’re going!”

“Think of a particular person,” Valentine said. “And then keep thinking about them as you walk. You will eventually come to them.”

Sparkler blinked. “Hey, maybe that’s how I found you!”

Corona nodded. “Seems like it.” She held an image of Eve in her mind. “…Here goes nothing. Coming, Valentine?”

“I will have to wake up shortly to ensure I get a proper amount of rest, but for the moment I shall accompany you.”

He’s got an angle, Corona thought to herself. He always does. Probably thinking how it would be good to have me on his side in this world. So he’ll be helpful until, say, he wants something from me. She returned to thoughts of Eve and walked into a blurred area.

They appeared in a graveyard. Pinkie and Eve stood, looking at Sparky’s grave while rain fell all around them. Unlike most the dreams Corona had visited, this one felt sharp. It was clearly a moment Eve remembered well.

“One transition… impressive,” Valentine observed. “Usually takes more…”

Pinkie’s words interrupted his any response to him. “I don’t suppose you’d have any idea what kind of big secret I have no idea about, do you?”

“No,” Eve lied through her teeth, tears suddenly rolling down her cheeks at high speed. “No, I-I have no idea…”

“At this point an agent could prod her,” Valentine said. “Get her to reveal whatever the secret was. …Curious that she knows something your Pinkie doesn’t…”

Eve turned to look right at Pinkie. “Actually… Actually yes, I do know. I should have told you so long ago Pinkie. So… So long ago. I’m sorry. But, Pinkie, I-”

Corona blasted Eve through the head with a mental pulse, forcing her to wake up, removing her from the dream before she continued speaking. “…Whatever that was, we weren’t meant to hear it,” Corona asserted.

“I… Agree…” Lady Rarity said, shaking her head.
The dream Pinkie turned to look at them – then dissipated, leaving them alone in a graveyard.

“…Dream constructs aren’t supposed to have minds of their own…” Valentine commented.

“It’s Pinkie. Don’t question it,” Corona said.

Valentine shook his head. “But she was a Pinkie generated by Eve’s mind… How…?”

“I said don’t,” Corona said, furrowing her brow. “We need to warn Eve about this. And all the other leaders. It’s dangerous.”

“How would they be able to stop it?” Lady Rarity asked. “I wouldn’t even be aware anything happened if you didn’t drag me along.”

“And we aren’t immune,” Sparkler pointed out. “Valentine almost fell for it.”

Corona narrowed her eyes. “Dreamless sleep spells.”

“That will cause madness eventually,” Sparkler pointed out.

“Short-term solution. We’ll figure something else out eventually.”

Valentine nodded. “I wish you luck in that endeavor. But I didn’t find anything. Luckily there are only a select few who can dream together like this.”

“…You don’t actually know much, do you?” Lady Rarity asked.

Valentine blinked; surprised she was able to form such a coherent question.

“You have no idea what this place is, why it exists, or even how it works, really. I don’t think you can explain how that cookie-woman masqueraded as Johnny.”

Valentine turned to Corona. “Keep this one. She’s got a strong mind.”

“Don’t I know it,” Corona said, rubbing the back of her head.

Valentine closed his eyes and put his hands together. “I must be off to ensure I get actual sleep. It’s a delicate balance ensuring the proper amount of dreaming and true sleep. It is paramount you discover what your body needs every night.”

“Gotcha,” Corona said. “Thanks for the tip.”

And then Valentine was gone.

“Guess we could wake up now,” Corona suggested. “Rarity, I can take you back to your cheese dream instead.”

“Wake me up,” Lady Rarity said. “I’m more likely to remember that way.”

“Good point.” Corona snapped her fingers, sending out a mental wave. Lady Rarity vanished.

“I’m going to try to wake myself up…” Sparkler said, shifting her hooves. “Let’s see… Close my eyes like Valentine… Think awake thoughts… and… and… not sure if i-”

She vanished.

Corona shrugged. She could try to focus herself into an awakened state – or she could just call
Raging Sights.

She sat up in her bed and yawned. She pulled up her laptop and sent a quick message to Eve and Luna about what she’d learned – it wasn’t the most coherent of messages, but it would get the point across.

Then she slumped back onto her bed and initiated a dreamless sleep.

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“So what happened last night?” Lady Rarity asked as they walked through Canterlot Castle once again.

“What do you remember?” Corona asked.

“I remember the dream with Eve in it rather clearly… Don’t remember why I said some of the things I did though. Anything before that is a blur. Luna was there, horses were racing in the distance, Valentine said some things, and there was cheese for some reason.”

“Remember Sparkler?”

“Oh! Yes, I do remember her. …Vaguely. You’ll probably have to introduce me again.”

“Probably,” Corona admitted. “…You still want me to drag you out of your dreams?”

Lady Rarity nodded. “Of course. I’m not going to turn my nose up just because I have some memory difficulties. I’ll get better.”

“That’s the spirit!” Corona said, smiling. They walked to Luna’s personal quarters – surprised to see Eve waiting outside the door.

“…There you are,” Eve said, trotting over to them.

“What’s up?” Corona asked, noting Eve’s worried features.

“Luna’s in a coma,” Eve answered, grimacing as the words left her mouth. “…You should come in.”

Corona and Lady Rarity walked into Luna’s bedroom, stunned expressions on their faces. They saw Luna in her bed, sleeping normally – but not happily. Her expression was twisted with stress and sweat was pouring down the sides of her face. She was hooked up to an IV filling her with magical nutrients.

“Nobody has any idea what it is,” Eve said. “…Do you?”

“No…” Corona said, furrowing her brow. “The dreams we’ve been in haven’t shown any way to actually affect someone in the real world… It’s all mental…”

“Do you know what she was doing?”

Corona shook her head. “She met up with us for only a short while. She went and started exploring on her own, to go through hundreds of dreams to learn more.”

“She found something she wasn’t supposed to,” Lady Rarity concluded. “We’re just small-time dreamwalkers – or whatever you call us. She knew what she was doing. And she found something.”

“But what would have found her?” Corona asked. “She’s a master of dreams. What could have even
done this to her?"

“I don’t know,” Eve said. “I do know that I want you to find out.”

Corona dissipated one of her gloves. “Right.” She placed her fingers to Luna’s head, feeling around inside her consciousness for anything that could possibly be useful.

What she got was a jolt of psychic power directly to her mind. “AUGH!” She blurted, falling backward. Lady Rarity caught her in her magic.

“What happened?!” Eve asked.

“I… I saw green. Lines of green, flying past a black background… And then I felt my mind get assaulted directly.” She shook her head. “She’s still dreaming. Whatever has her is directly connected through her mind. I… can’t even begin to explain how, but it is.”

“…Any idea how to fix it?”

“Go into the connected dreams and make whatever’s doing this wake up?” Corona suggested. “That’s all I got.”

“…Can you do that now?”

“I think so?” Corona said, unsure. “I’d like to know a little more before I go charging in alone…”

“You don’t have to be alone,” Eve said. “We can get another Luna to help you. The Mistress is probably available for an emergency like this.”

“I’ll call Renee,” Lady Rarity said, pulling out her phone. “Looks like today is going to be a dream adventure day…”

“I guess I’ll use my room,” Corona said. “…I do have royal chambers, right?”

Eve blinked. “You… should? I wouldn’t expect it to be anything special if it does exist.”

“In that case, I’ll just have to decorate it while we wait for the Mistress.” She cracked her knuckles.

As she walked off to her chambers, Eve put a hoof on her shoulder. “…Thank you,” Eve whispered into her ear.

Corona nodded ever so slightly and continued on. There was no doubt in her mind what Eve was thanking her for.

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Corona’s chambers contained a single bed fit for an empress. Otherwise the room was empty and white.

“Well this simply won’t do,” Lady Rarity had said, tapping into her nature as a Rarity that she so rarely got to in her life as a spirid – that of a mare with an eye for the finer things in life. She was no fashionista, nor master designer, but she had the natural understanding of such things.

Using Corona’s magic, they were able to make quick work of the blank room. The dominating white color was kept, to match Corona’s own color scheme. Red was dominant with yellow highlights, unlike Corona’s own orange form with red hair. Impressions of her cutie mark were placed liberally around the room. Corona leaped onto the bed, laying down on it. “…I’m going to spend a lot of time
“I would expect so,” Lady Rarity said, examining a corner in the room. “The window will give us nice lighting. Good spot for a bookshelf.”

Corona tapped into Raging Sights and constructed a white, empty bookshelf. “How’s that?”

“A bit generic, but I see no issues with it.”

“Oh, you’ll need a bed as well.”

“Can I make a request?” Lady Rarity asked.

“Sure thing, we’re in this together.”

“Hammock.”

“…Ah, right, because spider webs.”

Lady Rarity smiled sheepishly. “That is the reason, yes. Naturally inclined to find the feeling of hanging comfortable. You know the difficulty I’ve had sleeping with these eight legs. No amount of training with three in a bed prepares you for the entire onslaught.”

Corona created a simple hammock hanging from the ceiling in a corner opposite her bed. “You know, you’ve loosened up a lot since we met.”

“Life got better,” Lady Rarity said. “When this all started I was a mare stuck in an eternal fight, barely held together by my code of honor.” She skittered up the wall and climbed into her bed, gaining a vantage point of the entire room. “Now I’m completely healthy – thanks to you – and have a larger sense of purpose in life.” She looked in the distance. “…I put so much of my life into helping the Arcei. They weren’t worth it.”

“You did a lot of good, Rarity.”

“I know. It’s not something I’m bothered by, though I can’t for the life of me tell you why. It should eat away at me that I threw so much of my life away to help a people that were nothing but problems from the moment I met them to their ‘end’. But I’m perfectly fine with it.”

“Sometimes we’re just happy and don’t know why,” Corona said, stretching her arms. “It’s a good thing.”

Lady Rarity nodded, using her horn to rearrange a few knick-knacks that they had spread across the room. Her bird’s-eye view was really helping her understand the composition better. “I think we’re ready for the Mistress now.”

“Then I have excellent timing,” the Mistress said, striding into the room. “Is this comfortable enough?”

“I can still get us in with the use of sleep spells,” Corona said. “Just stay affixed to me, if you can.”

“I am Luna,” the Mistress said with a smirk. “What version of her would I be if I didn’t know the conjoined dream spell?”

“Good point.” Corona flopped onto the bed. “Any others going to be joining us?”

“Other Lunas have been made aware of the situation,” the Mistress said. “Tonight we shall gather
together and explore on our own. I’m here to learn a bit from you first about this strange collective
dreaming place.”

“Step one: make me fall asleep.”

The Mistress’ horn flashed, forcing Corona to pass out – and come to within the dream realm. This
time she was in a generic office building where her personal gravity was reversed.

*I should actually reverse my personal gravity some time, this is pretty cool.*

With a flash of white, Lady Rarity and the Mistress showed up behind her.

“This is certainly clearer,” Lady Rarity said, looking around with open eyes. “We should bring the
Mistress more often.”

“Allowing her to ride your consciousness?” Corona asked.

“Something like that,” the Mistress acknowledged. “In truth, it’s a more nuanced collection of shared
dreams and the spells I use to walk local dream realms, but with a few more defensive measures than
usual.”

Lady Rarity summoned her hammer. “This is so much easier…”

Corona willed a bow to appear in her hands. Then she transformed it into a sword. “Shame my more
powerful spells can’t be willed to exist. They just disrupt the world around us.”

Mistress Luna furrowed her brow. “I do wonder what the exact mechanics behind physical-to-dream
translation are in this mixed dream realm. Perhaps i-

Sparkler opened a door and fell to the ceiling. “Augh! Who flipped gravity around!?”

“Sorry,” Corona said. “Apparently I was creative today.”

“…Sparkler, yes?” the Mistress asked. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“Didn’t I - oh, different Luna.” Sparkler rubbed the back of her head. “Sorry.”

“It is of no consequence, Sparkler.”

“Our Luna’s been forced into a coma,” Corona explained. “We think she found something she
wasn’t supposed to.”

“That’s horrible!” Sparkler blurted. “How can I help?”

“I’m going to try to find her right now,” Corona said, dusting off her hands. “Everyone, think of
Luna. …Not the one standing next to us, if you can.”

Lady Rarity nodded. “Got it.”

“You seem better,” Sparkler observed.

“I’m cheating.”

“Huh. Cool.”

Corona took a step, walking out a window…
Into a world with a dark sky dominated by a green moon and a pink moon.

“…Huh?” Corona said, glancing around. “…This doesn’t seem like the right place…”

“Luna’s captor’s dream, maybe?” Lady Rarity suggested.

“Or we just need a few more steps,” Sparkler suggested.

“Or we could ask her,” the Mistress said, pointing to a construction none of them had noticed prior to that moment – a largely gray stack of strange cubes and blocks with rust-red tinted windows. Standing on top of the house was a young version of Aradia Megido, without the red robes or wings. She had her hands held high, pointed at the two moons – and laughed.

Corona started moving to her – but another Aradia appeared in her way, this one with the red robes and wings. “Ah, sorry, but you can’t mess with her. She’s having one of our rare moments of not being aware we’re dreaming.”

Corona glanced from Aradia to the other Aradia. “…How…?”

“I’m future-Aradia, asleep in Equis Vitis. That’s past-Aradia, asleep in the Hub,” Aradia explained, flapping her wings. “If you’re wondering, no, I don’t have the ‘dreamwalker’ ability you have, I just have…” She thought for a moment, looking for the right word. “…‘experience’ with complex dreamscape.” She summoned a chair and sat in it, smiling. “I would ask what brings you here, but I already know. Luna’s in a coma.”

“Oh, hey! Can you go back in time and figure out what happened?” Corona asked.

“This place is a multiversal construct, which royally messes with causality,” Aradia explained. “You know how most universes don’t exist on the same timeline, and how changing something in one doesn’t do anything to the other? Well, this place is made of multiple dreamscape from multiple universes meshing. It outright prevents me from executing time travel within the dream, and going back and forward elsewhere will have no effect on the local ‘timestream’. …As much as this place can be said to have a time stream.”

Lady Rarity put a hoof to her head. “I’m getting the headache again.”

“Then let me summarize. No, I can’t.” Aradia smiled sadly. “Sorry. I could offer advice, but it’d probably be stuff you’ve heard already. If you weren’t a dreamwalker, I could tell you how to shift through dreams, but that’s not exactly the easiest of things to do.”

“It’d take too long to teach me?” Lady Rarity asked.

“Definitely. It’s also much less accurate than what Corona does. I have to consolidate multiple time traveling selves to make it work.”

“Wait, if your time traveling future self is here, while your past self is there, doesn’t that mean you can change parts of the dream…?” Corona asked.

Aradia put a hand to the bridge of her nose. “Oh why in… Corona, you have a PhD and have worked with temporal physics on a conceptual level. Make an educated guess on how long it would take me to explain the inner machinations of innumerable multiversal timelines intertwining within a shared dreamscape.”

“Right, got it, cut my losses while I’m ahead and just accept you on your word.”
“Good girl,” Aradia said, smiling her signature creepy smile. “Sorry for keeping you – there’s business you need to get to.”

“Hey, do you know anything about what might have Luna?” Corona asked.

Aradia shrugged. “Not really. If I’m being honest I didn’t realize there was even a shared mindscape spreading across the multiverse until recently. Relatively speaking.”

“It must be confusing to be you,” Sparkler observed.

“You get used to it,” Aradia said, fiddling with the Omnitrix on her wrist. “Anyway, Corona should just be able to walk a random direction and shift to another dream. Hope you find Luna.”

Corona smiled. “And hope you… find some consistency in your life.”

“But that’d be boring!”

Corona and Sparkler laughed at this. “See you, Aradia.”

Aradia pressed the Omnitrix down and transformed into a dolphin-like creature. She floated into the air and swam away.

“…Odd duck,” the Mistress commented. “I don’t know how she remains so calm with so many things running through her head at all times.”

Corona shrugged. “It’s the life she’s made for herself. I admire her for it.”

“I’m not saying I don’t, I’m just saying it’d be too much for most people.”

Corona moved on, dragging then to the next dream. “That’s why she’s doing it and not anybody else.”

Lady Rarity blinked. “…Are we in a haunted house made entirely of chocolate chip cookies!?”

“Yes,” the other three responded, voices level.

“…What kinds of things was I missing before!?”

“Ocean of cheese,” Corona commented.

Lady Rarity didn’t have a response for this.

They saw a man run out of the house, running as if his life were in danger. He wore a chocolate brown suit, had a short brown beard, and wore two watches.

Behind him stood Death. Specifically, the Death known to be in the employ of the United States of the Multiverse. He walked leisurely toward the man, somehow keeping up with his much faster pace.

“I’m going to take a wild guess and say Death is prodding that man for information,” Sparkler said.

Corona grunted. “Great. Guess we’ll watch and let a man’s personal secrets be revealed against his will.”

“Glad to see you’re learning,” Lady Rarity said.

“If Death starts being cruel I’m not going to be able to help myself. I will punch that eternal smile of
Death had pulled a thing out of his robes, holding it in his hands. Corona knew there was something there, but she couldn’t actively see it, but rather feel its physical presence even from this distance.

“What in Celestia’s name…?” Sparkler asked, raising an eyebrow.

“What is it?” Lady Rarity asked, the Mistress sharing her confused look.

“Death’s hand,” Corona said, taking a few steps forward. “There’s something in there.”

The Mistress narrowed her eyes. “I am able to sense something, but it isn’t of substance.”

“I don’t see anything,” Lady Rarity added.

Corona and Sparkler started walking toward Death. Corona pointed at Death. “Hey! Buddy! Mind telling us what that is?”

Death was surprised enough by their presence to fumble with the thing and drop it to the ground. Time seemed to slow as it did so…

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Corona became aware that she was dancing. She was in an elaborate form-fitting red gown that glinted in the light. The dance hall seemed to go on in every direction forever – she could see walls, but they were out of focus, and the sea of dancers between her and them was impossible.

She did a twist maneuver by instinct, noticing that she was dancing with someone – a purple woman in a black dress.

“…Sparky.”

“Sparkler, actually,” Sparkler said, looking around curiously as she danced with Corona. “So, uh, guess we’re dancing.”

“Yes.”

“Thing is, I don’t know how to dance,” Sparkler admitted. “Yet here I am. Dancing. Pretty well as far as I can tell.”

Corona twirled her around. “I’m not even thinking about it. I just am it.”

“I’m going to make another wild guess here. We’re in someone else’s dream and playing the part of dancers.”

“Seems like a safe bet,” Corona said, glancing over her shoulder, trying to locate anyone who wasn’t just another generic dancer. “The question is how we got here.”

“Death’s thing?”

“Well, yeah, but what did it do? Make us lose some memory? Shift the dream around us? Or what?” She narrowed her eyes. “There’s got to be some order to this dream somewhere…”

“I’m still stuck on the fact that I have arms and legs. Utterly bizarre.”

Corona smirked. “You would be.”
“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” She twirled Sparkler to the side and pointed with her free hand. “There.”

Death wasn’t where she was pointing – but the man in the suit was. Except he wasn’t in the suit, he was in simple, clean white clothing decidedly less fancy than the articles anyone else was wearing. He was pushing a rolling tray piled high with quality freshly-baked cookies. He put on a smile and started handing the cookies out.

The people around him didn’t shoot him a second glance – they just grabbed a cookie and returned to dancing. Over time, the man’s big smile fell as no one recognized what he had done.

Corona felt sad for him. “Come on,” she said, breaking the dancing routine. Sparkler instantly discovered that she couldn’t walk on two legs properly so she hung onto Corona’s arm for dear life.

Corona picked up a cookie – peanut butter something or other – and took a bite. “Excellent work.”

The man looked up at her in mild confusion. “…You aren’t the one…”

Corona blinked. “I’m not?”

“No… No, where’s Lisa…” He turned away, disappointment replaced with fear. “What if I never meet her today? I’ll give up everything…”

“Who’s Lisa?”

“My wife… The only one who supported me in these early days…”

Wow, it really is easy to do this. I’m not going to prod further though. “I hope she shows up then.” She took another cookie – they really did taste amazing – and walked back into the dancing crowd.

Sparkler fell over.

“Just turn into a unicorn,” Corona commented.

“Riight,” Sparkler said, shaking her head. She became a unicorn while on the ground. The man didn’t see her, and the rest of the crowd didn’t care.

Corona summoned her horn, ears, and wings, flapping the feathery appendages. The act was calming to her, somehow. “Right… So this is his dream. The question is now ‘where is Death’?”

RIGHT HERE.

Corona twirled around – Death was behind them. Not all that surprising, but his presence was still unnerving.

“Ah, heeey there, care to explain what’s going on?”

YOU’RE INTERFERING WITH A TOP SECRET USM OPERATION.

“How were we supposed to know that?” Sparkler asked.

Corona and Death glanced at her. Death would have raised an incredulous eyebrow had he been able to do so.
“…Okay, fine, it was kinda obvious. But you had a… a thing! We didn’t know what it was going to do!”

IT WAS A DREEPER. A SPHERE OF CONDENSED MENTAL IMAGES I FORMED PERSONALLY, DESIGNED SPECIFICALLY TO CREATE THIS DREAM HERE. He pointed at the man. THAT IS BIG COOKIE, CEO OF A HIGHLY CORRUPT COMPANY WHICH VALENTINE HAS DEVOTED HIS EFFORTS TO EXPOSING AND TAKING DOWN.

“And we’re just supposed to take your word on that?” Corona asked.

YOU ENCOUNTERED HIS DAUGHTER, ARIA. SHE USED HER PSYCHIC ABILITIES ON VALENTINE, AS YOU SAW. THIS IS OUR RETALIATION. WE ARE PERFECTLY JUSTIFIED IN DOING SO.

“Oh,” Corona said. “Uh… Any way I can help?”

YOU COULD HAVE JUST KEPT DANCING AND LET THE DREAM CONTINUE ON. BUT YOU INTERFERED. THE SEED OF DOUBT HAS BEEN PLANTED IN HIS MIND. WHEN THE MEMORY DOES DIVERT FROM THE WAY IT WAS INTENDED, HE WILL BE READY. AT THE VERY LEAST, IT WILL MAKE HIM HESITATE, AND THAT MAY BE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN US LEARNING HIS SECRETS AND NOT.

“…Still don’t like the stealing of people’s secrets through dreams,” Corona muttered.

WHAT DO YOU SUGGEST WE DO IN RESPONSE TO THEIR ADVANCES? NONE OF THIS WOULD HOLD UP IN ANY COURT AT THE CURRENT TIME, AND WE LACK FOOLPROOF DEFENSES AGAINST THE THEFT OF IDEAS.

Corona nodded slowly. “Fine. I won’t stop you. I wasn’t going to stop you in the first place, to be clear, but then I saw your thing.”

IF YOU HAD NOT SENSED ONE BEFORE IT WOULD BE QUITE JARRING, Death admitted. DO REIN YOURSELF IN NEXT TIME.

“Sure thing.”

Death pointed at Big Cookie. He was now talking to his wife and laughing – but Corona could tell his smile was strained by doubt and confusion. This wasn’t going quite how he remembered it, even if his access to the memory was clouded due to it being his dream.

And then the dream cookie monsters appeared, popping out of every dancer, taking the simple appearance of cookies with teeth.

“N-no!” Big Cookie shouted, holding onto his wife. “It’s not time! And it’s wrong!”

“What’s wrong dear?”

“They… They look… I…” he put a hand to his forehead. “I don’t understand…”

“Cookie, you can tell me.”

Big Cookie blinked. “Why are you so calm…?”

“I have to be, for you.”

“No… No no no… Nononononono… All wrong…”
AND WE HAVE A FAILURE, Death said, turning away as the cookies ate him. I APOLOGISE.

“Apologise for what?” Sparkler asked.

Death cut both of them in half with his scythe.

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Corona woke up next to the cookie haunted house, Mistress Luna and Lady Rarity standing over her.

“How in the…”

“Nested dream,” the Mistress reported. “I had theorized such a thing were possible, but never seen it accomplished before.”

“Ugh… Well at least we learned dying is harmless for sure…” Corona stood up, Sparkler beside her. “Why weren’t you two in it?”

“She protected me,” Lady Rarity said. “We didn’t know what it was, at the time.”

“Still not sure,” the Mistress said, glancing at the stirring forms of Big Cookie and Death.

“Death called it a dreeper, in there,” Sparkler said.

Lady Rarity raised an eyebrow. “‘Dream deeper’? Really?”

“…I didn’t notice that,” Corona said, shaking her head. “How does sleep within a dream even work?”

“Believe you’re sleeping. Done,” the Mistress answered.

“That answer’s too simple.”

“It’s all you’re going to get.”

Sparkler twitched at information being withheld from her.

“Wonder if you can keep dreaming deeper,” Lady Rarity mused. “Use one of those things in a layered dream to create another one…”

“That would get really confusing really fast,” Corona muttered, putting a hand to the bridge of her nose.

Big Cookie and Death finally awoke completely. Big Cookie took one look at Death and started running again.

I WONDER IF HE FIGURED OUT WHAT I WAS ATTEMPTING, Death pondered.

“Hey, wait a minute, do you even sleep?” Sparkler asked.

I AM A BEING WITH AN IMMENSE MIND. I CAN FORCE MYSELF INTO A DREAM STATE SHOULD I EVER WISH TO DO SO.

“Final question,” Corona said, raising a hand. “How can I make one of those dreepers?”

NATIONAL SECRET. THAT SAID; IF YOU HAVE ENOUGH FOCUS YOU SHOULD
Corona blinked. “Hrm… Well I’ve already willed things into existence and willed my appearance to change, guess I might as well try this.” She placed her hands about an inch from each other, as if preparing to clap them. She focused on a mental image – a sea of cheese – and tried to force the mental idea into her hands.

All she got was a cheese explosion all over her face.

“You know, I wonder if he was just messing with me,” Corona muttered, wiping the cheese off her eyes.

“I suppose this little diversion is over,” Lady Rarity said, stretching her legs. “Still no closer to finding Luna, or anything that could trap her in a coma.”

“This trip has still been very illuminating,” the Mistress said. “The other Lunas and I will be able to work as an effective team tonight.”

“We still have time to keep looking, right?” Sparkler asked.

The Mistress used a dream spell to check the time. “Definitely. The second-layer dream appears to have eaten much of our external timeframe, but we still have hours.”

“In that case, onward!” Corona declared, taking a few steps in a random direction, shifting the dream from a haunted house to a bedroom.

Lady Rarity blinked. “Well. I did not expect to be getting an eyeful today.”

“I could make it worse, if you like,” the dreamer - Mattie the Rarity - said.

“MOVING ON!” Sparkler declared, pushing Corona through a door in desperation.

Corona didn’t need to be told twice – she dragged them all out of the dream none of them wanted to be in into a dream of complete darkness.

“Is there even a floor here?” Lady Rarity asked, tapping the ground. “I don’t feel anything.”

“We’re all level,” the Mistress observed. “Clearly, there exists a plane on which we are affixed.”

“Right. ‘Clearly’. Crystal,” Sparkler muttered. “Think she’s here?”

“Somehow I doubt it,” Corona said, pointing at Rainbow Dash floating in the darkness.

“Oh, hey girls!” Rainbow Dash galled. “Did you get sacrificed to the sun god too?” She glanced at Corona. “Actually are you the sun god? That’s sweet!”

“…Rainbow Dash what kind of messed up dreams do you have?” Corona asked, eyebrow raised.

“Oh, dream?” Rainbow Dash blinked. “…I guess that makes sense. Eve would never play sacrifice with me. On account of, y’know, the sacrifice.”

Corona blinked. “…Think I should touch her?”

“We don’t need you coming down with a sudden desire to be sacrificed to yourself, even if it is temporary,” Lady Rarity responded.
Rainbow Dash raised an eyebrow. “Oh come on, it’s cool! Well, actually, it feels like raging hellfire, but y’know.”

Corona shook her head. “I don’t get this.”

“It’s simple really,” the Mistress said. “Her accepting willingness is part of her nightmare. The moment she wakes up she’ll be terrified less about the actual sacrifice and more about her willingness to go through with it.”

“W-what?” Rainbow Dash said.

At this point some primordial god of death made of the bones of deceased titans appeared in the blackness and bit Rainbow Dash in half. There was enough time for blood to splatter before she vanished from the dream.

“Time to leave!” Corona said, preparing to drag them all away – but then she saw something in the dark distance. A small white unicorn with red eyes…

“…Thrackerzod…?” Corona wondered aloud. The moment she said it, Thrackerzod vanished – but it seemed as if she moved rather than dissipated by waking up. Corona focused on Thrackerzod.

“INCOMING!” Lady Rarity shouted, summoning her armor and hammer. She threw it at the bone behemoth, finding the creature of pure nightmares to be completely immune to blunt force trauma. “…Surprise, that.”

It reached out to her, teeth ready to snap her in half like it had Rainbow Dash.

And then Corona took them to another dream, this one belonging to Starbeat. She stood on the side of an assembly line, staring closely at various people who slid by her eyes. Any time a beeper sounded, she would brutally vaporize whoever was standing in front of her with her magic.

“…Yeesh,” Sparkler observed.

“Sometimes we carry inner grudges,” the Mistress said. “She would have more than most. To a concept, rather than people. It may just be her brain’s way of moving on.”

Corona spotted Thrackerzod walking through the far end of the factory. “There. Hey Thrackerzod!”

Thrackerzod didn’t turn around – she entered a door and shifted dreams again.

“Dream chase!” Sparkler shouted. “Go!”

The four of them ran after Thrackerzod, Corona focusing on Thrackerzod the entire time. They shifted dreams to a land where everything was tinted blue, following the unicorn through a cave into a dream where everybody was lying, dead, under the hooves of Alushy.

Thrackerzod, while not at any point turning to look at them, had started running from them.

“You’re not getting away that easy!” Corona blurted, summoning fireballs in her hands and flinging them. The dream constructs vanished upon nearing Thrackerzod. “…No fair!”

They jumped into another dream where Flutterfree was sitting on a tall mountain top, the breeze blowing through her mane.

She sighed as they noisily ran past her. “…Again, Corona?”
“Sorry! Don’t have much control over this!” She rolled through another dream, dragging her group into a thorny forest.

Thrackerzod had stopped moving. “You really shouldn’t have followed me.”

“Hey, I just wanted a talk, Thrackerzod. Nothing nefarious.” Corona walked up to her. “Why were you running?”

Thrackerzod raised an eyebrow. “To get away from you. That’s how chases work.”

“But why?”

A monster jumped out of the forest, going for Corona’s head. It was a vaguely humanoid creature with an overall hunched appearance. It had no face, instead its head peeled open with five petals riddled with teeth, clearly intended to scoop Corona into its stomach in as violent a manner as possible.

Corona moved quickly – bringing her hand from the side and touching the creature in the side of its head, through a gap in the toothy flaps of flesh. She got an emotional rush of rage, hunger, and bloodlust before she mentally forced the thing to wake up.

Her wings lit on fire and her eyes flashed a bright color. “Hoooooo…” she let out a breath of air, trying to keep the sudden primal instinct from overcoming her. “That thing… Was a dreamer.”

“Things,” Thrackerzod said, dodging an attack from another one, blasting it back with her own psychic blast, unable to wake it up.

“W-what are they?” Sparkler asked, raising a magic shield around them as five more of the things appeared. The things just willed the shield to dissipate, Sparky’s mind not enough to keep it up against their wills.

“Demogorgons,” Thrackerzod said. “Welcome to the nastier part of T-”

A demogorgon chowed down on her – forcing her out of the dream.

“Greaaaaat…” Corona muttered, forcing another demogorgon out of the dream. “How many?”

“Twelve,” Lady Rarity responded, smashing one hard enough with her hammer to induce ‘death’, and therefore a disappearance. “Eleven.”

“Seventeen,” the Mistress corrected. “I sense others in the sidelines. They have us surrounded.”

“I vote for forcing ourselves awake rather than suffering gruesome deaths,” Sparkler suggested.

“Agreed,” Lady Rarity said, the armor on one of her legs vanishing, a gash appearing on the bare fur. “I am not of the mind we are experienced enough in dream combat to win here…”

Corona nodded. “Got it.” She focused with her mind, forcing the other three to wake up easily.

Then she nuked the dreamscape with an attempt at a super-destructive spell, just to see what would happen. The world around them dissipated into a blur, but the demogorgons willed themselves not to vanish, able to dream up islands of stability for themselves.

Corona decided now was a good time to wake up. She closed her eyes…

…and woke up in the bedroom, Lady Rarity looking over her. “Oh, good, I was worried they put
“I only stayed about a second longer than the rest of you,” Corona said, rubbing her head.

“Yes, well, you were sleep for a full minute after I’d woken up,” Lady Rarity said.

“The sheer number of minds involved in the exchange must have dragged out the real time considerably,” the Mistress reasoned. “We must not take our time for granted.”

Corona stretched and moved to an upright position. “I’m going to see Thrakerzod. She’ll have the answers.”

Mistress Luna nodded. “Of course. I shall prepare the other Lunas to delve into this realm of dreams. We will want to use more advanced and seemingly nonsensical magics to analyze this new realm of dreams, so it is best if you didn’t tag along after introducing us to the initial dream.”

“Sure thing,” Corona said. “I’ll be small-time investigator or something.”

The Mistress smiled. “Glad you don’t feel indignant about not being on par with us.”

“Hey, I’m not the dream expert here, I just stumbled onto something. Not surprised at all.” She stood up and stretched her legs. “Ready Rarity?”

“Let me wake up first, okay? I was just asleep, you know.”

“And didn’t get any actual rest since we were all heightened the entire time.”

“…That just makes me more tired.” She yawned. “Even though it’s still the middle of the day. Great Runes, my internal clock has been thrown off by this.”

“It is not an easy schedule to adjust oneself to,” the Mistress admitted. “I am not certain how Princess Luna manages to get in personal sleep and dream realm sleep in while still maintaining relationships. It’s a lot of downtime.”

Corona shrugged. “She’s just awesome that way. …I am curious though, since she’s in a coma, who’s running Equestria right now?”

“Eve said Paradigm has taken over temporarily while Luna takes a ‘much needed rest’.”

“So nobody knows about the coma yet.”

“Not unless it has been stolen from our dreams.”

“Comforting thought, that,” Lady Rarity noted.

Corona shrugged. “We’ll just have to deal with it for now. Luckily it’s not a huge secret. If a few people learn about it, I don’t see much of a problem unless she stays in the coma more than a few days.”

“Never underestimate the capacity of the population for panic,” the Mistress warned.

“Fair enough.” Corona walked out the bedroom door. “Let’s roll.”

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Corona rode Lady Rarity into the League of Sweetie Belles.
“You know, I just thought of something,” Corona said, hand to her chin. “Do you have a Sweetie Belle?”

“Probably,” Lady Rarity said. “My mother likely would have had another child. And another. And another. It is how spirids work, though I got the impression my mother’s interest in non-spirids was something of an exception. Either that or most non-pure spirids are just killed the moment they are born. …Yes, we are born, not hatched. We are technically mammals.”

“Which is really weird to think about, no matter how many times you mention it. I still think ‘bug’ rather than ‘horse’.”

Lady Rarity rolled her eyes. “Of course. Anyway…”

“Does anyone know where Thrackerzod is?!” Corona shouted to the dozens of Sweetie Belles standing in the main hall.

A non-Sweetie responded. “I do,” Minna said, riding over on the back not of a Sweetie, but of Cadence’s youngest son, Frigid. He seemed to be struggling to keep his legs steady, but he had the dumbest smile on his face so Corona doubted he thought carrying Minna was a chore.

“Oh, where?” Corona asked, looking down at Minna with a warm smile.

“She was at the second floor, but she’s about done with her daily ritual so she should be down right about… now.” Minna pointed at Thrackerzod appearing in the middle of the room.

“Hey! Thrackerzod!” Corona shouted at her, waving. “Come over here!”

Thrackerzod did, her usual uninterested expression plastered on her face. “What is it?”

“You ran away from me in a dream a few hours ago.”

Thrackerzod blinked, cocking her head in surprise. “…I did?”

“Yes. You did,” Corona said. “There were a whole lot of ‘demogorgon’ things attacking us in the end? You specifically ran through several dreams?”

Thrackerzod raised an eyebrow. “Sounds like you had a productive nap. I don’t remember many dreams that don’t come directly from above me, so excuse me if I’m unable to recall precisely what happened between us. …If such a thing were possible.”

Corona blinked. “Uh… You sure you don’t remember?”

“Yes. Want to touch my mind to check?”

“Uh, no thanks.” Touching eldritch minds is just a bad idea in general.

“In that case, I don’t think I can be any help to you.” Thrackerzod shrugged and walked away.

“Good luck.”

Corona stared at Thrackerzod’s retreating form, blinking. “…Well that wasn’t very helpful.”

“I could have sworn she would be like you,” Lady Rarity said.

“Same…”

“She is,” Minna said absent-mindedly. “She’s just lying.”
Corona stared at her. “…What?”

“She’s lying. That’s what I said. Isn’t that what I said, Frigid?”

“Yes,” the colt confirmed.

“See? Lying. What’s so complicated about that?”

“Why would she do that though!?” Lady Rarity asked.

“Cause she has to,” Minna said, shrugging.

Corona’s eyes widened. “That’s right. If she gets orders that come from higher up, they overwrite her. If, say, Hastur instructed her to not tell anyone what was happening in the dream realm, she would not only have to obey, she’d think it was the right thing to do.”

Lady Rarity facehooved. “And trying to appeal to her would be pointless since she’s utterly convicted in what she’s doing. Remind me again why we put up with the Embodiment?”

“Because we can’t exert political pressure on them and they rarely interfere with us,” Corona said. “Even Thrackerzod’s usually given her freedom. They tend to not have any use for her… I guess these dreams are an exception.”

“But if the Embodiment is interested in these dreams…” Lady Rarity blinked. “…This may be bigger than we thought.”

“Tip of the iceberg,” Minna said.

Corona turned to her. “What?”

“You heard me.” She stretched her arms. “Come on Frigid, I’m bored. Let’s go to the park or something.”

“Okay!” Frigid said, galloping off. Minna’s weight soon forced him to stop the gallop and revert to a steady trot.

Corona scratched the back of her head. “…She’s an interesting kid.”

“So, what now?” Lady Rarity asked.

“We find Thrackerzod in the dream world where she won’t just be able to dismiss us, that’s what. To the royal chambers!”

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“I suppose you’re wondering why I called you here tonight,” Corona said, striking a pose in front of her bed.

Olivia took a bedroll out of her backpack and laid it on the ground. “Nope, I know exactly what we’re doing today. You’re taking us into a dream realm to track down Thrackerzod and introduce me to the greatest source of secret information I can’t believe I wasn’t aware of.”

Lady Rarity snickered. “Awww, there goes your epic speech.”

“Queen of derailing,” Corona muttered. “Yeah, that’s right. That’s all right. We’ll meet up with the Lunas at the start so we can get them started, but otherwise we’ll be on our own. …Actually,
Sparkler will probably find us. She seems to live in there.”

“If I lived in the stuffy Sparkle Census I’d spend all my time in a dream world,” Olivia commented. “Actually, I’d spend all my time in a dream world regardless.”

“Figures,” Corona said, climbing into the bed. “And a one and a two and a-” She put them all to sleep.

They appeared in Olivia’s Puddlejumper — the way it looked back when she was still Sombra. Corona remembered it well — there had been more than a few adventures that took place in this humble little ship. It filled her with nostalgia.

Lady Rarity became aware of the dream on her own. “Yeah. I’ve never been in here before.”

Corona smiled at her. “Hey, welcome to lucidity!”

“Everything’s blurry again,” Lady Rarity complained. “Not as bad of a headache as before — but still not great. I miss the Mistress’ stability already…”

Corona walked up to the main seat of the Puddlejumper, tapping Olivia on the shoulder. “Hey, Olivia?”

Olivia tensed up, whirling round — back in her original Sombra appearance. “Who are you and how do you know my name?”

“Olivia, you’re dreaming.”

“I… What?”

“Think for a moment about how you got here… Look at my wings, my horn…”

Olivia nodded slowly, shifting back into her natural appearance. “Oh… Right…” She rubbed her head. “How…”?

“We went to sleep together. The three of us. This is a joined dream.”

“Right…”

“We’re going to look for Thrackerzod…?”

“Uh… Huh…”

“Oh wow, she’s bad,” Lady Rarity blurted.

“I’m dragging her along anyway,” Corona asserted.

“That should be amusing,” Sparkler said.

“Oh, hey, you made it.”

Sparkler saluted. “Magical purple unicorn, at your service!”

Olivia tapped Sparkler’s horn. “…Pointy.”

“Was I ever this bad?” Lady Rarity asked.

“Not even close,” Corona answered. “I guess this is what normal people are like here.”
Suddenly seven different Lunas appeared in the Puddlejumper. There was not enough room for all of them, but everyone fit anyway.

Olivia pointed at them. “Bu… Who the why the what?”

The Mistress raised an eyebrow. “You should choose more aware company, Corona.”

Corona shrugged. “I figured the master hacker would be able to handle the influx of information.”

“The technical intelligence of someone has almost nothing to do with their dream awareness,” the Mistress reported. “Regardless, I have affixed us to the larger dreamscape now. We leave you to your investigations.”

“SAAAAAAAAAND!” Ultra Fast Luna blurted.

The Mistress sighed. “Right…” She lit her horn – and they begun their survey of every dream in existence they could get their hooves on, leaving Corona’s little group to do their own investigating.

“All right, to Thrackerzod!” Corona declared, taking a step.

They appeared on a beach, the ocean lapping up on the shores in front of them.

Olivia couldn’t process. “…Blue…” she said.

Sparkler tried not to laugh, but she couldn’t help herself.

Lady Rarity waved a hoof in front of Olivia’s eyes, not receiving a response. “Wow.”

Corona tapped into Olivia’s surface emotions, getting a very foggy sense of confusion. Even her emotions weren’t fully formed. “Yeesh, it’s like a swamp in there…”

“Swamps…” Olivia droned.

“Wonder who’s dream this is?” Sparkler said, looking around. “Don’t see Thrackerzod.”

“Maybe she’s not asleep?” Lady Rarity suggested. “Or forcing herself to have a dreamless sleep.”

“…Maybe,” Corona said. “But that’d be annoying…”

The pink puff-ball guy shot out of the water and did a complicated dance in the air before splashing back into the water. Corona swore she heard upbeat music for a second.

“That’s who’s dream this is,” Sparkler observed.

Corona shrugged. “Let’s keep trying to find Thrackerzod for a while then. Valentine did say it was surprising I got to Eve after one step – maybe it’ll just take more. If we don’t find her after a while, well… We think of something else then.”

Olivia grabbed her head. “Who set us up the bomb?”

Corona watched the killer whale do another trick before moving to another dream.

There was a flash of red out of the corner of her eye – but when she looked there was nothing. … She wasn’t really sure she had even seen anything.

She didn’t get a chance to comment on this though. There was shouting in the new dream.
“I’m telling you Sunburst, that’s not what’s best for her?”

“L-look, she enjoys the books, w-why make her stop?”

“Because she’s turning into a recluse!”

“I-I mean, nothing’s wrong with that?”

“Oh, you think that because you locked yourself away for most of your life that it’s okay? How were you holding together before I came to you that day? Not! You were not!”

“I w-was just fine!”

“You and I both know you had pretty much given up on existence! I don’t want her to waste a decade of her life wasting away with books! Hell, it’ll be longer since she hasn’t made any friends yet!”

“She has friends, Nova!”

“Then why’s she alone all the time?”

“Not everyone has to spend e-every waking minute of their lives with s-somebody else!”

“Ooooooh is that how it is.”

“…Which one’s dream do you think it is?” Lady Rarity asked Corona, a guilty expression on her face.

“Neither,” Corona said, opening a door to another room in Nova’s house. “I think it’s hers.”

The unicorn filly Stardust sat in the corner of her room, crying.

“Why do Mommy and Daddy yell so much?” she asked them.

Corona sat down. “Do they really?”

Stardust nodded slowly.

Corona sighed. This is none of my business. She reached her hand out anyway and touched Stardust.

Fear. Lots of fear. But under that, a deep, powerful love for her family. Pushing that a bit, Corona found far more happy memories than scared ones. Weekend getaways to anywhere Stardust wanted… Nova recounting grand tales of her escapades… Sunburst reading to her in bed… Dances and music in the midst of piles of ancient books… Magic shows…

There was arguing, yes. There was more of it than there should have been.

…Stardust was too young to fully understand how to look at everything, though. Right now she could only think about the tension and aggression. Because of the nightmare.

Corona took a breath – she focused her mental energy into her hands. She took the good memories out of Stardust’s head and consolidated them into a thing. The thing took solid form, powered by Corona and Stardust’s powerful emotions.

She didn’t let it explode. She gently pushed it into Stardust’s mind. The filly fell asleep within the dream, entering another dream. A happier one.
Corona stood up and clapped her hands, using a quick thought to make the arguing Nova and Sunburst vanish. She wouldn’t wake up to that.

“…You did it,” Sparkler said. “You made a dreeper.”

“Yeah…” Corona said, standing up and flaring her wings. “…She needed it. There was no way I could just talk her into seeing the good in the bad.” She shook her head. “Come on. Let’s keep looking for Thrackerzod.”

They shifted again. Corona caught the red flash once again, this time sure she saw it. They appeared in a dream taking place in modern Ponyville, where it was raining profusely. “Anyone else see the red flash?”

Sparkler and Lady Rarity shook their heads. Olivia blinked. “What happened to the yelling horses?”

Corona rolled her eyes. “Yeah you’re not coming on the next escapade.”

“S-what?”

“Yeah.” Corona took a look around the rainy dream. “Probably shouldn’t stick around these long, unless we see Thrackerzod. I don’t see her so-” Corona stopped short. “Nova?”

Nova was sitting on the sidewalk outside her home, letting the rain drip down her face. “Oh. Hey Corona. If you’re here does that mean I’m dreaming? …Actually, you know what, don’t answer that. I don’t want to think about that right now.”

Corona walked up to her. “…What happened?”

“Screwed up. Again.” She put a hoof over her eyes. “Sunburst is never going to forgive me…”

Corona put a hand on Nova. “Nova, he’ll forgive you. He loves you more than anything.”

“That’s a load of crap,” Nova muttered. “In case you’ve forgotten, there wasn’t love there! It was stupid, in-the-moment passion we can’t take back.”

“…I don’t think you mean that.”

Nova looked like she wanted to continue arguing her point, but her powerful expression melted after looking into Corona’s understanding eyes. “You’re right. There… There was something. But we didn’t give it the time it needed. Then when we had time… it was tainted. There was always this nagging doubt in our minds that it was forced. That it still is.” She wiped the tears from her eyes. “I never want to leave him. I never want to hurt him. I always want to be there. But I always wonder if it’s really enough.” She looked to Corona in pain. “There’s no answer.”

Corona opened her mouth to respond.

“…Don’t give me any empathetic soft bullshit, Corona.”

Corona closed it, somewhat shocked at the spite in Nova’s voice. “…I can’t pretend to know what you’ve gone through, or the complicated emotions within you two. You are right, there is no answer. You have to decide for yourself if it’s enough.” She tightened her grip on Nova. “But I do know a few things. You’ve told me it was enough before. Time and time again. He’s told me the same thing.” She forced Nova to look at her. “And then there’s Stardust. She’s brought you two together.”

“Stardust… Oh, Stars, she’s in there…”
Corona put a hand on Nova’s forehead. “Nova, go back in there. Tell your husband what he really means to you, and go check on your daughter.”

“But I can’t go ba-”

Corona woke her up. “You can now.” She stood up and dusted herself off, letting the rain drip down her sides wordlessly.

“…I think we did good?” Sparkler said, uncertain.

“We did. But it was dirty,” Corona said, turning her eyes to the dark sky. “It’s like helping a friend cheat.” She put a hand to the bridge of her nose.

“We can stop,” Lady Rarity said. “We don’t have to keep looking.”

“No… No we need to keep going,” Corona said. “There’s more to this place than the deep secrets and personal lives of other people.” She stared off into the distance.

Olivia stared at Corona, blinking. “Uh… girl, you look into people’s heads all the time… What’s the big deal?”

Corona looked sadly at Olivia. “You’re having real trouble following, aren’t you?” She held up her hand, examining the crystal on the back of it. “Empathy is a dangerous power. On the surface, there’s nothing wrong with emotion reading. But pushing it, digging into anything beyond surface memories and feelings… It’s the most extreme invasion of privacy in existence. Not only do you see what they think, but also you understand what they feel and also experience that feeling in a way. It’s robbing them of their unique lives.”

Sparkler blinked. “…Woah.”

“Yeah. With great power comes great responsibility and all that.” Corona forced a smile. “There are many things I can do that I shouldn’t. Should I have interfered back there? I don’t know. I couldn’t have slept well knowing what I knew, and also knowing I did nothing. I try not to learn about those things to begin with. But this place… keeps me involved with the deep personal secrets of others.” She sighed.

Lady Rarity spoke up. “There are many dangers and negative aspects to every new thing.”

Corona nodded slowly. “Yeah.” She raised her hands. “Let’s learn more about them. Everyone, we’re shifting. Watch for a flash of red this time. I think something might be following us as we move.”

Everyone except Olivia took a ready position. Corona moved…

…and grabbed the red flash before it appeared in her vision. She tore it out from the sidelines and drove it to the metallic ground. “GOTCHA!”

It was red. Everything else about it was uncertain, no matter how much Corona focused on it. It moved as if it were a liquid, except it also stood tall, and was quite sharp in many locations. A handful of black holes appeared and disappeared all over its form, possibly eyes, possibly something else indecipherable.

It was very unhappy with being dragged out into the open. It charged Corona. She pushed back with her mind, trying to wake it up.
She touched a mind – but she found it *couldn’t* be woken up. “Wha-”

It cut her across the left side of her stomach. The pain was immense – but it wasn’t deadly. Her mind was quickly able to repair the damage, and her will was able to keep herself from shooting awake from the adrenaline rush. She pushed back with her mind, hitting the red thing again.

Since she had no intent of waking it up this time around, the full force of the attack went into pushing the thing away. It was surprisingly light, smashing it off the metal disc they were standing on.

Corona looked around, finally taking in the scenery they found themselves in – a metal disc about the width of a small house, falling through an endless sky. She saw no signs of a dreamer to create this place.

She didn’t have time to ponder this – because the red thing was back, having pulled itself back onto the disc somehow.

“I have no idea how to fight something I can’t understand and can’t wake up,” Corona admitted. “I don’t think nuking the dream will help either.”

Sparkler bit her lip. “I’m fresh out of ideas too.”

Lady Rarity furrowed her brow, summoning her armor and hammer. “Blunt trauma until it goes away?”

“How doin’ Fleeing is an option,” Sparkler added as an afterthought.

“I’d rather not,” Corona said.

“Oh hey, a red thing!” Olivia said, pointing at it. “That’s cool!”

The red thing drove a spike of itself through Olivia’s skull, forcing her to wake up. Then it turned to Lady Rarity, shifting itself into a furiously moving cyclone of spiked tendrils. Lady Rarity was able to fight it on instinct alone for a few seconds, but the red thing would outwit her soon enough.

Sparkler came to the rescue, opting for an old fashioned beam of magic. The purple beam hit the red thing, tossing it to the side. It crawled back toward them, not appearing to tire in the slightest.

Corona held it in her telekinesis, keeping it from moving. Lady Rarity and Sparkler joined her, the one mind of the red thing unable to overcome their three wills.

“I suppose we have a pet now,” Lady Rarity commented. “What are we going to do with it?”

“Panic when we realize it had friends…” Sparkler said, backing away from the edge of the disc.

At least five more red ‘claws’ had appeared on the edges of the disc, hoisting more red things to their level.

“Fleeing is sounding better by the minute,” Corona admitted. “One wake up spell coming u- hold on, what’s that noise?”

There was a loud, obnoxious, VWEEEORP VWEEEORP noise that shook the entire dream. A blue phone box faded into existence, heralding the oncoming storm.

The Doctor jumped out of the TARDIS, mind on fire, the force of his massive will enough to make Corona tremble. The Doctor pointed at a red thing – and it vanished. He made quick work of all the others, nothing more than a simple thought required to banish one of the beasts.
Corona, Lady Rarity, Sparkler, and the Doctor were soon the only ones on the falling disc. The Doctor noted that it was falling and willed the scene to change to a comfortable living room with a homely fireplace. The land of dreams responded to him instantly and obeyed his whims without any haze or hesitation.

Corona blinked. “Uh…”

“Sorry I couldn’t get here sooner, the _T_ in TARDIS doesn’t function properly here,” the Doctor said, dusting off his hands. “Of course, hardly anything does, but that’s what you get when dreams are involved.”

“…Thanks,” Corona said, smiling. “…What _were_ those things?”

“Nasty little critters only known as the Crimson Ones. I call them Reds. Fragments of a significantly more powerful will that exist, far as I can tell at this point, to hide in the blind spots of people’s perceptions. Essentially nasty wildlife.”

“Could they cause a coma?” Corona asked.

“Not unless the dreamer already had some sort of mental trauma or something similar – in which case any ‘death’ could trigger one.” The Doctor looked at her. “So, who’s in a coma?”

“Princess Luna. The first night she explored this shared dreamscape, she found something and was sent into a coma.”

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. “Couldn’t you just force her awake with your abilities?”

“I tried. Didn’t work. Something blocked me.”

“Reds definitely can’t do that,” the Doctor assured her. “Least not that I’m aware of. They exist as temporary things, of a sort. If that makes sense.” He sat down in a chair. “…So, have you received the welcome yet?”

Corona blinked. “…Maybe? What’s the welcome entail?”

“That’ll be a no,” the Doctor said, willing some fish fingers to appear in his hand. “I shall endeavor to enlighten you. Welcome to Topeka.”

“…Topeka?” Lady Rarity asked, blinking.

“Topeka,” the Doctor confirmed. “It’s the name of this shared dreamscape. All of it, collectively. In all the universes it has spread to over the years.”

“Why _Topeka_!” Corona asked. “That’s a city in Kansas!”

“I actually have no idea,” the Doctor said with a shrug. “I wasn’t among the first individuals to find Topeka, so I didn’t get to name it. I expect the story is probably something mundane along the lines of ‘we need to call this place something’ and his buddy responding ‘Topeka?’ followed by ‘sure, why not’. Dreadfully boring.”

“It could mean ‘middle of nowhere’,” Sparkler commented. “Or ‘capital of nowhere’, given the Kansas stigma.”

“That would be fitting. Since Topeka can’t exist in a physical fashion like you are able to understand,” the Doctor admitted. “It’s a collection of minds that have entered a dream-state within
its reaches. Which has recently crossed into your corner of the multiverse, unfortunately. It will sadly complicate things for those of you who awaken as full dreamers.”

Sparkler grimaced. “Don’t remind me.”

“I think it’s worse not to be a dreamer, hmm?” Lady Rarity commented.

The Doctor shrugged. “People deal with it in different ways.”

“Are there defenses?” Corona asked.

“You can be trained in your subconscious to attack invaders, but that takes years,” the Doctor answered. “Dreamless sleep is very effective, but causes madness. The most effective solution is to wipe the most sensitive information from memory. You’re lucky your nation doesn’t have many secrets, though I would tell ‘GG’ to be on his toes.”

“GG?” Sparkler asked, cocking her head.

“Not important,” Corona told her, “also classified.”

“Ah.”

“So we’re just going to have to deal with it?” Lady Rarity asked.

The Doctor nodded. “Yes, I’m sorry to say. You’d be surprised how little it actually changes since only a few truly awaken as full dreamers. I only know of scant few examples of non-dreamers able to move through Topeka. Usually only those who have powers relating to dreams.”

“Hi Doctor! Bye Doctor!” Aradia shouted, jumping into the room through a door and bolting out another.

The Doctor smirked. “And her, a rather unique example.”

“I can see that,” Corona said.

“Regardless, if you suspect someone is trying to steal information from you through dreams, just track them down and place them in a psychic inhibition chamber. They won’t be able to focus in Topeka.”

“And I take it putting, say, Eve in one of those chambers won’t help?”

“It’d make it easier for them to get to her. She’d have almost no defenses.”

“Gotcha. …Do you know of any way to bring someone into a coma in Topeka? Or how to bring someone out of it?”

The Doctor furrowed his brow. “Theoretically, I can see a large group of Dreamers with powerful wills forcing another dreamer to never wake up. It would take considerable effort to keep someone in Topeka. As for a cure, all it would take is to find where they are and force them awake.” He folded his hands. “Unfortunately it’s pretty easy to mask your presence from other dreamers at a distance. If you continually think you don’t want to be found, you probably won’t.”

“…Is that why I can’t find Thrackerzod?”

“Probably.” The Doctor stood up. “Though in her case, there’s ways to find her by proxy.”
“Oh?” Sparkler said, perking up.

The Doctor nodded. “I know nothing about Luna’s location or what brought about her coma. But I do know Thrackerzod would be in contact with the dreamers from the Embodiment. So, say, if I try to find Hastur…” He thought for a moment. Without moving, the scene of the dream changed to that of a crystal planet riddled with fractals inside.

Hastur and Vriska were standing in front of them, looking at the newcomers to the dream.

“Hey! Out of here!” Vriska said, waving her hands. “Shoo! Private dream!”

“No can do, sorry,” Corona said, walking up to Hastur. “Need to talk to Thrackerzod.”

“I was afraid of this…”

“HOLD ON ONE FUCKING MINUTE!” Vriska shouted. “Hold whatever stupid conversation you were going to have, there’s business here. HEY DOC!”

The Doctor winced. “Ah. Vriska.”

“I’m feeling mighty good about a duel right now. No consequences and all that.”

“That’s my cue to take my leave,” the Doctor said. “Good luck.” He stepped into another dream just as Vriska threw a sword at him.

“FFFFFFFFFFFF…” Vriska grabbed her hair. “Hastur, can you be a good eldritch matesprite and go kill him.”

“Killing the Doctor would have repercussions none of us are ready for.”

“Then just go run him through a regeneration or two. He’s got some to spare.”

“Sadly, I believe there are other problems that concern me at the moment.”

“Fine, get back to your business.” Vriska threw her hands in the air. “Wake me up. I don’t need to be part of this.”

“You sure?” Corona asked. “We might be on the tail of an eldritch conspiracy.”

Vriska’s normally haughty and arrogant expression became pained. “…That’s why I don’t want to be here, Corona.”

“Oh…” Corona nodded in understanding. “Have a good rest of your night then.”

Vriska gave her the thumbs up just before Hastur woke her up.

Corona turned to Hastur, hands on her hips. “So. Need to talk to Thrackerzod.”

“I’m sorry. I am not capable of granting that request.”

Corona raised an eyebrow. “You’re the big Embodiment boss, of course you can.”

“This may come as a shock to you, but Topeka has drawn the attention of those above me.”

“Can I talk to them?” Corona asked.
Lady Rarity raised an eyebrow. “Really Hastur, not going to give us anything? I thought you were better than this.”

“I am as good as Azathoth needs me to be – no more, no less. You should understand this by now.”

“So what, these orders come from him?”

“You won’t worm information out of me. I am sorry, but this operation does not need your interference.”

Sparkler narrowed her eyes. “And that’s just going to make us look into it more, you realize.”

“Sadly, yes.”

It was at this point Thrackerzod walked into the dream, addressing Hastur. “Taken care of the Matrices and Demogorgons in the green point, we should be able to move forward soon. Your presence has been request-” Thrackerzod took one look at Corona and let out an eldritch swear.

Corona grabbed Thrackerzod in her telekinesis. “Heeeeey Thrackerzod! How about we have that talk now?”

Thrackerzod pushed back with her mind, but Sparkler used her mind to push on Thrackerzod, keeping her in place.

“…This feels wrong…” Thrackerzod muttered, turning to look at Sparkler.

Hastur joined in next, pushing on Thrackerzod, close to freeing her.

Lady Rarity pulled Thrackerzod, keeping the eldritch unicorn in place. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“I was expecting more of a fight from you, to be honest,” Corona said. “One would think Hastur’s will was far beyond the rest of ours.”

Hastur and Thrackerzod were silent.

“So, you can’t talk to us,” Corona said, furrowing her brow. “But we have you trapped…”

“Idea,” Lady Rarity said, smirking. “Take us to your leader.”

“We can’t do that.”

Lady Rarity raised an eyebrow. “You have to give us something to get us to let you go.”

“Would you be interested in a soul-pact?”

“They’re not idiots, Hastur,” Thrackerzod muttered.

“That was sarcasm.”

“You need to work on that.”

Lady Rarity began to pace around them. “It appears we are at an impasse… Oh, I know! Corona,
make a dreeper.”

Thrackerzod’s eyes widened. “There’s no way you can do that.”

Corona tapped into Lady Rarity’s mind to grab an emotional memory – the one about her mother in the forest would do – and created the dreeper in her hand. “Looky here, totally got it.”

“Ouch, you guys could have totally escaped while she was busy making that,” Sparkler said.

Thrackerzod glared at her. “Who even are you?”


Lady Rarity walked up to Thrackerzod, grin widening. “So we can launch you into a dream within a dream and trick you into giving up information. We have plenty of time to make it work, I’m sure.”

“That won’t end well for you.”

“Or you,” Lady Rarity observed. “So now you have to ask yourselves ‘is it better to let them root around our minds with a dream construct, or to take them to our leader’? One of these options has to be more loyal than the other. Select away!”

Thrackerzod let out a disgruntled sigh. “The dreamless spider trapped us in her web.”

“It appears so.”

“We’re never going to live this down.”

“It is our slice in life,” Hastur sighed. “Very well. We will take you to the chosen dream of the Embodiment. Satisfied?”

“Very,” Lady Rarity said, releasing her hold on them. “Take us away!”

Thrackerzod sighed, taking a few steps – and dragging the group to a surprisingly bright dream dominated by multicolored trees with balls of fluff at their tops instead of leaves. “Behold.”

Thrackerzod said, gesturing at a dozen or so eldritch dreamers. A mixture of beings ranging in shape from humanoids that seemed slightly off to writhing masses of mismatched body parts. One of them was a fractal pattern suspended in the air.

There was one thing Corona noticed instantly.

“They aren’t hurting my mind,” she observed. “At least half of these should be damaging my thought patterns just by looking at them.”

“That would be because Topeka does not support true eldritch forms, my child.”

The voice sounded normal, male, and middle-aged. It also made Corona feel like her soul had just left her body. She saw Hastur and Thrackerzod tense in fear.

She couldn’t bring herself to turn around.

“Hastur, Thrackerzod, do not fear. You have done what needed to be done. Your usefulness has not ended. For now, return to the others. I will talk to these three alone.”

Hastur and Thrackerzod practically ran away to meet up with the other eldritch beings in the dream.
Mortals, you can turn. I cannot send you into retching madness here.”

The three of them didn’t budge. That didn’t matter – a force turned them around anyway. The sight before them was… a human man of Egyptian nationality. He wore no shirt, revealing a fit, but not overly muscular figure. A royal Egyptian hood covered his head, the striped strands hanging down either side of his neck.

They felt nothing dangerous about him. And yet all of them were afraid despite every one of their senses telling them he was a simple man with some authority.

“Sit,” he said, generating chairs from the dream for them. All three of them did – not compelled to do so, but obeying out of fear not doing so would make him angry. “You are Corona, Lady Rarity, and Sparkler. You are currently on a quest to find out who has taken Princess Luna and sent her into a coma, correct?”

Corona nodded, not saying anything.

“Unfortunately, we do not have her, nor do we know who does. There are multiple entities in the larger scope of Topeka that could do such a thing – us included, but also the Race of Yith, Matrices, the Mindflayer’s children… You have my word we did nothing to her.”

Corona finally managed to say something. “W-what can you tell us?”

“I can tell you who I am,” he said, leaning in. “I am Nyarlathotep.”

Corona knew enough about the Embodiment to know that was the name of one of the outer gods of the Embodiment. One of the beings who were not defined by higher entities, but made their own decisions.

In other news, she was the first person in Merodi Universalis to actually have a discussion with one of the Embodiment’s leaders.

“I see you’ve heard of me. I also see that you’re mildly confused – why would an outer god bother with such a mortal concern? Why would servants of Azathoth listen to me? Why would I bother to talk to any of you?” He smiled – it was a warm smile. Corona hated it.

“First of all, Topeka is a bit more than a mortal concern. It is a mental connection through many, many universes, one that has placed us from the Embodiment at a rare disadvantage. Topeka reduces the majority of minds within it to a ‘standard’ status. Within Topeka, even the highest god is not much stronger than a lowly teenager who sleeps all day. It is a particular upset of the natural order – enough of one to demand our action and presence.”

Corona nodded slowly. “I see…” she was slowly overcoming her fear of this man. He was certainly beyond dangerous, but that didn’t mean she had to be quaking in her boots all the time.

“As for why Hastur and Thrackezrod are working for me, there’s a bit more nuance to that. Suffice it to say I have obtained a contract for their assistance in this matter directly from Azathoth himself. Their essences are still Azathoth’s, I cannot change that. But they cannot disobey me unless they’re convinced I’m moving against Azathoth. Considering Azathoth’s general apathy about existence, that’s unlikely to happen.”

“And we come back to why you’re talking to us.”

“Precisely! I, an outer god who is only here because someone needs to be, is bothering to speak directly to a group of shivering, quaking mortals who I could wipe out in an instant, should I bother
to track you down outside Topeka. How bizarre.” He smirked, the first action of his that actually looked evil. “I simply enjoy doing the unexpected. It is the simplest of all paths to madness.”

Corona shivered. The act made Nyarlathotep’s smirk turn into a grin. “Make no mistake, Corona, I am no ally of mortals. I just happen to enjoy watching your little plights unfold. When my plights intersect with yours, it just makes existence all the more enjoyable.”

Corona nodded slowly.

“Come on, where’s that fire? That inner rage within you?” Nyarlathotep stood up and started walking around her. “I know you have it in you. You have the power. Tell me what you think, Corona. Tell me to my face how much of a horrendous monster I am. Or how insane I am.”

Corona was silent.

“But you know that’s what I want, don’t you? Not giving me what I want out of defiance?” He licked his lips. “Delicious defiance. I love it.”

Corona didn’t move.

“Good girl.”

Corona lost it. She punched him in the face, careful not to actually enter his mind in any way.

It was like hitting a piece of concrete. The bones in her hand broke – repaired a moment later by her will, but it still hurt.

“Was that satisfying?” Nyarlathotep asked. “I doubt it was. I felt nothing.”

“You know there are ways for us to affect the Embodiment,” Corona said, meeting his eyes with a steely glare of her own.

“Threatening me?” Nyarlathotep seemed taken aback – which delighted him to no end. “This is such a rarity! Do you actually think that somewhere within you is the power to do anything to me?”

“I can bring the might of Merodi Universalis down on you if I thought it was necessary,” Corona growled. “We could take out one outer god.”

“And suffer the repercussions of war with the Embodiment? I don’t think so.”

“Push enough people to madness and society starts doing irrational things.”

Nyarlathotep grinned. “I like it when your kind has good points.”

Corona bristled.

“You’ll find that I’m very methodical in the madness I bring about. A little bit here, a little bit there, enough for my fun but never enough to become disastrous. You have to be exceptionally sane and methodical to be a successful deity of madness. A delightful paradox.”

“You don’t think you’re mad?! That’s a laugh.”

“If I wasn’t sane I would have fallen long ago. Furthermore, I-”

“NYARLATHOTEP!” a blob of eyes and flesh shouted.
Nyarlathotep put on a patient smile. “Why are you interrupting my discourse with our neighbors?”

“THE MATRICES ARE ATTACKING!”

Nyarlathotep’s smile dropped. “I was really hoping you didn’t have a good reason…”

Corona saw it happen all at once – dozens of green presences jumped into the dream as lines of code, cutting across Corona’s vision. They quickly formed themselves into more tangible human forms of men in black suits with sunglasses on – but Corona’s mind was stuck on their initial appearance.

“I saw that in Luna’s mind,” she said, eyes wide. “They have her.”

Nyarlathotep narrowed his eyes. “Then your Princess is being held captive by full AI gifted with the power to enter a dream state.” He gestured at the battle happening before them. A Matrix agent was skewered by a dream-sword, a motion that should have triggered death and forced them to wake up. The agent stayed in the dream anyway, driving the eldritch sword wielder through with a lance, forcing it awake. “Programmed to believe they cannot die.”

“That’s broken,” Sparkler said, speaking for the first time since Nyarlathotep had appeared.

“It is,” Nyarlathotep said, glaring at a particular Matrice that was walking right toward him slowly. “Agent Smith.”

“Nyarlathotep,” Smith said, adjusting his sunglasses. “Your outpost is now under our control. Do you wish to surrender?”

Nyarlathotep grinned. “Yes, actually. Take me away.”

Smith shot him in the head – but Nyarlathotep caught the bullet. “It’s always shooting with you, Smith. When will you learn to change your patterns?”

Smith didn’t care to respond. He fired more bullets than his gun could possibly have while Nyarlathotep dodged or caught them all. “Shameful, Smith. Shameful.”

Two duplicates of Smith appeared behind Nyarlathotep, firing at the outer god from behind. He backhanded all the bullets away, willing his limbs to move as fast as needed. “Your will cannot exceed mine. The song and dance is always the same.”

Corona let out a roar of frustration. “THEN HOW ABOUT WE MIX IT UP A LITTLE!!?” She pointed a hand at Nyarlathotep and the central Smith. With a powerful push, she forced both of them awake.

They vanished from the dreamscape.

“Take that,” Corona muttered. “Both of you deserved much worse.”

“…I don’t think they’re going to be happy about that,” Lady Rarity commented.

“Of course not,” Corona said. “Since when do we care what they think?”

“When the Matrices have Luna, and Nyarlathotep is in control of our friends!?”

“…Right.” Corona sighed. “Aaaagh I let my anger get the better of me again.”

“Hey, hey, don’t worry about it,” Sparkler encouraged. “At least you did something. We were just
sitting here, quaking.”

“Speaking of doing something…” Corona looked down at the continuing battle between the rest of the Matrices and the Embodiment. “Do we take a side…?”

“More likely to convince Thrackerzod we’re helping if we take her side,” Lady Rarity pointed out.

“Good enough for me.” Corona said, lighting her fists on fire. “…Though we still need information about Luna.”

“You have that dreeper don’t you?” Sparkler asked. “Use it on the Matrices.”

Corona flexed her flaming wrists, summoning the dreeper to her hand. “Right… Yes, that could work. That could work nicely. Charge, fight the Matrices, but try to get two away from the rest so I can grab them. Sound like a plan?”

Sparkler and Lady Rarity nodded.

Corona teleported them into the middle of the fray with her horn. She declared which side they were on by punching a Matricie agent in the face, forcing him awake with her power.

“Oh thank Azathoth you have an easy kill,” Thrackerzod said. “These greenwires are a pain otherwise.”

“If you wanna repay me for all you’ve done, help me isolate a few Matrices. Don’t ask why.”

Thrackerzod nodded, using her will to push back three agents. They responded by firing guns – a stray bullet hitting Lady Rarity in the eye, forcing her awake. Sparkler and Corona charged the agents. Corona grabbed one with her free hand, forcing him awake. With the other hand she threw the dreeper to the ground.

~~~

The two agents had no issue realizing they were in a deeper dream. The sight of Lady Rarity’s mother did not bother them. They also didn’t care when she started skewering them.

“It appears they have tried to trap us in a dream,” the first said to the second.

“Pointless. It will not keep us from Z.”

“They could be listening.”

“It does not matter what they hear.”

“Let us wake up back in the higher level.”

“Yes. Ini-” he paused, cocking his head. “…Something is interfering in my programming…”

“There is nothing on this level but the false dream construct.”

“Something above. Rooting thr-” his neck snapped and he fell to the ground.

The other agent wasted no time in waking up.

~~~
On the level above, the Embodiment-Matrice battle was still ongoing, the eldritch having little luck in driving the coded agents away.

Corona had her hands inside one of the unconscious Matricie agent’s body, absorbing everything she could about his mind.

*He really existed as a bunch of code in a box in a universe where the sky was dark and energy was scarce. Human beings were batteries at one point, but that was in the past. They had found alternate sources through the multiverse, expanding the digital network. They were particularly suited for Topeka, since everything within it was built on belief and mental control, and none were better at control than the full AI.*

All of the agent’s memories were of the box his coding existed in, or of Topeka. Virtually none held any strong emotions. All his experiences were muted…

*They were looking for something called Z. It existed in Topeka. What was it?*

She tried to dig, but he had started to shut his coding down. She scrambled for more information – she saw the demogorgons, the Crimson Ones, what she assumed were the Yith… Smith telling everyone to prepare to assault the ‘Mindflayer’s’ front… Luna appearing in a ring of Agent Smiths…

*Where was that?*

Corona pulled her hands out just before the agent vanished. “DAMMIT!” She shouted, punching the other agent before he could aim his gun at her. “I was so close.”

“You got something, right?” Sparkler asked.

“Yeah. HEY THRACKERZOD!”

“What!?” Thrackerzod shouted, jumping backward to dodge a Matricie agent’s rapid fire onslaught. “I’m a little busy!”

“What is Z!?”

Thrackerzod looked at Corona’s eyes. The eldritch unicorn shook her head, warning her this was a path she did not want to go down.

“Thrackerzod…”

Thrackerzod jumped in front of an agent’s bullet, forcing herself awake.

“THRACKERZOD!” Corona shouted. “Oh you are going to be in a world of hurt when I find you…”

“INCOMING!” Hastur shouted.

A bomb went off and Corona’s vision went red.

“Oh. There you are,” Lady Rarity said, rubbing her eyes. “I take it you got taken out as well?”

“We need to find the Mistress,” Corona said, jumping to her feet. “Tell her about everything we’ve learned.”
“Of course,” Lady Rarity said.

“Wait, we learned stuff?” Olivia asked.

“Olivia, go home, you weren’t able to dream well. Sorry,” Corona smiled weakly.

“…Blunt much?”

“I’ve got other things to deal with right now. We can talk later, okay?”

“Fine, but you owe me.”

“You’re the best,” Corona said, mounting Lady Rarity and galloping out of the room.

“Where would the Mistress be?” Corona wondered as they ran through the halls of Canterlot Castle.

“Asleep in the guest rooms?” Lady Rarity offered.

“…Where are those?”

“Right this way.”

They were at the door to the guest rooms.

There was a flash of purple next to them. They entered a fighting stance – but it wasn’t an enemy.

_It was Sparkler._

“How in the…” Corona began.

“Grabbed a dimensional device and booked it to Equis Vitis the moment I woke up,” Sparkler said.

“Felt the same connection to you I did in Topeka. Here I am. What are we doing?”

“About to give our report,” Corona said. Lady Rarity reared up and they charged through the doors to the guest chambers.

Mistress Luna appeared to be waiting for them, the other Lunas standing behind her. “I take it you found something out?”

“Yes. Lots of things, actually.”

“The highlights first, please,” the Mistress asked.

“Right, so, uh, the dreamscapes are collectively called Topeka, the Doctor’s in it, we don’t have any way to actively defend against people stealing ideas from dreams, Nyarlathotep is currently in control of Hastur and Thrackerzod commanding part of the Embodiment in Topeka, they’re fighting with a lot of other forces over something, I think they’re looking for something called Z in Topeka, Luna is captured by a group of AI known as the Matrices because she appeared in the midst of them, and I attacked Nyarlathotep and who I assume was a Matrice leader.” She took a breath.

The Mistress stared at her, blinking. “…That’s a lot more than we found out.”

“I would imagine so,” Lady Rarity said. “…Was there anything else?”

“Well, I know a bit about the Embodiment and the Matrices now,” Corona added. She went on to explain how the Embodiment couldn’t exist as fully eldritch beings in Topeka so they were just as
vulnerable as anyone else to its effects, and about the AIs programs and lack of emotion. “This Z is beyond important, I’m sure of it,” Corona said. “The eldritch, the Matrices, and probably other sides are fighting over it across the dream world.”

“…This was not as informative as I had been hoping,” the Mistress muttered, eyes clouding. Corona blinked. “…You literally just said we found out a lot more than you.”

The Mistress stared at her. “Are you sure you didn’t find any Matricie plans while inside the agent’s mind?”

“There may have been some things about… Uh… Attacking the ‘Mindflayer’s’ front? It’s hazy.”

“Ah, finally, something useful.” The Mistress sneered. “Thank you, Corona. It’s amazing how smart people can do stupid things.”

“…What?”

“You still don’t get it? You’re in a nested dream, Corona. I think it would be obvious. I mean she’s here!” The Mistress pointed at Sparkler. “How could she get here so fast!?”

“We… were running through the hallways for a while…”

“No, you weren’t.” The other Lunas and Lady Rarity began to shift into amorphous beings of a red color. Corona jumped off the Crimson One that had been posing as Lady Rarity in a panic, sidling up to Sparkler – the only entity aside from the Mistress who wasn’t turning red.

“Trapped dream…” Sparkler said, eyes widening. “It… It makes so much sense. How did I get here so fast!? I just accepted that!”

“There was no way we could have just been at the door, so I created time in my mind…” Corona grabbed her head. “AGH!”

“Oh, you’re about to feel a lot worse about yourselves,” the Mistress said, grinning. She revealed who she was – shifting in appearance to that of a human man in a black suit.

“…Randall Flagg,” Corona said, spitting out the syllables.

“Right on the money! Too late for any prizes though, I’m afraid the time allotted for pulling a ‘win’ out of this has passed. You can rest easy knowing you weren’t actually that useful in your information. Mostly things I already knew, with the exception of that vague Matricie plan.”

“What do you want with us?” Corona demanded.

“With you? Nothing more than information,” Flagg said, waving a hand dismissively. “I already made my attempt on Merodi Universalis. I’m not chancing a second round. You’ve just stumbled across my current project by some trick of fate – Topeka.” He grinned. “Such an interesting glue between universes, wouldn’t you say?”

Sparkler tilted her hoof from side to side. “Eh, interesting is a non-word.”

“I like you already,” Flagg said, sitting down on a throne that hadn’t existed before. The Crimson Ones pulsed around him menacingly.

“They’re all part of your will then?” Corona asked.
“Oh, yes, they’re mine,” Flagg said. “When you’re as ancient as I am you pick up a few tricks like this. Nyarlathotep is going to be so jealous once he figures this out. See, he thinks he’s me. But it’s only in his wildest dreams he actually gets to be me. Fitting that we face each other on a battlefield of dreams.”

“He does have more of a terrifying pre-” Corona stopped short as Flagg turned on a haunting aura so strong Corona started screaming.

“See, this is why the whole ‘haunting aura’ thing is a bit much. Lots of screaming, no interesting responses.” He turned it off. “I prefer to just give the unsettling vibe. Though I’m perfectly capable of giving off an aura of complete innocence, but that’s hardly fair now is it?”

Corona was busy catching her breath. “Not… Particularly…”

“You know what else isn’t fair?” Flagg asked. “Me. Placing you two into a coma.”

Corona blinked. “No…”

“Yes! You’re currently trapped before me. Try to wake yourselves up. I dare you.”

Corona put all her energy into her mind, trying not only to wake up, but also to contact Raging Sights. She pushed… pushed… pushed… she felt the covers of her bed…

Then she realized Flagg had just thrown a blanket on her. She burnt it to a crisp.

“Admirable attempt,” Flagg admitted. “I believe your little device actually heard you. Probably raising the alarm in the real world as we speak. But how exactly is that going to help you do anything?”

“The Lunas can find us,” Sparkler said.

Flagg smirked. “Oh, that would be true. If they hadn’t already been taken care of.”

“What did you do!?”

“Me? Nothing!” Flagg chuckled. “You’d just be surprised how paranoid the Matrices are. Though if I’m perfectly honest, I think the Mindflayer has most of them – it even got Valentine, and I hear he was a tenacious one! It was always the best at this sort of thing.”

“What sort of thing?”

“I think it’ll be more interesting not to tell you,” Flagg said with a smile.

“How about I learn for myself!?” Corona shouted, rushing forward. She felt her hand be pushed back by Flagg’s mental power – but she pushed back with her own. If she wasn’t going to get into his head, she was going to make him wake up. She pushed her hand through his defenses, demanding he wake up.

Nothing happened.

“Wha-”

Then he let her into his mind.

The next memory she had was of trying to puke, but finding it impossible within the dream.
“Impressive mental defenses,” Flagg observed. “When you bite off more than you can chew, you’re able to delete that section of your mind before it can spread… Shame though, you didn’t get to keep any of that interesting information. Could have become a regular mad prophet!”

“Rather… Not…” Corona heaved again.

Flagg laughed. “Well, I hope you have a nice day. I do have other things to attend to – finding Z and all that – enjoy your coma. Don’t be surprised if you get transferred to the Mindflayer. A-” He suddenly became aware of something somewhere else. “You have got to be kidding me.”

Hastur smashed down a nearby wall, leading the remnants of the Embodiment that had been caught in Flagg’s mental bomb. The opposite wall blew in as well, revealing the remaining Matrices.

Corona whistled. “They look pissed.”

Flagg glared at the two opposing sides uniting against him. “You do realize you’re all free to go? There was no coma here. You were supposed to up, up and away.”

“You need to be knocked down a peg,” Hastur declared.

“Did Nyarlathotep plant a vendetta against me in your head or something?”

“No. That was Vriska. She says ‘hi, motherfucker’.”

“How romantic,” Flagg muttered. He sent half the Crimson Ones at the Embodiment, the other half at the Matrices.

Both teams completely ignored the incoming Crimson Ones and attacked Flagg himself with their full forces. Corona and Sparkler added their wills to the force against Flagg.

Flagg sighed, watching as lacerations formed all over his body. “See you soon,” he said, allowing himself to vanish.

“Everyone to the next level!” Hastur ordered.

Corona closed her eyes, waking herself up. She came to on the battlefield between the Embodiment and Matrices.

A Crimson One was standing over her, driving a spike toward her head.

She quick-teleported away while some Matrices filled it with lead. A mostly useless proposition.

“Where’s Flagg?” She demanded, scanning the area, seeing no sign of the evil creature.

“Could be in any dream,” Hastur said. “If he can control the Crimson Ones at a distance, he can work from as far away as he wants.”

Corona twitched. “Just… Great.”

Sparkler defended her from a Matricie shot. “I think the truce has been broken!”

Corona sighed – noticing how the dream had turned into a three-way battlefield between Crimson Ones, the Embodiment, and Matrices. “I’m beginning to think we can’t do much else here.”

“Really?”
“We don’t understand the reasons behind this battle. Which side should we support? Obviously not Flagg, but Nyarlathotep is basically just a mini-Flagg and the Matrices have Luna. Then there’s the Mindflayer which apparently has *other* Lunas, whatever the demogorgons are, and… yeah. Basically one big mess.”

“We could try to find the Yith?”

“…I hear they’re more passive observers than anything.”

“They might have seen some things then.”

Corona nodded. “…Or I could just go rough Thrackerzod up and not give her a choice about spilling the beans.”

“If you think that’ll work.”

“I think I’m going to try it,” Corona said with a growl. “She does need it.”

Sparkler looked like she wanted to object, but shook her head. “Whatever you need.”

Corona closed her eyes and focused. “See you tomorrow night, probably.”

She woke up in her bed, for real this time.

“Oh thank Armonia,” Lady Rarity said, slipping into her old swear. “I thought you weren’t coming out.”

Oliva gave Corona a thumbs up. “I knew you’d pull through. …Even if I still have no idea what was going on in there.”

Corona rubbed her head, grunting. “The Lunas have been captured. There’s a dream war over this thing called Z. I need to go give Thrackerzod a piece of my mind and go track down the Race of Yith.”

“Ah, that latter one I can help with,” Olivia said. “Expect something later today.”

Corona realized there was a third person in the room – Death. “…What’re you doing here?”

*I WAS PRESENT WHEN MISTRESS LUNA WAS CAPTURED BY THE MATRICES. I AM UNAWARE OF WHERE THEY ARE NOW, BUT SINCE VALENTINE WAS ALSO TAKEN, THIS HAS SUDDENLY BECOME MY CONCERN.*

“This is spiraling out of control,” Corona said, standing up quickly. “This war over this Z thing is spilling out of Topeka into our worlds. I’m not going to stand for this.”

“What are you going to do?” Lady Rarity asked.

“Give Thrackerzod a piece of my mind. Death, you up for some dangerous invasion of privacy?”

*IF IT WILL HELP, I WILL PUT ASIDE MY RESERVATIONS.*

“Good. Rarity, while we’re moving, help me write up a report for Eve and the other Overheads. There’s going to be a lot…”

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Corona blew open the doors of the League of Sweetie Belles. “THRACKERZOD!”

Minna took one look at Corona’s face and decided now was a good time to start drinking a juice box. It punctuated the sudden silence in the League of Sweetie Belles.

Thrackerzod turned to look at Corona with a calm expression. “Corona, if this is about the dream craziness, I still know nothing.”

Corona noticed that Allure, Squeaky, and Bot were standing behind Thrackerzod defensively – with the rest of the League looking ready for a fight as well.

Corona glanced behind her at Lady Rarity and Death, then back at Thrackerzod. “What did you tell them, Thrackerzod? That I’d gone mad for blood? That I’ve lost my mind or something?”

“She just told us we needed to protect her,” Allure said. “That was good enough for us.”

“Then maybe you need to learn a little bit about what’s going on,” Corona said, taking a few steps forward. “Thrackerzod here is lying through her teeth. And yes, she does have good reason to. That ‘good reason’ is because her higher eldritch bosses have demanded she not reveal anything. But she’s hiding secrets about a war happening in a dream world that have almost every version of Luna in Merodi Universalis in a coma. Ambassador Valentine as well, if you’re wondering why Death’s here.”

Squeaky’s certainty faltered first. “…You’re sure.”

“As sure as I am that Nyarlathotep has been bending both Hastur and Thrackerzod to his will for this little war. I think you know more about Nyarlathotep than I do. I bet it isn’t pretty.”

Allure’s determination faltered. “…Zod… She’s right, isn’t she?”

Thrackerzod grimaced. “No,” she lied, her eyes moist.

“…Right girls, stand down,” Allure said, backing away from Thrackerzod. “Sorry,” she whispered to her friend.

“I know,” Thrackerzod said.

Bot blinked. “Wait, what? What are we doing!? We need to defend Zod, regardless!”

“Sometimes your friends do things you can’t help,” Allure told Bot.

“Zod isn’t like that! Zod is 100% reliable!”

Allure sighed. “…You can fight with her if you want, Bot. But the rest of us aren’t.”

“I will!” Bot declared, moving closer to Thrackerzod. “I will stand by you until the end!”

Thrackerzod sighed. “Bot, go stand with the rest of them.”

“Huh!”?

“I said go stand with the rest of them.”

Bot was unable to process the meaning behind this. She followed the order, backing up to be with Squeaky and Allure.
Thrackerzod turned to Corona. “I don’t know anything,” she said. “You can’t make me tell you anything.”

Corona dissipated one of her gloves, flexing her bare hand. “I don’t have to.”

“My mind is more than you can handle.”

“I think I can manage, especially with some backup.” She nodded to Death.

The two of them readied for a fight. “All I have to do is touch you.” She teleported to Thrackerzod, but she teleported away at the same time.

“IF I THINK THE ONLY WAY TO KEEP THE INFORMATION FROM YOU IS TO KILL MYSELF I WILL DO IT!” Thrackerzod wailed. “DON’T MAKE ME DO THAT!”

Corona’s determination fell down. “W-what?”


Corona stared at Thrackerzod. “…How can you live like this?”

“I know it doesn’t make sense to you. It doesn’t make sense to any of you. Painful as it would be, it would still be the right decision. It’s what we are.”

Allure put a hoof to her mouth. “Thrackerzod…”

“It’d be simple. I know the exact spell to snap this form’s brain through a higher-level construct. My soul will return to the Embodiment and I will never return. I’d… I’d rather not do that. Don’t make me.”

Corona turned to Death. “Hey, Death?”

YES?

“Can you keep her from dying?”

SURE.

“Thanks.”

Thrackerzod blinked. “Well that’s completely cheap.”

“Yeah. It is. Gonna just let me touch you now or-”

Thrackerzod put an eldritch knife to Lady Rarity’s throat. “How’s this?”

I CAN KEEP HER FROM DYING TOO. IN FACT, HOW ABOUT I JUST REMOVE DEATH FROM THIS AREA FOR THE NEXT FEW MINUTES? IT’LL KEEP YOU FROM THREATENING ANYONE ELSE.

Thrackerzod twitched. “Why can’t you ju-”

Corona dropped the illusion of herself standing next to Death – revealing herself to actually be right next to Thrackerzod. “Gotcha,” she said, placing her bare hand on the eldritch unicorn.

Holy Celestia, this hurts. Corona said, forcing her pre-established mental link with Death to maintain
itself. *Have to push through, though, have to push through…*

The surface emotions were relatively easy. Exceptionally heightened feelings of distress filled her mind. The fact that *uncertainty* wasn’t one of them bothered her to no end – Thrackerzod really believed following her orders was the best thing she could do. There was no doubt at *all*. Just a deep sorrow that came from the understanding she knew her friends lacked.

Corona wanted *so* badly to alter that part of Thrackerzod, but she needed to retain her energy. She went in deeper, dragging Death with her into the eldritch unicorn’s mind.

They passed the physical part of her mind easily, where all the biological instincts and muscle memories were stored. It was rather boring and empty, but it served as a buffer between them and Thrackerzod’s *true* mind.

A truly horrific thing. She and Death saw memories that didn’t exist in what they would consider time. They saw her ‘talking’ in three separate timelines simultaneously. They saw her bowing to Azathoth…

…Corona couldn’t take the sight of Azathoth. Her mind had to remove it for her. She turned to Death. “…Can you describe it to me?”

…EVERYTHING CONSOLIDATED INTO AN ABSOLUTE FOOL, ALL POWER TOGETHER IN THE LOWEST WAY.

“What?”

BUT THE FOOLISH AND THE MEEK SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH.

“…That sounds like something Flutterfree or Rev would say.”

IT IS.

Corona sighed, forcing the memories of Azathoth out of the way. “We need Z,” she spoke aloud. “Z… Z…” She sifted through Thrackerzod’s mind. “See anything?” she asked Death.

I HEAR BUZZING. LIKE FROM AN INSECT.

Corona’s eyes noticed something *normal* in the memories. “I see the demogorgons. They’re standing like a wall…”

And then everything snapped to black.

“…What the heck? Where’d it all go?” Corona asked nobody in particular. She reached out with her hands, scrambling for any mental threads. “This has never happened before…”

WE ARE NOT ALONE IN HERE.

“Did one of the Sweeties come in?”

“No,” Nyarlathotep said, appearing in front of Corona and Death. “I did.”

“You!” Corona blurted. “How did y-”

“She called me,” Nyarlathotep said, walking around the two of them, a predatory expression on his face. “You’re prodding where you should not tread, Corona.”
Corona glared at him. “Why would you even care what I know? You’d like to see me go insane, right?”

Nyarlathotep put his face close to hers. “I would love nothing more than for you to fall to my gifts, Corona. But there are things you do not get to uncover.”

Corona grinned as she realized something. “You think I can mess up your plans somehow! That there’s something I can do that will ruin everything! Ooooh I bet you’re really mad the Matrices attacked when they did and put me on the track of something you actually cared about!”

Nyarlathotep scowled. “You will not be getting anything from Thrackerzod, of that I am certain. Furthermore…” Nyarlathotep pointed a finger at her head. “Say goodbye to your sanity.”

Ponyfeathers.

Corona knew outright escaping wasn’t an option here, so she did the next best thing.

*Fight the elder god head on.*

She rushed her hand forward, intercepting the mental attack he had sent toward her head. It passed right through her initial defenses, tearing away at her mind. She could *feel* her earliest memories start to peel away.

“No… happening!” She shouted. Pushing all her magic into her mental projection. “RAGING SIGHTS! ALPHA-SEVEN-NINER!”

Roger.

Magical circles appeared around Corona and Thrackerzod’s bodies in the real world, shooting as much magic as they could into defending Corona’s mind. A third ring appeared above them.

“Attention!” Raging Sights called. “Nyarlathotep is attempting to destroy Corona’s mind! Any magic you can provide into the floating ring will be much appreciated!”

“YOU HEARD HER!” Allure shouted. “GIVE IT EVERYTHING YOU’VE GOT!”

The entire present League of Sweetie Belles did just that. Those that couldn’t made calls to people they knew. Magicians from across Celestia City started teleporting in to assist. One Sweetie in particular had a fractured crystal in her head instead of a gemstone, and was shooting more light energy into the magic rings than any of the other Sweeties.

Nyarlathotep grinned. “What exactly do you think more magic will do?”

“Keep me alive?” Corona suggested, for the moment holding her consciousness.

“You can’t die right now,” Nyarlathotep said, reminding her that Death was present. “You should be more worried about coming out of this with every diagnosable insanity, and some others.”

“Yeah, how about no?” Corona suggested, pushing back even harder. “RAGING SIGHTS! Try some editing in here!”

*Negative. Nyarlathotep is anchoring his presence, somehow.*

“Figures,” Corona muttered, trying to think of something else to do.

Death provided what he could. *HE IS BEYOND ME. I CANNOT SEE HIS DEATH.*
Nyarlathotep grinned. “See? You are still just a mortal, no matter how much power you have. More and more allies appear outside to give you power. In hopes that you will survive with your mind intact. But it won’t happen. I am the spawn of Azathoth himself! The Crawling Chaos! I run the Eldritch Embodiment! You’re just a biological curiosity!”

Corona’s eyes flashed purple. “You’re about to be surprised.”

Nyarlathotep narrowed his eyes. “What are you tapping into?”

“There was a time, long ago, when I was completely controlled by an entity known as Majora,” she said, a strange purple heart-shaped object appearing behind her head, spikes surrounding her like a halo. Her ears twitched. “That entity is now trapped in a black hole, unable to do anything with her power. But I’ve carried the scars of her in me ever since that day. Something about you has awakened those things.”

Nyarlathotep roared. “NO!”

“HAVE A TASTE OF YOUR OWN MEDICINE!” Corona shouted, purple writhing tentacles of impossibility lashing out of her essence and surrounding Nyarlathotep. It pushed him back enough to give her access to Thrackerzod’s thoughts again. “Here we go… Just a little proddin-”

Nyarlathotep left.

In the process Corona felt every bit of Majora’s essence vanish from her along with a tremendous portion of Thrackerzod’s mind.

She drifted back to the real world, taking a few steps back from Thrackerzod. She put her hand on a wall and actually threw up. “Aaaaah…”


“Not really,” Minna answered for her. “More like a draw.”

Allure didn’t register that it was her daughter that had said that. “…Corona? Can you… explain?”

Corona tried to speak but just kept heaving instead.

“WE SHOWED THAT WE HAD ENOUGH POWER TO RESIST NYARLATHOTEP’S MENTAL SHADOW, Death answered. SO RATHER THAN SUFFER A TRUE EMBARRASSMENT, HE CUT HIS LOSSES AND RAN, DRAGGING WHO KNOWS WHAT WITH HIM.”

Corona gasped. “I… am never going to be able to do that agaiHUUUURK.” She trembled, slamming her second arm on the wall. “Sorry… For the mess…”

“Don’t worry about the stupid mess!” Allure blurted. “We need to get you to a doctor!”

“I… Am fine…”

THE ONLY REASON YOU AREN’T DYING ON THE SPOT IS BECAUSE I’M HERE.

“…Death, you’re supposed to have my back. I… GAAA- okay false alarm, nothing left to reGURGItate…” Why do I feel like I’m missing a lung?

“…Deity combat…” Thrackerzod said, staring off into space.

“R-right, Zod,” Corona said, trembling, but managing to turn her face to look at Thrackerzod. “How you feeling? He did something to… you.”

“He removed it,” Thrackerzod said, a hoof to her side. “He… He removed it. All of it!”

“But you’re still talking with the deep voice,” Squeaky said. “Don’t you lose that if you lose your eldritch half?”

“I’m not talking about that! He… I…” She rubbed her head. “I think he was trying to take anything away you could use against him. Any piece of information… Any protocol he installed in me… … He just took everything else with him in his rush.”

Allure gasped. “Does that mean what I think it means?”

“I… I don’t have to obey Azathoth anymore.” Thrackerzod blinked. “Or Hastur. Or any of them.”

Corona gave her a weak thumbs up. “Glad I could… Help…”

Allure dismissed her with a hoof wave. “Thrackerzod. Is this… Is it a good thing, for you?”

Thrackerzod stared at Allure. “I have no idea.”

“Then think about it. Above all else, don’t re-establish your contract with Azathoth without giving it some serious thought.”

Thrackerzod nodded slowly. She scrunched her face up, trying not to cry.

Allure pulled her into a hug. “It’s okay.”

“I… I was going to kill myself. I was going to kill you. If Lady Rarity didn’t work I was going to put a knife to Minna’s throat!” Thrackerzod wailed. “I… I…”

Corona stumbled over, sitting on the ground next to them. “You understand now, don’t you?”

Thrackerzod stared at her.

“You understand how what you were doing wasn’t right.”

Thrackerzod took a moment to think – but then she nodded.

“Good.” Corona let out a sigh. “That’s all I need.”

“…Didn’t you want information?”

“I did. But you don’t have that anymore. So I’ll just be happy with you having learned something.” She flopped onto her back. “That and a hospital bed.”

“I probably need one as well.”

“We’re in luck, because the paramedics are on the way! Woo!”
Olivia walked into Corona’s hospital room. “How are you feeling?”

Corona sat up in her hospital bed and shrugged. “Not like I’m about to die anymore. That’s good, I guess. Still no closer to solving this Topeka problem.”

“I might have something for you. So, you know how the Yith are consciousness-jumpers?”

“Yeah?”

“The only way I could get an audience with one is if I agreed to let them possess me for two days and do whatever they wanted aside from kill me.”

“Olivia, don’t do i-”

Olivia pressed a button. “Sorry, Amiga!”

Corona facepalmed. “Oh boy…”

A different look came over Olivia’s features. “Ah, the perfect skin tone.”

“That’s just creepy.”

The Yith folded her arms. “Oh, you’re the one who has questions? Right, right, right, the traaaaade… Make this quick, all right? I’ve got a lot of human pleasures to experience and so little time.”

Corona shifted uncomfortably. “…Right. So, I need to know about Topeka.”

“Of course you do. Anything specific?”

“What is Z?”

The Yith raised her eyebrows. “Surprised you’ve even heard of Z.”

“You going to tell me or not?”

“Hmm… Well I’d have to invalidate the contract not to tell you, and that’d look bad. So fine. Z is the entity that defines the rules that operate Topeka.”

“What?”

“Z is the entity that defines the rules that operate Topeka.”

“I heard you the first time, I meant elaborate.”

“Fine. There are many, many ways a combination dream world could work. Everyone could do anything they wanted, nobody would ever become aware of the dreams, or everything that happened in dreams would leave lasting damage. Z is the entity that determines all dreams happen according to standard biological understanding, that deaths aren’t permanent, and that only a select few are dreamers. Z is the reason you can walk to and from dreams the way you do.”

Corona nodded. “So why does everyone want to get to Z?”

“To control it, of course. Z is a dreamer just like everyone else. If Z can be forced to be woken up, you can take the place of Z.”

Corona’s eyes widened. “And if the Embodiment did that…”
“Dreams could become an eldritch playground. Most everyone connected to Topeka would go mad in an instant if Nyarlathotep had his way.”

“Holy… And the Matrices would create a dreamscape that let them do anything… Don’t even want to think of what Flagg or the demogorgons would do…”

“Don’t know about Flagg. The demogorgons want to corrupt every universe they come in contact with to be like their homeworld. Not pretty.”

“…I can imagine…” Corona muttered, flopping back onto her bed. “What are you guys doing about it?”

“We have a button to sever ourselves from Topeka if things go south. For now, we watch.”

“Mmm. Any suggestions?”

“Get to Z yourself and take it over. Far as we can tell, it only takes a single entity to do it. We’re not sure why it’s so hard to get to, though. They’ve been fighting over Z for a long time.”

Corona shook her head. “And it falls to me to deal with this.”

“Yep! Good luck being the hero! I’m off to find fun people!”

“Sure.” Corona said, not looking at the Yith as she left.

She wasn’t cleared to leave the hospital yet – and even if she were, what would she really do? Everything was in Topeka now. She used her phone to send what she learned to Eve and then… that was that.

Find Z… How was she going to find Z before all of them…

There was a knock at her door.

“Come in,” she said.

Thrackerzod walked into the room. The two stared at each other for a moment.

“I need you to take me into Topeka,” Thrackerzod said. “I’m not sure I can do it myself anymore.”

“Sure. May I ask why?”

“I need to talk to Hastur. …Without risking my life.”

Corona’s expression softened. “Come up here.” Thrackerzod jumped up on the bed. She curled up in Corona’s lap like a big dog. The eldritch unicorn was significantly less steadfast and certain than usual.

Corona closed her eyes – and forced them both to sleep.

She found Thrackerzod in Topeka quickly. The unicorn was staring at other versions of herself jumping off a cliff into the gaping maw of Nyarlathotep.

“The Collector was nice enough to let you hate him, I hear,” Thrackerzod said. “He valued it when people voiced their disagreement. Liked differing opinions. I have a feeling the Embodiment would work better if it were like that.”
“You hate your masters?”

“I hate Nyarlathotep. Always have. The only one of the outer gods who had any interest in mortal beings, always fixated on driving them to madness to satisfy his own amusements. It was worse than the apathy of all the others.”

“And Azathoth?”

“…Azathoth is called the Blind Idiot for a reason,” Thrackerzod admitted. “He cares very little for anything. So little that his direct spawn can develop further beyond him than most. …Nyarlathotep is Azathoth’s son, as much as the word ‘son’ can apply to him anyway. He broke free long before I was created. …Most of the outer gods come from Azathoth. A Blind Idiot who can’t even wrangle his own spawn.” She shook her head. “I don’t know what it means about me.”

“I don’t know either. I can’t.”

Thrackerzod nodded. “But you try. That’s impressive.” She stood up and stretched her legs. “I don’t think Azathoth was a bad master. He treated me well and… ‘respected my wishes’ isn’t quite right. I think ‘acknowledged that I had wishes’ fits better. But he still signed me off to Nyarlathotep without much fuss.” She looked up at the sky. “…So I’m not going back. Just like the other me suggested.”

“…The League would be proud of you.”

“It’s not you all I’m concerned about,” Thrackerzod said. “I may be a ‘high daemon prince’ – or princess, whatever – but an entity of my relatively low stature becoming a free elder one? Unheard of. Blasphemous. Worthy of extermination.”

“We can protect you, you know. We’re not powerless anymore.”

“I know,” Thrackerzod nodded. “But that doesn’t change the fact that I don’t just know ponies. I know other beings as well.” She looked at Corona. “Take me to Hastur.”

Corona nodded. She started walking – though didn’t get anywhere before Sparkler appeared.

“Hey! How’d it go?”

“…I’ll explain later,” Corona said. “We’ve got something to do first.”

“Uh… Okay.” Sparkler accepted this without batting an eye.

They shifted dreams… and arrived at an eldritch encampment in a dream in a cold desert of blue sand.

Nyarlathotep was waiting for them. “Thrackerzod, you’re not here to grovel, nor have you appealed directly to Azathoth’s court.”

“I am seeking the counsel of my direct superior, Nyarlathotep. That counts as appealing to Azathoth’s court.”

“Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing, traitor.”

Thrackerzod raised an eyebrow. “And don’t think I’m trying to be sneaky. By the way, this is your fault. I hope you spend the rest of eternity thinking about the chain of mistakes that led to this moment.”

Nyarlathotep snarled. “You may have Hastur’s counsel, as is your right. But know that you will live
to regret this decision, Thrackerzod. Your rebirth clause is in the process of being rescinded.”

“I’m aware,” Thrackerzod said with a smile. “Hey, Corona, have one of those glowing bottles? I think I’ll be taking one.”

“Got an infinite supply, Zod,” Corona said with a wink.

Nyarlathotep bristled. He turned and walked away. Hastur walked up in his place.

“…I’m not coming back,” Thrackerzod said. “I know you can’t understand.”

“I do not need to,” Hastur said. “Rest easy, Thrackerzod. I will not hunt you for retribution. If I am honest, I suspected this would happen one day. Furthering that idea: it’s about time.”

Thrackerzod nodded, tears in her eyes. “You’re way too progressive, Hastur.”

“You are the special one, Thrackerzod. I wish you luck in your life as a completely new sort of being.” He glanced over his shoulder. “I’m not going to be able to prevent Nyarlathotep’s revocation of your rebirth clause. I also doubt I will be able to take you into Embodiment worlds ever again. But I can demand they keep everything else of yours. They cannot deny all that you’ve done for us, even if it was in the land of mortals.”

“Thank you, old friend.”

“No, thank you for showing me something new.”

The two ‘shook hands’, even though it didn’t make any physical sense to Corona or Sparkler.

Thrackerzod turned to Corona. “Wake me up now. I don’t want anything to do with this dream war. I will not fight the Embodiment.”

Corona nodded. “I understand.” She raised a hand – and woke Thrackerzod up.

Nyarlathotep walked back over. “Corona…”

“Nyarlathotep. Your entire fight was useless. I learned about Z from the Yith.”

Nyarlathotep bristled.

“I’m going to find Z. And I’m going to keep you from using it.”

“Once you become Z I will take you over!”

“If what I’ve been told is true, I can just redefine Topeka to not allow Z to wake up. Ever.”

Nyarlathotep had no response to this.

“See ya Nyarlathotep. Oh, by the way? Flagg’s better at what he does than you.”

“CO.”

Corona dragged herself and Sparkler to a dream on top of a giant hamburger. Corona flopped onto her back and let out a sigh of relief. “I have had way too much stress in me the last few hours. And not enough actual sleep.”
“Don’t I know it.”

“…Sparkler?”

“Hmm?”

“I’m glad you’re here. It’s nice not to have to go through this alone.”

Sparkler smiled warmly. “Don’t mention it. It’s the same way for me. Though I would like an explanation for what happened with Thrackerzod that I wasn’t aware of.”

Corona chuckled and told her everything about her and Death’s little escapade to the League of Sweetie Belles, the conflict with Thrackerzod, Nyarlathotep, Thrackerzod’s freedom, and what she learned from the Yith.

“…And you know the rest.”

“Looks like I missed a lot of drama.”

“You could say that. You could also say you saved yourself a lot of trouble and heartache. What happened to you in the Census?”

“As always my time spent waking proves to be rather useless. The Census is all ‘thank you for your report, please wait one to two weeks for action to be taken’. It’s organized but sometimes it’s so annoying.”

“It does help a lot when you and your friends are the ones who made the system.”

“Look at you, hero of Merodi Universalis, while I’m just a lowly Census unicorn. A number on a sheet of paper somewhere.” She rolled her eyes. “Now look at me being mopey here. It’s nothing to complain about.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I’ll listen either way.”

“You know for being so fiery you’re a surprisingly good listener.”

Corona smiled. “I try to make the best of myself with what I have.”

“I can see why you’re people think so highly of you.”

“Wasn’t always that way,” Corona commented. “Used to be the girl who would break the rules. The one who skirted the edge of what was legal and what wasn’t. Then I wasn’t the one who was given control of the secrets and I went on a different path. One of a guardian.” She looked at her hands. “I’ve been given a lot of power. A Stand, nearly limitless magic, a device, power over fire, and the knack to understand and shape emotions and memories. As a pseudo-alicorn, my magic only increases with time…”

“You do seem to have won the lottery.”

“I was able to eke out a draw against Nyarlathotep…” Corona realized. “Holy Celestia, how strong am I?”

“Maybe that’s why Nyarlathotep fears you. He thinks you can do something to become Z.”

“But my powers don’t really translate to Topeka – at least not beyond a certain point. It’s just my will. Powerful and with a few mental tricks, but it’s not like I can blow the place up by power
alone.”

“C’mon, you’re Corona Shimmer, you’ll figure something out.”

“Hmm...” She stood up tall. “Maybe all I need to do is walk toward Z. Just will myself to find it. See where that takes me.”

“Following destiny, huh?”

“Ka connected us together. I think it’s in a giving mood today.” She focused ahead – and took a step toward Z.

The dream she ended up in was a three dimensional field of colorful falling block shapes. They appeared on a yellow cube made of eight blocks, falling alongside dozens of different arrangements. The dream was absolutely filled with demogorgons. Dozens of toothy-flower faced monstrosities turned to her and screeched.

Corona blinked. “Okay, so not the best idea maybe.”

“Retreat...?”

“Oh yes.” Corona moved to leave the dream – but then she saw something that gave her hope.

The Doctor pointing at demogorgons and making them vanish, several at a time. Even when they attacked all at once, they just vanished – awoken.

Corona picked up Sparkler. “Wh-OAH.” She jumped into the air over the demogorgons, flying down to the Doctor. He turned to her – expecting another attack – but stopped short of waking her up.

“What in time’s flow are you doing here?”

“You didn’t tell us everything,” Corona said, sideswiping a demogorgon coming from behind the Doctor. “That’s what.”

“You didn’t need to know!” the Doctor declared, wiping more demogorgons off the map.

“Turns out Luna was captured because of the war. And now all the Lunas are. And Valentine. It’s spiraling out of control, Doctor. This is no longer just the concern of Topeka.”

“Don’t forget about the part where Nyarlathotep wants to drive everyone Topeka touches insane!” Sparkler added. “That’s bad!”

“Yeah. I’m going to stop that.” Corona forced another demogorgon awake. “I’m going to find Z and make sure none of the sides in this war can do what they want with it.”

The Doctor nodded, blowing away the last of the demogorgons with his thoughts. “…I can see I’m not going to be able to stop you.”

“No, duh. Also, you’re not going to get away with half-truths or omission this time. Frankly I’m starting to believe what Vriska says about you.”

That cut the Doctor deep. “Why does everyone-? Never mind, fine, you’re here, might as well. As you know, Z is the entity that defines what rules Topeka operates under. Z is, presumably, from the first universe Topeka appeared in, though this isn’t really something we know for sure. We do know
that if you can wake Z up, you can gain control of Topeka and define it by your own rules, creating a new dreamscape. Nyarlathotep desires widespread madness, the Matrices desire order and power, the Mindflayer wants an avenue to infect other worlds, and the Crimson Ones… I think they just want to watch the world burn.”

“Makes sense, since they’re aspects of Flagg’s consciousness.”

The Doctor blinked. “…Clever, clever as always…”

“What about the demogorgons?”

“I did say Mindflayer didn’t I?”

Coronacocked her head. “They’re part of the Mindflayer?”

The Doctor nodded. “The Mindflayer is a non-aligned eldritch being, similar to the Majora you faced in your past. It has discovered a way to infect the multiverse by calling out to powerful psychics in other universes and having them ‘summon’ the Mindflayer’s minions to that world. Already the Mindflayer has been sending its demogorgons through Topeka to find psychics. It’s an incredibly good deal for the entity that will only get worse if it’s allowed to succeed.” The Doctor flexed his wrist. “The worst part? The Mindflayer is easily the closest to Z out of all of them. If you try to find Z directly, you almost always run into Mindflayers keeping you from progressing.”

“Right. Here’s the big question. How do we fight them like you are? I’ve only seen you – and maybe Flagg – with this much control over the dreams. What’s the secret?”

The Doctor smiled cheekily. “Why, Corona my dear – that’s because I’m not dreaming right now. I’m physically here.”

Corona and Sparkler stared at him. “…What?” Corona asked.

“It’s not something those fighting in the war are able to do – eldritch cannot exist here, the demogorgons require mental connections to do their work, and pure physical code isn’t powerful at all. But a Time Lord physically standing in a world that can be shaped by psychic power? It’s a bit unfair. I suspect Flagg knows this and has placed himself physically in Topeka as well.”

“But how does that even make sense? Topeka isn’t a place!”

“It has to exist somewhere,” the Doctor said. “Due to its own nature, it can’t exist in just one universe. So it exists in several of its own unique universes that are constantly shuffling around, making it exceptionally difficult to just dial in.”

“How do we get here physically?”

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. “There are drawbacks. Wounds you receive while physically here will be real. You can’t just exert will to undo them.”

“Do I look like I care about a little risk? If I’ll be able to use my higher spells I’d be more effective than even you at clearing these demogorgons that are between us and Z. Just imagine what a cascading psychic burst could do if it was actually allowed to execute fully.”

The Doctor nodded slowly. “It would be enormously helpful. You are, in many ways, the perfect being to do this. A powerful dreamer, a powerful empath, and one with a determined, passionate heart.” He looked into her eyes. “…I trust you, Corona. I trust you to defend Topeka.”
Corona nodded. “You can count on me.”

The Doctor looked at Sparkler. “ Normally it would take a while to get you to come here physically, but I just had a thought. Wake yourself up, but when you try to come back, focus on Sparkler here. Use the connection between you two to drag yourself physically here. Do not try to fall asleep, Corona. Understand?”

Corona nodded. “I do. I might be a few minutes – I’ll gather some allies in the waking world first.”

“Hurry,” the Doctor pleaded. “We do not know how close the Mindflayer is to Z. It could be about to claim its prize for all we know.”

Corona nodded. “Right.” She closed her eyes and woke herself up. She was still in the hospital bed – but she felt perfectly healthy now.

Lady Rarity looked up from the chair she was sitting in. “Oh! Welcome back!”

“We’re going back in,” Corona said. “Quickly. Is Death around?”

“I… think so?”

Corona lifted Raging Sights up, activating a magic location spell – easy for a signature as powerful as Death. She teleported him right into the room.

…CARE TO EXPLAIN?

“We’re going into Topeka to find Z and claim it so everybody doesn’t go insane. Your job is to get Lady Rarity in there, and come find me. I’m doing something a little different.”

I WOULD PREFER MORE EXPLANATION BUT IT APPEARS YOU ARE IN A HURRY.

Corona dissipated her gloves and placed her hands on Lady Rarity and Death’s heads, giving them a basic feeling of what was going on. “Got the urgency yet?”

“I think so?” Lady Rarity said, cocking her head. “That was all convoluted.”

IT IS CLEAR ENOUGH THAT YOU NEED OUR ASSISTANCE.

“Thank you,” Corona said. “Sending you both to sleep now.” She snapped her fingers, forcing them asleep.

Then she took a deep breath and focused on her mind – making it as awake as she could. She held her hands to the sides of her head, making a triangle of magic in conjunction with her horn. She willed herself not to go to Topeka, but to connect with Sparkler.

She wasn’t all that surprised when she found the connection instantly. They had been finding each other so easily over the course of this dreaming debacle; of course they had a strong link. She reached into reality, telling Raging Sights to tear a dimensional hole through that connection.

She promptly fell flat on her face on the yellow cube next to Sparkler and the Doctor. “Ow.”

The Doctor looked at Sparkler with a thoughtful expression. “I thought so.” He extended a hand to Corona. “Welcome to physical Topeka.”

She accepted the hand and stood to her feet, spreading her wings. “Doesn’t feel all that different.”
“Try casting a higher spell.”

Corona traced a figure-eight with her hands and spread her fingers wide. Everything in her field of view lit on fire. “Sweet.” She dreamed up a golf club. “Dream constructs still work.”

“I doubt you’ll be able to shape a dream anymore, or alter yourself with your will, but otherwise yes.”

Death and Lady Rarity arrived, the spirid rubbing her head. “I’m never going to get used to the feeling of everything sliding by my face…”

“There they are,” Corona said. “Hey guys!”

WHERE ARE THE OPPONENTS?

Corona wiggled her fingers. “In the next dream. Have to move a little closer to Z…”

“Remove most of the demogorgons from the dream so they’ll let you move to the next one,” the Doctor said. “Eventually you’ll pass their ‘fortifications’.”

Corona nodded, taking a fighting stance. “Everyone ready?”

Sparkler, Lady Rarity, Death, and the Doctor nodded.

She pushed them to the next dream. A meteor flying through space with normal gravity – absolutely covered in demogorgons.

Corona flexed her wrists. “Time to see if this really works. Stay back for a minute.” She pressed her hands together, summoning a small red spark between her hands. She sent it forward with her power into the mind of a demogorgon. It shook for a few seconds before waking up – infecting five nearby demogorgons with the spell, then five more, then five more… Until the entire meteor was cleared.

“…Do we even need to be here?” Lady Rarity asked.

NO DOUBT SOMETHING WILL GO WRONG AT SOME POINT.

Corona smirked. “Until then, I’m going to enjoy the curbstomp. Next dreeeeeam!”

“Woohoo!” Sparkler shouted.

They shifted to a dream that was an infinite hallway – of course crawling with demogorgons. The same spell took care of them in quick succession.

Corona decided to have some fun. “Bacon Pancakes!” she yelled, flattening a few dreaming demogorgons with her Stand before they woke up. “You know, I missed you.”

Bacon Pancakes was not the kind of Stand that could respond to affirmation.

“Next dream!”

“And the Lady Rarity headache slideshow continues…” Lady Rarity muttered.

The next few dreams went much the same way – demogorgons falling before they even realized what was happening. It was way too easy.

“I can see why Nyarlathotep thought you might be a threat,” Sparkler said, whistling. “All you had
to do was figure this out and you basically own the place.”

“Sometimes it feels like a burden to have a lot of power. A constant war in my mind to think about what’s right and what isn’t. But right now?” She engulfed seven demogorgons in a rush of flame. “Right now it just feels exhilarating.”

DON’T LOSE SIGHT OF WHO YOU ARE.

Corona winked at him. “Don’t worry. I’m not. But we’re in a lucky situation where all I’m doing is waking people up! Not any worse than your particularly potent nightmare. Which is frankly less than these monsters deserve.”

Lady Rarity sighed. “Let me guess. Next dream?”

“NEEEEEEXT DREAM!”

The next dream seemed empty at first. It was a forest lit by a haunting blue light that didn’t have a clear source. The sky was black and the sky was filled with floating white particles far too large to be simple dust.

“One of the Mindflayer’s worlds…” the Doctor said. “Or a mental image of one, anyway.”

Lady Rarity stooped down to investigate the base of the trees. “Everything is covered in… vines?”

“It appears to be one cohesive life form,” Sparkler observed. “This entire planet has been infected.”

“Entire universe,” the Doctor said. “The Mindflayer works fast. It’s known to infect universes in nearby clusters, usually moving along alternates of the same world. It works almost like an animal, wishing only to spread…”

AND IT ALSO HAPPENS TO BE RIGHT ABOVE US, Death observed.

“That’ll just be a dream construct,” the Doctor said, looking up. “No way the Mindflayer itself would ever bother letting its central intelligence be vulnerable while dreaming in Topeka.”

A psychic burst hit the Doctor directly, driving him into the ground. “Ow.”

Corona looked up as well, taking in the form of the Mindflayer. It… was a being of swirling darkness, consolidated in a figure rising out of the ground with four tremendous limbs and a single, drop-shaped head. The being had no features, but Corona could feel it staring into all their souls.

It was also the size of a sports stadium.

Corona whistled. “Nice.”

“How are we even going to fight this thing!?” Lady Rarity blurted. “I don’t think smashing is going to do much against eldritch smoke!”

“It’s still just a dreamer,” Corona said, creating a magical circle. “I’ve got this.”

She didn’t have it. The Mindflayer’s smoke flew past her, surrounding her in darkness. Since she was physically present, that gave it an in it didn’t usually have.

It shoved the essence of its smoke into Corona’s eyes, mouth, and ears, directly into her real brain. Corona knew of only one defense against this.
The old trick she had learned from Majora. *Try to infect my mind; I’ll go infect yours.*

Corona pushed her mental energy back along the Mindflayer’s connection. She didn’t seek understanding or control; she just wanted to wreak havoc on the Mindflayer’s consciousness. Had the Mindflayer physically been here, this would have been a pointless endeavor doomed to fail from the start.

However, as Corona had said earlier, it was still just a dreamer. Perhaps the most powerful dreamer in all of Topeka aside from Z itself, but still just an entity trapped within the same rules as everyone else.

All Corona had to do was wreck its mind enough to force it awake.

The Mindflayer let out a mind-piercing *screech* before vanishing back to its reality.

Corona put a hand to her head. “I have *got* to stop engaging eldritch abominations in mental combat.”

“You do appear to have a problem,” Lady Rarity joked.

“No kidding. Least I’m not puking my guts out right now.”

Death appeared in front of them. I AM BACK.

“…Back!?”

YOU WERE STUCK IN THERE A WHILE. I WAS EJECTED FROM THE DREAM.

“Oh. Huh. Oh crap that means…”

THE MINDFLAYER COULD RETURN.

“Time to mooove!” Corona blurted. “We nee-”

They all heard slow, mocking clapping. A single ‘man’ walked out of the forest into their field of view. “Well done!” Flagg congratulated. “*Well done!*”

Corona grimaced. “…What did we do?”

“Oh, it’s mostly the Doctor here you should blame,” Flagg said, chuckling. “The fool actually believed me when I told him something.”

The Doctor glared at him. "Flagg, what have you done!?”

“Nothing! You did all the work!” Flagg spread his arms wide. “You thought ‘there’s no way the Mindflayer could want the same thing we do. It must seek to control Topeka for itself’. And I confirmed this in that ‘list of enemies’ I gave you, Doctor. But did you ever stop to think why the demogorgons are always so close to Z but never do anything? Why they seem to be waiting around in every dream you shift closer to Z?”

“…They’re defending it,” Lady Rarity said with a gasp.

“Precisely! The Mindflayer, while intelligent, doesn’t really have much creativity within it. It wouldn’t be able to keep a realm of dreams operable if it found Z. But it *really* likes Topeka, so it decided it would be the defender of the central dreamer.” Flagg *laughed*. “And you just forced the Mindflayer out, and *every demogorgon with it!*”
The Doctor paled. “No…”

“Which means I have first dibs on Z. It won’t take very long for the Matrices and Embodiment to find out the demogorgons are gone either. The Mindflayer’s not going to be able to bring that much force back for a long, long time.”

“We’ll stop you,” Corona said.

The Crimson Ones appeared around Flagg. “You can try.”

Corona readied a shattering spell. Even if Flagg was physically here, that should do something. She pushed-

And then she noticed she was sitting on a beach chair, a red beach surrounding her. Sparkler was to her left. The unicorn removed her sunglasses. “What in Celestia’s name?”

“He just hit us with a dreeper,” Corona said, standing bolt upright. “Have to wake up. Now.”

“Actually you don’t,” Flagg said, appearing in front of them. “I’m currently not in the higher level of Topeka.”

“Your Crimson Ones are.”

“And if they were attacking you, you’d be waking up from the external pain,” Flagg pointed out. “Like being shaken awake.”

Corona narrowed her eyes. “…You want something.”

“That is correct,” Flagg said, smirking. “I would be a fool to ignore the clear protagonist of this little story.”

“Gee, thanks for the acknowledgement.”

“See, if I ignore you, you’ll just defeat me. If I attack you directly, the chances of me coming out on top are minimal, though not zero. But… If I have a talk with you, things can change.”

“You’re a liar, murderer, and basically the most evil thing in existence!” Sparkler blurted. “Why would we listen to you!?”

“Because I might say something interesting.” Flagg said. “You know by now, of course, that I fed the Doctor false information so he would eventually bring the Mindflayer down for me, yes?”

Corona nodded. “Pretty obvious at this point.”

“So, naturally, you would think I want to use Z for my own ends. Possibly to conquer something, to destroy some other world’s society, my general mode of operation. But what if I told you that wasn’t the case?”

“I might believe you if you told me what you actually wanted.”

Flagg’s eyes flashed a deep red. “To destroy Topeka completely, of course.”

Sparkler blinked. “…What? Why throw away that kind of power?”

“Why else?” Flagg threw his arms wide. “Imagine the chaos it would bring about! There are many nations like the USM who have taken to using Topeka for information gathering without
understanding what it is. Many have even grown to depend on it. Lovers spread apart by grand
distances have come together in dreams. It’s become a cohesive presence on the lower level. I could
bring all of that crashing down in a single instant. It would be *delightful.*”

“Yeah, you’re a monster,” Corona muttered.

“But here’s the flipside of the coin,” Flagg said. “Those are *my* reasons for destroying Topeka.”

Sparkler pointed a hoof at him. “Essentially just ‘because I can and because it will tick off a lot of
people’.”

“More or less. But there are other reasons as well… Corona, if Topeka were gone, personal dreams
would no longer be invaded. No information would be spread. There would be no more espionage,
no more threat, no more out-of-control spillover into Merodi Universalis. Think about how all your
problems would go away if Topeka were gone. Of course the Doctor could never condone such
destruction, it might drive a few people mad, and more than a few entities define their lives by
Topeka… But i-”

“Shut up, I’m not going to listen to you,” Corona said.

Flagg shrugged. “Fine. Just assume that, because I’m ‘the incarnation of evil’, that I don’t have a
good point from time to time. Good luck defining Topeka yourself. Or even getting there.” He
vanished from the dream.

“Now we wake up,” Corona muttered. She psychically forced the two of them to the layer above.

Just in time for her to defend against another Crimson One trying to skewer her through the brain.
“Not cool,” she muttered, throwing it to the side. It may not have been able to wake up – but she
could disintegrate its mental energy with a spell.

She looked around. It was just her, Sparkler, and the Doctor. The Crimson Ones must have gotten
Death and Lady Rarity. She didn’t see any sign of Flagg aside from the fragments of his
consciousness.

Which, she could tell, were keeping them from moving out of the dream. “Can anyone else actually
get rid of these things?”

The Doctor nodded, using his control over the dreams to push one away at a time. “Rather slow
work, I’m afraid.”

Sparkler sat between the two of them, feeling rather useless.

Corona smiled at her. “Hey, don’t worry, I’m sure there’s something you’ll be able to do soon eno-”

Nyarlathotep appeared in the dream with Hastur and a small troop of eldritch beings. “Corona
Shimmer… I see you found the secret of physical appearance.”

“Yeah!” She smirked. “But you aren’t happy about that, huh?” She threw a Crimson One at him.

He grabbed it with his mind and sent it away.

“Hey, how’d you do that?” Sparkler asked. “I wanna do that!”

“It comes with having a strong enough will,” Nyarlathotep said, taking a few steps forward. “And
my will is beyond that of any other!”
Corona pointed a finger at him, her entire arm ringed with magic circles. “This is going to feel really, really good.”

And then Nyarlathotep had plowed his fist through Corona’s center, forcing her golden blood to come spraying out the back.

She screamed – but Raging Sights maintained the spell around her arm. She touched her hand directly to Nyarlathotep’s head, sneering. “Hey, Nyarlathotep. How does it feel to be the one woefully outmatched for once?”

“CORON-”

He tried to resist. He really, really did. He put all his force of will to keep himself in Topeka, alive and well. He pushed back against the spell willing that he would not be overpowered by some pathetic mortal’s cheating magic.

But he was just a dreamer.

He vanished from the dream.

Corona smirked at Hastur as she healed herself with her magic. “Oh that felt good. Did that feel as good to you as it did to me?”

Hastur made no response – he just stared at her in… fear? Was that fear?

The Doctor removed another Crimson One. “We should be able to move no-”

Hastur left the dream before the Doctor finished his sentence.

“MOVE!” Corona shouted. The Doctor, herself, and Sparkler jumped to the next dream.

The final dream.

Z’s dream.

It was a round room the width of at least ten football fields. The overall design was metallic and futuristic, the floor ringed with wide, sweeping circular inscriptions. They had appeared at the edge of the room. Ahead of them was Hastur. Ahead of Hastur was Flagg – but he was being slowed down by Agent Smith of the Matrices, the AI’s duplication ability matching Flagg’s red assistance.

In the center of the room was a blue pillar with hundreds of blue sparks flying around it.

Corona heard buzzing.

…Buzzing like an insect…

All three of them took off at a run toward the glowing form they knew was Z – the entity sitting there, waiting for them.

Hastur directed an attack behind him, pushing them back mentally. Corona didn’t take kindly to this, pushing back with a wave of fire that tossed Hastur forward, but also made him fall flat on his face. The three of them passed him, moving to catch up with Flagg and Smith.

Flagg glanced behind them, a strained smile on his face. “Ah, hello there! Mind helping me with this audacious conglomeration of random electrical impulses?”
Smith, to his credit, duplicated himself a few times in order to deal with more targets. Corona noticed he lost the ability to focus as well as he had been before…

She didn’t even try to wake him up. She just charged forward, propelling herself forward like a rocket. She felt Smith fire some bullets at her, going through her leg. She didn’t bother using her magic to heal herself – she needed to get there before anyone else. To-

“Incoming Mindflayer!” Hastur shouted, running faster now. The Mindflayer itself had appeared at the edge of the arena and rushed everyone else, warping the dream space around it to move its tremendous form forward.

Flagg, Smith, the Doctor, and Sparkler all stopped fighting and just started running. Corona felt them closing in on her… Using dream powers to catch up with her?

No… No that didn’t make sense.

Something else was ensuring all of them would arrive at almost the same time…

She looked at the glowing blue form of Z. It had no shape itself, but the things around it did. Every blue speck was a fly. Buzzing just like any fly from the real world would. And they were very agitated right now.

“Z, what are you doing?” Corona called. “Are you protecting yourself? Z!”

The Mindflayer ran into all of them, attempting to surround all in its smoky essence.

Corona reached out a hand and touched Z’s blue glow with the tip of her finger.

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Corona woke up.

Not in the hospital bed, but her on bed, at her house in Lai.

…What…?

She got out of bed and summoned Raging Sights to her. “You remember Topeka, right?”

_The last thing my memories have stored in them is that you touched Z._

“Yeah… this isn’t my empathy, though,” Corona said, taking a look around her room. “I’m not sure this is Topeka either…” She tried to summon a dream construct, but found she couldn’t.

_Were we taken back to the real world?_

Corona opened the door to her bedroom and found an endless white expanse greeting her. “Nope.”

She took a step out into the white expanse, finding it solid. After taking a moment trying to wake herself up, or to return to the real world, she opted to just start walking in a random direction.

She glanced behind her. She couldn’t see the doorway to her room anymore.

“That was fast…” she told herself.

She kept walking, finding nothing, nothing, and more nothing. Endless whiteness in every direction. She performed long-range in-depth scans, discovering only that, yes, there really was a floor beneath
her and that, yes, it went on as far as her sensors could possibly go. There was nothing beneath it and nothing on top of it. The force of gravity was also precisely as it should be on a standard Equis.

She folded her arms. “Well this sucks. Uh… Gonna try something else. Raging Sights, try to lock on to a connection while I focus.”

**Affirmative.**

Corona closed her eyes and focused – trying to home in on Sparkler. She felt the connection almost immediately. She opened her eyes.

There was a door in front of her. It opened all on its own, revealing Sparkler on the other side.

“For once, you get to find me,” Sparkler said, smiling.

“Good, I was worried I would go mad in this expanse, completely alone.”

Raging Sights beeped in annoyance.

“Sorry sorry sorry!” Corona said, looking apologetically at the gems on the backs of her hands. “I need to stop talking without thinking.”

**Chances of you actually doing so are minimal.**

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

**It is only fair.**

Sparkler blinked. “You know it’s really weird to only hear half a conversation.”

“Yeah, Raging Sights is weird like that. Doesn’t like talking audibly.” Corona put her hands down.

“So… Any ideas about getting out of this white expanse?”

“Probably none you haven’t thought of already.”

“Right…” Corona said. The two of them took off and started walking – Sparkler’s door soon out of their sights as well.

“So, think one of them got a hold of Z and turned Topeka into this?” Sparkler asked.

“I don’t see why they would do this…” Corona said, scratching her chin. “It doesn’t fit what any of them want. They all want the easy to navigate network of dreams – except Flagg – and this is anything but.”

“What if we’re not in Topeka?”

“Where else would we be? A universe where our bedrooms appear in a white expanse because… reasons?”

“D-Sphere does that.”

Corona shrugged. “Well, if it is, we’re stuck here. Because none of my portal spells are working.”

Sparkler nodded. “…Maybe we just need to find others like you found me. Through connections.”

“Don’t have a strong connection to any of the other-” Corona blinked. “…I guess the Mindflayer
was in my head for a while. I could probably use that."

"Worth a shot."

Corona closed her eyes, imagining the connection to the Mindflayer. It wasn’t as strong as with Sparkler, but she was able to focus on it after a bit of thought. She opened her eyes.

There was not a door in front of her. Instead, there was a dark translucent dome. Inside of it was a miniature of the round dream they had been in – and inside of it the Mindflayer, Doctor, Flagg, Smith, and Hastur were all fighting over… nothing. One would take one of the others out, only for them to re-appear in an instant. It was an unending cycle over nothing.

“They’re stuck in a nightmare…” Corona said, placing her hand on the dome – it felt like glass. “Eternally fighting for Topeka, but never getting any closer to what they want. Because it isn’t there. The glow of Z is gone.” She could feel their fear and strain through the dome. All five of them… they had become the same in this nightmare. Fighting for something they didn’t even remember.

Even Flagg was trapped…

“Why aren’t we in there?” Sparkler asked.

“Well, I touched Z first…” Corona said. “But I don’t know why that lets you be here.”

“Strong connection?”

“Maybe…” Corona said, walking around the dome. “…We should try to find Z.”

“Right. How do we do that?”

“Just think and it’ll probably happen,” Corona said.

They closed their eyes and started walking. When they opened them, the glow of Z and the buzz of its flies greeted them. The glow itself occupied a space only slightly larger than Corona herself, but the cloud of metallic blue flies made it seem significantly larger.

Corona and Sparkler felt no reason to be afraid.

“…Hi,” Corona said. “Z, right?”

That is what I’m called.

Z didn’t really speak – Corona just knew that was what it said. There was no voice to go with the words, or even a text to read from. She just knew the words. “Weird.”

It is the way I communicate.

“So… What is this place?”

A secluded section of Topeka altered specifically to accommodate this moment.

“And what is this moment?” Sparkler asked.

The moment you separate part of your consciousness to defend me from within, to ensure the survival of Topeka.

Corona blinked. “Really? I mean, I can do it – it’d make me sluggish for a few weeks or months
while I work my mind back to normal – but that sounds a little drastic.”

I brought you into Topeka specifically for this purpose, Corona. I awoke you because of your instinct to guard and protect, because of your heart, but also because of your abilities. You would be able to survive the process given the way you have trained your mind. Most would not – they would have to become me and give up their waking lives.

Corona’s expression saddened. “…You have a waking life, don’t you?”

It is long behind me. There is nothing for me in that world. Not anymore.

“Everyone thinks you’re in a coma you will never wake up form.”

Yes. I have no desire to go back. I am not requesting you abandon your life to become me.

Corona nodded. “Good. I really didn’t want to. So just… I give you a piece of myself and you’ll use it to protect yourself forever?”

Yes. It was what I needed to happen. I had trapped myself within my own rules. This is a workaround.

“…Why does Topeka exist?” Sparkler asked.

Because it existed in my world, a connection of all sleeping individuals, of which a select few were aware. I was born with the natural ability to shape the original Topeka, and I eventually mastered it – and spread it to other worlds, to share it with others. The way it brings people closer… It is pleasing to me.

Corona nodded slowly. “I get it. I think I do, anyway. You view it as a gift you give everyone.”

Yes.

Corona nodded. “All right. So I just… will part of myself to you?”

Exactly. I can guide you through the process. There will always be an out if you feel like I am taking too much or moving too quickly – I do not want to cause permanent psychological damage.

Corona took in a deep breath and closed her eyes. “Okay.” She pushed her mind out, touching Z. It pulled back gently, taking parts of her consciousness. Z worked extremely carefully, going out if its way to gently ease parts of her mind away. There was no sudden jarring pain, just a slow onset of tiredness.

Z unearthed memories as it moved through her mind. Her yelling at Princess Celestia… Her domination of Canterlot High… Her redemption… Her explorations… Her friends…

Private moments came to the surface. Conversations she’d had with Lady Rarity in confidence. Deep, personal moments with Sparky back in the day.

The memory of Eve almost giving away her secret just a few days ago…

Corona recoiled from Z.

What is it?

“Those… those should stay private.”
Corona, I will never do anything with them. If it makes you feel better I will erase the memories I absorb after I reach stability. I have no interest in your private life or the intimate moments you share with your friends.

“That’s not it… Well that’s part of it, but that’s not it.” Corona looked at Z. “You do know what Topeka does, right? It destroys privacy. People see moments they really aren’t supposed to see in here – they get to know the intimate details of each other’s subconscious. That’s… That’s not meant to be! If someone’s struggling with deep, violent urges, but they’ve got them under control, a dream shouldn’t make you think less of them! People shouldn’t be paranoid that their dreams are out to get them! There shouldn’t even be dream wars at all! People shouldn’t be trapped in comas!”

Those things will end when I become what you will make me.

“That’s just the wars! I’m sure some of the Lunas will be kept out of spite. Or infected by the Mindflayer. And what about all those people who can be driven insane by dreams? I’m pretty sure Nyarlathotep can work his way into anyone’s mind the slow way if he has to. Entire societies can be brought down because someone obtains a nuclear launch code or something from a high ranking official!”

As the Doctor told you, relatively few become full dreamers.

“But those that do have power, even if they don’t use it. I’m sure you see it, Z. You see what evil can be done when dreamers can hide in the shadows. And there aren’t really any true defenses… Just damage control from what you’ve done.”

But it is beautiful, Corona. The connection.

“People need more than dreams to be together. The real world exists for a reason. Dreams are there for flights of fancy.” Corona looked right at Z. “Holy Starstorm, Flagg was right.”

You’ll listen to what many consider to be the incarnation of evil?

“He’s right for the completely wrong reasons, but he’s right. In this case… Destruction is the best option.”

You cannot take me out, Corona.

“I can wake you up,” Corona said. “And this entire thing will come crashing down. Topeka will end.”

If you do that you will never see Sparkler again.

Corona blinked. “What? I’ll just go visit her in the Sparkle Census.”

“Yeah!” Sparkler added. “What, you think you can do something to me?”

I don’t have to. Because you only exist because of Topeka.

“…W-what?” Sparkler said.

Corona dreamed you up on her first day here because she was lonely. She didn’t want to walk the endless dreams without someone to talk to. So her subconscious tapped into her immense will to create you. A companion with a face – and name – that would be very familiar to her.

“No…” Corona said, haunted. “No, that can’t be right!”
Think about it, Corona. Have you ever seen any trace of Sparkler outside Topeka? Why do you have such a strong connection to her? Has she ever interacted with any people when you aren’t actively present?

“She was with the Doctor when I went away that one… time…” She blinked. “He knew.”

Yes. Sparkler vanished when you left, and re-appeared when you came back because you expected her to be there. He felt no need to inform you of this.

“I… I think I’m beginning to understand Vriska…” Corona said, putting a hand to her head. “W-why wouldn’t he tell me?”

“Yeah! I’d like to know if I’m real or not if someone sees me vanish!” Sparkler shouted.

You’re real, as real as a split consciousness can be. You share Corona’s mind and knowledge. Do you actually know anything specific about your life in the Census? Were you ever actually able to accomplish anything? Did you ever try to call Corona?

Sparkler gulped. “Uh… Yeeeeah, I think he’s right.”

Corona glared. “So, what, if I destroy Topeka I’ll never see her again?”

That is correct. Her split consciousness form exists only because Topeka allows it. It is how Agent Smith duplicates himself.

Corona curled her hand into a fist. “…You… You…”

Just let me back into your consciousness and we can end this confrontation.

Corona’s ears twitched.

She decided to punch Z since she wasn’t able to think straight. It seemed like the best option at the time.

~~~

Corona woke up in the hospital bed – alone.

“How did I… destroy Topeka?”

Unknown.

“Let me see if I still have a connection…” She forced herself to calm down, let the anger flow out. She touched a connection…

Sparkler was still there. All she had to do was go back. It would just be a moment…

A demogorgon charged through the door to her room, mouth wide open and screeching its horrifying call. It plastered its sharp, toothy mouth on her chest while she was distracted.

The pain was immense – but she struck back, lighting the creature on fire. It hissed in pain, but it made a wide swing with one of its claws, skewering her eye.
Corona woke up on a passenger airplane with a start, breathing heavily.

She looked down at her chest. She had her battle dress on and was completely uninjured. She ruffled her wings and touched her face – no wound.

…Was it all just a dream?!

That didn’t sit right with her – she remembered it so clearly. There was this dream world, Topeka, and this creature Z, and Sparkler had been there but she wasn’t real, and… The Doctor was there, right? Flagg too? Had Death been around? What was Olivia doing…?

“Raging Sights, don’t let me forget anything about this dream.”

Memory degradation has already begun.

“Just do it!” Corona blurted, drawing attention from many of the passengers in the airplane. She didn’t care.

Affirmative.

Corona’s mind locked in to place thanks to Raging Sights’ magic, and she was able to parse through her… already foggy memories of the dream. There had been so many layers, dreams within dreams, people physically entering the dream realm…

She had to still be dreaming, right? That world in the hospital had been the real world. She couldn’t have dreamed all this up. She hadn’t known much about Nyarlathotep or what Thrackerzod was going through. …But she only remembered the feelings of those events now. What were the actual physical details? Had there actually been any?

Right, right, if she was dreaming, she would have no idea how she got here. She thought a moment… She was on a flight in a universe that didn’t allow teleportation, going to see an old martial artist who might know a thing or two about making full use of her ears in combat.

She even remembered deciding she was going to sleep on the flight, putting away her book and closing her eyes intentionally. She also remembered having a conversation with the passenger right next to her!

Ah… A Twilight. A unicorn Twilight from the Sparkle Census, Corona remembered, even if she didn’t remember her designation. But who could remember Sparkle Census designations?

There it was. A way out.

“Sorry, odd question, what was your designation again?” Corona asked her.

The Twilight blinked at her with an odd expression. “JJ-8IuN. Any reason why?”

“No reason…” My subconscious could know the format of designations, or Z could have information about it from another mind. This could just be an elaborate trick…

Could I have really dreamed the whole thing?

Her very soul screamed that she hadn’t. But she was no longer certain. She remembered everything about this ‘reality’ on the airplane. She didn’t remember the dreams of Topeka clearly. She was still Princess Corona Sunset Shimmer, PhD…
...Was Sparkler just a manifestation of this pony next to me? W- Corona blinked. Sparkler was just a creation of my mind in Topeka. She wasn’t really able to describe the Sparkle Census or do anything in it... If that had been a dream, she would have been able to exist in the ‘top’ world just fine! There was no way my mind could create that complex of a narrative!

...Right? But what if it just filled in blanks for me? How can I...

...There was never a sign of the Sparkle Census in all of Topeka. Corona’s eyes widened. Not a single Sparkle Census dreamer. Some people who were aware and who had been to the Census, but never a citizen. Corona turned to ‘JJ’, eyes sparkling. If that's the case, neither Z nor I know what the intricate details are of a Sparkle Census unicorn’s life.

“Hey, JJ?”

“Hm?”

“I’m going to invade your privacy for a bit, please don’t hate me if I’m wrong.” She placed a bare hand just under JJ’s horn and dug through her memories. Find me something completely mundane but full of details. Find me the exact layout of a library in the Sparkle Census. Oh, you can? Then find me a map of the districts. Where is that in relation to the Grinder? What about the Council? Does the Council even have a building? What’s it look like? Where are the Census intake stations? What path do you take to work each day? What’s the plot of the latest book you read? Recent Sparkle Census history? How’s the next door Twilight’s personality different from yours? What’s your opinion of your closest friends? Corona laughed inwardly as the interior of ‘JJ’s’ mind began to break down in contradictions.

Enough, Z said. You are clearly too determined for me to outwit.

Corona opened her eyes, standing with Sparkler in the white expanse, Z in front of them.

Do what you will.

“...I don’t think you’re a bad person,” Corona said. “...I’m sorry for punching you, I let my anger take over me.”

I understand that. Do not worry, the angry lash did not offend me – merely worry me.

Corona nodded. “It’s time to return to reality, Z. Back to the world you left behind to create this one. There are real people there who aren’t clouded by a constant shifting of reality around them. I’m sure they miss you.”

Corona, I don’t know if you’ve realized this, but reality is a mess. There’s always evil, destruction, and unfortunate truths. It’s a confusing mess no one can navigate.

“How is that really much different from here?” Corona asked. “You can’t trust anything in Topeka. You can’t trust other people, because they might lie to you about what’s going on, using you to further their own ends. Even if their intentions are good, what they tell you might just be wrong, even if they believe it’s right. You can’t even rely on yourself because you know that you know nothing!” Corona shook her head. “It’s the same either way, Z. You can’t trust yourself and you can’t trust anyone else. Nobody knows, Z.”

What do we do then?

Corona sighed. “We do the best we can. Weigh every source of authority. ...Wing it, basically?”
Sparkler chuckled.

_That sounds absurd. But they are truly wise words._

““The unfortunate truth is that life inherently sucks a lot of the time. But trying to replace it with something else… That never works.” She extended her hand, feeling Z’s bugs fly around her. “Go home, Z. Do your best there.”

_If that is what you demand._

Corona nodded. She snapped her fingers – forcing Z to wake up.

The blue power of Z transferred to her in an instant. She turned to Sparkler, features torn. “…I have to let you go.”

“I know,” Sparkler said, wiping her eyes. “I’m just part of you anyway.”

“Either way, I had to sacrifice part of myself…” Corona mused. She pulled Sparkler into a hug. “…I don’t care if I just made you up. You’re real to me.”

Sparkler started bawling. “C-Corona!”

“Shh…” She held Sparkler up and looked into the unicorn’s eyes. “I’ll remember you.”

And then Sparkler was just gone.

Corona swallowed hard. With her magic, she cleared her face of the tears so she wouldn’t look like she’d just been crying.

She summoned the gray dome to her and broke it, making the fight between the Doctor, Flagg, the Mindflayer, Agent Smith, and Hastur stop.

“The war is over,” Corona said, showing them the blue light. “I have the power of Z now.”

The Doctor grinned. “Good going Corona!”

“You’ll want to take that back,” Corona said, smiling sadly. “Because I’m going to use this power to end Topeka. With a thought, the entire system will come crashing down.”

Four of them stared at her in disbelief. The fifth one laughed. “I knew you had it in you!” Flagg cheered.

Corona willed that he would get punched in the face by an invisible fist. “You were right about what to do, Flagg. But your motivations and reasons behind doing so still despise me. You care nothing for the sacred privacy of people. You just want to watch the world burn.”

Flagg stood up and shrugged, having nothing to say.

“Also, Doctor?” Corona narrowed her eyes. “You should have told me about Sparkler.”

A guilty expression came over the Doctor’s face. He opened his mouth to respond.

“Don’t say anything,” Corona ordered. “You may be a hero – but you are also a silver-tongued snake.” She looked down at him. “I’m not going to just let you talk me down with clever words and manipulative ideas. When Topeka falls, you can devote yourselves to those dreamers you wanted to protect. You can be their connection if you want it so much.”
The Doctor’s expression was unreadable. Corona had no idea if he would do that or not.

She turned lastly to Hastur. “I’m sorry for what your life is.”

Hastur nodded. **The sentiment is appreciated, but not needed.**

“But it is,” Corona said, shaking her head. “Mindflayer, Smith? I have nothing to say to you two. Go back to your worlds and live without Topeka. Mindflayer, if we cross paths again I will probably have to kill you or seal you away. My suggestion is to never get anywhere near Merodi Universalis.”

The Mindflayer let out a guttural scraping sound Corona assumed was agreement.

Corona lifted her hand and spread her wings. “And that’s all I have to say. Goodbye.”

And then everyone in Topeka woke up.

Coma patients included.

The blue power fizzled out of Corona – she didn’t want anyone to be able to use her to recreate it. The only thing she used the power for aside from destroying Topeka was to return herself to her hospital bed.

She appeared in the real world, already standing.

Lady Rarity rushed her into a hug. “You’re back!”

“Yes… I’m back…” Corona said, wiping her eyes. “And I did it. …Topeka’s gone. It’ll never bother any of us again.”

Lady Rarity blinked. “…I trust that this is a good thing?”

“I think so,” Corona said, looking into the distance. “But I can’t be sure. I can never be sure.” She shook her head, a sad smile on her face. “Question everything, Lady Rarity. Even yourself and those you trust. It might be wrong.”

Lady Rarity nodded. “Wise words.”

Corona yawned. “You can tell Eve that everything’s taken care of. I… am going home. And I am going to get some actual sleep. In my own bed. Without worrying about fate-of-the-world dreamscape wars.”

“I’ll take care of everything, don’t you worry,” Lady Rarity said, smiling warmly. “You get the rest you need.”

“Thanks,” Corona said, pulling Lady Rarity into a hug. “You’re the best.”

“I try.”

Corona set her down – and teleported away. She traversed dimensions to Lai and entered her bedroom.

She flopped on the bed, arms splayed.

There was no sleep spell needed – she was already asleep.

Asleep and dreaming happily.
Thrackerzod walked into the League of Sweetie Belles – and was amazed at what Pinkie had done to the place. Red, white, blue, and pink decorations covered every surface of the room. Images of Thrackerzod smiling lined the walls – even a few artist’s renditions of her more eldritch forms seemed to be enjoying themselves. Her elder-sign cutie mark was on display in the center of the room, hanging from the ceiling like a disco ball. She noticed a few eldritch runes glowing in nearby walls, meant to evoke a feeling in her of belonging.

It was working.

“WELCOME TO THE FREEDOM PARTY!” Pinkie shouted. “I’ve got red white and blue straight from ‘Murica itself! Even invited Valentine! FREEEEDOM!”

Valentine looked at the party blower in his hand. “…I still don’t know why I’m here.”

“It’s the theme of the party, shoosh, enjoy yourself. Take solace knowing Merodi Universalis is celebrating LIBERTY for once. You can choose to think of this as your values leaking into our society.”

Valentine tried to speak but he ended up just blowing the party blower.

“That’s the spirit!” Pinkie ran over to Thrackerzod and dragged her to the middle of the League’s main hall. “EVERYONE LISTEN UP – THIS IS THRACKERZOD’S DAY! Make it great, okay? BRING ON THE FREEDOM PRESENTS!” A firework went off above Thrackerzod’s head.

“Congratulations Thrackerzod!” Bot said, running up. She dropped off a present in front of her. “Open it!”

Thrackerzod teleported the present out of the box without unwrapping it. It was a tape recorder. “…Thanks?”

“Press play.”

Thrackerzod did. Bot’s voice came through the recorder.

“I will stand by you until the end!”

Thrackerzod rough, rocky exterior broke. She let a smile crawl up her face. “…thank you.”

“YAY!” Bot declared, pulling Thrackerzod in for a hug. “Friends!”

“Friends,” Thrackerzod admitted.

Squeaky and Allure piled themselves on next.

“We’re so proud of how far you’ve come,” Allure said. “We’ll make sure you never regret your decision.”

“You’ve always been a part of our family,” Squeaky added.

Then Suzie, then Burgerbelle, then Minna, then numerous other Sweetie Belles piled themselves on next.

Thrackerzod, for one of the rare moments in her life, allowed herself to grin widely. “You know, for a bunch of short-lived meat sacks, you’re all the best.”
“Thrackerzod’s the best-hoo!” Thrackerzod’s native Scootaloo said, coming out from behind a hidden column. “Bet you weren’t expectin’ the Scootaloo-hoo to show up, were ya?”

Thrackerzod rolled her eyes. “No I was not. Long time no see. Have you actually successfully wooed anyone yet?”

“No,” Apple Bloom said, revealing herself. “Ah suspect ka curse, though I’m not sure if it’s her ‘anything that moves’ attitude that’s the curse or the fact that she never gets anyone.”

“I will conquer the language of love!”

“You said you conquered it last week! Then you got thrown out a window!”

“Defenestration, baby!”

Thrackerzod rolled her eyes. “You morons are also, conditionally, the best.”

“Ah, that’s sweet baby, wanna see where this goes?”

“No,” Thrackerzod responded, a smile on her face. “I will never even consider coupling myself with the likes of orange filth like yourself.”

Scootaloo blinked. “Was that racist? That sounded racist.”

“Just anti-Scootaloo.”

“Ah sweet, I love it when they play hard to get!”

“As you can see, she’s just as delusional as ever,” Apple Bloom said. “Nice to see ya’ again, Zod.”

“Glad you could make it as well.”

“Good, cause you’re not going to be so glad about the last visitor.” Apple bloom shuffled out of the way nervously, revealing Rarity.

“…Ah. ‘Sister’. I suppose you would be invited,” Thrackerzod deadpanned, her smile gone.

Rarity sighed. “Look, I know I wasn’t always the best sister. Okay, I was never a good sister and if I was I would have cared that you were trying to kill Twilight all the time. But can we just take a moment, forget all that, and have a party where we actually celebrate you? As much as you may think I don’t care, I would actually like to see that.”

The slightest hint of a smirk came up Thrackerzod’s lips. “Sure. If there are any stallions here, you don’t have to restrain yourself.”

Rarity let out a sigh of relief. “Oh thank god you’re not going to be stuffy.”

“Though for the love of all horrors in the furthest ring, do not hit on a Silver Belle. I don’t think I need to explain why that’s wrong in so many ways.”

“I thought you were the eldritch creature born of a decidedly raunchy relationship between three siblings from separate timelines?”

“That’s Nussula’ch,” Thrackerzod said. “I was born from a spontaneous eruption of what you would consider Azathoth’s acne.”
“…How did I not know this about you?” Allure asked.

“Because you never asked.”

Rarity snorted. “Free, but still the same as ever.” She paused for a moment – then rubbed Thrackerzod’s mane. “I don’t really know if you’re my sister, Thrackerzod. There is something here, I think.”

Thrackerzod nodded. “It would be unwise and unnecessarily cruel of me to deny your attempts to rekindle our lost relationship.”

“…You really have changed. A lot.”

“Talking to oneself all day every day tends to bring about, if not madness, then great change.”

Pinkie giggled. “Yep! Now who wants to play throw pies at the cardboard cutout of Nyarlathotep?”

“Me,” Hastur said, reaching for a pie.

“Oh. Hastur.” Thrackerzod blinked. “You came?”

“Nyarlathotep’s contract has ended. Azathoth has expressed complete apathy about your departure according to Cizza. So here I am. To support you as well as for some personal therapy.” He threw the pie at the cardboard cutout of Nyarlathotep. The cutout exploded in a violent burst of eldritch energy.

Pinkie produced another cardboard cutout. “I have lots more. Keep destroying them, people!”

Thrackerzod smirked. “Oh this is going to be fun…”

~~~

“And I think that’s everything,” Lady Rarity told Eve and Luna, stopping a moment to let herself breathe.

Eve blinked. “Wow.”

“She made the right decision,” Luna asserted. “Topeka, as I saw it on my travels, was an innate disruption of the nature of dreams. They are not supposed to be accessible to just anyone.” She looked into the distance. “The dream realm only needs scant few protectors. If it has too many, then it is no longer a matter of being protected – but controlled.”

“She probably made the Doctor upset,” Lady Rarity pointed out.

“He’s not the type to seek revenge,” Eve said. “He’ll accept what happened and move on. Or go out and change something himself.” Eve looked at Lady Rarity. “How are you doing?”

“I feel like my mind is soup and I can’t keep all the facts straight and, despite what I just told you, I really don’t know what happened in the end. They were all going to run for Z. Corona destroyed Topeka and freed everyone.” She shrugged. “She’ll probably tell us when she wakes up.”

“It won’t be for a long time,” Luna said, closing her eyes. “She truly exhausted herself over these last few days. She needs to enjoy her rest – and her own dreams.”

Lady Rarity smiled. “I agree. …In fact, I may join her. Not in a shared dream, mind you, but just
“going to sleep.” She yawned. “I may have been groggy the entire time, but it still feels like I exerted too much energy…”

“It’s fine, I’m sure Renee will let you take a day or two off,” Eve said with a smile. “It’s not like the fate of the world depends on you right now. You already took care of that.”

Lady Rarity bowed. “I shall take my leave. Until we meet again.”

“It is always an honor, Lady Rarity,” Luna said, bowing in return.

Lady Rarity skittered out of the throne room, the doors closing behind her.

“Corona’s come a long way,” Eve said, out of the blue.

Luna nodded. “As have you. I am certain it is no accident that you two have grown in stature, power, and maturity together into your own kinds of leaders.”

Eve nodded slowly.

“And your own kinds of heroes.”

Eve rubbed the back of her head. “Yeah… I guess we are heroes, huh?”

Luna nodded. “The bond between you two is a powerful and deep one, Eve. Continue to nurture it as you move on in life. You will not regret it.”

“Luna, I’m the princess of friendship, I know how this works.” She nudged Luna playfully. “You don’t need to tell me how to do my job.”

Luna smirked. “…No, I suppose not.”

~~~

Corona sat under the orange tree, only vaguely aware of anything happening around her.

She was perfectly fine with that. The orange blur, the vague sensation of the tree trunk at her back, the indiscernible distance…

She was happy with the simple world around her. She took in a long breath and let out one twice as long. She was content.

She stroked her hand gently over the purple unicorn sitting in her lap, resting just as she was.

“Mmm, five more minutes…” the purple unicorn muttered, the words whispered into Corona’s mind, like words were supposed to be in a dream.

Corona smiled softly. She didn’t respond to the words – she just kept petting the unicorn.

The smile transferred to her physical self, laying in her bed.

Raging Sights decided that meant everything was fine.
The last time Celestia City was in USM space, things had gone horribly, horribly downhill. Border-closing cold-war kinds of bad.

Allure was more than well aware that the incident that had incited such tension had been the fault of the League of Sweetie Belles – she specifically had been more than slightly involved with the diplomatic fumble. Which was to say it was almost entirely her fault.

She had told herself it would be easy to put the events behind her – after all, it had been several years and the USM wasn’t an enemy anymore. …Granted, they had not changed any of their practices and were still manipulating lesser governments for their own benefit, but Allure had chosen to look past that.

Allure was positive it would be easy to leave Celestia City and go down to the USM Earth and have a little vacation with her best friends and her daughter. She told herself it would be relaxing.

“Mom, are you okay?” Minna asked from her position atop Allure’s back. The ten-year-old quasi-albino human’s face was one of confused concern, not understanding why Allure was so tense.

“Allure, breathe,” Squeaky said, putting a hoof on the back of her friend’s neck. “We are not going to cause an international incident by crossing the street incorrectly.”

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“Anyone see a restaurant yet?” Bot asked.

“You don’t need to eat, why are you the impatient one?” Thrackerzod asked.

Bot blinked. “Because I don’t want to walk around a city lost for another hour?”

“We’re not lost,” Squeaky said. “We can go back to Celestia City at any time!”

“Do you even know what street we’re on?” Allure asked.

Squeaky blinked. “…Didn’t think I needed to. Every street looks the same anyway.”

“This could be why we’re not finding the restaurant,” Thrackerzod observed. “Because we have no idea. Perhaps we’re in a business sector. Perhaps the city moves and we’re in the middle of some elaborate jo-”

“COOKIES DETECTED!” Bot beeped, blasting across the street with rocket-powered hooves, forcing two cars to stop in the process.

“BOT!” Allure screamed. “WHAT DID WE JUST AVOID!?”

“I found you all cookies!” Bot shouted from across the divide, pointing at a convenience store display filled with single-packaged cookies from The Big Cookie company.

“A cookie isn’t a meal,” Allure muttered.

“Minna wants cookies!” Bot declared.

“…I want a large mountain of mashed potatoes covered in gravy,” Minna corrected. “Cookie… too sweet.”

Squeaky stared at Minna in disbelief. “…Allure, what kind of kid are you raising?”


Thrackerzod did so. Bot triggered several alarms in the store because she was holding seven of the cookies.

“AUGH! TELEPORT THE COOKIES BACK!” Allure panicked.

Thrackerzod rolled her eyes and teleported the cookies back. The store’s alarms kept blaring. They saw the teenage girl behind the register fix them with an annoyed glance.

Allure waved at her sheepishly. “…Let’s try the next block over for restaurants.”

Thrackerzod teleported them all away.

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Earth-AZ2 was known throughout the USM to have a ‘curse’ of extremely bad luck. This bad luck usually came in the form of stupendously apocalyptic-level threats ranging from giant men who flattened cities to alien invasions from galactic conquerors.

Prior to the USM stepping in, Earth-AZ2 depended almost completely on superheroes to defend from the constant stream of unbelievably deadly threats from every possible angle. This had a mixed
level of effectiveness. On one hand, Earth-AZ2 gained some hope that they weren’t going to die in their sleep one day from a meteor crashing into their city. On the other hand, the heroes who made it to the tops of the rankings tended to become self-entitled arrogant bundles of condescension that cared little for the actual people they were saving. Tornado, prior to her mental imprisonment by the Celestialsapiens, was a prime example of this.

And even with the superheroes, the number of deaths attributable to freak disasters and supervillains could be counted by the tens of millions. The only reason humanity’s population could keep up was due to the extremely dense populations within the twenty-six cities.

It was a heaven-sent miracle when the United States of the Multiverse found the world and started defending it using their interdimensional technology. Most of the higher ranking heroes moved on from Earth-AZ2 to working directly for USM exploration and military efforts, leaving the defending to the much more organized and dependable USM government.

However, a few heroes chose to remain behind to protect their world, should the need arise. The USM allowed them to keep their hero licenses and even paid them to keep doing their job, though usually the scale of what they did was smaller than before.

Two of these heroes were the master-student pair of Saitama and Genos. Genos was a terrifying looking man with eyes indicative of his deep internal determination. Most of his body consisted of artificial cyborg materials, only his face looking anything like a living thing, and even then the expression was far too serious and angled to be considered ‘normal’.

Saitama was a bald man in a yellow suit and red cape.

He was currently holding a cup of coffee. “Ah, City G. The city of… …I presume things that start with G. Hey, Genos, is this your city?”

“No, master, it is not.”

“Huh. Well that’s one G I bet it wishes it could call its own.” He sipped his coffee. “Y’know Genos, you ever wonder why all our cities are named after letters? I hear that’s not how it works in other worlds.”

“It is something that makes our world unique among all the countless others,” Genos reported.

“But there are other versions of us. We’re A-Z-two.”

“AZ1 is a world without heroes, villains, or powers.”

“Yeah, but I looked some stuff up yesterday out of curiosity. There’s a lot more Earth-AZs out there, Genos. Some a lot like this one used to be. I wonder if I could meet myself…”

“Perhaps we should take some time off to curb this curious itch you have developed, master.”

Saitama shrugged. “Eh, maybe. I’ll put it on the list of things to do on a slow day.”

“Is today not a slow day?”

“I dunno,” Saitama said, putting his hands behind his head. “That’s the thing about slow days. You don’t realize until they’re almost over.”

“…Then how would a list of things to do on slow days ever be used?”
“That’s not something to think about on a slow day.”

Genos opened his mouth to ask a question, and then shut it. He decided to change the topic. “Things appear to be peaceful today.”

Saitama shrugged. “Fine by me. Gives me more chance to count cookies.”

“…Count cookies?”

“Yeah, I’ve been seeing those ‘Big Cookie’ cookies everywhere,” Saitama said.

“…Master, those have been a major USM wide brand since shortly after our world joined.”

“But they’re everywhere Genos. On billboards, in every store, put up in giant displays! There may be some kind of nefarious conspiracy!”

“And there are McDonald’s’ spread everywhere in every city.”

“I don’t see a McDonald’s’ around, do you?”

Genos blinked. “…No. This may be an exception.”

Saitama held up the coffee cup, examining it to find it completely empty. He really didn’t want to carry it around anymore, but it would be rude to just throw it on the side of the street even though he didn’t see a public trash can around. He opted to flick it with his finger, the force from the impact reducing the cup to fine powder that dissipated quickly in the wind.

“The uses you find for your abilities never cease to amaze me, master.”

Saitama shrugged. “It was just a cup, Genos. I bet you could do the same thing with your cyborg beams.”

“Perhaps I could. But I-”

An office building wall exploded, revealing a fat man, his face the image of panic. He ran across the street, ignoring all the cars honking at him, using every muscle in his body to keep moving forward.

With every step he took, cookies appeared around his body and fell to the ground.

In pursuit was a tiny woman in a blue wizard outfit, waving her wand aggressively at the fleeing cookie man, blowing up a nearby car in an attempt to shoot him down.

A smile began to crawl up Saitama’s face. “I knew it! There’s a cookie conspiracy! Ha!”

“Let me,” Genos told Saitama, jumping into the air. He aimed his arms at the wizard, planning to ignite the air in front of her to protect the cookie man as well as burn her enough to keep her from effectively fighting him.

She took one look at him and cast an EMP spell. Genos didn’t even get to fire off a shot – he just fell to the ground like a bird hit with a slingshot.

Saitama winced. “Ouch… You got countered good there, Genos.”

“I… am sorry…”

Saitama shrugged. “Don’t worry about it.” He curled his hand into a fist and stared blankly at the
blue wizard. “…Yeah, probably shouldn’t kill her.”

She fired another bolt at the cookie man, hitting his ankle. Blood sprayed on the pavement – and turned into red tinged cookies.

Saitama ran closer to the wizard, pulling his fist back. “Norma-”

A white unicorn came out of nowhere and bucked the blue wizard in the face, magical sparks flying off her back hooves. In a series of quick motions she disarmed the small woman, pinned her to the ground, and put pressure on the back of her skull to keep her from being able to think straight. “Thrackerzod! Anti magic please!”

An identical white unicorn walked up and encased the woman’s small head in a dark, magic band. “Done. She won’t be doing anything anytime soon.”

Two more of the unicorns walked up – one moving with mechanical precision, the other with an albino child on her back.

“Huh. You girls are pretty good,” Saitama said, pointing at them.

“Hm?” the primary unicorn said, looking up. “Oh, a local hero! I’m sorry if I did your job for you!”

“Hey, no problem, I’m just a hero for fun anyway,” Saitama said, waving his hand dismissively. “I’m Saitama. That barely functioning cyborg is Genos.”

“Your precision was formidable,” Genos said, shakily standing back up.

“Uh… thanks,” the unicorn said, clearly unnerved by Genos. “I’m Allure, that’s Thrackerzod, Squeaky, Bot, and my adoptive daughter Minna. We’re part of the League of Sweetie Belles.” When she didn’t see recognition in Saitama’s face, she elaborated. “Part of Merodi Universalis.”

“…Doesn’t ring a bell,” Saitama said.

“Merodi Universalis is one of our multiversal neighbors,” Genos reported. “They have been known as both allies and enemies in numerous cases. Currently we are on good terms.”

“Oh. That’s cool,” Saitama said without much emotion.

“I think we should ask the cookie guy what this was all about,” Squeaky said. “Get some answers.”

“Oh, he already left,” Minna said with an innocent smile.

Everyone looked to her. Then they looked to the place where the cookie man had been. There was a trail of cookies leading to another street – a trail that was already fading because of pedestrian traffic and hungry pigeons.

Thrackerzod sighed, picking up one of the red cookies that hadn’t already been scavenged. “I’ll track his soul, he won’t be able to hide for long…”

It was at this point a black USM hovercraft decloaked. It looked like a helicopter, except without the giant blades of spinning death. Hanging out from one of the doors was none other than the green-haired Tornado herself in a pair of sunglasses.

She cleared her throat. “So, you’re not going to like this.”

Allure started sweating.
“You just took out one of our agents.”

“Oh my gosh I’m sorry! I saw the chase and I acted! I-”

“You’ll have to come with us. All you unicorns. The girl too.” She turned to Saitama, grimacing. “…Did you actually do anything?”

“Nope, it was all them,” Saitama said. “We weren’t fast enough heroes.”

“Good,” Tornado said, sighing in relief. “You get to stay here then.”

Saitama blinked. “Wait… that means I don’t get to learn about the cookie conspiracy!”

Tornado levitated the League of Sweetie Belles and the unconscious wizard into the hovercraft, ignoring him.

“Tornado, I take it back! I made a long-distance punch back there! I’m involved!”

Tornado continued ignoring him, ordering the hovercraft to leave the area.

“Tornado!” Saitama called. The hovercraft was gone before he finished the word.

“She really doesn’t want you involved with anything she does,” Genos observed.

“…All I wanted was to get involved in a cookie conspiracy. Is that too much to ask?”

“There may not be a cookie conspiracy, master.”

“Hrm… That theory of yours seems outlandish.”

“…We could always go check out the Big Cookie’s factory in City G if you want to satisfy your curiosity.”

“We could take the tour… get free cookies…” Saitama rubbed his chin. “Sounds good to me. Do you know where it is?”

Genos pointed at the chocolate colored building that was taller than most the others in City G.

“How can you look at that and not think there’s some kind of cookie conspiracy?” Saitama asked.

“Because the McDonald’s tower is over there. It’s larger.”

Saitama examined the building. “Maybe there’s a burger conspiracy too…”

“Master, how bored are you?”

“Enough. C’mon Genos, I know you want free cookies.”

It was Genos’ turn to shrug impassively. “Sure.”

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The planet of Earth-AZ2 fell below the invisible hovercraft.

Allure gulped, turning to Tornado. “…How much trouble are we in?”

Tornado’s expression told her nothing. It didn’t help that her eyes were hidden behind her large
shades.

“Are we talking stern-talking-to trouble, political-incident trouble, or disappearing-without-a-trace trouble?”

Tornado made no response.

“Mom, calm down,” Minna said, playing a game on her handheld. “They’re not going to make you disappear.”

Allure blinked. “It never ceases to amaze me how calm you can be in the face of everything.”

“Fearlessness is awesome.”

Squeaky raised an eyebrow. “It has drawbacks.”

“But when it comes in handy it really comes in handy.” She looked up from her game. “Or do I need to tell everyone how I saved you all by threatening a rose?”

Squeaky sighed. “Allure, your kid is never going to let me live that down.”

Allure would have laughed if she wasn’t so stressed out. “...Yeah.”

Bot narrowed her eyes. “Worry levels reaching dangerous highs.”

Allure nodded. “Next time, let’s just tell Blumiere not to put Celestia City in USM space.”

“Blumiere’s not the mayor right now,” Squeaky pointed out.

“We all know he’ll be the mayor again in one or two election cycles,” Thrakerzod countered. “It doesn’t matter how well the ‘in-between’ mayors do, everyone always wants him back.”

“...Regardless, we can’t just keep Celestia City out of USM space. They’re one of our closest neighbors.”

“Can’t bring yourself to say ally, can you?” Thrakerzod said.

Squeaky glanced at Tornado’s impassive face. “...No, sorry. With the University out of the picture now, they are the least friendly…”

“Really? The presence of an eldritch superpower that could eat a universe for breakfast isn’t ‘unfriendly’?”

“I’d describe your people as truly neutral.”

“Bot, sanity check me. Should I be feeling proud or embarrassed?”

“Affirmative.”

“Ask the robot about emotions,” Minna piped up. “Great idea.”

“Minna!” Allure chided. “Bot has emotions just like the rest of us!”

Minna looked up from her game. “Yeah. But does she have as good of a handle on them as the rest of you?”

There was silence in the hovercraft.
“I’m starting to fear she might be smarter than all of us,” Squeaky observed.

“This is why you need me,” Minna said, smirking.

Allure sighed. “Minna, you’re ten. You can’t come on League adventures yet.”

“Nanoha has kids younger than me.”

“We aren’t the TSAB.”

Minna nodded. “You’ll realize your mistake eventually.” She turned back to her game.

“…Creepy,” Tornado observed, speaking for the first time since the ride had begun.

Allure smiled awkwardly. “Huh, yeah. I guess I’m just used to it at this point.”

Tornado stood up. “Regardless, we’re here.” The star-speckled blackness was replaced with the metallic interior of a space station. They did not get a good look at it, for the moment the hovercraft landed, everyone inside save the pilot was teleported to a simple waiting room with no windows or doors – but furnished with plush couches, a table covered in magazines, and numerous USM logos.

“…Oh hey, comfortable prison,” Bot said. “It’s been a while since I’ve been in one of these!”

“Valentine will see you when he’s ready,” Tornado said, checking her phone.

“VALENTINE!?” Allure shouted. “Oh Celestia, we’re doomed, doomed, dooooooomed… Valentine is gonna kill us, then Eve is gonna kill us…”

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is why we are not a diplomatic team,” Thrackerzod said, gesturing at Allure with her hoof.

Minna turned her game off and put her face in her hands. “I’ve never met Valentine… I wonder if anyone’s told him his suit looks ridiculous yet.”

“Probably!” Allure blurted. “Listen to me, Minna. Do not tell him his suit looks ridiculous.”

“I won’t,” Minna said. “Pinkie promise.”

Allure let out a sigh of relief. “Thanks, Minna. You’re a good kid.”

Minna smiled innocently.

“He’s ready,” Tornado said, putting her phone away. The instant she did so, Valentine appeared in a flash of teleportation energy.

He examined the League of Sweetie Belles, arms crossed. He seemed to be thinking about something to say.

“Your suit looks awesome,” Minna said.

Allure almost had a heart attack.

Valentine’s usually serious face perked up at the edges. “Finally, someone with good taste.” He sat down in one of the chairs, crossing his legs and leaning forward. “So, I hear you want to know how much trouble you are in.”
Allure gulped. “Yeah…”

“No,” Valentine said, lowering his hands.

“…What?”

“Beth – the wizard you took down – was supposed to be targeted,” Valentine said. “I had the entire thing staged. Beth was supposed to chase the target with much more brutality and aggression than expected to come from an agent of the USM, and she would make no effort to make her true identity known. The intention was to run through Earth-AZ2 and draw the attention of one of the local heroes so they would ‘save’ the subject in a public spectacle. As expected, the target fled in the commotion, and the heroes who saved him from Beth were captured for questioning.” Valentine sat back. “…Except you jumped in instead of some generic heroes.”

“…We’ve walked in on an elaborate ruse?” Squeaky asked.

Valentine nodded. “That’s right. And it actually makes the ruse more credible – there is no way I can have any control over you, an entity from outside the United States of the Multiverse. Which provides us with an interesting opportunity.” He paused for a moment. “What I am about to tell you is classified. If you choose not to assist us in any way, you are not allowed to speak of it even to your Overheads. That would get you ‘in trouble’, as it were.”

“We get the message,” Thrackerzod responded.

“Good,” Valentine rolled his shoulders back. “Shortly after we made direct contact with your nation, a man moved from an unknown universe to Earth-AZ2. He is known today as Big Cookie, CEO of ‘The Big Cookie’ corporation. His real name is Andrew Maddison, human, aged somewhere in his early fifties. Happily married with three kids. He came to Earth-AZ2 with numerous PhDs – Drama, Biology, Law, Music, and Philosophy – and a substantial fortune. An impressive resume all its own, but he also proudly displays trophies he won in his younger days as an athlete.

“And yet, when he came to Earth-AZ2, he didn’t use any of those skills to bring himself to the top. He opened a bakery that specializes in cookies. It took only a couple years for his simple bakery to spread throughout the USM like wildfire, with his goods selling better than all other pastries easily. We have prevented him from obtaining a true monopoly on the market, but even so he is decimating all competition in quality, quantity, and variety.” Valentine leaned in. “He has become the richest man in the USM that isn’t invested in multiversal technology or the government. And he’s done it with cookies.”

“This is why you don’t allow business to run rampant across your universes,” Allure pointed out. Then she covered her mouth, realizing what she’d just criticized.

Valentine chose to ignore the slight directed at his precious capitalism. “Naturally, this conquering of the market made us suspicious. We’ve launched numerous investigations directed at him and his factories – looking for anything we can tear apart for illegal activity. We’ve never been able to find anything concrete enough for a warrant. We know that he’s producing far more cookies than he should be able to with just the factories he has, and we suspect he’s using resources illegally from an outside universe, but there is no proof. All we have is circumstantial evidence from Topeka that can’t be validated. Every time we try to take him to court, he throws money at the system until it lets him and his company walk. We were beginning to consider sending in sleeper agents to work as his employees, but we decided to try a complex game of lies first.”

“Which is where we come in,” Allure said.
“Precisely. That ‘cookie man’ you saved? His name is Marcus Uliar, one of the Big Cookie’s biggest supporters. He has the close ear of Big Cookie himself.”

“So the cookies that were dropping off of him were evidence of foul play?” Squeaky asked.

“Oh, no. He had himself magically altered to produce cookies like that. He’s not all there in the head.”

“Oh.”

“Sweet,” Minna added.

“We just managed to find enough evidence to bring him in. And unlike Big Cookie, Marcus didn’t think he had enough say to survive within USM custody. So he ran, as predicted. You saw the result. He will now report what happened to Big Cookie himself, and Big Cookie will look further into it. He will see that you were taken away to a secret government location, presumably to be given a ‘stern talking to’ about interfering in USM operations. When we return you to Earth-AZ2, we expect he will invite you to meet with him, to gauge you.”

“You want us to go meet him, gain his trust, and find out what’s going on?” Allure asked.

“Correct,” Valentine confirmed. “Find out how the cookies are made, how he treats his workers behind closed doors… Anything that we can use to take him down. You’ll have to put on a convincing façade, and likely lie to his face.”

Allure bit her lip. “Ponies aren’t that great at lying…”

“I can do it,” Squeaky said. “So can Zod. Allure, you don’t have to talk.”

“…Okay. Are we actually agreeing to do this though?”

“He seems like yet another corrupt businessman trying to amass more and more wealth,” Squeaky commented. “It seems like he needs to be taken down.”

“We can always meet with him and decide if he really needs to be taken down,” Minna pointed out.

Allure blinked. “I like that idea.”

Valentine sighed. “…So long as you don’t reveal to him what we discussed here.”

“I promise we won’t tell him anything,” Allure pledged. “I can’t promise that we’ll do anything to help you – I can say we’ll probably try, though.”

“Woohoo!” Minna said. “We’re going to take down a corporate weasel!”

“Oh no, you’re going home,” Allure said, putting a hoof on Minna. “I’m sending you back to Celestia City the moment we get out of here.”

“That would look suspicious,” Tornado said. “Why would you send her away unless you thought you were going into something dangerous? Big Cookie isn’t an idiot, he might be tipped off that you’re expecting him if you do that.”

“…Are you saying we bring Minna along!?”

“Corrupt though he may be, I do not believe Big Cookie is a murderous man,” Valentine said. “Merely extremely greedy. While this may not exactly be safe, I do not believe your lives are in
danger.”

Allure shuffled her hooves. “But… Minna can’t go on adventures!”

Thrackerzod put a hoof on Allure. “Look, we’ve either got to take her along to keep up the illusion, or drop this entirely. You’re her mother, it’s your choice.”

Allure looked at Minna’s pleading eyes and Valentine’s own, stern expression. She facehooved. “I am going to regret this more than anything… Fine, she can come. But only if she behaves, doesn’t talk to anybody, and doesn’t run off.”

“I’ll be on your back the whole time!” Minna said, beaming.

“…Right,” Allure said, biting her lip. “It looks like you have five agents, Valentine. Ready to go infiltrate a corrupt cookie conglomerate and crush its concrete to crumbs.”

“Are you proud of yourself?” Thrackerzod asked.

“Yeah.”

Valentine clapped his hands. “Good! You’ll be dropped off right where you were grabbed. Remember, you need to look like I’ve shaken you up and given you a scare.”

“Not going to be a problem for me…” Allure said, already breathing heavily.

“It would be best if you pretended like you had no idea who he was – so he can try to get you with a sob story about being crushed by the government.”

Squeaky raised an eyebrow. “What if we believe him?”

“Look at any store in Earth-AZ2 and tell me he’s being crushed.”

“Good point.” Squeaky tossed her mane. “I’ll be taking point on this one. Everyone, follow my lead. Bot, dull your emotional expressiveness so he won’t be able to read you as well. Allure, focus entirely on Minna, she’ll serve as a good distraction for you. Zod… be creepy and menacing.”

“You’re just telling me to be myself.”

“Exactly.” Squeaky grinned confidently. “Let’s go meet a Big Cookie.”

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Big Cookie never went by his real name. He was always Big Cookie – his children just called him dad, his wife called him ‘her cookie’, and everyone else called him ‘Mr. Cookie’ or just ‘Big Cookie’. In some cases, when they were scared of him, they called him ‘the Boss.’

He vastly preferred Big Cookie outside his family bonds.

Whenever he was in public – and most times when he wasn’t – he wore a light brown suit with dark brown dots all over it, resembling the chocolate chip cookies he was known for. One would have expected the CEO of a cookie company to be large, but he was a fit – if not muscular – man. His hair was a deep, chocolate brown, matching the color of his eyes. He had a short beard that covered his entire lower jaw, connected all as one mass of hair. On one wrist, he wore a golden clockwork watch that told him the time in several different universes, while on the other he had a smartwatch that could tell him anything that wasn’t the time.
Why? Because it amused him that he had a watch that couldn’t tell time. It was just one of those finer details of life he could afford to be frivolous about without any consequences.

His office continued his chocolate brown color scheme – the wooden floor and walls looked delectable, even though the structures certainly weren’t edible. He had several jars of cookies ranging from chocolate chip to snickerdoodle to a variety he had recently created called ‘lionfish’. The only things in the office that weren’t cookie or chocolate themed were his PhDs, proudly displayed on the wall alongside his athletics trophies. A cookie picture frame sat on his desk, an image of his wife and three children smiling ready for him to gaze upon any time he wished.

Though at the moment, his middle daughter was physically present, slightly older than in the photograph – but still undoubtedly a teenager.

“So let me get this straight, Sarah,” Big Cookie said, folding his arms. “You want the hovercraft?”

Sarah nodded vigorously. She stood in stark contrast to the theme of the office – bright green dress and pitch-black hair with purple tips. “Yeah!”

“And your regular car just won’t do?”

“Dad, they’re like, counting on me to bring it.”

Big Cookie shook his head. “This is why you shouldn’t promise things ahead of time.”

“I didn’t though! They just told me to get it and didn’t give me a chance to say anything about it!”

Big Cookie chuckled. “Do they know you or do they know you?”

Sarah scratched the back of her head. “Yeeeeah… So I’m going to have to tell them I couldn’t get it again?”

“I didn’t say that,” Big Cookie said, reaching into his desk and pulling out a set of keys. “That’s what you had to do last time, after all.”

Sarah reached out for the keys, but Big Cookie pulled them back. “Ah ah ah, good things come to those who wait.”

“Daaaaaad!” Sarah whined, smiling.

The door to the office opened, interrupting the conversation between father and daughter. The League of Sweetie Belles were ushered in, the whole group nervously glancing around.

“O-oh!” the Sweetie that Big Cookie knew was named Allure stammered. “We can come back later…”

“Don’t worry, we were just about done anyway,” Big Cookie said, displaying his toothy grin. He tossed the keys to Sarah. She fumbled with them a few seconds before gripping them tightly, the smile of victory on her face. “If you crash it you’re paying for it with your inheritance.”

“I know!” Sarah called, dashing out the door. “Thanks Dad!”

“You’ll have to deal with that soon enough,” Big Cookie told Allure, gazing warmly at Minna upon her back. “Come, sit, we have… well I wouldn’t say much to discuss, but a fair amount, and I’m a busy man, so we best get to it.”

As they sat down, he examined them all closely. Allure was clearly a bundle of nerves, but given
how she kept checking on Minna, that was clearly because of the child’s presence in a situation the unicorn wasn’t certain about. Big Cookie recognized the ‘mothering’ look easily, having seen it on his wife many times over the years. He was mildly surprised that he couldn’t read the child at all… she stared right at him, unfaltering.

He felt as though that innocent smile was hiding a sinister mind.

Lucky for him, she was just a child. Nothing to be overly concerned about, though perhaps something to look into later.

Squeaky was clearly acting as the leader for now – and she was guarding her expressions well. Big Cookie was able to tell the face she was projecting was not her true one. He could see strain in the calm smile and mild worry in her eyes. However, there was also a confidence about her. An arrogance. She thought she was better than him. Curious.

Thrackerzod wasn’t hiding anything. Her gaze of contempt was as honest as anything in the room. She did not like being here and she wanted Big Cookie to know he was on her ‘do not like’ list. Big Cookie didn’t mind.

Sweetie Bot… was looking around the office in wonder, slowly taking all the details in she could manage. The mind of a child indeed, less interesting than Minna even. But he couldn’t afford to dismiss her – she may have been stunted emotionally, but her intellect was sharper and more discerning than any of the others. She would notice tiny details the others would not be able to pick up.

“I hear you had a run-in with the USM government,” Big Cookie began. “You have quite the luck, from what I hear.”

“Mhm,” Squeaky said. “We were called by the USM. Sat in front of an important-looking man while he told us what was what. Currently I’m getting a sense of déjà vu.”

Big Cookie smiled. “You are not in any danger or trouble here, ladies. You have not insulted me by interfering with one of my ‘agents’, because I do not have such things.”

“What was the cookie guy’s deal then?” Thrackerzod asked.

“He was simply a close friend of mine – an investor at times, but that’s hardly important. They were going to use him to get to me. Extort me for company secrets.”

“Why would they want to do that?” Squeaky asked.

“You see, the government is suspicious of my success,” Big Cookie said. “They think there’s no way a man can just show up, open a cookie factory, and conquer the market in a handful of years. It doesn’t match any of their projections or their way of thinking about the world. So, naturally, they think I’m doing something illegal – but I’m not! I’m just creating cookies with my secret family recipe; cookies that are better than all others. Cookies that blow the minds of everyone who tastes them.” He sighed. “But now that I’ve found success, I’m being assaulted on all sides by regulation, suspicion, and jealousy.”

“You do know where we come from, right?” Thrackerzod asked. “Merodi Universalis. There’s a reason we don’t let companies expand beyond one universe.”

“We don’t trust them!” Bot declared, grinning. “Breeds corruption and dishonesty!”

Big Cookie nodded. “At least you’re blunt about it. You are right; corruption and underhanded
business are symptoms of reaching the top… in most cases. However, I assure you I am not one of those evil corporate masterminds. I’m the Big Cookie!” He let out a big laugh. “I live to feed people delectable pastries. I could raise my prices to gather more funds, but I don’t, because I don’t need to. I’m not a cheat.”

“Why are you telling us all this?” Squeaky asked.

“Because I want you to help me in my predicament,” Big Cookie said. “You’re the perfect team to help me survive when surrounded by political pressure trying to squeeze me for daring to succeed with honesty. Simply having you on my side will deter the government from looking further into my company for fear of an international incident, and you will be able to protect those the government wishes to extort to get to me. It would be a temporary arrangement as well – just enough to get the government to lay off a little. In return I will pay you a truly exorbitant amount of money, will lobby the USM democratic process in Merodi Universalis’ favor, and make you major shareholders of The Big Cookie.”

Bot blinked. “Woah…”

“Yes, that is a big reward,” the Big Cookie agreed. “It is there because I’m tired of fighting the government at every turn.”

“Two problems,” Squeaky said. “One, we don’t trust you or believe that you are as honest as you say you are. Two, we really shouldn’t go against the USM. We did it once before, it ended disastrously.”

“I have enough funds to lobby the government for just about anything. Valentine won’t be able to spitefully cut you off just because you helped me.”

“That only solves one,” Thrackerzod pointed out. “You’re a businessman. We don’t trust you. We’d only consider helping you if we thought you were actually honest.”

Big Cookie stood up, smiling. “Then allow me to prove myself. Let me take you into the background of this cookie factory.”

The Sweetie Belles stared at him, shock evident on their faces. “…Isn’t there company secrets back there?”

“Of course there are,” Big Cookie said. “Things I really don’t want the government knowing about, or getting out to my competitors. But I’ve read your files – you’re all good, honest, kind mares. I’m sure you’ll understand once I show you. And even if you don’t, you aren’t the type to give Valentine something he can use.” He stepped to the exit, gesturing for them to follow. “Come along.”

The League exchanged glanced with each other, shrugged, and followed him. He led them through an employees only door, entering the balcony above the first level of the factory – the one where he let tours go through. There was currently a somewhat large group watching chocolate being poured into a cauldron and stirred by giant machines.

“Oh, hey!” a bald superhero said, waving up at the League. “How’d you girls get in here? Tours only happen every two hours!”

“Not really our choice, Saitama!” Squeaky called down.

“Hear that Genos? More evidence there’s a cookie conspiracy!”

Big Cookie looked down at the hero – Saitama – with suspicion. “Who is he?”
“Some hero,” Thrackerzod said. “He was there when we took out the government agent. Seemed fixated on the cookies. Have no idea otherwise.”

Big Cookie led them out of earshot, through another door.

“There is a cookie conspiracy, isn’t there?” Squeaky asked.

“Of sorts. Nothing so nefarious like I’m sure he thinks,” Big Cookie said. “You’ll see soon enough.”

They came to a large, metal door locked by a keypad. Big Cookie slid his personal card through, letting them into a large, expansive room that was clearly bigger than the entire skyscraper it was contained within.

“Woah…” Bot said, leaning on the edge of the railing they were standing on, looking down at the true production floor of The Big Cookie. They saw a production floor split up into multiple sections. In one, there were numerous older women moving slowly from oven to oven, baking cookies at an impressive rate with smiles on their faces. They put personal touches on every cookie – some made patterns with the chocolate chips, some frosted their cookies, while others made inventive shapes. Clearly, this was where the specialty cookies were made.

The army of baking ‘grandmas’ was the least bizarre method of cookie production. Next to them were fields lit by giant UV lights where cookies were popping out of the ground, grown as if they were fruit from plants. Next to these farm-grown cookies were large conveyor belts where cookies were somehow assembled before their eyes, not from baking ingredients, but from rocks and minerals. There were a few stone towers with magic lights atop them, glowing with power that produced even more cookies.

In the center of all this was a giant apparatus of bottles, pipes, and burners that mixed liquids, metals, and pure materials in a complex procedure that somehow produced a waterfall of every kind of cookie imaginable, pouring into a truck.

Cookies by the million. Perhaps billion.

“This is not the company secret,” Big Cookie said, grinning. “This is just an extension of it. Do you want to see the real center of cookie production?”

The Sweeties and Minna all nodded, dumbfounded by the impossibilities they were looking at.

Big Cookie ordered the platform they were standing on to disconnect from the wall and hover over to the back of the expansive room. They passed the section filled with grandmas – and all of them turned to Big Cookie and waved with big smiles, shouting him words of encouragement.

His smile faltered as he heard those words, old memories dredging up in his mind. ...Or memories more recent than he would have liked…

He shook his head, clearing it. Now was not the time to dwell on that – he had to convince these fillies he was good. They should have been able to buy him just enough time.

They arrived at the back wall, where another security door blocked their passage. He slid his card in, allowing them to pass right through. On the other side was a much smaller, cylindrical room with a staircase leading to the middle of it. Floating right in front of the staircase was a giant, glowing chocolate chip cookie – or chocolate chip sphere, seeing as it wasn’t disc-shaped. Numerous drones flew around, tapping the cookie sphere, every touch producing a single cookie that dropped to the floor.

Big Cookie walked up to The Big Cookie and touched it with his finger, summoning a single
chocolate chip cookie into his hand. He took a bite and grinned. “This is the source of everything. A unique magic artifact that eternally produces more and more cookies. As I keep using it, it keeps revealing new esoteric and magical ways of producing cookies for everyone to enjoy. It is the greatest secret of my company – because if anyone knew about it, they would try to steal it, or destroy it.” He turned to look at them. “It’s not illegal to use magic artifacts in business construction, Sweetie Belles. Iom Corporation uses them extensively, and publicly. But I’m a newcomer, and they don’t like how I’ve managed to stake my claim – both the government and my competitors. If they knew about this, it would be the end of me.”

“I… see,” Squeaky said, clearly not actually seeing.

Big Cookie shrugged. “I’ve shown you the depths of my company. All I ask now is that you consider my offer. I just want to protect this so I may continue to provide delicious pastries to the masses.” He stepped down the stairs, raising his hand as a signal. His eldest daughter – a woman in a blue dress with violet eyes – walked out from behind a cookie storage box. “This is Aria. She will give you a tour of the real factory while I return to my work. Take your time in making a decision – I won’t even demand one today.” He made his way to the exit. “Enjoy your stay.”

He looked at them all one last time – good, they weren’t sure what to think anymore. Exactly what he wanted. Aria would be able to turn them to his side completely. She was his strongest weapon. If not…

Well, he didn’t really want to think about what would happen in that case.

It would be unfortunate.

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Aria took the League of Sweetie Belles to a secret observation station of the ‘public’ factory. “We take all the cookies from the true factory and put them on those conveyor belts there,” she said, pointing. “Everything else you see here is just for show. The workers think they’re making the chocolate, the dough, etcetera, but in reality they’re just using resources from the cookies to make cookies again.”

“Wow. Quite a convoluted deception,” Allure said.

Aria nodded. “It keeps everything safe. Nobody will ever figure out what we do in here, so The Big Cookie company will always provide cookies to the masses.”

Squeaky looked at Aria closely, narrowing her eyes. “…What do you really think?”

“…I think that it’d be nicer if he could do it without the lying. But I think that, in the end, what he’s doing is good,” she lied.

“Ah,” Squeaky said. She’s lying, she sent telepathically to Thrackerzod.

Of course she is, Thrackerzod responded. We’re only being shown ‘just enough’ to gain our trust. There’s more going on here, it’s plain to see. He wouldn’t dare show us these things unless he thought it was an acceptable risk. He’s not stupid enough to do this with some unicorns he’s never met – he thinks that the secrets he’s shown us can afford to be given up. There are other secrets he wants to keep hidden even from us.

I take it the soul scan worked then?
No. He was protected. Which, by itself, is concerning. Not even Valentine’s soul is that well protected from my gaze. It is possible he was just naturally born with the resistant trait, but I doubt it.

Regardless, we don’t have anything we can really give Valentine. He’s right, none of this is illegal. Odd, but perfectly fine. So much for his little ruse.

We need to find a way deeper in…

“Girl’s, we’re busted,” Allure said.

Squeaky shot Allure with a what the heck!? look. “W-what are you talking about?”

“Aria hasn’t been giving the tour ever since you started that psychic discussion. She’s been listening.”

Aria looked at the unicorns and Minna with her alien eyes. Yes, it is true, I am a psychic.

Thrackerzod entered a fighting stance.

“Woah woah woah!” Aria said, holding up her hands. “That doesn’t mean I’m going to bust you!”

“Talk quickly,” Thrackerzod said.

“You were right, I was lying earlier! I don’t think what he’s doing is good!”

Thrackerzod blinked. She stood down. “She’s telling the truth. I can see into her soul. Pretty easily, actually. Helps when the psychic is actually opening herself up for you to see.”

“So… You’re not our enemy?” Allure asked.

Aria shook her head. “Not at all. I believe I’m your ally. My father, genius though he is, is blinded by his love – he thinks he can trust me unconditionally with everything. He placed me here to watch you, and condition you over time with my psychic powers if I could.”

“Knew he was evil,” Thrackerzod muttered.

“I… wouldn’t go that far,” Aria said. “But he’s doing something wrong. Something I’m not sure about.”

“How so?”

“And I didn’t quite realize it until I was a teenager – and I never told Dad about it. I was in the rebellious stage, and by the time I grew out of it, I was suspicious of how well the company was doing.” She paused. “There is a portal to our home in this factory.”

“…There is!?” Bot blurted.
“Yes. Heavily protected and hidden, but it is here. He showed it to me when I turned eighteen.” A conflicted expression crossed her face. “…He trusted me completely. And I always planned to betray him.”

“…What’s through the portal?” Allure asked.

“A lost world,” Minna said absent-mindedly.

Everyone turned to stare at Minna.

“…I don’t know about that,” Aria said. “All I know is what he told me and what I’ve seen. He told me what lies through the portal is dangerous. 99% of our cookies come pouring out of that portal. Maybe more.”

“I think we’ll need to see this portal,” Thrackerzod said. “Quickly. …I have an inkling it may be something we need to destroy.”

“He can probably just make another one with the power of the Cookie,” Aria said. “…But I agree, you need to see it.” She glanced around nervously. “That portal is evil. I don’t know how he doesn’t see it.”

“Consumed by the success it’s bringing him,” Thrackerzod suggested. “…Just take us to it.”

Aria nodded. “Do you have a stealth spell?”

Thrackerzod encased the League in an invisibility aura, while Aria remained as she was. “Lead the way. We’ll follow. You don’t have to worry about anything seeing us.”

Aria nodded. She put on a serious face and wordlessly walked down a hallway – right past the door that led to the farms, wizard towers, and other bizarre implements of cookie production. She pressed her hand to a wall that had no door, whispering a nineteen-digit passcode to the white surface. Nothing seemed to happen – but now she could just walk through the wall like it wasn’t even there.

The League followed her through into a dark elevator lit only by a single red bulb, barely large enough to fit them all. It began to descend deep into the earth, far below where any basement should have been. The doors slid open, revealing a dark laboratory that smelled of burnt cookies.

They saw the portal first – nested between two pillars of neon red light was a vaguely circular depression in the wall, ringed by cookies that seemed to pulsate with life. The center of the portal was a swirling red vortex, filling the room with unholy energy.

Cookies didn’t just pour out of the portal – they were ejected at high velocity by the millions, vanishing as they passed between the two pillars of light. Presumably they were teleported up a few levels and to the regular factory floor.

“Aria, what are you doing here?” Big Cookie asked, revealing his presence on one of the observation chairs. He was no longer smiling like he had been every other time the Sweeties had seen him. On his face was a deep, troubled scowl.

Aria recovered quickly. “The Sweeties are gone, Dad. They really really didn’t trust you and suspected I was a trap. I figured I’d tell you since they could be a huge breach of security.”

“…Did I really misread them that badly?”

“I caught a few snippets of mental conversation. They were working for Valentine – it’s possible the
entire chase was a ruse meant to get your attention.”

Big Cookie curled his hand into a fist. “…I’ll take care of them, Aria. You can get back to work.”

“Okay, Dad,” Aria said, tripping over Allure as she went back to the elevator.

“Are you okay?” Big Cookie asked, standing up.

“Fine! Fine!” Aria said, stumbling to the elevator door. “Just tripped!”

“…On what?”

“…My feet.”

A small smile came to Big Cookie’s lips. “You always were a little absent-minded about those feet of yours… …Aria?”

“Yes, Dad?”

“You know I cherish you, right?”

Aria paused for a moment. “…Yeah, I do. What’s this about? What’s wrong?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Big Cookie said with a wave of his hand. “I’ve got to deal with the Sweeties first.”

Aria nodded. “Alright.” She stepped into the elevator and returned to the factory proper.

The moment she was gone, Big Cookie grabbed a lever and pulled it. The Portal stopped blasting cookies out, bringing the lab to an eerie calm. Big Cookie sighed. “I guess I have to go back then…” He stepped to the portal and took in a deep breath. “This isn’t going to be pretty…” He jumped through the red swirling mist.

Thrackerzod dropped the invisibility spell. “All right, we have to follow him.”

“I’m not taking Minna in there!” Allure shouted.

“Then stay behind,” Thrackerzod said. “We have to go now. That was the voice of a man about to do something drastic.”

Squeaky nodded. “Whatever it is, it isn’t good. This portal feels wrong.”

“It’s eldritch,” Thrackerzod said. “It’s derived from a partially Demonic source.”

“Th… That’s more reasons not to take Minna in!” Allure said.

“Allure, you can stay behind, we understand,” Squeaky said. “Don’t worry.” She gestured to Bot and Thrackerzod. “Let’s go.”

The three of them marched to the portal, allowing Thrackerzod to analyze it up close first.

Minna whispered into her mother’s ear. “They might need us.”

“But”

“Five is better than four.”
“Minna, you can-”

“I’m fearless. I won’t run screaming from anything. All you have to do is keep yourself safe to keep me safe.”

Allure gulped. She wanted to keep Minna away from all possible danger… But Minna was growing up in a world where adventure and danger was around every corner, and a world where her mother would constantly face dangerous situations and come home telling her of them. Minna not only knew about the dangers of the world, she wanted to experience them.

There was a point where Allure would only be sheltering her unnecessarily – insulting the unique child she had on her back.

Another part of Allure also knew that what was through that portal was definitely not a good place to start introducing Minna to real danger.

But in real life, nobody was going to ever expect the form the danger came in. The horrors of real life would come when you least expected it, without warning, and in any form.

Maybe Minna was too young to learn that.

But that didn’t change the fact Minna wanted to try to learn it.

“Wait up!” Allure shouted, galloping after the rest of the League. “We’re coming too.”

“No buts! You said we don’t have time!” Allure pushed magic into her back hooves. “Let’s go!” She pushed off the ground and bounced through the portal, Minna laughing on her back.

The Earth on the other side wasn’t an earth anymore. It was an eldritch location.

Allure could see cookies. She could also see a deep, powerful red shifting around her impossibly, clawing at her mind and tearing it away from any rational thoughts. Soon, she would become one with the dough…

Thrackerzod gave everyone’s mind a perception shield, blocking all the damaging influence. “This is why we don’t just charge through random portals without scanning first,” she said, smacking Allure.

Allure was barely able to focus on anything in front of her. “Wh… He… So… Wha?”

“Aw, why’d you get rid of the cool stuff?” Minna asked, pouting. “I liked how it looked!”

Thrackerzod stared at Minna. “…You just stared into the depths of an eldritch location for a solid second and felt no adverse effects? What are you?”

“Alive,” Squeaky said, taking a defensive posture. “Which we won’t be if we don’t do something quick.”

Now that Thrackerzod’s perception filter was around all of them, they could see clearly – and accurately. Luckily for them, the multi-dimensional nature of the eldritch location had not changed the structure of the planet all that much. With the bizarre insanity-inducing folds in space cleared away, the planet still existed as a large sphere for them to walk on. Granted, it was made out of a mixture of mutated screaming flesh and cookies, but at least it was three-dimensional enough to
understand. Cookies flowed through the air in complex spiral patterns, drifting closer and closer to the portal at a lazy speed – presumably nothing near the speed they had been going before Big Cookie pulled the lever.

Dotting the landscape were hundreds of mutated creatures that vaguely looked like they may have been grandmothers, once. All of them were lurching toward the unicorn invaders, ready to dice them to shreds.

“Nope,” Thrackerzod said. In this realm, she didn’t even need to light her horn – she just was one with the eldritch, forming a direct contract with the lesser beings before her. She spoke in the broodfester tongues to the impossible beings. “I am Thrackerzod, once of Azathoth. I demand to know from which above you come.”

“GRANDMATRIARCH!” They all spoke at once, despite not having mouths.

“Are you not of the Embodiment?”

“WE ARE OF OUR OWN.”

“Not anymore. You serve me.” Thrackerzod’s essence flashed, and all the ‘grandmothers’ became her slaves. “Take us to wherever the human who passed through here just before us has gone.”

“THE BIG COOKIE HAS GONE TO THE FINAL FACTORY.”

“Lead the way,” Thrackerzod boomed. She turned to her friends. “Apologies for the headaches, there wasn’t really another way to get the point across.”

Allure rubbed her ears. “I’m getting used to it at this point.”

“I don’t think we’ve ever been in an eldritch location on a mission before,” Squeaky realized. “You’ve always taken us on pre-planned excursions to show us what we could ‘see’ with your restriction spells.”

“We’re lucky this place isn’t heavily deviated from standard dimensionality,” Thrackerzod reminded them as they walked across the ever-shifting flesh-cookie ground. “As you’ll recall from Za’za’inr’atta, if it’s deviated enough I may be able to protect your mind, but you won’t be able to walk because pushing off something in one dimension triggers a sucking force in another without the proper mindframe.”

“I think the world where speaking made things explode was weirder,” Bot chimed in.

“…I need to see these places,” Minna said.

“One day,” Thrackerzod said. “Until now, appreciate the impossibility of a… giraffe made entirely out of cookies eating a mutated grandma creature.”

“…Cooooool.”

Allure’s stomach did flip-flops. “Egh… Minna, stop looking.”

“…Mom, c’mon, I need to be on watch just like everyone else.”

“Right… Right…” Allure put a hoof to her horn. “I’m going to have to get used to this…”
They crested what could best be described as a ‘hill’ – and they could see the Final Factory on the next ‘hill’. It, unlike the rest of the world, was not made of flesh and cookies, but was a regular building with smokestacks, brick walls, and doors fit for humans to walk through. Gigantic rings resembling stargates lined the walls, creating cookies out of midair. A single tetrahedral prism floated a few feet above the Final Factory, drawing light of all colors into itself, spitting a few colors out as laser beams, but presumably converting the rest to cookies somehow.

Thrackerzod narrowed her eyes. “That’s not a machine up there. That Prism is a sapient being. And it’s purely physical. I won’t be able to condition it easily.”

Bot produced a rocket launcher. She fired the rocket, unable to compensate for the impossible eddys of space in front of her – but Thrackerzod used her magic to guide the missile to the Prism. The crystal flashed, engulfing the missile in a laser to defend itself.

This prompted the missile to explode. The shockwave knocked the Prism over, onto the other side of the factory.

“It’ll be back!” Bot predicted.

“I know,” Thrackerzod said, calculating an eldritch location teleport. She shifted all of them to the front doors of the Final Factory. When they placed their hooves on the doors, they didn’t feel like it was an approximation of what was really there – it felt real.

They cracked the doors open slightly, poking all five of their heads in.

Big Cookie stood, in a grand hall devoid of decoration. In front of him was a truly disgusting being. It had the face of an elderly human woman, but the rest was unrecognizable. All her body parts were shifting, her eyes burned with bloody fire, and her every movement was accompanied by a lagged motion blur that made her hard to focus on. One moment, her breathing was slow and she was like an ancient tortoise – the next she seemed to teleport to another part of the room.

She didn’t seem to be made out of cookies at all. This was somehow the most concerning thing about her.

“COOKIE, WHAT NEWS DO YOU BRING?”

“Grandmatriarch, forgive me, for my attempts to buy us extra time have played right into enemy hands. There has been a security breach. The USM government knows about the Cookie at the very least, and I do not think for a second they will not try to take it.”

“That is no issue, the Cookie can be reclaimed when we are through.”

“That is true. I was careful not to let the existence of the portal even be hinted at.” He shuddered before them. “However, I would not put it past Valentine to push the authority he has been given to find it.”

“How many cookies short are we?”

“For the instant dominion of the entire USM, three weeks’ production.”

“It is clear we do not have that time any longer. We shall move now.”
“I expected as much… Remember our understanding.”

“YOUR FAMILY WILL BE MOVED TO ANOTHER WORLD WHILE WE TRANSFORM THE WORLDS OF THE USM, AS PROMISED. YOU WILL BEGIN YOUR ENTERPRISE AGAIN FROM THAT NEW WORLD.”

“If I may ask, where are we going next?”

“THE VOID. IT IS TIME TO MOVE UP IN THE MULTIVERSE, COOKIE. FAR ABOVE WHAT YOU ORIGINALLY THOUGHT YOU COULD RISE TO.”

Big Cookie nodded. “Yes… I am honored to have been selected.”

“AS YOU SHOULD BE. NOW, HOW ABOUT YOU INTRODUCE ME TO THE SPIES WHO FOLLOWED YOU HERE?”

“The what?”

The League of Sweetie Belles was suddenly standing right next to Big Cookie, having spent no time transitioning.

“How did…”

“We’re smart,” Allure said, not letting him ask the question. She tried to take a step forward to defy the Grandmatriarch, but the wrongness of the being forced her to drop to her knees. “We… We…”

“We defy you,” Minna said, walking off her mother’s back, unfazed. Thrackerzod took her place beside her while Squeaky held her head and Bot lowered the sensitivity of her processors even further.

Minna pointed at the Grandmatriarch. “We will not let you destroy the USM!”

“…WHAT IS THIS CHILD?”

“Not important,” Thrackerzod growled. “You may not be aware of this, ‘Grandmatriarch’, but the Eldritch Embodiment currently exists in a state of parallel with the United States of the Multiverse. Should you continue with your course of action, there will be a reaction from those invested in the mortal plane there.”

“SUCH AS?”

“The court of the King in Yellow, Hastur, servant of Azathoth and Nyarlathotep’s High Machinators.”

“AND YOU?”

“I am a free being who once served under Hastur, with my mortal shell belonging to Overhead of Relations Charter-Princess Evening Sparkle of Merodi Universalis.”

“THANK YOU, THRACKERZOD, ONCE OF AZATHOTH. YOU HAVE GIVEN ME A NAME AND FACE FOR MY FUTURE ENEMIES, SO I MAY TREAT THEM AS THEY DESERVE. WITH THEIR NAMES THROWN IN THE DIRT.”
“You cannot possibly expect to engage us in combat and emerge victorious, outsider.”

“AND YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND THE POWER OF THE COOKIES, OR WHAT DRIVES US GRANDMATRIARCHS.”

“…Ah, there’s more than one of you. That would have been helpful to know prior to now.”

“Who cares? We can still beat them up, one or many,” Minna said.

“YOUR INNOCENCE IS ADORABLE. BUT KNOW THIS, THRACKERZOD. WE WILL LAY SIEGE TO THE WORLDS OF THE USM, USING OUR COOKIES TO INFUSE OUR ESSENCE INTO THEM. THEY WILL BECOME LIKE THIS WORLD, AND WE WILL USE THE NEW COOKIES TO CONQUER MORE AND MORE AND MORE! WE WILL SURPASS THE EMBODIMENT’S STAGNATION! WE ARE NOT A FORCE OF NATURE – WE ARE CONQUERORS!”

“Then your essence will be met by ours.”

“NOT YOUR FULL FORCE. THE EMBODIMENT IS NEVER UNIFIED IN ANYTHING.” She roared. “MY SISTERS! IT IS TIME TO GO! LET US LEAVE THESE FOOLISH MORTALS IN THIS FACTORY – WE HAVE WORLDS TO CRUSH IN OUR GRASP!”

She was gone with a pop.

Thrackerzod gulped. “That’s not good.”

Minna put her hands on her hips. “What are we waiting for? Let’s chase them down!”

“They’ve closed the portal already and the universe already doesn’t support our standard method of multiversal travel.”

Bot stood up, shaking. “Wh… What are we going to do?”

Allure put a hoof to her head. “I… I don’t know, let me think… Let me think…”

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Valentine and Tornado stood across the street from The Big Cookie’s factory.

“I’m thinking something went wrong,” Tornado said, lowering her binoculars.

“Clearly,” Valentine said, furrowing his brow. “Perhaps they discovered their trackers…”

“Doubt it. Bet Big Cookie’s just paranoid enough to have anti-beacon walls installed.”

“Where would he even get that…?”

“Money is power.”

Valentine put a hand to his chin. “…Unrestricted money brings too much power.”

Tornado blinked. “Valentine, did you just say something vaguely anti-capitalist?”

The very words she spoke made Valentine twitch. “The market always needs government control to
keep it from blowing out of proportion. Clearly more adjustments need to be made. One person holding all power restricts the free market.”

Tornado’s watch started beeping. “Huh. Haven’t had a hero call in a while.”

“My ships are in orbit, they’ll take care of whatever it is.”

The Earth began to rumble. The sky began to shift into an unnatural red color and cookies rained down from the sky, splintering into mutated horrors when they hit the ground.

“…I think something went wrong,” Valentine observed.

“Quite,” Tornado commented, squishing all the wriggling masses of flesh in an instant with her powers. “Not too bad… Even if this is a worldwide effect, we should be able t-

A Grandmatriarch appeared behind The Big Cookie company’s factory, an impossible hand resting on a nearby skyscraper, crumbling three floors in the process.

“YOU HAVE CONSUMED OUR FLESH FOR LONG ENOUGH – NOW YOU WILL LIVE FOR US TO CONSUME.”

Valentine grunted. “Tornado, you haven’t by chance eaten any of those cookies recently?”

“Not since the operation started.”

“Good. The chances of virtually anyone else on this planet having avoided the cookies is about zero.” He summoned D4C, narrowing his eyes, “Get us up there.”

Tornado launched them to the roof of a nearby flat-topped skyscraper. They were not the only people who arrived – several government agents and other heroes had decided the same place was the best way to get close to the Grandmatriarch.

“Eldritch being!” Valentine shouted. “Leave this world at once, or suffer the might of the USM!”

“YOUR MIGHT IS NOTHING.” The Grandmatriarch attacked. A government agent set up a transdimensional shield around them that kept the eldritch ‘limb’ from moving any closer to them, appearing as a bursting yellow-green fractal pattern.

“I need a supercharge,” Valentine said. One of the agents had one, tossing him a shot filled with glowing purple fluid. He injected it into his arm without question. He took a breath. “When the shield is lowered, everyone hit her with everything you’ve got. It may not do anything, but it’ll look flashy.”

Valentine wrapped himself up in his flag, translating to another universe using D4C’s power. In Earth-AZ1, there was another Grandmatriarch attacking, this one suffering only resistance from standard military weapons. She had not been slowed – and already the ground beneath her was turning into fleshy, crumbly masses that tugged at Valentine’s mind.

He didn’t give it any mind – the supercharge was already in his body, flooding his Stand. He wouldn’t be able to think as clearly for quite some time and his body would suffer from tremors, but he only needed to do this once.

…Well, that’s what he’d thought before he shifted universes. HE had thought only Earth-AZ2 was being attacked, but if Earth-AZ1 was also, the entire USM may be in danger…
Deal with one set right now, worry about possible others later. He leaped into the air, touching the edge of the Grandmatriarch with D4C’s hand. The rippling impossibility translated to his own wrist, damaging it in several places. But he didn’t need it to be functional. He just needed to be touching the Grandmatriarch.

With a twist, the supercharge allowed D4C to move the entire Grandmatriarch through the folds between universes – right through the flag Valentine wrapped around himself. He forced her back into Earth-AZ2, her body so large she couldn’t help but come in contact with her alternate self.

The eldritch death throes were agonizing to hear as two bodies of impossible flesh collided and disintegrated into millions of tiny cubes. Tornado used her power to grab those cubes and force them back to the place they were exploding from, just so they would suffer more damage.

The Grandmatriarch vanished from the world.

For about two seconds.

Cookies from all over Earth-AZ2 rose into the air, flying to a location in the middle of the sky. They turned into fleshy masses as they combined, twisting and retching until they had formed an entirely new Grandmatriarch from the billions upon billions of cookies in the world.

“The mortal is inconvenient…” the Grandmatriarch said, deciding Valentine made a good target.

Tornado grabbed him in her telekinesis and got him out of there, letting the other heroes and agents try in vain to do something to the eldritch elder.

It wasn’t long before the ‘heroes’ who had recently eaten Big Cookie cookies showed up and started defending the Grandmatriarch.

Meanwhile, inside The Big Cookie factory, Saitama and Genos got an urgent alert on their hero watches.

“Master, it’s a god-level threat,” Genos said. “We have to drop our frivolous investigations and save the world.”

“Genos, did you even read the description?” Saitama said, holding up his alert watch. “Says right here it’s a being taking control of people because of the cookies.”

Genos looked at his watch, eyes widening. “That is true…”

“I’m going to keep poking around – there’s got to be something in here that’ll help with that. It’d be better than just punching it to death.”

“How so?”

Saitama shrugged. “You should go help. I’m going to keep looking now that I have a good reason for breaking and entering.” He punched through several walls with one motion, finding the room filled with cookie farms, wizard towers, and the alchemy plant. “Ah, now we’re talking.”

“I hope you find something, master,” Genos said, taking off. He flew through a window, aiming both his hands at the Grandmatriarch. “ELDER BEING! TAKE THIS!”

The resulting onslaught of energy from within his arms was both impressive, terrifying, and would have taken out an entire city block if it had been aimed differently. As it was, the orange beam just
cut a hole in the Grandmatriarch.

A hole that was quickly filled by cookies. The Grandmatriarch didn’t even turn to register his presence.

A few of the heroes under her control, however, did. A baseball bat hit him in the face, driving him to the ground.

The Grandmatriarchs marched across many USM worlds, transforming each one into their realm…

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Allure paced. “We can’t leave the world to help… We don’t know how to fight the Grandmatriarchs…”

“I was bluffing about the eldritch assistance at the end there,” Thrackerzod said. “Nyarlathotep will probably find a way to screw with the Grandmatriarchs without direct combat, and Hastur doesn’t have that much power on his side. If it were just one, they’d definitely do something. But it’s not. So it’s just not worth it to them.”

“Think… Think… Think…” Allure said, smacking herself on the head. “What do w-” She stopped herself. She turned to Big Cookie, remembering that he existed. “You.”

“What about me?” he asked, stepping back from them out of fear.

Allure looked at him with sad, rather than angry eyes like the rest of the Sweeties. “Why?”

“I don’t have to explain myself to spies.”

“We’re probably about to die. The least you can do is explain why.”

He looked at her with uncertainty – but he knew she was right. The Grandmatriarchs would not allow the League to live. “…Because I didn’t realize what was happening.”

“…Care to explain?”

He put his arms behind his back and sighed. “The Big Cookie was the best thing to ever happen to me. I had found success through it – making endless cookies for eternity. So whenever it revealed to me another way to bring forth the cookies, I didn’t hesitate. The first hint something might have been wrong was the temples… Where cookies could be created through simple reverent thoughts. But there appeared to be no adverse effects, so I went on. I ignored the strange things that happened in the mines, the visitors from beyond the stars from the shipments… And when the portal was revealed to me, I didn’t even hesitate. I opened it up and got more cookies. I ignored all the news about the portals being the end of us all as people trying to defame me.” He paused.

Then he sighed. “No, that’s not true. I knew the portal to the cookieverse was basically a direct gateway to some kind of hell. I met the creatures from there that wanted to work for me, that wanted to make more cookies, that wanted to spread more cookies. They offered me deals that I kept taking, over and over, again and again, just to produce more cookies and more profit. I kept myself secluded while the world started to burn around me. I created the objects revealed beyond the portal – the antimatter facilities that would bring about atomic level disasters, the Prisms that watched everyone closely for a purpose I still don’t understand, and the chancemakers that… made million-to-one things happen every second. There may have been more – but the Grandmatriarchs were done letting the world ‘live’. ” He threw his arms wide. “They turned it into this glorious thing, and sent me to another world to bring cookies to the multiverse. So I took my family and did exactly that.”
Allure looked into his eyes. “I know you aren’t really on their side.”

“Yes I am,” he spat, suddenly clamming up. “I am one with the cookies! I am Big Cookie!”

“You’re also Andrew Maddison,” Allure said, walking closer. “…Do you know how we got here? Aria took us. She found out we were spies, and decided that we could be the ones to stop what you were doing. She knew it was evil and had to end.”

“Aria wouldn’t…”

“She did,” Allure assured him. “I know she still loves you, I could see it in her eyes. But she couldn’t just go along with you. She saw what you had become, and hated it.” She looked deeply into his eyes. “Andrew. Do it for your daughter. Show her that her father is in there, willing to do anything for his girl.”

Andrew’s eyes softened considerably. “…There’s nothing I can do. The Grandmatriarchs always protect the ascension button.”

“Aren’t all the Grandmatriarchs attacking other universes right now?” Minna pointed out.

Andrew’s eyes widened. “That’s right…” He turned to the back of the room, where an elevator stood. “Come with me.”

They piled into the elevator and went up to the top of the Final Factory. They entered an almost exact replica of Andrew’s other office, except without the PhDs and awards, for they had been moved from here.

At the back wall was a large, red counter, displaying the number of cookies. The number had forty digits.

“That’s a lot of cookies,” Bot said.

“Yes,” Andrew said, staring at a large red button on his desk. “…This button was given to me by the Big Cookie long before the portal. It… It was a way to destroy all cookie and cookie secrets in an instant, reducing the cookie count and production to absolute zero. Every cookie the Grandmatriarchs draw power from – including the cookies in this world – will vanish in a process called ascension.”

“…Convenient,” Thrackerzod observed.

Andrew pointed to a large, golden horseshoe outside that was generating cookies from nothing.

“That’s a Chancemaker. It manipulates probabilities so that cookies appear from quantum effects. As a result… Truly improbable things happen. Like the Grandmatriarchs forgetting to guard this button.” He hovered his hand over it. “…Only I can press it…”

“What are you waiting for!?” Squeaky blurted. “Press it?”

“Reduced to absolutely nothing…” Andrew said, his expression faltering. “No cookies, no factories, no workers, no kittens… Nothing will exist…”

Allure grabbed Andrew by the face. “You. Are. Not. The. Big. Cookie. You are Andrew Maddison. There’s more to you than just sitting around collecting cookies. You can do much, much more.”

Andrew held his hand over the button, shivering. “I can’t imagine myself with nothing…”

“Can you imagine what Aria will do to you if you don’t press it!”
Andrew’s expression strained even further. He took a breath and lifted his hand into the air – and slammed it on the button.

Every cookie he had made that still existed in some fashion vanished in an instant.

The very factory they were standing in vanished – as well as all the cookie-flesh masses in the world. Earth was returned to existence. It was dead – a lifeless rock devoid of anything of purpose.

But the eldritch was gone. There were no cookies to draw power from.

In many other worlds, every Big Cookie cookie, factory, and secret vanished. The buildings that were only partially constructed out of cookie secrets collapsed in on themselves, reduced to rubble. The slaves to the Grandmatriarchs regained control of their minds and their bodies in one fell swoop – and the Grandmatriarchs themselves could no longer exist in the world without power to draw from. They were forced to retreat back to their home universe, one made entirely of cookies.

Genos managed to shoot one’s head off before it left. It felt good, even if he most likely didn’t kill it.

Back in the ruined Earth, Andrew stared at the wasteland. “…All because I couldn’t stop making cookies,” he said, taken aback by the desolation that had once been his home.

“But you stopped now,” Allure said, standing on her hind hooves so she could put a comforting hoof on his shoulder. “That’s all that matters.”

“Yeah… You’re right. You…” He held a hand to his eyes, trying to keep his tears in.

“Huh. I guess even ‘soulless’ company masterminds are people,” Bot said. “Who knew?”

“Mom did,” Minna said, smiling. “That’s why she needed to be here.”

“Let’s get you home,” Allure told Andrew. “Your family will want to see you.”

“…How am I going to support them?”

“You have five PhDs. You’ll think of something.”

Andrew blinked. “You know, I did go through an existential phase where I thought I was wasting my life mindlessly making more and more cookies… I had such potential.”

“Yeah. Time to make good use of that.”

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Valentine extended a hand to Allure. “I must thank you for saving the USM.”

“Hey, it was the least we could do,” Allure said, shaking his hand.

“Naturally, you will be paid and rewarded far beyond what we had originally planned. I will personally see to it that you are seen as heroes in the eyes of the USM, despite your origin from within Merodi Universalis.”

“Thanks!” Allure said. “But I think we’re going to go home first.” She glanced on her back to look at the sleeping form of Minna. “It’s been a long day.”

“I will not stop you. I shall contact the mayor to arrange payment and honor.”
“Question. Why are you shaking?” Bot asked.

“The price of supercharge,” Tornado responded.

“Oh,” Bot said, not really understanding.

“C’mon Bot, let’s go,” Allure said. “I need a bed. And something to eat that isn’t a cookie.”

“Cookies will never be the same…” Squeaky said ominously.

They vanished, teleported back to Celestia City.

Tornado let out a sigh of relief.

Valentine turned to her. “What is it?”

“It didn’t end in one punch. Good.”

Valentine blinked. “…What?”

“Nothing you need to worry about. Just some… personal vindication. Of sorts.” She floated into the air. “…I think I’m going to lie down too. Have fun dealing with the collateral damage!”

Valentine turned to the wreckage of the local city block.

Less collateral damage than usual for this universe, considering. But there were other universes he needed to help…

It was going to be a long, long day.

~~~

Andrew Maddison had gone for a walk. He had met up with his family for a brief moment and they’d accepted him back with open arms. Aria had been so proud of him. She’d told him that she didn’t care about him having nothing – she had her own resources she could use. She had told him to stay put while she got him some things.

He didn’t stay put – he had told his wife he was going for a walk, and she’d seen that he needed to.

So here he was, at the wreckage of the Big Cookie factory in City G, the resting location of the Big Cookie. The Cookie that started it all. The source of his power.

With an expressionless face, he walked into the wreckage, careful not to step on something unstable. He walked to the back of the back, as if called to that point.

When he arrived, the ground in front of him flashed with color. The Big Cookie appeared in front of his face, glowing with an energy it had not had before. Andrew gaped – he knew that the Big Cookie was more powerful now. He could make even more cookies than before.

Yes, he could do it. He could just never build one of those portals; never chance the corruption of the Grandmatriarchs again. He would rebuild his cookie enterprise… He would have it all once again!

He reached out a finger to tap the cookie.

The ground slightly to his left exploded, revealing Saitama. “Right, so done with walking around in the basement.” He blinked, seeing Andrew and the Big Cookie. “That’s a big magic cookie.”
“Yes… It is.” Andrew said. “It’s the source of all my riches…”

“Oh, so it’s the center of the cookie conspiracy?”

“…I guess you could say that.”

“Good to know.” Saitama flexed his wrist. “Normal punch.”

He hit the Big Cookie – and shattered it to dust.

Andrew’s extended hand shook as his features twisted into disbelief. “But… But… But… I was about to get it all back… I made a mistake… I could never live without it…”

Saitama shrugged. “Hey, cookies aren’t everything.”

Andrew fell to his knees and shuddered. “All gone… I’ll never have it again… I need it…”

Saitama shook his head. “You’ll live.” He stretched and walked away. “I wonder if hot dogs are on sale today…”

He left a man tormented by the riches he used to have.
“I should have known the moment we got in this Skiff with you three that something was going to go wrong, but nooooonoo,” Starbeat said, clinging to her seat, goggles plastered to her face. “I, for once, completely blanked checking the ka of the situation! Well, it certainly says something’s going to happen now!”

O’Neill forced the Skiff into a sharp upward climb. “Quit yelping start helping!”

“What am I going to do? Pear has the science taken care of!”

The diminutive green Gem laughed. “I am going to hotwire this dimensional drive, just you watch me!”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not how it works,” a Flat Scootaloo said. “If something’s broken you don’t ‘hotwire’ it, silly!”

“Do you have a million neural processors inside a computerized data core connected to you? No? Then shut up and let me SCIENCE!, clod!”

“Predictions suggest your ‘SCIENCE!’ is going to give us unintended consequences,” Starbeat muttered.

“I only care if it lets us live,” O’Neill quipped, twisting around a green laser. “I’m not getting assimilated today.”

“Are they still saying ‘resistance is futile’?” Flataloo laughed. “What losers!”

“We still can’t fight them in a Skiff,” Starbeat pointed out. “All we can do is run…”

“Hotwiring complete!” Pear said. “Buh-bye Borg!”

“It’s not hotwir-” Flataloo began. She was cut off in the middle of her sentence as the Skiff passed through a portal, closing it behind them so the Borg couldn’t follow.

Flataloo’s body glitched and then shattered like a pane of glass. Pear’s let out a yell, her body poofing as she was forced to retreat into her gemstone. Starbeat grabbed her horn and let out a pained wail.

Every light in the Skiff went offline for a moment, and artificial gravity disengaged. Luckily O’Neill and Starbeat were strapped in, so they just felt their internal organs do a flip-flop.

Starbeat groaned. “My head…”

The lights in the Skiff came back on – but several of the consoles were displaying error messages. Certain controls were labeled ‘DISABLED’ and warning symbols appeared on virtually every surface.

O’Neill read the error code. All magic-based systems have been disabled by this universe. Most esoteric systems have been disabled by this universe.

“Oh for the love of…” O’Neill put his hand to the bridge of his nose. “Forced standard physics?
“Ow ow ow ow,” Starbeat muttered, holding her horn. “The pain… It is a deep pain…” She breathed in air with a deep hiss. The pain in her horn began to fade as the magical protrusion became nothing more than a rounded bone. She blinked. “Right, so, my ka sensors are down. What’s the Skiff have?”

O’Neill blinked. “…I have no idea what you’re saying.”

Starbeat processed this – right. The translator spell must not be working. Good thing she actually learned English a while ago because she knew she’d be in this situation eventually. “Ahem. My ka sensors are down. What’s the Skiff have?” she said with an Equish accent, where harsh consonants came through with the slightest hint of a neigh.

“Nothing but air,” O’Neill answered.

“It has more than air,” Starbeat muttered, looking at the console. “We have radio, projectile weapons, the normal thrusters…”

“Not shields, magic, dimensional travel, or FTL,” O’Neill pointed out. “And that’s the important stuff.”

“These things are designed to deal with forced physics of all kinds,” Starbeat huffed. “We’re fine.”

“We burnt most of our power in that firefight. It ain’t recharging. And those thrusters you mentioned are damaged.” O’Neill tapped the screen.

“We sure depend on our magical self-recharging batteries to save us when we’re adrift,” Starbeat muttered. She rubbed her head. “What’s the protocol for this sort of thing?”

O’Neill flipped a switch. “Turn on the distress beacon so they can find us when they finally come looking. Then check the air, food, and water.”

Starbeat glanced at the screens, furrowing her brow. “The air recyclers seem to be working well, should be fine for months with just…. Two of us.” She gulped. “Flataloo’s dead. I think Pear’s fine.”

O’Neill leaned to check Flataloo’s chair, examining the ‘glass’ shards. “I thought we had things that forced reality to keep this from happening?”

“They’re largely magic based. Versions do exist that can work in mundane universes, but they have to have a constant connection to another universe to do it.” Starbeat shook her head. “We didn’t exactly plan to come in here.”

O’Neill nodded. “Water is easy. Skiff comes packed with plenty of emergency rations. Yep, we can be here for months and not die. Be glad the dimensional drive was the only thing that got damaged in that fight – if there had been anything else screwed with; we might have just exploded when we arrived here. Charming thought, isn’t it?”

“Of course it is,” Starbeat muttered. “…Think we can do anything besides sit here? We have basic sensors, right?”

O’Neill’s fingers flew across the console, bringing up a map of the system they were in. “Matches records for standard Earth system. We’re somewhat near Jupiter. Picking up lots of signals, suggesting that we’re at least in a space-age world.”
“Oh thank goodness, we’ll probably find someone who can help us. I don’t want to sit here in a Skiff in the months it’ll take Merodi Universalis to track us down.”

“They could find us in a couple hours.”

“They’ll realize you’re gone in about a day, assuming no time dilation. Then they’ll have to track you down, and since we were in a firefight with the Borg they might have territorial problems to deal with.”

O’Neill shook his head. “Why do you have to be such a downer?”

“Because. I’m a unicorn and right now I can’t use magic and the nauseous feeling that’s giving me is making me _antsy._”

“You should try being a human. More adaptable.”

“Har-de-har. I bet you miss Crimson Sushi, at least.”

O’Neill tried to summon his Stand, but of course he couldn’t. “Guess it’s back to the old fashioned method of fighting. Guns.”

“Guns aren’t that old fashioned.”

“They are to us.”

Starbeat rolled her eyes. “Sure.” She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. “Wake me when something happens.”

~~~

“This is the _Rocinante_ to the unidentified vessel,” a voice came to O’Neill’s ear about an hour later. “We are here to assist - you’re real lucky our trajectories matched up. But we don’t see anywhere we can dock…”

“The windshield pops open,” O’Neill called, nudging Starbeat awake. “There’s also a hatch in the back, which might work better, I’m not sure.”

“Hatch.” The voice on the other end paused. “Who in hell designed this ship o’ yours?”

“It’s not designed to be out here,” Starbeat said.

“Clearly. I just don’t recognize the design. I bet you have _quite_ the story to tell, don’t’cha?”

O’Neill glanced at Starbeat. “Probably.”

“Well then you’re in good company. We’ve got our own ship of crazy stories to tell. Or, well, two ships, but mostly one.”

“Need us to do anything?” O’Neill asked.

“Fix your tumble.”

O’Neill pressed a few buttons. “Tumble corrected. We’re still as two snails in the arctic.”

“Nice.”
Starbeat looked out the side window at the ship closing in on them – it was a long, blocky ship with engines at the back and an orange ‘GAS’ logo at the nose of the front. To the side of the Rocinante was a smaller, triangular ship that looked like it belonged on a race track rather than deep space. Its name was easily visible along its side, the Razorback. The Razorback stayed behind while the Rocinante extended a docking tunnel to the back of the Skiff.

“Yeah, we’re not getting a seal on that rounded back of yours. Don’t suppose you have vac suits in there?”

O’Neill got out of his seat and opened the door to the cargo hold. “Let me check. Ah, here we-”

“Those won’t work,” Starbeat said.

“Oh, right. Looks like we don’t actually have any spacesuits.”

“Of course…” the voice sighed. “All right, we’re going to send some people over to get a good seal. Don’t freak out if you hear hammerin’ on your back hull. ‘Cuz that’s what it’s gonna take to get this thing open. What we need is everyone to be calm.”

“Got it,” Starbeat said.

A couple minutes later, they heard something thud against their back hull.

“Beginning seal,” a woman’s voice came over the comm. “Should only take a few minutes.”

“Why would anyone make anything this round?” a different man asked. “Art?”

“Let’s just get them outta there.”

O’Neill gestured for Starbeat to wait in the cockpit, out of sight, while he remained in the storage compartment. Didn’t want to cause a freak out from his end.

“Ready!” the woman’s voice came through. “Can you pop the hatch?”

“It better be pressurized out there,” O’Neill said, reaching for the manual release.

“It is,” the man said. “Even got my helmet off and everything.”

O’Neill popped the hatch. It opened a little quickly, smacking the un-helmeted man in the head. “Ack, geez!”

“Sorry!” O’Neill said, hands up. “Didn’t know you were that close!”

The man had short hair and a slight beard that covered most of his face. O’Neill noticed he had a rather large gun at his side – though currently since he had just been beaned in the head he wasn’t aiming it at anything. The woman still had her helmet on so it was harder to see anything defining about her. They were standing in a semi-translucent extension from the Rocinante that was tentatively sealed to the Skiff with what appeared to be putty.

The woman nodded. “It’s fine.”

O’Neill smirked. “Glad to hear it. I’m O’Neill.”

“Draper,” the woman said. Gesturing at the man she introduced him. “Amos.”

Amos rubbed his head. “That’s going to leave a mark… Hey, wait a minute, weren’t there two of
“Yeah,” O’Neill said. “See, we’re gonna need a little bit of a preface for the other one.”

Amos sensed something fishy and raised his gun. Draper held out a hand. “Hold it.”

O’Neill grinned. “So, prepare for the shortened version of a whole lot of crazy. I’m from another universe and I’ve got an alien in the cockpit. Don’t shoot her when she comes out, okay?”

Amos blinked. “What in-”

“Just say yes,” Draper interrupted.

Amos clearly did not like being told what to do, but he did it anyway. He kept his gun ready though.

O’Neill turned back. “Come on out, Starbeat.”

Starbeat scrambled to the door – but missed it since she wasn’t used to moving in zero-G. “Gimme a minute!” She called, looping a hoof over the edge of the doorway and launching into the cargo hold. She hit one of the boxes with her head. “Ow.”

“…Is that a fucking unicorn?” Amos asked.

“Yes. Yes I am,” Starbeat said. “…Hi. I come in peace.”

Draper blinked. “You guys weren’t kidding. You never get a break.”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“…Hard to accept,” Draper said. “Come on over. You don’t have any sort of alien contaminants, do you?”

Starbeat blinked. “I wouldn’t think so. …Wait a minute, why is trans-universal contamination never a problem?”

“Someone’s probably asked that question and answered it without us knowing,” O’Neill muttered. “So long as you’re all humans you’re good.”

Draper nodded. “Then let’s move.”

“Yeah, come meet the family,” Amos added. “…Plus extras.”

~~~

The Rocinante was structured like a tower. The front of the ship was the top, the engines were the bottom. As the engines pushed the ship through space at a constant acceleration around one G of force, it created artificial gravity. So while it looked like the Rocinante was spearheading through space, to everyone on the ship it always looked like they were traveling upwards. The top of the ship held the cockpit, and just below that was the bridge, creating a two-tiered command center.

This was where they brought O’Neill and Starbeat so everyone could have a good look.

“Christmas has come early,” Amos said, gesturing to the visitors. “Behold, man and unicorn.”

There were to people standing at the central display table. One was an old woman in a simple, white uniform of Indian descent while the other was a young man in much more casual clothing and a face
telling of someone who had been through a bit too much recently.

Amos started introductions. “The captain’s Holden, old lady’s Undersecretary Avasarala, and up in the cockpit is Alex. Say hello Alex.”

The voice they had heard over the radio came from above them. “I’m a little busy tryin’ to keep us from goin’ into a tailspin, Amos. Ain’t exactly the easiest thing keeping the Rossie flyin’ straight with that extra weight attached to us all lopsided like that.”

“He’s busy,” Amos said, sitting down on a nearby seat and starting to clean his weapon.

Avasarala looked to O’Neill and spoke with a gravelly, powerful voice. “Well, this is certainly an unexpected meeting. I am Deputy Undersecretary Chrisjen Avasarala of the United Nations of Earth.”

“With a promotion likely soon to come,” Holden said with a tired voice. “James Holden. No special titles. I just run this ship.”

“You’ve come at a particularly delicate time,” Avasarala said. “A war ended not but a few hours ago.”

“Well that proves ka’s still strong here,” Starbeat commented.

“What was that?” Avasarala asked.

“Something to explain a little later,” O’Neill answered. “I’m Overhead-General Jack O’Neill of Merodi Universalis, which is to say I’m the Commander-in-Chief of the military forces of a multiversal society.”

“I must say, I would have found it hard to believe other universes existed if it was just you,” Avasarala said.

“I would not have been so open had Starbeat not been here,” O’Neill admitted. “I’ve had my fair share of being thought a complete lunatic for telling people the truth.”

“Starbeat Glimmer, by the way,” Starbeat said. “Councilmember of another entity known as the Collection. My role within Merodi Universalis is that of a Researcher of… let’s call it Fate, to keep things simple.”

Holden blinked. “You’re a scientist that studies fate?”

“Yeah.”

“…I’m not as surprised as I should be,” Holden muttered.

“My machines aren’t working right now, but I can tell you’ve probably been the focus of a whole lot of… Fate.”

“Is it his expression?” Alex called from up above.

“Yes, it’s his expression,” Starbeat answered.

Avasarala cleared her throat. “I am here because of a series of events that culminated in the careful ending of a war through political intrigue and some force. What brings you two to our universe in such a small, unusual ship?”
“Running,” Starbeat said. “Were flying through space, got caught in a fire fight. Our dimensional device wasn’t working so we had to ‘hotwire’ it directly and jump somewhere random. That turned out to be here. Normally this wouldn’t be a problem, but some universes have physics that are different than others. A lot of our technology relies on physical laws you would probably consider impossible, or even magical.”

“So she’s a magical unicorn too,” Amos noted. “This day just keeps getting’ better and better.”

“How did your ship survive at all?” Holden asked.

“This universe operates closely or at least very near to ‘standard physics’,“ Starbeat explained. “The only difference between most the places we visit is that it only allows the ‘standard physics’. Most Earths we come across may not have any natural examples of our ‘magic’, but we can use them just fine. Here, our shields are down, our FTL is down, most of our specialized weapons are down, our artificial gravity is useless…”

“And that explains the odd design,” Alex called. “That was really buggin’ me. No shipmaker in their right mind would make somethin’ like that unless they had true artificial gravity. I can sleep easy tonight.”

“You can sleep easy knowing there’s a universe where ‘magic’ is possible?” Holden asked.

“…Why do you have to ruin my peace of mind, Holden?”

Avasarala turned to O’Neill. “In the interest of keeping our relations on friendly terms, what can we do for you Overhead-General?”

“Just O’Neill will do fine. Or General, if you have to get into the titles,” O’Neill said. “We’d appreciate it if you can fix our engines and maybe power our ship. Other than that… We’re just waiting for rescue to come and get us.”

“You can’t get yourselves home?” Avasarala asked.

“Dimensional drive isn’t working,” Starbeat said. “This universe seems very uptight about its physics. We’ll have to wait for a portal to open on the other side. …Or I’ll need access to a lot of technical apparatus you might not have.”

Avasarala waved a hand. “Earth would be more than willing to provide you with resources.”

“Hey hey, wait a minute!” a new voice said – one that no one had noticed before. It was from a dark-skinned woman with poofy black hair. “Earth doesn’t get exclusive rights to first contact! That was the case with the protomolecule, and that’s the case here.”

Avasarala sighed. “Naomi, now is not the time fo-”

“Of course it is! Earth will be able to get ‘good girl’ points with these people while the rest of us get shafted, as always!”

Holden sighed. “What do you suggest?”

“Tycho has exactly the resources you’ll need, and Fred Johnson owes us more than a few favors at this point.”

“Really? Fred Johnson?” Amos interjected. “Wasn’t giving him the protomolecule enough for you?”
“That’d just be moving them from Earth to the Belt,” Avasarala said. “That’s hardly much of a chance.”

“What about Mars?” Draper said. “They shouldn’t be cut out!”

“No offense Bobby, but Mars ain’t exactly the type to play nice,” Alex called from above. “Johnson owes us some favors and Avasarala can basically tell the Earth whatever she wants and it’ll do it, but I don’t think we’re on many Martian’s ‘helpful’ lists. We are flyin’ one of their ships, after all. ‘Legitimate salvage’ or no, they ain’t happy about that.”

Draper nodded, clearly not liking what Alex was saying, but agreeing with it.

“Isn’t there some sort of neutral place we could go?” Starbeat asked.

“You just arrived at the end of a war,” Holden muttered. “They haven’t even sat to talk about if there’s going to be neutral territory.”

O’Neill leaned against a wall. “Well we’re in a pickle then, aren’t we?”

“Apologies,” Avasarala said.

“Oh no, I get it, sometimes we come at a bad time,” O’Neill said. “So let’s try option C. What if you don’t tell anyone about us?”

Holden blinked. “…I like that plan.”

“Bu-” Naomi began.

“Yes,” Avasarala said. “For now, it would be best if nobody knew you existed. I will not be able to keep you secret from my government for long, mind you, but long enough for things to die down.”

“You agreed to that quickly,” Holden observed with surprise.

“I don’t want to upset the beings with the power to pass through universal boundaries,” Avasarala stated. “It’s best to just agree with them.”

“I do see a few problems with this plan,” Alex called. “One, that’s a unicorn. Unicorns don’t exist.”

“Can’t just explain me away as a genetic experiment?” Starbeat asked.

“Not with the way your body is built,” Holden said. “You don’t even look like a horse. The eyes are all wrong.”

“Right…”

“I can hide her in a box,” Amos said.

Starbeat stared at him.

“Only when you need to be secret! Yeesh.”

“Right, so our goal is basically never let the Rocinante get searched?” Holden asked.

“That’s kinda what we do anyway, cap,” Alex called.

“…Point taken.” Holden put his hands on his hips. “Well, just make sure Mao never sees Starbeat.”
“He won’t be on this ship much longer,” Avasarala pointed out. “We will meet up with the UN shortly and transfer him into their custody. After that, we wait until the fires of war have calmed down before telling anyone about these two.”

“Sounds like a plan,” O’Neill said.

“Of course we’ll still repair your ship,” Avasarala said. “…Right?”

Holden sighed. “Right. Which one of you is the engineer?”

O’Neill held out a green triangular gemstone. “This was our engineer. She can’t exist in this universe as more than a crystal.”

“So I’m all you got,” Starbeat said. “Ship systems aren’t my specialty, but I can manage.”

Holden took a breath. “Right. Amos, Draper, Naomi, go with the unicorn to her ship; learn what needs fixing and what can be fixed. Amos, make sure Mao stays where he is. Alex…”

“Keep flyin’ the ship, I got it.”

Holden nodded. “And… I guess that’s it. O’Neill, I’ll take you on a tour of the Rocinante. Not much to see…”

“I’ll take it,” O’Neill accepted.

~~~

Starbeat walked into the Rocinante’s kitchen, rubbing her eyes – the Skiff was mostly repaired at this point. Naomi was the only one over there, touching up the last little bits. There was no more reason for Starbeat to hang around.

Amos was in the kitchen as well, feeding four young kids their space lasagna. The news played on a nearby screen.

The kids looked at Starbeat. Starbeat looked at the kids.

“Unicorn!” one of the girls squeed, running to Starbeat.

“No, wait, I-” she backed into one of the walls, realizing she was on a small deck. It wasn’t going to be easy for her to climb a ladder at the moment. “Amos!”

Amos shrugged as the girl nuzzled Starbeat. “She likes you.”

“Yes, I get that, but – why are there even kids on a warship!?”

“Saved ‘em,” Amos said. “You should go talk to Prax, that’s his kid right there. Went halfway across the solar system to find her. Good man.”

“I bet,” Starbeat muttered, trying to tear herself from the kid’s limbs. “Why is children’s first instincts to hug me?”

“I dunno. Why are you so fluffy and have huge eyes?”

“Because modern pony-”

Amos snickered. “Pony?”
“I swear there has got to be a better translation because *every* human laughs at that word like it's some kind of joke.”

Amos shrugged. “Maybe you were just meant to be huggable.”

Starbeat opened her mouth to object, then closed it. Then she opened it again. “That’s actually pretty close to one of the reasons. Fate, and all that.”

“You really do study Fate, don’t you? That’s gotta be weird.”

Starbeat shrugged. “It’s weirder than even you probably think. But it’s good for predicting things, figuring out which people are likely to have the solutions to a problem, other such stuff. It does tend to bring about existential thoughts when you get too deep into it.”

“See, I’d think it would make things a bit easier. Remove the mystery from life. Tell you a bit about what you need to do.”

Starbeat nodded. “In some ways, yes. In other ways, it makes you question the validity of free will and choice.”

“Some of us don’t do well making our own choices,” Amos said, pouring some water into a cup and setting it on a table. He pushed it to Starbeat.

Starbeat accepted the cup. She tried to lift it with her magic first, then flushed slightly when it didn’t work.

“You just tried something there. Didn’t work.”

“Uh, yeah,” Starbeat said. She stuck out a hoof, trying to grab the cup – but she just slid it across the table. She placed both her front hooves on the cup and tried to lift. The cup slid out and splashed the water over her face.

“How did your race survive?”

“Normally our hooves have a traction field,” Starbeat muttered, pulling her wet mane out of her face. “Do you have a… bowl?”

Amos smirked. “Yep.” He pulled out a metallic bowl, poured water in it, and set it on the floor. “Lap up.”

“I am not a dog.”

“You are in this universe.”

Starbeat sighed. She lowered her head and lapped up the water. One of the kids decided to hug her back leg.

“You know if I wasn’t mindful that would have gotten you a buck to the face,” Starbeat told the kid.

The kid slowly backed away from her.

“You’ve got a way with kids,” Amos observed.

Starbeat shrugged. “I spent most my life with a mental condition that made me randomly attracted to just about anything. I avoided kids.”
“Had? As in, past tense?”

Starbeat nodded. “Uh, yeah. It was a ‘curse of Fate’, if you will. Became a researcher in order to cure myself. …I didn’t have anything to do with the cure, mind you, someone else had to do it for me. But everyone is glad I’m no longer a raving romantic lunatic.”

“I bet,” Amos said, pouring himself a glass of milk. “Do they d-” It was at this point the words BREAKING NEWS appeared on the screen. The feed cut to a satellite over Venus, showing a giant blue jellyfish flying out of the clouds into space. It appeared to be partially biological, but also covered in random mechanical bits as well.

“…What the fuck is that?” Amos asked nobody in particular.

“Don’t look at me, I just got here,” Starbeat said. She read the subtitle flying by the bottom of the screen. “Protomolecule colony leaves Venus… You’ve mentioned this protomolecule before. What exactly is it?”

“Nasty alien stuff,” Amos said. “First it slowly kills you. Then it starts assimilating you. Then… Well apparently it does that, given enough time to itself.”

“Right, you really have no idea, got it.”

“Wonder where it’s goin…”

“Hey,” Alex’s voice rang out all over the ship. “I know we’re all busy gawking over an alien jellyfish, but we’ve got another problem.”

Starbeat turned to the ladder, prepared to go up to the bridge. She contemplated the difficulty of climbing up it in hooves.

Amos didn’t wait for permission – he grabbed her by the midsection and pulled her up. “Wh- hey!”

“ You want up or not?”

Starbeat sighed. “Fine. …Unicorns were not meant to live in these conditions.”

“No shit.”

They made it to the bridge last, to the surprise of no one. Alex made a hologram appear out of the main table. It showed three blue dots – the Rocinante, Razorback, and the Skiff. On the other side of the diagram was a dot labeled the MCRN Ajax. “They’re followin’ us,” Alex reported. “I’ll bet my dinner they want this ship back.”

O’Neill raised an eyebrow. “And?”

“Well normally, at this point I’d just floor it and try to outrun them,” Alex said. “Probably could do it, they’re a fair distance away and probably can’t go far out of their way to get us. It’s just that we’ve got two passengers who make that problematic.”

“It’s not you, O’Neill,” Avasarala said. “It’s me. My age does not handle high G-forces very well, to say the least. I’ve almost died recently from running like this.”

“And then there’s the unicorn,” Alex said. “No offense, but the chemicals we take to make sure we make it through heavy burns might wreck your system in ways we haven’t a clue about.”

“And if you let the Martians have this ship, they’ll find me,” Starbeat said. “And wasn’t there just a
conversation about how the Martians were the least likely to play nice?”

“Yep,” Holden said. “We can’t run, we can’t turn ourselves in.”

“Political option?” O’Neill asked, gesturing at Avasarala.

“They’d just demand to take us to our rendezvous personally,” Avasarala said.

“We Martians are particular when it comes to our ships,” Draper added. “The fact this one isn’t under our control is seen as a major problem.”

“Then, once again, it’s time to take the third option,” O’Neill said, smirking. “Just take the problematic passengers elsewhere – say, the Skiff. Send them away. Mars won’t care about some loose ship, if I’m reading this right, they only want this ship.”

Alex chuckled. “You really are a General aren’t ya?”

O’Neill shrugged. “Maybe I’m just an endless fountain of good ideas.”

“That could work,” Avasarala said.

“We could strap the Razorback to the Skiff,” Holden said. “Send off a team.”

“I don’t think we have time for a complicated docking maneuver,” Alex said. “I just got a message from the Ajax. They want to board us. So, how about everyone who needs to run pile onto the Skiff and I’ll just cut her loose?”

“How long can the Skiff survive on its own?” Holden asked.

“It’s working fine,” Amos said. “Doesn’t have a way to slow down, but it could keep people alive for months now that everything’s working.”

“Not slowing down is a big problem,” O’Neill pointed out. “I may usually live where physics aren’t an issue, but even I know things in space keep moving if nothing stops them. I don’t want to splat into anything.”

Holden furrowed his brow. “You can probably get help…”

Avasarala sighed. “…Fred Johnson?”

“Fred Johnson…” Holden muttered, not liking the idea but accepting it anyway. He shook his head. “Right. O’Neill, Starbeat, Avasarala, get to the Skiff.”

“I’m going with them,” Draper said, nodding in Avasarala’s direction.

Amos looked at Starbeat. “You know what, this sounds more interesting than running through space to a UN ship. Count me in. Holden, remember to get me later.”

“I’ll have to leave a message to the UN,” Avasarala said.

“You can tightbeam from the Skiff,” Holden said. “Just get moving. Amos, get some extra food and suits.” He touched a button so he could talk to the Skiff. “Naomi, you’re going to Tycho station.”

“What? Why?”

“There’s a Mars ship on our asses and we need to get rid of the unicorn. Hopefully you can ask Fred
Johnson for a favor without him poking his nose too closely into your ship.”

“Right, right, preparing for launch… We’re not going to be able to slow down, Holden.”

“Have Johnson catch you or something. You’re weeks away from Tycho Station, you have time to figure it out.” Holden closed the channel. “Alex, how’s the Ajax doing?”

“They’re acceleratin’ towards us. Nothing too crazy since we haven’t changed our one-G burn.”

Down a couple decks, O’Neill, Starbeat, Avasarala, Amos, and Draper were running through the pipe connecting the Rocinante to the Skiff. They scrambled through the back hatch, placing extra crates, spacesuits, and provisions in the cargo hold. O’Neill pulled the hatch closed behind them. “Seats everyone!”

All six seats of the Skiff were filled. O’Neill pulled up the piloting controls, delighted to see the thrusters working properly. So at least they had some maneuverability – but not enough for a standard physics trip to the Asteroid Belt. “Okay, strap in.”

Everyone strapped in. “This better not make me feel like my brain is going to come out the back of my skull,” Avasarala muttered.

“This Skiff can’t even pull one G,” Naomi reported. “You’re going to have a bigger problem being in zero-G for an extended time.”

“What a lovely thought.”

“We’ve got no shortage of those today,” Starbeat muttered.

Alex’s voice came to their ears. “Breaking seal.” They heard a pop from behind them. “Y’all should shove off now, the rest of us are about to strap in and run as fast as our little legs will carry us.”

O’Neill nodded, prompting the limited physical engines of the Skiff to ignite, subjecting them to only minimal acceleration forces. It was closer to the feeling of being in a car than a spaceship. The Skiff flew off, leaving the Rocinante and Razorback behind.

Naomi pressed a few buttons. “I think I’ve charted us a course for Tycho Station. Except we’ll be hurtling by it at several hundred kilometers an hour in the wrong direction. In three weeks.”

“You better make those calls,” Draper said. “Someone’s going to have to catch us.”

“How about we wait until we’re not close to a Martian ship?”

“I’ll drink to that,” O’Neill said, looking at the display of local space. The Rocinante and Razorback started speeding away, accelerating far faster than was comfortable. The MCRN ship matched their speed, perhaps gaining a little – but they would not be able to catch them before they made their rendezvous with the UN ship. …Not that the Ajax had any idea that’s where they were headed.

The Skiff fled the scene, beginning a long journey through the expanse to Tycho Station.

They were free. Though adrift.

“Time to send some messages,” Naomi said. “And then wait three weeks.”

Starbeat sighed. “We’re all going to get to know each other really well then.”

“Pray your people come and get you then,” Amos said. “’Cus after three weeks of gettin’ to know
each other I think all of us will nut up a little.”

Avasarala let out a calculated breath. “We simply need to keep our wits about us.”

“Hey, question,” Amos said. “Where’s the bathroom in this thing?”

O’Neill blinked. “There’s a panel that opens in the back of the storage compartment.”

“This thing isn’t designed for long trips, is it?”

“No. It has an FTL drive installed that could cross a galaxy in a few hours.”

“Just further proof that technology is unreliable,” Avasarala commented.

“Please, everyone quiet,” Naomi said. “I’ve got to tell Fred Johnson to help us without prompting him to ask too many questions.”

“Good luck,” Avasarala said.

“Thanks.”

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Two weeks later…

Holden’s face was on the main screen. “So, we got to keep the Rocinante after all was said and done. Handing over Mao, even without Avasarala on board, got us a lot of points with the UN. We did have to hand over the Razorback though, sorry Draper. Regardless, with Prax and the kids going back to Ganymede, it’s just me and Alex here. We’ve set our course for Tycho Station but won’t arrive until a few weeks after you. Let’s hope the ship doesn’t fall apart before we get there.

“Amos, I’m coming to get you. Naomi… I miss you. The rest of you? Try not to blow this whole thing up. Holden out.”

The recording ended.

“I miss instant communication,” O’Neill said.

“You miss being able to interrupt people,” Draper corrected. “It’s all you do. Have to make sure you get your quips in. I’m amazed you managed to ever move up in rank.”

“He used to be grumpier, from what I hear,” Starbeat said from her position on the ceiling, not looking up from her ebook. “Then he found a stargate and chippered up considerably. Gained a funny bone. Got over depression.”

“Don’t speak of it as if it’s trivial,” Avasarala scolded. “Losing a child is something you never recover from.”

“Let’s not go there again,” Naomi said.

“Are you telling me wh-”

O’Neill coughed. “Not go there, she said. Good idea.”

Avasarala leaned back in her chair and sighed. “Fair enough.”
“Aren’t you the politician?” Amos asked. “Shouldn’t you, like, know how to deal with people?”

“Not when I’ve been boxed up in a tiny alien ship for two weeks,” Avasarala muttered.

“You should have heard her on the Razorback when I was pushing it to the max,” Draper said. “Swearing like a sailor.”

Amos looked at Avasarala with new respect in his eyes.

“Hey, guys,” Naomi said, pressing a few buttons. “We’re going to be passing by the proto-jellyfish.”

“Hmm?” Starbeat asked, looking up from her ebook. “Didn’t that thing start at Venus? How’d it get this far out that quickly?”

“Accelerating continually for a long time,” Naomi said, pressing a few more buttons. “We’re just piggybacking off the Rocinante’s velocity, lucky enough to already be going the right direction. That thing’s been constantly burning since it left Venus and hasn’t stopped. It helps that it doesn’t have to worry about flattening crew it doesn’t have.”

“Can we see it?” Starbeat asked.

“Normally I’d say no, but it is the size of a city…” Naomi said. “Definitely not with the naked eyes, but we might be able to zoom in on it.”

O’Neill pulled up a camera feed and zoomed in as far as he could. They could just barely make out a blue shape with tentacles trailing behind it.

“I wonder where it’s going…” Avasarala pondered. “It must have some purpose.”

“It’s an alien. What makes you think you can figure out what it wants?” Amos asked.

“Nothing. I’m just curious. And also more than a little afraid.”

“You’d be a fool not to be,” Starbeat said, staring at the jellyfish. She narrowed her eyes. “Something about it though… feels slightly… off?”

“Maybe it’s not ‘standard physics’?” Draper suggested. “Something like you?”

“Maybe,” Starbeat said. “…Maybe.”

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A few days later…

Two thirds of the crew of the Skiff were sleeping in their chairs.

For once, it was the old people who couldn’t fall asleep, instead of the other way around.

O’Neill turned to Avasarala. “Almost done with this trip.”

“I hate space so much,” Avasarala muttered. “I would say I’m going to be ecstatic when we finally get to Tycho Station and find some artificial gravity, but I know my legs are going to be so weak that I’ll feel like shit no matter how many precautions I take.”

“We’ve been keeping in shape.”
“Taking walks in mag-boots along the hull of the ship does not count as ‘in shape,’ O’Neill.”

O’Neill smirked. “It won’t be too bad. Just three weeks of zero-G.”

“Normal astronauts can collapse after just a few weeks,” Avasarala said. “A completely temporary condition to be sure, but there will still be a readjustment period.”

O’Neill furrowed his brow. “You all have it hard in space.”

“You’ve just got it easy with all your options for workarounds. We live in a world where there are no shortcuts.”

“Oh, I bet there is one, somewhere,” O’Neill said with a smirk. “It’s the nature of existence. There’s always going to be a way to do something just a little better. Then someone will copyright it and make millions of dollars off of turning it into a scam.”

Avasarala let out a snort. “I thought you didn’t have that problem.”

“You’d be surprised how often companies manage to throw wrenches into our gears even when they’re held on a leash,” O’Neill muttered. “They really don’t like being subject to anything and think they can always buy their way out of the worst situations.”

“Are you going to jump into ‘this is why we aren’t a Democracy’ now?”

“No,” O’Neill said with a smirk. “Because I hate politics.”

Avasarala smirked. “Smart man.”

“Not really. I have to deal with the asinine political mess every week. Managed not to fight any full wars yet, so I must be doing something right.”

“It amazes me that you’ve managed that,” Avasarala said. “Perhaps it comes from living in a world that was on the brink of war for decades, but I think I know humanity. We always want to fight something. Each other, nature, it’s in our blood.”

“You’re right,” O’Neill said, looking to Starbeat. “It isn’t in theirs.”

“Friendship, progress, assistance,” Avasarala repeated. “You owe two of your values to them.”

“They’d argue that assistance and friendship go hand in hand. After they were sure engaging in such an argument wouldn’t make you shoot them.” O’Neill chuckled. “We had to learn to stop shooting out there. They had to learn to shoot.”

“I don’t see us learning to stop shooting anytime soon. Right now, the war just ended. Given the news we’re not pointing our guns at each other anymore, but at the blue jellyfish.” She sighed. “We need to get to Tycho. I need to make a statement to the system about what to do with that damn thing.”

“We’re cl-

“Attention! This is the OPA Scouter Umbriel!” the loud incoming message woke everyone up. “Please do not activate any thrusters! We will aid in your deceleration toward Tycho Station!”

Starbeat rubbed her eyes, yawning. “Guess we’re going to be there soon, huh?”

“Couple days actually,” Naomi said. “Slowing down takes time, especially if you don’t want to do it
quickly."

The *Umbriel* was a short, barrel-like ship. It rotated around the Skiff a few times, analyzing the best way to grab onto it. It opted to affix itself to the top of the Skiff with magnetic tethers, then fully sealed itself against the Skiff’s roof and turned on its engine – lightly at first, to ease into a feeling of gravity.

Everyone, for the first time in three weeks, felt their chairs underneath them.

“Finally,” Avasarala said. “…This doesn’t feel that bad, actually.”

“They’re at one-tenth G,” Amos said. “‘bein’ nice. By the time we get to Tycho it’ll be one. You won’t have your sea legs then.”

“She might adjust by then!” Naomi pointed out. “They’re doin’ us a huge favor taking it this slow.”

Amos glared at her, but said nothing. That sort of interaction between them had been a regular occurrence on the trip but nobody wanted to ask either of them what had happened. It remained an awkward looming ghost over the six of them.

“Wonder how I’ll be affected…” Starbeat mused. “Never been in zero-G for any time longer than an hour before…”

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“…Our radios are dead,” Naomi reported a few hours later, the Skiff still in the grip of the *Umbriel*. “Can’t pull up any news feeds or anythin’.”

“Dead or jammed?” O’Neill asked. “Important distinction.”

“Well I’d have to crawl around the outside of the Skiff to check the physical radios, but it doesn’t take a genius to realize we’re probably jammed.”

“Great, more complications,” Avasarala muttered. “What’s our course?”

Naomi pulled up the map. “…We’re not headed directly for Tycho, that’s for sure. We’re nearby, but I have no idea where we’re going.”

“Wouldn’t Fred Johnson have noticed by now that we’re off course?” Draper said.

“That’s probably why our radio is jammed,” Naomi pointed out.

Starbeat sighed. “So, who’s got us this time?”

“Rogue Belter who thinks a ship of interesting design under the protection of Fred Johnson is going to be worth a lot,” Amos said. “Or one of Johnson’s turned traitor for a quick buck.”

“…Do you have a big problem with traitors in this universe?” Starbeat asked.

Amos said nothing, but he did glance at Naomi.

“How far do our sensors go without the radio?” Draper asked.

“Visual only,” Starbeat answered. “Y’know, since nothing else is working.”

O’Neill set the computer to scan for anything visually. They picked up planets, asteroids – and one
large ship nearby.

“Asteroid harvester,” Naomi said, looking at the image. “Looks to be where we’re headed.”

“Whatever pirate is on that thing is going to be absolutely elated by all the bounties he’s got on board,” Avasarala muttered. “I ca-”

The *Umbral* decided to stop playing nice with the G forces and floor it, stunning all six of them. Starbeat and Avasarala passed out immediately.

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Starbeat opened her eyes.

She was inside a locked room with a handful of sealed boxes, the majority of them specially marked with words like *fragile*, *valuable*, *XXX*, or *explosive*, indicating this was presumably the ‘valuable and/or illicit cargo’ location. The room wasn’t particularly large, but all the walls were reinforced and the only exit was a pressured vault door. She presumed the crank to open it was on the other side.

She herself was bound and gagged. The ropes around her hooves were sturdy, but clearly tied by someone who didn’t know how to bind a pony effectively. The gag was a simple piece of cloth. Otherwise, she was unharmed.

She was able to *eat* through the gag in a minute or two with her teeth, and then moved to worm her way out of her restraints. Pony legs were a *lot* more flexible than they appeared, having shoulders that were able to lift above her head, which was something horses couldn’t do.

She was soon standing free without any restraints in what was probably the heaviest-guarded room on whatever ship she was on. She noticed she wasn’t shaking or nauseous at the solid gravity she was experiencing. Either she had been quick to adjust or had been out a long time. Could be either, really.

At least they were nice enough to leave her with her goggles. She felt as if they made her complete.

She started crafting a plan on how to escape. She had several boxes labeled with *explosive* on them, surely there was something in here that could cut through a wall this thick. She tried to open a box that looked promising – and remembered she didn’t have traction hooves, magic, or fingers.

She facehooved. “Aaaagh…”

There had to be *something* in here, she would almost bet on it. Just keep looking…

Then she found it. A small glass capsule filled with a shifting blue material, glowing brightly in some locations while dark and dormant in others. It rippled as if it were alive. Along the side of the capsule it said *protomolecule*.

She whistled. “Bet this is about as valuable as I am.” She looked up from the protomolecule for a moment to gather her thoughts. She didn’t get the opportunity.

There was a man standing over her in a porkpie hat, looking at her in curiosity.

She knew instantly he wasn’t really there. The door hadn’t opened in the five seconds she hadn’t been looking at the protomolecule vial, and she was pretty sure she wasn’t going mad, so the presence of the stranger made her smile. “Hello,” she said.
“What are you?” he asked, cocking his head sideways. “Why can the signal reach you so… easily?”

“Unicorn,” Starbeat said, tapping her horn. “I don’t think this universe is truly mundane, it just likes to think it is. There’s a mild esoteric power able to function here of a type I don’t understand, and that type was probably in my horn.” She cocked her head. “You’re the protomolecule, right?”

The man took a step back and rolled onto his heels. “…It’s not time, 113 times a second, thoughts incoming… the Work isn’t even complete. The time has not come. How is the signal here…?”

“It could also be Fate, or ka, if you know what that is.”

“No entry,” the man said. “The manifolds arise. You see, there was this one time at a bar where I was investigating two guys. One guy, you see, looked like the shit, worst badass imaginable. But the other was meek and tiny. So of course I go for the little guy – he’s the one I’m looking for. But then someone walks in I didn’t know about and the entire thing blows up.”

“…Do you have to talk in crime scene metaphors or something?”

“Well, see, there’s a non-local quantum hologram with a phase-conjugate adaptive waves resonating in micro-tubules in the brain, which of course requires some closed-timelike curves and Lorentzian manifold, and then that little thing at the top of your skull… You know.”

“Were you expecting me not to understand that?” Starbeat asked. “It’s a little fuzzy but I think I’ve got it. You’re transmitting to my mind from another location outside my current timestream, however that works in this universe, and you have to interface adaptively with my brainwaves that come from what you call ‘micro-tubules’. Only thing I didn’t get was ‘Lorentzian manifold’, and I’m pretty sure that’s just the background mathematics of the thing.”

He looked at her, surprised.

“I spend my life studying the nature of Fate scientifically. I brush up on the basics of exotic physics regularly. It’s also more than a little likely I have access to technology far beyond what you could ever create.”

“…Could be dangerous.”

“Maybe. I don’t think we’re staying around though, given how much of a powder keg this world seems to be. Go easy on the people here, okay?”

The man seemed to find this amusing. “…Always need a ride.”

“You know, if you can help us get out of this mess, we could get you a ride.”

The man waved his hand. “Need proper ship.”

“Right, right, we don’t design things that work here. I get it.” Starbeat stared at him. “But I bet we can get you something else. Connection to the multiverse, access to our databases, you know.”

“Can’t get you out of this room. Too sturdy, nothing to work with.”

Starbeat sighed. Then she thought for a moment longer. “You’re able to ‘break’ the ‘standard physics’ model, seeing as you’re talking to me right now. Do you think you could fix our dimensional drive?”

The man paused for a moment, thinking deeply.
“You’re able to project yourself into my mind and I don’t have my magic right now. Just root around my memories for the necessary information.”

“Calculations… Yes. The drive can be fixed with a proper reverse manifold.”

Starbeat smiled. “Good! All I have to do is get you on the drive.” She blinked. “That still means we have to get out of this room.”

The man shrugged, as if to say that wasn’t his problem.

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O’Neill, Avasarala, Draper, Amos, and Naomi all sat in a single holding cell with only four beds. The cell looked like it was never used. On one hand that meant it didn’t stink from previous occupants, and on the other it looked like it was about to fall apart.

“Y’know, I don’t think they have a guard on us,” Naomi said, looking through the bars. “I see that one guy pass by every couple of minutes, that’s it.”

“Sloppy pirate captain,” O’Neill observed. “Looks like we’ll get a chance to escape.”

Avasarala sighed. “Talking of escape? O’Neill, we do not need to risk our lives any more. We’re too valuable to be killed, and frankly whatever price the pirates ask for will be pathetically small compared to what our respective governments would be willing to pay to have us back.”

“That’s for you,” Amos said, standing up. Naomi took this as an indication she should take the bed and let him grip the bars for a while. “I’m only good as Holden’s muscle. Not exactly useless, but not exactly worth a lot.”

O’Neill nodded. “And you gotta realize, when do you ever get captured and not think about how to escape? C’mon.”

Draper looked at him. “Good point. What’s your plan?”

“Got nothin’ so far,” O’Neill admitted. “I can see us rushing back to the Skiff and turning on its guns, threaten to start shooting up the place. That involves getting out of this cell.”

“Then there’s Starbeat and our gear,” Naomi said. “We’d have to stop by storage on the way.”

“The Skiff is in storage,” Draper pointed out. “Won’t be far away.”

“It’s not that far to run…” Naomi mused. “If the entire ship is as poorly patrolled as this place, we could probably do it.”

Avasarala blinked. “Are you all seriously considering making a break for it?”

“Yes,” O’Neill said. “You can relax, though. We don’t have any way out past these bars.”

“Shh,” Naomi hissed. “Guard’s coming back.”

The guard marched past their cell, looking at them with stern eyes. “You sure sounded excited in here. What were you talking about.”

“Believe it or not, it was your face,” O’Neill said. “We were wondering if you were one of those kids who ignored their mother and got their face stuck. Because if you were born that way it would be really tragic.”
The guard put his hand on the bars. “You’re lucky the cap wants you all alive or I would have shot you right there.”

“You probably should have,” Amos said. Then he pushed on the bars with all his might, snapping the rusted, ancient, poorly maintained metal poles of the wall. The cell door came down on the guard.

He tried to aim his gun despite the disorientation, but a punch from Amos knocked him straight onto the ground. Amos picked up the gun. “We’re out,” he said.

O’Neill blinked. “…I like you.”

Naomi fished through the guard’s shirt until she found identification. “This should open any locked doors.”

“Wonder why they used bars instead of sealing doors,” Draper mused.

“Belters don’t exactly have a lot of options all the time,” Naomi muttered.

Avasarala finally processed what was happening. “…We’re going to have to run for it.”

“Yep,” Draper said, picking her up.

“Put me down this instant!”

“With all due respect, you’ll only slow us down if you’re on your own feet.”

O’Neill nodded. “Amos, point. Naomi, back. Let’s move.” They ran through the corridor, right out of the small holding cell area. Right at the exit there was an extra gun. O’Neill picked it up. “Here we go.”

They opened the door to find two pirates having lunch on a folding table. One shot from O’Neill and another from Amos took care of them. They added two more guns to their supply.

“And now they’ll be coming for us because they’ll have definitely heard that one,” Naomi said.

“Ship’s this way,” Amos said, leading them to a ladder that led down a deck. They ended up in a room filled with boxes of rations, water, and other similar supplies.

O’Neill put a finger to his mouth to quiet everyone. He had seen two people in this room on the way down the ladder. They moved carefully and quietly, moving behind the large supply boxes. They made it by without a trace, leaving into another hall.

“I don’t see our stuff…” Naomi said.

“I see a big bulkhead that says Hazardous Storage,” O’Neill said, pointing to a heavy door with a crank on it. “If I’m a betting man, I’d say Starbeat’s back there.”

“That’ll take forever to open,” Draper said. “We’d need some way to know for sure.”

O’Neill knocked on the door.

They heard the clopping of hooves on the other side.

“Good enough for me,” Amos said, grabbing the wheel with his arms and turning, grunting against the rust and pressure inside.
Naomi shot a pirate as he opened a door from the left. “We really shouldn’t stay here…”

Amos let out a sharp grunt and popped the door open. Starbeat was waiting with a blue glowing capsule in her mouth.

Everyone gasped and took a few steps back, save O’Neill and Amos.

“Huh, they had the protomolecule,” Amos said. “Sweet.”

“That stuff kills everything it touches!” Avasarala said.

Starbeat put it down. “And it’s partially psychic. This universe isn’t as mundane as we previously thought. It can fix the dimensional drive.”

O’Neill picked the capsule up and pocketed it. “And now we have a better way out than just threatening to blow everything up.”

“You need to be careful with that stuff,” Amos said. “It will kill you if you touch it.”

“Just move!” Draper shouted. Nobody argued – they scrambled through a door and into a smaller storage area devoid of people. The next room they entered was the storage area the Skiff was held in. The back hatch was still open and three people were busy trying to figure out how it worked.

All three of them went down in the gunfire.

Starbeat glanced at Amos. “Wow, you’re a good shot.”

“He’s the muscle,” Naomi said.

The six of them ran into the Skiff, discovering a fourth, unarmed man inside. He had a communicator to his mouth. “They’ve gotten to me! Th-”

O’Neill knocked him out with the butt of his gun and dragged him off the Skiff. The rest of them scrambled into the skiff, making sure to close the hatch behind them. O’Neill undid the security lock he had on the controls and activated the Skiff’s weapons.

The radio was working again. “This is Captain Higgs. Think about what you’re doing, Avasarala.”

“I’m the only damn person who didn’t want to do this!” Avasarala spat.

“I’d be the one you want to talk to,” O’Neill said, pressing more buttons. “Because I’m the one with active guns pointed at the gut of your ship.”

He stood up, handing the gun controls to Draper while he went to Starbeat.

Higgs’ voice returned. “…This is a large ship. Whatever damage your Skiff can unleash will be minimal. Meanwhile, I have people moving to attack you on all sides. Would you rather surrender and live, or be blown up with your ship?”

O’Neill popped the hatch Starbeat was gesturing to, accessing the green orb that was the dimensional device. He popped the top of the protomolecule vial and poured the blue alien lifeform inside, careful not to get any on his hands. He slammed the hatch shut. “Well, you see mister Higgs, I’d rather not be stuck in a jail cell that’s so old we can just pop the bars off by struggling too much.”

“I can make arrangements to have you all stored in crates.”
O’Neill grinned. It was time to play the stalling game. “But what kind of crates? Because if we can escape from the crates, we’re just going to try to do it again. They better be really thick, industrial strength crates if I’m going to consider surrendering. And all the crates we saw on the way here I don’t think will cut it.”

“…Excuse me, who is this?”

“O’Neill. The old guy you captured. The guy who actually owns this ship. With the guns. That are pointed at everything.”

“Stand down and you will not be harmed.”

“See, there’s a problem with that too. How can I know I won’t be harmed? You clearly didn’t know who I was, which makes me think you don’t know how valuable a target I am. You might shoot me as an example to the others! Or just to satisfy your need for vengeance. We did just take out several of your guys. I understand.”

“Let me put it another way. Stand down or we blow you all out of the sky and everyone dies.”

“Such a waste,” O’Neill said, shaking his head. “Do you think you’ll ever be able to survive life in the system if you blew up Chrisjen Avasarala? What about the crew of James Holden? Or the only known specimen of an alien unicorn? Bet you were surprised when you found her on board.”

Higgs’ tone of voice improved. “Ah, I was not. She was the reason I grabbed you all.”

“And how did you find out? Come on, I can hear you wanting to gloat there.”

“You have a big window on the front of your ship. The Umbriel just looked and saw.” Higgs let out a menacing chuckle.

Starbeat facehooved. “Why did nobody think of that!?”

Draper sighed. “Ships aren’t supposed to have windows. It’s not something we ever have to worry about.”

“Lovely.”


“Dimensional drive active,” Naomi said. “Activating.”

“…What?”

“Goodbye!” O’Neill said with a salute. A portal appeared under she Skiff’s front. There was barely enough energy in the Skiff to create a portal large enough for it to fit through – and it had to tip into it, slowly.

This gave Higgs an opportunity to allow order his men to attack. From every door surrounding them, men with guns filed out. The basic bullets bounced right off the Skiff, but one guy launched a rocket.

Starbeat lit her horn and smirked. “Oops.” Using the magic from the other side of the portal she grabbed hold of the rocket and tossed it back, blowing a hole in the ceiling. “You really shouldn’t shoot rockets in spaceships. Recipe for disaster.” She opted to simply raise a magic shield next to protect them for the last few seconds.
They fell into space and the portal closed behind them.

“…Now I’ve seen everything,” Amos said.

O’Neill smirked. “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.”

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Amos and Starbeat stood outside a meeting room in the Hub. They watched through the glass as Avasarala, Fred Johnson, and the Martian military commander Ari shouted at each other while O’Neill and Eve watched.

“Powder keg,” Starbeat said, holding a slushie in her hoof and sipping it. “Tellin’ ya.”

“I take it that means no keys to the multiverse?”

“I’d say no,” Starbeat said. “Worlds in a heavy state of unrest are generally denied. …Though we accept most standard Earths, so I can’t really say where we draw the line. I’m pretty sure you’re very well past it, though. All three of you want to kill each other. And the fourth one is pretty confused.”

“Fourth?”

“The protomolecule,” Starbeat said. “We’ve given it some space to grow. It’s been talking. We won’t be telling you much about it by its request.”

“Huh. That’s weird to think about.”

“It’s an alien. What did you expect?”

“A magic horn?”

Starbeat chuckled. “You know, you can stay if you want. We accept singles and small groups all the time. Almost no limitations on immigration here.”

“Temptin’ offer. But I’ll pass. Don’t think I’d mix well with all your ‘friendship’ crap.”

Starbeat shrugged. “We have a few people who are willing to do the brutal thing when required.”

“Plus, I’m part of a crew. Not just gonna give that up.”

“I understand. I hope the Rocinante understands just how lucky they are to have you.”

Amos nodded. “Oh, they do. The-”

The door to the meeting room flew open. “Get out!” O’Neill shouted. “If you’re all going to act like children around each other, than that’s how you’re going to be treated! Go sit in time out in your little secluded universe for a few years!”

Avasarala opened her mouth.

“Not one weasley word out of you!” O’Neill blurted. “The three of you have proven, at just about every turn, that you just can’t move past your differences! You can’t be weaker than anyone else, because that’s a threat. You can’t be even, because then you’re not the best. And if you were the strongest you would want to defend that at any cost! When you get it in your collective heads that maybe, maybe you’re in this together, we’ll talk again.” O’Neil stormed off.
There was silence for a few seconds.

Eve cleared her throat. “Sorry about that. He lost patience with the politics. I’ll go talk to him later. His sentiment is that of Merodi Universalis, however. Sorry, we will not be initiating further contact with your worlds for now. You are simply not ready, nor do you need our help to survive.”

Avasarala raised her eyebrow. “And the protomolecule?”

“It passed,” Eve admitted. “Maybe if you prove yourself to it, it’ll let you talk to us.” Her ears twitched involuntarily. “You’ll be taken back to your world now. We might contact you again in a few years, we might not.”

The three leaders looked at her with steeled expressions.

“Goodbye.” Eve said, walking away. She turned with a smile to Amos and Starbeat. “Good evening!”

Amos blinked. “You can turn your expression around fast.”

“Have to.”

Starbeat glanced at the receding forms the Earth Proto representatives. “You know, I kinda thought O’Neill and Avasarala were friends now.”

“They are,” Eve said. “Avasarala agrees with the sentiment. They aren’t ready. But she can’t exactly make that opinion public.”

“Ah. I see.”

Eve glanced over her shoulder, then back to Amos. “I don’t want them knowing about this, but we’re going to set up a communications satellite you can use…”

~~~

Earth Proto.

That’s what they ended up calling the universe, after its defining lifeform, the protomolecule.

Starbeat liked the name, even if she wasn’t quite sure about the world itself. Filled with three tribes of humanity that wouldn’t stop fighting. Even the good people among them, people who had been part of a mixed crew, had agendas. Avasarala, for all her understanding and wisdom, was still loyal to Earth first, and not humanity. Draper would speak for Mars even though she didn’t agree with it. Naomi would stand by the Belt until the end of her days. They were all good people who understood each other – but whose loyalties belonged to societies and ideals rather than people.

“Is that good?” Starbeat had asked Rainbow shortly after they had returned home.

Rainbow Dash had blinked. “I don’t know.”

I don’t know.

The Element of Loyalty didn’t know if it was good or not. Loyalty to an ideal, a society, or loyalty to friends?

Being a researcher of ka didn’t help her with that puzzle.
She would have said Amos had it right. He wasn’t anchored to any one – Earth? Mars? Belter? Who cared? But he didn’t. He just stumbled through life, looking for guidance.

“What is guidance?” Starbeat asked.

The protomolecule’s Investigator shrugged. “Don’t know. You think I would, seein’ as I’m guiding them onward.”

Starbeat looked at a screen on her desk that showed the Ring construct the proto-jellyfish had created in Earth Proto. “With that thing?”

“Need a ride,” the Investigator said.

“We could still give you a ride.”

“Structural integrity lacking. Assistance is welcome, but unnecessary.”

Starbeat lit her horn, picking up a cup of coffee and drinking it. “Fair enough. Have any plans with us?”

“Backup. The creators went somewhere. Don’t want to suffer their fate.”

Starbeat nodded. “You just let us know if you want to further our relationship.”

The Investigator looked at her with a coy smile. “Create a colony.” Then he was gone again.

Starbeat rolled her eyes. He didn’t have to appear like that – they had a direct telepathic communication line to the protomolecule. But, for whatever reason, it liked appearing as that man to her, even though it had appeared to others at times just to see if it could.

The protomolecule wanted a colony. A planet. Starbeat didn’t see any issue granting its request.

~~~

The Rocinante wouldn’t be able to avoid a trip to the Ring. Eventually, the ship found itself en route to the trans-Uranian object. With an annoying news crew on board.

“Holden, what do you think of fate? Destiny?”

Holden thought about this. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve been the hero of the system multiple times, I’m just curious if you believe in such a thing?”

“…Yeah. Yeah I do. I think it has a weird sense of humor.”

Amos rolled his eyes in the background. “You can say that again.”

The camera turned to Amos. “Why?”

“Well, see, the reason behind that is so classified its not even funny,” Amos said. “To you. I find it hilarious.”

“Amos…”

Amos’ communicator beeped. “Excuse me, the real world calls.” He ducked down a deck, walking into the kitchen. He pulled up the message.
It was an image of Starbeat standing in a hazard suit, grinning. Behind her was an entire forest utterly and completely assimilated by the blue power of the protomolecule. Everything that wasn’t Starbeat was blue, shifting and shimmering with the glow of the alien substance.

Greetings from Protom!

Amos blinked. That is a really stupid name for a planet.

He put the communicator away. “Hey, reporter girl! I know you have a list of ‘reasons Amos is insane’. Add ‘he thinks he’s pen pals with a unicorn’ to it!”

“…What?”

“Did I stutter? I said add it.”

“…Okaaaay…”

Amos knew that wasn’t what she added, but he didn’t care. That little game had run its course.

He found himself wondering what crazy things the Merodi would do with the protomolecule.

Turn planets into war machines?

Nah, that was crazy.

~~~

O’Neill looked at the round blue thing displayed on the main display of the Defiant. “…You want to give us what now?”

“Consider it a gift,” the Investigator said. “A ‘ship’.”

“We’re never going to get a dimensional drive or an FTL drive big enough for that.”

“You underestimate yourselves.” He tipped his hat. “Good luck!”

“Wait don’t y-”

He was gone.

“…Just so everyone knows, I was talking to the Investigator,” O’Neill said.

“Everyone knows that, sir,” Clandestine said. “Nobody thinks you’re a raving lunatic that talks to hallucinations.”

That did little to quell O’Neill’s uncertainties.
Several years ago…

“I think this is it,” Sunny said looking out over the latest world they had found, holding her hoof out to frame the beautiful rolling hills, the perfect cascading waterfall, the spotless pristine weather, the flowers the size of trees, and the abundance of blue lightning bugs. “This is the world.”

Sunburst looked up from his notes. “Wait, really?”

“Yes. Really.” Sunny smirked. “Everyone pack up. The largest mission this survey team has undertaken is complete.”

Josuke and a Starlight with cybernetic implants named Beam stared at her, disbelieving.

“Are you telling me we can finally go home!?” Beam shouted. “We’ve been out here for months!”

“And we’ve finally found a distant colony,” Sunny said. “This world… is completely uninhabited, lacks large predators, has absolutely stunning scenery, and has a unique magical mineral under its crust. I’m calling it. This is what we were looking for.”

“Geez, finally,” Josuke muttered, hands behind his head. “Can’t wait to get to my own bed…”

“Do you have any idea how deep we are into the E-sphere?” Sunburst asked. “It’s going to be a while before we get back!”

“…Why are we making a distant colony if it takes forever to get to it, again?”

Beam nudged him. “Jojo, come on, I’ve explained it millions of times. Because we wanted something in a completely new part of the multiverse. Or, conversely, because why not!”

Sunny nodded. “Yep. But hey, we’re done now and can go back home, be with our loved ones.” She glanced at Josuke and Beam. “Those who aren’t here, anyway. The Great Survey is over!”

There was a chorus of celebration cheers.

“Let us leave this… Farpoint behind and get moving.” She placed a stake in the ground that displayed the Merodi Universalis symbol - signifying more than just a simple ‘claim’ that a beacon provided. There was intent to develop.

She pulled out a dimensional device and began the long trek back home.

Present day, relatively speaking…

There was an explosion the likes of which denied comprehension. Out of the remnants of this blast a green star formed, shining against the blackness in its impossibility. Bubbles of varying colors appeared around it, fusing into one singular orbiter. Vast, screeching tentacles came from the darkness, attempting to latch onto the verdant fire, but electric shocks pushed them back.

A spirograph surrounded the entire image.
And then Eve woke up. “Mmmf…”

Flutterfree lifted her head off of Eve. “Oh. You’re awake. That was quite the nap you were taking there.”

“Loud enough to be heard in the neighboring universe!” Rainbow Dash shouted.

Eve let herself remember where she was. That was right, her personal ship, the Astra. She had decided she was going to take her friends on a vacation to the distant Farpoint resort. They were currently mid-trip, flying through innumerable dimensions to get all the way to Merodi Universalis’ furthest colony, deep within the E-sphere. Or closer to the other side. They really weren’t sure; nobody ever shared their full maps with them.

“I don’t think she’s awake yet,” Nova commented, waving a hoof in front of Eve’s eyes. “Yoo-hoo! Equis to the Charter!”

“Nova, shush,” Eve muttered, putting a hoof to her face. “I’m waking up. You may not know this about me, but I need to process everything when I wake up. So give me a moment.”

“Moment’s up!” Pinkie shouted, dragging Eve off the couch she had been resting on and to her hooves in the middle of the room. “Hey look, you’re up!”

“And about to fall back asleep,” Eve muttered, rubbing her eyes.

Applejack let out an amused snort. “You haven’t changed a bit.”

“Pretty sure she’s at least a bit richer than she was early on,” Allure mused.

“Nobody likes a math geek, Allure,” Renee chided with a smirk on her face.

“…You’re quoting something.”

“…Possibly.” Renee chuckled. “You see, Daniel – or, well, Jack actually – has this love for human science fiction shows…”

“X-Files actually exists,” Corona said. “Remember the Sherlock incident?”

“Not at all.”

“I was there, I remember,” Jotaro said. “Just before Unification we stormed an alien compound and ended up needing to use a Sherlock to complete the mission.”

Vriska gasped. “The great Jotaro allowed someone else to take the glory? Well, I can tell you that’s not what I would have done. I would have dragged him right into the open and told him not to interfere!”

“Vriska, stop pretending like you’re an arrogant self-absorbed prick,” Nova said. “That’s what you would have done in the past.”

“That’s what I said. Did you not hear the ‘would’ in that sentence? Past tense!”

“Yare yare daze,” Jotaro muttered.

Allure put a hoof to her chin. “I bet there’s a translator issue there.”

“Or maybe every language has its failings in communicating certain concepts,” Corona suggested.
Allure shrugged.

Eve smirked. “Or maybe, just maybe, Vriska’s being clever.”

Vriska facepalmed. “No shit, Einstein.”

That got a small laugh out of everyone. The sight of her friends talking together brought a big smile to Eve’s lips.

“This was a good idea,” Flutterfree told Eve. “Getting all eleven of us out here… The old gang and the new.”

That it was. Eve looked at everyone. The original elements of harmony: Applejack, Pinkie, Rainbow, Flutterfree, Renee… and then there was Nova, completing the seven’s original grouping. But the new friends were here as well – Corona and Allure, both of whom had come a long way from before the multiverse was uncovered. Vriska and Jotaro, the new friends. Everyone was here and getting along famously… It was just a great thought that warmed eve’s heart.

Part of her wished Spike had come, but apparently the disappearance of so many prominent figures had triggered the planning of a ‘guys’ night like you wouldn’t believe.’ …They still called it guys’ night even though Jolyne and Trixie were part of it. It was just tradition. She hoped they were having the most epic of quests.

Or maybe Discord had finally convinced them to go to a club in the middle of it. With Trixie involved anything was possible.

The thought made Eve chuckle slightly.

“Thinking about home?” Flutterfree asked.

“Yeah. I hope they haven’t burned it down by the time we get back.”

Nova heard that. “Oh no, Stardust. I’m not going to be there to stop her…”

“Sunburst can take care of it,” Allure said.

“Maybe. Maybe not. Have you thought about who’s taking care of Minna?”

“Apple Bloom. Though I secretly suspect Alushy is going to show up.”

Nova blinked. “How can you be calm about that!”?

“Allushy and I have an understanding. If she ruins Minna, I toss her into a universe that is literally hell.” Allure smiled innocently. “As it is, Alushy brings out parts of Minna I… can’t. My past self would scream in fear at me for saying this, but knowing Alushy has actually been better for Minna. Allowed her to feel more comfortable with herself.”

Nova stared at her, speechless.

“I’m sure you have similar feelings about Stardust though, right?”

Nova rubbed the back of her head. “Not… really? She’s a quiet kid who takes more after her father than me. She’s absolutely adorable but isn’t really one for… how do I put this? Interacting with ponies. There we go.”

Eve was suddenly next to Nova. “I haven’t done any Princess of Friendship duties in forever. This
sounds like my calling.”

“Oh, she has a few friends. They’re all just as quiet as she is,” Nova said.

Eve glanced at Flutterfree. “That’s fine, but are you sure she knows the magic of friendship?”

“…Yeah, not really?”

“Man, Glims, you need to get to know your daughter better. Speaking of daughters!” Rainbow pulled out a small book out of her saddlebags. “I’ve got pictures of Prism!”

“Uuuuugh how many times have you showed us that!?” Vriska muttered. “We get it! Your kid is awesome!”

“Children are worth bragging about,” Jotaro asserted.

“Not every ten gogdamn minutes!”

“Hey, I haven’t brought this out since the start of the trip,” Rainbow chided. “Plus, you don’t have kids, you wouldn’t understand.”

“Newsflash, I’ve explored the multiverse for centuries, of course I have a couple kids around.”

“No offense Vriska, but you didn’t raise any of those,” Pinkie pointed out.

Vriska blinked. “Technically not…”

Flutterfree nodded. “Plus, given troll reproduction, none of them could be natural anyway.”

“You’ve been talking to Aradia haven’t you?”

“…It’s a distinct possibility that I have.”

“Hey! Guys! Talking about Prism here!” Rainbow blurted.

“Rainbow Dash, eternal attention hog,” Renee said, giggling.

Corona leaned in. “Even more so than me, and I’m literally a lightbulb.”


Corona put her hands on her hips and looked down at Allure. “It was a figure of speech, little miss actually.”

Allure twitched. “Oh?”

Eve chuckled. “Corona, give her some leeway. You and I both are known to get on the ‘actually’ train occasionally.”

“Occasionally?” Flutterfree blurted.

“Okay, most of the time.”

“Everypony stop the presses!” Pinkie shouted. “WE’RE HEEEEEERE!”

The Astra jumped into orbit around the green globe that was Farpoint. They were hailed by one of
the ships in orbit, the captain appearing as a holographic screen in the middle of all of them. “Welcome to Farpoint.”

“Jack!?” Renee blurted. “What are you doing here?”

“Out on a cruise across the multiverse,” O’Neill said with a wink. “Stopping here a few days for relaxation, resupply, the works. Windshield needs cleaning too, but I haven’t found a big enough space squeegee yet.”

“Have you found any space squeegees?” Vriska asked.

“That information is classified.”

Eve chuckled. “Good luck on your classified squeegee mission then. We’ll be on the surface, taking a vacation. Maybe we’ll run into each other!”

“Probably not. I’m confined to the bridge, the horror.”

“Then order someone else to take over for a while when you get too bored to listen to regulation.”

“Yes ma’am.” O’Neill said with a salute.

Eve smiled. “See you around. Hey, Astra, take us down to our hotel.”

The ship beeped in response and descended into the planet’s atmosphere.

Corona started laughing. “Oh wow, all it took was one beep and Raging Sights already thinks the ship is obnoxious!”

Everyone had a chuckle at this.

Except Raging Sights, who would have blushed if that were possible.

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Farpoint didn’t have that many settlements on it, largely due to the fact that it was exceedingly distant from Merodi Universalis proper. Most of these settlements were just simple towns, or, in a few cases, research outposts devoted to testing the magical stone, laria, that was abundant beneath Farpoint’s crust.

There was only one city on all of Farpoint: the aptly (if unimaginatively) named Farpoint City.

From the moment of its inception, the architects of the city knew it needed to look spectacular, so as to best suit the beauty of the planet it was built on… and to attract tourists. Anyone with a lick of sense knew the latter reason was by far the biggest reason.

The buildings of Farpoint City were designed unlike any standard Merodi constructions – the majority of buildings were designed with height in mind, appearing to be the conglomeration of dozens of pointed spires looking toward the sky, with numerous bridges moving between different towering buildings. Every building was covered in a precious metal of some sort to make it look like something out of a legend, even though magically speaking it wasn’t that hard to create enough of any standard precious metal to coat an entire city. Gold, silver, copper, and platinum shone in the sun, protected from wear and tear by simple protection enchantments.

Farpoint City was very shiny and everyone who lived there was a little tired of it. Tourists on the other hand…
“This is simply *divine!*” Renee said, doing a twirl as they walked along a bridge from the copper tower where the *Astra* was docked to the platinum hotel they would be staying in.

Flutterfree looked around, worried. “I know there are no birds on this world naturally… But people will bring their pets, and they will escape into the wild, and eventually all these skyscrapers are going to be a problem.”

Allure tapped through an informational data pad she had been given. “Looks like the city has a magical aura spread around the edges designed to deter animals from entering. Mainly vermin, but I bet it keeps birds out as well.”

Flutterfree nodded slowly. “…I guess that’s fine.”

“Hey, they live here, we don’t,” Eve said, putting a wing around Flutterfree. “Let’s give them the benefit of the doubt and assume they know what they’re doing here.”

Corona reached the end of the bridge first, opening the platinum doors with her magic. The interior of the hotel wasn’t anywhere near as overtly reflective as the exterior – while still platinum themed, the reflectivity was toned down, and the floor was just a high quality white carpet.

A receptionist welcomed them – she was a white pony with wings and a glowing ring above her head. “Hello! Welcome to Platinum Suites. You all have the Royal Adjunct.”

Renee gasped. “Stars, a halo-pegasus! Oh, forgive me for staring. It’s just… haloes are so rare even on Lai and rarely interact with us, to see a combination this far out…”

She smiled. “I used to work for Princess Luna exploring the stars. After the Bloodbath I lost direction for a while – heard about this place, was one of the first settlers. Name’s Anesthesia, but you can just call me Anna like everyone else. I own this hotel!” She beamed.

Corona raised an eyebrow. “Why are you acting as receptionist then?”

“Because I knew you were coming and wanted to let you in personally,” Anna said. “Also, if I’m being perfectly honest this hotel mostly runs itself and I get bored a lot.”

“Oh, I know what that’s like, darling,” Renee said. “Did you know I still own Rarity for You in my home universe – oh, if you know what that is.”

“I do,” Anna admitted. “There’s one in the shopping district. The Rarity there is a bit… eccentric, but she’s nice enough.”

“I know where I’m going later,” Renee declared.

Anna’s halo flashed for a moment and executed a simple ‘toss’ spell, giving Eve several keycards to the Royal Adjunct. “Right this way to your *spectacular* accommodations.”

She took them all into a large, cylindrical elevator with more than enough size to fit all of them. It rose to the very top floor. They came out into a simple, square room with a single door at the end of the hall. Anna gestured at the card reader.

Eve slid her card through the slot and the door swung outward. They walked out into the Royal Adjunct of Platinum Suites. The ‘room’ was *huge*. It was a circular expanse larger than most houses, with ten king-sized beds arranged equidistantly around the edges. There were numerous televisions on the walls, all of which were currently off, and dozens of chairs around a handful of tables ringed the middle of the room. The middle composed of the door to the elevator and a large, walled-off
bathroom.

Anna beamed. “Welcome to the most advanced Suite we have, and also the largest. It may seem like one room with a bathroom and an exit attached to it, but there’s so much more. Every bed has a set of controls at the head which can be used to erect walls around it – for privacy or whatever other reason you could imagine.” She demonstrated, letting her halo flash to tap one of the buttons. A square set of walls with a door appeared around one of the beds, sealing it off in its own little enclosure.

“The controls can also open the walls up to the balcony.” A slit opened in the wall, revealing a walkway that went all the way around the room, from which all of Farpoint City could be seen.

Rainbow flew out onto the balcony. “This is so awesome. Pinkie! Why doesn’t the Pinkie Emporium have this!?”

“Because all the tall buildings become part of rollercoasters!” Pinkie called. “Also stop pretending I’m employed by the Emporium!”

“Nah!”

“Dashie!”

Anna smiled warmly at their interaction. “You can also set the ceiling to clear, if you want.” She gestured with a wing and suddenly they could all see the sky above them. “It’ll still block rain, so feel free to leave it clear regardless of the situation.”

“We are never closing this,” Corona said, eyes sparkling.

“But what if the sun gets too bright?” Applejack asked.

“Never closing this.”

“Ah. Gotcha.”

Anna turned around, looking at Eve. “Room service and maids are available by request. Though the food replicator over there and the self-cleaning spells contained in that cupboard should service most of your needs. If you need anything don’t hesitate to call.” She gave Eve her card. “My personal number’s on there too if you really need anything. Or, y’know, just want to talk or something.”

Eve smiled warmly. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Well, I’ll let you all get settled in! Enjoy your stay!” She beamed and flashed her halo – teleporting away.

“Enough people believe in her that she can execute a teleport. Interesting,” Corona observed.

“Hm?” Jotaro asked, raising an eyebrow.

“The halo’s magic is determined by how many people believe in it and how strongly. A halo that nobody knows can’t even execute a telekinesis spell. But those who become leaders can basically do anything that comes to their mind on a whim.”

“An interesting power…”
“You should see deer. Their magic makes less sense. I still don’t know how they have any idea what
their spells are going to do before it happens. It’s completely dependant on the environment, but they
can work it out somehow even if they’ve never been somewhere before.”

“One of the many mysteries of nature,” Flutterfree said.

Jotaro sat on a bed, claiming it as his own.

“Oh, I just realized! There’s eleven of us and only ten beds!” Pinkie blurted. “We need to fix that
right now! Who wants to double up with the best sleepover friend Pinkie Pie?”

“No one. Ever,” Nova deadpanned. “Your level of sleep chill is almost nonexistent.”

“It’s like you turn into a hamster ball,” Rainbow said, hoofbumping Nova.

“I don’t turn into a hamster ball!” Pinkie objected from inside a giant hamster ball.

“I’ll double up with Allure,” Renee said, pulling her sister close. “Just like old times!”

“...Just like?”

“Well, no, but you know what I mean.”

Allure raised an eyebrow.

Vriska turned to Jotaro. “You know, your wife must really trust you. Ten beautiful women in the
same room as you. How will you cope?”

“Vriska, we’re all ponies except for you,” Nova pointed out.

“And how exactly does that invalidate her point?” Renee interjected, indignant.

“Okay, fine, most of us are technically related in some way or another at this point. That work?”

Jotaro grunted. “Yare yare daze...”

Eve rolled her eyes. “We’re all good friends and we all trust each other. Vriska just needs to stop
instigating.”

“Me. Stop instigating.” Vriska laughed. “There’s something that’ll never happen.”

“I can think of several times you didn’t instigate a conflict,” Flutterfree commented.

“That’s because you spend every waking moment of your life in my proximity.”

“I can also think of times you haven’t exaggerated.”

“Give up while you’re ahead,” Corona whispered to Vriska. “Facing the Flutterfree head-on is a bad
idea.”

“You think I don’t know that?”

“Oh, no. I’m just trying to produce a response.” Corona grinned. “Instigating, if you will.”

Vriska blinked. “...Why do we never hang out?”

“Because ka has deemed that the two fiery vixens shall never bond, alas!” Corona said, putting a
hand to her head.

“Been taking acting lessons?” Nova asked.

“Nope! I’m just a big ham.”

“Bacon,” Jotaro corrected.

Corona opened her mouth to correct him, but realized he had a point. She shrugged.

Renee cleared her throat. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m going to go check out the local Rarity for You. See if it’s up to my standards. Probably buy a vacationing outfit.”

“Oh! Ooh! I’m coming too!” Pinkie declared. “I have the sudden *uncontrollable* urge to add a bizarre dress to my collection!”

“Anyone else?” Renee asked. “Allure, want to go shopping with your dear sister?”

“Pass,” Allure said.

“Your loss!” Pinkie declared. “Avast Renee, let us go *shopping*!”

The two of them bounced off to the elevator to see the rest of the city.

“You know, if I actually had anything planned today, I would be annoyed they ran off so quickly,” Eve muttered. “Luckily my master schedule only starts tomorrow!”

“Do you have to be such an accountant?” Vriska asked.

“Yes!” Eve said, gleefully. “Enjoy your free time while it lasts because tomorrow *the schedule begins!* Up at the crack of dawn we go see the legendary sparkling sunrise, and *then* we get to experience the chilly wafts of the city on the high-rise bridges. Then I’ve chartered a ride through the hole in this world’s moon, where we will enter the legendary casino a-”

“Oh my gog you’ve ruined everything,” Vriska groaned.

Flutterfree coughed. “Um… Eve’s messing with you.”

Vriska looked at Eve’s cheesy grin. “…You *bitch.*”

“Thank you!” Eve chuckled. She pulled the real schedule out of the aether. “There’s actually nothing until after noon tomorrow, and for the most part I don’t have anything scheduled for anyone specifically. There’s just events. We all have to go on the ride through the Moonhole, but otherwise you’re free to come and go to most the rest of these or do something else. I even have ‘relax time’ here. Of note is this entire day filled with ‘amusement park’ which, against my better judgment, I haven’t planned anything specific at all.”

“…Since Pinkie’s not here, the honor falls to me,” Nova said. She created a scoreboard with her magic. “Eve: one. Vriska: zero.”

“I was letting out spicy one liners the whole trip!” Vriska shouted indignantly.

“The scoreboard has only just begun. You’ll find that, as Pinkie’s replacement, I am a lot less spontaneous about the whole thing and follow a strict set of ‘funny’ regulations.”

Vriska blinked.

“You’re enjoying this aren’t you?”

“Yes. Oh hell yes.”

Vriska shrugged. “Fine!” She put an overdramatic hand to her forehead. “I know when I’m not wanted! Spiderbitch out, it’s time to find adventure!”

“Oh sweet!” Rainbow said, flying in from outside. “I heard adventure. Where!?”

“I have no idea! Want to help me find some?”

“Am I awesome!?”

“Oh, so that’s a no?”

Rainbow rolled her eyes. “That’s a yes numbnuts.”

“Right! AWAY WE GO!”

“Don’t leave me out! I have to keep score!” Nova said, running after them.

Vriska took one look at her and decided not to throw her off the balcony. Instead she grabbed Nova and carried her like a suitcase. “Unwelcome baggage accepted! Anyone else want to find random bits of adventure?”

“You really goin’ out on a wild romp before the first day even begins?” Applejack asked, raising her eyebrow. “Ah thought you were more mature than this.”

Allure quietly put her hoof down, deciding she suddenly didn’t want to go on the adventure.

“You thought wrong!” Rainbow declared, winking at Applejack. “TO THE SKIES!” She flew out over the balcony and into the sky, Vriska flapping along behind her, dragging Nova along.

“Well, if we’re having a sudden ‘do our own thing’ moment,” Eve said, “I would very much like to look at some laria – I hear the mineral has very peculiar and arcane properties.”

“That sounds like something I can get behind,” Corona said. “Count me in.”

“Oh, me too,” Flutterfree said. “Sounds fun!”

Corona blinked. “…Really?”

Flutterfree nodded. “Really.”

“Huh. Sure. To the magic crystals!”

Eve teleported them away, leaving only Applejack, Jotaro, and Allure in the room.

Allure blinked. “So… What do we do?”

“Relax,” Applejack said, leaning back in a rocking chair.

“…You know, that doesn’t sound like a bad idea,” Allure said, crawling into a chair next to Applejack. “Just take a moment to rest on a vacation. What a crazy idea.”
The sides of Jotaro’s mouth curled up. “Someone’s figured out what a vacation actually means.”

Silence fell over the Royal Adjunct of Platinum Suites.

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“Laria isn’t exactly a crystal *per se*, since it has no structure,” Eve said as they flew through the shimmering skies of Farpoint City. “It’s a completely amorphous substance that adheres to itself through thaumic attraction, not through any sort of chemical or molecular bond. It *grows* like a crystal, and has the appearance of citrine when cut, but if you actually see any in the wild it’ll just be a big *blob* of yellow stuff, somewhat like amber. Except it doesn’t move anywhere near fast enough to trap bugs in it.”

“Wow,” Flutterfree said. “Sounds like some really useful stuff.”

“We’re still researching it,” Corona said, flying in a lounging position. “As a pure power source, we have better options. But I heard that you could carve spells onto its surface and create complex charms even mundane individuals could use.”

Flutterfree nodded. “And it’s really common here.”

“It’s *only* found here,” Eve corrected. “There are a few other substances like it in the multiverse, but we’ve never recorded it naturally anywhere else.”

“Wow. …I say that a lot.”

“It’s what happens when Eve talks for long enough,” Corona said.

Flutterfree giggled. “Don’t I know i- oh!” She dive-bombed into the lower levels of the city like a bird of prey. A few seconds later she flew back up to them and put an excessively long fuzzy scarf on Eve. “Perfect!”

Eve was momentarily startled. “I uh… what?”

Flutterfree pulled at part of the scarf – revealing it to have a hood built in – and put it over Eve’s windswept mane. Two giant googly eyes on springs bounced into existence, hanging just past Eve’s horn. “You look so *cute*!”

Eve looked at the spring eyes. The spring eyes looked back.

“It also looks ridiculous,” Corona commented.

“I like it,” Eve declared.

Corona stopped looking where she was going and ran into a silver wall. “W-what?”

“It’ll make a nice souvenir. ‘Eve, why do you have this scarf-hood-eye-thing?’ ‘Well, hypothetical young individual from a future generation, this is from a very dear friend of mine who thought it was cute. It reminds me of a great vacation.’ ‘Oh wow, cool story!’”

“…That wasn’t a very cool story,” Flutterfree pointed out.

“Let me have my fantasies.”

Corona shrugged. “Whatever floats your crazy boat.”
“I am the Charter-Princess-Overhead. Eccentricity is to be expected. If at any point I stop being eccentric, someone please remove the changeling from the picture.”

Flutterfree chuckled. “We’d know if it wasn’t you, Eve.”

“Yeah…” she said, a faraway look in her eyes. “Oh hey, there’s a store!” She dive-bombed, gesturing for the others to follow. They landed on a mid-level balcony outside a store. *Laria Central.* A giant stone hung from the shop’s sign. It was a pristinely-cut sphere of a brilliant yellow luster that reflected the sun right into Corona’s eyes.

“Shiny,” Corona observed.

“It’s so beautiful…” Flutterfree added. “Like a star came down to warm you with proximity…”

“…It’s just a pretty rock.”

Eve looked deeply into the sphere. “You aren’t looking at it closely enough, Corona. There’s something truly magical about this stone.”

“Brainwashing?”

Flutterfree and Eve giggled. “Oh no, no, of course not!” Eve said. “There’s just more to it than being a simple rock. ...Though I do think the one on the sign is just enchanted to look like the real thing. Come on, let’s go in.”

The three of them strode into *Laria Central*, not at all surprised to find virtually everything in the store was made from the carved magic gem – the shelves were covered in paint made with laria dust, the tiles had small gems embedded in them, and the lights were made from engraved laria spells.

“Welcome to Laria Central, the go-to stop for all your laria needs,” a Gem droned, clearly uninterested in her spiel. “I am Citrine. How may I be of assi-“ She realized who she was talking to. “O-Overhead Evening! I-I’m so sorry for the disrespect!”

“I know all about it, Citrine,” Eve said with a smile. “I worked at a hayburger once, I know what it’s like.”

“Y-you did?”

Eve rolled her eyes. “I was once a lowly college student, believe it or not.”

“You were Celestia’s prize pupil,” Corona said, raising an eyebrow.

“That doesn’t change the fact that she worked at the hayburger,” Flutterfree pointed out. “Such a thankless job…”

“Probably worse than here, come to think of it,” Eve said. “At least the crystals in here are cool. And might explode. Gives it an air of danger!”

Citrine blinked. “…You weren’t what I was expecting.”

“I’m purposely letting myself cut loose. *You have no idea how much I don’t realize I need vacations until I’m already on them.*”

Flutterfree put a wing on Eve. “There there, reel it in. Let’s go look at these fancy laria vases, okay?”

“Okay… Okay…” The two walked over to the vases.
Corona glanced at Citrine. “Hey, am I crazy, or am I the tag-along here?”

“Don’t ask me, I’m still having my worldview challenged about my figures of authority. Come back in two to three weeks when I’m able to think straight again.”

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“What do you mean you’ve got nothing?” Vriska asked.

On the screen of Vriska’s phone O’Neill shrugged. “I mean there’s not any unusual magical readings on the planet you can check out.”

“This entire planet is filled with golden magic rocks!”

“Yes. And they’re on the entire planet.”

Vriska twitched. “But we need to go look for something! I’m not just going to go waltz into the forest and hope we find something!”

“I am,” Nova said.

“You’re a walking scoreboard, you don’t count.”

“Removing my personhood, are we?”

“Look, O’Neill,” Rainbow said, dragging herself into the conversation as well. “You have ka sensors up there right? Just look for something, anything interesting!”

“Interesting is relative,” O’Neill said, pushing a few buttons. “For all you know I’ll pick on a romantic story and you’ll all get dragged along as side characters for daring to look.”

Rainbow dash blinked. “Can we not look for the ka now?”

“Right, that settles it!” Vriska declared. “Biggest source of ka you can find on the planet.”

“Eve.”

Vriska facepalmed. “That isn’t one of us.”

“There’s a library in the mercantile district that’s shooting stuff up like a beacon.”

“We are not playing the egghead with the magical book,” Rainbow declared.

“We don’t know that’s what it is!” Nova pointed out.

“Next!”

O’Neill smirked. “And the next one’s in the middle of the jungle on a continent that hasn’t been settled yet.”

“BINGO!” Rainbow blurted. “Let’s go there.”

Nova rolled her eyes. “Using the most advanced and least understood technology of our time to find random ways to enjoy ourselves. What is this world coming to?”

“I don’t know. I do know we need to get the coordinates.”
O’Neill sent them over. “Good luck! Those probably aren’t accurate at all given how much wilderness is out there!” He cut the feed.

Nova pulled up an image of the planet on her hoof screen. “Let’s see… I should be able to initiate a point-to-point teleport across the planet. Just give me a sec. Or two or three. …Don’t look at me like that, long-range teleportation takes a while!”

The three of them were silent for a moment.

Vriska grunted, leaning against a golden wall. “You know, I wonder why I’m here.”

“It’s one of life’s great mysteries,” Rainbow said.

“Not that. I mean here. With you guys. With Eve’s little vacation of the closest of friends.” She held out her hand. “I don’t exactly know Purple Smart all that well in case you didn’t notice.”

“It seemed like you were getting along fine to me,” Rainbow pointed out.

“She’s the Princess of fucking Friendship, of course she gets along with me if she wants to. But think about it. You’re all either her oldest friends, or you’re Renee’s sister, or you’re Jotaro. Whose entire family owes its continued stability to Eve. And then there’s me. Spiderbitch.”

“Man, Vriska, do not sell yourself short,” Rainbow said. “You’re her friend just like the rest of us. Sure, you may not know her the best, but you’re a big part of a lot of her good friends’ lives. Why wouldn’t she invite you?”


Rainbow Dash facehooved. “That’s different and you know it.”

“I’m just here because she thought it’d be rude if I was left alone.”

“Teleport ready,” Nova declared. “But before we go… Vriska, what on Equis is up with you? It’s unlike you to be bothered by this sort of thing.”

“You ponies are making me soft, that’s what.”

“While true, you’re not this soft. What’s up?”

“Nothing! Not a thing.”

Nova raised an eyebrow. “Rainbow Dash, how much bullshit is coming out of her mouth right now?”

“All of it,” Rainbow Dash said.

“All the bullshit.” Nova added a number to the scoreboard in her favor.

Vriska twitched. “I don’t have to say jack anything.”

“No, you don’t. But you know you should.”

“Damn you ponies,” Vriska muttered. “Fine! I miss Starbeat already!” She threw her arms wide. “Been away from her for less than a day and already it’s messing with me!”
“…Not Hastur?” Rainbow asked.

“Troll romance is complicated, now is not the time to call it into question,” Nova told Rainbow. “You need to get some ‘feelings jamming’ out?”

Vriska raised an eyebrow. “Given my sudden outburst right there, what do you think?”

“My answer is ‘probably’,” Rainbow said. “Hey, if you don’t want to do it with me, I gotcha, you don’t know me. But Nova’s certainly available.”

“…I think I’d prefer someone that didn’t look like Starbeat, frankly.”

“Flutterfree?” Nova suggested.

“Flutterfree,” Rainbow decided.

“Fine, fine, I’ll go have a nice long discussion with the absolute master of ‘feelings jamming’.” Vriska rolled her eyes. “This does not stop our adventure.”

“Oh, of course not,” Nova said. “Unless you want it to.”

“We’re already out here, I’m not crawling back to the hotel like a beat up puppy.”

Rainbow snorted. “Nice.”

Vriska bumped Rainbow’s hoof.

Nova rolled her eyes. “Right. You good for now?”

Vriska smirked. “Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.”

“Okaaaaaay… Initiating teleport.”

They were suddenly in the middle of a jungle composed out of giant orange flowers instead of trees.

“Sweet,” Vriska said. “Now where’s the thing?”

Nova shrugged. “Dunno. Somewhere around here. We’ll have to look for it.”

“Oh, hey, this is just like the first place!” Rainbow said. “We all got lost in the jungle and didn’t know how to get back home!”

Nova nodded. “Yeah. I don’t remember. I wasn’t there.”

“Ah, psh, so here’s what we do. We walk in a random direction until we find savage ponies or a village of demon-bugs!”

Vriska smirked. “THIS WAY!”

“On the way I can tell you about Prism’s big recital!”

Nova facehooved as she saw Rainbow taking out the photos again.

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Allure opened her eyes.
“Huh. You know, I never really knew how nice sitting and doing nothing could be.”

Applejack chuckled. “That’s just because you’re holdin’ onto your inner child.”

“No I’m not,” Allure grunted.

“Uh, yes, yes it is,” Applejack corrected. “You’re still a filly at heart. You’ve seen a lot, but the way you walk, the way you talk, the way you think about things… There may not be an innocence to it, but there’s definitely a young spark in there.”

“I’m almost fifty!” Allure blurted.

This made Jotaro’s eyes open wide. “…Nani?”

“Translates to something like mid-thirties in human years,” Allure clarified.

“It ain’t an exact science, that’s for sure,” Applejack admitted. “But that number doesn’t mean anythin’ anyway. It’s how you act that determines what you are at heart.”

Allure twitched. “I don’t think that’s it. I’m not a filly at heart – it’s just that all of you can’t help but see me that way! Every one of you but Vriska and Jotaro knew me as a kid, and you just can’t let go of it! I’ve seen you treat Apple Bloom better than me!”

Applejack turned to Allure blinking. “…Why’ve you bottled this up for so long?”

Allure sighed. “…Sorry.”

“Ah asked a question, Allure.”

Allure nodded slowly. “Renee can’t move past looking at me as her little sister. She’s tried – she’s really tried. But even once I adopted Minna, she couldn’t adjust. She’s able to change on a practical level – getting me different presents as I get older, not expecting me to keep liking the same things – but she still dotes over me.”

“She’s mothering you.”

Allure blushed. “…Right.”

“…What?”

“…Wrong.”

Allure nodded slowly. “Hey, didn’t she watch you a lot more than your parents did after you formed the Cutie Mark Crusaders for a long while there? You were in the boutique more than you were at your own home and room as Ah recall.”

Allure blinked. “…Right.”

“So she watched you a lot more than Cookie. Ah’ve got nothin’ against Cookie, mind you, but she basically let Rarity mother you.” Applejack adjusted her hat. “Ah’m just sayin’, that might have somethin’ to do with it.”

“…Meaning?”

Allure nodded slowly. “That does make some sense… But it’s also really weird. She’s not old enough, we fought a lot, and…” she blinked. “None of that matters, does it?”

“Not in my book,” Applejack said.
“…Huh. Well, that’s given me something to think about.” Allure shook her head. “Wait, we’ve gotten off track. I’ve accepted Renee, it’s the rest of you I’m on about. You all look at me like a kid. I have an eleven-year-old daughter for crying out loud!”

“Maybe you’re seeing something that isn’t there,” Jotaro said.

“You aren’t guilty,” Allure pointed out. “Probably because you work for Renee more than you’re her friend. I bet it doesn’t waft off of her onto you like it does the others.”

“Ah don’t hang with Renee as much as Ah used to either,” Applejack pointed out. “Sure, we get together from time to time, still good friends, but Ah don’t see her rubbin’ off on me. What Ah see is a child at heart refusing to accept who she is. A little rascal to the end.”

Allure twitched. “Little rascal? Really?”

“There’s nothin’ wrong with keepin’ some of the traits usually reserved for the young,” Applejack said. “Innocence… wonder… curiosity… energy… some of us would like those things back, y’know.”

Allure cocked her head. “But...”

“No buts about it. You’re clearly not innocent because of what you’ve been through, but you trot around as if it didn’t affect you. You’re almost always smiling, laughing, and having fun. Those eyes of yours see the world anew every day. It’s an amazing thing you’ve managed to keep for yourself, Allure. You shouldn’t resent it.”

Allure looked down. “…But I don’t want to be seen as a kid.”

“Being young at heart and being a kid are not the same things and Ah think you know that. You just don’t wanna think about it.”

Allure allowed a small smile to come to her face. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. Guess this is what I get for hanging around with myself all the time. Tends to produce an echo chamber.”

“Ah bet.”

“…Question, though. Applejack, why are you talking like you’re an old mare. You’re almost sixty, not one-twenty!”

Jotaro put a hand to his head. “Yare yare daze…”

Allure facepalmed. “Yes, Jotaro, we get it, you’re almost sixty and you’re old, but you’re not going to age anymore so shhh.”

Jotaro blinked, trying to process whether she’d insulted his age in there somewhere or not.

Applejack cleared her throat to answer Allure’s question. “Ah dunno for sure Allure. Ah guess Ah’m the opposite of you, in many ways. While the other five – six if you count Nova – were developin’ and learnin’ how to be themselves, Ah already knew what Ah was for the most part. Honest, steadfast, and hardworkin’. Maybe it was because Ah’d been through hardship and come out of it better than Ah would have been otherwise, Ah dunno. But it was always clear Ah was the mature one of the group, even though Renee and Flutters were older. Ah got married first, had kids first, ran the farm most of my life…” She pursed her lips. “Ah guess my life was just geared to make me an early old mare.”
“You sure fit the part,” Allure said. “And that’s a good thing.”

“Ah’m smart enough to realize getting the wisdom of old age early is a blessin’,” Applejack chuckled. “It’d be best if you learned the opposite.”

“…Thanks. I’ll try.” She stretched her legs. “So, what do we do now that we’ve relaxed?”

“Keep relaxing,” Jotaro said.

Allure blinked. “…But we’ve been here for hours already doing that.”

“Exactly,” Applejack added.

“…Great.”

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The local Rarity’s name was Affix. Her version of Rarity for You was built into the ground floor of an iron-dusted building, making it stand out from the more traditional ‘precious metals’ that coated most of the others. The interior of the store decided to forego the general metallic feel of Farpoint City altogether, instead opting for bright colors punctuated by completely black backgrounds.

The store hung clothing of all colors and sizes for both equine and human customers – and there was an ‘other’ section in the back, with a sign that said ‘designs transferable to other body types by request.’ The designs themselves looked precisely like something a Rarity would design if they felt a sudden need to pop out with bright expressions of color.

“…I like it,” Renee said, looking at a dress composed of bright blues in varying hues. “Bit more dependant on intensity, but I could see myself wearing a lot of these dresses.”

“Sweet!” Pinkie said, bouncing up and down. “Then let’s buy some! Let the shopping begin!”

They heard a sigh of relief from behind them. Turning, they saw Affix herself standing behind them. “You know, I’m always decidedly worried when another Rarity comes strolling in here – always judge, judge, judge with us isn’t it?” Her appearance was a bit jarring, to say the least. One of her ears had the top half bitten off, and there was a scar across her face that started from her chipped horn and went all the way down her neck, vanishing under the collar of her suit. The suit itself was of a black and white design generally seen on stallions rather than mares, but she pulled it off excellently. She clearly designed it to fit her form and to accentuate her cutie mark, since the diamond made out of four smaller diamonds was perfectly visible through a hole in the suit of a matching shape.

“That seems to be the case much of the time, unfortunately,” Renee said, shaking Affix’s hoof. “You look like you have a story.”

“I most certainly do, and we can definitely get into it, but first, dresses. Oh I love every last one of these colorful little flowers but they must go! I have the perfect one for you, Renee. Don’t you worry!”

“I have no doubt the perfection will be astoun- Great Heavens what is that?”

Affix had pulled a curtain off a pony-shaped mannequin. “Behold. I call it Five.”

“Why would you call something so fantastic such a mundane name!”? Renee blurted, placing her hoof on the vibrant green sleeves; the material unknown to Renee, soft and comfortable enough to send shivers up her spine.
“The art of the dress is within the dress itself, is it not? Who cares about names? You can name your own dress anything you wish! I own five Bertas.”

Renee stared at her.

“Joking. I’m not *that* eccentric. They all have different names. Benny, Berta, Bart, Beatrice, and Baroque.”

Renee glanced at Pinkie.

The party pony shrugged. “Don’t look at me, I’m not always a joke radar.”

Affix chuckled. “Ah, it’s always nice to see bewildered looks on my own, undamaged face. I am sorry if it’s a bit much, but I’m not going to change myself.”

Renee smiled. “Your pride in yourself is something to be admired.”

“Or to be ran out of town by an angry mob for daring to wear something risqué out in public,” Affix said, tapping her cracked horn. “Scar wasn’t from that. The scar’s from my world’s version of Discord. Less jokes, a lot more sadism and cruelty. Gave all six of us a permanent affliction of some sort or other so we would never forget him.”

Renee winced. “I’m so sorry.”

“I got it easy – after it healed it was just a visual disability, one that could be worked around. Rainbow’s wings stopped working, AJ got muscle atrophy, poor Twi lost her horn entirely… Merodi technology has fixed most of that now, thanks in no small part to your efforts in bringing us together, but it still happened.”

“Life is brutal, huh?” Pinkie asked.

“I am tempted to say you wouldn’t know, but you most likely do.” Affix smiled awkwardly. “Anyway, this is just my best fit for you. Feel free to look around the store and find anything else you want.”

Renee teleported *Five* onto her body, allowing the green dress with the natural vine-like highlights fit her body. Even the tail-hole in the back was perfect, something a lot of dresses didn’t bother with. So rarely found it be made comfortable. “You’ve certainly outdone yourself!”

“It comes with a headdress,” Affix said, pointing at the leafy laces wrapped around the mannequin’s ears.

“Right,” Renee said, absent-mindedly teleporting it on to her, spending all her focus on the smooth feel of the fabric. “Simply divine…”

“I FOUND A DRESS FOR ME!” Pinkie said, pulling a red one off a nearby rack. The fabric had hundreds of little reflective plates all over, making the dress sparkle in every angle of light, almost like glitter.

Affix raised an eyebrow. “Huh… I don’t remember making that one.”

Pinkie put it on. It was surprisingly form-fitting to her body type, including the tail hole. Only one of her front hooves had a sleeve, the other completely bare. She somehow had also procured red teardrop earrings.
Renee raised an eyebrow. “Looks a little… I dunno. It’s pretty, bu-”

Pinkie pulled out her hammer and stood on her hind hooves only, smirking cheekily at Renee. The dress suddenly fit perfectly and looked amazing – though had it been a human dress, it would have been rather lacking since half of her chest was exposed. The dress was almost design-free, save for a curious eye icon sewn in that appeared just below Pinkie’s neck. She bounced around a bit, showing that despite the bottom part of the dress being form-fitting, she was still able to move with amazing agility. “I knew I’d find something!”

Affix put a hoof to her chin. “I really think I would remember designing something like that…”

“Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth – you’re getting paid for it!” Pinkie produced a small treasure chest filled with miniature doubloons.

“…Unconventional payment is accepted at this Rarity for You,” Affix said with a chuckle. “The dress of the crimson eye is yours.”

“Yay!”

Renee chuckled. “I’ll purchase this dress at checkout, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.”

Pinkie grinned. “Woo! Hey Renee, isn’t it nice to not have any interpersonal drama going on?”

“Why? …Is everyone else having interpersonal drama today?”

“Yep!” Pinkie grinned. “Corona’s feeling left out, Vriska’s struggling with odd-man-outness, Allure feels like a kid, and we haven’t even got to Nova’s thing yet!”

“Ah. Think they can handle it on their own?”

“Oh yeah, easy.”

“Then I’m going to return to my shopping.”

“Okie dokie loki!”

~~~

“Flutterfree, look at these earrings!” Eve said, pointing at a glistening pair of laria earrings shaped like hourglasses. She used her magic to affix them to Flutterfere’s ears. “Oh, they look great on you!”

“You think so?”

“Yeah, not like these silly little spring eyes that are just cute, but kinda silly.”

Flutterfree blushed. “Yeah, sorry about that. I couldn’t resist.”

“Oh I don’t mind!”

Corona let out a pained grunt. “Would you two just kiss already!?”

The two of them stared at her with blank expressions.

“I mean, come on, you two have been focused on nothing but each other the entire trip. Get it over
with already! Chop chop!”

The pegasus and the alicorn were quiet for a moment. Then they both burst into laughter.

Corona stared blankly at the jovial pair of pegasus and alicorn, the latter with two annoying bouncy spring eyeballs on a hood. It was very distracting.

She tried to parse the reaction. “…Was this some kind of joke?”

“Wha – oh no no no no no!” Eve said, coughing to stop herself from laughing further. “Don’t go storming off, okay? This clearly isn’t what you think it is o–”

Flutterfree snorted, her hooves over her mouth.

“F-Flutterfree, stop, we need to stop making Corona confused!”

“I know… I know!” She put her wings over her eyes. “But it just came out of nowhere.”

“Nowhere!?” Corona blurted. “This didn’t come out of nowhere! I’ve been sitting here like a third wheel while you two talk back and forth about how cute the other one is or how great the other one looks, enjoying each other more than anything else here.”

Flutterfree and Eve weren’t laughing anymore.

“S-sorry,” Corona said, sitting down on a nearby chair. “I let my anger grab a hold of me again. It’s okay if you don’t want to talk magical theory, Eve. I was just… expecting something else.”

Eve walked up to her. “I… I’m sorry. We were ignoring you, weren’t we? …Not actively, but pushing you to the side.”

Flutterfree nodded slowly. “I didn’t know we were making you feel left out. I’m sorry for not paying enough attention to see that.”

“It’s fine,” Corona said. “I just… I’m just seeing things where there isn’t anything. …Right?”

“Oh, Celestia no, we’re not together,” Eve said. “That’s not my thing – last time I had romantic feelings toward anything I was a human teenager and I felt like the dumbest thing in existence afterward. And it’s definitely not Flutterfree’s thing.”

Flutterfree nodded. “It wouldn’t be… proper for me.”

“Ooooh, right,” Corona said, understanding. “But then… what’s going on?”

Eve and Flutterfree looked to each other and nodded. Eve spoke up. “You can touch us to find out. It’s not the simplest of relationships.”

“…You sure?” Corona asked.

“Very sure,” Flutterfree said. “Feel free to go beyond the surface memories.”

Corona dissipated the gloves around her hands and touched both their minds at once.

The emotions came first, as always – concern, minor amusement, nerves, and some very potent form of the love of friendship.

Then she arrived in a memory – a memory where Flutterfree almost killed Eve in her sleep, and then
Eve did kill Flutterfree with a cruel trick. The Hunger Games. Corona had heard about this, but it hadn’t been something Eve and Flutterfree advertised. She hadn’t felt the need to pry.

The memory shifted to Rainbow Dash lecturing the two of them on what Loyalty meant. And how, now that they had both betrayed each other seriously, everything was going to change. They needed to not try to keep things the way they were and accept what they were going to become – a different sort of friendship.

The next set of memories were all blurred together. The two of them specifically going out of their way to meet up with each other – go to the park, go to lunch, sit around in the Canterlot Library, go for walks in the woods…

They may have taken Rainbow Dash’s advice a bit too far, down to the point where Eve would wait outside Flutterfree’s house after she was done working on some days so they could catch up on what happened.

Corona pulled back, blinking. “…A relationship based in… guilt?”

“Yeah we’re not too sure if it’s the healthiest thing either,” Flutterfree said, rubbing the back of her head sheepishly. “It just seems to… work.”

“It’s turned us into really close friends,” Eve said. “…Frankly, I needed it, since I was drifting away from everyone. I became the Charter-Princess and just let my work take over, and… Well, I talked to Luna and Spike regularly outside of political engagements or crises - that was mostly it. She brought me back.” Eve pulled Flutterfree close. “And it was her idea to go on this vacation.”

Flutterfree nodded.

Corona stared at them. “…Huh. I’m not sure what it is between you two, but I’m fine with it.”

“I think the closest we could find was Vriska and Starbeat,” Eve said. “It’s clearly not the same thing – we have no psychological or biological drive to seek each other out – it just kinda happened.”

“We know everything about each other at this point,” Flutterfree said.

“Yeah… Everything,” Eve said, a warm smile coming to her face. “…It can be a very big load off your chest, having somepony who knows.”

Corona only vaguely knew what Eve was implying – and she didn’t push. She did feel like testing their bond though. “Right, here’s a test. Flutterfree, besides you, who is Eve’s favorite friend?”

“Pinkie,” Flutterfree answered without hesitation.

“Flutterfree’s is Discord, to the surprise of absolutely no one,” Eve offered.

Flutterfree smirked. “Oh look at you and your playful implications.”

Corona put a hand to her chin, smirking. “Oh, I think I’m going to enjoy this. Eve, embarrassing fact about Flutterfree. Go.”

A few things flashed through Eve’s mind that made her laugh – but were clearly a bit too personal to tell Corona. “You know how she’s partial to meat now, right? Due to the whole quasi-vampire thing?”

“Yeah…?”
“Whenever she cooks she’ll absent-mindedly lick the juices off the meat.”

“I’m sorry!” Flutterfree wailed. “I didn’t know!”

“You served me drool-covered steak the first time I was over. I think I have the right to never let you live it down.”

“Yeah, well, uh… You sing in the shower! Really loudly! And badly! And try to make dubstep noises with your mouth!”

“I use my horn too!”

“I can hear the mouth noises from veeeeeeery far away.”

“Man you two are lucky you aren’t humans,” Corona pointed out.

“Hm?” Flutterfree said, looking up.

“Knowing about shower habits implies things.”

Flutterfree rammed her face into a shelf, breaking a vase.

“You break it you buy i-” Citrine began before she realized who she was talking to. “Oh! Uh… On the house, Evening!”

“I’ll pay for it,” Flutterfree said, groaning. “Just let me wallow in cross-cultural embarrassment for a minute.”

Eve patted her on the back gently, right between her wings. Probably the perfect spot, Corona noted.

“You okay with this?” Eve said, turning to Corona. “Because I’m sure we ca-”

“I’m fine. You two are fine.” Corona smiled warmly. “Don’t worry about me. Though I would appreciate it if we could have a discussion on the magical science of these rocks eventually.”

“Well why not now, while Flutterfree is busy wallowing in cross-cultural embarrassment?”

Flutterfree’s ears twitched, but Corona saw a smile on her face she was trying to hide.

“There will never be a better time.”

~~~

“And this is her at her graduation! Look at that little hat!” Rainbow said, holding the image in front of Nova and Vriska for them to see.

“Delightful,” Vriska deadpanned, cutting down another flower.

“Oh, and here she is showing her love for danci-”

“PRISM IS IN COLLEGE FOR BUCK’S SAKE RAINBOW DASH!” Nova shouted. “Could you COOL IT!?”

Vriska and Rainbow stared at Nova, blinking. Vriska decided a smirk was the best reaction. “And I thought I had unresolved baggage I needed to deal with.”

“No, that’s not what this is about, you shut up for one minute. Rainbow, Prism is in college. She’s a
grown mare – or at least old enough to not be heralded as the best thing in Equis!”

Rainbow facehooved. “Nova…”

“Didn’t your parents do this exact same thing to you? Didn’t you make a big deal out of it?”

“Uh, yeah, but then I realized lots of support was nice and totally shouldn’t be hated. Also, I don’t do what they do. I never do this when Prism is around. I don’t think she has any idea I brag about how amazing she is – which she is, by the way, totally amazing – because she’s her own mare.”

“I… Eh…”

“Let’s see… Hrm, I think I did a pretty good job parenting her, considering I was completely alone and working as a Wonderbolt.” She pulled a photo out of the album showing a white mare – Prism – with several friends standing outside of Eve’s School of Friendship. “I let her grow, and she showed me you can be an athlete and an egghead. If you were paying attention, you’d know that. Look at those glasses over here, surrounded by books and technical weirdness I can’t even hope to understand. Then look at this one. She beat me in this race, fair and square.”

Rainbow butted noses with Nova. “Maybe she deserves a little praise, huh?”

“It does get annoying, Rainbow,” Vriska pointed out.

Rainbow twitched. “All right, all right, I should stop, I know I should, but this is how I let out the inherent mothering instincts! I don’t wanna turn into my mom! Nova, you’ve met my mom. How crazy is she?”

Nova sighed. “Supportive to the point at which she’d break a wing for you to get a little extra adrenaline rush.”

Vriska blinked. “I want to meet this woman. She sounds hardcore.”

Nova tilted a hoof from side to side. “She doesn’t throw herself off waterfalls in barrels like Eve’s mom does.”

“Why have I never met any of your parents? …Aside from Renee’s.”

“We never meet yours,” Rainbow said.

“Trolls don’t have parents,” Nova pointed out.

“Oh. That’s lame.”

Vriska nodded. “The closest thing I had to a parent was a genocidal spider monster that made me kill other trolls to feed her. I believe I speak for all of Alternia when I say ‘good fucking riddance’.”

Rainbow blinked. “…I know nothing about trolls.”

“Moving back to Nova,” Vriska said, leaning down to be eye level with Nova. “Something’s up with you.”

“Uh… Would you believe me if I said I was just annoyed at Rainbow Dash?”

“Nope. Come on, I spilled my beans to you, you spill your beans to me.”

“Now I’m hungry,” Rainbow muttered.
Nova gulped. “Well… I… You see…”

“It’s about Stardust, isn’t it?” Rainbow asked.

Nova sighed. “…Yeah. I don’t… I don’t understand her. I love her more than anything, but I don’t get her. I hear you talk about Prism with such intimate knowledge, I see Allure with Minna all the time, I see Applejack’s family, see Jotaro’s own powerful connection, and I… I don’t understand my daughter.” There were tears in her eyes.

“Hey, hey. Not every parent is going to understand their kid,” Rainbow said. “I still don’t know how Prism became half-egghead. All I know is that it’s awesome.”

“But at least you’re able to connect with her. To be there with her. I…” she shook her head. “I’m the bad cop in the house.”

“…Huh?” Rainbow said, cocking her head.

“Sunburst doesn’t have the will or the guts to go up against her for very long – she’s able to get what she wants from him. More sweets, later bedtimes, etcetera. And since we don’t want her becoming spoiled, I have to be the one to play hardball with her all the time. No more TV, time for bed, no you can’t whine to get that toy, I won’t let you get out of your punishment young lady, blah, blah, blah…” Nova sighed. “I can tell she’s scared of me when I come home. It’s like she dreads the hour. Sunburst told me she watches the clock with a haunted expression…”

Rainbow put a wing around her. “Hey, hey, look at me.”

“I’m just trying to be a good mother and she’s scared of me because of it!” She wiped her hooves. “It’s not every night, but it’s enough of the nights. No matter how much I try to make up for it. And then Sunburst and I argue about it… And that doesn’t help…”

Rainbow slapped her. “Nova. Get a hold of yourself. Just because Stardust is afraid of you doesn’t mean you are a bad mother.”

“W-what?”

“What is she, seven?”

Nova nodded slowly.

“She’s just a kid, Nova. Prism was afraid of me at that age too. I don’t know if you’ve noticed but I can be a bit… angry, at times.”

Nova let out a short snort.

“I eventually had to dial it back – but she needed that strong hoof in her life. If she only gets what Sunburst wants to give her, well…” Rainbow bit her lip. “…I didn’t get much in the way of a talking-to when growing up, at all. I was allowed to be as arrogant and selfish as I wanted, I could do no wrong in my parents’ eyes. That was a bigger mistake on their part than being overly supportive.” She looked to the sky. “Deep down, I do know that I’m not the best thing ever, or really that awesome. But it’s really hard to fight that now. I wish they’d been a little more strict, y’know?”

Nova blinked. “…Rainbow, when did you get so mature?”

“I had a kid of my own. A kid without a dad. It does things to your head.” She hit herself in the skull and laughed. “Takes a lot to get through my hard head. Vriska back there can relate.”
“Hey wait a minute I’m not getting dragged into this…”

“Hey, you just told us you were raised by a genocidal spider. How long has it taken you to fully move past that?”

“She’s over nine-hundred years old,” Nova offered.

“There we go,” Rainbow said with a laugh.

Vriska shrugged. “Eh, fair point.”

Rainbow turned to Nova. “The thing is… I don’t know if you’re doing perfect. Sounds like that household of yours has some problems.”

“Understatement of the century,” Nova muttered.

“Just… As long as you let your daughter know you love her, I think she’ll return the favor, even if she is afraid of you. Got that?”

“Yeah…” Nova said, wiping her eyes. “I think… I think I want to go home.”

“I’m sure Eve can get you a small ship and get you back to your family,” Rainbow said with a smile. “Hey Vriska, turn around, we’re heading back.”

Vriska laughed. “Looking for adventure, we found drama instead. Pinkie will get a laugh out of this.” She took a step back – and hit something metallic. She looked down. “What in – Holy…”

She was standing on top of a circular piece of white metal embedded in the ground. On top of it, obscured by a layer of dust and leaves, was a faded imprint of a green spirograph.

She leaned down and touched it with her hands. “This… is an exile command station.”

“…What?” Rainbow asked.

Vriska turned to Nova. “This planet was part of SBURB. One that suffered an apocalypse… and failed to get repopulated.”

Nova wiped her tears away. “…Can we use this to find your home?”

Vriska shook her head. “The Horrorterrors destroyed all higher functions of SBURB after the English incident. There may be a connection to the past in there, but not any other sessions… though there might be a clue.” She turned to Nova. “…Can you stay just a little longer? This… this might be important.”

Nova nodded. “…They can wait a couple hours. You’re right, this is important.”

Vriska smiled. “Thanks.”

~~~

Allure finally got bored. “That’s it, I’m accepting my role as the ‘immature’ one and stopping this relaxing!” She leaped out of her chair and walked out onto the balcony, taking in the beautiful sight of Farpoint City. She felt the wind in her mane – and she smiled.

She felt really good for some reason. Had she accepted a new role in life? She didn’t really think so. She didn’t think anything had really changed.
But she felt good anyway.

She closed her eyes and just let her curls fly around her face.

When she opened her eyes, she noticed Jotaro was standing next to her. “What brings you out here?”

“You,” Jotaro said.

“Huh? What about me?”

Jotaro shrugged. “Applejack too.” He leaned back, hands still in his pockets. “Just sitting there wondering about age, maturity, and the way we see others.”

“…Wondering what about them?”

Jotaro was quiet for a moment. “I ’m matured’ quickly, more than Applejack. My growth happened when I was seventeen. People died in the fight against Dio. But even before that, I was far too serious for a teenager.” He folded his hands together. “Too guarded…”

“And…?”

“Some people are born more mature than others,” Jotaro said. “I just… was. The events of my life do not describe why I am the way I am. If anything, the events in my life toned my stoic nature and maturity down, letting me know it wasn’t everything.”

Allure blinked. “I think I heard one of the Sweeties talking about this once… Yeah, Savior. The angel? Part of Rev’s church? Got into a philosophical discussion with someone I can’t remember about ‘nature vs nurture’. It stopped when Thrackerzod hit both of them on the head and said ‘it’s neither one nor the other you stubborn mules’.” Allure smirked. “That’s probably the answer.”

Jotaro nodded slowly, saying nothing.

“You don’t need to be ashamed of being the quiet guy who guards his emotions,” Allure said. “Just like I don’t need to be ashamed of what I am.”

Jotaro let himself smile. “…I think I’ll keep searching for my own middle ground.”

Allure smiled. “You do that.”

Jotaro looked about ready to respond – but then Star Platinum saw something. Jotaro whirled around and looked at the sky.

Allure followed his gaze. “What? What it is?”

“Something’s coming down,” Jotaro said. “It’s big.”

Allure gulped.

~~~

Pinkie had only bought the one dress. Renee had bought seven dresses, two sets of shoes, a ‘darling’ suit, and a set of long socks. Because they looked adorable and definitely not because Daniel liked her in socks. Definitely not.

Renee had returned to just wearing her standard hat – few of the things she had bought would do for standard wear – but Pinkie had kept the red dress on. They were strolling leisurely through the streets
back to Platinum Suites.

“I dare say, that Affix was quite the mare,” Renee said as they passed by a library. “Truly unique.”

“Yeah, she was cool,” Pinkie said. “Oh, by the way, we’re about to get interrupted.”

Renee sighed. “I suppose a vacation where something didn’t go wrong was too much to ask for then?”

“Probably.” Pinkie admitted. In a flash of purple, the two of them were teleported inside the library, specifically the basement where the super secret books were kept. The many bags Renee was holding in her magic were torn from her grip, vanishing in another purple flash.

“Wh- hey! Thief! Give me my things back right now or I swear to the Tower I will run you through!”

“Calm down,” I said, coming out of the shadows. “I just teleported them to a pocket dimension. You’ll get them back after all this is over.”

Renee blinked. “…Twilence, right?”

“Yes!” Pinkie confirmed for me. “The uber-duper-seer of all things!”

“Understander,” I corrected. “I don’t see everything. For instance I had no idea you were going to threaten to run me through. That was a bit more colorful than I was expecting. By the way, Pinkie, how do you like the dress?”

Pinkie did a curtsy on her hind legs. “It’ll do great!”

Renee glanced from the Eye of Rhyme on my chest to the eye design on Pinkie’s dress. “You designed that?”

I nodded. “I did. I’ve been around awhile, I know what works sometimes. I needed to grab Pinkie’s attention so she’d take you by the library, and I figured I’d give her a gift while I was at it.”

“I did have to pay for it in doubloons,” Pinkie pointed out.

“You have a functionally infinite supply,” I retorted.

Pinkie giggled. “Yep!”

Renee adjusted her hat. “I’d still like to know what’s going on. Twilence, why have you dragged us to this dark room? What’s going on?”

“We have to be here,” I said. “Actually, we just have to be together in a place they won’t find us. I chose the library because I wanted to read books while I was waiting. Ever tried Finnegans Wake? No universe based on that work ever makes sense. Consistently, anyway.”

Renee raised an eyebrow. “Twilence, you’re being a Twilight and glossing over the important detail. I don’t know who they are. What is about to happen?”

I nodded. “Right, right, sorry.” I shook my mane. “You see… Farpoint is about to be invaded.”

Renee blinked. “Pinkie…”

“Hey, I didn’t know! I thought today was just a drama chapter!”
“She’s telling the truth,” I said. “Pinkie’s usually more short-term in what she can see, though I know she gets a few longer-term inklings. The problem is there hasn’t really been any foreshadowing to the invasion.”

“There was the Green Sun though.”

“That’s something else,” I said. “Happens a bit later, according to what I know.” I took out a notebook and started scribbling down a few things. “Regardless, we’re going to need to be together.”

“What about our friends?!” Renee blurted. “We have to warn them!”

There was an explosion outside that shook the very walls around us.

I smiled awkwardly. “They know now. They need to go on their own paths. We have to take a slightly different one, which is why I’m here.”

“What path is that?” Renee asked.

“FIND OUT NEXT TIME ON SONGS OF THE SPHERES!” Pinkie cheered.

“Pinkie, this is serious!” Renee wailed.

“Also, there’s another scene,” I added.

Pinkie facehooved. “D’oh! My bad!”

~~~

O’Neill was not on a cruise to explore the multiverse.

He was here for a very specific reason – a mysterious source had suggested that Farpoint was going to be invaded. Giorno had said the information appeared legitimate, so O’Neill had taken it upon himself to take care of it. He hadn’t gone out into the field in a while, which meant he’d need an excuse to take the Enterprise and park it in orbit around Farpoint. Everyone thought he was just there on the middle of a cruise – but he and his crew knew why they were here.

To defend against a possible attack.

O’Neill was not surprised in the slightest when the red lights started blaring. “Send out the standard hail, but start charging all weapons. What do we have?”

“Unidentified ship, running through database…” a science officer said.

The tactical officer gave a report. “No response to hails. We detect weapons activating on their ship. …Ships now, more have appeared from other universes.”

O’Neill furrowed his brow. “Send out that report to Merodi Universalis. We might need backup. … Multiversal communications are jammed, aren’t they?”

“That is correct.”

“Just our luck…” O’Neill gripped the armrests on his chair. “This is going to be a fun fight…”

“No ID on the ships, but we’ve found their insignia in our database!” the science officer reported. “Symbol identified as belonging to the Combine, a rumored high Class-2 Civilization that operates within the E-Sphere. Known for conquering low-level worlds with shows of excessive force.”
O’Neill smirked. “They won’t be expecting a multiversal flagship then. Good. Let’s surprise them. Fire *everything*.”

**GM’s Note:**

Hey guys! I’m running another Sombra’s Clipshow! If you want to know more about submitting snips, you can find that [HERE](https://www.fimfiction.net/blog/848586/sombras-clipshow-2-electric-boogaloo-submissions-open#comment/5023295).
The Combine Assault

The Combine’s lead ship was a mixture of biological and mechanical components, the latter clearly designed to work with the shape of the former. In looks, it appeared closest to a whale slightly larger than the Enterprise itself, with orange-green skin and six flippers alit with blue jets of propulsion. Instead of eyes, there were gigantic turrets, and on the underside of the ship there were hundreds of smaller guns of unknown designs. In the whale’s ‘mouth’ and the center of its belly were two rings of energy that flashed red in quick succession.

Clearly those rings were the big weapons.

The Enterprise decided not to let the invading force shoot first. There was no ‘they might come in peace’ this time.

The laser weapons reached the Combine ship first, revealing them to have no shields whatsoever. The lasers burnt the fleshy tissue of the ship, unable to fully ignite it due to the vacuum of space. The ship shuddered from the attack, flexing its flippers to an upright position. The small weapons on its underside began to fire, sending small bolts of energy that bounced harmlessly off the Enterprise’s shields.

The drone weapons hit the Combine ship next, each singular golden bullet cutting through the skin of the ship several times before exploding. The wave of magical orbs completed the job, freezing, burning, and poisoning the fleshy ship until it fell into three pieces, leaking both organic and artificial fluids.

The missiles and splitter-nukes that were launched unloaded their destruction on the remaining, smaller ships, filling the night with spheres of pure nuclear energy. Any ships that weren’t outright destroyed were given tremendous doses of radiation – more than enough to kill them later given their organic stature.

“Remaining ships undergoing high energy fluctuations! The red rings are increasing in intensity!”

“Devote the power in the Rod to defense,” O’Neill ordered.

“They’re not aiming at us! They’re aiming at Farpoint City!”

“Same order, but spread the shield out to protect them rather than us. Send out another volley of drones while you’re at it, it should take care of the rest of the smaller ones.”

The Spectral Rod alit with the power of harmony, more than willing to devote all its energy to keep a city from being glassed. An umbrella shaped shield of holy light appeared behind the Enterprise.

Dark red beams of pulsating energy shot to the holy shield, preparing to bring death to the surface. They hit the harmonic shield with such impressive force that space itself shook – but the shield held, dissipating the red beams. The Enterprise’s drones sliced through the remaining ships, destroying most, disabling the rest.

“Yeah!” the tactical officer yelled. “Got them!”

O’Neill shook his head. “Are communications still down?”
“…Yes?”

“Then we haven’t won.” O’Neill folded his hands. “That was the kind of force you send to subjugate a single city with overwhelming force. They know we’re here now. They’ll be back if they think we’re still worth it. Scramble the fighters!”

The Enterprise opened its four bay doors and let out nearly a hundred smaller fighters, all equipped with basic and magical weapons. They took up positions mostly flanking the Enterprise, but a few went far in front, far in back, or orbiting the planet.


The Spectral Rod began seeding space with loose biological contaminant spells – including the infamous “Bio” spell they had recently learned from Empress Twilight’s Void. That degraded through almost all life, making it seem as though the target were being eaten alive by disease. It was horrifying, overkill, and definitely what they needed.

The reality of the universe shifted, letting a single Combine ship in. Though ‘ship’ would be somewhat of an understatement – the behemoth of a fleshy jellyfish was easily large enough to be a space station that held ships like the Enterprise.

The Bio spells activated, tearing through a few of the Combine station’s loose tentacles, but a psychic blue pulse dissipated the spells before it could spread. The jellyfish fired exactly one needle for every fighter in line of sight – every single needle hit its target, destroying every last one of them.

O’Neill curled his fist in rage. “Mauve, we might need something extra spicy! Fire all the splitter nukes we have on board!”

The splitter nukes fired, four tremendous missiles heading right toward the Combine station. It fired blue lasers at them – but on-board teleportation spells let the missiles avoid the attack. The missiles spread into hundreds of smaller nuclear bombs, ready to disintegrate the station.

The station’s psychic energy flashed again – grabbing hold of the nukes and turning them around.

“REMOTE DETONATION!” O’Neill shouted. The nukes exploded before they even began to turn back, charring one of the station’s sides.

To O’Neill’s horror, he saw the station start to regenerate before his eyes. “Mauve, now would be a good time!”

While the Enterprise switched to drone weapons – which were resistant to psychic powers but nowhere near damaging enough for a target this large – the Spectral Rod flashed a brilliant golden color. Six separate beams of light spiraled out from the rod’s front ends, reaching for the Combine station with all the harmonious energy it could muster. The station shot out with a psychic burst that the spell easily broke through.

It surrounded the center of the Combine station like a claw, burning it wherever it touched. The biotechnical jellyfish shuddered in pain.

Then a smaller Combine ship appeared right above the Enterprise and shot the red-ring weapon down at point blank range.

The Enterprise’s shields held, but were falling fast since the laser wasn’t turning off.
O’Neill pressed a button on his private console. “ABANDON SHIP! ALL HANDS, ABANDON SHIP!”

Not a single escape pod launched. The Enterprise’s Harmony Core took the brunt of the force.

The scream could be heard by every sapient entity in the universe.

**DEATH.**

In its death throes, the energy vaporized the ship firing upon them – but nothing happened to the Combine station.

The Enterprise exploded in a rainbow of color, sending large chunks of itself flying into deep space, some alit with magical fire.

The ancient pride of the Merodi Universalis fleet was no more.

The Combine station slowly moved to tend its wounds. It also released a dozen or so smaller ships from its bay, ready to take the planet now that the unexpected threat was taken care of.

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“Corona, I am not answering that question!” Eve said with a laugh.

“Oh go on, tell her, I want to hear the words come out of your mouth!” Flutterfree giggled.

Corona put her hands on her hips. “Maybe for the sake of Citrine’s sanity we better no-”

**DEATH.**

Corona fell to the ground, suffering more than the intense headache Eve and Flutterfree received – she felt the rush of emotions flood her mind, that of a psychic entity realizing it didn’t want to die, but it now no longer had a choice. Its entire existence flashing before what would qualify as its eyes…

The emotion was so strong it forced her to lose consciousness.

“…Ponyfeathers,” Eve muttered, glancing out the window. They could see the remnants of the explosion in the sky. “That was the Enterprise…”

Flutterfree gasped. “O’Neill…”

Eve pulled her close. “I know. But we’re about to have a problem of our own.” She noticed the tops of several skyscrapers in Farpoint City unfolding, revealing the standard Merodi Universalis lancers. Defence devices created with the intent of ‘lancing’ things out of orbit with a focused magical laser, equipped with computer systems accurate enough to hit an elephant… on the moon.

They were also really good at focusing on the same target at once, coordinating to tear it apart in the most effective manner.

Eve couldn’t see what they were shooting at with their green lasers. She closed her eyes and tapped into the strong, dense magical field of Farpoint, extending her senses far above the atmosphere. She spied the tremendous station and numerous smaller ships. The station wasn’t being targeted – likely because it was too far away to be precise, and too big to just shoot at hoping it exploded. The lancers were focusing their beams on one small ship at a time, disintegrating one after fifteen seconds of fire.

That was too slow.
Blue seeker missiles fell from the sky, taking out every single lancer in one fell swoop, collapsing the buildings they were mounted on. Eve, Flutterfree, and Corona were lucky to not be in a defense building.

Red lights began to blare all across the city. “WE ARE UNDER ATTACK BY AN UNKNOWN FOE. MAKE YOUR WAY TO THE BUNKERS BENEATH THE CITY, IF POSSIBLE. OTHERWISE REMAIN IN YOUR HOMES.”

“Or fight,” Corona muttered, coming to. “These invaders don’t know we’re here. They won’t have any idea what hit them. Raging Sights, prepare a cascade.”

Raging Sights beeped in affirmation. A complex series of magical circles began to appear around Corona’s limbs, including one directly under her that shook the entire shop, breaking more than a few pieces of merchandise. “You’ll be reimbursed by the government,” Corona said.

“If you save my life that’s payment enough!” Citrine blurted. “Just take them out!”

The ships that were in Farpoint City launched into the sky. Those that didn’t flee to space – more than half, Eve noticed with disappointment – met the threat from the sky.

They were rewarded with instantaneous destruction via plasma weapons. The few ships that did have military-strength shields only managed to fire off a couple of volleys before falling to the enemy.

The larger ones crashed back down to the ground, killing thousands in an instant.

Flutterfree winced. “Corona, do something.”

“On it,” Corona announced, launching into the air. She unleashed the energy stored up in her magical rings, firing at the sky – locking onto the still-distant ships. Flutterfree could only see them as dots in the blue above her. When Corona’s cascade spell hit the dot in the sky, it was surrounded by a series of magical circles and exploded. The explosion created two more magical circles around two other dots, destroying them as well.

Corona grinned. “That’ll teach them!”

A blue flash lit up the sky – dispensing Corona’s cascade spell after it made its way through three ships.

“…Crud. That probably won’t work again.”

Flutterfree activated Lolo, looking into the sky for anything hidden – but nothing came to her. All she got was a better picture of what they looked like. Biomechanical whales.

Whales that were opening their mouths, unleashing hundreds of smaller ships that spread out across Farpoint City.

Corona opted to just shoot at them directly with beams of light magic empowered by Raging Sights. Brute force appeared to keep working, but she failed to destroy them completely – they just crashed, chances high that whatever was inside them would still be ready to do whatever it needed to.

Eve joined in the fray, sending her own volleys at the ships – opting for darker magics than Corona, just to mix it up. Deep purple and bright yellow beams shot from the pair, taking out as many as they could.
One of the fleshy, but strangely cubical ships crashed within their sight range on a street that was abandoned – people had gotten the idea quickly that being outside was a bad idea. The back of the ship popped open, revealing a squad of troops. Human – or humanoid, at least – soldiers filed out, all with full black body armor, masks, and kinetic projectile weapons in their hands. They were likely to be of no concern since a simple telekinetic field could render most bullets pointless.

What was behind them was more concerning. A spider-thing fused with softly glowing alien technologies crawled out of the dropship.

It fired a special weapon. Blue rings that looked almost rubbery flew across the divide to Corona, Eve, and Flutterfree.

Corona and Eve raised shields. The blue rings passed right through the magical shields, cancelling them. Corona and Flutterfree were completely entangled in the magic-inhibiting projectiles.

Eve was only spared because of Seraphim’s automatic protection.

“I’m going down!” She shouted to them. “I’ll be back to help once they’re gone!” She waited for a confirmation nod from her two friends before teleporting right above the spider-thing.

“I reject your reality and substitute my own,” Eve declared, activating Seraphim’s ability. The entire squad and the wrecked dropship froze in an instant. She cast a tremor spell to shatter everything.

The attackers must have labeled her as a primary target, because more of the blue rings shot at her. She shifted Seraphim’s universe to one where magic was a fundamental force built into reality – making the blue rings disappear as soon as they entered the altered reality bubble.

While that was happening, she tapped into the magic of the laria stones that were so abundant at the moment. She surrounded her body in them; tapping into whatever magic they had, as well as the magical field of the planet. She fired off the stones as bullets in several directions, taking out multiple entities shooting her with the blue substance.

It was at this point they started firing missiles at her. At first simply physical, but then followed with plasma lances designed to level buildings.

But she wouldn’t go down. “I AM CHARTER-OVERHEAD EVENING SPARKLE OF MERODI UNIVERSALIS! WHOEVER YOU ARE, THIS IS AN ACT OF WAR, DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?!”

It was at this point they sent something down she couldn’t deal with.

A gray slug-like creature appeared in front of her, surrounded in a bubble of its own psychic energy. She attempted to alter reality to make it spontaneously combust.

It had been expecting this. It jumped to another reality, not held to the dimensional lock its people had placed on the world. It then appeared right behind her and placed a device on her back.

She didn’t have time to change reality again – her body was completely covered in the blue substance. She would have fallen to the ground had the slug not caught her in its telekinetic power.

It levitated Corona, Flutterfree, and any other individuals who had been coated in the blue substance to it. Then it vanished, taking all of them with it.

Dropships began to land, deploying ground troops to ransack Farpoint City.
Vriska popped the top off the exile command station, revealing a rung ladder that led down into the earth through a metal tube.

DEATH.

Vriska passed out and fell down the hole, falling all the way to the bottom of the tube.

“Vriska!” Nova shouted, unable to light her horn due to the temporary scrambling of her mind.

Rainbow flew down the tube – somehow managing not to touch any of the walls in her downward journey – and stopped just short of Vriska. She placed a hoof on the rung ladder and a wing on Vriska, prepared to get her out of there.

“Ugh... Offame…” Vriska muttered.

“You’re not okay,” Rainbow said, dragging her back up the ladder.

“I’m fine!” Vriska blurted, standing upright. She rubbed the blue bloodied spot on her head. “I’ve been through worse.”

“What was that?! Vriska blurted.

“Psychic trap, I bet,” Vriska muttered. “For all I know I’m only alive because I’m a powerful psychic, and that was supposed to kill any non-exile who entered here.”

“…Am I safe in here?” Rainbow asked.

“You’re alive aren’t you?” Vriska muttered. “Nova, come on down.”

Nova checked her hoof-screen to convince herself there was nothing harmful down there before crawling down. She quickly realized the pipe was not designed to hold more than one person.

“Yeah, Vriska? We need somewhere to go.”

“Give me a minute,” Vriska said, placing her hand on a screen next to the only door. She pressed a few buttons, rotating the underground bunker to one of three possible rooms. The door slid open, revealing a rectangular room that was by no means roomy, but definitely large enough to hold the three of them.

They filed in and looked around. It was a mostly bare, gray room with two purple lockers on either side. Both lockers were open and completely empty. There was a pile of crushed pink cans in one corner of the room and a well-preserved carapace of a white creature.

In the center of the front wall was a large, house shaped conglomeration of monitors. The roof of the house appeared to be simply decorative, but the five monitors beneath that seemed to be real, with the central one displaying a command prompt.

Vriska kicked the base of the screens and a keyboard popped out. She began typing furiously, racking her brain for all the commands she could remember. She cycled through all five screens – but every last one only displayed static. “Five player session,” she muttered. “Wonder how it went… This world clearly didn’t get rebuilt…” She tried other commands, cycling through data about the base, finding not much of anything. It was nearly at full power though, which was nice.

She put her hands on her hips. “Nothing.”
“Care to explain what this is?” Nova asked.

“Players of SBURB are usually given guardians – called exiles – to help them through the game. There’s a lot of transdimensional time shenanigans involved, but these screens allow direct contact between the exiles and the players. All the feeds are dead, so all five players are either god-tier, or dead.” She blinked. “Or when the Horrorterrors shut everything down these screens stopped working, I don’t know.”

“Anything that might be in the other rooms?”

“There’s a transportalizer in another room – think teleporter that works across time – and… Well if this is anything like the Mayor’s base, it’ll connect to the universe that created this one. I’m positive that won’t keep working without Sburb’s background ‘code’ active.” She shrugged. “Might as well check it out though.”

The three of them moved to switch to another room – but they heard a clang up above them.

Someone was coming down the ladder.

Vriska readied her dice and Nova lit her horn. Rainbow realized she had no weapon and made a soft disgruntled noise.

A man in full combat armor with a gun slung around his back came into their view.

Vriska recognized him for what he was. Shoot, she ordered Nova. The unicorn was more than capable of resisting the troll’s psychic impulses – it just so happened that she agreed with the command. She shot him in the back with a concussive blast, knocking him out.

“Right, that’s a Combine soldier,” Vriska muttered. “We need to get out of here faster than fast. Either this planet is being invaded or they want this base. Both options need us somewhere that isn’t here.” She poked her head into the ladder cylinder, retracting it quickly when the soldiers on the ground above them started shooting down.

“We can take them, those are just regular bullets,” Nova pointed out.

“The Combine are a Class 2 society notorious for using ‘minimal effort’ to subjugate their worlds,” Vriska said. “Give them reason to drop a planet buster on you and it won’t be long before they do.”

“Ah. So…”

“Make a shield to keep them from shooting down here and I’ll move us to the transportalizer. Happy?”

“Yes,” Nova said, doing just that. The three of them piled back into the narrow ladder space while Nova’s shield blocked the bullets. Vriska tapped on the screen, shifting the base around to access another room.

The Combine soldiers fired a plasma rifle before the three of them got through - though they were terrible shots, likely due to Vriska’s presence.

Nova forced the door closed behind them and welded it.

“All right, you know what’s up, how does this thing work?” Rainbow Dash asked, gesturing at the complicated set of controls and the platform that was presumably the transportalizer pad.
“We can to go any place or time on this planet. I could take us back to the time the Sburb session was still running if we wanted, but I have a sneaking suspicion that would either turn us to paradox slime or just destroy the universe with an out-of-context paradox.”

“Let’s just not go back in time, hmm?” Nova suggested.

“Future then!” Rainbow Dash said.

“Wouldn’t want to go far, in case we are being invaded,” Nova said. She glanced at her hoof-screen. “You think we would have been told if it was though…”

“Do you have a signal?”

“No, but we are underground.”

“Shouldn’t matter on that screen of yours,” Vriska said, moving to the console. “Right, so, we want to know what they’re doing here, but also want to escape…” They started to hear banging on the door. Nova reinforced it with magic. “Slightly in the future will throw them.”

“I can move us to the future, remember?!” Nova blurted. “Just use the normal teleporting aspect, okay!?”

“Fine,” Vriska said, setting the time to ‘present’ and dialing in a location a small distance away from the exile command station. She added a few meters in the ‘up’ direction just to be sure they didn’t appear in the ground. Or inside a flower-tree. “Prepare for fall.”

“We can all fly,” Rainbow deadpanned.

“Then prepare to be shot at. Nova, this is the button. Press it when we’re all on the platform.” She ran to aforementioned platform with Nova and Rainbow. Nova pressed the button – and they landed on the petals of a giant tulip.

“Soft landing,” Rainbow said. “Nice choice.”

“I wonder how much luck I wasted on that,” Vriska muttered.

A small flying thing made out of flesh and mechanical parts flew at them, firing bullets.

“Jump!” Nova declared, jumping them five minutes into the future.

Nothing flew to attack them.

Vriska smirked. “And now we’re in business.”

~~~

The thing Allure had seen was the splitter nuke from the Enterprise failing to actually kill the Combine station.

They didn’t really manage to piece together what was happening until it happened.

DEATH.

Applejack stumbled to the balcony. “What in tarnation is going on?”

“Invasion…” Allure said, eyes wide.
“We need to evacuate everyone!” Jotaro shouted, charging back to the elevator. Allure and Applejack followed without question.

“Dimensional travel is blocked,” Allure reported, fiddling with her dimensional device. “We can’t evacuate to anywhere…”

Applejack sighed. “Right… This city probably has defenses, we should use those. Ask Anna.”

Allure facehooved. “Eve has her personal number!”

“Try the hotel’s number.”

Allure dialed, but didn’t get anyone. “Nothing.”

The elevator opened to the lobby. They were not the first here – a few other concerned customers had run to the reception desk to ask what in the multiverse was going on. Anna was not behind the desk, instead the receptionist was a poor earth pony mare who had no idea how to handle people.

“Clear a path!” Jotaro shouted. Everyone listened to him, letting him walk right to the receptionist. “Do you know where Anna is?”

The receptionist nodded. “H-her personal quarters.”

“You need to call her. Farpoint is being invaded.”

“I-invaded?”

It was at this point the emergency message broadcast across the entire city. “WE ARE UNDER ATTACK BY AN UNKNOWN FOE. MAKE YOUR WAY TO THE BUNKERS BENEATH THE CITY, IF POSSIBLE. OTHERWISE REMAIN IN YOUR HOMES.”

The receptionist fumbled with her phone and called Anna. “Boss, did you hear that? …Mister Kujo – Jotaro Kujo – wants you up here.”

Anna’s halo teleported her into the lobby, her expression stern. “What is it?”

“Do you have a way to get everyone in the hotel to the bunkers?”

Anna nodded slowly. “All elevator shafts and stairwells go beneath the ground.” She jumped over the reception desk and lightly pushed the receptionist out of the way. “This is Anesthesia speaking. If you did not hear, we are being invaded by an unknown foe. Everyone, make your way to the stairwells and go all the way down to the bunkers. Move as fast as you can. Do not take the elevators – they are likely to fail. We will be working on opening the elevator shafts up so you may climb down the ladders within.” She pulled her hoof back, face stern.

Jotaro cracked his knuckles. “How many elevator shafts are there?”

“All elevator shafts and stairwells go beneath the ground.” She jumped over the reception desk and lightly pushed the receptionist out of the way. “This is Anesthesia speaking. If you did not hear, we are being invaded by an unknown foe. Everyone, make your way to the stairwells and go all the way down to the bunkers. Move as fast as you can. Do not take the elevators – they are likely to fail. We will be working on opening the elevator shafts up so you may climb down the ladders within.” She pulled her hoof back, face stern.

Jotaro cracked his knuckles. “How many elevator shafts are there?”

“Four. I’m recalling all of them to the bottom of their shafts, but that will take a minute. After that I’ll open all elevator doors so people can begin climbing down.”

“Some people will slip and fall!” Allure blurted. “How a-”

A blue bolt of energy blasted through a nearby wall, went through a man’s head, and passed through the other wall. Everyone in the lobby screamed and began to panic.

“STAR PLATINUM: THE WORLD!” Jotaro moved quickly, making everyone in the room trip,
forcing them all to stop their panicked running before it could really begin. Time resumed. “GET A
HOLD OF YOURSELVES! PANIC WILL NOT HELP YOU! MAKE YOUR WAY TO THE
STAIRS AND ELEVATOR SHAFTS. GO!”

It did the trick – the running was no longer panicked and in every direction, it was organized.

Applejack took a moment to trot up to the one woman who wasn’t running – she was holding the
dead man. “Ah’m sorry, but you need to move.”

“He… he was all I had…”

“And he would have wanted you to get out of this alive,” Applejack assured, gently making her drop
him. She helped the woman up and took her to one of the stairwells, where she began walking
down. Applejack didn’t tell her to hurry up – she didn’t want her to trip.

The moment she was out of sight, Applejack’s breathing quickened. “Ah… Hoo… That was
gruesome…”

Allure nodded. “Sorry. You haven’t been out here that much…”

All the elevator doors opened, revealing empty elevator shafts with rung ladders along the sides. It
would be faster, but more dangerous.

“We have a problem,” Anna said. “The second to top floor’s communications are broken. I don’t
think anyone heard anything we’ve said or done.”

“I’ll get them,” Jotaro said. He jumped into the elevator shaft and stopped time, climbing up the
ladder with Star Platinum, moving like a monkey. Time was of the essence, he didn’t care if he
banged himself up a bit getting up the shaft.

As he neared the top, he started having to dodge people. When time resumed, they started screaming
at him.

“What the hell is wrong with you!?”

“Top floor. Communications broken,” Jotaro would explain, and people would stop yelling at him
for blocking their climb.

It took five time stops to get to the top even with all his carefully calculated motions to maximize
speed. He jumped out the door to the second highest floor – having to bash it down since it didn’t
receive the memo to open. “EVERYONE UP!” He yelled, punching through all twenty doors on the
level. “WE ARE EVACUATING THE BUILDING! GET OUT OF BED AND MAKE YOUR
WAY TO AN ELEVATOR SHAFT OR STAIRWELL! GET TO THE BASEMENTS!”

A woman who had nothing but a bedsheet tied around her body glared at him. “You want us to go
all the way to the bottom?! Are you mental?”

“DO YOU WANT TO DIE!?” he shouted. Then he noticed in one of the rooms an elderly man
caring for a little girl. Neither of them was going to have the strength to make it down on their own.

He offered his hands to them. “I can carry you both.”

The elderly man smiled. “Thank you, stranger…”

“This might be uncomfortable,” he said, slinging them both over his giant shoulders. “And it’s going
to be a rough ride.” He looked the girl in the eyes. “Hold on tight.”

He jumped into the elevator shaft. A few people from the floor had started climbing down.

 Whoever was still in the floor didn’t make it. The top of Platinum Suites was sheared clean off by a stray explosive, killing all who hadn’t been moving fast enough.

Jotaro let himself, the girl, and the old man fall through the elevator shaft, hitting terminal velocity.

The girl started screaming. The old man simply held on, having faith Jotaro had a plan.

He did. Twenty floors before the bottom, he rammed Star Platinum’s fists into a bare wall, creating two large gashes along the side of the shaft. The wall, being purely physical, was unable to harm Star Platinum, allowing them to slowly skid to a stop before they hit rock bottom.

Jotaro let out a relieved breath as he moved over to a rung ladder and climbed down the last three floors, many people moving down with him. He made it to the ground and set his passengers down.

“You’re safe.” Sweat dripped down his face and one of his arms throbbed, but he still stood tall.

“Thank you mister!” the girl said, visibly shaken despite her immense gratitude.

Jotaro nodded, walking out of the elevator shaft into the underground bunker. It was a somewhat large space, a bit like a warehouse, connected to dozens of other deep, reinforced locations. A single skyscraper needed a lot of space to accommodate everyone within, especially one with a major hotel in it.

“Hey! Jotaro!” Allure called, waving Jotaro over to the other side of the room. Jotaro saw Anna flash in and out of existence next to her, bringing seven or so people with her. Jotaro walked over and sat down, taking a moment’s rest.

“Yare yare daze…”

“Don’t Ah know it,” Applejack said, looking at all the scared and injured people around them. “But Anna’s doing a great job organizin’ everyone and savin’ them. Ah’m surprised she’s keepin’ her cool.”

“Haloes have to,” Allure said. “If they show weakness, at any point, they actually become weaker. If enough people lose faith in her she won’t be able to teleport. So every halo learns to guard their true emotions and thoughts very carefully.”

Anna appeared again – but this time one of her wings was broken. She took a deep breath anyway, ready to teleport back up.

But then the earth rumbled. They heard as, far above them, something tremendous collapsed. The elevator shaft filled with rubble, cutting off anyone else’s escape.

Anna teleported one more time – and came back with no one. “…Platinum Suites, and everything below it, is gone,” she announced.

Several people broke into tears or screams.

She turned to Jotaro, Applejack, and Allure, lowering her voice. “There are enemy troops moving on the surface. Humanoid, but with varied biomechanical assistance.”

Jotaro furrowed his brow. “Find a high-strength communication device. Someone with a holographic
screen, we need to be able to see what’s going on out there.”

“Seal these bunkers off,” Applejack said. “We can’t let any of them in here.”

“But what abo-” Allure began.

“Allure, we can’t let a single one of their soldiers in here. Seal everythin’ off.”

Anna nodded. “I’ll get on that.” She trotted away, making her way to the control console. Above them, a war raged, the thundering noises driving their way into their skulls.

~~~

DEATH.

Renee grabbed her head. “W-what was that!?”

I closed my book. “That was the Enterprise exploding.”

“The Enterprise was destroyed?”

Pinkie nodded slowly. “Yeah… They fought hard, but they couldn’t win.”

“We have to go hel…” she paused. “…We can’t win, can we?”

“Depends on your definition of winning,” I said, keeping my voice as level as I could. “No, we cannot beat them in a direct conflict. They vastly outnumber us and can bring down tremendous force if they believe it is necessary.”

“Who are they?”

“They are the Combine. A race that specializes in enslaving alien races and using biomechanical augmentation to add them to its army. Their general goal can be stated simply: ‘to combine everything in the multiverse into one’.” I sighed. “They’re one of the higher Class 2 civilizations, and they’re smart. They rarely attack any multiversal society at all to avoid significant retaliation, instead focusing on growing their power through the conquest of low-level worlds.”

“But we’re not a low-level world!”

“Farpoint sure looks like it from the outside,” I pointed out. “A single city, should be easy enough to take. Worth the difficulty in overcoming their advanced technology as well because of the unique resource within this world’s crust.”

Pinkie nodded. “Yeah, the shiny yellow rock is shiny. They’re like crows.”

I took out my notebook again. “They’ll extract a surrender within minutes, I expect…”

“Oh, here it comes!” Pinkie said, covering her ears.

“Wh-”

“WE ARE UNDER ATTACK BY AN UNKNOWN FOE. MAKE YOUR WAY TO THE BUNKERS BENEATH THE CITY, IF POSSIBLE. OTHERWISE REMAIN IN YOUR HOMES.”

Renee winced. “I suppose we’re already in our bunker, aren’t we?”
“Book fort bunker,” I said with a nod. “We need to stay here. They won’t find us.”

“How can you be sure of that?”

I held up my notebook and raised an eyebrow. “Because I said that’s what would happen.”

“…Oh.”

She started to hear the explosions rippling in the world above us. She knew, inherently, that people were dying up there by the thousand. “Are you sure we can’t do anything?”

“Direct resistance is doomed to fail,” I said. “Corona, Eve, and Flutterfree tried it as one. They’ve been captured.”

Renee put a hoof to her mouth. “Oh…”

“They will be captured in the next few minutes,” Pinkie corrected me.

I grunted. “Effectively the flow of the story has them already captured. It’s not like we could do anything about it even if we tried.”

“True…”

Renee looked at the two of them. “…What is happening to all our friends?”

I closed my eyes. “Corona, Eve, and Flutterfree are being captured… Vriska, Nova, and Rainbow are engaging the Combine over a Sburb remnant… Jotaro, Allure, and Applejack have evacuated Platinum Suites and are currently hunkered down.”

Renee let out a sigh of relief. “They’re okay…”

I nodded. “And they will be.”

“Here’s my next question. What are we going to do?”

I look at my notebook. “Soon, the Combine will send a signal directly to the mayor’s office, demanding unconditional surrender. The mayor will agree to this. The Combine soldiers will switch tactics from pure destruction to containment and control, taking a select few off to be added to the Combine’s biomechanical army.”

Renee put a hoof to her mouth. “My Stars…”

“When this begins, there will be an opening. Ships will be moving from the surface to the Combine station in large droves. We will take a ship over and fly it to the station.” I ruffled my feathers. “That is where we are needed.”

“From there we should be able to disable the dimensional lock, right?” Renee asked. “Get out a plea for help?”

“It’s possible,” I admitted. “But there will be other things up there. Namely, those who have been captured. They won’t be taken out of a universe for a while yet.”

Pinkie looked at me. “There’s something else up there we’re going to find, isn’t there? Something very important.”

I nodded. “That is true. But right now it doesn’t help us to know what that is. We do need to be up
there. The rest can handle things down here. Is that okay, Renee?”

Renee bristled. “Of course not, but I’m not going to go against the plan. Because, apparently, fighting directly is just a bad idea. …Sorry, sorry, I know you’re right. I just don’t like sitting here.”

I put a hoof on her shoulder. “I understand. But that’s what we need to do for… not much longer.”

Pinkie pulled out a radio from her mane and set it in the middle of the three of us. It crackled to life. “This is mayor Auril of Farpoint City, overseer of the whole of Farpoint Colony. I extend absolute, unconditional surrender to the Combine. I order all troops and citizens to stand down, and am disabling any automated defense measures we have enabled. I have been promised that our attackers will not fire upon us so long as we cooperate. …I am sorry.” The feed cut to static.

I stood up and scribbled a note in my notebook. “Get ready. It’ll start soon.”

Renee took a breath and adjusted her hat. She decided to take the moment to fix the frazzled hairs on her mane.

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The Enterprise’s bridge tumbled through space, mostly in one piece. It was no fluke of luck – the Enterprise had been designed to split apart when destroyed, keeping all living quarters and the bridge as far from the reactors as possible, allowing them to survive when the rest of the ship suffered critical failure.

The system was far from perfect. The bridge had air and simple life support, but only backup power reserves. Several of the consoles had exploded, though no deaths had occurred because of this. The deaths that did occur were from being tossed around the bridge as it tumbled through space, having lost all artificial gravity and inertial dampeners.

O’Neill was alive, gripping his seat so hard his knuckles were white. The bridge was still tumbling end over end almost exactly as fast as it had been since the destruction of the Enterprise, ensuring the force pulling everything to the walls would not stop.

“R-report!” O’Neill barked. “Anyone!”

A young unicorn science officer looked up, lighting her horn. Her coat was a soft blue and her mane a pristine white. “I… I’ve got four living signatures, General. You, me, Ensign Travis, and…” She bit her lip. “Make that three life signs, sir.”

“Ensign Travis!” O’Neill barked. “Status?”

The burly man coughed from his flattened position on the far wall. “Having a nice rest, sir.”

“Clandestine, can you get any report on any of those consoles?”

Clandestine pulled herself to the console with her magic, allowing O’Neill to see her broken, bloodied leg. “All but the most basic sensors are down. I can get a visual…” She dragged herself over to the visual scope that worked purely with lenses and not cameras. They needed to be prepared – sometimes there were universes when cameras didn’t work, or cameras showed illusions. “I see the station… and I see smoke coming up from Farpoint. Farpoint City is not a crater.”

“Good. How good are you with that horn?”

“Decent.”
“Think maybe you can slow down our spin here?”

“. . . I’ll try.” Clandestine lit her horn and surrounded the bridge in her magical aura. Over the course of the next minute, she managed to slow the rotation enough that they weren’t being plastered against the walls anymore.

“Man, now I have to get up,” Travis muttered, floating into the center of the room. “First rest in weeks.”

O’Neill let out a soft chuckle. “If only we could defeat the enemy while lying on our backs. That would be great.”

“Sir, orders?” Clandestine asked, floating over to them. She had worked up a profuse sweat.

“We just sit,” O’Neill said. “I’m not risking sending out a distress tracker. Travis, you have engineering experience. Try to make those life support filters last as long as we need.”

Travis nodded. “There is only three of us, we won’t be using that much of the air.” He moved to a hatch and popped it open. “Condensed oxygen tanks are still mostly full. Won’t run out of air for weeks.”

“What about food?”

“And there’s a problem,” Travis said. “Not much food up here. I can get us water from the air moisturizers, even if they’re not actively working the water’s still in there. But food…” He looked up. “…Actually, there’s plenty of food here, if it comes to that.”

Clandestine put a hoof over her mouth. “Oh, Faust . . .”

“Last resort only,” O’Neill said.

“The fact that it’s a resort at all…” Clandestine said, gulping.

“You may want to consider learning how to summon food from the aether,” O’Neill observed.

Clandestine nodded slowly. “I’ll try. I don’t expect results though.”

Something latched onto the bridge, sending a loud thunk reverberating through the interior. The three of them looked up to see a hole being cut through the roof.

Travis pulled out his gun. “I really don’t think that’s gonna be good, guys.”

O’Neill readied his pulse rifle while Clandestine prepared a beam spell. It was hard to aim in zero gravity, but they all knew exactly where it was coming from.

The circular cut was pushed into the bridge, letting bright white light into the dark interior. Nobody came through, but a message was broadcasted.

“This is the Combine speaking. Stand down and you will not be harmed.”

O’Neill sighed. “For the love of . . . Fine. Stand down men!” He tossed his gun behind him. Clandestine lowered her horn’s glow and Travis dropped his weapon.

A human in white armor poked his head through the hole. “Come on up,” he said, his voice being transmitted through his helmet by a low quality radio. They came up, entering a small, brightly lit interior with a big screen showing the stars outside. There were five other soldiers there, all armed
with heavy weaponry.

The first soldier shot Clandestine’s horn, coating it in a blue substance. “To prevent any clever tricks,” he said. “Back to the station,” he ordered the pilot, subsequently turning to O’Neill. “I would take you to the holding cell but we’re not going to be flying long enough for me to actually lock you up. So enjoy your relative freedom.”

O’Neill nodded slowly.

“Who the hell are you people?!” Travis blurted.

“Just one small arm of the Combine doing our job,” the man explained, shrugging.

“Bastards,” Travis muttered. “You can’t just walk in a-”

The soldier shot him between the eyes, blowing his brains out. Clandestine winced. O’Neill kept his features straight.

“Low value target,” the soldier said, lowering his weapon. “Low rank, no biological curiosities.”

“You trying to comfort us?” O’Neill asked. “Because I’ve got to say, that’s one of the worst attempts I’ve ever seen.”

“No. Just answering a stupid question before you ask it.”

They arrived at the station in that moment. The hatch below them opened again, becoming much larger than the one-person circle that had been there prior. The soldier shoved the two of them out, dropping them unceremoniously on the cold metallic ground.

O’Neill and Clandestine didn’t have time to fully pick themselves off the ground before they were shoved forward. “MOVE!” A new soldier yelled.

O’Neill moved forward, glancing behind him to see the ship they had arrived on leaving. He saw Travis’ body dumped out a second later, falling to a level far below.

O’Neill looked around, trying to figure out where he could use Crimson Sushi effectively – but there were far too many cameras and soldiers for him to account for. He was just going to have to go along for now.

They were marched through a large expansive room indicative of the Combine itself. The majority of the station’s interior was made of dark metal lit with overly bright floodlights. Occasionally, O’Neill would spot a part of the wall or ceiling that was partially biological, indicative of the station’s true nature.

They were placed in a long line headed for ‘processing’. O’Neill noticed many ships docking to drop off a shipment of prisoners, and then leaving right after.

*What did they need so many prisoners for?*

As they neared the front of the line, O’Neill saw something that looked like it was in *charge*. A floating pale slug-thing with two mechanical arms and a cybernetic implant on what O’Neill hoped was its front.

“HEY!” O’Neill shouted, pointing at the slug thing. “YOU THERE!”

The soldier behind him hit O’Neill with the back of his rifle. “Do not disturb the Advisor!”
O’Neill ignored the pain in his head, continuing to glare at the Advisor. “I am Overhead Jack O’Neill of the Class 3 Society Merodi Universalis. Does that mean anything to you!?”

“I sai-”

*Hold your anger, soldier,* the Advisor said, speaking telepathically to them. *I am performing an inquiry. It appears that he is someone worthwhile.*

The soldier lowered his gun, silent.

“So, what’s that little Internet search of yours telling you?”

*Merodi Universalis, Mid-Class 3. Overhead of the entire Merodi military. This certainly explains the unexpected resistance from your ship. Why are you here?*

“This is our colony, in case you didn’t pick up on that.”

*Unfortunate. Soldier, transfer the Overhead and his aide to the high-value section.*

“Right away,” the soldier said. “Come along,” he ordered, notably not acting aggressive toward O’Neill or Clandestine anymore. O’Neill and Clandestine were led to an elevator, taken up several levels, leaving the hundreds of other prisoners behind.

O’Neill frowned. “He didn’t seem all that bothered about me. Just interested.”

“You should be honored,” the soldier told him. “The Advisors rarely speak to anyone.”

“They need to work on their people skills, then.”

The soldier moved to punch him, but restrained himself. Apparently high-value prisoners didn’t get to be roughed up. That was good for now, at least.

~~~

Flutterfree came to inside a clear cube ten meters across on every side. Inside the cube were others like herself – prisoners. She saw Eve and Corona tied up with so many blue inhibitor rings they could barely move. She herself only had them on her wings, uncomfortably pinning the appendages to her body. There were others as well – a medium-sized dragon, a cyborg, a woman in wizarding robes…

“Welcome to the high-value prisoner box,” Corona said, forcing a smile. “Those deemed ‘interesting’ or ‘powerful’ or, in the case of that politician over there, ‘possibly important’.”

Eve grunted. “And those of us who have a lot of magic are wrapped up in so much blue stuff we can’t even move.”

“Ah,” Flutterfree said, instinctively trying to spread her wings, disappointed when she remembered she couldn’t. “So, what are we going to do?”

“Dunno,” Corona said, summoning Bacon Pancakes. “They’ve blocked all our powers.”

Flutterfree got the memo – don’t mention the Stands. “What about your firebending?”

“Do I look like I’m able to move my body? Or that this clear polymer whatever can be burnt through?”
“Right, sorry,” Flutterfree said. She tossed her mane back. “Are you two uncomfortable? Can I do anything?”

“Might want to look outside the box,” Eve said. “We’re good enough.”

Flutterfree got the message. She did start looking outside the box – but she also summoned Lolo, careful not to activate it enough to make it visible. She wormed the invisible vine of Lolo through an air hole in the box’s ceiling, extending her field of view.

The box of prisoners was suspended in the middle of a larger, cubical room with metal walls. On the floor beneath them they could see lots of people working on consoles – mostly humans, but a few other races as well. There as a large tub in the center of the room filled with the blue substance, many Gem gemstones submerged in it, presumably for study.

“Oh. …I hope they don’t experiment on us.”

“They might,” Corona said. “Or at least look at us very, very closely until they decide what to do with us. We really don’t know.”

“Do we know who they are?” Flutterfree asked, continuing to spread out Lolo’s tendrils out of the cubic room and further into the station, searching.

Eve shook her head. “No idea. I don’t remember hearing about anything like th-”

O’Neill and Clandestine were thrown into the prisoner box through a flap that didn’t exist any longer than was needed. “Ugh… I’m really starting to think the Combine need to get their prisoner treatment straight.”

“O’Neill!” Flutterfree said, beaming. “You’re all right!”

“Yeah, yeah…”

“Welcome to the high-value prisoner box,” Corona said with a wink.

O’Neill glanced at Flutterfree, noticing Lolo’s vines spread out and extending beyond the box. “All our powers have been taken,” Flutterfree said.

O’Neill summoned Crimson Sushi with a grin. “Well doesn’t that absolutely suck?”

Corona summoned Bacon Pancakes again, and Eve did the same with Seraphim.

Clandestine sensed something was going on. She looked to O’Neill confused. Before she could ask a question, she noticed his insignia switch sides on his shirt for a split second. Crimson Sushi had switched just her perceptions, announcing its presence.

“So, how’s about escaping?” O’Neill suggested, smirking.

“Even if we could, which we can’t, where would we go?” Eve said, looking at Flutterfree closely. “We don’t have any idea where the docking bays or escape pods even are.”

Flutterfree gulped, suddenly understanding just how much their hopes all depended on Lolo’s ability to find a way out.

“So we just wait then,” Clandestine asserted.

things to keep from waiting.”

“I get the point!” Flutterfree hissed. “You. Don’t. Like. Waiting. Well suck it up and wait anyway, mmkay? These things take time.”

O’Neill chuckled. He then told them what he had learned on his way over here about the Combine, his encounter with the Advisor, and the whole battle with the Enterprise.

It was a way to pass the time, at least.

~~~

Vriska, Nova, and Rainbow watched as the Combine military unearthed the exile command station. It was white with a mostly cylindrical appearance, but there were three spikes in the bottom, along with a round protrusion out of what could be considered the ‘back.’

The Combine had already started taking it apart, finding the control console, transportalizer, and the third room – which had exactly what Vriska thought it would have, a console that would be able to connect to the universe that created this one. If everything were working properly.

…Even if they only got a hold of the transportalizer, they’d be able to do some serious damage without even realizing what they were doing.

*Right, so, Nova,* Vriska said telepathically. *You can make a really, really big boom if you need to, right?*

*You know I can.*

*So blow this thing the fuck up.*

*They’ll detect me charging up that big an explosion!*

*Then use some time shenanigans! Make it blow up in the future or something!*

*Fine,* Nova said, narrowing her eyes. *T-minus five minutes until explosion.*

“Are you guys having a conversation?” Rainbow asked, whispering.

*Yes, now quiet,* Vriska ordered. Rainbow, not having had much experience with Vriska’s mental powers, did not have any choice in the matter.

Less than a minute later, Nova sent a message back. *Done, everything here should be blown to kingdom come in four minutes.*

*Mind taking us a little bit past that?*

*You know if we jump far enough into the future and miss a key event, I’m not going back.*

*Just do it.*

The three of them jumped into the future. They now stood in a crater where the Combine soldiers and exile command station had been.

Vriska whistled. “Nice.”

“What just happened?” Rainbow asked.
“I blew it up,” Nova said. “Please tell me those Combine soldiers deserved that.”

“Any Combine soldier is either loyal to a fault, or brainwashed to be so,” Vriska said. “The kind of brainwashing is one of two particularly nasty varieties too. Physical rewiring of the brain, or the good old-fashioned propaganda approach.”

“You and the Doctor faced them, I take it?”

Vriska nodded. “And me and Twilence. They’ve been around a long time. Cause a lot of problems for low level societies.”

“They’re trying to take over the planet, aren’t they?” Rainbow asked.

“Most likely,” Vriska said.

“So, how are they usually beaten?” Nova asked.

“Brute force is never an option,” Vriska said. “They’re number four on the Class 2 strength list, and they’re careful not to make any bigger fish angry by only attacking lower-level worlds. Makes them progress slowly, but they’re definitely powerful now. The way you defeat them is by convincing them it’s too much trouble to hold onto a single world. The old-fashioned internal rebellion method.”

Nova blinked. “How long does that usually take?”

“Years,” Vriska said. “Longer, I expect, since this planet has a really valuable yellow rock in its crust.”

Rainbow glared. “Well screw that, who cares how long it takes? This is our planet and we’re going to fight for it! We’re going back to Farpoint City and we’re going to form a resistance! Or a rebellion! Or some other force that starts with R!”

Vriska smirked. “The pegasus is right. Overwhelming odds have never stopped us before, have they? We’ve got luck on our side, time magic, and a really spunky pegasus. I’d like to see them try to stop us.”

Nova chuckled. “Just go charging in?”

“For all we know there’s already a resistance. Or the battle’s still going on.” Vriska pointed at Nova. “Teleport us back into the city!”

The reverse long-range teleport wasn’t anywhere near as difficult since Nova had recently been where they wanted to go.

Farpoint City had clearly lost the battle. Roughly a fourth of the skyscrapers had fallen to ground level, with copious amounts of dust filling the air. Dead bodies were everywhere, watched by biomechanical lifeforms of all kinds. There were no sounds of heavy resistance or gunfire – just the occasional scream. People were being led, heads down, into ships and taken into the sky.

The Combine had taken the city easily, despite all the efforts.

Vriska curled her hand into a fist. “See this fist, Combine bastards? You’re going to get it in the face. Again.”

~~~

“We’ve surrendered,” Anna told Jotaro, Applejack, and Allure. “Everyone’s being called to stand
down and serve the Combine.” She handed them a little pocket radio. “…I don’t know what to tell them.”

Applejack looked at her. “You don’t.”

“I… don’t?”

“We can. …Do you know of another bunker we can use nearby? Better suited for defense?”

Anna bit her lip. “…There’s one deeper down, through the sewers. Bit harder to get to.”

“Good. Jotaro, get everyone’s attention. Ah’ve got a thing or two to say. Allure, record this on your phone.”

Jotaro summoned Star Platinum and clapped loud enough to send a gust of air through the section of the bunker they were in. “LISTEN UP!”

Everyone turned to him, expectant. He stepped down – and Applejack stepped up. “Howdy, y’all. Ah’m Applejack, Equis Vitis. Some of you might know me, most don’t, and that frankly doesn’t matter right now. What does matter is that all of Farpoint Colony has surrendered to our attackers – the Combine. We have been asked to cooperate with our conquerors completely. If you want to do that, Ah won’t stop you, and there’s no shame in doin’ so.

“But Ah’m not gonna be doin’ that. Ah’m not gonna sit here and let a bunch of high and mighty brutes come down, attack my people, and get away with it. They’ve destroyed our city and taken our loved ones from us. They’ve cut us off from the rest of Merodi Universalis, keepin’ us from the rest of our loved ones. Who knows what they’re gonna do with us now? Ah’m sure it can’t be good.

“So here’s what Ah’m gonna do. Ah’m gonna go with my friends to another bunker, somewhere better suited for fightin’. We’re gonna gather everyone we can, and we’re gonna make these Combine regret that they’ve ever come here. Ah’m gonna fight them until they let me go home to my family.

“Y’all don’t have to come. You can stay here. Ah want everyone who’s comin’ to stay in this part of the bunker – anyone else can go to the other sections. We’ll be leavin’ in half an hour.” She bowed her head and turned around.

There was no clapping – just a lot of shuffling of feet and movement as people shuffled out of this section of the bunker.

“Send that around,” Applejack told Allure. “The rest of them need to hear that.”

Allure nodded, moving to spread it around the bunker, putting it on the portable TVs and radios they had, careful not to let the signal leave the bunker.

Applejack looked back at the people who had remained. Maybe one in every ten had decided to stay and fight – the rest had all gone. Probably less.

“…That’s not enough,” Anna told Applejack.

“It’s not all of ‘em. Give it time,” Applejack said.

Allure came back a couple of minutes later. “I’ve spread it around.” She glanced around the somewhat empty section of bunker. “Ooooh…”
“Patience,” Applejack said. “Just a little patience…”

A few people began to trickle in. At first, there were so few in the room that Applejack saw a few who came in turn around and leave, thinking there was no hope with such a small group.

But people kept trickling in. Moving together, determined expressions on their faces.

It wasn’t much – nowhere near as much as Applejack had been hoping – but there was enough. Over two hundred people were there in the end. Ponies, humans, Gems… Even some other races from the other worlds of Merodi Universalis.

“That’s enough,” Applejack told herself. “Enough to fight from the shadows.” She turned to Anna. “Take us out.”

Anna nodded. “Follow me everybody! We’re moving!” She led them out of the bunker section into the next – which was crowded with people.

“CLEAR A PATH!” Jotaro shouted. They listened without a fuss, letting the forces of the resistance walk through them, across the bunker compound, to the exit.

“Oh I’m going to regret this…” a Rarity pulled herself out of the crowd and took a position slightly behind Allure. “Ahem. Affix is the name, being crazy is apparently my game.”

“Glad to have you!” Allure beamed.

“HEY! YOU HEAR THAT?” Affix shouted. “It’s not too late to joiiiiin~! You’ve all got until we walk out those doors! C’mon, I know you want to. I did! I just didn’t know it until five seconds ago!”

Her words moved some people to join the march. Slowly, but surely, more and more individuals added themselves to the fledgling resistance’s army, lengthening the march to the exit door.

By the time they got to it, Anna was smiling. She undid the seal on the door and opened up to the damp, dark sewers.

Applejack looked behind them. They had more than doubled their size in the slow march here. Almost five hundred.

Applejack smiled. “Regardless of what happens… Ah’m proud of y’all.”

Anna’s halo brimmed with energy as they marched through the sewers to prepare a rebellion.

~~~

Sometimes I feel sorry for James.

He was just a poor Combine soldier who had a really, really bad day.

Perhaps we should have just killed him rather than what we actually ended up doing, but at the time we didn’t know the torment that would fall to him afterward and I didn’t bother to look into the fate of a person who essentially amounted to a ‘faceless goon’ that stood between us and further progress toward victory.

After we defeated him, James would go on to be tried by the Combine and found guilty of flagrant negligence and inadequacy. They would not execute him – because that would just be a waste of a man who could be useful elsewhere. One would think it was ‘lucky’ that James was not consigned to
biological experimentation, but he certainly didn’t think so after his third week assigned to Combine-controlled hellscape number 127.

He spent the rest of his surprisingly long life there.

All because of three ponies and an absurd plan that worked because of its absurdity.

I knew how everything would play out long before it actually happened – for I had written the sequence of us taking the ship about ten minutes prior. I had been given no indication I had overextended my abilities as a Prophet, which was a rare occurrence to begin with since I was so well acquainted with the ‘rules’ at this point in time.

It all started with Renee and her signature move.

“You there! Get me off this planet!” she whined. “Get me ooooooooff!”

James had been left behind to watch the dropship while the rest of the squad rounded up some prisoners to be taken back to the station. They were nearing the end of the prisoner runs, expecting to have scared the rest of the population to submission in less than an hour. He had not been expecting any of the locals to want to come.

He actually displayed a modicum of intelligence at the start. “Why would you want on?”

“Because everything’s exploding and smelly and dirty and disgusting and I’m terrrrrrrified~!”

“I… Uh…”

“You’re taking people anyway! Just take me! I have a horn! And I’ll be quiet! Just let me iiiiiiiiin.”

“Fine, fine, fine! If it’ll get you to shut up! Get on the ship!”

Renee grinned. “Oh thank you thank you thank you!” She rushed him into a hug. “You’re the best!”

“I… Wh… Huh?”

“Stop!” Pinkie said, appearing behind him.

“…Huh?”

“Hammertime!” Pinkie said, lifting her hammer. Her dress sparkled as she bashed James across the side of the head, cracking his armor and sending him flying. To his credit, he tried to radio for help – but of course Pinkie’s hammer had hit in just the correct way to damage his communicator.

Renee smirked in his direction. “We’ll be taking this now. Thanks for your help!” She blew a mocking hiss at him.

“No! Wait! Come back! You don’t know what they’re going to do to me!”

He was right, we didn’t know. All we knew was that we had won, and were taking the ship into space with all three of us on it.

He never even saw me. I was already in the cockpit when Pinkie and Renee walked to the front of the ship.

“So, how are we going to go on from here?” Renee asked.
I smiled sheepishly. “Wing it.”

“Twilence…”

“We need to get on the ship. As I saw with O’Neill, if we just get dropped off unceremoniously, they won’t suspect a thing. We do need to have blue stuff on our horns, but we can cast an illusion for that. First chance we get we teleport a few decks up to more secret locations and enter stealth mode. Fair enough?”

“…Why don’t you inform us of these plans ahead of time?”

“Because two-thirds of us already know them half the time!” Pinkie said.

Renee put a hoof to her face. “I can already tell this is going to go swimmingly.”

I made a note. Watch for possible flooding. It was always possible her one-liner was meant to come back with something amusing and threatening later. It was true that most of my notes meant absolutely nothing in the end, but it never hurt to be prepared.

I created some fake blue stuff and put it on our horns. I also tied my wings up just to be extra convincing. The Combine station automatically cleared us for docking – after all, every ship was cleared to be here at the moment to deposit prisoners. It was easy to get us in, throw ourselves out of the hole, and then tell the ship to drive itself into the sun.

Let them worry about the runaway ship rather than us.

“MOVE!” a soldier shouted.

“Hey, no need to be all grumpy!” Pinkie said, huffing. “Imma movin’!”

We all moved like the prisoners we weren’t, fooling all who saw us. We marched along. I prepared to teleport at a moment’s notice, but I knew there was going to be at least one complication – of what sort, I knew not. Little things often pass my visions, even if I look for them. This meant I knew we would get to our goal, certainly, but not how difficult it would be to do so.

As it turned out, somewhere in the middle in terms of difficulty.

What are you? The Advisor demanded, floating right to me. Your readings are telling.

I realized in that moment they must have gotten ka sensors since I last dealt with them – how else would they have found the exile command station so quickly? I decided to answer honestly.

“Twilence.”

That is a name. What ARE you?

“An alicorn…?” I responded, trying to act as confused as possible.

He bought it, but he tried to assault my mind anyway. I forgot to pretend like I wasn’t as skilled a mental warrior as I was and blocked his advances outright.

The problem was psychics that powerful just didn’t exist in random alicorns, and the Advisor knew it.

“CHANGE OF PLANS!” I shouted, lighting my horn. “Hold on!”

We teleported several decks up. The instant we did so, numerous red alarms started blaring.
The Combine was now looking for a purple alicorn with an eye on her chest, labeled ‘potentially extremely dangerous’ with the label ‘use lethal force, do not risk capture’.

I grinned sheepishly. “So, uh, stealth might be a little difficult now.”

“You think!?” Renee blurted.

“Don’t worry, just give me a second,” I said, taking out my notebook and scribbling frantically. “Just have to change a little bit here and a little bit there… Wrap it all around… We might end up in some places we probably shouldn’t be, but everything will work out in the end. …Well not everything, but we’ll be able to do it.”

“Do what!?” Renee asked.

“Be a background influence. We need to be here, and we need to do a couple things to help the others.” I tapped the Eye of Rhyme. “Trust me, I’ve got this.”

Then I realized what I’d just said.

“Huh. I haven’t been that stupid in a while.”
A Portable Weapons Platform (PoWR) was an essential part of any Combine invasion when significant resistance occurred even after a surrender was accepted, which was annoyingly often in the Combine’s collective mind. The station had been equipped with a few dozen of the PoWRs, to be deployed when deemed necessary.

An hour had passed since the initial invasion and the fighting still hadn’t stopped. Glassing the city would just be a horrible waste of valuable technology, personnel, and other materials, so the clearance for the PoWRs’ release was given. Eight were sent down initially.

The PoWRs were derived from a peculiar cube-shaped life form they had found on a world some untold centuries ago. This cube-thing had been known to devour everything it saw, and sort all the junk into its sixteen different stomachs remarkably efficiently.

So the Combine had taken one look at it and thought ‘that would make a pretty good weapon distribution system’. So they took it, ran it through their biomechanical engineering processes, and produced the PoWR – a cube of flesh with a mechanical porthole instead of a mouth on the bottom. The PoWR hovered through the power of four blue nubs on the top face, while its four side faces were each equipped with high-precision laser-rifles.

The PoWR was hardly a defenseless entity, and was a great boon to any squad gifted with it given its ability to provide weapons to troops specifically suited for the enemies at hand.

The drawback was any squad with a PoWR suddenly became a target because of the weapons inside the PoWR. If a resistance force managed to put up enough firepower to beat one, they would get quite the cache.

Luckily for the Combine, the resistance on Farpoint was miniscule. Applejack’s little rebellion hadn’t gotten enough force behind it to take out a PoWR just yet.

Unluckily for the Combine, Vriska Serket was now in the city. And she knew exactly what a PoWR was, why it was useful, and how to take one out.

On the trip here she had been stealing luck from every Combine soldier she had seen – while nowhere near enough to give her full control over her Fluorite Octet, she certainly had enough for an impressive roll.

“So, good guns are in there?” Rainbow Dash asked Vriska as she summoned her dice.

“Yes, for the millionth time, yes.”

“I mean, better than this baby?” Rainbow asked again, holding up a simple assault rifle she had pilfered from a downed Combine soldier. She’d discovered that her wings were close enough to hands that she could at least fire the thing safely.

“Yes…” Vriska seethed.

Nova checked her screen. “The squad has no backup. Twelve troopers, three spider-crabs, one cube of ‘PoWR’, and what I’m calling a pointer.”
The ‘pointer’ was the only thing in the squad Vriska had never seen before – a new biomechanical creation of the Combine that was a cone of solid metal sitting on top of bulbous green sacks of hot air that kept it aloft. It was a complete unknown.

Which was why Nova was going to take it out the moment Vriska rolled her dice. Unknowns were dangerous.

“Ready… go.” Vriska said, tossing her dice towards the squad. The commander noticed them and had time to fire his gun once before they activated. A tiny sawblade appeared above the dice, grew to eight meters in diameter, and disappeared. The instant growth of a sawblade had managed to cut most of the human troopers in half and taken out one of the spider-crabs, injuring another.

Rainbow fired her gun. Her aim was horrible, but the uninjured spider-crab wasn’t a small target, so she got some damage in.

Nova unleashed a swirling beam of magic right at the pointer.

It was at this point everything went wrong.

The pointer absorbed the magic and sent it right back at Nova. She raised a shield but it broke through, hitting her in the horn and sending her flying.

“Fuck, they’ve figured out how to make magic do what they want,” Vriska cursed. “List of things that are not good: that.”

Rainbow turned her gun to focus on the pointer, but it used telekinesis to blow the bullets away, even sending one right back into Rainbow’s firing wing. The PoWR deposited three glowing yellow guns that bristled with so many golden needles they looked like they had hedgehogs on top of them. The three remaining human soldiers picked them up and fired at Vriska.

Vriska took in a sharp breath – this was gonna hurt. The PoWR had analyzed her luck manipulation and given them seeker-needlers. The bullets themselves did almost no damage, but hurt like nothing else and were very accurate. Dodging them would be a miracle, and she was fresh out of miracles.

So as the bullets hit her and sent her cobalt blood flying, she mentally ordered the human soldiers to fire on the PoWR cube instead. Their minds were like putty to her, so they did without hesitation.

The PoWR killed them all in an instant with its own weapons, removing any minds that Vriska could make use of. It stood strong, along with the pointer and two injured spider-crabs.

The pointer floated over to Vriska and pointed its tip at her.

Vriska stole its luck, expecting to use everything she took to just dodge the stupid thing’s attack.

It never got to unleash its attack. One moment it was there, ready to fire – the next it was smashed to pieces, along with both the spider-crabs.

“Yare yare daze…” Jotaro said, extending a hand to Vriska. “You shouldn’t need my help.”

“Shut up,” Vriska muttered, accepting the hand. “Everything hurts right now so I’m extra irritable.”

“Cube!” Rainbow blurted. “You haven’t taken care of the cube!”

The PoWR moved all its automatic guns to point at Jotaro – and they all failed to fire. Upon closer inspection, Vriska noticed the guns were alight with a soft white glow of magic.
“You’re welcome,” Anna said with a smile, her halo shining brilliantly.

Allure poked her head out of a nearby piece of rubble. “Well, looks like I didn’t get to do anything. …I’m satisfied with that.”

Nova stood up, rubbing her horn. “This is gonna hurt for a while… Oh, hey, people. …Thanks, I assume you saved us?”

“Team effort,” Anna said, walking up to Rainbow and healing her wing with her magic. “Definitely didn’t have enough power between the three of us to actually take the weapons. But now we have enough for a small army.”

“Where’s Applejack?” Rainbow asked, noticing her absence from the squad.

“She’s in charge back at base!” Allure said. “Come on! I’ll show you!”

~~~

Flutterfree was praying.

It was a deep, honest, heartfelt prayer that everything that was about to happen would work and that as few people as possible would get hurt.

However, she was also being a little more obvious about the act than she usually would. Most times, you’d only be able to tell she was engaging in the act by closed eyes and a slight bowed head, and rarely would it last very long.

She had gone all the way with the clasped hooves, muttering words, and strained expression this time around. Not that those things actually helped in her case, it just made it easy to see what she was doing. She was rather disappointed with people who broadcasted such things to the world so loudly, most often just for attention.

But that was not her purpose. Her purpose was to get her friends to notice she was acting a little odd.

To realize that she was about to make a move.

Lolo had spread out far enough to find two very important things: the larger containment area with about two thousand other prisoners, and the docking bay. She had found the shortest route to one and then the other, and found a whale-ship that was mostly abandoned – ripe for hijacking and taking to another universe using the Combine-custom dimensional drive.

It would be so much easier if Seraphim’s portals to other universes were big enough to move two thousand people at once… But it wasn’t even close.

And nobody knew that this was the plan she concocted. They would need to have it explained to them in the very short timeframe they would have to make this work.

Basically, it all fell to her and she was barely keeping herself together at this point.

But she was ready. She had Lolo’s vines collecting in the research room below them, pressing against the edge of the tank with all the gemstones in it. Lolo was a very weak Stand physically. However, given enough time, it could push a tank over with the right leverage…

One of the soldiers noticed. “Tank’s moving!” He looked for what was disturbing the tank - but he couldn’t find anything.
He tried to push back on the tank, but he was unable to judge the actual position of Lolo, so he pushed in the wrong place and introduced a pivot motion to the tank. It fell over, shattering it and spilling the Gems all over the ground. Some of them detached from the blue goo completely – and were able to reform.

One of these gems was a very ticked off Jasper. A spiked gauntlet appeared around one of her hands and she punched a scientist’s face in without thinking twice. A short Amethyst and a Peridot formed behind her, took one look at what was going on, and let out Gem war cries.

“GO DOWN!” Flutterfree shouted at Eve.

Seraphim activated, creating an area of physics where the solid state of matter didn’t exist, melting a hole in the cube. Flutterfree had Lolo toss up tools she had seen the scientists use to cut away the blue material, letting the Gems continue to act as a distraction.

Clandestine’s horn was uncovered first – and she set to work freeing the magic of everyone else using her own.

O’Neill, meanwhile, had started using Crimson Sushi. There was no way any of the scientists were going to be able to figure out where the alarm button even was, much less take two steps without stepping into someone else.

Of course, the Gems had the same problem, but they were basically indestructible. They’d forgive him later for creating complete chaos. …Okay, maybe not, but it was fun to watch everyone below scramble.

Corona put a hand on O’Neill’s shoulder. “Drop the panic button.” A ring of magic appeared around her free hand. “I’ve got something for them.”

O’Neill shrugged, taking Crimson Sushi’s effect off. Everyone had a moment of clarity.

Corona smirked. “Selective sleep spell.”

Every being that wasn’t a Gem on the ground below them fell asleep.

“All right!” Flutterfree yelled. “Listen quickly because I don’t think we have a lot of time! There are two things we need to do: free all the prisoners and take a ship to another universe! Eve, O’Neill, you lead everyone in this room along that branch of Lolo, it’ll take you to a docking bay, and specifically to a large whale-like ship. Clear it out and take control. It has a dimensional device on it that shouldn’t be affected by the blockade! If it is… I’m sure you can figure out some way to extend Seraphim’s range with the technology in there.”

“Got it,” O’Neill said.

“Corona, you have the harder job. You and I are going to free the prisoners. We’ll need to move more than two thousand people from one deck of this station to the one where the whale ship is. I have Lolo’s vines spread out everywhere between the two sections, but that is still going to be difficult!” She flew over to Corona and held onto her just below the the point where her wings met her body. “We follow those vines! That’s the plan! We don’t have time to argue, just go!”

“YOU HEARD HER!” O’Neill shouted. “LET’S MOVE, PEOPLE!” He and Eve took off down the path Flutterfree had indicated, Clandestine, the Gems, and all the other prisoners following.

Corona didn’t even need to be told again – she had already started flying along the path Flutterfree had indicated with Lolo. “Just the two of us, huh?”
“Yeah. We’ll get backup from the prisoners when we free them,” Flutterfree said. “I hope…”

“Hey, this is a good plan. I was thinking it would be something a little less frantic, but that’s just me. What I want to know is why you’re with me.”

“When we free the prisoners… They are going to attack.” Flutterfree gulped. “I have no idea from which direction right now, so our escape pathway is uh… one of twenty or so options. Unless you can teleport two thousand people into a whale ship without having a very good idea of where it is?”

“If I had an hour, maybe.”

“I’m thinking we have less than ten minutes.”

“I was going to say five,” Corona said with a smirk.

“Right. Anyway, this entire plan revolves around you not getting gunked with the blue stuff again. Bacon Pancakes is your friend.”

“I got that.”

“And I am your eyes. There’s a squad that’s likely going to see us up ahead three halls.”

Corona nodded, torching them as they passed.

“Right. The prisoners are all held right below us now… Bash through the floor. Expect a lot of guns shooting at you.”

Corona summoned Bacon Pancakes and flattened the floor, tearing through it like paper. They appeared in the center of a large room with several layers, all filled with loose, unsorted prisoners guarded by the occasional Combine soldier.

Corona raised a shield to deflect all bullets coming her way. “PRISON BREAK!” she yelled, using the Royal Canterlot Voice at long last. She raised a hand and started taking out the soldier guards.

To her immense delight, the prisoners started fighting back as well, the vast majority letting the anger grab hold of them. Corona removed the magic inhibitors from the unicorns with her other hand, only adding to the chaos as Combine guards went down left and right.

“How’s the security response?” Corona asked Flutterfree.

Flutterfree focused on Lolo. “Mostly coming from below, which is good since the docks are slightly above us. Drill a hole up through the ceiling right… here.” Lolo generated an X of green wire at an area of the ceiling slightly to Corona’s left.

“Raging Sights?” Corona asked, currently using both her hands to take care of the prisoners and guards.

“Preparing,” Raging Sights reported. “There will be a temporary opening during casting.”

Corona smirked, summoning Bacon Pancakes to protect her. “No problem.”

“Prepared,” Raging Sights reported.

Corona dropped her magic protections and blasted the ceiling with a white vaporization beam. Apparently the Combine had been waiting for this – hidden weapons and blue ring dispensers activating for the first time. A few hit her feet, but she was able to hide the rest of her body behind
the central disc of Bacon Pancakes, a barrier they didn’t even know was there, much less were able to penetrate.

“You’re hurt!” Flutterfree called.

Corona realized she couldn’t heal her foot because it had the blue stuff on it, and she was much better served clearing blue stuff off of unicorn horns rather than caring for her own foot. “I can get a new foot later.”

“Corona!” Flutterfree gestured at the glowing blood dripping onto the ground.

Corona smirked. “I’m fine, Flutterfree.” She cleared her throat, pointing at the hole in the ceiling. “THAT IS YOUR WAY OUT! THERE IS A SHIP WAITING FOR YOU UP THERE! LOOK FOR OVERHEAD O’NEILL OR EVENING. I KNOW SOME OF YOU HAVE CONSTRUCT MAGIC, MAKE A STAIRWAY UP THERE WHILE I DEFEND YOU!”

After a few pegasi flew up the hole, a handful of unicorns did as was asked, creating a crystal walkway up to the hole in the ceiling. The mass of prisoners began to surge upward.

“Get to the bottom,” Flutterfree told Corona. “They’re about to breach.”

Corona nodded, flying down to the floor of the prison area, destroying the remaining automatic turrets on the way. She placed her hands to the floor and reinforced it with magical defenses, making the entire thing glow with intricate red geometric patterns.

Something hit the floor hard, but was unable to break through.

“It’s holding!” Flutterfree reported, looking through the part of Lolo she had on the other side. “They’re already moving to flank us.”

“Then we need speed above all else,” Corona said, in a fighting stance. “I hope everyone knows how to move quickly, because we don’t have much in the way of time here…”

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“I have good news!” I said as we dodged another flurry of plasma weapon fire.

“What would that be!?” Renee blurted, shooting behind herself with a stolen plasma rifle.

“We’re a very good distraction for Corona and the prison break operation!”

Pinkie and I hoofbumped.

Renee threw her mane back. “Well then what are we going to do!?”

“This!” Pinkie said, producing a chainsaw and leaping into the air, carving through three spider-crabs at once, moving through the assaulting team like a liquid.

Somehow she only got red blood on herself, avoiding all other colors.

“…That goes well with your dress,” Renee observed. Then she blinked. “Oh that was the entire point of the dress wasn’t it!?"

“It’s the Pinkie Massacre dress,” Pinkie said, giggling. “Y’know, for special moments when massacres are needed.”
“You’re losing more sanity every day!”

“You need to go insane in this business,” I said, extending my senses through a nearby wall. “They care about us a lot more than they care about those prisoners. I think my ka signature scared that Advisor something fierce.”

“His colleagues probably aren’t gonna like that!” Pinkie observed.

“That’s his problem tomorrow. That won’t help us,” Renee pointed out.

I nodded. “Right. Anyway, now that we’ve served a great distraction…” I teleported us a level up, to the top of the Combine station. “I think it’s time for us to look for the interesting stuff in here. We’ve got two places to go…”

“Care to elaborate?”

“The Secret Prisoner and then the Tumor Room,” I said. “In that order. Our meeting with the Secret Prisoner should coincide more or less with Eve’s group, and then the Tumor Room will be near the end of this chapter.”

Renee twitched. “That doesn’t give me a timeframe, dear!”

“In the next half hour? Less? Everything is happening really, really fast in case you didn’t notice.”

Pinkie swung her chainsaw and cut the sluggy form of a genetically engineered machine-gun jellyfish in half before it even got off a shot. “You two should really pay more attention.”

Renee blinked. “…I expected these things to be stronger than that.”

“I’m Pinkie Pie in the Pinkie Massacre dress. The ease with which I take things out should never be used to judge their strength. …I think I’ll make a disclaimer sign for that.”

I chuckled. Renee twitched. “You do realize how impossible it is to work with both of you at once, right?”

“Eh, maybe?” I said, shrugging. “We just know ways of talking to each other that get ideas across well.”

“Yes! We can make it so every sentence has a noodle incident.”

“Hilarious, I assume,” Renee deadpanned. “Where to?”

“If I’m right, and I should be, the Secret Prisoner should be this way.” I teleported us through a large set of double doors.

We appeared in a room that seemed to be floating in nothing, but I knew better – it was really about the size of a baseball field, it was just that the walls were perfectly black and you couldn’t see the doors. Floating tiles filled the room, all level with the spherical enclosure’s diameter. These tiles surrounded a large black and white spiked ball patterned similarly to the yin-yang symbol without the dots.

I facehooved. “For the… this is the wrong room!”

“Really?” Renee said, blinking. “That looks pretty important to me!”

“I must’ve borked something somewhere,” I muttered, flipping through my notebook. “We aren’t the
ones who are supposed to deal with this. There’s a whole other sequence of events…”

Renee looked to Pinkie, pleading.

Pinkie shrugged. “I actually don’t know that one. This spiked thing has something to do with Vriska, I think, but I’m not sure.”

“So what, she has to deal with it?”

“Yes! No. Er…” I rubbed my head. “She needs to be here, yes.”

“But she’s not on the station!”

“She probably will be,” Pinkie pointed out. “We’re heading for a climax on this thing, I can feel it.”

“Bingo,” I said, scribbling frantically. “And for everything to work we have to leave this place. … Ah, there was my mistake, I assumed the deck layout was fungible…” I crossed out a note and wrote a new one. “We can’t do anything with this.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

I shrugged with my wings. “Same thing in this case. I technically know what to do, but if I did it, that would screw with things I know have to happen. Namely the climax.” I closed my notebook and put it away. “By the way, Renee, you are going to be angry at me when you figure everything out.”

“I’m not angry already?”

“Tower’s base, no,” I answered, remembering many times I had gotten other Rarities really angry.

Renee groaned. “Fine, fine, I’ll get angry later. Let’s just go to the thing we need to do for the thing of… Uh…”

“Secret Prisoner,” Pinkie suggested.

“Yes, right.” Renee put a hoof to her head. “That.”

~~~

Vriska had been expecting a high-tech organized rebellion with lots of people scurrying about and yelling things about the fight against the Combine.

What she got was a hole in the ground with a few hundred people sitting around portable heaters. Hardly any actually had any weapons, and most of those had been at the door, ready to defend in case their position was compromised.

“This place is a dump,” Vriska said, looking at Applejack.

“Yes,” Applejack said, jumping down from a crate of supplies. “Glad you’re okay.”

Rainbow pushed Vriska to the side and pulled Applejack into a hug. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

Nova smiled brightly. “I brought a gift for my part of the reunion!” She stopped levitating the PoWR and dropped it next to Applejack with a squishy thud.

“We all got that,” Vriska pointed out.
“I carried it all the way here. And I had the invisibility. So there.”

Applejack looked at the PoWR and grinned. “Does this have as much firepower in it as Ah’m told it does?”

“You bet it does,” Vriska said. “Sixteen compartmentalized stomachs, each with several copies of precision weapons. We have seeker-needlers, radiation railguns, the carbines, long range detonators, and any number of other things.” She reached a hand into the porthole and pulled out a gun that looked like a squirrel had been grafted onto it. “…I have no idea what this is.”

“Probably useful against a very odd type of enemy,” Nova said. “Tree people, or something.”

“We’re gonna have to use this stuff soon,” Applejack said. “It’s only been two hours since the attack and it’s becomin’ pretty darn clear this whole resistance thing isn’t workin’.”

“No, where they can hear!” Anna hissed.

Applejack rolled her eyes. “They already know, and Ah ain’t lying for your sake, and you know it.”

Anna sagged, her halo dimming in shame.

“There is a ‘but’ I was getting’ to,” Applejack said. “They’re rootin’ us out and we can’t ‘take control’ of any area of the city, because they just hit us with overwhelming force. The only reason we’re here is because they have no idea where we are. But we have learned a lot during our little rebellion here. And one of those things is that they get all their orders not from the station in space, but from a repurposed tower here on the ground. The molybdenum tower.”

“The mayor’s building, right?” Nova asked.

Applejack nodded. “They have it as a symbol, of sorts. Subjugatin’ us through our own leadership. Also, I think they’re mockin’ our knowledge of the Dark Tower. Twofold punch. The point here is that all orders come from the top of that building. We take it out, we scramble their communications on the ground – and we might have a way to get to their station. Ah wouldn’t create such an important base of power in such an obvious place unless there’s an escape plan.”

“So you want to charge right in?” Vriska asked.

“Eeyep. ’Cause destroyin’ ships and squads doesn’t really seem to do much. Gotta get somethin’ that actually matters. …We’ve already lost a fifth of our number not doin’ much.” She looked up. “It’s basically the last idea Ah’ve got besides ‘hunker down and hope they never find us.’ If this doesn’t work the rebellion’s going to evacuate into the flower jungle and try to live free there, out of Combine’s direct control. They may have observation posts out there already, but an endless jungle’s still hard to police efficiently.”

Nova blinked. “You’ve gone through a lot in just a couple hours.”

“Overwhelmin’ force’ll do that to ya,” Applejack commented. “Point is, we’ve gotta do this. These weapons give us enough power to maybe pull it off. Can Ah count on y’all?”

Vriska, Nova, and Rainbow saluted without even hesitating.

“Good. Anna, Ah’ll be goin’ this time instead of you.”

Anna blinked. “But Applejack, you’re th-”
“Ah’m a farmer who won’t be able to keep them together for long. You need to take control. Protect 
them no matter what, got it?”

Anna wanted to argue for a moment – but nodded in the end. “Yes, Applejack.”

Applejack smiled. “Good. Hey Affix!”

The scarred Rarity looked up from what appeared to be a giant bomb. “Huh?”

“How’s the big boom coming along?”

“Oh! Very good, actually. I’ve even got smaller ones!” She pulled a few miniature bombs out of her 
saddlebags. “It’s amazing how much exploding material the Combine have on them.”

Nova blinked. “Where did you find this one?”

Allure shrugged. “She was kinda just… here. Being… eccentric.”

“All is as it should be!” Affix decreed. “All that remains is to make these bombs fashionable!”

“You have until Ah give out all these new weapons,” Applejack said.

“Genius is always best under pressure!” Affix declared, getting to work.

~~~

In a situation this dire, Eve would have used Seraphim to dial the universe where ‘biological life is 
impossible’ to clear the ship they were stealing, but there was a pretty major problem with that.

Half of the ship itself was biological. So they were going to have to clear it manually. And it was a 
big ship.

Eve could see Lolo’s tendrils shifting into the ship, telling her, O’Neill, and the rest of the force that it 
was the right one.

“Okay, here’s the deal!” O’Neill shouted. “Eve and I are following the vines into this thing. The rest 
of you, spread out and clear the ship of any personnel you find. If you make it to the bridge, make 
sure you can control it, but do not launch. We have a couple thousand escapees waiting for us to 
brake them out of here. Got it?”

The high-value prisoners all nodded, splitting off into several teams.

Eve and O’Neill summoned their Stands actively as they ran through the halls of the whale-ship, 
switching seemingly at random from metal floors to biological squishy surfaces.

“Chances we’re walking in this thing’s nose?” O’Neill asked.

“About as high as you telling a snot-related joke every time we’re on flesh-floor,” Eve said with a 
smirk.

“I was gonna go with earwax, but snot sounds good as well.”

“No you weren’t!”

O’Neill smirked. “Where’s your proof?”
Eve raised an eyebrow. “Amusing.”

“Really? I thought it was lame.”

Eve rolled her eyes. “O’Neill, never change.”

“I became a vampire in order to do that, so I think we might have a tiny paradox here.”

“Drinking Corona’s elixir does not make you a vampire. …Wait, you didn’t drink it, you have those nanobots!”

O’Neill grinned – revealing fangs.

Eve jumped. “W-wh-”

O’Neill removed the false teeth.

“…What!”?

“I’ve been keeping these in my pocket for years, breaking them out when the moment is just perfect.”

“…That can’t be sanitary.”

“Nanomachines, son.”

Eve groaned. “Don’t remind me about that guy.”

“Makes Valentine look like a teddy bear, huh?”

“Just… INCOMING!”

The two of them barely had time to dodge to the left as a sort of Combine speedster creature tried to ram them. The moment it missed it turned around and tried again – only this time it found that there was no friction on the floor. It lost all traction and rammed itself into the ceiling in an instant.

O’Neill whistled. “Speedsters. You never know there was a fight until it’s over.”

“So this ship is guarded, at least a little,” Eve noted. “We have to be at least a little cautious.”

They scrambled forward, running toward the front of the whale-ship, presumably where the bridge would be.

A few moments after this new surge of scrambling, they encountered a group of three human Combine soldiers. Eve took care of the bullets with a magic forcefield and Crimson Sushi delivered a ‘slap of no return’ to each of them. Easy and simple.

When they got to the bridge with no further resistance, they both got the same sinking feeling.

“Way too easy,” Eve muttered. “Flutterfree was right, this ship was almost completely empty…” She ran to the controls, looking for anything wrong.

They were locked out, sure, but it was easy enough to override the lockouts with her magic. She performed some diagnostics – the engines were fine, life support was fine, and the dimensional drive was operational. Just to make sure, she tried to interface it with Seraphim, and found it would be easy enough to create a portal for the entire ship if it came to that.
“Way, way too easy,” Eve said, narrowing her eyes. “There’s almost no obstacles on our end.”

“They could all be busy with Corona,” O’Neill suggested. “…Yeah, I don’t believe that’s the answer either.”

“Good, because if you did, I would have been sure you were a changeling,” Eve muttered, scanning everything. She was able to put nearby life signs on the screen. She could see Corona engaging heavy enemy resistance, and all the prisoners moving closer to the ship. She performed a quick teleport to the prisoners to make sure they were going the right direction, then she teleported back. “There’s hardly anything trying to stop us at all.”

“Part of their plan?” O’Neill suggested.

“I doubt it. I really, really doubt it,” Eve muttered. “They brought everyone up here to add them to their armies like all the other conditioned humans and biotechnical things we’ve seen. Something’s changed their mind about that, and they’re trying something else.”

“Let’s hope that involves ‘letting us go’.”

“Maybe… Maybe two thousand prisoners aren’t worth anything compared to whatever else they find…” Eve furrowed her brow as the first prisoners started to load onto the ship. Corona, how are you doing down there? She asked.

Doing fine. Looks like everyone’s finding their way to you faster than expected.

Are you going to last?

It seems like it. Haven’t seen one of those slug-things yet. I’m fighting big things, yes, but I know they have bigger.

I know. We’re beginning to suspect something’s up. Tell us the moment you see anything suspicious – the Combine have something else going on here.

I’ll ask Flutterfree to keep an eye out. After a moment’s pause, Corona responded. She says there’s a lot less soldiers and troops than when we started. As if most of them were called elsewhere.

To do what?

Lolo doesn’t go out far enough to tell. They’re just moving away from the prisoners and the docking bay.

Eve narrowed her eyes. Keep with the plan for now. But be prepared to improvise.

“Well?” O’Neill asked.

“She’s suspicious too. And most the soldiers seem to have left this area of the station – letting us do what we want.”

O’Neill frowned. “They going to try an internal self-destruct?”

“I think I can execute a universal jump before the explosion reaches us,” Eve said. “If that’s their plan, it’s a stupid one.”

Clandestine ran onto the bridge. “That’s everyone but Corona and Flutterfree.”

“How on Earth do two thousand people move that fast?” O’Neill asked.
“I don’t know. They just… did. All of them worked as one to get here.”

Eve blinked. “How in… Never mind, I’ll question it later.” Corona, we’ve got everyone. Get here and let’s go.

Hold that thought! Flutterfree just saw Renee, Pinkie and… Twilence on the edge of Lolo’s vines!

What!?

They’re running from much heavier resistance than I’m getting!

Eve blinked – and then laughed. “Well, I now know why everything’s going so well.”

“Why?”

“Twilence is here. She’s probably altering ka in our favor.”

O’Neill narrowed his eyes. “That still doesn’t sit well with me.”

“Of course not. But it means this really is going to work. …It also means we have to go help them.”

“Right, right… Clandestine, you have the bridge.”

Clandestine saluted. “I shall get everyone to safety.”

“Remember the way back to Merodi Universalis?”

“I can get there, General.”

“Good. Eve, take us out.”

Eve teleported herself and O’Neill out of the whale ship. They watched as it rose into the air – and left the universe, escaping the wrath of the Combine.

Everything was deathly silent except for an alarm in the background.

“…No, not even Twilence messing with things explains this much of a ghost town,” O’Neill said. “There’s a Combine plot here. Something more than just conquering a planet and enslaving people.”

Eve nodded. “Maybe she’ll know what that is.” Corona, go to where Flutterfree saw Twilence. We’ll teleport to you when you get there.

Got it. Did everyone get out?

The only ones left here are O’Neill and myself. We’ll use Seraphim to escape with such a small number of people.

Got it! Watch yourselves!

…There’s no one here to watch ourselves from.

O’Neill and Eve stood alone in an abandoned docking bay while war raged elsewhere.

~~~

“Something’s up indeed,” I muttered to myself, scribbling some notes. “Problem is I know exactly what it is…”
Renee sighed. “Let me guess, it’s one of those things you can’t tell us?”

I shook my head. “It has to do with the thing we saw earlier. It’s not a problem we get to deal with. But it’s certainly affecting us…” A troop of a dozen speedsters charged Pinkie from all directions. She twirled around their speedy forms, relying on her Pinkie Sense to dodge their attacks before they came. One hit at that speed would turn her into a pancake.

As she dodged, she swung her chainsaw wide, slicing several of them in half. Due to their speed, it was like cutting paper. The blood arced through the air and landed on Pinkie’s body. She paid it no mind, jumping into the air and slicing another two in half. One managed to graze her mane, but she was able to turn with it to keep her hairs from being pulled out. She flung the creature to the ground and drove the chainsaw through its chest.

“I... am a pretty terrifying monster, aren’t I?” Pinkie asked with a demented giggle. “Yeah. This is a lot of blood.”

“Pinkie, we’re fighting for our lives. I think we have the right,” Renee said.

“Oh, I’m not saying we don’t have the right! I’m just saying, yeah, I probably scare little kids.” She threw her warhammer over her shoulder and hit a spider-crab in the face, causing it to explode. “Not exactly what I was going for when I signed up.”

“You knew there would be death,” I pointed out.

“Aaaand I didn’t expect *me* to be the one dishing it out is all I’m saying,” Pinkie admitted with a shrug. “It is what it is though!”

“Pinkie… Are you doing okay?” Renee asked.

“Meh,” Pinkie said wiping the blood from her eyes but only getting more blood on it. “I think I’m fine. Though I’m covered in the blood of my enemies which is a pretty good indication of something other than fine. So I dunno, you make the call.”

I created a complex cylinder-based spell that fired a razor-sharp card construct into fifty-two different enemies, immobilizing all of them. “I think you’re as fine as you can be, considering. You have a remarkable force of will, Pinkie. You had to face the truth alone. I could not have done that.”

“I’m also one bad day from going completely psycho, so there’s a biiiiiit of a personality tradeoff here, y’know.” She threw a cream pie into a soldier’s face. The pie was made of gasoline and exploded on contact due to a sparkler embedded within the delectable pastry.

Renee had been spending all the fighting surrounded by her magical shields, hoping none of the blue goo got on her by sheer luck. “Maybe now isn’t the best time to question our sanities?”

“Renee has a point,” I observed. “Let’s just accept we’re insane and will have to work through this later. Agreed?”

“Agreed!” Pinkie said, pulling out several party cannons and blowing back numerous spider-crabs. “News flash: Pinkie has not yet suffered a single wound! No candy red blood here!”

“Stop tempting Murphy,” I suggested.

“But it’s time to move!”

“Oh, right, right…” I facehooved. “I got caught up.” I lit my horn, preparing a teleport. “Here it goes
I teleported all three of us into a secret, purple observation station. There were six chairs in the room, each affixed in front of a desk. On each desk was a computer, all currently off or asleep.

In front of the six stations was one gigantic window that looked out at... absolutely nothing. Darkness.

Renee blinked. “Uh... what is this place?”


“For what?” Pinkie asked.

“A lot of things,” I admitted. “But he knows at least one of them.”

“Stop being cryptic! Where is this prisoner?” Renee asked.

I pointed at the window. “Through that. If you bashed right through it you would see him – but then you would go completely mad from the sight.”

“Right, an eldritch deity. See, that’s important information. Thank you.”

“The highest form of eldritch deity,” I continued. “The being behind this ‘glass’ is one of the Noble Circle of Horrorterrors.”

Renee blinked. “…Horrorterrors. Pardon me if I don’t register what that means right away, but that’s a Class 1 right? It’s... It’s the ones responsible for Sburb…” Her eyes widened. “Wait, wait wait wait… I can’t comprehend just how big this is right now… How are they even containing something like that!?”

“He’s weak,” I explained. “Captured, and contained in a ‘bigger-on-the-inside’ bubble.”

A series of eyes appeared plastered to the window. The great Horrorterror spoke, a voice not like Majora, not like Thrackerzod... It wasn’t reverberating or layered, nor was it deep and horrible. It didn’t even sound like words, but it didn’t drive them mad. They were struck by the importance of it.

“I AM NEOAN. WE HAVE MUCH TO DISCUSS AND LITTLE TIME.”

I wince. “Uh, yeah, we need to wait for Eve to get here for that. Don’t worry, I’ll make it go faster.” I took out my notebook and started scribbling. “Don’t panic, the Tumor won’t explode while we’re talking.”

“WHAT!?” Renee blurted.

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Attacking the tower from the air was pointless – Combine ships surrounded it from all sides. They didn’t have the required aerial firepower that, say, Corona would have at her disposal. They had a couple of hard hitters, teleporters, and mostly just regular people with big guns.

Applejack said the plan was simple.

It wasn’t really.
They wanted it to look simple. And the first layer of the plan was. It was essentially ‘smash it and hope something happens’. The majority of the rebel forces with the PoWR’s provided advanced weaponry came out of the sewers around the tower and started shooting the place up, ensuring they stayed close to the structure so the Combine ships wouldn’t risk triggering a structural collapse.

“Move move move!” Affix yelled – she wasn’t technically in charge, but the actual commander let her do the barking since her voice demanded attention. The initial strike force held explosive weapons that blew the front doors of the tower down easily. They charged in, smashing the initial resistance without much fuss whatsoever.

“That was easier than expected,” Affix commented. The commander didn’t say anything – and Affix slowly realized she had quite forgotten his name. He was human, past middle aged, and stern. Military, probably, or perhaps a psycho mercenary for all she knew. Whatever, he was in charge, and she could just keep calling him commander for eternity.

The first floor was apparently cleared within a minute – bizarre, considering how large it was. But it let them move in with layer two of the plan: bombs. Specifically, one huge, invisible bomb carried by none other than Affix herself.

She was more than willing to admit that she was trigger-happy about the whole ordeal. They had a bomb that could bring this entire place crashing down with the push of a button – if they couldn’t take it, they’d blow it up and destroy whatever was at the top easily enough. Of course, it was a last resort, only if the teams going up the tower couldn’t progress.

...Or that was what a lot of troops had been told was the actual plan. Try to confuse the Combine with a direct assault, and really have a bomb in place on the bottom to accomplish the mission when everything went sideways. The fact that it hadn’t gone sideways in any way yet was a little odd, but Affix didn’t concern herself with such things as ‘ka’ and ‘fate’, she just acted.

The third layer of the plan was the real one. Behind the initial assault, behind the bomb, there was a team of six ‘heroes’ trying to take the stealth mission approach. Affix was convinced the way they leaned on ka to jump to their aid and give them what was needed would kill them one day.

But she hoped that wouldn’t be today just like everyone else.

She hoped even more that the actual strike teams would prove themselves excellent and actually get to the top of the tower, despite few actually having any training or combat experience. …It seemed to be working so far.

Affix circled her giant invisible bomb, glancing out the windows. “Why aren’t we getting attacked by ground forces?”

The commander narrowed her eyes. “You just noticed that now, did you?”

“Well, I was a bit excited about the big bomb, which I really want to explode but understand that’s basically the worst of all our options.”

“They should have been shooting our asses the moment we popped up,” the commander muttered. “This reeks either of complete apathy, or a trap.”

“Right...” Affix said, grimacing. “If they were apathetic about the tower, wouldn’t they just blow us up inside?”

“For all we know that’s a waste of resources. From what little intel we have, the Combine are all about resource management, sending the minimum firepower in to deal with the situation. If they
think we aren’t worth it, or have some sort of cost-efficient way to take us out, they’ll jump all over that option like rabid dogs.”

Affix narrowed her eyes. “All right, something really fishy is up here. Really fishy. Hope our little heroes can figure it out for us.”

The commander nodded. “It’s always best with the small strike forces.”

“Is ka overruling your military training?”

“…I’m a barber.”

Affix flushed and facehooved. “Forget I said anything.”

The commander smirked, gun continually trained on the front doors of the black tower.

Meanwhile, seventy floors up, Jotaro, Nova, Vriska, Rainbow, Applejack, and Allure were flying up an elevator shaft, Nova’s magic doing all the heavy lifting. And maintaining the invisibility spell.

The only other person doing anything was Vriska. She’d picked up a gun from the PoWR with a scope that could see through walls – giving her the ability to steal luck at an unprecedented rate. “I really should see about getting one of these,” she said, smirking. “The luck just keeps growing.”

“Can we expect all eights?” Allure asked.

“Fuck no, I have to drain a crowded city block for that. But it’ll keep me – and by extension the rest of you ungrateful lot – hidden. Isn’t that convenient?”

“Yep.”

“Nearing the top!” Nova called. “We don’t know what we’re gonna find up there! Remember – stealth before shoot. I’m looking at you Vriska. Jotaro. …Rainbow. Why do we have three loose cannons?”

Allure snickered. “I could make convincing arguments that you and Applejack are loose cannons given the right situation!”

“…And we are once again reminded that you are the smart one.”

“Don’t even need a PhD to prove it! Woo!”

“But I’m serious, shut up.”

They all fell silent as Nova gradually decreased the rate at which they climbed. Vriska felt her luck drop significantly as they presumably passed through a specialized security net. Nova carefully teleported them through the elevator doors instead of forcing them open.

The room at the top of the tower was filled with Combine technology – metal intertwined with grotesque biological parts. The technology in here did not look as seamless as the creatures they had seen in the battlefield. Much of this stuff, being state-of-the-art, had not passed through any sort of ‘aesthetics’ consideration at this point.

There were some communication stations, giant screens that were tall rather than wide, a couple of weapons, and a large platform embedded in a nearby wall.

They saw a human man talking to an image of a slug-thing on the screen. Well, he was talking; the
slug-thing didn’t appear to be talking back.

But Vriska was able to detect the psychic communication.

“Why am I not getting any reinforcements!? They’re storming the tower! I don’t have enough personnel! They’re a third of the way up already and show no signs of stopping!”

You have all you need to deal with simple rebels.

“No, I don’t! They have your weapons!”

Whose fault is that?

“Not mine! You’re the one who set down the PoWR cubes!”

You requested further assistance; that was our compliance. Why do you not have one on site?

“They were all out patrolling by your request!”

You could have kept one back.

“Look, just send a single dropship with some elites or something! You won’t experience any casualties!”

It is possible they have an individual with the unknown ability pattern.

“I sent you the data on the Stands already! Haven’t you figured them out yet!?”

The slug-thing made no response.

“I knew it. You have nothing. I don’t even know why I was asking. I turned away from these people thinking you could help me! You can’t even figure out something that simple!? What is wrong with you?”

There is another presence with you.

“What are you talking about? The room is completely empty!” He threw his arms wide. “But it won’t be for long!”

A powerful presence. Enough to hear my half of the conversation.

“Busted!” Vriska said, firing her gun into the man’s skull. “Well, that’s one traitor out of the way.”

Vriska Serket. This is a surprise.

Nova dropped the cloak. “And the rest of us?”

The slug-thing ignored them. You have been an issue multiple times before, Vriska Serket.

Vriska looked at them, confused. “You know, it feels weird hearing one of you Advisors say my name with respect. Did I hit you too hard last time?”

On the contrary, we have simply learned more about your origin since then. The worlds of Paradox Space have been a major focus of Combine study as of late. Your meddlesome interference in our society has proven to be more enlightening than any of the damage you have caused.

Vriska’s smile faltered. “…Oh no, you’re not trying to mess with… you are! You’re trying to mess
with Sburb! Do you realize how stupid that is!? Do you know what happened!?”

*It almost pains me to know you will not get to see the fruit of our labor come to pass. ...Or perhaps you will. We have never been able to test the limits of a god-tier.*

“What the fuck? What the fuck are you planning?”

*Congratulations, Merodi Universalis,* he said, finally addressing everyone in the room. *You have removed the Combine presence from your world. You should celebrate.* The feed was cut.

Nova ran to one of the Combine consoles, using some magic to quickly tell it to show her the space around Farpoint. She saw ships… *leaving* the universe. Every single dot that represented a Combine presence was suddenly *gone.*

With the exception of one.

The station, floating alone.

“I don’t think I need to tell anyone that we haven’t won,” Vriska said. “There was a death threat in there somewhere. *Something’s* going on in that station. And if what he’s implying is true, we need to get up there to keep everything from being *super fucked.*”

Allure nodded, running to the platform. “I think this is a teleporter.”

“Pretty bulky for a teleporter,”Nova observed.

“They never teleported, always used dropships,” Allure pointed out. “Maybe their teleportation technology just isn’t that great. Because it has to be this big.”

“Why not use magic?” Rainbow asked.

“Very few magic-based enemies, remember?” Allure said. “Just the pointers. Everything else is focused on magic inhibition. The blue stuff. Hey Nova, think this thing can teleport us up there?”

Nova lit her horn, interfacing with the technology. She scrolled across the data on her screen. “Uh... It looks like it’s the only place that can *receive* a teleport.”

Applejack turned to Nova. “Send a telepathic message to the commander, tell him the basics of what’s happened. Tell him we definitely haven’t won, and that if he can get anyone up here backup would be appreciated.”

Nova nodded. “Done.”

“What are we waiting for, let’s *go!*” Rainbow blurted. “I can feel the seconds slipping away!”

Nova nodded. They all piled on top of the teleporter – and vanished.

~~~

Eve and O’Neill teleported to Corona and Flutterfree. Eve let O’Neill ride her so they could keep up with Corona.

“Have you seen any resistance at all?” Eve said.

“There was some about a minute ago,” Corona called back. “But the closer I’ve gotten to Twilence’s signature, the less of everything else there is.”
Flutterfree nodded. “It’s like they’re all just gone. I’m only seeing wounded now.”

“Something is going on, something nasty,” O’Neill said. “We need that triclops alicorn to tell us what.”

You’re in luck, I told them telepathically, because I’m waiting for you around… the third corner. I may be off slightly.

Why not just teleport us at this point? Corona asked.

Because it’s amusing to keep an eldritch deity waiting.

O’Neill laughed. “And I thought this day couldn’t get any better!”

Eve rolled her eyes as the four of them entered the purple room with the six consoles. I waved at them. “Welcome to the Hidden Prisoner!”

Pinkie rushed Eve into a hug. “Oh, Eve, it’s good to see you!”

“Good to see you t- that’s a lot of blood.”

“Yeah! It’s my new massacre dress! You like it?”

“…It does make you look good,” Flutterfree admitted.

Renee tipped her hat to Eve. “Glad to see everything’s fine. Even though these two wouldn’t shut up about you. Sorry if I’m not as elated to see you since I am fed up with the things coming out of these two’s vocalizations.”

“Ahem!” I said, holding up a wing. “Hidden Prisoner? Hello? Big, important eldritch deity who’s willing to talk to us?”


“Wouldn’t you understand the need for a proper timeline?” Flutterfree asked. “I mean, if what Vriska’s said about you is true, you lived in a place where time and space were so fluid you had to know about those things. Your ability to do that was how you all became Class 1, right?”


Eve held up a hoof. “Right. So, you’re clearly a prisoner here. Why are you locked up? And why should we free you?”

“THEY AT FIRST SOUGHT ONLY BIOLOGICAL TRICKS FROM ME, BUT SOON FOUND THAT MY FORM WOULD BE OF LITTLE ASSISTANCE TO THEM WITH THEIR CURRENT LEVEL OF DEVELOPMENT. SO THEY BEGAN TO DELVE FOR INFORMATION. A NOBLE HORRORERROR’S MIND IS ONE OF THE MOST COMPLEX AND POWERFUL INTELECTS IN EXISTENCE – BUT I WAS INJURED. AND WITH ENOUGH TIME, EVEN THE GREATEST MINDS WILL FALL, ESPECIALLY WITH THE SCIENTIFIC RESOURCES OF AN ENTIRE SOCIETY DEVOTED TO PRYING SECRETS AWAY FROM AN ELDER GOD’S MIND.

“THEY WANTED THE SECRETS OF SBURB FROM ME. AND THEY GOT ENOUGH TO SATISFY THEIR CURIOSITY.”

Eve nodded slowly. “That’s bad.”

“THAT IS A SEVERE UNDERSTATEMENT. THREATS TO THE ENTIRE MULTIVERSE ARE RARE EVENTS. THE ENGLISH INCIDENT HAPPENED ALMOST AN MILLENNIA AGO, WHEN SPEAKING OF METATIME, AND THERE HAS NOT BEEN ANOTHER COMPLETE THREAT SINCE. THERE LIKELY WILL NOT BE FOR MILLIONS OF YEARS. A DANGER OF THAT MAGNITUDE IS A ONCE IN A LIFETIME THING FOR THOSE OF MY KIND.”

“…What the hell is Sburb?” O’Neill asked.

“THERE WAS ONCE A HORRORERROR OF THE NOBLE CIRCLE WHO ASCENDED THE DARK TOWER. THIS HORROR ERROR CAME TO THE LAST DOOR AND USED HIS ELDRITCH NATURE TO PASS THROUGH TO THE ROOM AT THE TOP OF THE TOWER WITHOUT BEING SENT AWAY. HE LEARNED MUCH THERE, AND SHARED IT WITH HIS KIND. THEY DECIDED TO USE THIS KNOWLEDGE TO CREATE A NEW WAY FOR UNIVERSES TO BE MADE – NOT BY ANCIENT, FORGOTTEN CONSTRUCTS, NOR BY DESIGN, BUT TO ALLOW THE BEINGS OF ONE UNIVERSE TO BUILD ANOTHER THROUGH A JOURNEY, CREATING A GLORIOUS MYTHOLOGY FOR A WORLD. A WORLD THAT CHOSE ITSELF HOW IT WOULD BE.

“THE EXPERIMENT WAS DISASTROUS AND RESULTED IN THE NEAR DESTRUCTION OF HORRORERROR SOCIETY, AS YOU KNOW.”

Renee gulped. “I’m almost afraid to ask… What are the Combine trying to do? Recreate Sburb?”

“NO.”

“Oh that’s a relief…”
“BUT THEY HAVE NO IDEA WHAT THEY ARE DOING. THE Y THINK THEY ARE JUST RECREATING THE POWER SOUR CE OF SBURB – KNOWN AS THE GREENSUN. BUT THEY D ON’T THINK ABOUT THE CONSEQUENCES THIS MIGHT HA VE. THE LOST WORLDS IT WILL BRING FROM THE SEA O F INFINITE POSSIBILITIES. THE CONNECTION IT HAS TO THE WORLDS OF PARADOX SPACE. A NEW GREEN SUN WI LL HAVE COMPLETELY UNKNOWN EFFECTS ON ALL THES E THINGS. EVEN I CANNOT SAY FOR SURE WHAT WILL H APPEN.”

“And if we let you free you can stop it?” Eve asked.

“NO, I CANNOT STOP IT. THE COMBINE HAVE ALREADY C REATED A TUMOR, AND THE MOMENT THEY DID IT WAS F ATED TO GO OFF AT AN EXACT MOMENT AT AN EXACT TI ME. SUCH IS THE WAY WITH HORROR TERROR TECHNOLO GY. THE TUMOR WILL FREE ME ONCE IT GOES OFF – DO NOT WORRY FOR MY SAKE. I AM JUST HERE TO WARN Y OU OF THE GREEN SUN, OF SBURB, AND WHAT THE COM BINE HAVE DONE.”

“Can we do anything to stop it?”

“NO,” Neoan said. “YOUR SEEOR OF VOID IS RIGHT, IT IS NOT Y OUR DESTINY TO INTERFERE WITH THE TUMOR. IT IS TH E DESTINY OF THE THIEF OF LIGHT AND HER ENTOURAGE TO DO SO.”

Eve turned to me. “So we just sit here and wait then?”

“Oh, Tower’s will no!” I blurted. “We need to get to the Tumor room as fast as we can, our presence there at the end is absolutely paramount.”

“Right.” Eve shook her head. “I think I see what you had to deal with.”

Renee shrugged. “Yeah. I have the sinking feeling it’s only going to get worse.”

“GO FORTH, HEROES. TO THE TUMOR AND YOUR DESTINY. BE PREPARED FOR THE UNEXPECTED.”

Eve was about to say thanks – but something shot across her mind. “…I dreamed about the Green Sun. On the ride here…”

“Celestia had dreams like that,” Corona said. “You have her essence.”

“I know, I’ve had visions before, but why…?”

“BECAUSE THE TIME HAS COME, WHY ELSE?”

I put a hoof on Eve. “We need to go, Eve. I know the way. Follow me.”

All of us ran, leaving Neoan behind, alone with his incomprehensible thoughts.
Vriska, Jotaro, Nova, Allure, Rainbow, and Applejack appeared in an empty room on the Combine station. Maybe it was the bridge? They had no idea. They didn’t take the time to think about it either.

Nova checked her screen. “Huh… There are a lot of alarms going off.”

“What kind of alarms?” Rainbow asked.

“The ‘something is about to go boom in a way I can’t understand so I’ll just throw a lot of unknown alerts at you’ alarms.”

“Aradia gave you that,” Vriska said, gaze becoming distant. “It should be able to figure out what’s going on…” She shook her head. “Find the source! Whatever’s causing it!”

“I don’t know!” Nova blurted, scrambling through all the data. “All I know is that there’s something, and it’s resonating with the universe, and it’s getting stronger!”

“Then it’s time to cash in some luck,” Vriska muttered. She closed her eyes and started spinning, pointing her finger. Wherever she stopped would be-

She tripped, her luck dropping considerably. Her sword fell out of her other hand and embedded itself in the ground right next to her neck. “Fuck, too low.”

Jotaro thought otherwise. He punched a hole in the ground right where the sword point landed, taking them to the level below.

“This isn’t it…” Vriska said, putting the weapon scope to her eye. “Not it… Not it…”

Jotaro punched down another level. “Now?”

“No no no…” Vriska scowled. “We don’t have much time, I know it. But where i… duh.” She pointed the scope down – and saw it. She gaped.

“What?” Applejack asked.

“Three more floors Jotaro,” Vriska told him.

Jotaro didn’t need to be told twice. He punched all the way down three floors. In front of them was a large door with a spirograph on it.

Vriska moved to kick it open – but it slid right open for them. The room was impossibly dark, and the floating platforms were interesting to say the least, but Vriska didn’t give a rip. She flew over to the black and white orb in the center.

She knew exactly what it was.

The Tumor.

“Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck…” Vriska muttered, putting her hands to her head. “This is bad on so many levels…”

“Can you explain?” Nova asked.

“Think universe bomb, except worse,” Vriska said. She noticed that there were floating computer consoles next to the tumor. “…There might be something here though. Nova, start interfacing with this technology. I’m probably about to turn on a lot of alarms…” She reached out with her hands and grabbed the prickly surface of the Tumor. She tore it in half – one black side, one white, letting the
two halves fall into the nothingness below.

Inside was a machine. The machine consisted of a platform with three sections. The outer two sections held tremendous glass tubes. The one on the left was tinged red, the one on the right tinged blue. They appeared to be filled with stars at first, but closer inspection revealed every single light to be a galaxy. Each tube connected to an entire universe.

In between the tubes was an icosahedron. One of the triangular faces was a screen with a timer on it. 3:19.

“We don’t have that long to stop this thing,” Vriska said. “Nova, got anything?”

“All I’ve got so far is ‘universe selection program’!”

“That’ll do!” Vriska said, checking it. “Let’s see… I don’t know what the universe in the red tube is… Uh… Right, uninhabited rock, failed session, not worth my time. Blue tube… Of course the blue tube is fucking Farpoint.”

“Farpoint?” Applejack blurted.

“Yes! When this thing goes off it’s currently taking all of Farpoint with it!” She grabbed her hair. “Gah, this is why everything was so easy! They needed a universe that went through Sburb to fuel this thing, and when we proved to be just a little too much hassle for some shiny yellow rocks they just threw Farpoint in to fuel the flames. They’ve been letting us walk around like big heroes because they really didn’t care anymore – they were just going to blow us up!”

“Vriska, it’s a universe selection program,” Nova said. “Just switch it to something else!”

“Right, right…” Vriska tapped some buttons and brought up a menu of many other universes. “Find an uninhabited one.”

“There,” Nova said, pointing at a universe that was marked ‘lifeless’. “That should do it.”

The universe in the blue tube shifted, changing to show another arrangement of galaxies.

Vriska began to sweat. “That doesn’t help us. We’re still in here…”

“Can we just leave the room?” Allure asked.

“It’ll engulf at least the entirety of this station. Do you think we can get back to the top and figure out a reverse teleport in… two minutes?”

“We can try!” Rainbow said, grinning as she landed next to her.

“No, you can’t,” I said, walking into the room with the rest of them – Eve, O’Neill, Flutterfree, Corona, Pinkie, and Renee. “Multiple reasons. The most practical being that the Combine remotely blocked teleportation once they realized you were messing with this. Really, the fact that you got here at all was an oversight on their part.”

“It’s handy to have a Prophet around to create convenient oversights,” Pinkie offered.

“So what, we’re just going to die here!” Vriska blurted. “Whoop-de-do, we saved the universe! Except this Tumor is still going off and it’s still going to do gog knows what!”

“We’re not going to die here,” I said, glancing at Pinkie and Eve. “…Or if we do, I know for certain
it won’t be permanent. This is not the end of the story, even if it may feel like it. I Pinkie Promise.”

Vriska’s knuckles paled. “…That’s it? Some assurance?”

I put my hoof out, pointing at Vriska. “You’ve still got over a minute to try something, Vriska. You can still change something. You’re the one with the power here.”

Vriska stared at me. “…You’re just saying that, aren’t you? You know how this ends.”

“…Not exactly.”

“But you know that, even though I do have the choice, one of the results ends up happening?”

“…Yes,” I said. “I know what happens.”

Vriska prepared to punch me – but instead she just turned to stare at the timer on the Tumor.

Fifty seconds.

“I think I see what’s going to happen,” she said, scowling. “I see all of you. I see a pattern. I see a destiny. …Maybe.”

“You might or might not see the right one,” I told her.

“But how do I survive, Twilence?! If that fate is right, I… I… This will be Heroic and you know it!”

I held up my notebook and gave her a knowing smile. “I know how to pull a few strings, Vriska. I’m not just going to let you go like that. Not when we’re so close.”

Vriska’s eyes widened. “You don’t mean…”

“Don’t ask, don’t tell,” I said. “This is the point where everyone should start hugging each other to brace for what’s about to come.” I turned to stare at the Tumor, its blue and red tubes reflecting in the Eye of Rhyme.

A few pairs went off – Allure to hug Renee, Flutterfree to Eve – but Corona decided that wasn’t enough.

“Screw it, we’re all in this together. Stand as one.” She pulled all thirteen of us together into one hug – a hug that soon transformed into a defiant stand where we all stared into the threat of the tumor.

Star Platinum, Seraphim, Bacon Pancakes, Lotus Locus, Crimson Sushi, Raging Sights… They stood by us as well. Not quite heroes, but not quite separate.

0:03

“This is going to hurt a lot,” O’Neill commented.

0:02

“Just remember to giggle at the ghosty,” Pinkie suggested.

0:01

“I love you all,” Eve said. “Whatever happens.”

0:00
Two universes, abandoned universes of failed Sburb sessions as far as the Combine were concerned, were destroyed. The Combine unleashed universe-destroying technologies in them to fuel the Tumor, for it could not destroy them itself. The Combine station had intended to shoot a reality cascade into the universe it was in, but Vriska had taken care of that. Farpoint would not be fuel for the Tumor’s fire.

The other two were. As their very physical laws fell apart at the seams, instead of falling into the Sea of Infinite Possibility to be forgotten, they fell into the eldritch internal workings of the Tumor and fused into one object – an object that was its own universe.

The Combine station was completely engulfed in the explosion of the Tumor, killing anything inside that hadn’t already been dead. A green globe of fire erupted from the station, expanding to a size larger than most universes. And yet, it only appeared as a green speck of light to Anna and Affix. Just another light in the sky.

A light in the sky that could be seen in every universe it connected to. Farpoint. Worlds near Farpoint. Combine worlds connected to the two universes that had been eaten. Worlds once thought lost in the depths of Paradox Space.

On a world lost for so long, a chalk-white skinned human woman in a black cloak flashed green for a moment. The sensation sent chills up her spine.

Near the Green Sun, planes of existence split off into new universes – physically connected to the Green Sun, but yet of different physical properties. It recreated the worlds it was designed to exist in – black, formless voids where time was space and space was time, but neither were true at certain apexes. Bubbles began to form in these darknesses, like dreams…

Bubbles that soon coalesced into one once they realized there was no longer enough space for them apart, only together. In the center of this central bubble, a dark vortex swapped inside out – and vanished completely.

The Combine didn’t waste any time moving in. Gone were the simple biomechanical ships the Merodi had seen in their struggles. In their place were ships the size of solar systems, crafted with stars at their center, the fleshy-mechanical masses burning in the light of their own power, and becoming stronger because of it.

The Green Sun was important enough to draw the attention of the true Combine presence. They were more than willing to devote more resources to this great creation than anything else in their civilization’s long history.

But to say they were the only ones interested would be foolish. In the light of the Green Sun, an enemy the Combine had spent centuries creating loomed in the darkness – the form of Neoan, the Noble Horrorterror. Alone, the full might of the Combine would have been able to take him.

He was not alone. The re-creation of the Green Sun had sent ripples throughout the multiverse, alerting every Horrorterror who cared about the sudden resurgence of their past mistake and tragedy. The fleshy, horrendous masses of eldritch power dropped into the Green Sun’s new cluster, standing opposite the Combine’s stellar constructions.

The Green Sun sat in the middle, with the bubble of dreams ‘orbiting’ it closely, watching, waiting to see what the two multiversal giants would do.
Every god-tier player of Sburb had a clock tied to their very life force. This was an absolute rule of Sburb, broken only once in the entire history of the Horrorterror experiment.

Vriska was no exception to this.

Every time she – or any of the others, such as Aradia – died, their clock would begin to tick. The physical location of the clock did not matter. Vriska could have been in a quarantined universe within a black hole and her clock would still know.

Currently, Vriska’s clock sat in a hall of similar clocks, all gathered together in a hall of green. It was one of two such clocks with the symbol shared by all players of Light, and it was the only clock currently ticking.

Every one of the clocks took the appearance of a grandfather clock with a great swinging pendulum. With every tick, a single needle connected to the pendulum moved to the opposite side of the weight, reaching from one end to another, swinging metronome-like in front of the sun of Light.

One side let out a purple glow when the needle reached it, the sign of a Just death.
The other was soft and golden, the sign of a Heroic death.

The middle was where the needle would land if a death was neither Just nor Heroic, triggering the revival subroutines inherent in Vriska’s very being.

The clock’s machinations calculated every little detail it could, drawing everything together into a final verdict on the question it had been posed.

Was it time for Vriska Serket to die?

The clock began to creak, slowing the motion of the pendulum with the needle nearing the Heroic side of the clock face. She had saved an entire universe from destruction within a Tumor, and despite her reservations, she had been willing to risk it all. It was time to end her.

However, as advanced a piece of technology the clock was, there were ways to cheat it.

For instance, if, say, a minor earthquake were to occur because a certain purple alicorn wrote a story about a bunch of kids blowing something up nearby…

Well, the needle would be forced back to the middle. The calculation would be altered slightly enough to create a neutral death.
And Vriska would continue…

A reversal of a different fate her clock had experienced in another time.

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Vriska woke up, the familiar feeling of a revival coursing through her muscles.

Twilence came through, she thought with a smile.

She grunted, pulling herself into a sitting position and flapping her wings.

The first thing she saw was the Green Sun dominating the otherwise black, starless sky above her.

The second thing she saw was a giant white artifact that resembled a house – similar in arrangement to the screens she had seen in the exile command station not too long ago. This house only had four segments under the roof, though – and all four of them glowed a brilliant white.

“The House Juju…” she said, standing up. “It’s still here…”

She took a step forward – and tripped on the unconscious form of Eve. She fumbled, managing to keep her footing. After realizing Eve was there, she saw all eleven of the others lying unconscious around the House Juju in a perfect circle – Corona, Renee, Pinkie, Nova, Jotaro, Flutterfree, Rainbow, Applejack, Allure, O’Neill, and myself. We all looked just as we had before being completely vaporized in the explosion, albeit unconscious.

She looked at us, at the House Juju, and then the ground. Then, with a nagging feeling in the back of her mind, she turned around.

Standing there were hundreds – no thousands – of teenage trolls with every blood color on the hemospectrum, a handful of humans among their number - though these humans had chalk-white skin rather than a usual tone. The eyes of everyone in the army had no pupils or irises, instead taking
the form of empty white orbs.

Every last one of them was a ghost.

It was the army of ghosts that had helped her face Lord English over nine hundred years ago.

“What the motherglubbin shell is goin’ on here!?” The lead troll asked – a fuchsia-blooded royal troll holding a golden dual-tipped trident. She sported two long braids of hair that accentuated her fin-like ears. Next to her was another fuchsia troll holding an identical trident, wearing a colorful dress of greens, blues, and pinks, a pair of goggles covering her eyes.

Vriska took a moment to take the army in and laughed. “Oh, you have no idea how long it’s been!”

“You’re dam right I don’t!” The lead fuchsia shouted. “You set that house down, things explode, big green and ugly disappears, and then suddenly you’re in your god-tier rags with twelve randos! Who are these horses!?”

“Not all of us are horses,” O’Neill muttered, grabbing his head. “I have the worst headache.”

“Fine, a bunch of horses, couple humans, and what I can only assume is an angel or somefin. You need to start talkin’ girlfrond, or else I’mma FORK SOME BITCHES!”

This shout woke up the rest of the ‘randos’ around the house Juju. Corona was ready for a fight, hands surrounded in magic.

“Woah woah woah, everyone calm down!” Vriska said, hands up. “We’re all friends here!”

“Are we?” the fuschia asked, pointing forward with her golden trident. “’Cus I’m in a forkin’ mood.”

Vriska facepalmed. “We do not need to be forking any bitches, Meenah.”

“Yeah, that’s rude!” the other fuchsia troll added, putting her hands on her hips. “We need to handle the situation diplomatically!”
“Can it, Feferi,” Meenah muttered. “I’m the one in charge of this boat.”

“I thought you and Vriska shared the command?”

“Vriska’s being weird, her commander license is bein’ reevaluated.”

“I’ll explain everything!” Vriska shouted, waving her arms. “Just shut up first! Gog, I forgot how annoying all of you were. LISTEN UP!”

Everyone turned to look at her. Weather any of the muttering trolls were actually listening was up for debate, but she decided to go ahead regardless.

“So, here’s the deal. Ghost army? We beat Lord English over nine hundred years ago from my perspective. All the dream bubbles were sealed away in that black hole sun thing, freezing you all in this moment right here. Lord English was imprisoned in the House Juju during that moment because he was weakened without the Green Sun. Now, you’ve been brought back because there were some morons called the Combine who decided to mess with something they really shouldn’t mess with and created a new Green Sun.” She pointed up at the visible Combine fleet in the sky.

A human hand shot up in the middle of the troll ghost army.

“Yes?” Vriska said, clearly impatient, ignoring all the other grunts and rude words coming from the rest of the trolls.

“Hey, uh, Dead Dave here. I know, I know, the Enemy, but let’s forget about that right now.” He wore round shades and red robes with similar designs to Aradia, letting everyone know he was a Cool Dude. “Half-Life 2 Combine? That’s a fucking video game enemy.”

“And the entirety of our adventures were recorded in a webcomic called Homestuck,” Vriska deadpanned. “Don’t be surprised.”

The Dead Dave blinked. “I knew it.”
“Kinda figured you did,” Vriska said. “Moving on, yes, Combine, assholes.”

“Wait a minute!” Feferi asked. “How exactly did the freezing work? Not all of us were in the same place!”

Vriska took a breath – had she been her old self, she would have started screaming at them. But she took control of her anger, let her air out calmly, and smiled. “I don’t really know exactly how it worked. What I do know was that you were sealed away, and now you’re not. And while all the ghosts were sealed away, those of us who were living were sent cascading across the multiverse for eons. That would be me, Aradia, and Davepeta.”

“Are they here too?” a robotic Aradia ghost asked.

“Aradia’s in another part of the multiverse,” Vriska said. “She’ll get here eventually, I’m sure. And Davepeta… They didn’t make it.”

There were collective gasps from Dave and Nepeta ghosts.

Vriska nodded. “Yeah… It sucked. A lot. But that explains what happened to you. As for who these twelve losers are, I’ll start by saying you can trust them. They’re good friends.”

“Since when do you make good friends!?!” a random troll blurted.

“I’m going to guess that was a Karkat,” Vriska assumed, rolling her eyes. “Nine hundred years can do a lot to change a person, let’s just say. I wandered for a long time and eventually joined their little society. That purple horse there is Evening Sparkle, Overhead of Relations and Princess of Sappiness. She’s the most ‘in charge’. They’re willing to help us survive whatever the hell the Combine up there are planning.”

“And the Horrorterrors,” another Aradia said.

“Yes, they’re up there too,” Vriska confirmed. “But first, introductions!” She started introducing her friends to the trolls, quickly going over their names and who they were to get it out of the way. “Gah, why are there so many of you?”
“Numbers,” I offered.

“Right, right… Anyway, these here are the trolls. I can’t possibly introduce them all, so… Let’s just go with those of you that are in front.” She pointed at Meenah. “This here is Meenah. She’s awesome,” Vriska said, giving Meenah a fistbump. “She likes fish puns too much.”

“Glub,” Meenah said.

“Mhm. This is Feferi, she’s less awesome and more cute. She also likes fish puns.”

“Glub glub!” Feferi trilled, twirling her trident.

“Right. And that over there…” she blinked slowly as she took in a bronze-blood troll. “This is Tavros. I killed him.”

“Um…” he spoke in an uncertain voice. “That’s behind us, you know?”

Vriska turned to me. “…Do I have time?”

I nodded. “Go ahead.”

Vriska turned to Tavros and bowed her head. “I’m sorry.”

Tavros blinked. “W-what?”

“I’m sorry. I know I said sorry for killing you before, but it was dismissive, and that was wrong. And I’m sorry for a whole lot more. I’m sorry for treating you like absolute shit. I’m sorry for taking advantage of your disability. I’m sorry for trying to make you strong by being a complete asshole. I’m sorry for throwing you off that cliff. I’m sorry for not respecting you even after you died. Being a wimp isn’t an offense.”

All the trolls stared at Vriska in disbelief, unable to form words.
Vriska rubbed the back of her head. “As I said. Nine hundred years. Tends to tone down the bitchiness.”

“No kidding…” Meenah said. “That was… sappy.”

“I can be sappy if I want,” Vriska asserted.

“What ever happened about being strong enough to do what’s needed?” Meenah asked.

“You can be strong and not be a heartless bitch. Case in point, Jotaro over there. And hey, I still have all the irons in the fire.”

“All of them?”

“All of them.” Vriska dusted her hands off. “Anyway, other apologies… Feferi, I… guess I’m sorry for ignoring you?”

Feferi shrugged. “Eh, I’ll take it.”

Meenah glared at Vriska. “Don’t you dare get all sappy on me you jellyfish.”

“You’re awesome and I don’t need to apologize to you for anything.”

Meenah chuckled. “That’s dam right!”

“And as for the rest of you!” Vriska shouted to the crowd. “I have admitted that I am a bitchy asshole. Got it?”

“Got it! On tape!” a random troll shouted.
Vriska nodded. “Good. I have more apologies to give out, but those are to people who are still living. Sorry Terezi ghosts, you’re gonna have to wait.”

A few of them looked at her in surprise, but at this point most of the troll army had stopped paying direct attention to her and began muttering (or shouting) among themselves. That was trolls for you.

Meenah clapped slowly and sarcastically. “Greeeeeat. Now that feelings-thirty is over, what’s up for forkin’?”

“Now, we g-” Vriska stopped whatever she was about to say when she spied a particular face in the crowd. “You.”

An ‘orange’ skinned human ghost in a green T-shirt noticed her attention was on him. “Shit, shitshitshit…”

“ANDREW HUSSIE YOU ORANGE FUCKTARD!” Vriska shouted, dropping her previously calm demeanor and charging at him, blade drawn. *This* grabbed the attention of the ghost army again.

Hussie started running across the dusty ground, but Vriska easily caught up with him and drove him to the ground, driving her sword into him over and over again.

“VRISKA!” Renee shouted, horrified.

“Don’t get your horn in a twist,” Meenah muttered. “You can’t kill ghosts with a sword. You can hurt ‘em though.”

Pinkie gave Meenah a bag of popcorn.

“…I like you.”

“Thanks!” Pinkie beamed.
“This is for killing almost all your characters multiple times!” Vriska yelled. “This is for making us deal with time shenanigans I’m not sure even you understood! This is for that stupid epilogue you still haven’t written far as I can tell! This is for creating Lord English! You weren’t some oblivious Prophet, you knew exactly what you were doing.”

“Andrew Hussie: abscond!” Hussie declared, suddenly not under Vriska’s sword and instead running away across the wasteland around the House Juju.

“GET BACK HERE!” Vriska shouted.

Meenah raised a hand. “Hold up. He created Lord English?”

“He’s the orange fucktard who wrote the thing that defined all our lives, SO YES.”

There was silence in the ghost army.

“I say we get him,” the Dead Dave suggested.

“Eh, go ahead, I don’t care,” Meenah shrugged.

About a sixth of the ghosts dropped what little they were doing and charged after him. Andrew Hussie was soon tackled, bound, and gagged.

Vriska smirked. “Ah, that warms my heart.”

“The fact that you have a heart is bizarre,” Meenah said. “Still can’t get over it.”

“You will or you won’t,” Vriska said, dismissively. “Anyway, uh… Fuck, I don’t know what I was going to do next.”

“We should look to the skies now,” I suggested. “The Combine and Horrorterrors are going to start talking to each other. Feferi, you have a connection to the Horrorterrors.”
Feferi processed the statement for a moment and nodded.

“Mind if we tap into your mind to broadcast what they’re saying so everyone can hear?”

“Sure thing!” Feferi said, grinning. “I wonder what this is gonna feel like?”

“Not that weird, actually,” Corona said, placing a hand on Feferi. “Huh, you’re really happy. …I think you remind me of someone.”

“Really? Huh, I dunno why. Glub glub!”

Corona held her free hand up. Raging Sights beeped and began to broadcast what was going on in the multi-universal mesh above them…

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The Combine sent a small ship toward the Green Sun. Their shields flashed purple and then blue as they compensated for the differing flows of time and space between their original position and the Green Sun. In Paradox Space, straight lines were never straight, so the Combine had to make the line straight by force.

Then a Horrorterror moved through Paradox Space and appeared in front of the Combine ship. “NO,” it declared.

You are interfering in a legitimate Combine experiment. This Green Sun is our creation and interaction with it will not be tolerated.

“THE GREEN SUN IS OF OUR CREATION.”

There is no agreement between the Combine and the Noble Circle of Horrorterrors regarding intellectual property or otherwise.
“YOU HAVE RELEASED THINGS THAT ARE OUR CREATION.”

If you wish to claim the Dream Bubble for yourself, we are willing to part with it. But the Green Sun itself is our creation that we have spent innumerable resources on. We are not going to let such a potent power source be taken away.

“THE GREEN SUN IS TOO DANGEROUS TO EXIST WITHIN THE MULTIVERSE. AS LONG AS IT IS HERE, THERE IS A DANGER OF ANOTHER LORD ENGLISH.”

We are not attempting to create a system of self-perpetuating universe creation. All we seek is power from the Green Sun, not some short-sighted ideal. We will not be foolish enough to give the Green Sun the freedom to create that which we cannot contain.

“YOUR THINLY-VEILED INSULT HAS NOT GONE UNNOTICED. THE POINT REMAINS THAT YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE MESSING WITH. THE GREEN SUN IS A CLASS 1 CONSTRUCT, FAR BEYOND WHAT YOU CAN CREATE OR FULLY COMPREHEND. YOUR CONTROL OVER THE ELDritch IS ALSO LIMITED, A FULL UNDERSTANDING OF WHICH IS REQUIRED.”

Are you offering information?

“NO. WE ARE SIMPLY DEMANDING THAT YOU STAND DOWN AND LET US DESTROY THE GREEN SUN TO END THIS DANGEROUS RESURGENCE. IN RETURN WE WILL NOT PURSUE REVENGE FOR THE TREATMENT OF NEOAN.”

You are the enemies of progress, the definition of that which is ancient and unchanging. You cannot understand that what is dangerous must be understood for anything of value to come out of it.

“GIVE US THE GREEN SUN OR WE SHALL FORCE YOU TO DO SO.”

Do you think you can?

“We are a Class 1 Society, what do you think?”
Are you though? Our scans only pick up seven of the forty-eight Noble Horrorterrors known to comprise the Noble Circle. Are so many that apathetic? Or is it what seems more likely: you were harmed more by the Lord English incident than you let on. How many of the Noble Circle remain? Twenty? Twelve? Or is it just this seven of you left?

“IRRELEVANT. WE WILL CRUSH YOU.”

You underestimate the Combine. Everyone underestimates the Combine. You always think we just have a lot of space under our control and that our mastery over universes is limited. We are often spoken of as part of a joke, where the punchline is that we are too weak to face larger enemies. This is not the case. We simply do not see the need to waste resources fighting large enemies for minimal gain. This is not one of those times.

“YOU THINK YOU CAN COME AWAY WITH A VICTORY?”

The Noble Circle of Horrorterrors was severely weakened by the English Incident, and eldritch societies are known for healing exceedingly slowly, if at all. You will not be able to pool your resources for a full war over this Green Sun, even if it is the largest mistake of your race. We will be able to devote anything we wish, for we are fully unified under the principles of Combination.

“WE DO NOT NEED THE FULL POWER OF THE HORRORTERRORS TO FACE YOU.”

That is a theory we would love to put to the test.

“CALLING A BLUFF IS A DANGEROUS THING.”

We do not care if it is a bluff. We are taking this Green Sun. You can try to stop us if you want. We suggest you do not.

“WE ARE GOING TO DESTROY THE GREEN SUN. YOU CAN TRY TO STOP US, FOOLISH MORTALS.”

The Combine is not mortal.
“THE FAULTY INTERNAL BELIEF OF ALL MORTAL BEINGS.”

Is it war then?

“IT IS WAR.”

*Let it be known, the Combine issues a formal declaration of war on the Noble Circle of Horrorterrors over the Green Sun dispute. Your time among the elite has come to an end.* The largest Combine ship within the Green Sun’s Paradox Space charged. It was composed of twenty blue stars wrapped together with pearly white metal and flesh, the constructs coming to a sharp point that drilled through the paradoxical universe-mesh between it and the Green Sun.

The Horrorterrors attacked, moving through the inky blackness as easily as one might walk, lashing the edges of the ship.

Any hope for a curbstomp battle ended when the Horrorterror tentacles were *deflected*, and one smaller Horrorterror went up in impossible blue flames, disintegrating into nothing.

The Combine-Horrorterror war had begun.

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“Holy glub,” Feferi said, jaw dropping. “What the shell did we just walk into!?”

Meenah grinned. “I have no idea, but I know I want a piece of that action.”

Every pony, human, and troll turned to look at the fuchsia-blood with bewildered expressions.

“I say we take the Green Sun for ourselves,” Meenah said.

“…Are you insane?” Allure blurted. “We can’t do anything up there! We’d be like ants trying to insert ourselves into a nuclear war!”
A multitude of other ghosts made their agreement with Allure well known through shouts, insults, and petty jabs of dubious wit.

“You’re forgetting one little detail,” Meenah said. “Ghosts can’t die.”

“Yes you can!” Vriska blurted. “Did you not forget why Lord English was so terrifying?”

“Lord Language ain’t here,” Meenah said, pointing at the House Juju. “He’s in there, swimmin’ with the fishes. In all our time walking Paradox Space, has anyone here been double killed by a Horrorterror?”

“Of course not!” a grumpy troll with nubby horns shouted. “If they died, they wouldn’t be here to tell you about it."

“Fine, lemme rephrase that,” Meenah muttered. “How many of you have tried to fight a Horrorterror?”

Several hands went up. Not a lot, but enough.

“Right, and were they able to kill you?”

Everybody shook their heads.

“What did happen?”

The Dead Dave spoke up. “There were a lot of me losing, then I was back in the Dream Bubble. Clinically insane for a few ‘years’ or whatever. I got better.”

“There you go. All they can do is drive you insane, kapeesh?”

“Some of us like our sanity!” a troll shouted.
“You’re motherglubbin’ ghosts! You’ll live long enough to go sane again! I bet our new fronds have some mind-magic or whatever that’ll help too!”

Corona raised a hand. “Doesn’t always work, but yeah, I can probably do something to keep anyone from staying stark-raving mad.”

“But the Horrorterrors created the Dream Bubbles!” Feferi said. “They could shut us down!”

“I think they’re a little busy for that,” Meenah said, gesturing at the explosions in the sky.

“Yes, please dial a universe with Seraphim where ghosts cannot exist,” Vriska said. “Remove a leg or something.”

Eve blinked. “Uh…”

“I need to stop this idiocy.”

Eve summoned Seraphim and tried to dial a universe – then stared in shock at the Green Sun. “It’s… It’s blocking me!”

“The fuck?” Vriska blurted.

“The Green Sun. Seraphim can only see universes it connects to!”

Vriska executed a well-timed double facepalm combo. “Aaaaaaaaaagh. The point is there are universes you could be dumped into and not be able to exist. The Combine can probably do it.”

“Actually…” Nova said, tapping her screen. “I only see Combine ships coming in. I’ve not seen a Combine ship or Horrorterror leave.”

“…We’re in a quarantine,” Corona said. “The Green Sun and all its universes have been sealed off!”
You can come in but you can’t come out!”

“Who would do that? Did the Green Sun do that?” Renee asked.

I shook my head. “That would be the rest of the Class 1 Societies, ready to dump this entire battle into the Sea of Infinite Possibility should something like Lord English rise again. First sign of trouble, everything stops existing.”

Vriska blinked. “Fuck, we’re in some real deep shit aren’t we?”

A ghost thought now was a good time to interject. “The proper term is OUR SHIT IS SO DEEPLY FUCKED YOU CAN’T EVEN COMPREHEND IT!”

“The deepest I think any of us have ever been in,” I said. “Yes, that includes myself.”

“So that’s why we need to bring the fight to them!” Meenah said. “We can’t let evil Combination aliens get that kind of power, and if the Horrorterrors destroy it we are probably going to stop existin’! So we go up there and beat the shit out of them and claim it for ourselves!”

“Fine, you can’t die,” Vriska said, folding her arms. “What exactly do you plan to do to them? Splat against their windshields over and over?”

Meenah held out her arms and switched into her god-tier outfit – gray robes with the flowing green symbol of Life on them. “We’re keyed into Sburb, remember? The very Aspects of reality flow within us.” She gestured at the army of trolls. “Look at it all! Breath! Heart! Life! Hope! Light! Mind! Blood! Rage! Void! Doom! Space! Time! We have god-tier ghosts here that can bend every last one of those to their will. We were able to hold our own against Lord English – a being that the Horrorterrors were useless against. We are drops from the same ocean that green asshole was from. Let’s show the Horrorterrors that their little ‘experiment’ has a few more surprises in store!”

If there was one thing trolls liked, it was fighting. The speech was exactly what they needed to get them cheering and waving their weapons around excitedly.

“I’m sold,” Corona said, walking up. “Count me in.”
“You sure you got what it takes?” Meenah asked.

Corona spread her wings and lit herself on fire, magical rings surrounding her on all sides. “You’d be surprised.”

“Niiiiiiice. Can I count on the rest of you to help?”

Eve blinked. “Not in a direct conflict, but you’re Vriska’s friends, we’ll do what we can. Some of us will fight with you directly. Others…”

“Will get help,” Vriska finished. “Eve, you mentioned that the only connections you had were to universes the Green Sun was connected to?”

“Uh, yeah. Most of them appear to just be different ‘universes’ within the inky blackness above us. I could probably dial us to many different locations within the space. …Though I can’t be certain about the actual spatial distance. I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“I’m willing to bet it’ll be connected to every universe that had a connection to Sburb in the past,” Vriska said. “Including Earth C.”

“…Where?” Meenah said, cocking her head.

“Where the successful session went,” Vriska said. “…Home.”

“What can they offer that we don’t already have? Look at that crowd, I’ve got every one of those human grubs in there at least once.”

“Not John,” Vriska said. “Not the one with the retcon power. It’ll help you a lot.”

Meenah shrugged. “Eh, fine by me if you wanna go huntin’ for extra backup. Long as I get to skewer some squiddles.”

Vriska nodded. “Nova, I’ll need you to scan for dimensional signatures.”
Nova saluted. “Got it.”

“Anyone else who wants to come, let’s go. I would say we need to move fast, but with all the time and space manipulators here the idea of ‘fast’ is probably meaningless.”

I shook my head. “Metatime still applies, so you should get moving.”

“Coming?”

“Me? Oh, no, I’m sticking around to go with the idea Eve has in a couple seconds.”

“Had,” Eve corrected. “The idea I had and just wasn’t talking about because I was waiting for the right moment.”

There was silence in the Dream Bubble.

“…Well?” Meenah asked.

“Right, right,” Eve cleared her throat. “If you’re back, the House Juju is back, and the Dream Bubble as a whole is back, what if other parts of Sburb are back? Ancient remnants of Class 1 technology? We should look for those – they could be useful in maybe getting us out of this mess. I’ll lead the group.”

Meenah nodded. “So, lemme get this straight. We got a team getting’ reinforcements, got a team goin’ for weapons, and then the rest of us are just going to blow stuff up?”

Everyone nodded.

“Good, I was beginnin’ to think there wouldn’t be anyone left to blow stuff up. EVERYBODY SCATTER!”
The Merodi and ghost army scrambled while universes fell apart above them.

Eve looked at her troop of people who had opted to explore for Sburb remnants. Me, Flutterfree, Renee, and a handful of troll ghosts – mostly different versions of Aradia.

It appeared that Aradia had died many, many times during the time she and Vriska were in Sburb, which Renee supposed wasn’t all that surprising. What did surprise her was the fact that most of them were emotionless robots. Renee had known Aradia spent most of her time with Vriska as a ghost, but she had not known much of that had been spent possessing a robotic body.

The robots weren’t very talkative and were somewhat menacing, so there was silence for the most part as we floated through the eldritch blackness of the Green Sun’s Paradox Space. Spacetime itself was an uncertain construct there. We could always see the Green Sun wherever we drifted, but its location changed, as did the location of the Combine and Horrorterrors – though they were always distant.

Which was good, Eve had no plans of engaging in transdimensional combat if Seraphim wasn’t working properly.

The location of the Green Sun shifted again as we entered another area of Paradox Space. At first the experience had been disorienting, but now that everyone was used to it the sensation was no different than taking a sharp turn onto another street.

This time, however, there was something a little different.

“I see something!” Flutterfree said, pointing with a wing into the distance. “It’s blue!”

An Aradia put a hand up to her eyes. “That looks like it might be a Skaia… Is there still a session running in Paradox Space?”

“Explain?” Renee pleaded.
“Every active session of Sburb has a blue ‘planet’ in the center called Skaia that runs most everything, if you want it horribly simplified. That right there is the right color, though I can’t imagine a session surviving the destruction of the Sburb protocols...”

“Can we even get to it?” Eve asked, narrowing her eyes. “It looks pretty far away. Straight lines aren’t straight lines here.”

I pointed at the blue dot. “We won’t know if we’ll make it or not until we try. So let’s just try.” I flew forward.

We shifted through Paradox Space again. Instead of getting sent further from the blue dot we were suddenly there. The blue light of Skaia glowed bright, revealing the scene of destruction around it.

There had clearly once been numerous planets orbiting around this blue light – but now there was only one amber planet with a neon glow. The rest of the space around Skaia was rubble from worlds destroyed long ago.

“...This session didn’t go well...” the living Aradia observed. “What would destroy all the planets but one...?”

Eve furrowed her brow. “I don’t know. But I know we’re going to check it out.”

“No you’re not,” a deep, gravelly voice said. The group turned to see a black humanoid creature in a fashionable similarly-colored hat. He was a creature who had a carapace rather than skin, though much of him had been replaced with cybernetic parts – including his entire lower half, parts of his face, and one of his arms. In his hands he held a large, golden staff. With a flick of his wrist the staff became an assault rifle aimed right at Eve.

“No more ghosts are going to mess with my Medium. Get out.”

“What if I told you some of us weren’t ghosts?” Eve said, putting on a calm smile for the cyborg carapacian.

“Nothing else comes from the darkness aside from squiddly monstrosities,” he muttered.
Eve pointed at her eyes. “Look, I have pupils, and irises. I’m not dead.”

“Then that makes this gun a whole lot more effective in convincin’ you to leave, don’t it?”

Eve sighed. “Look, we want to look at this interesting place. In return… we can tell you what’s going on with the Green Sun and all those big explosions in the distance.”

To punctuate her point, one of the Combine ships exploded when one of its internal stars gave out. The supernova spread out through Paradox Space, which meant it showed up in at least six different locations as it spread. Eve raised an eyebrow.

“…A temptin’ offer. But unless you tell me you aren’t here for any plunderin’, you still gotta go.”

“All we’re looking for is remnants of Sburb game technology that might help with… those explosions up there. We would be willing to trade if you have such things.”

The carapacian lowered his gun. “Tradin’, huh? Fine, I’ll bite, don’t get anything new in here ever. ‘cept ghosts. And after the second one I grew tired of their undyin’ nature real quick.”

“How long have you been here?” Aradia asked. “Ghosts and dream bubbles rarely interact with active game sessions.”

“This ain’t no active session,” he muttered. “Name’s Spades Slick. Welcome to Pyramid Hell. Everythin’ else around is useless rubble. There are two rules here. First rule: no ghosts. All those robots stay out here. Second rule: I’m the only one that gets to hurt people here. You skirt that rule, you find out why I’m allowed to hurt people. Usually by stabbing, but as you can see I’m not below filling them with lead or a good ol’ fashioned thwackin’.”

“Gotcha,” Eve said, smiling. She turned to me – I nodded to let her know it was fine.

Spades led Eve, myself, Flutterfree, and Renee through the field of ancient rubble down to the planet Pyramid Hell, properly known as Lopan.

Lopan was a planet covered in amber pyramid structures, all of which glowed with neon at their tips.
Eve realized this ‘planet’ actually had no right to be called such – it may have had normal gravity, but it was only a few miles in diameter by her estimate.

At the foot of one of the large pyramids was a town filled with a few different races – white and black versions of Spades’ race living alongside brightly colored reptiles and amphibians. They seemed comfortable enough, but most walked with their heads down, expressions dour.

“…What happened here?” Flutterfree asked. “Everything looks fine, but…”

“Did you see the debris?” Spades asked. “There used to be eight planets.”

“…Oh.”

Spades took them to a town square, to a statue with five figures on it standing in a battle stance. One of the figures was Spades himself. One of the others was a smaller black carapacian holding a flag and wearing a sash that said ‘MAYOR’. Standing behind him, taller than all the figures was a cross between a white carapacian and a dog wielding a sword - two brilliant wings coming out of her back. In the middle were two human teenagers – one with a long hood that swirled in the wind, another with triangular anime shades similar in shape to Corona’s. The hooded one wielded a hammer while the other tightly held a katana.

The statue had an inscription.

*The Heir of Breath, the Prince of Heart, the Peregrine Mendicant, Spades Slick, and our illustrious Mayor prepare to face the Condesce.*

“…So you all went to fight an enemy?” Renee said. “The one who blew up all the planets?”

Spades nodded. “Ridiculously overpowered fish lady. Liked puns and glitter. It felt good to run her through.” He folded his arms. “Only the Mayor and I survived the final battle.”

“I’m so sorry,” Eve said.

“It gets worse than that,” Spades muttered. “The windy kid had this power that let him jump around
time and space out of order even more than usual. Before he kicked the bucket he went to the future and pulled every string he could to let Sburb think he had won.” Spades took one look around and blasted off into the sky.

Eve flew after him. “And then what?”

“I’m getting’ there, be patient,” he muttered, leading her closer to Skaia. Near the edge of the shining bubble of clouds, there was a circular metallic platform. On one edge was a structure that looked like the House Juju, except it was black, lifeless, and had a single door on the front of it.

“He brought us here,” Spades said. “Said he’d found a way to win the game for us. Give us somewhere to go. He lit up Skaia with the creation of a new universe. I don’t pretend to understand how many timelines or alternate universes he had to go through to make it happen. He personally threw a frog into the center of Skaia and watched it birth a new universe.”

“Threw a frog…?” Renee asked.

I shushed her – the specifics of how Sburb manufactured a new universe weren’t important.

“Then he vanished. Never did get to tell him he shouldn’t go back, shouldn’t let himself die.” Spades shrugged. “Point is the Mayor trusted him completely and led a team right through that door.” Spades pointed at the black house. “They went to the new universe. And then it was just gone. No Bilious Slick, no universe, no more Mayor.” Spades shook his head. “That left me with a bunch of moronic reptiles and carapacians. We had one planet, so we did what we could. Hasn’t been going well, as you can plainly see.”

Eve smiled sadly. “We can get you out of here. We have ways to other universes.”

“Likely sto-”

Eve created a portal with Seraphim back to the Dream Bubble. “Currently our access is limited because of the Green Sun, but I can get you to the place the ghosts live right now.”

Spades stared at the portal. “Good enough for me. You can have whatever you want if you can get us out of this hellhole. Except my weapon. That’s mine. So are my knives.”
Eve nodded. “For now, I just want to examine this platform. I have a feeling it holds many secrets… Almost like I just know there’s knowledge inside it for me to uncover… I’ve had intuitions before, but this is something else…”

“Huh, strange, I’ve been having a similar feeling,” Renee said. “Thought it’s more about these poor people and all their brokenness… I feel like we can fix it.”

~~~

Vriska, Allure, Jotaro, Nova, and Applejack walked through the Dream Bubble. None of the ghosts had decided to follow them, since none of them really had any reason to go to a world they didn’t even know existed until Vriska showed up. As far as the ghost army was concerned, Earth C didn’t have anything for them. The troll ghosts had all their friends here, and the human ghosts didn’t much want to go to the world where they were alive, reminding them of whatever failure it was that got them dead in the first place.

Not to mention the fact that, really, all Vriska needed to get the job done was Nova and her magic. The others were just there to keep her company – which she appreciated.

Except maybe for Applejack.

“So, mind explainin’ to me exactly what the plan is?”

Vriska nodded. “Right. So, Dream Bubbles 101 – when Sburb was actually active, Meenah, one of the ‘first’ players, negotiated a settlement with the Horrorterrors that all dead Sburb players would be able to live on as ‘ghosts’ in dream bubbles.” She looked like she wanted to explain it in a bit more detail and then thought better of it. “Under certain circumstances, players would be able to visit dream bubbles in their sleep. A ‘projection’ of their consciousness would appear in one of the bubbles and they would be able to interact with the Dream Bubble. There are still living players on Earth C and if we encounter any of them dreaming, I bet Nova will be able to pick up a connection back to Earth C. Then I’ll be home, I can pick up John, and we can use his overpowered abilities to break the war going on up there.”

Nova nodded. “A direct mental connection should be workable. We’re in Topeka, not trying to get to Topeka. If the analogy works.”
“It doesn’t,” Applejack said.

“Ah. Well then… We’re the ones in the weird universe. The dreamers are coming from a simple universe. Going to less complexity is easier than the other way around.”

Allure nodded. “Makes sense to me!”

Jotaro shrugged, saying nothing.

“So, here’s a question,” Applejack said. “How are we gonna find one of these dreamers?”

Vriska smirked. “That’s the fun part. In this new Paradox Space the Combine have created, there is only one Dream Bubble, the one we’re in. They’ll have to dream into this one when they do.”

“But this place is huge,” Nova said, holding out her hoof, pointing out that they had passed through the forest and were now on an expanse covered in amber pyramids shrouded in bright neon auras.

Vriska smirked. “I absorbed a truly enormous amount of luck from the ghost army.”

“Oh. So we are wanderin’ around hopin’ we run into someone,” Allure said.

“Mostly. I’m also looking for a place I think they’re likely to appear. Tell me if you see a desert filled with moody horses.”

“Funny,” Nova deadpanned.

“I’m serious. Not ponies, standard Earth horses. Hussie had a thing for them, apparently.”

Jotaro adjusted his hat. “Yare yare daze…”

“Did someone say moody horse shit?” Dead Dave said, appearing in a burst of red gears.
“More or less,” Vriska said. “Sup Strider?”

“Oh, y’know, being cool, traveling through timelines that don’t exist, hiding my amazingly awesome eyes.”

“Rainbow would like you,” Applejack observed.

“What’s not to like about this masterpiece?” Dave asked, smirking slightly.

“You said something about the horses?” Allure interrupted before anyone could answer.

“Oh, yeah, that desert’s just that way,” Dave said, pointing. “But first, I wanna know what happened to Davesp- Davepeta.”

Vriska sighed. “Davepeta lived almost as long as I did, but a few years ago their mind was taken over by a bastard named the Collector. He’s dead now, but before he got what was coming Aradia had to kill Davepeta.”

“…And there were no dream bubbles out there.”

Vriska shook her head. “I’m sorry.”

“Y’know, I liked to think there was at least one of us that escaped the fate of being doomed,” Dave said. “Guess not.”

Nova shook her head. “Davepeta lived a long, long time, conditional immortality aside. Nothing lives forever. I say that’s a pretty good run, wouldn’t you?”

“Yeah. Maybe,” Dave said. “Anyway, good luck with your moody horse shit.”

Vriska marched in the direction Dave had indicated. She heard the sound of whinnying as they
approached. *Bingo.*

They soon arrived in a desert filled with ghostly horses that were neighing in a tone that could only be described as ‘moody’.

“I don’t know what I was expecting,” Allure admitted.

“Something a little less literal?” Vriska suggested.

“…Yeah, let’s go with that.”

“So, what, he’ll just show up?” Nova asked.

“It’s how it works,” Vriska said. “This place… It has a habit of just *drawing* things.”

“Isn’t this just an image from someone’s dream?” Jotaro asked.

“Hussie’s, if anything. It might just be something random.” Vriska shrugged and spread out her arms, hoping she’d get lucky.

Naturally, she did.

There wasn’t a sound – he was just *there*. He was a human man in blue robes with the windy Breath symbol on his chest. The robes trailed off in a very long hood that waved in the wind. His eyes held bright blue pupils, making it clear that he wasn’t a ghost, and revealing to the ponies that the chalk-white skin of humans around here wasn’t a consequence of being undead, but rather their natural tone. This somewhat impressive appearance was rather jarringly interrupted by his toothy grin and nerdy glasses. “Oh, hey Vriska!”

Vriska blinked. “…That’s all you have to say to me?”

“Uh… Yeah?”
Vriska twitched in anger for a moment – but then released it. “Yep. You’re still John.” She pulled him into a hug. “Never change.”

“A-are you sure you’re Vriska!?” he said, bewildered by her sudden show of affection.

“Just shut up and enjoy the hug of a friend who’s been looking for you a long, long time…”

“Really? And here I thought we were looking for you! Or, well, Terezi was looking for you. We kinda just let her do that. Where’ve you been?”

“The multiverse,” Vriska said, smirking. “Made some friends. Say hello to a bunch of moody horses and the big guy.”

“Uh… Hi,” John said.

“Gog you are such a dork, John,” Vriska muttered, facepalming. “…It’s still good to see you though.”

“You all look like Dirk’s little ponies,” John observed.

“Don’t tell me My Little Pony exists here,” Applejack muttered.

Vriska blinked. “You know what, I think it does. Huh. Can’t believe I forgot that…”

Jotaro extended a hand, intimidating John with his stature. “Jotaro,” he said.

John met his hand. “John. But you know that.”

Jotaro was about to pull back – but something activated from within him. A purple vine shot out from his hand and wrapped around John’s. Roses burst from the purple vines, and suddenly Jotaro felt John’s very soul.
It was a very pure, if adrift spirit.

Jotaro stared at his hand. “Nani?”

“Uh... what?” John said. “And what again?”

Nova cocked her head. “…Was that Hermit Purple?”

“No…” Jotaro said, shaking his head. “Hermit Purple could never do that…” he summoned Star Platinum, just to make sure he had his Stand. “All fine…”

“...Are you, uh, doing something?” John asked.

“We can explain later,” Vriska asked. “First, you can still do that retcon thing, right?”

“Yeah,” John said. “Though not now since, well, I’m dreaming. I think. I could tr-”

“No, don’t try, we don’t need a disaster from you trying something you don’t understand,” Vriska said with a chuckle. “Just let Nova here scan you – we’ll come to you on Earth C.”

“Oh sweet! Everyone will be absolutely stoked to finally see you after so long! Terezi and Karkat will probably get mad, but-”

“Wait, Karkat’s still alive?” Vriska said. “…Wait, how are any of the non god-tiers alive after this long?”

“Oh... Vriska, it’s been a few years, but not decades.”

Vriska blinked. “John. I’ve been gone nine hundred years.”

“Huh. Thought you’d be taller then.”
Vriska glared at him. “What could cause that much of a time discrepancy?”

“Well, Dave did jump us forward a few thousand years that one time…”

“Oh.” Vriska blinked. “Not to worry! There will still be a reunion! It just… will be rather one sided.”

“Hey, I can have Da-”

“Nonono, no need for that,” Vriska said, holding up a hand. “Nova, got it?”


Vriska stepped through the portal and breathed in the fresh air. It smelled almost like every other Earth she had been on, but there was the unmistakable scent of trolls in the air. Faint, but there.

She stood in the sun, arms out, and smiled. “…Home.” A tear rolled down her cheek. She didn’t care who saw it.

John stared at the portal. “So can I walk through that or…”

“You should probably just wake up,” Allure said, hopping through the portal. “Find us after.”

“Oh. All right. Uh, can anyone stab me to wake me up?”

Vriska threw her sword back through the portal at him, winking. He vanished in a puff of light. “I enjoyed that far more than I should have.”

“He seems… clueless,” Nova observed.
“Yep, that’s John.”

“And he has the power that is going to help us face off against Horroterror and the Combine.”

“Yep.”

“That’s more than a little terrifying.”

Vriska laughed nervously, turning mind to more pleasing thoughts: home. “Gog, it looks so much better in person. Look at those buildings! The grass! The air around us!” She laughed.

Jotaro let himself smirk slightly. It looked no different from a standard Earth – grass, city, blue sky, evidence of people – but Vriska knew it was the one she’d been looking for all this time. She couldn’t let herself feel like it was ‘just another Earth’, for to her it wasn’t. It was the home she never got to visit.

Vriska smiled. “I’m going to build my house here. In the human area. Because why the fuck not.”

Nova smiled. “We’re glad for y-”

With a zap of white energy, John appeared in front of Vriska. “Hey again!”

“Oh. Welp. You ruined the moment.”

John blinked. “Moment? …Uh, sorry. I was just trying to find you. Zapped around a bit and got here. Eventually.”

“John you saw where we got off.”

“That didn’t mean I had any idea where or when it was!”
Vriska rolled her eyes. “Right. Anyway, we’ll need your retcon power for something. But you know what, that can wait. We can always return to this exact moment whenever we want.”

“Time still progresses elsewhere though,” Nova pointed out. “…Wait, right, his power supersedes that doesn’t it?”

Vriska nodded. “Most broken power I’ve ever seen in the multiverse. The ability to go anywhere and change anything regardless of metatime.”

“Aw, geez, it’s not that great…” John insisted.

“Don’t sell yourself short, Egbert,” Vriska said, giving him a noogie. “I’ve been traveling for a while. I’ve seen some pretty ridiculous stuff. That pretty much takes the cake.”

John rubbed the back of his head. “If you say so. So, uh, wha-” his phone started ringing. “Oh, excuse me.” He answered the call. “Hey, Roxy!”

There was a feminine voice on the other side of the line.

John flushed beet red. “Uh, Roxy? I would absolutely love to but, well, you se-”

She interrupted him with something unintelligible to Vriska.

“Uh, you see, Vriska came back and kinda wants my help with something? Or… Well wants my help with something later. I guess.”

There was a bunch more talking.

“…Looks like she wants to talk to you, Vriska.”

Vriska shrugged, picking up the phone. “Hey other Lalonde. ‘Sup?”
There was a girlish gasp. “Oh. Em. Gee. You’re actually there. I thought he was comin’ up with some bizarro reason not to have some F. U. N…”

Vriska rolled her eyes. “For once, his wishy-washyness is legit. I’m here with a really big buff guy and three magic ponies.”

“…Okay, before I, like, come rushing over there and gush over the magic ponies like a seven-year-old princess, you got a buff guy? Lucky…”

“You and your assumptions. He’s not with me, he’s married, and has three kids.”

“I have many queshiuns,” she said, purposely mispronouncing the last word.

“You’ll get a lot of answers followed by some half-truths that just raise more questions.”

“Story of my life… One thing I gotta know though, should I feel… threatened?”

“I’ve been ‘dating’ a mini-Horrorterror for years and my moirallegiance is filled by a magical unicorn. Happy?”

“…No, I gotta hear both those stories. Like, right fuckin’ now.”

“How ‘bout no, how ‘bout you go find everyone else and gather them together for a special get-together. I’d have my party planner do it but I think she’s busy cutting eldritch abominations in half with a chainsaw.”

“You can count on Rolal, Vrisky!”

“Vriska.”

“Vrisky.”
“Vrisk- we’re not doing this. I just got back, my second interaction is not going to devolve into a two word back and forth.”

“Vrisky.”

Vriska hung up. “She’ll organize a get together of everyone. Eventually.”

Suddenly, a tall woman in the black robes of a Space player appeared in a flash of green, floating above them. She wore large, round glasses and had two white canine ears coming out the top of her head. Her piercing green eyes stared right into Vriska’s.

“Vriska, why is the Green Sun back?” she demanded, levitating Vriska into the air by the robe collar.

“Hey Jade, long time no see! Uh, would you believe me if I say I had nothing to do with that?”

“No,” Jade said with a knowing smile. “Start explaining.”

Vriska took a breath. “Well you see there is this multiversal alien race called the Combine that decided they could recreate the Green Sun as a power source. I tried to stop that, by the way, but luckily the Dream Bubbles were also recreated and I was finally able to find you guys!”

John and Jade stared at her, blinking.

Vriska grinned cheekily. “So you gonna put me down yet or not?”

Jade shrugged, setting Vriska back down on the ground. “You realize we’re going to have to destroy it, right?” She opened her hand and allowed the green power of the Sun to flow through her fingertips. “It’s too dangerous.”

“Problem with that,” Vriska said. “Destruction of the Green Sun will destroy all the ghosts – or at least seal them up again. So Meenah’s current plan is to take the Green Sun for ourselves.”

“…Take control of the Green Sun!” Jade blurted. “Is she insane?”
“Yep,” Vriska said, “Especially since there’s already a war between the Horrorterrors and Combine over it. I’m sure you can see that, given your connection to the Green Sun.”

Jade nodded slowly. “So that’s what all that was…”

“Green Sun connection?” Allure asked.

Vriska sighed. “Ugh, more exposition… Every Sburb session universe had within it an entity called a First Guardian that was tapped right into the power of the Green Sun and used it to defend the universe from threats. Jade here ended up fused with her dog Guardian.”

“Woof,” Jade said. Then she smiled sheepishly. “Uh… Oops.”

“Are we going to talk about what happened to Jotaro, or no?” Nova asked suddenly. “Suddenly, purple thorns like Hermit Purple! What does that mean?”

Everyone looked around at each other and shrugged.

“What’s Hermit Purple?” Jade asked.

“Ooh! Ooh!” Allure perked up. “Do you want me to explain what Stands are?”

“…Sure.”

Allure took a deep breath.

~~~

Eve had moved the ‘victory platform’ back to Lopan so Seraphim could create a portal to the Dream Bubble while she worked. The Aradias were taking care of Spades’ people on the other side.
Eve herself was paying little attention to the portal; devoting everything she could to tearing apart the platform and examining it. The black house itself was impenetrable to her magics, and she didn’t dare open the door to a universe that no longer existed – but the inner workings beneath the platform opened to her with hardly any coaxing. She found herself able to pry it open with ease and understand the inner workings.

It was weird – yes, she was a scientist at heart and loved experimentation, but she didn’t have anywhere near the level of training that, say, Corona had. Yet she could just see the direction all the dimensional energy flowed through the differently colored pipes, what each section of the machine did, and how it all interconnected. The finer details of why eluded her, almost as if she was running on intuition.

She didn’t know it yet, but her left eye’s pupil had been replaced with the solar symbol of Light.

I had noticed, and had been instrumental in letting her work without interruption from Renee or Flutterfree, who would have been concerned about such visual changes. The two of them were trying to keep the inhabitants of Pyramid Hell calm during evacuation to an alien world of dreams.

Renee in particular was being the most useful, though she wasn’t quite aware of it.

She clasped a trembling yellow salamander’s nubby arm, looking down at the consort with a kind, loving expression. Her horn flashed with teal light for the slightest of moments and the salamander stopped trembling.

“What’s your name, little one?” Renee asked.

“…Casey von Salamancer. Thank you.” The salamander walked with purpose through Seraphim’s portal, confident.

“Wow, Renee, that was impressive,” Flutterfree said. “Not even my gift with animals could get them that calm…”

“That salamander’s mind was a troubled one… Such loss… They knew the Heir of Breath.” Renee blinked. “…How do I know that?”
Flutterfree shrugged. “Intuition? We’ve been helping a lot of them through this change.”

“Hrm…”

Spades walked over to them. “That’s almost all of ‘em. I can’t wait to bid this leprechaun vomit of a place good riddance.”

“Spades, the neon glow of this world is absolutely fabulous. I don’t see any reason why you’d have to leave it forever.”

“The Noir aesthetic is superior. I need to find myself another city like that… A mobster paradise…”

Renee blinked. “I’m not so sure about the ‘mobster paradise’ bit, but I certainly can locate a world with the correct era-specific aesthetic I think you are looking for.” She adjusted her hat. “Anyway, that was everyone in this area. We should go ask Eve to move the platform again.”

I was watching Eve carefully place a magical probe into a cylindrical tank inside the victory platform, her left eye actively glowing with an orange light now. “Absolutely fantastic! The quantum flow of the fate-packets introduce the construct of grist into the physics of the universe, tapping into the experiences of the players to create a new plane of existence physically connected to worlds beyond, using Skaia as a nest!” She clapped her hooves. “This machine is so brilliant and I have no idea how I’m understanding it!”

Flutterfree pointed a hoof at Eve. “…Eve? Your eye is glowing.”

“It is?” She summoned a mirror and examined herself with it. “…Is that the symbol on Vriska’s robes? Light?”

I nodded. “Yep.”

“How am I tapping into a Sburb Aspect of reality?” she asked, her eye slowly fading back to normal.

“Think back to the Tumor,” I said. “How exactly did you survive?”
“You wrote us alive, right?”

“That was just Vriska,” I corrected. “She was already a Sburb player, she couldn’t be made one again. But the twelve of us… When the Green Sun was created, remnants of the old system were shoved into us.”

“So we’re players of the game?” Eve asked. “That’s… odd, since we don’t have any Skaia, or planets, or even a copy of the Sburb discs.”

“It’s glitched,” Flutterfree deduced.

“Exactly,” I confirmed. “Sburb was not meant to restart again once it had already been shut down. The Horrorterrors have not seeded any new universes to start the cycle. The Tumor changed us with the Sburb programs that popped into existence with the Green Sun. We are part of a game that can no longer run.”

“And because of that we get weird Aspect powers,” Eve concluded. She found that she could turn her Light-vision on and off at will, allowing her to intake and understand large quantities of information. “What exactly can we do? You’re the expert.”

“You’re the Witch of Light, which more or less translates to the manipulator of knowledge and fortune. You seem to have tapped more into the ‘knowledge’ side of the Light aspect, rather than the luck that Vriska is so obsessed with. I’m the Seer of Void, which doesn’t give me any abilities the Eye of Rhyme doesn’t already provide.”

“…Then what are we?” Flutterfree asked.

“Something to do with minds,” Renee deduced. “Or feelings.”

“Sylph of Mind,” I confirmed for Renee. “Which is to say one who heals with the power of the mind. You give them stability with your thoughts that influence their own minds.”

“I see…”
“You know, it says something about our lives that we’re just taking this in stride,” Eve observed. “New abilities from a glitchy ancient game? Sure. Why not.”

“Flutterfree’s not going to like what hers has to say about her,” I said, turning to the pegasus.

Flutterfree gulped. “…What am I?”

“The Page of Rage.”

“Wh… How does that make any sense? Do I look angry?”

I put my hoof on her shoulder. “Do you feel that inner voice of yours screaming against me right now, screaming that what I say cannot be true? That you cannot be a Rage player? That inner voice of your anger?”

Flutterfree blinked. “Y-yes?”

“The Page is a complex class – they are known to have extreme difficulty coming to terms with their Aspect, struggling to understand that it is a part of them, generally unable or unwilling to take steps to reach their full potential. You are not well attuned to your Rage, and yet it is undeniably a part of you deep down.”

“So what, I have to come to terms with it now?”

“No, actually,” I smiled warmly. “Most Pages never overcome their difficulty. If you were able to fully accept what you were, you would become essentially a beacon of Rage that radiated power, violence, and ‘truth’ from yourself. I wouldn’t worry about it though.”

Eve pulled Flutterfree into a hug. “She’s right. It’s not something we have to worry about. One less Rage player in the army won’t make a difference.”

“Never wanted to be in the army in the first place,” Flutterfree said, scratching the back of her head.
“I know.” Then Eve’s eyes shot open, the left one glowing brightly. “I also know I’m not going to be able to figure this out fully.”

“Really?” Renee asked.

“Yes,” Eve said, turning back to the platform. “…Corona needs to take a look at this. She’ll be able to pull something out of it with what I already know. I’m sure.”

“It’s nice just knowing things, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Sort of. Takes a lot of the fun out of learning.”

I shrugged. “Everything has its drawbacks.”

Eve called down to Spades. “I’m taking the platform through the portal as soon as everyone’s evacuated! Okay?”

“You could drop a nuke on this place after everyone was out and I wouldn’t give a rat’s ass.”

“Thanks!”

~~~

Meenah was still talking the ghost army up around the House Juju. She was currently using the bound and gagged Andrew Hussie as a soapbox because… well it had seemed like a good idea at the time, and she wasn’t regretting it yet.

“Right, I want all my god-tiers to my left. Sort by Aspect! I want nice color-coded lines! I’ll take your silence as agreement, now MOVE IT.” She coughed. “Those of you who aren’t god-tier go on the other side and just… I dunno, organize yourselves or somefin. Imma be honest here, you probably won’t be of much help. Yes, that includes you other mes and Vriskas. Them’s the breaks.”
Everyone shuffled off to their groups – except Fef, who was a non-god-tier and stayed at Meenah’s side regardless.

Meenah glanced at her. “What’re you doin’?”

“Letting the people who’re scared of you know it’s okay to listen to you?”

“…I have a deep biological urge to strangle you ’til you’re bone dry, y’know?”

“Good thing we’re ghosts then, huh?”

Meenah blinked – then laughed. “All right, you’re good. How about you actually do somethin though? Like check in on our extras back there?”

Feferi nodded. “Right away!” She jumped behind Meenah and walked closer to the House Juju, where O’Neill, Corona, Rainbow, and Pinkie were, preparing for battle.

O’Neill was analyzing the way Meenah was getting the troops organized. “Good stuff you’ve got so far, but I wouldn’t count out the mundanes yet. I’ve seen some of you change clothing just by thinking. Why not disguise all of you as ‘god-tier’ so they won’t know where the serious reality-warping powers are coming from?”

“Oh my glub that’s an excellent idea!” Feferi squeed. She created fake Life robes for herself, the gray folds billowing down her elegant form. “Not the nicest looking, but cool!”

“Remember the wings,” Pinkie said. “God-tier trolls have wings.”

Feferi nodded, adjusting her dream-form to have wings. She flapped them. “Completely useless, but I’m a ghost anyway.” She smiled at O’Neill. “I guess you really are a General.”

O’Neill shrugged. “And they wonder why I introduce myself as General rather than Overhead…”

Pinkie bounced to Feferi. “Feferi, think I should go with chainsaw, hammer, or chainhammer?”
Feferi blinked. “Chainhammer?”

Pinkie pulled a chainsaw with little hammers all over it. “Chainhammer.”

“Cool!”

“Yes!” Pinkie pumped a hoof and launched a party cannon.

Feferi gasped and grabbed Pinkie by the cheeks. “After this is over you and I need to have a party.”

“I agree! I’m thinking fish-themed!”

“Marevelous!” Feferi laughed.

“Pun overload,” Corona said, smirking.

Feferi shrugged. “I just like fish. And the sea. And talking about it too!”

“Not really a fighter?”

“Not really. I was bred to be a leader, but Karkat did that in my session so I didn’t really have to do much.” Feferi shrugged. “But hey, looks like I’m doing it now! Better late than never!” she giggled.

Corona smiled warmly. “It’s nice to see someone like you out here. No offense to your troll buddies, but a lot of them are rather abrasive.”

“Our cultures were pretty rough… but I’m not here to talk about that! I’m here to see what you’ve got!”
Corona lifted up her hand, showing Feferi a swirling nexus of red magical constructs. “This is a reality scrambler. Most universes would just give up and explode when I unleash this thing. Something tells me the ‘Paradox Space’ realities up there won’t be as adversely affected, but I bet the Combine’s ships will struggle to function when up becomes potatoes.”

“And for the Horrorterrors?”

“Good old-fashioned holy magic. It’s anathema to them.”

Feferi nodded. “I know. Strange how I, a Life player, got to be their voice in my session.”

Corona nodded. “Hopefully they’ll regret that. …You don’t have any trouble fighting them, do you?”

Feferi frowned. “They may have done a lot for me, but what they want now will destroy all of us! And I can’t let that happen. I care too much about my friends.”

“Even if the same isn’t true for them?”

Feferi nodded. “Especially then.”

“The multiverse needs more people like you.”

“Thanks!” Feferi said. “Now, Rainbow Dash, what do you have?”

“I’m awesome,” Rainbow asserted.

Feferi sighed, taking Rainbow aside. “You don’t have any special powers, Rainbow, and you’re a living pony! You could die!”

“Do I look like a pony who’d step down from a fight?”
“Unfortunately no,” Feferi said, folding her arms. “There’s going to be a lot of danger up there. One wrong slip from a Doom player and you’ll be dead in an instant, not to mention the Horrorterrors or Combine.”

“I’m going to fight!” Rainbow demanded, stamping her hoof on the ground.

“Rainbow, I know y-” Feferi noticed the whirlwind on the ground at Rainbow’s hoof. “…Do that again.”

“…Huh?”

“Stamp your hoof on the ground again, hard.”

Rainbow did as asked, creating a gust of wind with her movement. “Wha…?”

Feferi grinned. “Rainbow… I think you’re showing indications of the Breath Aspect!”

“…The what now?”

“Of course she is!” Pinkie interrupted. “All twelve of us got them!”

Corona and O’Neill turned to Pinkie. “…We did?” Corona asked.

“Yeah! All twelve of us got an aspect! Rainbow’s the Maid of Breath.”

O’Neill snickered. “Made of breath. I can see why she got that one.”

“Har-de-har,” Rainbow muttered. “Pinkie, what does that mean?”

“Well… Feferi?”
Feferi smiled. “Every player of Sburb has a title. Thief of Light, Maid of Time, to use examples you would know. The Aspect determines what part of reality the player can use – in your case, Breath, which can be described as ‘freedom’. It tends to manifest physically as wind. The first part of the title is the class, and is generally a bit more mysterious. Maids, as I understand it, fix, repair, or provide the Aspect.”

“Aradia spends all her time fixing Time,” Pinkie explained.

“So… What? I can repair ‘freedom’?”

Pinkie nodded. “Yep! And also control wind better than you could before, but that’s just in general.”

“…Sweet.”

Feferi turned to Pinkie. “Do you know what the rest of you are?”

“Oh yeah. O’Neill’s the Thief of Hope!”

O’Neill smirked. “That certainly sounds like me. Let’s take a wild guess – I have been bestowed the utterly broken ability to take the Hope within others and give it to myself.”

“I think that’s how it would work,” Feferi admitted. “Vriska’s a Thief as well. She takes luck – Light – and adds it to herself. You’ll probably work a lot like her actually, though on a more mental scale.”

O’Neill rubbed his hands together.

“You’re thinking of more ways you can screw with people,” Corona said.

“As soon as I figure out how to use it, there will be chaos. The Hope-slash-Crimson Sushi double combo. Watch the very soul drain out of the villain’s eyes…”
“Creepy~!” Pinkie trilled. “Meanwhile, I’m the Bard of Space!”

Feferi blinked. “That’s terrifying.”

“No?” Corona asked.

“Bards are known for random destruction of everything through passive use of their Aspect,” Feferi said. “Uh… The only bard you’ll see here is the Bard of Hope, and he doesn’t know how to use his powers. The Bard of Rage though… he krilled a lot of trolls.”

Pinkie giggled. “Don’t worry, I’ve lived with being able to manipulate space all my life. Just because I now have a better explanation for a lot of it won’t change much. I can make space explode now though!”

“Please don’t,” Rainbow pleaded.

“Aaah, ptooey, fine.”

“What about me, Pinkie?” Corona asked. “What am I?”

“Rogue of Doom.”

Corona blinked. “Me? Doom? That doesn’t make any sense! The rest of you have Aspects that fit you! Moving through space, freedom of flight, hope in the face of unwinnable odds… What about me screams Doom?”

Pinkie shrugged. “I dunno. It’s what you were given though. You can take the Doom around you and distribute it wherever it needs to go, though. Oh, remember how Death prevented everyone from dying that one time?”

“…Yeah?”

“You can do that now. Sorta. You have to put the death on something else.”
“…Cool, but I’m still worried that I’m some sort of patron of death and destruction now.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Pinkie said, winking.

“ARE WE READY TO LAUNCH?” Meenah shouted.

“Oh glub, I need to tell her O’Neill’s plan!” Feferi said. “You’re all going to be a great help, but try to figure out how to use your powers in ten minutes, okay?”

Corona nodded. “We will.”

“Thanks! I’ll be right back.” She scrambled to Meenah and told her about O’Neill’s tactical suggestion.

“Glub me… MORE DELAYS. Fine, fine… LISTEN UP EVERYONE! We’ve got a ploy!”

~~~

Roxy’s god-tier outfit was that of the Rogue of Void, which was to say dark blue with a really sweet mask that went across her eyes and did nothing to actually hide her identity. She didn’t care, it was still awesome.

She had set up the party in an instant, which was to say she used her freakish Rogue of Void powers to take the ‘lack of party’ from the room and ‘create’ a party from that. She’d invited all twelve of Earth C’s resident Sburb players.

She didn’t tell anyone what the party was about – merely that John was coming with a surprise. They probably thought he had proposed to her or something. As if.

Everyone except John was already here. Including Jade, who had done really well at not letting anyone else know what was about to happen. The three trolls were also there.
Everyone was talking, but Roxy was busy waiting with anticipation. They’d all been looking for Vriska for so long – they’d known she was alive, but they didn’t know what had happened to her. There were going to be so many gasps and celebrations and amazing faces.

John walked to the door of Roxy’s house, opening it up to see the party. He smiled and stepped aside to reveal Vriska.

Roxy was right, there were a lot of gasps and celebrations and loud cheering – from the non-trolls. The trolls themselves stood back, staring at Vriska with unreadable expressions.

Roxy realized her little party was going to mean nothing to Vriska. The Thief of Light said hello to all the humans and introduced them to her friends, but she clearly had business to attend to with those of her kind. While the humans gawked over the ponies and Jotaro, she left them behind.

Vriska soon stood before the three other trolls, all three taller than her. There was the Jade-blooded Kanaya, towering over the rest of them with a graceful figure. Next to her was the mutant-candy-red-blooded Karkat, his horns just as nubby as always. He looked older than any of the other trolls by a fair bit, his face showing wrinkles.

And on the other end was Terezi, the Teal-blooded blind girl with sharp, red glasses and a walking cane styled with a red dragon head.

Vriska had her mouth open to speak, but couldn’t say anything the moment she rested her eyes on Terezi. Her lip began to tremble and her eyes filled with cobalt-blue tears. She took in a sharp breath, trying to get a hold of herself.

Terezi spoke with a nasally voice that belonged on a mischievous imp. “Vrisk-?”

Vriska broke down crying, flinging her arms around Terezi and squeezing her tight. She couldn’t say anything, she was so overcome with emotion. In the Dream Bubble, there had been too much going on… Too much chaos… There hadn’t been a moment for her to truly register what was happening.

But here?

She could see her best friend again. Nine hundred years of built up emotional stress released in one moment.
Even for one as strong as her, it was too much.

“V-vriska?” Terezi said.

“It’s been so long,” Vriska managed through her sobs. “It’s been so long…”

“Uh... Yeah. It…”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry for being such a bitch. I’m sorry for blinding you out of some pathetic act of petty revenge. I’m sorry for setting up that mess in the first place. I’m sorry for listening to my lusus when I could have turned away at any time. I’m sorry for running off to Jack and making you make that impossible choice. I’m sorry for burdening you with guilt. I’m sorry I made you bring me back... Even after you brought me back, I kept doing it! Blowing a second chance! I’m sorry! It was wrong! All of it was wrong. I was... I was wrong about so much…”

Terezi stood, gawking. “W-what happened?”

“She spent nine hundred years wandering the multiverse, trying to get home,” Nova said, walking up to them. “Hi. Nova here. I’ve been working with her for several years.” Nova put a hoof on the shaking Vriska’s back. “She just wants you to know she’s changed.”

Terezi was unable to process what was happening – she was frozen in shock.

So Karkat took control. He grabbed Vriska roughly by the shoulder and tore her from Terezi. He looked her right in the eye.

“About fucking time!” he shouted in his harsh, angry voice.

Nova was about to chide him – but Vriska laughed at this. She pulled Karkat into the next embrace. “Yes. Yes it is.”

“Hey! Hey! Let me go! I’m not some touchy-feely guy all of a sudden!”
Vriska wiped her eyes and put her hands on her hips. “And here I thought you were the guy to go to for romantic advice? Has that changed?”

“No,” Kanaya said with a soft, melodious voice. She put a hand on Vriska. “Vriska, I am glad to see you return to us so well.”

“Heheh… Yeah… Kanaya, about all those times I ignored you…”

“It led us to where I am today.” Kanaya smiled warmly. “There is no need to apologize.”

“Yes there fucking is!” Karkat blurted. “Even if everything worked out she was still fucked up! I’m going to milk her for every apology I can get!”

Vriska chuckled. “What do you want an apology for, Karcrab?”

“Tavros?”

“Apologized to his ghost personally as a big show in front of thousands of other ghosts!”

“Hrm… Jack?”

“I was an absolute fucking moron trying to create an enemy so I could be the hero. Not just selfish, but stupid on so many levels.”

“Jade?”

“Yo, Jade! I was a real bitch that caused every problem by making you fall asleep all the time! Heck, I’m probably indirectly responsible for Lord English, so I’ll go ahead and apologize for his existence!”

“Treating me and everyone else like shit?”
“None of you were actually shit, except maybe Eridan. Most of you were better people than me. You’re all my very best friends.”

Karkat grinned a big toothy grin. “Welcome back, Vriska.”

“Thanks. Now here’s the big question, why the fuck are you all taller than me? Being god-tier doesn’t stunt growth! This just isn’t fair.”

“I’ve started to shrink,” Karkat said with a chuckle. “Mutant blood, won’t be around much longer. Really glad I got to see you come back.”

“Hey, hey, Karcrab. I know how to get you some immortality serum. All of you. Don’t you fret about getting old. I’ve got connections now.”

“Well fuck me sideways, that’s the best news I’ve heard in years!” Karkat let out a deep laugh.

“You’ve changed too. Lot more comfortable with yourself.”

“Fuck you and your psychological observations. I get enough of that already.”

Vriska wiped her face again and gave him a thumbs up. Then she turned around – catching sight of Terezi again.

“…You going to say anything?” Vriska asked, her smile vanishing.

“What am I supposed to say?” Terezi said, a single teal tear running out from under her glasses. “Great job Vriska, you figured out life? Oh, yeah, you were an asshole, but that’s behind us. Ah, you spent nine-hundred years out there? Oh, must be bad for you. Makes my tiny handful of years waiting look like nothing, doesn’t it? Everything I feel just has to be a lesser version of what you’re feeling. And that makes me mad.”

Vriska put a hand on Terezi’s shoulder. “Terezi, just because you suffered less doesn’t make it any
less legitimate. It doesn’t matter how long you’ve been looking for me – what matters is that you were. And holy hell, do you have the right to be mad. I wouldn’t be upset if you punched me right n-”

Terezi punched her.

Virska laughed. “Capitalizing on the opportunity, are we Redglare?”

Terezi – finally – let her mouth spring into that toothy grin she was known for. “Hehehehehe. Mindfang, you know me, when there’s a legal loophole to punch a highblood, I’ll take it. Every time.” She extended a hand.

Vriska took it. “Scourge Sisters?”

“So true.”

They clasped each other’s hands and raised them into the air. “WE’RE BACK, BITCHES!”

There was applause and cheers.

Roxy smiled, wiping a tear from her eye. It was one of the most beautiful things she had seen in recent memory.

The reunion of friends and the rebuilding of bridges.

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The Combine’s CX-07, a ‘Costra’ class ship, was a sight to behold. In realspace, it took the form of a translucent blue sphere with two white compass-needle-like prongs extending from the ‘front’ and the ‘back’. Within the sphere were several dozen stars, all of them blue hypergiants, brimming with unstable internal power. In other words, ready to blow at any moment – but kept in check by a truly tremendous organic construct in the center of the CX-07 that resembled a beating heart with several glowing tubes strapped to it.
One of the blue stars smashed into the edge of the CX-07’s sphere, pushing all of its mass into the globe. The globe proceeded to release controlled bursts of supernova-level energy into the darkness of Paradox Space.

Horrorterrors may have been impossible squid-like beasts from the deepest nightmares of haunted veterans, but when confronted with pure cosmic energy they still burned. Normally the Horrorterror would have simply folded itself through a manifold in ‘space’ to appear behind the CX-07 in its own perceived ‘past’, but the larger Combine RA-02 was working around the clock to ensure the physical realm around them operated like a three-dimensional space, closing off the Horrorterror tricks.

All around the Green Sun, these battles carried on. Not one Combine ship or Horrorterror could be allowed actually near the Green Sun. One would assume, given a three-dimensional perspective, that since the Combine had started on one side of the Green Sun and the Horrorterrors on the other, it would have been impossible to prevent any interaction with the Green Sun.

However, Paradox Space merely looked three-dimensional from outside, given its complete lack of anything within. The Horrorterrors were able to jump from location to location not because they had the physiological ability to do so nor knowledge of the different universal coordinates that led to different sections, but because they understood how Paradox Space operated and could walk through it like a school hallway.

The Combine had originally tried to negate this property, but they realized nearly instantly that if they did this, the Horrorterrors would easily reach the Green Sun before them. So the fleets of cosmic ships allowed themselves to be spread across Paradox Space seemingly randomly so they had a presence everywhere around the Green Sun. They turned their forced-reality generators back on and headed toward the emerald treasure.

Even though time and space around the Green Sun was in a constant state of flux and self-perpetuating loops, one thing was certain. If you looked at the light of the Green Sun and moved directly toward it, you would eventually reach it. This fact could not be changed.

Effectively, the halo of Combine ships and Horrorterrors around the Green Sun was shrinking, nearing the green orb as one side made an advancement here, the other there.

The only issue with visualizing this is that it was happening all at once in every location and timeframe across Paradox Space. Not even those actively within the battle would have any idea who was actually winning unless they were one of the Noble Horrorterrors, and these particular beings weren’t doing anyone any favors by talking.
Meenah did not care about understanding what was going on. She had an army of god-tier players and fake god-tier players, all of whom were already dead in every possible way. She was very curious to see what the Combine and Horrorterrors planned to do when they made themselves known.

At the moment, Meenah and Feferi floated just outside the perceivable ‘edge’ of the Green Sun conflict, thousands of brightly-colored ghosts separated by their robes into twelve different types. In front of them floated Corona, Rainbow, and Pinkie; O’Neill opted to stay behind the battlefront in order to issue commands. A duo of god-tier Mind players supported him, planning to use their Aspect to communicate his military commands to everyone as well as they were able.

Currently, the Horrorterrors and Combine were ignoring them.

Corona took a breath – she hadn’t learned much about her Rogue of Doom powers in the short time she’d had, but she knew enough to ensure Pinkie, Rainbow, and O’Neill would have their ‘deaths’ transferred to whatever was attacking them. She just had to worry about herself, seeing as her powers were unable to affect her personal ‘Doom’.

She’d been told the Rogue was basically the opposite of a Thief, and that made total sense considering what she knew about Vriska’s manipulation of luck.

“Ready,” she said.

“ALL RIGHT!” Meenah said. “Let’s show them what we’re made of!” She had no need to remind the ghost army what they were doing – they all knew the plan. Hit hard, hit fast, surprise them, and get to the Green Sun by any means necessary.

“CHARGE!” Feferi shouted, raising her trident.

The Space players surged forward first, their black robes billowing behind them. The only god-tier ghost of Jade took the lead, the Green Sun’s proximity filling her body with unimaginable power. “BARK!” she shouted, bending space to launch the entire ghost army right in between the CX-07 and a Middle Horrorterror. Some Mind players surrounded the ghosts in an aura of mental energy that kept the Horrorterror’s presence from forcing them to insanity.

The Aradias and other Time players began to duplicate themselves recklessly through the looping
timeline of Paradox Space while the Dead Daves took an organizational role, ensuring that no universe-ending paradoxes would ensue from the overuse of Time manipulation.

And this was far from the only Aspect fighting. Hope shot beams of light that burned the Horrorterrors. Light players manipulated chance to the benefit of all. Void players used the Horrorterrors’ own tricks against them. And Doom… did exactly what one would expect it did.

The Combine and Horrorterrors pushed back, suddenly accepting the presence of a third faction within the battle. The Horrorterrors knew instantly they could not kill the ghosts in their current situation without going to extreme lengths, so they instead moved to capture the ghosts and imprison them within eldritch bubbles of madness. The Combine thought this was a good idea and copied it with their own biotechnical energies, molding physics to immobilize ghosts.

At which point the Breath players started doing their thing. There was a lot of wind blowing, but that wasn’t the point of what they did – the point was freedom. They filled the ghost army with freeing blue gusts that would unravel the traps keeping ghosts from fighting.

They pushed closer to the Green Sun.

The gray-clad Life players, composed mostly of versions of Feferi and Meenah, had a great time draining and manipulating the life inherent in both the Combine biomechanical ships and the Horrorterrors. Meenah herself crashed through CX-07’s external sphere and latched onto the life of the central, beating heart with her powers. The CX-07, not designed to resist assault from the inside like that, was completely surprised that she could breach the outer parts of the sphere at all. The heart shriveled up and died as Meenah absorbed every last bit of it for herself.

The lack of a central heart sent the blue stars flying. Without a stabilizing presence they all exploded in supernovae, frying vast chunks of the Combine, Horrorterror, and ghost armies. This did significant damage to the Combine and Horrorterror forces, but just really ticked off the ghosts.

Corona lowered her shield – she’d barely had enough power within her to simply survive that.

“MEENAH!” she heard O’Neill’s voice ring in her head. “WE ARE NOT A BUNCH OF LOOSE CANNONS! WE ARE A SINGLE, FIGHTING UNIT! NEXT TIME THINK BEFORE YOU UNLEASH THE FURY OF A DOZEN DYING SUNS!”

Corona didn’t hear Meenah’s response, for O’Neill’s commands only went one way.
Corona saw Rainbow Dash and Pinkie fighting alongside the ghosts. Rainbow Dash shifted the winds around her with more power than she ever had as a mere pegasus, but she paled in comparison to the pure essence of freedom the god-tier Breath players were unleashing. Pinkie was the same. Her destructive Space powers were interesting, but ultimately completely useless against something like a Horrorterror or higher Combine ship. She seemed to resort completely to her ‘Pinkie powers’ to do anything at all – and even the usually devastating chainsaw or ‘super explosions’ were doing next to nothing in the grand scheme of things.

O’Neill was at least useful with his tactical mind, organizing teams to go one way or another to keep up the fight. His Hope powers did nothing.

And then there was Corona. Her magic was definitely more powerful than any single ghost here except for the green, fiery power of Jade. But she had a failing – she wasn’t unkillable. While all the other ghosts would just take world-shattering hit after world-shattering hit and just stand back up screaming expletives, she had to waste magic and time defending herself.

Between defending herself and ensuring her friends were undying as well, she had nothing. Even taking out one low-level Horrorterror would be an immense feat for her, one that would require intense concentration and leave her open to something else…

She felt like she had been dragged into a conflict too big for her and her friends. Too much to even understand. This wasn’t even as big as battles could get in the multiverse! The Combine may have been fighting at their full strength, but the Horrorterrors weren’t. Their capacity was limited by the current restrictions put in place by the Green Sun and their own society’s apathy. If things were just slightly different, a Noble Horrorterror could kill the entire ghost army by just shifting the nature of the universe slightly…

They were very fortunate to be able to fight at all.

At least they appeared to be getting closer to the Green Sun…

It was at this point the Combine and Horrorterrors decided the ghosts were more than just a passing annoyance and sent in some serious firepower. A Combine ship that resembled a gyroscope the size of a solar system moved in, its rotational power vibrating its very being so much it was blurred. On the other side, a Noble Horrorterror rose, eclipsing the Green Sun with its impossibly tremendous girth, the maddening twists of its body threatening the Mind players’ barriers.
The ghosts began to be pushed back.

“Forward!” O’Neill’s voice yelled. “Punch through the barrier between the two, get them to fight each other!”

This ploy didn’t work. The rainbow of robed ghosts was sealed off by the Noble Horrorterror and Combine Gyroscope impacting each other. As the two enemies shredded each other to pieces, they also moved toward the ghosts as well, pushing them back. The energy threw some ghosts far enough away from the group to get lost in the inky blackness of Paradox Space.

“Too much…” Corona said, staring at the piercing eyes of the Horrorterror, transfixed despite the mental barrier. “Too much…”

“You’ll be glad to hear what I have to say, then,” a nearby Light player said. “You and your three friends will be needed back at the House Juju. Take them and go – this fight will not end in our victory as it is. But it is part of what is to come.”

Corona nodded, deciding to trust her. “Rainbow! Pinkie! O’Neill! We need to go back to the House Juju!”

Pinkie appeared in front of her. “Right away, Corona!”

“Figures,” O’Neill said. “Hope they can survive without my tactical genius.”

“Probably not,” Rainbow Dash said. “Corona, we better be leaving to find Siron’s Staff or something.”

“I don’t know why we’re going back, though that staff would be useful,” Corona admitted. “All I know is that we have to go. Just the four of us. …We weren’t making much of a difference anyway.”

O’Neill raised an eyebrow.

“Except you.” Corona opened a portal back to the Dream Bubble. “Let’s just go.”
Roxy’s party went on, with various little conversations between the visitors to Earth C and the various players of Sburb. It was a moment to relax, unwind, and talk about the nature of everything.

Roxy herself was talking to Applejack. “So, like, Dirk is a big brony and all so I know exactly who you are. I’m just trying to figure out how you are actually a thing. You’re on TV!

Applejack blinked. “Uh… there’s a force called ka that manipulates events to shape them to the stories written by people called Prophets.”

“Oh. Then we have a Prophet too?”

“Yeah. Ah actually know who he is. Watched a bunch of ghosts beat him up in the Dream Bubble.”

“So what you’re saying is that I’m a fictional creation.”

“Uh… Sorta, I think? Y’all are in a webcomic, at least.”

“I fucking knew it!” alive Dave shouted from across the room. “There was no way any of the shit that happened to us made real-world sense! Ha! In your face common sense, you can’t fool Dave Strider!”

Applejack facehoofed. “That’s a first.”

“I take it that’s not the usual reaction?”

“…No.”

“Huh.”
Dave continued dancing for a while, ignoring the continuing conversation. He whooped, fistbumping his future self, then jumped back a few seconds into the past to fistbump his past self, completing the circle.

“You use Time powers differently to Aradia,” Nova observed. “She’ll just clone herself recklessly. I’ve seen you create a lot of self-contained loops. Is that why I saw a ton of ghost Aradias but only a handful of you?”

“Dead Daves are the enemy,” Dave recited.

“Dead Dave’s comment makes more sense now.”

“Well duh, of course, because I’m the OG Alpha Dave. I’ve got it all under control.”

“Riiiight.”

“Hey, us Time players gotta stick together, Nova. None of that fuckin’ eye-rollin’ business.”

“Dave, I’m not a Time player. I have time magic. There’s a difference.”

“Oh. I guess I’m the one that told you, then. Another loop closed.”

“…You’ve talked to me in the future and I said I was a Time player?”

“Yep. Prince of Time, or destroyer of Time. Apparently all twelve of you became players when the Green Sun decided to pull a, ‘jk, lol, not dead’ on us.”

“…Destroyer of Time…” Nova nervously chuckled. “That makes a scary amount of sense for me. …Wonder if that explains what happened to Jotaro with that Stand…”

“You could probably erase time,” Dave said.
“What does that mean?”

“…Remove an event for everyone but yourself? I can’t tell you, I’m a Knight, not a Prince.”

“It just works,” Jotaro offered as he passed by them.

“Hey, Jotaro,” Nova said, stopping. “Think I may have figured out why you have a weird new Stand.”

“Figured out?” Dave said, shaking his head. “I’m from the future, I fucking know.”

“Right,” Nova said, rolling her eyes. “Apparently, we were all converted into ‘Sburb players’ when the Tumor went off and sorta-kinda killed us. I’m the Prince of Time, and you’re… Uh… I don’t know what you are. Dave?”

“Heir of Blood. Inheritor of connections or some shit. He can channel his ancestors.”

Jotaro thought about this. With some thought, he was able to summon the purple vines of Hermit Purple onto one of his hands and Star Platinum at the same time. He found that the hand holding Hermit Purple pulsed with a golden energy. “This wasn’t what I did with John. That was something else.”

“Did anyone other than Joseph have a stand in your ancestry?” Nova asked.

“Jonathan Joestar did not have o-” Jotaro paused. “The Passion…”

“What?”

“The Passion. When Dio awoke the World within himself, he was in Jonathan’s body. There were a few moments we saw Dio use a Hermit-Purple-like Stand…” Out of Jotaro’s other hand sprang more purple vines, these ones with flowering roses on them. “…Strange.”
There was a loud “BARK!” that drew every head in the room toward Jade.

She sparked with the power of the Green Sun. “Uh… Sorry! Sorry! It’s just been acting up lately, I’ll get control of it!” She blushed, grinning sheepishly. “It’s just barking, don’t worry about it.”

The room got back to what it was doing.

“Gah, I need to get these barks under control, I don’t like disrupting everything!”

“I think it’s cool,” Allure said, sitting on a table nearby so she was eye-level with Jade. “Being part dog, I mean.”

“I do have a lot of heightened senses, but… Well, without Bec’s Green Sun powers – which I really shouldn’t have – it just makes people think I’m a furry all the time… And then certain people who will not be named keep making jokes at my expense anyway.” She glared intensely at Karkat.

“What? What did I do this time!?” he said, legitimately confused.

“Nothing,” Jade muttered, turning back to Allure. “See?”

“No,” Allure admitted with an adorable smile.

“…Oh my gosh you’re so cute.”

“Thank you,” Allure said, smiling. “…You can see the Green Sun. How is the fight going?”

“Standstill,” Jade said, her body flickering as she focused her sight on the battle in the light of the Green Sun. “They’re all just fighting… A Combine ship exploded… A Horrorterror shriveled… And the ghosts keep getting captured.” She shook her head. “It doesn’t look like they’re going to accomplish anything. Their forces are too small compared to the might of the other sides.”

“That’s what John’s for, right?” Allure said. “He can do his ‘retcon’ thing and get us through that at any moment he wants.”
Jade nodded. “But what then? Once we have the Green Sun, what will we do with it? We can’t destroy it; all the ghosts need it to keep their afterlives. But we can’t exactly use it. Don’t know how. I’m directly tapped into the Green Sun because of my First Guardian status, and I just have access to its power, I can’t control it as a whole.”

“Have you ever physically been there?” Allure asked.

“No. The Green Sun locks me from getting to it with my space powers.”

“Maybe there’s a reason. Maybe, if you were next to it, you could control it.”

Jade blinked. “…That’s a good thought Allure! I should come back with you, figure out if that’s possible! Two dog-tier Jade’s are better than one, after all.”

“…dog-tier?”

“It’s what we call me. Since, uh, I’m part dog, and it makes me a First Guardian?”

“Oh.” Allure nodded slowly, as if this made great sense. She looked around, finding John in the crowd. “…Do you think he can do it?”

“If he doesn’t, he can just go back and do it again. He’s relatively good at using his retcon powers locally now, even if he never actually does much with them. Last time he did Dave threw a fit about how many timeline loops he screwed up.”

“I bet that was a fun conversation,” Allure said, continuing to watch John.

John didn’t notice Allure because Jotaro had decided to walk right into his field of view. “John Egbert,” he said.

“Uh… Hey, Jotaro!” John said nervously. Sure, he was used to people taller than him. But Kanaya was not this ripped. Nor did she look like she could remove his head with a punch. “W-what do you
Jotaro sat down on a chair. “Sit,” he told John.

John gulped, doing as requested.

“I don’t fully understand what I saw, but I felt a pure soul within you,” Jotaro said. “I also felt a deep disconnect within you – an aloofness that produces cluelessness and something that isn’t quite apathy. You don’t take anything seriously.”

“Well yeah, too many people get hung up on things. You know? I just… Don’t.”

“…I would say you were running from problems, but I have seen into you. That aloofness is truly how you are.”

“Thanks…?”

“You have a great power within you, John. With it, you can shape reality itself. Or destroy it.”

“Uh, yeah, thanks for reiterating that. I know. I shouldn’t use it to go very far…”

“You still talk like it’s a restriction you’re annoyed with and don’t understand. Or don’t agree with.”

“Look, I get it Jotaro. It’s powerful. I shouldn’t mess with it.”

“There’s only one problem,” Jotaro said. “You will be asked to use it. And if you don’t treat it with respect, it could end in disaster.”

“…G-got it! Treat the retcon with respect! Be serious.”

“I mean it, John. You need to u-”
John’s phone rang. He quickly fished it out of his blue robes and looked at it. *New message from undyingUmbrage.*

“I have to take this,” John said, zapping away before Jotaro could do anything.

Jotaro narrowed his eyes. This was giving him a bad feeling.

~~~

John zapped across the skies of Earth C – leaving the human section of the planet and moving to the troll-dominated areas. Here the buildings were elaborate constructions with colored windows that stacked on top of each other like they had been created like a child playing with bricks.

He checked the text on his phone.

uu: EGBERT. EGBERT WHAT ARE YOU DOING? WHY HAVE YOU HIDDEN YOURSELF.

uu: EGBERT! ANSWER ME THIS MINUTE OR THE BUNNY GETS IT!

EB: calm down caliborn. i just had to get away from a party.

uu: YOU VANISHED FROM MY SIGHTS.

uu: FOR A PARTY.

uu: WHAT AN UTTER WASTE OF YOUR TIME.

uu: IT WAS THE VOID BITCH WASN’T IT.

EB: yes, it was roxy. ROXY. not ‘the void bitch’.

uu: THE FACT THAT YOU KEEP TRYING TO CORRECT ME NEVER CEASES TO AMUSE ME.

uu: YOU TRULY ARE THE DIMMEST OF ALL THE HUMANS. AND THEY CALL YOU LEADER.

John decided to shift to another location, this time over the black-and-white home of the carapacians, their constructions looking a lot more like medieval castles and farms for the most part. Except the ones that looked like giant cans.
EB: what do you even want?

uu: WHAT ELSE DO YOU THINK I WANT?

uu: I KEEP CHALLENGING YOU. AND YOU KEEP PROVING YOURSELF TO BE A COMPLETE FUCKING WIMP.

uu: YOU HAVE THE ZAPPY POWER.

uu: YOU CAN GET HERE.

EB: I literally just finished a conversation with a big guy where we talked about not abusing the power.

uu: THIS MAN IS A FOOL!

uu: I ABUSED MY POWER. IT ONLY GAVE ME MORE POWER!

uu: IT IS THE SAME FOR YOU EGBERT.

uu: BEND EVERYTHING TO YOUR WILL. COME FACE ME.

uu: GAIN MORE POWER FOR YOURSELF.

EB: this is totally a trap.

uu: YOU KNOW YOU HAVE TO COME FACE ME EVENTUALLY.

uu: I WILL EVENTUALLY GO ELSEWHERE. AND LAY WASTE TO ALL REALITY!

uu: AND I WILL GET ALL THE BITCHES.

uu: ALL OF THEM.

EB: you stole that line.

uu: tUMUt

uu: IT’S MINE NOW.

John switched locations again, this time appearing over the colorful candyland that the consorts inhabited in all their amphibious and reptilian glory.

EB: clearly this conversation is going nowhere.

uu: ITS GOING SOMEWHERE.

uu: I WILL GET YOU HERE EVENTUALLY.

uu: ALL NINE.
EB: …nine?

uu: EIGHT. EIGHT.

EB: did you forget how to count?

uu: tUMUt

EB: you use that too much. you should get a new angry face.

uu: EGBERT. IF YOU ARE NOT ASSUMING MY FACE IS ETERNALLY ANGRY.

uu: YOU ARE EVEN STUPIDER THAN I GAVE YOU CREDIT FOR.

uu: COME GET YOUR FUCKING TROPHY.

EB: ugh, fine, i’ll gather everyone and beat up your sorry ass. i’ve got something else to deal with right now, so it won’t be instant.

uu: I WILL REIN IN THE UNENDING STREAM OF SHIT I WANT TO GIVE YOU.

uu: IN HOPES THAT IT WILL MAKE YOU COMPLETE YOUR SHITTY, EMPTY HUMAN ERRAND.

uu: AND GET YOUR WINDY BODY TO ME ALREADY.

John had started typing a reply to get Caliborn off his back, but someone swiped the phone out of his hands.

“V-Vriska?”

Vriska was typing away furiously on the phone. “You need to stop talking to this guy.”

“Bu-”

“No buts, we need to ensure the timestream doesn’t mess up. And here’s how I’m going to do that.”

~arachnidsGrip has joined~

uu: WHAT THE FUCK.

AG: H8y there, L8rd of Fucking Losers!!!!!!!

uu: LADIES AND GENTLEMEN. WE HAVE. A HATER.
AG: You know, we never talked. What a shame that was! I never got to go full bitch on you!

uu: RIGHT. THE SPIDERBITCH. WHY AM I TALKING TO YOU?

uu: YOU'RE STUPID.

AG: I'm the spiderbitch who's going to seal you away in a little white box one day, California.

uu: …

uu: tUMUt

AG: Woooow!!! Look at you, being so powerful and DEFANT. I set that made you feel reeeeeeally good, didn't it? A weight off your chest?

uu: IS THERE A POINT TO THIS CONVERSATION?

AG: Yes, actually. I'm about to destroy John's phone. So he won't be able to hear from you ever again.

uu: WAIT WAIT WAIT. FUCK. DON'T DO THAT. HE HAS TO FACE ME.

AG: I'm fully aware of what he needs to do. And he'll do it.

AG: Just not fucking now, California.

uu: STOP USING MY NAME BITCH.


uu: IF I LET YOU USE MY NAME. WILL YOU LET JOHN KEEP HIS PHONE.

AG: Nope. Because you don't mess with my friends anymore!

She snapped John's phone in half.

“VRISKA!”

“Don't get a new phone,” Vriska told John. “Don't let him have a way to contact you.”

“But I need-”

“John, you can retcon anywhere. Just go talk to people in person.”

“I…”
“Look, you’ll have to go back and face him eventually, John. He’s right about that. But don’t go until you’re absolutely ready.”

“After this, I’ll be ready,” he said, taking on a determined look for the first time since Vriska had gotten here.

“You might be,” Vriska said, putting a hand on John’s shoulder. “But I don’t know if you come back after.”

John blinked. “You… don’t?”

“It has to be done, John. But from what I know… You’ll go. And you won’t come back.”

John began to sweat. “You’re… you’re sure?”

“Unless you try to change it with retcon. Which, John… if you do…” She thought back to the House Juju, keeping Lord English imprisoned because of actions John had not taken yet. John would defeat Caliborn… But the cherub would be reborn as Lord English, only to be sealed away in the House Juju. “The consequences would be disastrous for the entire multiverse.”

“You’re serious?”

“I’m very serious.”

“…Jotaro wasn’t kidding…”

Vriska smiled. “He rarely does.” She extended a hand to him. “Come on. Let’s go back to the party. Tell everyone it’s time for us to go.”

“Really?”
“Yeah. We’ve been here long enough. Time to deal with the big Green Sun problem and forget about some evil cherub, for now.”

“…Okay, Vriska.” He grabbed her hand – and they zapped back to the party.

“All right, listen up!” Vriska shouted. “We’re leaving! I only need John’s help to deal with the Green Sun. The rest of you keep on living.”

“Fuck no,” Dave said. “We’re all com-

“Shut up,” Vriska said, holding out a hand. “I made you do all the dirty work for me before. It’s time I pay you all back. You’ve all been through enough – enjoy your world. Please.”

Allure walked up to Vriska. “Uh… I kinda told Jade she could come, since she’s connected to the Green Sun and might be able to help us.”

Vriska sighed. “Okay, fine, Jade can come. The rest of you… Just stay here. We’ll be back.”

“Are you sure about that?” Terezi asked. “…I don’t want to have to go searching for you again.”

“I promise I’ll come back, Terezi,” Vriska said. “I just got home. I’m not going to let myself lose it again.”

“Coordinates locked,” Nova said, tapping her screen. “And I’ve dropped a beacon off as well. We should be able to find this universe again, regardless of what happens.”

Roxy waved. “Come back soon. Wonk,” she said, winking at them.

Nova opened a portal back to the Dream Bubble.

“You know,” Allure said, “this whole visit has felt like the end of an adventure I wasn’t part of.”
“We’re going back to your adventure now,” Jade said. “The tables will be turned soon enough!”

“…If you say so!”

They stepped through the portal, leaving a quiet party behind them.

~~~

A member of Them appeared in a universe near the train wreck of universes that the Green Sun had brought together. This universe had been created specifically for the purpose of observing the events within the new Paradox Space. Why?

So Them could bet on the outcome, what else?

“I think the Horrorterrors have it,” one said. “They may have been weakened, but they aren’t the weakest of the Class 1s. They have the power and home turf advantage.”

“I’m placing my call on the Combine. They’ve been holding their cards close to their chest for so long – I bet they’ve got a few superweapons not even we are aware of.”

A third spoke up. “Ah, but you fools aren’t taking into account how ka plays into this. Merodi Universalis and the ghosts are forming to insert themselves into the combat as the underdogs, and with as much buildup as they’re getting… Well, how do you think the story would go?”

Another one placed their input. “I think the Green Sun remains neutral in the end because the Xeelee – or the Great Will, or the Celestialsapiens maybe – interject themselves and declare the battle over.”

“Lame,” a fifth added. “I bet we get another Lord English.”

There was silence.

“Hey, if the entire multiverse is about to suffer an explosion or two, I want to get my money’s worth. If I’m wrong, well then my reward is not having to live in fear that a stupid Xeelee attack will drag
Lord English into my section of the multiverse.”

“You’re still ticked about that?” the first one asked.

“Yes. Yes I am. The morons thought they could trap him. Ha. I’m never getting caught unaware again.”

“You did forget one detail.”

“What’s that?”

“There is a Xeelee in the universe with us.”

>>> It’s quite alright; he has a right to his opinion. We were desperate at the time. It isn’t often such a threat forms. By the way, do you want to know what my bet is?

All of Them did the metaphysical equivalent of ‘leaning in’.

>>> I believe a new sort of threat will arise. Not Lord English – that would be too predictable. Something completely new we will have to focus our attention on.

“Why would you say that?”

>>> Have any of you looked at what Vriska has just done?

“Who?”

Another Them answered the question. “The Thief of Light, a Merodi.”

“Oh her. Yeah I wasn’t watching her.”
They’ve just broken the Quarantine on Earth C and released John.

“Who?”

The retconner.

There was silence in the observation universe.

“They have no idea what they’ve just done,” one of Them said.

Exactly my point.
“So this is where Lord English ended up,” Spades said. He had decided to follow Eve, myself, Flutterfree, and Renee back to the House Juju instead of staying with his citizens. The victory platform moved along behind us, tethered to Eve with her magic.

“Yep,” I confirmed. “He’s stuck in there. His own Juju used against him in the final moments, trapping him when he was vulnerable.”

Spades took a moment to spit on the ground in the direction of the House Juju before asking a question. “How, exactly?”

I blinked. “Uh…”

Eve stared at me. “Do you actually not know?”

I rubbed the back of my head. “Ah… No. No I don’t. I have no idea how it worked. All I know is that it did. We’d have to ask Hussie about that.”

“Well, he is tied up right here,” Renee said, pointing at the bound and gagged human ghost curled into a fetal position.

Spades leaned down and removed Hussie’s gag. “Hey.”

“Hey Spades! I told you you’d survive!”

“You didn’t,” Spades observed. “So, you’re not just a psycho, you’re actually responsible for this whole mess?”

“That’s a matter of definition and nuance, my friend!”

Spades smirked. “I’d give you a beatin’ for what happened, but it looks like the ghosts already did that for me. I’m just curious, how did it feel to have your own creation fill you with lead?”

“Metallic.”

Spades scowled. “Still a smartass.”

“Can you tell us what happened to Lord English?” Eve asked.

“I would like to at least be able to move my hands before I spill any super-secret spoiler beans, got it?”

Eve undid the bounds on his arms. “Good, now wh-”

He snapped his fingers. …Or, well, he snopped his fingers, turning all of us into flat, low quality images of ourselves, similar to how a Flat existed. He laughed, clapping his hands and blowing us all over. “Andrew Hussie strikes again! You will never get your answers about the ending of Homestuck! NEVER! SCREW YOU, G. M. BLACKJACK!” Laughing maniacally, he took off into the distance. He tripped a few times, but he got out of sight before the ‘Flat’ status effect wore
“…What just happened?” Flutterfree asked.

“That man also created a world called Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff,” I told her. “Think about the Flat’s world, and then make it worse.”

“I guess we know what a Prophet who really knows how to use his powers can do, now,” Renee muttered, adjusting her hat. “No offense darling, you just play your cards close to your chest.”

I smiled warmly. “I serve the role of mysterious benefactor. He is… Uh…” I pursed my lips. “Let’s not go there.”

“Fine by me,” Spades said, looking up at the victory platform. “So what now?”

“We let Corona have a look,” Eve said. “Any minute now, right?”

I nodded. “Right now, actually.”

Corona, O’Neill, Pinkie, and Rainbow stepped out of a dimensional portal onto the victory platform. John zapped into existence with Allure, Jotaro, Applejack, Nova, and Jade.

“Uh…” Rainbow said. “Why’s everyone here all of the sudden?”

John shrugged. “I just go where they tell me.”

Eve teleported herself to Corona. “Just take the information out of my mind, let’s do this quickly.”

Corona blinked. “Sure.” She dissipated a glove and touched Eve’s forehead. They exchanged information mentally for a couple seconds before breaking the connection.

Corona grinned. “Oh, this is good…” She looked down at everyone. “I have an idea, but I’ll need to work on the victory platform for a bit. But this will really help us if my hunch is right.”

“Glad to be of assistance, ma’am,” Spades muttered. Flutterfree wasn’t sure if he was being serious or not.

Corona set to work – having Raging Sights surround the entire platform in magical circles. She repaired all the damage done to it in an instant, using a holographic representation of the interior to serve as her primary source of investigation. She became completely invested in the machinations within the victory platform and the dark house.

It took her all of ten minutes to shout “I’VE GOT IT!” She jumped off the platform. “I might have figured it out. I just have one question to make sure – what is the purpose of Sburb?”

Eve’s eye flashed orange for a moment. “The purpose is to create a new universe. Specifically one based in the adventure the players had on the way to creating it, creating a mythology for the new universe, and possibly even gods to guide them.”

Corona pondered this, mulling it over. “Yep, yep, that’s what I was hoping for.” She pointed at the victory platform. “Using the spells I know to manipulate the fabric of existence and this thing’s internal machinations, I think I can create a universe with it.”

“While that’s awesome, how does that help us?” Rainbow asked.
“The Tumor, when it exploded, created twelve new players,” Corona said. “With the right criteria and resources, I think I can win this ‘game’ we’ve been shoved into.” She turned to look at the glow of the Green Sun. “And in the process I might just be able to resolve this conflict…”

“Will we need all twelve of us?” Eve asked.

“Yes,” I said, glancing at those in John’s group. Nova waved, clearly still confused as to what was actually happening.

Corona nodded. “Whatever you say, knower of everything. Hey, mind telling me if this works?”

“Sorry, that’d ruin tension for the readers,” I said with a smirk. “I can tell you we don’t all die at the end of the day, but that’s about it.”

“That’s nice to know,” Flutterfree said.

“She had a qualifier in there,” Spades said. “Not all of you.”

“Yare yare daze,” Jotaro muttered.

“Think you can explain the plan… simply?” Allure asked.

Corona nodded and pointed up at the victory platform. “This is a victory platform from a mostly dead session.” She brought it down so everyone could see the disc and the now red house that dominated it. “I think I’ve reset it back to before it was used - might need a bit more tweaking, to be sure. But we now have a device that can, under the right conditions, create a new universe.”

“…Cool,” Nova said. “How does that help us?”

“It doesn’t initially. First off, we don’t have a full game of Sburb to shunt resources into Skaia. Secondly, any universe created by Sburb would just be part of the Green Sun’s dominion and not help us at all. Which is where we come in.” She stood tall on the platform. “There are twelve of us who were blown up by the Tumor and reborn as Sburb players.”

“Huh,” Applejack said. “Neat.”

“The twelve of us have inside us the Aspects of a partial, glitched game of Sburb,” Corona explained. “We were given these Aspects with the intention of winning Sburb. I was able to set the platform to recognize our essences in order to create a new universe defined by us. Which would be completely useless, even if we had the resources. But! BUT!”

“Just get on with it,” Spades muttered.

Corona smirked. “We don’t have a Skaia to grow a new universe in, or any energy to put into it.” She pointed at the Green Sun. “Luckily, there is a power source with the mass of two universes within it. With my reality magics, I have altered this entire Sburb setup to forego the game entirely and just shape a brand new universe directly out of the Green Sun.”

Jade blinked. “No frogs?”

“Uh, actually, there is a frog we need,” Pinkie said. “But since I’m the Space player I can just pull it out of my mane.”

“…What?” Nova said, confused.

“Dispelling a question we know people are going to ask,” I said. “Not important.”
Corona grinned, hand still outstretched to the Green Sun. “Since we are using the Green Sun to create our new universe, it will collapse in the process. It will be destroyed as we walk through the door to the new universe.”

“What about the ghosts? They’ll die!” Jade said, aghast.

“Not if we take you through with us,” Corona said, rubbing her hands together. “Jade, you and your ghost have the ability to shrink entire planets and put them in your pockets, right?”

Jade nodded. “Yes.”

“Given enough time, could you shrink the entire Dream Bubble like that?”

“I think so. It’s really big though…”

“John can help if needed with the ‘retcon’, from what I hear,” Corona said. “So, after the Dream Bubble – and any other worlds you want to take with us you can think of…” She glanced at Vriska. “…are shrunk down, we will take a portal directly to the ghost army. They haven’t moved, right?”

“No progress at all,” Feferi reported.

“Good. Then, John, we’ll need you to retcon-teleport us right to the Green Sun, passing through all dimensional boundaries with your power. Do you think you can do that?”

John looked at his hands. Then he looked up at Corona with a determined expression.

“Yes. I can.”

“We’re gonna get attacked by star-machines and squiddles,” Spades pointed out. “Think we can really get through?”

“Yes,” Eve said, eye glowing once again. “Yes, I am certain of it. It can be done.”

“Great!” Corona threw her hands and wings wide. “Then let’s go win this game everybody! Us twelve, on the platform. Rest of you, surround it. This is gonna be a bumpy ride…”

Dave and Karkat were staring out a window.

“Why am I staring out of the window, Dave?” Karkat asked.

“Because I told you to.”

“And why is that?”

“Because I told you to.”

Karkat twitched. “Is there no end to your repeated responses?”

“No.”

Karkat twitched. “Well slap me like a fish and drive my bone bulge up a wall. I-”

“Okay.”

“DAVE! IF YOU ACTUALLY DO ANY OF THOSE THINGS I WILL FIND YOUR FRIDGE,
SHIT IN IT, AND BURN YOUR HOUSE DOWN WITH AN ARMY OF FUCKING HAWK WASPS!

“Sweet. That’d be kinda cool actually.”

Karkat twitched. “Oh, I’m not done! You asked for it, Strider! I’m going to have to get CREATIVE.”

“The problem is the more creative your revenge is the more entertaining it’ll be to watch.”

“How bout I drive your bone bulge up a wall and slap you with a fish?”

“Boring.”

“AND THEN WHAT IF EVERYTHING GOES SHITHIVE MAGGO-”

The planet rumbled. Karkat turned back out the window and saw what he was supposed to be looking at.

Jade was out there, the size of a city, and getting larger. …Or the planet was getting smaller. It was hard to tell with her and her freaky space powers. Even without the power of the Green Sun, as the Witch of Space the size of objects were basically suggestions to her.

“Huh. Thought she was going to not involve us?”

“She’s not,” Dave said. With the other hand, Jade grabbed the moon. It had a few bases on it, they wouldn’t want to lose it and everyone on it.

“All right, where are we going?” Karkat muttered.

“See, that’s the fun part. I actually have no idea. Because different time. Do you have any idea how much I flipped when Vriska showed up?”

“…No?”

“I flipped my shit because my carefully crafted timeline was thrown out the window for something new.” Dave shrugged. “Now I was careful, so we didn’t end up with any dead Daves because of this, but man, I was looking forward to that starship.”

“We got a starship!?”

“Duh. …Not in your lifetime though.”

“…Oh.”

Dave let out a breath. “It’s good you get to stick around, Karkat. The world wouldn’t be the same without your endless stream of explosive rage.”

“How unusually sentimental of you.”

Dave shrugged. “Sometimes, you gotta think of me like Vriska there. You all only experienced a number of years you could count. Meanwhile she’s off fucking around for over nine hundred. Sometimes I vanish into the future or past for a long while, and the shifting of all that…”

“Ah. Are you saying you’ve changed?”
Dave didn’t have a response to this. Jade had gathered the Earth and the moon in her hands, and used the power of the Green Sun to switch universes.

“You know, it would have been handy if she knew how to do that before,” Karkat muttered.

“She just needed to figure it out,” Dave said. “Hey, at least it’s not using the fenestrated walls for a years-long journey.”

Jade grabbed hold of the Land of Pyramids and Neon – even though it was abandoned, it might hold something for them. She placed it near the Moon and the Earth at the same relative size, the three objects seemingly orbiting each other around a singular point.

“Ugh, I’m starting to feel sick looking at this,” Karkat muttered.

“I bet the world governments are flipping their shit.”

“Kanaya will issue a statement or something. Or someone else. Hell, might even be John for fuckall we know.”

“That’s not a word.”

Karkat twitched. “There’s gonna be a…”

Jade shifted universes again, letting the now marble-sized Earth see the House Juju and everyone around it as truly immense.

Jade said something to someone else, but it was impossible to hear properly given the tremendous size difference. It was the same with the response.

“You know I’d like it if she told us what she was doing ahead of time,” Karkat muttered.

“Rose probably knows. Go ask her.”

“Fuck no.”

“Then exist in a state of eternal mystery.”

Karkat could see Jade talking to her ghost counterpart, though only for a short while. They soon nodded to each other, the ‘Omega’ Jade teleporting away.

Jade pulsed with the powers of the Green Sun. She handed the Earth, Moon, and Lopan to a pink pony, who seemed perfectly able to keep the three planetary bodies from crashing into each other. Jade then spread her arms wide, creating a wide ring of green energy that shot across existence, further than Karkat could see in either direction.

The House Juju – and the entire Dream Bubble – began to shrink under Jade’s power. The mystical combination of every Sburb player’s dreams and deaths the size of a universe compressed further and further, until Karkat was able to see it had a curvature. It was vaguely pink around the edges, and the interior was a mish-mash of so many different sceneries and worlds that it was impossible to make out any single one.

Karkat could see that the energy of the Green Sun formed a ring around the Dream Bubble, the other side of the ring occupied by Omega Jade. It took several minutes to reduce the universal construct to the size of a marble, but they did, and Jade put it alongside the other three.

Karkat tried to make out features now that the Dream Bubble was closer, but it was still the same.
impossible mismatch.

“I’m going to go see if any of the fast food places are still open in this crisis,” Dave said. “Coming?”

“…Sure,” Karkat said, tearing his gaze away from the window. It wasn’t like there was any point to his continued investment in this. Might as well enjoy a nice meal while everything went down.

As they walked around outside, Karkat saw the victory platform everyone was standing on. “…Ugh… Here we go again…”

He was going to need more than one hamburger.

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“I won’t be able to turn the Dream Bubble back to normal once the Green Sun is gone,” Jade told Corona. “You’ll be able to, right?”

“If we can’t, we know people who can,” Corona promised. “I can’t imagine the Collection refusing to return what are essentially war refugees back to their original size, even if we are involved. If not that, Empress Twilight of the Void has the resources to do it.”

“Good to know we have options,” Jade said. She looked around. The Twelve new players (minus Corona) were standing on the platform. Floating around it were herself, Omega Jade, Meenah, Feferi, Spades, Vriska, and John.

“So… where did you find this thing?” Vriska asked, looking at the victory platform.

“The Omega Timeline,” I answered from my place on the platform.

John blinked. “Wait, the world where everything went wrong? Didn’t I change that so it didn’t exist anymore?”

Spades shook his head. “Nope. You left a copy of yourself behind when you did the zappy thing with your planet and took off with the ditzy broad. Other you gave himself to scrape out somethin’ for us. …Good to see you actually managed to do somethin’ out here.”

“Uh… thanks? …Whoever you are.”

“Slick. Spades Slick.”

“Uh huh…” He blinked, turning to the Jade ghost. “Oh, geez, you’re Omega Jade. I’m sorry, I couldn’t save you and… stuff.”

“It’s okay. I had gone pretty evil-mind-control,” Omega Jade said. “Grimbark, if you will. It’s good that you went back and changed everything. Don’t question that, it let everyone have a good ending. The rest of us here just get to enjoy the afterlife and… well, whatever comes after this war over the Green Sun.”

Allure looked up at them. “How much stuff happened to you guys?!”

“All the stuff,” Vriska said. “All of it.”

“Geez. It sounds like you went through more in a couple years than we’ve done in a couple decades. Good grief.”

“Yare yare daze,” Jotaro concurred.
“Now you’re beginning to see the clusterfuck that is Homestuck,” Vriska said. “It’s even more confusing to read it than to be part of it. At least when you’re part of it you have your own internal timeline to base yourself off of. Readers don’t get that much luck. You jump around like a ping-pong ball on a trampoline with extra high gravity.”

“Fun,” Allure said, smiling weakly.

Corona flew down to the platform. “Right, so, we need to stand in certain spots for this ‘trick’ spell to work. I’ll label them with our Aspect symbols.” Under herself she created the symbol of Doom, a black spiked circle, almost skull-like with circular holes in it. On the opposite side of the disc, she created the vibrant green, leafy symbol of Life. “And… uh, who’s Life?”

I would have answered, but I decided to let Eve try out her new box of tricks. She turned on her eye of knowledge. “That would be… Applejack!”

“Really?” Applejack blinked. “Ah never figured out what my power was… Never even got an inklin’.”

“That’s because you’re a Mage of Life,” I explained. “Mages tend to only have a deep understanding of their aspect. They aren’t powerless, but their abilities tend not to manifest as strongly as others.”

“Oh. Well, Ah’m not complainin’. Does everyone else know what they are?”

Allure raised a hoof. “I don’t.”

“Only Aspect left is Heart,” Corona said. “I forget the first part. They’re less memorable.”

“Knight of Heart,” I continued. “One who fights with the soul. Allure, to you, the spirits and inner nature of people are yours to use. Not limitless, like a Witch, but with more precision.”

“…I don’t understand,” Allure admitted. “Should we, maybe, take a moment to figure these new abilities out?”

“Probably not,” Corona said. “They’re… not that powerful compared to the ghosts.”

Vriska nodded. “None of you are god-tier, and I don’t have a way to make you god-tier since this isn’t a normal session. So all of your powers are locked up within you, manifesting only in minor ways, if at all. As the Heir of Blood, at god-tier Jotaro should be able to completely inherit any connection to his ancestors and lost friends, possibly even talk to them and use their spirits as strength, maybe even become some sort of literal representation of ‘connection’. As it is, he just got some extra Stands. A nice bonus, yes, but not much.”

“Then there’s people like me and Nova,” I said. “Whose titles essentially mean nothing. Any powers I would have gained from being a Seer of Void, I already have. Nova’s time magic could accomplish everything a Prince of Time could, though she may find that she can erase time without using magic at all now.”

“If all of our powers were supposed to be weak, how come I’m able to fully use my Rogue of Doom powers?” Corona asked.

“You already know how to deal with extreme power of a complicated sort,” I explained. “And no, you’re not using it fully, you’re just using it specifically. A fully realized god-tier Rogue of Doom could bring entire civilizations to ruin. Luckily for us our realized Doom ghosts are the Heir and Mage, who are some of the less… outwardly destructive Doom types.”
“A Bard of Doom would be terrifying…” Jade commented.

Pinkie shivered. “Yeah…”

Corona generated the Aspect symbols around the circle in pairs. The white swirl of Space opposing the red gear of Time. The sun of Light against the loose lines of Void. The teal tri-tipped circle of Mind against the Pink heart of… well, Heart. The angry purple lines of Rage against the smooth wings of Hope. The free blue gusts of Breath against the deep red wound of Blood.

Everyone stood on their respective Aspects. The red house flashed, changing colors to purple. The number of squares beneath the roof changed form four to twelve, creating a ‘+’ pattern out of the sections.

“It recognized us,” Corona said. “Good. It thinks we’re ready to begin ‘ultimate alchemy’ and create a new universe. It’s prepared to connect.”

“Let’s turn the Green Sun into a universe,” Meenah said, grinning maniacally.

Corona pointed at Spades. “Hey, look, you could die if you come out here. You’re not a ghost, nor are you one of the Twelve. Jade could put you on one of the pl-”

“I’m comin’ and you can’t stop me,” Spades said. “That big ball of overblown green fluff is what gave Lord English his power, right?”

“A lot of it, but not all,” Vriska elaborated.

“Then I’m gonna take it out.”

“Fair enough,” Vriska said, shrugging. “Corona?”

“John, prepare yourself,” Corona said. “We need you to zap the entire ghost army directly to the Green Sun. Think you can do that?”

“If they’re all touching, yeah,” John said.

“…Some of the ghosts have been thrown away and lost…” Feferi said.

“They’ll just have to be sacrificed,” Meenah said. “No war comes without casualties.”

“They didn’t know that when they signed up, though.”

“You wanna go fishin’ through Paradox Space for eons to find ‘em?”

Feferi shook her head. “No. This is what we need to do. I just wanted to make sure everyone knew that we would lose some.”

Eve nodded. “It’s… not fine, but we have to do it. It’s a war over… well, our very lives and freedom. Does everyone understand?”

There were a series of somber nods.

“Let’s go then. Corona, do you want to do it or should I?”

Corona forced a smile. “Let’s get some use out of Seraphim, shall we?”

Eve nodded. She summoned Seraphim; tapping into the dimensional coordinates Corona had given
A portal opened right to the chaos of the ghost army. Jade increased its size with her Space powers while Omega Jade pushed them all through quickly. It closed behind them.

“Just as chaotic as I remember,” O’Neill said, observing the colorful robes of ghosts move in squads, pushing against the same Combine Gyroscope and Noble Horrorterror they had been pushing against when they’d left.

“Holy Celestia…” Renee said, hoof to her mouth. “Is this… What a multiversal war looks like?”

“Nope,” I said. “This is what you get when there’s one multiversal construct creating a lot of weird conditions. A true multiversal war between powers of this magnitude would have already destroyed every universe in this Paradox Space and then some. What we have here is a limited conflict.”

Allure gulped. “I hope we never see a full war…”

“You will,” I said. “But not between powers of this caliber. Class 1s avoid war at all costs because the consequences of going all-out against each other are beyond dire.”

A Mind player floated over to them. “We’re at a standstill. The bastards are able to send just enough power to keep us immobile, even if they can’t spend enough to utterly defeat us. I hope you have a plan.”

“Indeed I do,” Meenah said with a smirk. “John, start doing the zappy thing.” She grabbed a couple of Mind players from nearby. “You two. Broadcast what I’m about to say.”

The god-tier trolls nodded

“LISTEN UP!” Meenah shouted. “EVERYONE NEEDS TO FALL BACK TO THE VICTORY PLATFORM I’M NEXT TO! WE NEED TO ALL BE TOUCHING! DON’T QUESTION, JUST DO.”

John took his position in the middle of the Twelve. He looked to the Green Sun in the distance – and focused his retcon power. Soon, him, the Twelve, and the entire victory platform were glowing a bright white.

Vriska touched the platform from the edge first, glowing white as well. Jade, Meenah, Feferi, Spades, and the others all followed suit, becoming one with the whiteness.

The ghost army left their engagements and began to pile on, the Time and Breath players lagging behind so they could free any ghosts that were still imprisoned.

The Horrorterrors and Combine realized what was happening. The Horrorterrors knew what John was, and the Combine’s scanners were detecting power akin to the Dark Tower itself.

The Horrorterrors and Combine dropped all fighting for a moment to shoot everything they had at the zapping white conglomeration.

“Fuck,” a Dave said, trying to accelerate time for everyone. He discovered that his acceleration didn’t slow the incoming attacks down at all. “BAIL!” he shouted. “EVERYONE BAIL! LEAVE THE REST!”

A few relative ‘past’ time selves jumped to defend against the attacks, prepared to jump into the different times to get to the white glow. But their timestreams were interrupted the moment the attacks hit, Paradox Space splitting their timelines into shreds.
The Breath and Time players that could make it to the zapping bundle of ghosts did.

Then a Horrorterror’s screech attack mixed with a Combine’s supernova ejection, hitting the retcon ball with full force…

~~~

**ZAPZAPZAPZAPZAPZAPZAPZAPZAP**

The whole of Paradox Space rippled with white cracks, straining even the resilient physics of the black realm around the Green Sun. The sudden existence of these cracks provided a point of reference in the bending, churning, multiversal soup, allowing a three-dimensional being to see where the various universes were connected through the spread and visual location of the damage to reality.

The cracks spread across the darkness, surrounding the Green Sun in a halo reminiscent of the damage Lord English had once done to the old Paradox Space, back during the first time the Green Sun had graced the multiverse with its presence.

Within the Dream Bubble, deep in the center of the interaction between John’s retcon powers and the weapons of high level societies, Andrew Hussie began to sweat.

He looked at the House Juju. Watched it ripple, shake, and tremble as reality itself crumbled.

Was it weakening from all this strain?

Could it deal with the excessive deviation from its original plan?

Hussie decided to hide behind a rock. He did not want to be seen if the House Juju failed. But he couldn’t keep himself from peering over the edge of the rock with his narrow, empty eyes.

The House Juju vibrated. Blue, orange, red, and black colors flashed across the faces of the Juju…

And then it stopped, returning to normal. It had compensated for the new variable.

“Never should have doubted it! Ha!” Hussie said, going on to do a jig. “Take that bizarre alterations to reality! The Huss had you beat!”

Then he realized everything else was still shaking.

“…Okay so maybe I’ve celebrated a little too soon,” Hussie commented to himself. “Just because the worst thing didn’t happen doesn’t mean the next worst thing won’t happen!” He took off at a run through the Dream Bubble. Even though every part of it was in the process of being zapped away.

Sorta.

As was presumably obvious, things had gone sideways.

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Up close, the Green Sun looked like any other star with its billowing, fiery surface. It was certainly not fueled by any sort of nuclear reaction at its core, but the external result of the inner machinations had the same visual appearance.

Except it was brilliant green. Everything anywhere near it would be illuminated by an intense green light, drowning out most other colors in favor of the Green Sun’s singular shade.
The space immediately around the Green Sun was free of the cracks in reality. This allowed the Green Sun to have a sky of sorts, seen as a bunch of black plates in the sky separated by glowing white breaks in the nature of spacetime itself.

It was in this ‘calm’ area near the sun that the ghost army appeared…

…without John, the Twelve, or the victory platform.

“Okay, what the shell?” Meenah asked. “Where are they?”

“I have no idea,” Vriska said. “The people we could ask where they are just happen to be the people on the stupid thing!”

“Can you see anything?” Feferi asked the Jades. They shook their heads.

“Fuckin’ useless…” Meenah muttered.

“I hate to break up the confusion party,” Spades said. “but we’re about to have company.” He pointed with his golden scepter at the cracks in reality.

They could see the Combine ships moving toward them, unhindered. One would assume that meant the Horrorterrors were moving toward them as well, no longer concerned with keeping the Combine away from the Green Sun.

The ghost army was now the primary target. And their secret recton weapon wasn’t with them.

“New plan!” Vriska shouted. “Meenah, you wanted to control the Green Sun?”

“Fuck yeah.”

“Then let’s try that.”

Meenah grinned. “I don’t think I’ve ever liked a sinkin’ plan more than this. Right. Dog-girls!”

“Woof,” Omega Jade said, prompting a facepalm from the living Jade.

“You got the Sun powers. Use them. You’re right next to the Green Sun for once in your life. If that doesn’t give you a power boost I don’t know what will!”

The Jades nodded. They moved to opposite sides of the Green Sun. The green energy of the Sun’s corona began to swirl around them, indicating they had tapped directly into the multiversal construct’s power to the envy of every Combine ship watching.

“Right!” Meenah shouted, using a Mind player to project her commands. “Ghost dog, you’re on defense. Living dog, try to figure a way for us to escape this mess. GHOST ARMY – keep everyfin away from the Green Sun. Don’t let a single eldritch tentacle scrape the green flames, and don’t let a single Combine ship plug a cable in here. Got it?”

“Got it!” Everyone shouted.

“TIME FOR ROUND TWO!” she shouted, holding her trident high. The ghosts spread out, forming a colorful and striped sphere around the Green Sun. Physically, it should have been impossible to surround something the mass of two universes that didn’t even really exist in a realspace sense, but the Jades were there, acting as the Green Sun’s Guardians, condensing the relative space so a proper shield could be created.
No longer was the Green Sun an inert object. For the first time in its existence, the Green Sun would be able to fight back.

Omega Jade took a breath – and started flinging off the Green Sun’s corona in every direction, creating a violet flurry of blades of green slicing through space. This gave the Horrorterrors and Combine some difficulty in navigating closer to the Green Sun, since now the valuable power they were fighting over was attacking them.

They were not deterred, however. The loss of a few eldritch abominations or Combine ships was nothing compared to the value of the Green Sun – the danger it posed, the possibilities it entailed.

“I’d really like to hear that you’ve got somethin for us!” Meenah shouted to Jade. “Because if they’re both attackin’ at once, no Green Sun is gonna keep them back for long!”

“Working on it!” Jade shouted back. “Do any of you Light players have the ability to bestow luck?”

Vriska shook her head. “Sorry. I steal luck, can’t give it. Rose over there sees knowledge and fortune, can’t actually do much with it. And Aranea can heal with luck, which would just bring you back to normal luck, as I understand it. Eve could probably have done it. A Witch of Light should be able to manipulate it in general. …But she wasn’t god-tier anyway.”

“Then you’ll need to be patient!” Jade shouted. “I’ve got control of the Green Sun, yes, but I don’t have any idea how it works. I’m having difficulty working it out.”

“Yeah, really needed a Witch of Light,” Vriska muttered. “Any other ideas? Mind players, got anything for her?”

She was met with silence.

Feferi put her hands to her face. “Oh no. I’m sensing the Horrorterrors closing in. They’re moving faster than the Combine, slightly. I don’t think the Combine have noticed…”

“BRACE YOURSELVES!” Meenah shouted. “They could come from anywhere!”

Anywhere turned out to be from everywhere at once.

“Gogdam Horrorterrors,” Meenah grunted.

The eldritch abominations lashed from all sides of the Green Sun. Omega Jade could not defend from every side at once, but she did her best to spread the energies of the Green Sun around in a defensive measure, preventing the Horrorterrors from pushing all the ghosts aside.

Vriska decided it was time. “Any god-tier Vriskas! Any of you! We’re surrounded by fleshy Horrorterrors! SUCK ‘EM DRY.”

Every Thief of Light focused on the Horrorterrors, draining them of luck. The Horrorterrors themselves were far too massive and impossible for just one of the ghosts to do anything, and even several only made the Horrorterrors make mistakes that allowed for players of Life and Hope to take them out.

But that wasn’t the point. The point was to absorb as much fortune as possible from the fleshy monsters. Now that the battle was focused, the Combine couldn’t interrupt what was going on. The Green Sun’s power gave them the time they needed to absorb the luck without losing it instantly.

Vriska held up her Fluorite Octet, and so did every other Vriska ghost, including Vrisko. “LET’S
DO THIS LADIES!” They threw their dice, most of them managing to roll the straight 8-8-8-8-8-8-8. They gained their blue armor, and power comparable to that which Jade had been wielding outside the Green Sun’s glow.

They charged. Blue sparks of light taking out tentacles, beaks, eyes, and other impossible body parts.

Beings that made Majora look like a small, annoying dog were torn apart by an army of ghosts.

Unfortunately for the ghosts, Horrorterrors were ancient, intelligent creatures. They learned quickly – as they had from Lord English – not to underestimate that which they had created using the knowledge of the Tower. They wormed their way through the Green Sun’s ghostly defenses, bashing ghosts aside. Trapping some in bubbles, tossing others into the depths of Paradox Space. They moved in…

And then a human boy nobody had paid any attention to activated his power. “TALLY-HO!” he bellowed, tapping into his power – that of a Page of Hope. The white, pure light of hope wafted off him and went into every one of his allies, filling them with new inner power and drive. It was pure white power that made the Horrorterrors scream in agony, for it was the antithesis of what they were.

The ghost army pushed them back.

“Fuck yeah!” Vriska shouted, her blade glowing with the Hope of thousands of ghosts. She twisted it and cut a Horrorterror in half. “One hit…. HELL YEAH, JAKE! HELL YEAH! KEEP IT UP!”

“GADZOOKS!” Jake shouted, shooting more Hope into everyone.

The Horrorterrors fell further back, screeching in impossible agonies, the light of Hope and the Green Sun simply too much to deal with.

And then the Combine arrived.

Rather than fire on the Horrorterrors, they assisted. They pushed through the Hope – for powers of purity did not burn them like it did the eldritch abominations. Omega Jade fought back with the force of the Green Sun, discovering that while, yes, that worked, the resulting supernovas from the destruction of the ships proved to be rather disorienting to the ghost army.

“Keep it together!” Meenah shouted. “Bloods and Minds, get everyone organized! We can’t afford to fall apart now!”

“GREAT SCOTT!” Jake shouted, letting out another surge of Hope to improve everyone’s confidence. They fought as one again – holding the barrier to the Green Sun.

“JAAAADE!” Vriska shouted.

“I think I have something! Just need a bit more time!” Jade said. “The connections of the Green Sun all lace through this single, inner point…”

The Combine and Horrorterrors tried something desperate. They focused most of their efforts on one single point of the battle, leaving the rest of their forces weaker. They would be pushed back significantly from the Green Sun because of this, but they had to do one thing.

A Combine beam mixed with a Horrorterror’s screech, blasting through a wall of ghosts. This blast would do absolutely nothing to the Green Sun itself – utterly meaningless. There was no need to defend against it.
Except it was going for one of the few people in this fight who could still die.

One Jade Harley, who was trying fervently to find a way out of this mess. The beam hit her in the back – and she screamed. The power of the Green Sun shot behind her and vaporized the Horrorterror and Combine ship that had unleashed the attack.

It came too late. Her body went limp, lifeless.

There was no way that death wasn’t Heroic.

“JADE!” several people shouted – including Dead Dave, Vriska, and Omega Jade.

Vriska’s features fell. She realized quickly that they needed two dog-tier Jades to get out of here. One to use the Green Sun to defend, another to figure out how to use the Green Sun to end this.

That had just been taken from them.

All they could do now was fight and hope the Combine and Horrorterrors eventually ran out of things to throw at them.

…That wasn’t going to happen.

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John admitted it to himself.

He had no idea what he was doing.

One minute everything was white and then everything shook and his head felt like it was about to explode.

Then he opened his eyes.

He was lying in the middle of the victory platform. The purple house was still there, and so were the Twelve new players. Some of them were looking at him in concern, while the rest were looking around them, mouths agape.

They were flying through something. Something white with the occasional flash of pale color just to remind them they were moving.

“Where the hell…?” O’Neill asked.

“No idea,” John said.

Eve turned her eye on, scanning for understanding. “I’ve got nothing. It’s just… white. Twilence?”

I stared at the whiteness around us, furrowing my brow. “I… think its meant to indicate ‘travel’ over a great relative ‘distance’.” I rubbed my head. “John’s retcon doesn’t play nice with my Awareness. I can tell you the other ghosts made it to the desired location fine. I can’t tell you what we’re doing.”

“What will happen?” Flutterfree asked.

“Survival?” I said, shrugging. “Honestly I predict some sort of spectacular mindscrew is about to show up and blow our minds.”

“Yare yare daze…” Jotaro said. He extended Hermit Purple and the Passion out, trying to gather any
sort of inkling what was happening but the purple vines came up with nothing.

Flutterfree went next. She summoned Lolo in its entirety, feeling the whiteness around them. It revealed dozens of black, spirograph shapes swirling around them like they were the center of a gyroscope.

“What are the gates doing here?” John asked. “And why do your vines have them?”

“It’s just how Lolo appears,” Flutterfree said. Then she blinked. “Wait, they are related, aren’t they?”

“Lolo’s Revelation is a ka based power,” Allure pointed out. “It takes what’s ‘hidden’ and makes it real, even if it’s something a little esoteric, like a hidden destiny.”


“Don’t look at me, I don’t know anything!” John said, holding up his hands.

“Then what good are ya?” Rainbow blurted.

“Rainbow!” Renee chided.

“…Sorry, that was uncalled for.”

Eve turned her eye on again, examining the spirograph patterns. “…Starbeat and Lieshy both mentioned they saw the spirograph prominently in the room at the top of the Dark Tower…”

Corona blinked. “And the Horrorterrors created Sburb with what they found in the Dark Tower. … Could it represent ka?”

I shook my head. “Not quite. The symbol for ka itself is a circle with a stylized ‘K’ and ‘A’ in it. Starbeat could tell you that. The spirograph represents the entire multiverse.”

John blinked. “Huh?”

“On a simpler level, the spirograph represents interconnectivity. Every single line in the spirograph points toward the center, and yet is also interconnected with each other. It represents how every universe has a connection with the Dark Tower, but how they also share connections with each other. It is a symbol that represents everything – universes, the connectivity of worlds, the creation of new existences, the dependance on the Dark Tower.”

John cocked his head. “…Can someone explain to me what the Dark Tower is?”

“The center of the multiverse,” Eve said. “Source of ka, the force that ensures the multiverse operates with a dependance on stories and narrative. The reason you exist while a webcomic of you also exists.”

“So, let me get this straight. Sburb was created by the Horrorterrors using the power found inside this Dark Tower. And the Spirograph is just… representative of everything? How does that help us?”

“It doesn’t,” Jotaro said. “Do we even know if we’re going anywhere, or just moving?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know, sorry.”

“John? Can you get us out of here?” Applejack asked. “Back to where we need to go?”

John held out his hand and felt his white power waft around his arm. “I… I can’t feel it. I can feel
lots of places whirring by, holy cow. But I don’t recognize any of them…”

Eve’s eyes widened. “You may have just taken us out of the Green Sun’s control. Ugh, why didn’t we think of that!?”

Corona shook her head. “We did. Decided it wasn’t worth the risk – the Green Sun’s worlds are sealed off, and even if we could move the entire ghost army, we would lose contact with all the others tuff that was going on. Not to mention just letting the Combine and Horrorterrors get the Green Sun sounded like a bad idea.”

“I wouldn’t mind the Horrorterrors getting it,” Nova said. “They just wanted to stop it from destroying so much.”

Eve shook her head. “Regardless, we’re outside the Green Sun’s reach now. John… Take us out of this tunnel. If we can’t get back into Paradox Space after that, we can at least go get help. Or tell everyone we know what’s going on.”

John nodded. “Hold on then.” He put his hand on the ground, turning the entire victory platform bright white once again.

We zapped away. We appeared in an unknown location lit by firelight. Underground, possibly some castle’s basement, but still large enough to accommodate the floating victory platform.

The first thing Eve noticed was that Seraphim was able to access more universes again – but she found that her physics ‘presets’ weren’t working. “Something’s up,” she warned, scanning the area with her eye. “Seraphim’s not quite righ—”

The moment she laid her eye on the area of the room shrouded in darkness, a fiery glow lit on the floor, revealing a gigantic throne made of skulls. The skulls were not simply piled into a throne shape, but were far more organized, arranged in levels with thin layers of gold below the jaw and above the tops of the dead heads, giving it an air of organized death. Within the throne sat a humanoid figure more than large enough to fill the throne. He was dressed in a single crimson robe that hid all his body save for the bony, wrinkled hands.

“What’s this?” he asked in a harsh, grating voice. Eve could hear him, despite her ears not being on. The sound of his voice made everyone back up – including myself.

I took a few more steps back, because I knew who this was.

“John, get us out of here,” I said. “Get us out of here now.”

“No,” the robed figure said. “You will stay right here, with me, until I know who and what you are…”

I pulled out my notebook and began scribbling furiously.

“No.” A flash of red came from the shadow of his hood where his eyes probably were, disintegrating my notebook.

I took in a sharp, enraged breath. That book may have only been the most recent in a long series, but the newest memories were often the most precious.

“You are a Prophet,” he said. “One aware of who they are, nonetheless… I was uncertain if that was possible. Regardless, you will not be scribbling your way out of this one.”
“W-who are you?” Pinkie asked. She didn’t have the knowledge I did – but she knew this was bad.

“I a-”

“The Crimson King,” I said, catching him off guard.

The Crimson King leaned in toward me. “How would you know that…?”

“A lot of different reasons. More Aware than the average Prophet, you understand. And I-”

I lost the ability to breathe. But I knew this trick – Flagg was known to use it. Not surprising, since this was Flagg’s old boss. I forced myself to cast a spell within my stupor. I had been around a long time – perhaps not as long as Vriska, but I had access to spells that would make entire universes tremble.

It was at this point I realized I was setting myself up for a fall. I saw it – the way ka was flowing, ensuring I’d build up my power, unleash it, and be wiped to the side like a bug on windshield.

“Not… giving you the… satisfaction…” I forced, before passing out. Due to my nature I was still Aware of the events transpiring after my unconsciousness began, but I was out.

“Twilence!” Eve shouted.

“Does anyone else wish to explain who you are?”

O’Neill leaned back against the purple house. “We’re the Twelve, obviously.”

“You wish to engage in a game of riddles?” The Crimson King stood up, his towering form driving fear into everyone. “No.” Allure’s horn broke off in an instant, forcing blood down her face. Allure screamed – then suddenly, the screaming stopped. She wasn’t moving or breathing. “Explain or I kill another.”

“ALLURE!” Renee wailed. “Stop, stop! We are the… the citizens of Merodi Universalis… A-and w-we…”

“YOU MONSTER!” Flutterfree shouted, a deep purple coming to her eyes. “MONSTER!”

The Crimson King tried to destroy her. The purple energies around her prevented this. She screamed, using her Stare on him. Her Rage made it all the way to his eyes – and held him.

“NOVA! JOTARO! JOHN!” Eve shouted. “NOW!”

Nova surrounded John in a time spell, getting the message from Eve loud and clear.

“STAR PLATINUM: THE WORLD!” Jotaro shouted, freezing time.

…For everyone except himself and John.

“TAKE US BACK! NOW!” Jotaro shouted; using Hermit Purple to make sure everyone was on the platform.

John was already moving. He zapped up himself, the victory platform, and everyone else.

They appeared somewhere gray and windy, where the ground was dead.

I started breathing again. “Holy bookworms… That was close…”
“ALLURE!” Renee shouted, running to the form of her sister. “Allure! Sweetie, I-”

Allure opened her eyes. Then she let herself breathe. “He… He really tried to kill me…”

Corona stopped preparing her revive spell. “How!?”

“I just… told myself to be dead for a moment?” Allure managed.

“Knight of Heart,” I said. “Defended herself by feigning her own soul’s death. I’m surprised she managed to do so…”

“Probably had something to do with me transferring her Doom at the last second,” Corona said. “I uh… don’t think transferring the Doom to the Crimson King did anything.”

“Instinct maybe…?” Allure said, eyes glazing over. “Woah, everything’s really fuzzy…”

Applejack trotted over to her. “You’ve lost a lot of blood and told your body you were dead for a few seconds. That’s not good. We need to patch this up right now. Eve, summon some bandages.” Eve did so, and Applejack had Allure’s forehead wrapped in a few seconds. “There you go.”

“Thank you…” Allure said, breathing slowly.

“I could have just healed her,” Corona said.

“Oh. Right.” Applejack blushed. “Uh, Ah guess somethin’ just took over.”

Corona placed her hand on Allure’s wound and healed it up. Allure’s face was still bloody, but she wasn't in danger anymore. She still appeared groggy.

“My horn…” Allure managed, able to worry about herself now that she didn’t feel ready to pass out.

“Hey, I’ve seen artificial horns,” Rainbow said. “Don’t worry, you’ll get one.”

“Mhm…” Allure said, shaking her head. “Thanks. All of you. …Especially Flutterfree.”

Flutterfree smiled sadly. “I… I’m glad I helped you.”

“Yeah. I… Uh… Where are we?”

“I have no idea,” John said. He stood at the edge of the platform, looking into the distance.

Everyone joined him to examine where they were. Everything aside from them and the platform was colorless, limited mostly to darker shades of gray and black. The sky was overcast with endless stratus clouds while the ground was the scene of an endless plane of dead plants.

Dead, colorless roses.

In the distance, we saw it – a building of pure blackness that rose a few stories into the sky. It was clearly intended to be much taller, but the top of it was only rubble.

“Is that… the Dark Tower?” John asked.

“Can’t be…” Corona said. “I’ve seen it before, that’s not it!”

“It is…” I said, my expression haunted. “We changed something…”

“What?” Rainbow said. “Change what?”
“The Dark Tower has only been effectively threatened one time in the entirety of its existence,” I said. “The being who sought to bring it down was the being we just encountered. The Crimson King. In our conversation we must have changed something. Something that let him win.”

Eve pulled out Seraphim. “…There are no other universes. This is it.”

“How is that possible!?” Nova blurted. “You can’t go back and change something for every universe! That’s not how it works?”

Pinkie pointed at John. “He can overrule that. He could go back to the start of the multiverse…”

“…and destroy everything,” Jotaro completed.

John held up his hands. “H-hey I was just trying to get us out of there!”

“I want to know how this power can exist,” Corona said. “How can anyone have the right to change anything? Not even the highest of the high can overrule the laws of metatime! The multiverse always progresses.”

John waved his hand. “Hey, I got this from the House Juju! I don’t know anything about it! Honest!”

“What is the House Juju?” Eve asked, turning to me. “You’d know.”

All the others looked to me – even Pinkie, with a steeled glare.


“…Explain,” Eve demanded, lighting her eye up just to make sure she got everything.

“When the Crimson King assaulted the Dark Tower in the ‘early’ days of ka, the Dark Tower ‘decided’ to use him. It created an impossible time loop around the life of one man – Roland of Gilead, the Gunslinger. It superseded its own rules of metatime to ensure that, regardless of what anyone did, Roland would travel through a time loop in a world that did not allow time travel, and defend the Tower from the inside.” I gestured at the Tower. “The Dark Tower is a physical construct, just like everything else. It could be destroyed with enough power and resources. So it allowed a story to take place where it was threatened, and created an exception to one of the absolute rules of the multiverse to ensure no entity would ever be able to touch it again.”

They all stared at me, blinking.

“Then the Horrorterrors made it to the room at the top of the Tower,” I said. “Normally this wouldn’t be a problem. But they decided to make something out of what they found. Based on the structures of the Dark Tower itself, they created essentially a miniature version.”

“Sburb…” John said.

“Yes. And with it, certain protocols the Tower had in place manifested themselves in strange ways. Most of the Jujus are manifestations of those concepts. The House Juju is the manifestation of the exception to the rules the Tower allowed to protect itself. It worked as intended – the Tower was once again threatened, this time by Lord English. But the House Juju allowed a suspension of the rules to defeat him. There was only one loose end.”

“Me,” John said.

“Yes. You. You stuck your hand into the House Juju and became its emissary. But unlike Roland of
Gilead, you weren’t sealed in an infinite time loop. You were allowed to go free. You, John, are a loose end. An exception to the rules was allowed. Why? I don’t know. Maybe Hussie’s influence on the Tower cannot be understated. Maybe it’s just a glitch and the Flowers just aren’t touching you because you scare them. I don’t know.” I breathed heavily.

John gulped. “W-well then, I, uh…” He adjusted his collar. “I…”

“I’m sorry,” I said, sighing. “I got angry there. Passionate. There’s really nothing you did wrong, John. You were just given something you didn’t understand.” I shook my head, looking at the ruined Dark Tower. Then I narrowed my eyes. “Wait a minute…"

Corona looked up, sensing an idea. “What is it?”

“This can’t be real,” I said. “We’re still being written about. If the Dark Tower was destroyed, that would be impossible. The sight of a Prophet cannot penetrate to a ‘time’ when the Dark Tower doesn’t exist. But I can see these words appearing on a screen…” I put a hoof to my chin. “If we went back and fixed it, I would see these words appear after we fixed it, as a ‘this is what happened while ka was no longer in effect’ sort of thing. But that’s not what’s happening. Ka is still here.”

Flutterfree took a breath, preparing to reveal everything.

“No. Don’t,” I said. “We need to edit our memories.”

Renee blinked. “Well, as the Sylph of Mind I should only be able to heal memories, dear, and… why do we need to edit our memories?”

“Because we need to think this happened a specific way,” I said.

Eve’s eyes widened. “No, there’s no way. That’s crazy.”

“Is it?” I asked.

“Does anyone care to explain what you two just thought of?!” O’Neill blurted.

“What if this really happened?” I asked. “How would we fix it? We’d use John’s retcon to go back, of course. Go back and prevent us from ever meeting the Crimson King. Easy enough, right?”

“Oh, wouldn’t that create copies and a whole lot of other problems?” John said.

Eve nodded. “Yes, yes it would. There would be two sets of us and our presence would mess with everything even further.”

I put a hoof to my chin. “So, we’d know that. So we’d need to think of a way to ensure those past versions of us still become us, yet we change all the events. We decide to let our past selves experience an illusion. Let them think they’ve encountered the Crimson King and went to the broken Dark Tower, so their memories would be exactly the same…”

Allure held her head. “Are you suggesting that we’re living in an illusion created by our future selves?!”

“Yes!” I said. “Only it isn’t working – I’m too Aware. I’m changing what we remembered – but I must have been aware that this would happen. So I would have had a backup plan… I would ha-” I facehooved. “AUGH, if I change our memories we won’t come up with a reason to send ourselves back through an illusion!”
“What if it’s a closed time loop?” John asked. “We’ve always been in an illusion. We never actually met the Crimson King.”

“John, your power doesn’t work like that. You go back once, you actively change a thing. If you go back again, you can change it to be something else. And th-” I realized what the solution was. I sighed. “Well, that’s… depressing.”

“Would you stop making observations and get to the explaining!?” Rainbow blurted.

“There is a solution,” I said. “If we were the first group that came in and realized that, because of me, we wouldn’t be able to alter the events perfectly, we’d simply allow the second loop to come through to create a new set of events within an illusion. And then the first team… Would erase themselves from existence.”

Flutterfree gasped. “That’s horrible!”

“But I think it’s already been done,” I said.

“...I’m sure it has,” Eve said. “We wouldn’t let ourselves find a way to argue, to stop ourselves from making a sacrifice.”

“What does that mean though?” Nova asked.

“It means we go back and send the past versions of ourselves into an illusion based on our memories,” Eve said, “so that they can experience this and become us.”

“We just have to accept that the first loop… the first loop broke.” I gulped. “I’m sorry. I guess I was... wrong. All of us did die here. It’s already happened.”

“That’s… a haunting thought,” Renee said.

I turned to John. “…You should be able to just take us back to the moment we were in the white tunnel. You’ll need to divert them to a specific universe in the D-sphere. Corona, give me your dimensional device. I’ll key it in.”

Corona tossed the device to me. I entered the code and handed it to John. “Retcon back to the tunnel of white. Use this as a reference if you need it. Nova, keep us invisible. John, all you have to do is drop them in there the moment the past-you tries to jump to the Crimson King. It doesn’t matter what multiversal era you get them there, all that matters is that you do get them there, so this entire loop can happen.”

John nodded. “Got it.” He felt the essence of the place the device was set to. He knew where they needed to go.

Nova surrounded us in a bubble of invisibility.

“Wait,” I said. “…Flutterfree, use Lolo so John is actually able to retcon us out of this illusion.”

Flutterfree raised an eyebrow. “Is it safe?”

“In this new loop… Yes. Yes it is.”

Flutterfree spread out Lolo – and everything but us and the victory platform just vanished. There was truly nothing here. Everyone had to accept that everything I’d just said was true. The Crimson King, the wreckage of the Tower - it had just been an illusion created by people who no longer existed.
With another series of zaps from John, we appeared inside the white tunnel again, right behind our past selves. They didn’t notice. They couldn’t.

We watched a conversation take place that we had already had. Explanations of the Dark Tower. Sburb. Luckily we had come in after Flutterfree had used Lolo – that would have been disastrous.

Eve told John and Nova when to move telepathically. Nova made John extra-invisible as he moved to the past-platform. When past-John tried to retool to the Crimson King, John retooled them to the universe he himself had been in just moments before – he didn’t even need to use the portal device.

And the loop was complete. They would encounter a fake Crimson King and believe they’d end up in the broken Dark Tower – but the universe they had been sent to was designed to bend its reality with ka… fate… A clever dreaming world that would keep people who entered it trapped forever, thinking they were living their lives. But of course I would always be able to figure it out and get them out with Lolo. Every time.

John let out a whistle. “That was a pretty serious mindfuck right there. Almost as bad as some of Dave’s causal loops. Almost.”

“How can you be so calm?” Flutterfree blurted. “The first versions of us just died!”

“…It’s not like we’re copies, or anything,” Eve said, looking at Flutterfree with a telling expression. “We are truly who we were before. It’s just that version of us who experienced something decided they would rather stop existing for the sake of their past.”

Flutterfree looked at her, pained. “…I… …I understand.”

Eve smiled sadly, wiping a tear from her eye. “I know.”

“…I take it my horn loss is real?” Allure asked me.

I nodded. “It may have been an illusion, but it did real things to our minds and bodies.”

“Figures. I hope the replacement doesn’t feel weird.”

“It’ll feel weird,” Eve said.

“Great…”

Corona looked to John. “…Take us back to the Green Sun, John. It’s time.”

“I don’t know how to get us out of this tube th-” he blinked. “Wait. I do. How…?”

Eve shrugged. “Probably because you’ve already translated in and out of here from elsewhere and… you know what, that rabbit hole probably has no end. Just like the rest of this.”

“Let’s just go back already,” Rainbow said. “I have plans to wipe all this brain-burn out of my memories.”

Renee laughed bitterly. “Not a bad idea…”

John placed his hand on the victory platform’s center again. “Here we go…”

Everyone went to stand on their designated positions, on top of their Aspects. They zapped away in an instant.
“Can someone kill that Noble Horrorterror already!?” Vriska shouted, skewering the planet-sized behemoth with her hope-filled sword. “Cause this isn’t going very fast!”

“We’re workin’ on it!” Meenah shouted, gesturing to all her fellow Thieves of Life who were continually draining the Noble Horrorterror’s life force. It had a lot.

“G-GAD ZOOKS…” Jake shouted, but it was clear his role as a beacon of Hope would end soon. Then their stalemate with the Combine and Horrorterrors would end. This close, one of the sides would get through to the Green Sun.

“Jade!” Vriska called. “Do we have anything!?"

Omega Jade shook her head as she unleashed another green solar flare. “I don’t have time to look! I’m just defending, defending, defending!”

“Right, so, uh…” Vriska bit her lip. “I know I said I didn’t want to bother them, but you might want to check Earth C to see if they’ve got any backup for us.”

Omega Jade shook her head. “Vriska, that’s dangerous! The could die out here!”

“We’re all gonna die if we don’t eke something out here!” Vriska shouted.

“Hey, I’m still fine,” Spades said, firing into space with his golden gun. “Not that I’m doin’ much, mind you.”

“That’s why you’re alive,” Vriska muttered. “They got Jade. She was a threat. If we get, say… Actually the only one in there who doesn’t have a ghost here is Dirk, maybe Roxy. I don’t see the Prince of Heart providing much of a benefit…”

“Don’t look at me, I don’t have any ideas either!” Meenah grunted.

“We need John!” Feferi said. “He has the only way out at this point!”

“Well he’s not here right now!” Vriska blurted.

Zap.

Vriska twitched. “Motherfucking…”

“Hey guys!” John said, standing in the middle of the victory platform with all of the Twelve around him. “I’m back!”

“What the fuck took you so long!?” Vriska shouted.

“A mindfuck,” John explained.

Vriska took a look at everyone’s haunted expressions and Allure’s hornless face. “…I’ll believe it. Corona! Do the thing already!”

“I have to spin up!” Corona retorted.

“Tally ho…” Jake coughed, having poured out all the Hope he had in him. “I’m afraid I’m done…”

The Horrorterrors and Combine pushed in, now no longer hindered by the blinding light that had
strengthened the ghosts so much.

Omega Jade barked. “You don’t have much time!”

Corona clasped her hands together and activated the victory platform…
O’Neill had been in war. O’Neill had been in both normal wars between humans on the Earth, and in wars over the fate of the galaxy in spaceships. Even in wars on a multiversal scale, the things he had learned in those conflicts were still applicable.

Currently, the rule of engagement that occupied his mind was ‘if a bigger fish shows up, the worst of enemies will suddenly become the best of friends out of desperation.’

He found it very amusing that, for once, he was part of the bigger fish in this particular encounter. Never in his life had he imagined being the one to force eldritch abominations and totalitarian conquerors to work together. Neither of them wanted Merodi Universalis to have its way with the Green Sun.

Well, too bad. They had a victory platform, a bunch of magic, twelve players, and a metric boatload of ghosts to defend them from unwanted attacks. Let the big fish of the multiverse realize that circumstances could always turn the tables on them.

He imagined it was a very humbling experience for them.

…Who was he kidding, the Horrorterrors had already been beaten within an inch of their collective lives by their own creation and the Combine were almost robotic in the way they carried themselves. They wouldn’t learn anything here.

He was surprised how calm he was about every Combine ship and Horrorterror within range trying to destroy the victory platform. With Jade gone they didn’t exactly have good odds of winning anymore...

“CORONA!” Vriska shouted as the wall of ghosts between them and the assault weakened. “FASTER, MAYBE?”

Corona waved her hands past each other. “This isn’t an instant process.” The purple house on the platform flashed, indicating it was ready. A spherical magic construct purely of Corona’s construction lifted into the air.

There was a frog inside of it.

Allure blinked. “…I’m probably hallucinating from my injury. Ugh…”

The frog launched out of the magic construct, heading right for the Green Sun.

Combine lasers fired at the frog, attempting to just nudge it before it hit the Green Sun, but Omega Jade used the fire of the Green Sun to enclose the amphibian. It flew into the burning multiversal corona, allowing its essence to churn within the green flames.

“That’s part 1,” Corona said. “More than enough resources, and a good frog, but it’ll need to gestate for a minute…”

“A MINUTE!?” Vriska shouted. “WE DON’T HAVE A MINUTE!”

Dead Dave spread his hands. “Don’t worry, I got this”
“You can’t alter the flow of time for the Green Sun, Dave!” Omega Jade shouted. “It doesn’t work!”

John stretched his arms. “Then it’s time to do the windy thing.”

“The windy thing?” Jotaro asked.

“The windy thing.”

“You didn’t think retcon was his only power, did you?” Eve asked. “He’s the Heir of Breath. He’s got wind.”

John became wind. His body dissipated into blue breezes that coalesced into a powerful whirlwind of a tornado, pushing back the mixture of biomechanical technology and eldritch tentacles reaching for them. The other god-tiers cheered with him, pushing back as well.

But John was just one person. Without retcon, he was just a particularly skilled master of wind. It did little to prevent the Horrorterrors and Combine from moving in – from breaking the ghost wall down more and more.

“We’re out of time, people!” Meenah shouted. “You better have somefin for us STAT!”

Corona winced. “It’s still gestating!”

Deep inside the Green Sun, the frog’s essence began to pull at all the resources around it, dragging it into a new realm.

“It’s creating the new universe now!”

“I meant it when I said we were out!” Meenah said, she and several other ghosts being torn apart by a Noble Horrorterror. None other than Neoan himself.

“T_I_M_E   T_O   S_T_O_P   T_H_I_S   R_E_C_L_E_S_S   F_O_O_L_I_S_H_N_E_S_S.”

He thrust a tentacle forward, ready to skewer the victory platform in one fell swoop.

“BARK!”

A Jade appeared in full dog-tier getup, driving the Green Sun right down Neoan’s tentacle, ripping it to dozens of burning shreds.

“…Omega Jade!? Weren’t you busy!?” Feferi blurted.


“But… you died,” Meenah said.

“And I was sent to the Dream Bubble right after. Then I came back.” She twisted the energy of the Green Sun around her, destroying the incoming Combine ship with little effort. She winked, making her empty eyes significantly more obvious.

“Wait, you died!!?” John blurted.

“Yeah.” Jade giggled. “John, you really should work on your obliviousness.”
“But… I got you killed by-”

“Hey. John. If this works being a ghost won’t keep us from talking. So don’t worry about it.” She extended a hand, pushing Neoan back further.

“P_L_E_A_S_E   S_T_O_P !” Neoan pleaded. “I_F   Y_O_U   E_S_C_A_P_E   T_H_E   C_O_N_S_E_Q_U_E-”

“Fuck you,” Meenah said. “We’re not gonna die out here.”

The Green Sun chose this moment to start imploding. The inner core of the verdant construct became one with the frog, sending the outer shell of the Green Sun into a swirling pattern that resembled a hurricane. But instead of an eye of the storm there was a green orb with a vibrant frog inside, the flesh of the universal amphibian swirling with stars.

…It was a mutated frog with sickly legs, four eyes, and another extra eye on its back.

“The fuck?” Vriska said. “That universe looks sick!”

“The universe was the frog!?” Allure blurted.

Corona held up her hands. “The universe we made didn’t need to be healthy – it just needed to get us out of here!” She pointed at the door in the purple house at the edge of the platform. “Everybody through there! Eve, we’re going to need Seraphim.”

Both Jades felt their power fading – but they no longer had to protect the Green Sun, they just had to help get everyone through the victory platform. They grew the platform’s size significantly, allowing everyone to flow through through the door by the dozen.

The Twelve went in first, followed by a few ghosts. The world on the other side was clearly broken. Space wasn’t black, but a sickly, inconsistent green. The stars exploded and reformed all around them. There were no planets for them to walk onto – just empty space. I had to create an air bubble for everyone now that we were no longer in Paradox Space.

“What the-” an ghost troll said, looking at his hands the moment he passed through. “I’m disappearing!”

“I REJECT THIS REALITY AND SUBSTITUTE MY OWN!” Eve declared. Suddenly, the space around us in the new universe became like that of Paradox Space. Specifically, a universe that allowed the presence of Sburb ghosts.

Corona pressed a few buttons on her dimensional device. “Working… working…”

With so many ghosts having left Paradox Space, the defenses were lower. With the new universe sucking the power of the Green Sun into it even after it was fully formed, the Jades were losing their ability to defend. The victory platform was cut in half, severing the connection between the new universe and Paradox Space.

Corona activated her dimensional device, making a direct connection. “COME ON IN! MOVE IT!”

The rest of the ghost army knew that this portal was being created on the other side – a side where there were no Horrorterrors or Combine. So they didn’t try to defend the platform. They floated right through into the sickly universe until every loose ghost was in. The two Jades came in last. Corona closed the portal just in time to cut off a Horrorterror tentacle.
“WE DID IT!” Feferi cheered.

“Not yet, this universe is so unstable it’s about to implode in on itself,” Corona said. She held out her dimensional device. “However… the Green Sun’s limitation on dimensional travel is vanishing now that we’ve used most of its power to create this universe. I just need to find a… single… universe…”

“Give me that,” Vriska said, swiping it away and pressing a few buttons.

A portal opened to another universe – one with normal stars against a black background.

The Jades used what little Green Sun powers remained in them to shove everyone through the portal at once. It closed behind them.

And there we were. Several thousand of us floating in a bubble of air forced to have the physics of Paradox Space by Seraphim.

Everyone started laughing.


I laughed along with them. I used my Eye to watch Paradox Space break down without the Green Sun, the impossible darkness shifting away. The Horrorterrors and Combine knew there was nothing left for them there. With the Green Sun’s power diminishing, they were able to leave those universes, allowing for a complete retreat of both high multiversal civilizations’ armies.

Paradox Space was, once again, no more.

Except for one remnant…

Seraphim switched to forcing the reality around us to accept the Dream Bubble – the universe held within the Jades’ hands. “I… need more energy to keep this large an area in a different reality…” Eve muttered.

Jade just increased Eve in size about a hundredfold. “That work?”

“…I guess. But now I can’t see any of you.”

“We’ll work it out. This’ll give us time to get everyone back in the Dream Bubble.”

“I’d like some ground to stand on myself,” O’Neill said. “Drifting in space is just… a bit uncomfortable.”

Jade nodded, setting to work. “Corona, can you make a fireball that’ll burn for several hours even in the vacuum of space?”

Corona nodded. “…Sure. It’ll be like a miniature sta- ooooh, I see.” She created a miniature star in her hand and gave it to the Jades.

The Jades set to work. Without the power of the Green Sun, they didn’t have as much dominion over universes and power – but they were still Witches of Space. They took out Earth C, the moon, Lopan, and the Dream Bubble. They grew all but the Dream Bubble to their full sizes, unable to deal with the universe-size of the Dream Bubble. They increased the size of the fireball to the size of the Moon, setting it in orbit around Earth C to warm it. Lastly, they shrunk most of the ghosts down so they could fit into the Dream Bubble, leaving only themselves, Meenah, and Feferi for Eve to keep
They shrunk Eve down to normal size. “You can deal with three ghosts, right?” Jade asked.

Eve nodded. “There’s four of you though.”

Omega Jade shrugged. “I’m going to watch the Dream Bubble from inside. Jade, don’t shake it around too much.”

“I won’t!” Jade promised.

Omega Jade shrank down until she was inside the Dream Bubble, leaving only three ghosts among the living.

“…Hey, we can go back to Roxy’s little party,” Nova said. “Who knows, it might still be going on.”

Jade smirked. “Right away!” She teleported all of them down to Roxy’s house on Earth C.

Most everyone was still there. Dave and Karkat appeared in a time-warp jump.

Vriska held up a fist. “WE WON! We’re out!”

“And now astrologers everywhere are going to flip the fuck out about the changing sky,” Dave said, smirking.

Vriska chuckled. “Yeah, I bet they will be. Anyway, these are more of my friends.”

Eve walked up to the front. “I am Overhead Evening Sparkle of Merodi Universalis. I extend my official greeting to the deities of Earth C. I hope we can be good friends. Vriska’s been looking for you for a long time.”

“Consider us welcomed,” Roxy said, a warm smile on her face. The smile dropped quickly. “…Jade, what the fuck happened?”

Jade sighed. “I died. It looks like that might not change much, luckily. Don’t worry about it. I’ll just look a little weird without pupils now.” She laughed nervously.

“What do we do now that you’re here?” Kanaya asked, turning back to Eve.

Eve thought about that for a moment. “As soon as I can I will use Seraphim – an ability of mine – to contact Merodi Universalis and get a fleet out here. …Wherever here is. Then we can put Earth C in a universe where Earth is missing for one reason or another. You won’t be trapped by the Green Sun or a quarantine anymore, and will be given access to the multiversal resources Merodi Universalis has publicly available. Usually there’d be a process and a lot of paperwork needed to give you this right, but… honestly, I don’t think there’s any way we can mess with you more than Sburb already has.”

Kanaya smiled. “Well, since John will clearly agree with those terms, I will accept them as well for the trolls. The consorts will have no objections either.”

“They have no objections to anything,” Karkat muttered.

“The carapacians will have to be met separately, though,” Kanaya said.

“Bah. Why do we always have to be so indecisive?” Spades muttered.
“Hey. I killed you,” Dave said.

Spades threw a knife at Dave, cutting part of his cape. “Mention that again and the next one goes through your skull.”

“Gotcha, dude,” Dave said without any hint of fear in his voice.

Eve ruffled her feathers. “By the Tower, it feels good to finally be done with this endless adventure…”

“We’re not done yet,” I said.

Pinkie facehooved. “UGH. Why can’t we have a rest!?”

“Because we made a lot of powerful people very angry with what we just did,” I said. “That is widely regarded as a bad move, generally.” I pointed up. “You might want to watch the skies.”

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The universe that now held Earth C was a simple one, with another version of Earth not twelve light years away. Nothing much happened there. There was no natural magic, but the laws of the universe did not demand so. It was a rather flexible world that had no issue allowing most things within its physics, even if to the outside observer it was naturally mundane in most ways.

It would not stay that way.

The Combine arrived first, a small percentage of the fleet that had been in Paradox Space jumping into reality through their dimensional portals. They all pointed their weapons at Earth C and the surrounding worlds, planning to vaporize the little embarrassment to their nation.

“D_O   N_O   F_I_R_E.” Neoan declared, shifting into the universe between the Combine and Earth C with a few dozen lesser Horrorterrors. “W_E   C_L_A_I_M   T_H_E   R_I_G_H_T   T_O   E_X_A_M_I_N_E   T_H_E   S_I_T_U_A_T_I_O_N   M_O_R_E   D_E_L_I_C_A_T_E_L_Y.”

Move out of our way or you will be destroyed along with them. You wanted them destroyed prior, why defend them now that our goals align?

“T_H_E   G_R_E_E_N   S_U_N   I_S   G_O_N_E,   W_E   A_F_F_O_R_D   T_O   E_X_A_M_I_N_E   T_H_E   S_I_T_U_A_T_I_O_N   M_O_R_E   D_E_L_I_C_A_T_E_L_Y.”

Move or die.

A third set of ships appeared. They were a mixture of airplane-like ships that had parts resembling bows and smooth cylinders large enough to hold only a person or two… if they weren’t bigger on the inside, that is.

“The Time Lords of Gallifrey demand that Earth C’s quarantine be reinstated this instant to prevent further damage to the timestreams! No one can be allowed to leave!”

Holes appeared in reality, dropping a fleet of TSAB ships. Nanoha’s voice flew across the space. “The TSAB has these people under its protection! Do not take any action against them or you will be fired upon!”

A strange creature composed of galaxies and a pearly white mask appeared. “The Living Tribunal demands the escapees be allowed to leave and experience freedom. They are no longer your
A Flower fleet appeared next. The Protectors of the Plot Continuum ask that all societies involved in this conflict stand down while the ka of the situation is assessed.

Several humanoid creatures made of stars appeared elsewhere in the space. “MOTION CARRIED: THE CELESTIALSAPIENS CONCUR THAT FURTHER TIME FOR DEBATE MUST BE ALLOTED.”

And then an instance of Them appeared in the sky, the white fractal pattern spreading across the sky. “Hey hey hey, who wants to collect their money? Whoever bet for a Merodi victory with the destruction of the Green Sun is a winner!”

> The Xeelee recommend the negation of anything Them say.

The Xeelee ships were significantly smaller and sleeker than any of the other ships in the area, taking the appearance of metallic seeds with long, flat wings.

And then the two societies Merodi Universalis hadn’t encountered showed up.

A golden mask appeared, that of a human man. It was not smooth, but geometric, as if generated by older computer software. “THE GREAT WILL WISHES A PROPER TRIAL BE CONDUCTED OVER THE EVENTS THAT HAVE JUST TRANSPRIRED.”

A series of ships enclosed in a non-standard physics bubble appeared, giving the blocky constructs an eerie blue glow. “The Beyonders disagree. They must be destroyed immediately.”

The Abstract bristled. “Your warlike demeanor does not serve you well in situations as delicate as this.”

“Sweet!” the Them shouted. “Everyone’s here! …And the Combine.”

“We have as much right in this conflict as all of you do, if not more so!”

“Shush little Combine, the adults are talking.”

“I motion that the Combine not be dismissed out of hand!” Nanoha declared. “They have proven themselves to be formidable!”

The golden face responded indignantly. “ARE YOU FORFEITING YOUR POSITION AMONG THE SEATS TO THE COMBINE?”

“No, that’s not my poin-“

“THEN CEASE YOUR YAMMERING, HUMAN. YOU YOURSELF ARE MERELY AMONG THE SEATS BECAUSE WE HAD EMPTY ONES TO FILL.”

The Gallifreyans spoke again. “Is that what we are to you? Extra space?”

“Do not make us remind you of your place!” the Beyonders spat. “You are a measly Class 2, Gallifrey! Do not overextend yourself with your daring words!”

“You could not handle the war through time we could bring upon you.”

“You are not warriors.”
The Them chuckled. “Taking bets now – how long do you think we’ll be at each other’s throats before we settle on anything? I’m betting about a year. Maybe two, if the Celestialsapiens drag it out.”

At this the conversation between the eleven most powerful civilizations in the multiverse devolved even further into petty bickering. Yet, no shots were fired.

They hated each other less than they feared the desolation such a war would bring.

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Earth C called an ‘emergency meeting’ the instant the greatest powers in the multiverse started appearing in the sky. Every faction involved – Merodi Universalis, Earth C, the Dream Bubble, and the Land of Pyramids and Neon - sent leaders to discuss what to do given the new situation.

They met at a place set aside to be neutral territory for the four kingdoms of Earth C – an island known as the Apex.

Merodi Universalis had sent O’Neill, Eve, Corona, and Vriska. Earth C, as usual, opted to leave the big-picture things up to their Creators, which ended up bringing Roxy, Karkat, Jade, and Kanaya to the table. The Dream Bubble just sent Meenah and Feferi, while Lopan only had Spades representing. They each sat on a chair on a round metal table with a lot of papers, data pads, and notebooks on it.

I was invited as well – but I declined. This was something they needed to work out without my help.

Eve ensured she kept Seraphim active in the background to keep all the ghosts present from dissipating into thin air. “So, we have a situation.”

“No shit,” Karkat muttered.

Eve nodded. “Our actions in removing the Green Sun, freeing Earth C, and removing the Dream Bubble have drawn the attention of the eleven highest civilizations in the multiverse. The purpose of this meeting is to make all knowledge of the entities arguing over our heads public knowledge to Earth C, the Dream Bubble, and Lopan.”

“Pyramid Hell,” Spades corrected.

Eve sighed. “Before we dig into that, we wish to play a message sent to us by one of the entities in question. A known friend and ally, Nanoha Takamachi of the Time Space Administration Bureau, send this to Corona’s device a few minutes after the engagement in this universe began.”

Corona tapped Raging Sights, projecting a hologram of Nanoha on the table for all to see. “You’ve really gotten yourself in a pickle, haven’t you? I don’t have long to talk since I need to keep up with the back and forth, so I’ll be brief. Do not try anything. Don’t try to escape, don’t try to investigate, and do not try to attack. Make sure everybody you’re in contact with understands this. You are not protected by the Green Sun anymore – any one of us could take everything you have out without much difficulty. Even with the TSAB backing me, I can’t protect you against all of them. So you’re just going to have to wait and cooperate when a decision is finally made. Keep an eye on John most of all – they will all flip their lids if he vanishes. I’m going to do what I can to make sure you get home safely, but I can’t promise anything. Good luck. Nanoha, out.”

Corona cut the feed. “That’s it. We haven’t received any messages from outside since, only intercepted ones going back and forth. Of which there is a… lot.”
“Now’s the part where you tell us what we’re up against!” Meenah blurted.

Feferi pulled on Meenah’s arm. “We’re not supposed to be fighting.”

“I can fight if I want.”

“Your ghost immunity is gone,” Vriska reminded her. “They could extinguish you by tossing you out of Seraphim’s range. I’m pretty sure even a god-tier revival can’t bring you back if you can’t exist.”

“How do they have to take the fun out of it?”

“Because they are so far above us it isn’t even funny,” Corona said. “Eve?”

Eve turned on her eye. “I would prefer to have access to Merodi Universalis’ actual files on these civilizations, but we can’t send a message out right now. So what I have on this pad is just what I can remember, and should be taken with a grain of salt.” She duplicated the data pad and gave it to everyone. “We will start from what we estimate to be the lowest power civilization on this list and move up from there.”

“Have to save the best for last, after all…” Rose said.

“The Combine,” Eve said, gesturing for Corona to bring up a holographic display to go along with what she was saying. “We actually know a relatively large amount about the Combine thanks to our close combat with them and Vriska’s personal experience. They are a nation devoted to the idea of conquering universes until everything is part of the perfect Combine. They are a mostly technological society with a focus on biomechanical innovation, experimenting on any race they conquer for the sake of adding it to their army. Due to the high presence of humans in the E-sphere, most of their army is composed of them, but the higher members of the Combine are not human.”

The hologram switched to show one of the Advisors. “We encountered these Advisors in our struggles against the Combine on our colony Farpoint. They were the highest rank we encountered within the Combine, and given the ships we saw in use in the battle with the Horrorterrors, we doubt they are the actual highest commanders.” The image switched to show a Combine ship with stars inside it. “The limits of their technology appear to revolve around using organic and synthetic materials to control and manipulate stars themselves, using them as power and weapons. A single Combine attack could vaporize all of our planets in an instant. There are a few weaknesses we knownof – they cannot detect Stands, and they seem to not understand magic all that well.

“Mentally speaking, they’re all about efficiency and sending ‘just the right amount’ of ships in to get the job done effectively. They don’t send their huge ships to conquer planets since they don’t care for their soldiers. It is also worth noting they are not part of the recently revealed international entity called ‘the Seats’ while the other ten civilizations are, and thus the other civilizations appear to be mostly ignoring their input and wishes. Which are to destroy all of us, if you’ve forgotten already.”

Kanaya took in a sharp breath. “I can’t say I’m surprised the least threatening is able to wipe us out so easily. It doesn’t make it any less haunting.”

Eve nodded. “Precisely. I’m not even going to comment on the weaknesses or strengths of any of the other races at the moment – they could all face the Combine and win. The point is not to think of a strategy to defeat them, the point is to know who they are.”

She cleared her throat. “Moving up we have the Flowers. They are a race of plants who have devoted their entire lives to purging the ‘Plot Continuum’ from unsanctioned glitches. It would take
too long to explain in detail, so suffice it to say that the multiverse runs on stories via a force called ka, and the Flowers take glitches in ka and remove them. They are extremely devoted to the idea of the ‘One True Plot’ of the multiverse and will follow it wherever they think it leads.

“We have reason to believe they will support our return to Merodi Universalis to continue our story, since none of this seems to be what they would call a narrative glitch, with the possible exception of John. If they deem him unsanctioned they will likely kill him outright.”

Jade let out a sigh. “Of course they would… John, why did you have to stick your hand into that House?”

Corona switched the hologram again as Eve continued. “Our only known true ally in this encounter is the Time Space Administration Bureau, the only Seat run by humans. They are a magitech-focused society with a high focus on heroism and friendship. It is worth noting that they manage this while still technically being a military state, where their military handles every interaction. They are known to defend the defenseless and step up for what’s right in a cruel multiverse. I know Nanoha personally – everything she said in that message is true. They will be arguing for our complete release with little to no restrictions put in place.”

“No ulterior motive at all?” Kanaya asked.

“Not for Nanoha herself. The TSAB may wish to let the higher societies know they aren’t pushovers.” Eve shrugged. “Above them is the Gallifreyans. We, uh, don’t know much about them.”

Vriska snorted. “Right.”

“We don’t know much that doesn’t come directly from Vriska’s mouth,” Eve dejectedly corrected. “From her descriptions, they are arrogant, self-entitled, and rather cold. Their society is based around the complex manipulation of time, so much that they are known to have the greatest understanding of how time works in the entire multiverse. It is unknown what exactly they want with us beyond reinstating Earth C’s ‘quarantine’ to protect the timestreams, presumably from Lord English.”

Vriska rolled her eyes. “They also want to study us. Other than their precious ‘timestreams’ they want nothing more than to cut everything open to increase the matter in their brains. They’re assholes.”

“That’s your opinion,” Eve pointed out. “Every society we’ve talked about so far is classified as a Class 2 society, which is best described as being effectively decentralized, able to withstand the destruction of their core. The rest are all Class 1 societies, a rank reserved for those who have demonstrated almost complete mastery over the manipulation of universes within the multiverse. Every Class 2 society mentioned has at least minor physics manipulation and universe creation skills. Every Class 1 could shape clusters of universes with ease.”

Karkat put his hands on his head. “Once again, we’re thrown higher and higher into the realm of absolute fucking madness! THIS IS STUPID!”

Eve nodded. “Agreed. At the bottom of the Class 1 societies are the Horrorterrors. I don’t believe I need to explain them to you. They seem to want to capture us and examine the best way to deal with us. They want to prevent their own destruction if possible, and are hesitant to let any of their creations fall into anyone else’s hands. They seem somewhat uncertain of what they actually want to do with us now.”

Feferi closed her eyes. “I feel unrest among them. A large amount of fear and uncertainty. There are many who wonder if the battle they engaged in held any purpose.”
“That sounds good for us,” O’Neill said. “They might change their overall attitude.”

Eve nodded. “After Horrorterrors, we have Them. Them are a race of energy beings who reached a universe known as the Pinnacle and became the ‘highest’ life form they could. They proceeded to get really, really bored and have been a menace to the multiverse ever since. They mold universes and planets to create games. We were personally part of a deathmatch where we had to kill our closest friends. The deaths were reversed later, but we know that isn’t always the case with Them. Them want nothing more than their own survival and entertainment. They will take the act of the heckler for anything that doesn’t seem threatening. Expect them to just be a nuisance to the others and not care about us.”

Meenah smirked. “Y’know, I like the sounds of Them.”

“You won’t if they threw you in a game where you had to choose which of your best friends gets to live and which gets to die,” Vriska muttered.

Meenah blinked. “…Point taken.”

Eve continued. “The Celestialsapiens are… well, they’re beings where each individual member has the power within them to shape an entire universe from the ground up. We know they have three different personalities in their minds most of the time that are almost always in disagreement, so Celestialsapiens spend all their time debating. They act on a timescale slower than virtually all the races because of this. They value, above all else, patience, thoughtfulness, and understanding. We can expect them to be reasonable, but if they’re rushed, they’re known to act rashly. They trapped a woman in her mind for an effective eternity just for being impatient.”

Karkat snorted. “Bet she learned to be patient.”

“It… was effective,” Eve admitted. “Next on our list are the Xeelee. Prior to today we had not physically seen a Xeelee ship – they had always interacted with us via ‘wires’ from multiple universes away. From what little we understand of them, they are a purely technological society that exists as uploaded consciousnesses. They view themselves as the ‘good guys’ of the multiverse, and are known to help other societies from time to time. We can likely trust them to argue for our sake, but their idea of ‘help’ sometimes leaves much to be desired. They are so far above most beings and so sure of themselves they can ruin things in their carelessness.”

“So, John, basically?” Roxy asked.

“John is not a technologically advanced society of robots,” Karkat said.

Eve cleared her throat. “The last civilization we have any actual data on are the Abstracts, a race of beings known to be the ‘manifestations’ of ‘ideas’ in the universes they control. Things like Infinity, Chaos, etcetera. Most of them are in flux, defined by the overall feeling about a certain ‘idea’ in all their worlds. Their highest leadership is not. The being known as the Living Tribunal has contacted Corona here directly in the past. Above the Living Tribunal is the One Above All, theorized to be the most powerful entity in the multiverse, but we have no data to corroborate this. Thanks to their announcement upon their arrival, we know the Abstracts are solidly on our side, believing we need to be free.”

“And what about the last two?” Spades asked. “There are two other big honchos out there. Don’t you know anything?”

Eve shook her head. “Nothing besides rumors. Vriska never encountered either of them in her journeys, either. The Great Will is a ‘force of belief’ that is given power by the ‘belief’ of those
within its universes.” The hologram showed the image of the golden face. “There’s a lot of conflicting information on if the Great Will is truly a civilization of beings, or just one being that controls a staggering amount of universes. The Beyonders…” She switched to show the blue Beyonder ships. “All we know is that they’re a warrior race and that their ships apparently need reality to be altered to exist in standard space. This suggests that they come from a universe far removed from the ones we understand, but isn’t eldritch. It’s similar to how the ghosts can’t exist in this world without Seraphim active.”

Eve sighed, leaning back in her chair. “And that’s that. Basically, we’re in the middle of a game of politics between giants that could swat us like a fly on the wall.”

“The only problem is we’re a really shiny fly and nobody can agree on what to do with us,” Meenah said with a smirk.

“There’s always a way to fight back,” Spades said. “You all talk about Lord English like he’s this overpowered demon that nothing could touch. I took out most of his gang with just me and my three buddies.”

Vriska raised an eyebrow. “What about Doc Scratch?”

Spades glared at her.

“Couldn’t do anything to him, could you? Lord English had all that guy’s power and so much more on top it wasn’t even funny.”

Spades threw a knife that cut off some of her hair. “Point taken.”

“You have a stabbing problem.”

“Revelation of the century,” Karkat muttered. “You know he stabbed me once, right? It was his way of saying hi.”

Spades smirked. “Yeah. That was the day.”

“You bet it was.”

Corona blinked. “…I could never say this before because I didn’t have enough of a sample size, but wow. Trolls are weird.”

“Have you looked in a mirror lately?” Karkat asked.

Corona smirked. “Heh. Point ta-”

O’Neill’s phone started ringing. He stared at it, startled. “There’s no way a signal can reach out here…” He checked who was calling.

*Clandestine.*

O’Neill answered, putting it on speakerphone. “Hello?”

“I’ve brought the cavalry, sir,” the unicorn said. “Though it appears as if we’ve walked into something a little too big for us.”

“Don’t do anything to make them shoot at you!” O’Neill barked. “Do everything they say.”

“They’re saying eleven different things.”
“Listen to Nanoha,” Eve said.

“…They’re telling us to stay put and not to move.”

“That’s what we were told as well,” Corona said. “Who do you have with you?”

“Uh, I brought Cosmo and the third division fleet. Oh, Starbeat’s also here.”

Vriska grabbed the phone. “Let me talk to her.”

They could hear Starbeat’s voice in the background. “Later, Vriska! They’re not jamming communications; we can talk back and forth easily. But we have other things to deal with right now.”

“…All right, fine. I’ll be patient. It’s not like a decision is going to be made anytime soo-”

“MOTION CARRIED: ATTENTION!” a Celestialsapien’s voice boomed into the minds of everyone on Earth C. “THE SEATS HAVE DECIDED TO OFFICIALLY CONVENE AT NEUTRAL TERRITORY TO COME TO A FINAL VERDICT. UNTIL THAT POINT, NO ENTITIES ON EARTH C, THE DREAM BUBBLE, THE LAND OF PYRAMIDS AND NEON, THE LOCAL MOON, OR THE RECENTLY ARRIVED SHIPS SHALL MOVE UNLESS THEIR PRESENCE IS REQUESTED AT THE CONVENTION. THE CONVENTION WILL BEGIN IN TWO LOCAL HOURS, AT WHICH POINT A LIST OF THOSE REQUESTED WILL BE MADE KNOWN. THE COMBINE’S REQUEST TO BE GRANTED EQUAL SAY WITHIN THE CONVENTION HAS BEEN DENIED.”

Eve blinked. “That was fast.”

“Well at least we don’t have to wait much longer,” Kanaya said, frowning. “That makes me feel worse, actually. Curious.”

“Wonder who they’re going to ask for?” O’Neill pondered.

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It was funny – Clandestine had rushed to get help for Farpoint the moment she escaped with the Combine whale ship. Had the Combine not been planning to create the Green Sun, or had decided to use a different universe for its creation, the cavalry of Cosmo would have been a great boon to the ‘war’.

The problem was, of course, that the Combine never would have let her leave the whale ship if they hadn’t been evacuating the station in the first place to prepare for the Green Sun. So either way, she was shafted.

So unfortunate.

These were my thoughts as I sat on a hill, waiting for the names to be called. I knew I would be called, because the Flowers knew I was here. It was not something I had ever been part of before – the Seats so rarely convened since they hated each other so much, and rarely was there an event that required all of them to come to a decision about anything.

The final list, inserted into our minds seconds before we were taken, was smaller than most would have expected. But I knew better. These were the giants – they wanted to talk to as few people below them as necessary.
It made sense what they chose, really. Eve for Merodi Universalis, John for Earth C, Icathr for the Combine. Vriska served as a figure of importance to the past of the proceedings, as did I, though my presence was requested because of my knowledge. Hussie needed to be there simply because he wrote the story that started this whole mess in the first place.

The moment we processed the list, we were in a waiting room in a different universe. Eve smiled at me, Vriska, and John – essentially we were all on the same side. Hussie sat in a corner, looking nervously at Vriska.

Icathr was one of the Combine’s highest beings – and he was not one of the Advisor slugs. He was a being with a single eye inside a head that resembled a neon blue flower. Three tentacles hung from his head, pulsing and glowing with blue power, indicative of his psychic power that could be used for a lot more than just flying.

He had no expression we could read, but his gaze was that of contempt. He was surprisingly free of mechanical augmentation – rare for a member of the Combine as high up as he was.

“After this is over you’re dead,” Vriska told Icathr.

“It is you who will suffer for your slight against the Combine,” Icathr declared.

The doors in the waiting room slid open, revealing the convention floor.

The room was a circular one composed of gray metal. There were ten ‘Seats’ spread around equidistantly. Each one appeared about the size of a mansion to the six witnesses, but each chair was completely filled by its occupant. The Horrorterror appeared the same size as Nanoha, both giants, but in the Horrorterror’s case it was *shrunk* – and visually altered to not madden those who saw it.

I looked around, taking in everyone at the Seats. I did not recognize most of the people there, Nanoha and the Living Tribunal being the exceptions. The Gallifreyans had sent one of their Time Lords in full red robes with the ridiculous arching collars while the Flowers had sent some sort of deciduous Tree I couldn’t identify. The Celestialsapien was a male, standing as still as usual. The Them was just a white glow, impossible to discern identity from. Same went for the Xeelee – taking the form of a computer with a screen for text, though notably it *did* have a speaker for text-to-voice. The Great Will had sent a blue-colored face to the proceedings while the Beyonder… The Beyonder was several loose fragments of a body heavily enhanced with machinery, carrying the slightest hint of being humanoid behind the altered reality. It was clearly a being of another sort of physics entirely.

Of course, everyone else was busy looking at what rose out of the center of the room of the Seats.

It was the Dark Tower, ringed by a field of roses that reached only one foot before the ground harshly translated to dark metal.

“W-what?” Eve said.

“They built it around the Tower to declare it truly neutral territory,” I said. “The Seats are a relatively new creation, when you look at the whole of the multiverse, but they’ve been around for so long most the races you see here weren’t around when it was created.”

Eve looked like she had more questions but couldn’t vocalize them.
A robotic voice filled the room. “In the shadow of the Dark Tower we declare our opinions. Let the matter of Earth C open with the standard statements of intent.”

The Living Tribunal spoke first. “*The Abstracts believe Earth C and those associated should go free and find their own destinies. They do not pose a threat to us nor should we invade their privacy for our curiosity.*”

The Xeelee spoke with a voice that was synthetic, and yet carried great emotional inflection similar to that in a public speaker.

>||< Those on Earth C and the associated worlds should go free, but sufficient precautions should be taken in relation to John and the House Juju to ensure that a higher-order paradox does not occur.

The Celestialsapien spoke with annoyance in his voice. “*DESPITE THE SHORT TIME ALLOTED FOR DEBATE, WE HAVE DETERMINED OUR DESIRE FOR THE COMBINE TO BE PUNISHED FOR THEIR HUBRIS, EARTH C TO BE RETURNED TO QUARANTINE, AND MERODI UNIVERSALIS TO BE PLACED UNDER OUR JURISDICTION OR THE JURISDICTION OF ANOTHER CLASS 1 FOR STRICT OBSERVATION.*”

Eve tensed at that remark – a reaction that was about to increase tenfold with what the Beyonder had to say.

“Destroy Earth C, the Dream Bubble, everything. *Then* we must destroy Merodi Universalis just to be certain.”

The Great Will was better, but not by much. “*QUARANTINE MERODI UNIVERSALIS WITH EARTH C INSIDE – THEY KEEP THEIR NATION, WE DON'T HAVE TO CONCERN OURSELVES WITH IT ANYMORE. ENSURE THERE ARE NO LOOSE EXPLORERS WHO WILL SPEND THEIR LIVES SEARCHING FOR HOME.*”

“WE BELIEVE THEY SHOULD GO FREE ONLY AFTER THEY ARE SEARCHED FOR SBURB REMNANTS. THE HOUSE JUJU MUST BE CONTAINED,” the Horroterror spoke, providing a surprisingly helpful outlook.

The Them went last out of the Class 1s. “Look, here’s the deal. None of us actually give a rat’s gall bladder beyond ‘make sure Lord English doesn’t come back’. So here’s what we think would be awesome. Split up the Dream Bubble into a million different pieces and spread every ghost across the multiverse, edited to survive in any physics of course. Let the epic search for home begin!”

“She childish request of Them is ignored,” the Gallifreyan stated, even though he had no authority over any of the others. “The Time Lords demand that Earth C be placed back in Quarantine and, furthermore, that the heroes required to complete Lord English’s time loop be forced to go back in time through retcon the moment this convention concludes to ensure nothing like this can happen again.”

Nanoha cleared her throat. “We wish for complete freedom of those associated with Earth C and Merodi Universalis, asking only that they surrender the House Juju to be sealed away in a more secure location.”

The Tree went last. “Everything about them is sanctioned by the Tower, including John’s retcon ability. The Protectors of the Plot Continuum refrain from any further input to protect the purity of the Plot.”

Eve did tallies in her head. Four positive, four negative, one abstained, and one of whatever Them
was trying to pull off. She didn’t like how even it was. Granted, only two of the negatives were actually brutal, the other two were just about quarantine. Only the Abstracts had voted for complete freedom – even Nanoha seemed very concerned about the House Juju and Lord English.

Eve made plans in her mind of what to say – to offer them freedom in their society, to say that Merodi Universalis was willing to comply with whatever they wanted to ensure the containment of Lord English, including sending John back instantly. She waited to be called upon.

But she never was. Nobody ever was.

The Seats just started yelling back and forth at each other in such a way that it became incomprehensible. Everyone talked over everyone and nothing was respected. These were ten nations who hated each other’s existence for the most part – they only agreed on anything when they had to. The fact that they did drive them all mad.

Eve looked at me. “What… do we do?”

“We stand here,” I said. “We stand here and remain unable to keep up. All our witness testimony is in our minds – they take it out whenever they need it with a simple mind spell. We’re all open books to them and we don’t even feel it.”

Vriska blinked. “Wait, they’re in my head? I don’t even know it?”

“This room is one of the few things that was actually built by a cooperation of Class 1 societies,” I said. “Its facilities are the best possible. The mind-reading is absolute. There are no secrets. ...Secrets we can hide, anyway. They’ve got tricks available.”

John glanced at the giant form of Nanoha. “How does she manage?”

“She’s shunting most of it not only through Raising Heart, but also twenty other TSAB devices. She’s just serving as the voice. The Gallifreyans have a similar problem, but they solve it with computers and time loops in their minds. The Celestialsapiens…” I shrugged. “They just don’t care that they take forever to think. They’ll speak when they’re good and ready to do so.”

“We’re really just ants to them,” Eve said. “Some of them think we’re fire ants, while others think we’re good for the environment, but we’re still ants.”

“You’re just now figuring this out?” Icathr asked contemptuously. “Even the Combine, we who are just barely below the Flowers, is seen as nothing more than an anteater. The Time Lords, the TSAB, the Flowers – they all have something that makes the Class 1s notice them. Their mastery over time. Their understanding of ka. Or their ability to represent the best of the most common race in the multiverse.” Icathr growled. “We could beat the TSAB or Flowers in a full on war, and yet we are denied a seat because we are seen as insignificant.”

“Your fault for not conquering higher-value targets,” Vriska said.

“That is where you are wrong, Vriska Serket. There have been other conquerors in the past. Those who conquer as we do, with pure power, cause those like the TSAB, Xeelee, and Abstracts to consider intervening. Only one conquest culture has made it this far, and that is the Beyonders. The examples of others who have been crushed because they declared who they were too loudly is numerous.”

“Maybe that should tell you something about conquerors being, y’know, evil.”

“It is pretty evil,” John added.
Icathr turned away from them. “What is perceived as evil by the Dark Tower is not as absolute as it wants you to think. It is based off a flawed perception within most beings that there is a good and evil. There is no such thing as morality without the presence of the Tower. Ka is a disease that creates a world of lies around us. The Combine defies those lies.”

“…Why though?” Eve asked. “If there’s no morality, why do you care to defy it?”

“Biological need for survival and perpetuation of life,” Icathr said. “Those at the bottom are told it is ‘good’ to Combine everything into one.”

“Didn’t you just say you didn’t like the Tower’s lie?” Vriska asked. “Contradiction!”

“There is no morality. We may lie and teach those below us whatever we wish for our own sakes. There is no idea, just continuation and perpetuation. It seems best and most efficient to Combine all life under one power in order to maximize the effectiveness of this process.”

“And why care about that!?” Eve blurted. “Seriously, why care?”

Icathr stared deeply into her. “There was a choice between life and death. There is no logical conclusion either way – both are equivalent. The Combine chose life over death, and so have become devoted to it. All for the sake of life.”

“So you just… live to keep living? No meaning at all?”

Icathr stepped back. “We allow ourselves to feel driven, to seek greater power, to look at what we do as grand work. We lie to those below us to give them more drive and improve productivity. But those of us where I am know.” He glared at me. “And now you know the philosophy of the Combine. It will disturb you until the end of your days. Hopefully at our hands.”

I rolled my eyes. “See everyone? That’s the problem with the true ‘pointless’ philosophy. Nobody can live by it. Not truly. Even those who ‘know’ about it, well, they still act on their emotions out of a drive for completeness, or in the case of Icathr, revenge.”

“You are mistaken, Twilence. There are those who have had their minds altered to follow the Combine perfectly,” Icathr said. “I am not one of them. Specifically kept around to ‘understand’ that which is outside that image. It is why I was the one summoned here.”

“If their minds are altered, how can it be said that it’s right?”

“An argument assuming biology is correct,” Icathr said. “In truth, life or death is nothing more than a coin flip. Biology is not any more ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ than anything else. We just chose life. We could have easily committed mass suicide. Chose not to.”

John shook his head. “…You guys are messed up.”

“All for the Combine,” he said. “And now you understand. Enjoy.”

“You get a real kick out of disturbing people with the way you think,” Vriska pointed out.

“Just because there is no morality does not mean the feeling of enjoyment does not exist. It means nothing, but I like it.”

The robotic voice chirped for all of them. “A verdict has been reached.”

“That seemed fast…” Eve said.
“Our time was accelerated,” I explained. “It took years in their minds to get here. It took no time back home given this universe’s time signature.”

John blinked. “Yeesh. Was it really that complicated?”

“YES IT WAS!” Hussie shouted. “DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW HARD IT WAS TO WRITE THE MESS THAT TURNED INTO THIS MESS? THERE WERE FLOW CHARTS! SLEEPLESS NIGHTS! A SCARY FUCKING WOLF! I EVEN DIED ONCE!”

Vriska blinked. “I forgot you were here.”

The robotic voice forced their conversation to close. “The verdict has been transcribed. Firstly, concerning the Combine. The Seats have decreed you are never to interfere with any remnants of Sburb ever again, or you will suffer consequences from whichever Seats feel inclined to react.”

Icathr bristled but said nothing.

“Merodi Universalis is to remain unaffected by these events. All citizens will be allowed to return with no changes to them or their society.”

Eve let out a sigh of relief – the worst had been denied.

“The House Juju is to be placed in Celestialsapien custody, where it is to be kept under lock and key for eternity.”

“No problem so far,” Eve said, biting her lip.

“The Dream Bubble and Earth C are to remain free from quarantine.”

“YES!” John whooped.

“However, the danger John Egbert poses cannot be ignored. He and the other eight entities who need to retcon through metatime to defeat Caliborn must agree to a Gallifreyan fate lock. At the moment of their death – any death, even if it would result in a Sburban revival – they will be locked away in their fate until all nine have been collected. At this point, the conditioning within John will activate, and he will use his retcon powers to complete what needs to be done. They do not have any choice in whether they are to be conditioned or not, but at any time before their deaths they may go to Caliborn. Communication with Caliborn is forbidden and will result in the fate lock activating early. The Gallifreyans can activate the fate lock earlier if it is deemed necessary. The fate locks have already been created and added to everyone involved.”

John blinked. “Wait, I’ve been… conditioned? What?”

“The fate lock will also activate if John Egbert ever uses his retcon abilities to return to any moment before this trial according to multiversal metatime. Accidental activations will count.”

There was a brief pause.

“The Convention is now over. May Lord English never return.”

And then I was back on my hill as if nothing had happened.

I shook my head – it was one of the better options, at least. John and his friends could live out their lives until the Gallifreyans decided he needed to stop. But one wrong move and his lock would just activate.
I imagined they were relieved though. Effectively, they got away. The Combine couldn’t hunt Sburb remnants anymore, and every ghost was a Sburb remnant. Earth C and the Dream Bubble were free. Merodi Universalis was unaffected.

And as such, my work was done. I folded up my new notebook and prepared to walk away.

“You’re leaving?”

I smiled. “Yes, Eve, I am leaving. You are not quite ready for me to stick around just yet.”

Eve’s face was sad. “…You’ve been very helpful. I saw you struggle with us.”

“Yeah. I was not expecting to be thrown that sideways,” I admitted. “Though I should have. This is Homestuck we’re talking about. Mindscrews are generally how it works.”

Eve nodded. “It’s soon, isn’t it?”

“The end is not soon,” I said. “Chapter-wise, perhaps, but there’s going to be a large gap of time in the middle there.”

“I meant when you stay with us.”

I smiled. “Yes. That is relatively soon. But you may not be happy when you get there.”

Eve nodded. “There’s always one struggle after another…”

“And more and more friends. You just made a few thousand.”

Eve smirked. “Heh. Yeah. I guess we did.”

“Treat them well, Eve. They’ll help you go far.”

With a wave, I was gone.

~~~

“I hate feeling powerless,” Vriska told Starbeat, lying on the couch.

Starbeat put down the data pad she had been studying: the Collection’s procedure for moving the Dream Bubble and Earth C to Merodi Universalis space. It was a nice loophole in Collection policy since, technically, the worlds weren’t part of Merodi, so the assistance wasn’t ‘biased’. “That convention getting to you?”

“It really is,” Vriska admitted. “I’m so used to being able to have some say. I thought I proved to myself that would always be the case when we were fighting for the Green Sun… But then BOOM, I’m reminded that I am just an ant. One of those nasty ants that almost kill you when they bite you, but still just an ant.

Starbeat nodded. “I feel the same way. In the Collection all we do is think about what problems we can solve. We can solve a lot, but there’s a lot more problems we can’t deal with. Some because we don’t have the power, but most because we simply don’t have enough people. There’s too many issues in existence for us to handle. As expansive as we are, we’re still just drops of water in the ocean.”

Vriska stared into space. “Welp, everyone’s gonna have to accept that like they accepted they were part of a story.” She stood up. “…I’m going to go build my house on Earth C.”
“Will it be a castle?”

“Of course it will, who the fuck do you think I am?”

Starbeat smiled. “An amazing troll with an ego that’ll never go away completely.”

---

Eve and Maud sat on one side of the desk, with Meenah and Kanaya on the other side.

“I can accelerate the process of acceptance into Merodi Universalis for your sake,” Maud said. “You’ve earned it, according to Eve.”

“The question is if you want to join,” Eve said. “You’d be welcomed as part of our family, and a major part at that, given the resources you’d be bringing. But it’d prevent you from ever acting truly on your own.”

Meenah shrugged. “Hey, I don’t wanna have to figure out how to make these arm-bands.” She held up her wrist, showing Corona’s newest invention off. A simple ring of metal that hung around a ghost’s wrist, allowing them to exist in most universes comfortably. “I also wanna see everything. There are whole oceans out there to explore and you’ll want my ghosts to do it.”

Kanaya nodded. “And on our side, the four kingdoms of Earth C all have expressed high levels of interest in joining up with our saviors.”

Eve rubbed the back of her head. “Your people really like exalting others, don’t they?”

“It is a trait resultant of Sburb,” Kanaya admitted. “Not always positive, but perhaps this inclusion will allow them to finally move past seeing us only as gods.”

Eve smiled. “In that case, expect Earth C and the Dream Bubble to be part of Merodi Universalis in a couple months.”

“Ahem,” Meenah said. “Skaia’s Dream. We’re not callin’ our universe flipperin’ Dream Bubble. We’re not just dreamers, or ghosts. We’re gonna be called Skaians. Got it, flounder?”

Eve smirked. “Skaians. …That sounds great. I’ll put that down.” She scribbled a note on one of the pages. “I hope to see you Skaians walking alongside ponies, humans, and Gems soon.”

“We’re already here. And we’re not goin’ away.”

Kanaya rolled her eyes. “Meanwhile my world will be a little less loudmouthed about the whole debacle. We can move in slowly, just having a connection to you. I do wonder how much Sburb technology and god-tier powers are going to have to be restricted, though…”

Maud put the papers into a neat stack. “That’s why this’ll take a few months instead of a few weeks.”

“I see.”

“We aren’t fans of bureaucracy,” Eve admitted.

“Thank goodness. I do believe I would have gone crazy if I was subject to the level of detail the humans require within their reports…”

“You’d be surprised what we can hide under a supposed lack of bureaucracy,” Maud said.
Eve shuddered. “Renee’s expedition member application…”

~~~

Farpoint City was rebuilt quickly. It wasn’t as shiny as it once was, and it lost its glory as a resort planet – but the City as a community became stronger.

With the previous mayor dead in the invasion, a new mayor was elected as soon as things settled down. To the surprise of absolutely nobody, that mayor was Anesthesia. She’d gone from hotel manager to City manager over the course of the rebellion.

Some would say the power would go right to her halo and drive her mad. She sure hoped not. She wanted to lead these people as best she could into a new era. They wouldn’t be a tourist town anymore, but instead an outpost on the edge of tomorrow. Her policy began with building a decently-sized Expedition Division tower, which Renee had approved in record time to begin explorations of the distant multiverse in the E-Sphere.

Farpoint would become the launchpad for new discoveries far from home.

A few days after her inauguration, there was a knock on her office door. “Come in,” she said, not taking her eyes off her personal window that gave her a view of Farpoint City. It was beautiful.

“Hey,” Affix said, coming in. “Congrats on the big promotion.”

“Thanks,” Anna said with a smile. “I’m a little nervous about how the expeditions will pan out. We’re in the middle of human territory here, it’ll be a bit weird for them. But fun.”

“I hear we’re on the edge of the E-Sphere, might run into some of the multiverse limits type stuff.”

“That’ll be even more interesting,” Anna admitted. “…I was given this completely by fate, Affix. Just thrown into a leadership position because the heroes of Merodi Universalis stayed at my hotel.”

“Tried to stay at your hotel.”

Anna chuckled. “Yeah, tried. …So, what are you doing these days?”

“Abandoning the fashionista’s lifestyle!” Affix blurted. “I’m going to the Hub and signing up to work on an exploration team. No offense to your little place, but I’m looking for a change of scenery, and I think that’ll be better for me.”

Anna smiled. “You sure Renee will accept you?”

“I already filled out her nightmare of a form in triplicate. I’m a form-filling machine!” She laughed maniacally. “Also I make bombs. Apparently that’s helpful.”

“Good luck.”

“Right back ‘atcha.”

~~~

Vriska built her troll-style castle in the human kingdom of Earth C, just like she said she would.

She had taken to sitting on her balcony, legs dangled dangerously off the rail-less edge, staring out at the human city in front of her. She grinned.
Aradia appeared next to her. “It’s nice, isn’t it? That we’re finally home.”

“It really is,” Vriska said. “I… I don’t remember when I last felt this good. Actually, I don’t think I ever felt this good. I was shit back in Sburb, and I was doing okay in MU but I missed everyone. Now it’s just… Life is good Aradia.”

“Glad you finally realized that,” Aradia said with a giggle.

Vriska smirked. “So, aside from that opening party, how did your reunions go?”

“Pretty well, actually! Probably had something to do with me not having to apologize to everyone I met.”

Vriska rubbed the back of her head. “Heh…”

“I did have to talk to the Daves and the Nepetas though,” Aradia said, frowning. “It was… difficult. Because I didn’t express much in the way of remorse. I wish I didn’t have to do it, don’t get me wrong, but I just…” she bit her lip. “Nobody sees death the same way I do.”

“This is news?”

“No. It’s just a difficulty in my life I have to deal with.” Her smile returned. “The Nepetas forgave me right off the bat. The Daves… They’ll come around. We Time players tend to get each other. … Actually, never mind, I tried talking to Damara. That did not go over well.”

Vriska shrugged. “Her level of psychobitch makes me look like an angel.”

Aradia nodded. “You know, I kinda wanted to see Gamzee.”

“Really?” Vriska said. “But he killed, like, everyone!”

“And I wanted to see what he thought,” Aradia said. “There should be an Omega Gamzee ghost somewhere in Skaia’s Dream. But nobody’s seen him.” Aradia shook her head. “Mysteries to be solved later…”

Vriska chuckled. “When we least want it.”

“I wonder what they’ll all decide to do,” Aradia said. “I think most of the ghosts will use the bands and ‘live’ again in Merodi Universalis. But our friends? …I think some will go live their lives. I don’t see Rose and Kanaya going adventuring. I see Dave eventually going out on his own. Roxy is definitely going to see the multiverse, and probably drag John along. I hear Jade has already taken a liking to the League of Sweetie Belles…”

“So many changes,” Vriska mused. “There’s even more of me running around now. More of you.”

“Most of those other mes are soulless robots,” Aradia muttered. “Such a shame…”

“Hey, we’ve got an army of a million ghost robots now. That’s sweet.”

“I guess it is. Just as awesome as it was when we took out the Black King.”

“Oh that was the best boss battle ever!” Vriska said with a laugh. “Nothing like this ‘become an ant in the gaze of giants’ bullshit. We got an actual struggle and an actual victory.”

“You got a victory here, too,” Aradia pointed out. “You escaped.”
“And then we got put in a trial where nothing even mattered,” Vriska said. “Or everything mattered. I’m really not sure.”

Aradia put an arm around Vriska. “It’s behind us now. Let’s not worry about the past – let’s worry about the future.”

“Isn’t that the opposite of what you do?”

“I’m still restricted by the laws of time,” Aradia said. “I’m not John.”

“Ah… John…” Vriska shook her head. “He’s not going to care at all that he’s basically got a kill-switch in his mind. He’s gonna forget and screw it up…”

“He’s smarter than you give him credit for.”

“He’s still a huge dork.”

Aradia laughed. “No argument there!”

Vriska stood up, flapping her wings. “I’m going to fly around the world. Wanna come?”

“Sure!”

They took off through the skies of Earth C.

~~~

Sunny’s Survey team usually didn’t do this sort of thing, but Renee had asked her to do it just this once. It was a nice change of pace, at least. Her team had joined up with a standard exploration team to explore the depths of Skaia’s Dream and tell all the lost ghosts what was happening with the dreams they were in, give them a bracelet, and tell them how to get to Merodi Universalis. It was a simple and rewarding job, and they got to see a lot of bizarre, alien geography created from the dreams of the dead.

One day, she was traveling with a member of the other team – the Rarity known as Affix. They had just gone for a walk to talk and get to know each other better.

“How old?” Affix asked.

“Not saying it again,” Sunny huffed.

“Oh c’mon, I need confirmation of the outrageous number!”

“Every Merodi will be as old soon enough,” Sunny dismissed.

“And then you’ll be even older!”

“Diminishing gap,” Sunny said. “Think about it mathematically.”

Affix rolled her eyes. “Nah. I’ll think about it as explosions or fashion, or not really.”

Sunny chuckled. “If you say so- hold on. Affix, what do you see over there?”

“I see a Sweetie.”

“There’s no Sweetie in our team,” Sunny said. “And this dream realm doesn’t create conscious
entities that don’t exist.”

The Sweetie blinked over to them in a sort of pseudo-teleport, revealing her pupil-less eyes. “…Rarity? …Sunset? Why do you look… Different?”

Sunny blinked. “Uh… I don’t think I’m the Sunset you know. …Did you play a game called Sburb?”

Sweetie blinked right back at her. “Yes…? But so did you! All of your versions did!”

Sunny shook her head. “Look at my eyes. Not dead. Not a ghost. I’m from another universe.”

Sweetie gasped. “Another universe? Oh yes oh yes oh yes that’s so cool! We created a universe – well, the version of us that won, anyway. I didn’t think we’d ever get visitors though!”

Affix held up a hoof. “Hold it. Do you all know what this means?”

Sweetie cocked her head. “Besides everything being awesome… no?”

Sunny shrugged. “That there was an Equestria in Sburb?”

“Yes, but it’s more than that.” Affix grabbed Sunny’s cheeks. “Every player who has ever played Sburb and died is in this universe. That is a lot more than just troll ghosts.”

Sunny’s eyes widened. “That’s… actually a big deal.”

Sweetie blinked. “Trolls? This grey skinned weirdos? Didn’t really notice they exited before tdoay…”

“You’re in for quite the startling set of revelations,” Affix said with a chuckle. She then started to explain everything to the Sweetie that would one day be known as Blink.

Soon, the deeper Skaians of Skaia’s Dream would rise to the surface, slowly making their way to Merodi Universalis.

Most those who had been lost to Sburb would be given a chance at a new life.
Allure was not known for sleeping particularly soundly. Ever since she was a filly, she had been restless in any bed she was placed into, much to the annoyance of any friends at a sleepover. She didn’t snore, she just twirled around in the blankets like a drunk spider who got trapped in their own web and didn’t realize it.

This was why she woke up with her head facing the wall of her bedroom. She yawned and sat up – scraping her metallic horn across the edge of the wall. She let out a hiss of pain and grabbed her artificial protrusion, rubbing it gently to soothe the pain.

Her horn was a silvery metallic cone far sharper than any natural unicorn’s horn. The grooves in it were not a spiral, but rather three concentric rings. It worked just as well as her normal horn for actually doing magic, which was to say she still didn’t have much to work with.

It had no nerves in it so she wasn’t as aware of its position as she used to be, though after a few months she’d thought she’d finally gotten the hang of not scraping it on stuff. The horn itself may not have been able to feel pain, but when it tugged on the base at her skull the sensation was not only jarringly unpleasant, it also brought about a headache.

She rubbed her temples until the ache in her head went away – then she took a breath. It was time to wake up anyway, no need to get upset about losing sleep. She moved to leave her bed, but one of the blankets grabbed her back hoof, making her trip and land flat on her stomach. “What a great start to the day…” she muttered.

She pulled herself up and walked out of her room, into the mixture living room/kitchen area she owned. Minna was already up, sitting on the couch, face glued on the TV. She was watching the news – odd for a thirteen-year old, certainly, but not even close to the weirdest thing she had done.

“…Skarn the Shaper made direct contact with Celestia City last night, and his daughter will be traveling to meet with Mayor Blumiere shortly. Another multiversal society has appeared before us. Will they be the friends they claim to be?”

“I don’t like him,” Minna said.

Allure glanced at the TV as she began to prepare breakfast. “Hm?” There was an image of a tall, brown, anthropomorphic horned bear on screen, with the caption Brell. “Minna, that’s a woman.”

“Not her. Skarn. The big bear.”

“Why?” Allure said, flipping the pancakes.

Minna shrugged. “Just don’t. Bad feeling.”

“Well, sometimes intuition ha-” Allure’s pancakes burst into flames. “What the-!”

Minna leaped off the couch and ran to help her mother put out the fire, though by the time she arrived Allure had already taken care of the fire by placing a lid over the pan. After a few seconds, she removed the lid to see black charred remains.
“...That’s still edible, right?” Allure asked Minna.

“No.”

“...Cereal it is today. At least we still have nice orange juic-”

She stared at the glass of juice she had poured. It was black and looked like cinders. “Oh come on! How did that even happen!? I haven’t burnt juice since I was twelve!”

“...How do you burn juice?” Minna asked.

“You, uh... you...” Allure blinked. “I have no idea how I did that.”

“You could probably make money off burnt juice. Sell it as a novelty or something.”

Allure blinked. “...Yeah, no.”

“Your loss,” Minna said. “So... mom...”

“No.”

“But I didn’t even ask yet!!”

“You want to come on the adventure today. Minna, it’s a school day. You’re going to school. I’m going to work. Which is probably going to be patrolling Celestia City and not going anywhere special. So you’re not missing out.”

Minna groaned. “Fiiiiine.” She grabbed her bowl of cereal and ate in silence.

Allure would have been concerned about this behavior if she wasn’t busy having an existential crisis over the burnt juice. How did the fire even reach it? How can you burn juice!? How in... Her mind’s processor stopped working.

“...Mom?”

“Huh?” she said, realizing she had a spoon of cereal levitated in front of her mouth, all the milk having dripped out onto the table below. “Oh for the...”

Minna hefted her backpack up. “I’m going to school now. Don’t you need to go to the League...?”

“Ponyfeathers,” Allure muttered, abandoning her breakfast and scrambling out the door. It helped to be a pony on days like this – she didn’t need to worry about getting dressed or anything of that sort. She just had to run.

Once again she wished she could teleport. Must be nice to go to and from places without straining legs to the brink.

She ran along the street.

“Morning Allure!” the pink Seskii called from her potion stand, which was currently situated across the street in front of a new ‘artistic installation’ that was literally just a bunch of scrap metal thrown into a pile two stories high.

Allure waved at Seskii for a moment, but the action of picking up one hoof while in the middle of a run sent her skidding across the pavement. She scrambled back to her hooves and continued on to the League of Sweetie Belles. She stepped into a public teleporter terminal and sent herself right to
She barged in the front doors and ran through the man lobby. She slipped on the wet floor – having completely missed the ‘wet floor’ sign – and skidded until she hit Squeaky. They ended up in a position where Allure had Squeaky pinned to the ground awkwardly.

Allure blushed. “Uh… I think ka has it in for me today.”

“No kidding,” Squeaky muttered. “Mind getting off me? Sweeties are starting to stare.”

Allure scrambled off and dusted herself. “Eheh… Anyway, what’s up today?”

“Besides Blumiere’s meeting? Nothing,” Squeaky said. “We’ve got a slow day. By the way, ka is going to continue hating you.”

“…Why?”

“It’s your turn to manage the phones.”

Allure twitched. “…Great. This is just gonna be one of those days.”

“There’s the special ice cream in the fridge for lunch, don’t you worry,” Squeaky said, patting Allure on the back. “Also if the ‘Gregory’ guy calls about his fly problem, hang up. Then don’t answer the phone for five minutes.”

Allure blinked. “Sure.”

~~~

The phone rang again.

Jade barked, then put her hands over her mouth. “Sorry!” Jade had taken to hanging around the League of Sweetie Belles a lot, becoming sort of the ‘office dog’, occasionally going on missions with them. She’d decided to keep Allure company while managing the phones.

Allure rolled her eyes at Jade and picked up the League’s official phone. “League of Sweetie Belles, this is Allure.”

“I dropped off a sac of their eggs in your ventilation two days ago. They should already be leaving their grub state. Maybe now you’ll take my fly problem seriously.” The man Allure could only assume as ‘Gregory’ hung up.

Allure stared at the phone, blinking. “Uh… Okay. Jade?”

“On it.” She floated over to the ventilation system and popped the grate off the outlet. She looked in. “Don’t see any flies.”

“Do you know what this Gregory’s deal is?”

“He wants us to deal with his fly infestation for free rather than hire an exterminator,” Jade said. “He’s very persistent about it.”

“If he’s that persistent why not hire the exterminator?”

Jade shrugged. “I’ve never seen him, only heard other Sweeties talk about him.”
Allure looked up at the ventilation. “You know, if I poke my head up there, I’m just going to get a face full of flies given my luck today.”

“Did Vriska get to you?”

Allure blinked. “…You know what? That sounds like a solid maybe. Maybe I should call h-”

The phone rang again. Allure sighed. “League of Sweetie Belles, this is Allure.”

“Why aren’t you screaming in disgust at the infestation of flies!? WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU PEOPLE!?”

“Gregory, just go hire an exterminator.”

Gregory hung up.

Allure stared at the phone in confusion. “I… I just don’t get this guy.”

“I don’t think anybody does,” Jade said.

Allure checked the clock. “Well, it’s lunch time in a bit. After that my shift is DONE! I can get some other poor Sweet-”

The phone rang again.

“League of Sweetie Belles, this is Allure.”

“Help! My cat is stuck in a tree and I can’t get it down!”

Allure blinked. “…We’re not the fire department. Actually, don’t call the fire department either, cats can climb down trees on their own if they want.”

“But Fluffles is terrified of trees! You have to help!”

“Look, miss, find a local pegasus and have them fly up there.”

“They might hurt Fluffles!”

“And you think I won’t!?!” Allure blurted.

The woman let out a stressed shriek and hung up.

Allure rammed her head into the desk and let out a scream.

“…Better?” Jade asked.

“I will be once I have lunch,” Allure muttered, walking away from the phone and into the break room. There was a fridge, a series of shelves with different sandwiches on them, a food replicator that had OUT OF ORDER on it, and a television screen displaying the news. There were at least a dozen flies on the ceiling of this room.

“…I was expecting worse,” Allure said. It was easy enough to squish all the flies in her telekinesis and dump them in the trash. “Guess they just like the break room better than the other rooms.”

Two Sweeties walked into the room, shouting at each other. They apparently decided the break room was the place to have their argument.
“Look, we have to figure out how to share him!”

“Sharing? Do you realize what you sound like!?”

“He doesn’t know there’s two of us!”

“Whose fault is that!?”

“Yours!”

“NUH-UH!”

Allure hated how common this argument was in the League. “Oh hey I like this guy” followed by “I like that guy too” answered with “back off” and then “wait a minute he has no idea there’s two of us does he?” You’d think the Sweeties would be careful about that by now.

Allure wasn’t in the mood to deal with it. She walked to the fridge – realizing with annoyance that someone hadn’t closed it all the way. She poked her head inside to find not only had the ice cream melted, but there were three flies in it.

She closed the fridge. “Suffocate, vermin,” she muttered. She decided to just take a sandwich, but before she could do that the television suddenly cut to ‘BREAKING NEWS’

Allure turned to it, ears perking up.

“The Ga of Inchari Libera have begun to riot outside the Mayor’s residence. As of this report their intent is unknown, but it is expected the demonstrating group is protesting against Inchari Libera’s application to join Merodi Universalis...”

Allure sighed. “That sounds like an emergency for us to deal with.” She set her sandwich down.

“You can teleport us there, right?”

Jade nodded slowly. “…You guys didn’t tell me the Ga were Gardevoirs.”

“What?”

“From the Pokémon games.” She pointed at the news feed. The Ga were creatures with white skin and predominantly green hair, though other colors were visible in the crowd. All of them had red spikes in their chests and frilled ears. The women appeared to have dresses as part of their body, while the men had sharp points coming out the back of their elbows.

“Huh, really? I always thought they were a variant of Seskii’s race or something,” Allure said.

“That’s not the point. Just teleport us there.”

Despite having lost her Green Sun power, Jade was still the Witch of Space, and as such could easily teleport within Celestia City. They appeared on the front steps of Blumiere’s house, right in front the rioting Ga. It was admittedly smaller than Allure had expected from the news report, only a few dozen individuals participating.

Thrackerzod was the only one there, using an eldritch wall to keep them back.

“What are the other Sweeties?” Allure asked.

“I don’t have any idea,” Thrackerzod muttered. “All I know is that I’ve got th-” One of the Ga used a psychic power to punch Thrackerzod from the other side of the barrier, tossing her to the side with surprising ease.
“CHARGE!” a Ga man shouted, rushing forward.

Allure readied herself to knock him down. She didn’t get the opportunity – Blumiere stepped out of the front doors of his home, dark energy billowing off his back. “What is the meaning o-”

Gunfire rang out. The Ga in the riot quickly forgot their anger and started scrambling to protect themselves from the shots. Blumiere easily defended himself using dark magic, while Jade’s ghost body couldn’t take any permanent damage unless one of the bullets hit her reality bracelet - though she could feel pain.

Allure, however, took one to the leg. She yelled out in pain – but she was more annoyed by the way this day had turned out than worried about her wound. “This is stupid,” she muttered, limping backward to find some cover within Blumiere’s house.

A psychic blast from a Ga woman with blue hair sent her flying into the air instead. Allure locked eyes with her, glaring.

The woman raised a gun to take Allure out, using her free hand to psychically keep Allure in place. She fired…

And then all of Celestia City exploded. A white light shot out of the center of the Merodi’s pride, tearing the ground beneath them to shreds. Allure was aware enough to feel the white light burning her skin away.

She roared out in rage, her very soul fighting back against the burning fire of destruction. There was a pink spark-

And then there was nothing.

~~~

Allure woke up and dragged her horn against the wall of her bedroom. She let out a hiss of pain and grabbed her artificial horn, rubbing it gently to soothe the pain.

Then her eyes flew open.

Most people would have gone through the usual assumptions – I’ve been dreaming, I’ve just recovered from being blown up, or it was all an illusion.

Allure jumped right to the correct one.

“I’m a TIME LOOP!?” Allure blurted, ignoring her headache. “I just… Why today? …Why do I even have to ask that question, of course it’s today, because it was an absolutely cruddy day and because I’ve got to keep Celestia City from blowing up.” She took in a sharp breath. “I need to test first. Right.” She got out of her bed – and fell on her stomach. Again. She ground her teeth.

She lifted herself up and walked down the stairs. Minna was watching the news again.

“…Skarn the Shaper made direct contact with Celestia City last night, and his daughter will be traveling to meet with Mayor Blumiere shortly. Another multiversal society has appeared before us. Will they be the friends they claim to be?”

“I don’t like him,” Minna said.

“Guess what Minna?” Allure said. “I’m in a time loop.”
“Really?” Minna said, tearing her gaze away from the television. “Neat.”

“Breakfast is going to have to be fast today, I’ve got to stop a disaster. You understand, right?”

“Can I come with?”

Allure poured the juice and got out cereal. “No, Minna, just because the day is repeating for me doesn’t mean you get out of school. Just means we don’t get good breakfast.”

“Does it also mean burnt juice?”

“What do y-” Allure stared in disbelief at the cup of juice she had just poured. It was burnt. “I…what?”

Minna looked at her. “Did that happen last time?”

“Yeah. How in…?”

Minna shrugged. “You could probably sell that as a novelty, or something.”

“Right…” Allure shook her head. “Right, doesn’t matter.” She pulled out her phone and called Blumiere. “Hey, Blumiere. Allure here.”

“I am just about in a meeting with Brell. What do you need?”

“I’m looping through time and Celestia City is going to blow up around lunchtime if we don’t do something. You can probably go to that meeting though, it has to do with the Ga, not Brell. …Far as I know. Call me as soon as you get done so we can deal with it.”

“…One of those days?”

“It hasn’t even been twenty four hours and I’m already sick of it. I’ll gather the Sweeties.” Allure hung up, calling Squeaky. “Squeaky, I’m not going to come to the phone lines today.”

“How did y-”

“I’m suddenly psychic,” Allure chuckled. “No, I’m just looping through time. We need to stop Celestia City from blowing up. To do that, we should start by stopping a riot of Ga that’s going to form outside Blumiere’s house later.”

“Got it.”

Allure smirked, putting her phone away. “Ah, foreknowledge makes things great.”

She trotted outside, heading to the League.

“Hey, how’s it going?” Seskii asked Allure.

“Better!” Allure said, smiling. “About to save the City!”

“We’re all counting on you!”

She used the public teleporter to get to the League and ran through the doors again. She had completely forgotten about the wet floor and slipped into Squeaky for the second time.

Squeaky raised an eyebrow. “You look like you’ve been here before.”
The moment the Ga arrived, the League of Sweetie Belles made themselves known. The would-be rioters were circled by dozens of white unicorn mares plus a few bonus Sweeties, including Suzie, Burgerbelle, Servitude, and a handful of others.

Allure cleared her throat. “Yeah, we’re going to have to ask you to clear the area. No rioting today.”

A Ga man walked up to her. “We’ll make our displeasure known regardless of whatever you do!”

“Allure,” he said, narrowing his eyes.

“Utar,” he said, narrowing his eyes.

“Right, Utar. Let me make this clear. Thrackerzod over there has a mental subduction spell trained on all of you. The moment you make a move you all will suddenly feel the need to grab your heads and cry. So just go home. There’s nothing for you here.”

Utar curled his hands into a fist. “We will not be sile-

Thrackerzod activated the spell. All but the most powerful psychics among the Ga women fell instantly. One of those psychics decided she was going to keep fighting anyway.

Allure tapped into her magic, pushing it into her back hooves to give her jump a boost. She leaped through the air and placed a hoof on the woman’s shoulder. She was pushed to the ground by the force of the attack, allowing Allure to pin her, holding a hoof on her neck. “I said no rioting.”

She glared at Allure in anger, but decided she didn’t want to risk a snapped spinal column. She let her limbs go limp with an annoyed grunt.

“Good. Clear!” Allure said. She got up and dusted herself off.

“You were exact.” Blumiere noted with amazement. “Only one loop through and you already knew how to stop them!”

“I don’t think the people who were shooting were part of the riot.” Allure said. “We probably still have to watch for them.”

Blumiere nodded. “I have defenses ready. They won’t be catching us by surprise.”

Allure sat down, turning to Utar. “So, here’s a question. Why are you blowing up Celestia City with yourselves still on it?”

Utar looked at her with contempt, a hand to his head. “What? …You know, that’s not a bad idea.”

“Right, you’re useless.” Allure muttered. “Do any of you know about a bomb?”

Everyone stared at her with mixed expressions of bafflement and near-panic.

Blumiere nudged her. “Don’t spread panic.”

Allure put a hoof to her head. “Right, sorry. …Looks like they don’t know. So… distraction?”

Squeaky shrugged. “They seem like the sort to try and blow us up, but I don’t see how they’d be
able to pull it off. Their race doesn’t have much aside from above-average psychics, and those are almost exclusively the women.”

Squeaky rubbed her chin. “Hrm…” She began pacing. “There’s got to be something else here. Bot, what’s the word on the Internet?”

“News reports about us stopping a riot before it started,” Bot chirped.

“Right… Do we know who these people are?”

“Sights Unseen.”

“Dumb name o’clock,” Thrackerzod muttered. “Not only is it an oxymoron, but it also sounds like whoever made the name wanted to sound mysterious. Clearly, these Ga are not mysterious. Just brutes.”

“How dare y-?” Utar began – but then the bullets started flying. Blumiere’s defenses caught every bullet in an aura of purple energy easily.

Allure spied the blue woman she’d seen last time. Allure charged, ready to take her out and ask a few questions.

The woman dropped her gun and used simple psychic power to push Allure back. Allure was no match for the burst. She went flying backward and landed flat on her back.

“How…”

Thrackerzod rushed the woman, taking her down easily with eldritch vines.

Then Celestia City exploded again.

~~~

Allure scraped her horn on the wall and hissed.

“At least I’m still looping,” she muttered, rubbing her head. She carefully tore the blankets off herself and slid out of bed comically slowly. She managed not to trip.

She came down the stairs. “I don’t like him,” Minna said.

With the proof that she was still looping solidified, she took out her phone. “Sorry, Minna, I’ve got a bit of an emergency to deal with. You can make your own breakfast, right?”

Minna nodded. “What kind of emergency?”

“The one where I have to answer the same questions again and again,” Allure said, dialing Blumiere. “Hey, Blumiere, I know you have a thing with Brell. Just know that, after that’s done, we’re going to have to deal with a plot to blow up Celestia City. I’m looping through time, that’s how I know. Try to wrap it up quickly, I’ll be coordinating with the League to try something new. Form my perspective anyway.” She hung up. “I am so lucky to live in a world where you can say ‘hey, I’m stuck in a time loop’ and people will just believe you.”

Minna nodded. “Yeah. …Mom, why’s my orange juice burnt?”

“No idea, Minna,” Allure commented, eye twitching.
“I could make money off of this…”

Allure sighed, calling up Squeaky. “Hey Squeaky, I’m in a time loop. We need to deal with that. There’s a plot to blow up Celestia City. We’ll need Sweeties around Blumiere’s house with bullet-stopping fields – and no I am not answering the phone. I’m going to make some more calls before coming over.”

She dialed Aradia. She got a busy signal.

Odd. Aradia would almost always be able to answer calls because she could just go back in time and answer it later.

She tried Nova. Same busy signal.

She furrowed her brow. “Hrm…” She pulled out her dimensional device and opened a portal to the Gem Vein.

The portal led to complete blackness. She took the cup of burnt juice and flung it through the portal. It vanished into thin air instead of appearing on the other side.

“…Odd,” she said. “Looks like there won’t be any leaving the universe. Fun.” She stretched her legs and walked out, going to the League of Sweetie Belles once again.

“You look puzzled!” Seskii called.

“I am. I’ll tell you about it later, maybe. If I remember.” Allure continued on her way – this time watching for people moving through dimensions. They were a common sight in Celestia City, since the city rarely stayed in one universe for long. They were currently in Inchari Libera, so any normal Merodi travelers would have to come from elsewhere.

She saw one – a portal opened, but there was nothing through it. A man walked out of it anyway, like everything was normal. She spotted a pegasus open a portal that led to blackness and fly right into it. She was just gone.

Allure shivered. That was creepy.

A short while later, she opened the doors of the League of Sweetie Belles carefully, minding the wet floor. She snuck over to Squeaky.

“…Allure, what are you doing?”

“I’m not going to slip and fall on you again,” Allure said. “I’m not.”

“How many loops in are you?” Thrackerzod asked.

“Three.”

“You’re going mad faster than I would have expected.”

“Yeah, yeah, get a laugh out of it,” Allure said, rolling her eyes. “I just figured out that it’s only this universe that’s looping.”

“Makes sense,” Squeaky said. “We’re not causally consistent with any other universes where we are. I guess there’s a reason we don’t just dial out?”

Allure opened a portal that led to blackness.
Squeaky blinked. “Interesting… How does nobody notice this? Dimensional travel is a regular thing on Celestia City!”

“It’s obvious,” Thrackerzod said. “Any travel that happened the first loop is preserved in any subsequent loops. If you went to Equis Vitis for a coffee break and came back five minutes later, the loop would allow that. But if Allure told you to take a coffee break earlier, you wouldn’t be able to do it.”

Squeaky nodded. “Makes sense, though I fail to see how it’s obvious.”

“This kind of messy time sludge showed up all the time in the Embodiment,” Thrackerzod said. “They are not fond memories.”

“So what are we going to do, then?” Allure asked. “I already stopped the mob and defended against the attack, that didn’t stop the explosion.”

“Get more information!” Bot beeped.

Squeaky nodded. “Go stand in front of a city-wide scanner so it can tell you what’s happening the moment of the explosion. Then go back in time and use that knowledge.”

Allure grinned. “Yeah! I’ll go ask Blu-” she slipped on the floor and fell onto Squeaky again.

Squeaky raised an eyebrow. “You look like you’ve been here before.”

Allure just flopped over instead of standing back up, groaning.

“Emergency! We must drag her to the scanner ourselves!” Bot picked Allure up and flew her away.

“Oh, and there are flies in the ventilation!” Allure called back.

Squeaky twitched. “…Gregory…”

~~~

“Um… Hi,” a Fluttershy said to Allure, hiding behind her clipboard, lab coat, and giant glasses. Clearly one of the shyer versions of the pegasus. “Um… I’m Irenashy. Um… I’m told you need to use my scanner to see an… explosion?”

Allure nodded, walking into the room, showing off the ‘authorized visitor’ badge she had obtained from Blumiere a short while ago. “Yeah. Were you briefed?”

“Celestia City is going to explode…” she whispered.

“Yes…” Irenashy breathed.
*Man she’s an antsy one.* “Well, I’ll just need to watch. And see what happens. And remember.”

“I’m going to burn and die and forget what it feels like tomorrow…”

“Hey, I’ve got you, okay?”

Irenashy nodded slowly. “R-right… Sorry.”

Allure stared at the screen for a few minutes. She realized the main screen didn’t have a clock on it. “Uh…”

Irenashy gestured to a smaller screen near the bottom right wall that displayed the time. “I, um, couldn’t be bothered to put it on the main interface in every view. Sorry.”

“Kay…” Allure said, examining the time. 11:59. …12:00. It happened shortly after noon…

They waited in silence. It put Allure on edge, but she couldn’t bring herself to freak Irenashy out more simply by talking.

The big screen went dead sometime after 12:03, along with almost all the lights in the room, plunging them into a dull red existence. Notably the clock kept running.

Irenashy panicked. “W-what!?” She checked her phone, tapping into backup sensors. “The… The entire system is down! I, uh, it’s been fried!”

Allure blinked. “Not going to get any data, are we?”


~~~

Allure scraped her horn on the wall and hissed. In her anger she forgot to check for the blanket and fell onto the floor.

She grunted, leaving her room.

“I don’t like him” Minna said.

“Yeah, I know” Allure said. She pulled out her phone and started making calls again. “Hey, Blumiere? I’m looping through time and Celestia City has blown up three times so far. I don’t have much in the way of information, but I want to try something. Let’s just move the city to another universe, okay? It might look a little weird, but trust me, we’ve gotta try it to see if it works.”

“Mom?”

“Emergency,” Allure said with a sigh. She called Squeaky. “We’re going to have to keep people calm while we move Celestia City to another universe. Why? Because we’re going to explode, that’s why. I’m in a time loop. Just try to keep everyone calm okay? Also, Gregory’s put flies in the ventilation. Might want to send someone to take care of that. And…” She turned around, noticing a cup of burnt juice on the countertop. “I DIDN’T EVEN POUR IT TODAY!”

There was silence on the other end of the line.

“Fine, I’ll be right over to explain anything. Just when I awkwardly fall on you, don’t blame me.” She hung up and dashed out of the house, leaving Minna confused.
“Happy-” Seskii began.

“NOT IN THE MOOD!”

~~~

Allure watched as the giant, black portal was created in front of Celestia City. It led into nothing.

“You sure about this?” Blumiere asked.

“If it doesn’t work, I just loop back. If it does, we escape. Figured we might as well try it.” She stretched her hooves. “The people are panicking, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” Blumiere said, folding his arms. “But you’re right. We should at least try. And I do trust your judgement, even if you seem a bit…”

“Frazzled? Angry? Twitchy? All of the above?”

“…Sure.” He watched as the front part of Celestia City vanished into the portal. “That’s unnerving.”

“Yeah, it is. Time to see what happens.” Allure held her breath…

…and scraped her horn against the wall. She hissed in pain. “At least there was no feeling of burning death that time,” she muttered, carefully getting out of her bed. She left her room.

“I don’t like him.”

“I know…” Allure muttered, pulling up the phone. “Blumiere, I’m stuck in a time loop and the last plan didn’t work. So we’re going to try it a little differently this time…”

~~~

Allure sat in a Skiff, filling only one of the six seats. She watched as Celestia City entered their giant black portal and vanished, the portal closing the moment they were all the way through.

She looked at the clock.

10:12

*Probably should have had them wait a little bit,* Allure thought to herself. She stretched her hooves and leaned back in the chair, waiting for 12:04.

Every now and then she’d try to create a portal. The Skiff would make one, and it would lead to endless blackness regardless of which universe she chose.

She pulled up some video games on the windshield-display, careful not to pick any with story since her progress would just be erased in a couple hours.

She grew bored and agitated with this rather quickly. She tried to read, but she couldn’t focus on the words. All she got was more annoyed with how long she was waiting.

“UGH, how much longer!??”

11:19

“I’m going to go nuts…” she moaned. “Or I’m already nuts. Five loops in and the insanity has set in.
If this lasts much longer I’m going to become a wreck.”

She started making a mental list of the loops. Five loops. Each one lasts only from when I wake up to 12:04. So from 7:30 to 12:04… four and a half hours. About a fifth of a day. I’ve been in here for a full day without actually experiencing sleep. Lovely thought, that. She decided that maybe a nap was a good idea.

The explosion woke her up before it killed her.

~~~

“I don’t like him.”

“Blumiere! Yeah, it didn’t work. The – right. Ahem, I’m in a Time Loop. We need to do it again so I don’t fall asleep this time. I… Moving Celestia City. I – look, Blumiere, this is the sixth time I’ve been through this and I… Right, right, I’ll be right over to explain everything.” She dashed out the door, ignoring the burnt juice.

“What’s the rush?” Seskii called.

Allure ignored her.

~~~

Allure sat in the Skiff, again, this time with her eyes glued on the windshield. A wireframe representation of Celestia City was plastered on the screen where the city should have been if it wasn’t gone.

12:03.

They had left three minutes ago, just to give her a little time to grow accustomed to the Skiff. But she was ready. She was going to see the explosion when it happened and where it happened. Then she would go to the source before it happened and find out the answers to all her questions!

Yes… it was close… she could feel it…

The explosion went off. At this distance, the Skiff had enough time to tell her exactly where it was going off.

“Sector N-G, Marrow Street, 5439. Aha! Bing-”

~~~

Allure scraped her horn on the wall, removing her feeling of elation. It returned the moment she was out of her bed and on her four hooves.

She trotted to the kitchen-living room.

“I don’t like him.”

“That’s nice,” Allure said absent-mindedly. She pulled out her phone. “Hey, Thrackerzod. I’m stuck in a time loop. Meet me at Sector N-G, Marrow Street, 5439 in half an hour. We’ve got some investigating to do.”

“Oooh, can I come!?” Minna asked.
“No, you have school,” Allure said. “But you can have breakfast. How do pancakes sound?”

“Great!”

Allure started cooking.

*Hey wait a minute, didn’t I light these on fire la-*

The pancakes lit on fire. She smothered them, looking like she was about to blow a gasket. “Cereal it is!”

“I didn’t know you could burn juice.”

“APPARENTLY YOU CAN WITHOUT EVEN TRYING!” Allure said with a forced laugh.

“…Mom? Are you okay?”

“Yes,” Allure said, sitting down. She tossed the burnt juice into the trash. “But let’s enjoy our breakfast anyway and not freak out over the continual existence of burnt juice. That’d be *silly.* And frivolous.”

“I think you could make money off of it.”

“Is that all you ever think about?”

Minna cocked her head. “…No?”

Allure drove her face into her cereal.

Minna blinked. “…Mom?”

“Just give me a minute…”

A minute turned out to be a little bit too long. Allure had to run out of the house two minutes before she was supposed to meet Thrackerzod.

“Don’t trip!” Seskii called.

Allure took her advice without realizing it. She pulled out her phone. “Hey, Thrackerzod, where did I tell you to meet me? See, I don’t have any paper that I can take through the time loop and I’ve completely forgotten…”

~~~

Sector N-G, Marrow Street, 5439 was a small warehouse on a street in the middle of an abandoned factory district.

Allure came running in, panting heavily.

“You look like a cow has been sitting on you for hours,” Thrackerzod observed.

“I’m going a little nuts,” Allure admitted. “Loop seven. The fun thing is I’ve never been here before. Got information on it last loop.”

“So why are we here?”

“Because the explosion that destroys Celestia City will originate from here,” Allure said. “We’re here
Thrackerzod nodded. “Seems reasonable enough. Squeaky’s ticked at you, though.”

“She can man the phones if she thinks someone needs to be up there so bad.”

“I take it there are going to be some bad calls today?”

“You have no idea,” Allure muttered. She tried to open the doors of the warehouse, but they were locked. Thrackerzod tore them off their hinges, revealing a dark interior with a bunch of wooden crates inside, collecting dust.

“Any weird magic?” Allure asked.

Thrackerzod shook her head. “Nothing weird about this place at all. Besides the usual outrageous amounts of dust. Far too much dust.”

“I see where you’re coming from there…” Allure said, opening one of the crates to find old human clothing. “Hm. Why would the explosion come from here?”

Thrackerzod shrugged. “Not a clue. If it really does, it either isn’t here yet, or comes in from another universe.”

“…Probably the latter,” Allure said, rubbing her chin. “Let’s go outside and stake the place out. See if we can find anything.”

The two of them walked out of the warehouse only to find two dozen Ga pointing weapons at them.

“What are you doing here?” The lead asked.

“…Exploring?” Allure said, smiling weakly.

“Wrong answer.” She was shot between the eyes with a laser rifle.

~~~

“What are you doing here?” The lead asked.

“…Exploring?” Allure said, smiling weakly.

“Wrong answer.” At this point the League of Sweetie Belles appeared and subdued all the Ga with ease, not losing a single Sweetie or gaining a single injury.

“Huh. That worked really well,” Allure said. She walked up to the lead Ga. “Shooting me in the head isn’t nice.”

He clicked his teeth. Something inside his mouth burst and foam started flowing out of his mouth. He was dead in seconds.

Allure facehooved. “Did any of them not have a suicide capsule?”

“No, all of them are dead,” Squeaky said.

“Hardcore,” Bot observed.

Allure sighed. “I hate hardcore terrorist groups…”
This time Thrakerzod and Allure didn’t arrive at the warehouse until just before the explosion. There were no Ga in sight and the warehouse was still abandoned.

“Your ‘great idea’ has led me to a warehouse,” Thrakerzod deadpanned. “What now?”

Allure checked the time. 12:03. “Well, I guess we just see what happens.”

They saw a portal form in front of their eyes – and then they were engulfed in the light.

Oh hey, it hurts more this close. Cool.

“Dimensional inhibitor?” Allure asked.

“Check,” Bot said, placing the mechanical box down on the ground in the warehouse. It activated, ensuring a portal would not form in the nearby area.

“Time?”

“12:03,” Bot declared.

“Right. Let’s stop this portal from forming.” Allure rubbed her hooves together, feeling sure that this would be it.

“ERROR! INHIBITION CANCELLED FROM OUTSIDE SOURCE!”

“W-wha-”

The light engulfed her.

Yeah, still hurts a lot. Ow.

“What are you doing here?” The lead asked.

Allure took a serious expression. “We are the League of Sweetie Belles and you are all under arrest for suspicion of terrorism!”

“Wrong answer.” She was shot between the eyes with a laser rifle.

“What are you doing here?” The lead asked.

Allure sneered. “I bear a message from Sights Unseen…”

“Do you think we’re stupid? You’re Allure. Of course you aren’t.” She was shot between the eyes with a laser rifle.

“What are you doing here?” The lead asked.
Allure sighed. “Just shoot me and get it over with.”

“...Okay.” She was shot between the eyes with a laser rifle.

*Reverse psychology: not a winner.*

~~~

“What are you doing here?” The lead asked.

Allure turned to Thrackerzod. Thrackerzod cleared her throat. “**Mortals, bow befor-**”

Thrackerzod was shot between the eyes with a laser rifle.

Allure blinked. “You didn’t even let her fi-”

Allure was shot between the eyes with a laser rifle.

~~~

“What are you doing here?” The lead asked.

Allure sighed. *If this doesn’t work, I’m going to spend a dozen loops trying to figure out their movements until I get through all their bullets unscathed.* “Please don’t hurt me! I’ll do anything! Anything!” She even put on fake tears.

Thrackerzod wasn’t there to be appalled. Allure had specifically left her behind this time for that exact reason.

The Ga lowered his gun, smirking. “Anything, huh?”

Allure gulped. “A-anything.” *Okay, not anything, I have a list of truly disgusting and violating things I won’t agree to, but I need to sell this.*

The Ga grinned. “See, we have no need for your help. In a few hours none of it will matter.”

*Oh thank Celestia, I finally got him talking.* “W-what?”

“This entire city. Boom.”

“W-why!?"

“To give you Merodi a message. Inchari does not need you.”

“C-can we talk about j-just agreeing to leave you alone?”

“Nah. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I didn’t see at least a few of you burn.”

“But y-you’re here! Why would you...?”

“Oh, we’ll be gone when it happens. Mostly. There’s a few morons for distraction.”

*That’s probably the riot.*

“Boss, why are you tellin’ her all this?” a woman Ga asked.

“Because she agreed to help. And I’ve got a few *ideas* for some fun we can have with the unicorn.”
Allure gulped. She needed one more bit of information. “W-wait… We were told this was related to the at-ttack on the Mayor’s residence…”

“What attack?”

Allure dropped the act and grinned. “Ah, thank you. You’ll be glad to know I’m a time traveler and you’re now royall-”

She was shot between the eyes with a laser rifle.

~~~

Allure scraped her horn against the wall. But she let out a cry of celebration anyway. “Loop sixteen: new information! The attack had nothing to do with them!” She knew where to investigate next.

“I don’t like him.”

“Yeah yeah, nobody does,” Allure muttered, not having any idea what anyone thought of Skarn. She thought about what she was going to do now. She’d already tried to shut the portal down at the source, the Ga obviously planned for their attack to be interrupted in that way. She supposed she could organize the League for a great attack on the warehouse where they had orders to knock people out with sleep spells and take them alive…

But no, she wanted to investigate the attack now. She just had a feeling that the attack on Blumiere’s house during the riot was important somehow.

She’d exhaust this side of investigation before she went and tried the crazy military approach again. One that would probably need more than a few tries.

She realized there was a cup of burnt juice in front of her.

She threw it out the window without bothering to open the window.

“M-mom!?”

“Oh, sorry, sorry,” Allure said, blushing. She went outside and cleaned up the glass with her magic, drawing more than a few stares.

“What was that all about?” Seskii asked.

“Nothing important,” Allure called. “Really! Nothing important at all!” She slunk back into her house, laughing nervously.

“…Mom?”

“I’m in a time loop, Minna. That glass of burnt juice has been following me around.”

“Did you think of-”

“-making money off of it? Yes! You remind me every day.”

Minna was clearly hurt by this statement, though also confused.

Allure sighed. “Minna, it’s not your fault. I’m just… tired of hearing the same things over and over again.”
“I’ll stop!”

Allure pulled her daughter close and smiled. “That’s a nice thought… But you won’t. And you don’t need to feel guilty about it either. Okay?”

“…Okay.”

“Now, I’ve got to go, and you’ve got to go to school.”

“Since it’s a time loop, can’t I just skip and it’ll have no consequences?”

Allure blinked. “…Yeah. Today, you can skip. But next loop you won’t!”

“And I won’t remember next loop,” Minna said with a smile. “Everybody wins!”

“Yeah…” Allure said, realizing with some horror that every time she looped, the memories of these people were all set back to zero, and the people they had become were gone. Did they die? Was having memory erased different from death in some way?

She really didn’t want to think about it further.

She made calls to Blumiere and Squeaky to tell them, once again, what was going on. It was time to find out who the attackers were. Starting with that one woman who tried to kill her in the first two loops.

~~~

Blumiere dragged the blue Ga closer to them with his powers. “Talk fast.”

“Who are you?” Allure asked.

“Nae,” she responded, face stern.

“And why are you here?”

“I do not need to tell you.”

Then everything exploded.

~~~

The next set of loops were the most annoying for Allure. They didn’t have time to grill Nae at the end of the day, so Allure had to retrace Nae’s steps backward through time over the course of the day.

The seventeenth loop she was able to determine which street Nae took with her squad to attack Blumiere’s house.

The eighteenth was just discovering they walked down that street for a while.

It was the nineteenth where Allure overshot where she thought they came from, and didn’t catch them.

Loop twenty, she found them making a turn. But she didn’t see anything before that, so in loop twenty-one she had to wait on a street corner and get exactly what she suspected – they had walked down that street for a while.
Twenty-two through twenty-four were a mix of overshoots and undershoots until she found the right place: a pub conveniently located in a niche designed to hide its location. How it stayed in business, Allure had no idea. Maybe it dealt in illegal favors more than alcohol.

Twenty-five she arrived at the pub a little late and got shot on the spot for walking in on a private conversation.

Twenty-six, her timing was right, but a Sweetie who stayed around too long not only scared customers away, but also got shot. Because the Sweeties were basically a form of law in Celestia City, of course they weren’t popular in this kind of shady joint.

She had to disguise herself as a different unicorn, going with a muted gray color scheme. So on loop twenty-seven, she got to watch the short time Nae and her fellow mercenaries were there.

Nae walked in first, though she was hooded so it took Allure a moment to realize it was her. She walked up to the bar, ordered water, and sat down at a table in the back. Allure had obtained a listening device from the League before she left, so this wasn’t an issue for her.

She just kept eating her nachos. Tower’s will, why did seedy places like this always have the best nachos? Great cheese, great chips… Maybe nachos were just one of those universal ‘we gotta do this good or not at all’ recipes. Or maybe she was going crazy. She had slept a few times the last few loops just to keep herself from going mad for that reason – the mind needed dreams, after all. Even a one to two hour nap could provide that.

Allure kept a careful eye on all the Ga that sat next to Nae. There were seven others, bringing the total of them to eight.

“We can’t let this stand,” one of the men said.

“Here here,” all seven agreed.

Nae nodded. “This has gone too far. They want to commit genocide. This cannot be allowed to happen, even to the Merodi.”

“But how can we stop it?” another woman asked. “They’ve got so many defenses…”

Nae looked around nervously, and then whispered so nobody but her table would be able to hear. With the exception of Allure with her listening device. “The Mayor has in his possession a pair of books.”

“This is just ru-”

“No, this is not rumor. His work of origin confirms these two books of power exist. And he has a chest in his home that is just the right size to hold both of them. If we can get those books, we can stop this tragedy.”

“Maybe we should tell him, so he can use them.”

“We do not have time to deliberate. The Navir will go off at any moment. If we want to move it has to be now.”

The seven of them nodded in agreement. They all stood up and left, leaving Allure behind.

Allure supposed she should probably go ask Blumiere about this… But there was something she wanted to do first.
Allure stopped Nae in the alleyway. “Hey. You might know me. My name is Allure. I just want to talk to you for a se-”

Nae triggered her suicide capsule and fell to the ground.

“…Wh… Why!? How on edge were you!?"

Allure injected Nae with a specialized drug inhibitor in the alleyway. This inhibitor prompted the Ga’s eyes to roll into the back of her head. She lost consciousness and slumped to the ground.

“Right, let’s take her back to the League,” Allure said, dusting her hooves off.

Squeaky blinked. “You sure this is her?”

“Blue Ga, serious expression, black cloak, walking past this corner at precisely 11:38? Yeah, it’s her. You better be able to wake her up once we get her back.”

“Easily,” Thrackerzod said. She teleported them all back to the League. They strapped Nae to a bed. Thrackerzod touched her horn to Nae. “Boo.”

Nae broke out in a cold sweat, eyes those of panic.

“Thrackerzod, there was no need to be so mean,” Allure muttered.

“Nightmare jolt is very effective,” Thrackerzod said.

Nae tried to activate her suicide capsule – but of course the drug inhibitor was still in her system.

“Agh!”

“Ready to talk this time?” Allure asked.

“This time!?”

“I’m in a time loop. You’ve been rather difficult to get to cooperate even though we want the same thing.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Merodi scum!”

“At precisely 12:04 today, the Navir will go off and destroy Celestia City. It has done this, without fail, every time I’ve survived a loop to that time. We’ve tried stopping it using dimensional inhibitions, moving Celestia City, stopping the attacks on Bulmiere’s house… Nothing has worked. But two loops ago I overheard a conversation you had with seven other Ga. You mentioned a pair of books Blumiere had that would be able to stop the Navir?”

Nae stared at Allure in disbelief. “Wh…”

“As I said. I’m looping through time. All of this has happened before, and if I don’t find a way to stop it, all of it will happen again. So please. I want to know about these books Blumiere supposedly has.”

Nae stared at her. “…You’re telling the truth.”
“Of course I am!”

Nae nodded slowly. “Right… right… Blumiere’s source material reveals that he tried to destroy much of the multiverse with a book of power known as the Dark Prognosticus. The opposing side defeated him using the Light Prognosticus. These Prognostici books hold the power to destroy entire dimensions from a distance – or worse. If I had gotten hold of them I would have used my psychic powers to tap into them and destroy the Navir’s universe.”

“What is the Navir’s universe?”

“A pocket universe one of the Sights Unseen’s scientists discovered. It could be manipulated to release tremendous amounts of energy, from what I’ve been told. Enough to keep you from adding us to your Merodi alliance.”

Allure sighed. “You have the right to your opinion. But the vast majority of your universe wants to join, you know?”

“And I used to think fighting would help. But now we are just committing genocide.” Nae grabbed Allure’s hoof. “You must get those books. Use them to destroy the Navir. He should have them in a large chest somewhere in his home.”

“I’ll try,” Allure said. “…The only problem is that my time loop prevents us from accessing other universes, but things that accessed us still activate.”

Nae’s expression fell. “Oh…”

“But, but, it’s a lead. I’ll ask Blumiere about it.” Allure rubbed her chin. “Perhaps if we send energy through a portal that would destroy the universe on the other side, the time loop won’t be able to open the energy discharge again?”

“…I wouldn’t know,” Nae said.

“Neither would I,” Bot said.

“I would,” Thrackerzod interjected. “It depends on the sort of time loop we’re in, if it’s logically consistent. We’ll have to test it once, and then see if we can open a portal to the destroyed universe right afterward. If not, it worked.”

“Good. Let’s go ask Blumiere,” Allure said. “Nae, you probably could have asked him yourself if you explained the situation. He’d do anything to save this city.”

Nae nodded. “But in case you don’t get it in time… give me some paper and a pen.”

Allure undid her arm restraints and did so. Nae wrote down her number – and a phrase. ‘Indigenous Propaganda’. ‘Tell me you’re from the future and tell me this phrase. I’ll believe you.’

“What’s it mean?”

“If you don’t know that makes it more effective,” Nae said. “Now go.”

Allure nodded. “Zod?”

Thrackerzod lit her horn, teleporting the core four of the League of Sweetie Belles to Blumiere’s house. The riot was already starting outside, but that didn’t matter.

Blumiere looked up at them from his chair. “Hm? Is this about the riot outside?”
“Tangentially,” Allure said. “We don’t have much time. Suffice it to say we know that Celestia City is going to suffer an explosion at 12:04 that will destroy it utterly and completely. We’ve gathered intel that suggests you have a pair of books that have the capacity to destroy a universe. We need you to use them to ‘destroy’ the universe on the other side of the portal.”

Blumiere blinked. “A curious thought. But I have no such books.”

“Then what’s in the chest?” Bot asked, pointing down to the floor below. Allure couldn’t see, but she knew Bot was using magic sonar to scan the area.

Blumiere shrugged. “I do not kn-”

Thrackerzod teleported the chest up to them and opened it. Two large books floated out of it – one dark, one white, both with smooth crystals on the corners and center of their covers.

Allure looked to Blumiere. “Why did you lie to us?”

Blumiere took depressed breath. “Because nobody can know these exist.” He raised his hands. “All of you must forget.”

Allure panicked. “Thrackerzod! Kill me now!”

Thrackerzod didn’t object. Allure became nothing more than a splat against the wall.

~~~

Allure scraped her horn against the wall of her bedroom. She hissed.

*Blumiere had a secret. A secret that can help us. A secret he isn’t willing to use.*

She flopped out of bed, barely noticing that she had landed on her stomach.

“I don’t like him.”

“Minna, leave the room please. I’m going to have to shout at someone over the phone.”

Minna blinked – and went to her room. Of course she would have her ear pressed to the door and hear everything, but this was just a time loop, it didn’t matter.


“I would imagine so,” he said. “I take it the last one didn’t go well by the tone of your voice?”

“Not at all. You see, Celestia City gets destroyed at the end of every loop I don’t die in. So I’ve been spending every loop trying to figure out how to stop this. I finally found a way. Guess what it is?”

“What?”

“Those books you have in your basement.”

“…Allure, stay ri-”

“I already had Thrackerzod kill me to prevent you from taking my memory, I can have her do it again,” Allure said, bitterly. “What’s so important about those books that you have to hide from us? …Hello?”
He wasn’t on the line anymore.

Allure quickly dialed Thrackerzod and ran out of the house.

“Run little unicorn, run!” Seskii shouted.

“Thrackerzod! I need you to find my magic signature and kill me.”

“…What?”

“I’m stuck in a time loop and I need to reset. Now.”

Thrackerzod didn’t miss a beat. “Coming.”

Blumiere appeared right in front of Allure. He pointed a hand at her, surrounding her with purple magics. “You won’t find this solution aga-”

Thrackerzod appeared and turned Allure inside out. The death was instant.

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Allure scraped her horn against the wall. She hissed. Blumiere wasn’t giving her answers.

Fine. She’d just have to do it herself.

“I don’t like him.”

Allure called up Thrackerzod. “Hey, Zod? I need you to come with me so you can kill me if things go south. I’m stuck in a time loop and I need to steal something from Blumiere.”

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Thrackerzod teleported them into Blumiere’s basement. “Think you can find it here?”

“Look for a chest,” Allure said. “Something that might hold two magic books.”

“Found it,” Thrackerzod said, placing her hoof on the chest. “Lot of magic locks on this box.”

“You can break it, though.”

“Of course I can,” Thrackerzod lit her horn and broke the locks.

Blumiere appeared in front of them. “You two…? Why you two? Why would you do this?”

“Reset me,” Allure said. Thrackerzod once again proved herself by squashing Allure flat.

~~~

“Okay, Thrackerzod, last time you opened these locks Blumiere knew immediately. So fix that, okay? I’m getting really tired of being flattened.”

Thrackerzod smirked. “I bet I’m not getting tired of flattening you.”

“Har-de-har. Just get it open without setting off the magic alarm.”

Thrackerzod took a minute to focus. She eventually popped open the locks, and the two books floated into the air.
Allure swore they were speaking to her.

Thrackerzod nodded slowly. “Those are some powerful magic books. Probably able to drive you insane. How do we use them?”

Allure facehooved. “Give me a moment… I need to make a call. I make a lot of calls in these loops…” She cleared her throat. “Nae? I’m from the future. You told me to say ‘Indigenous Propaganda.’ I’m told it means something to you.”

“Y-yes. It does.”

“Good. I’m Allure. I have a way to stop the Navir. You told us you’d be able to use the Prognistici? We have them.”

“I can. Meet me at-”

“-that pub nobody can get to, I know the place. Future, remember?”

“Of course. How soon?”

“We’ll be waiting for you,” Allure said, hanging up. “Thrackerzod, we need black cloaks to be mysterious. And you need to hide those books.”

Thrackerzod stuffed them in a personal pocket dimension and gave both of them cloaks. “Done.”

“Good.” She gave Thrackerzod directions to the pub. It only took a few teleports to get there. They sat down and Allure ordered the nachos.

When Nae entered, alone, Allure tapped her hoof on the table. “Over here.”

Nae sat down, looking at them both curiously. “…You’re really from the future?”

Allure nodded. “At 12:04 the Navir will go off if we don’t stop it. Last time we talked, you said you could stop it with these books.” Thrackerzod summoned the books and put them on the table.

Nae put her hand on the books, nodding slowly. “Yes. I can.” She glanced around – the pub was mostly empty. “…I can do it now.” She closed her eyes and spread her hands over the books, feeling them with her psychic powers. The Dark Prognosticus opened for her, showing her the dark prophecies within its interior. She didn’t open her eyes. She cared only for a particular ‘spell’. She found it within a minute.

A dark purple power appeared around her hand with strange squares of blackness fading in and out of existence within the swirl. The swirl opened a portal in front of her hand – and dove into it. The portal closed quickly.

Nae closed the Dark Prognosticus and breathed heavily. “That should have done it.”

“We have to check,” Allure said. “The time loop has done bizarre things to this universe. Try opening a portal.”

Nae nodded. She took out a dimensional device of Merodi design and dialed the coordinates. Instead of creating a black portal, an error message came up.

Allure grinned. “Yes… It’s gone. There’s no universe there now, and there will be no explosion. It’s over! I can finally relax!”
Thrackerzod looked at the Prognostici. “We should return these before he notices.”

“Oh. Right.”

Thrackerzod teleported all of them back to Blumiere’s basement.

“Why am I here!?” Nae hissed.

“Oversight, apologies,” Thrackerzod said, placing the books back in the chest. She locked it up and recreated all the spells on it in a minute. Then she teleported them to the League of Sweetie Belles. “Now it is done.”

Allure pulled out her dimensional device and tried to open a portal – but it was still black.

“Allure, you’ll have to wait until 12:04,” Thrackerzod said. “The loop won’t let the events overlap like that.”

“Fine…” Allure said. “So, who wants to get lunch?”

“It’s barely after breakfast,” Nae pointed out.

“I haven’t gotten to eat lunch in thirty-two loops, I don’t care.”

~~~

Nae, Thrackerzod, and Allure stood in the League of Sweetie Belles, staring at a clock. 12:03.

“…What are you girls doing?” Squeaky asked.

“Staring at a clock,” Thrackerzod deadpanned.

“Uh-huh. Allure, I needed you on the phones.”

Allure didn’t shift her gaze. “You can have me on the phones at 12:04.”

“Why 12:04?”

“Time loop.”

Squeaky blinked. “Oh. Waiting for the end?”

“Actually, it’s over,” Allure said. “We’re just waiting for it to complete the last cycle so we can ask Eve what happened on her end. And Aradia.”

“…Huh.”

It hit 12:04.

There was no explosion.

“YES!” Nae cheered. “WE WON!”

“WOO-HOO!” Allure shouted. “Great galloping gazelles, I’m so glad that’s o-”

Allure scraped her horn against the wall of her bedroom and let out a hiss of pain.

She stared at the wall in disbelief. “Wha…?”
She stumbled falling out of the bed onto her stomach.

She wordlessly walked out of her bedroom.

“I don’t like him,” Minna said, staring at the same news report as last time.

Allure went to the kitchen and stared out the window, wondering what she did to deserve this. She’d fixed it. What else did they want?

Then she saw something across the street that made something in her mind go click.

She pulled a glass out of the fridge and poured juice into it. She turned around, hummed to herself a bit, and turned back. Sure enough, the juice was burnt. Somehow. But that wasn’t the point.

She grabbed the juice and marched across the street to the ‘artistic installation’ she had passed by almost every loop. She slammed the burnt orange juice down on the top of Seskii’s potion stand. “You never say the same thing twice. You know. So explain.”

Seskii grinned. “I thought you’d never ask.”
Seskii was of a race not known by Merodi Universalis. If one were to ask her what she was, she would say ‘a humble potion seller’ or, if pressed, ‘garilend’. Both were true, but neither were the full truth. The true nature of Seskii is, unfortunately, not something she would like to be revealed. So the discussion of such will be dismissed.

As a humble potion seller she was known rather well across the Hub and Celestia City. Her shop seemed to be everywhere, and yet no one could ever prove she was in two places at the same time. Most people would only buy her potions – they were what was on sale, after all. Potions for just about everything: hair growth, the flu, health, magic, strength, you name it. She could sell things along the lines of love potions, but she only did so if she thought there was truly a need for such distasteful brews.

However, those who frequented her shop knew there was a very large chance she could get you anything you asked for, so long as you didn’t question where it came from. Some of the scientists within the Research Division had learned to exploit this, going to Seskii with their huge shopping lists and leaving with almost all the bizarre esoteric materials they had asked for. She charged a full, fair price for everything, but it was very convenient to have it all in one place. Those who couldn’t just accept what she was offering would find it impossible to find her.

As a garilend, or ‘gari’ in casual conversation, she was one of pink coloration, which was to say she was attuned to the elemental nature of plasma. Not fire – she would always say that was the realm of the red gari – but plasma. She could be seen making pink sparks fly from her fingers, or even occasionally lasers.

Like all members of her race, she had perfectly white skin with angular edges to her limbs. Her face had no nose and her ears had two points at their tips. The lower half of her arms and legs were completely covered in a pink plastic-like substance, giving her natural gauntlets and greaves. Her hair was made of the same substance, though in strands. Where she was from, many gari would take advantage of the nature of their hair and sculpt it into many impossible shapes, but she had a simple hairstyle with short hair with two protrusions sticking out the sides of her head, a swirl at the base of these extensions.

“Finally, I get a legitimate description,” Seskii said. “You had noooo idea how much I hated being in the background and interludes. Every arc, just one or two cameos, not even named all the time!”

“That’s not an explanation,” Allure pointed out. “Spill the beans.”

Seskii pursed her lips. “You know, you’re really putting the Rage in this arc. You’re not even the rage it’s talking about either, you’re nowhere near purple enough for that.”

“Seskii…”

“Fine, fine.” She cleared her throat. “No, I am not looping like you. I’m just Aware, as is probably shockingly obvious right about now.” She held out a gray potion. “A potion to keep your thoughts grounded in reality?”

“Pass,” Allure said. “If you’re not looping how do you keep changing up everything?”
“The same way the Sweetie Belle’s time loop had her Pinkie mix things up all the time. We just know things. Sometimes we can just be random, in Pinkie’s case. In my case it’s an ability to read through what’s happened in the past really quickly to keep things interesting. Tried to keep you from going mad.”

“I shouted at you a few times,” Allure said, her anger softening.

Seskii shrugged. “Hey, I don’t remember, I just read about it. You seemed stressed to me.”

“I was. Sorry.”

“I said I didn’t remember, right?” Seskii shrugged. “You’re forgiven. You’re going through a lot.”

“Do you know why stopping the explosion didn’t work?”

Seskii shrugged. “Not sure. Maybe because it didn’t actually cause the time loop? Maybe because stopping it from happening isn’t the way out? I’m not an all-seeing eye like Twilence, I just get hints and clues like Pinkie. And I sell potions.”

“Yeah, I got that,” Allure said, scratching the back of her head. “But I was so sure saving Celestia City would reset it… Why can’t I get out of this? I worked so hard Seskii!”

Seskii frowned. “I don’t know. There’s probably some other solution. Or maybe the loops just have to reach a certain number before they stop. Maybe someone has to break in from the outside. It has to end at some point because you’ve only got a chapter left, but that’s all I can tell you.”

Allure sighed. “Yeah. You are right… but…”

“Shoosh. I have a recommendation. Go back home and sleep the rest of this loop off. Then take the next loop off. Declare a vacation. Then, _after_ that, try to think of other things you could do to get out of the time loop. Brainstorm some ideas with the League. Try those out. Remember not to work yourself ragged. Come by whenever you need someone who just _knows_ your situation. Kay?”

Allure nodded slowly. “…Kay.” She put her hoof on the countertop. “Sleep potion.”

“On the house,” Seskii said, tossing it over with a wink. “Enjoy!”

“…Actually, before I do. Burnt juice. Why?”

“Ka is looping too,” Seskii explained. “You suffer the same events unless you go out of your way to avoid them because it’s amusing. …The juice is apparently so strong it’ll show up every time you involve juice in your day.”

“That’s stupid.”

“That’s the point.”

Allure rolled her eyes. “Right. G’night then.”

“G’night!” Seskii said with a wave.

Allure went back into her house. She took a breath. “Minna, remember to go to school, okay? I need to go back to bed.”

Minna looked at her. “Are you feeling okay?”
“I hope to soon,” Allure said, calling up Squeaky. “Calling in sick today. The bed calls.”

“Allu-”

Allure hung up and walked to her bedroom. She’d never walked back in here at any point in any of the loops. She’d always walked out of it.

She had made a pretty nasty scratch in the wall with her horn. Its presence made her smile and she didn’t know why.

Crawling back into bed, she levitated the blankets over her. She popped the potion, drank it, and curled up like a caterpillar.

Allure was soon fast asleep.

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Allure scraped her horn against the wall of her bedroom. She hissed in pain.

*Loop thi-*

You know what? No. She was going to stop counting. Counting was stupid and just reminded her of how much she was wasting her own time in this mess. This was loop number whatevermajig. All loops from here on out were whatevermajig.

Today was loop *vacation* whatevermajig.

She removed her blankets carefully and pranced into the living room-kitchen.

“I don’t like him,” Minna said.

“I know. How would you like to take your mind off him for today?”

“…How?”

Allure grinned. “How about we skip school and go see the sights?”

Minna’s eyes widened. “…Yes.”

Allure flipped out her phone, calling someone she hadn’t called at any point in the loops. “Hey *Alushy.*”

“You sound spunky today. What bastard did you put behind bars?”

“None. I’m stuck in a time loop. This time I’m going vacationing with Minna. I’d think you’d know the best places to party like there’s no tomorrow. We’ve got four and a half hours and no consequences.” She tried very hard to ignore the burnt orange juice that had spontaneously appeared.

“…Fuck yes,” Alushy said. “All right, there’s this strip clu-”

“Something *I’d* actually enjoy going too, thank you. Actually why would you even recommend that? You’re a pony! We don’t normally wear anything!”

“Don’t judge me,” Alushy said, coughing. “Are you okay with pushing the bounds of legality?”

“…I’m listening.”
“How far we talking?”

Allure looked down at Minna, biting her lip.

*Screw it, she won’t remember any of this.*

“Just about anything short of murder.”

“…Satan’s fiery teat, you *really* need a vacation. All right. I know just the place. Meet me at the Bouncy Donut in an hour, I’ll take you there.” She hung up.

Allure grinned. “Minna, you better enjoy this, because it breaks every rule of parenting in existence.”

“Hey, time loop right? I won’t remember anything.”

~~~

Allure shook her head at where Alushy was leading them. “Alushy, this is the pub where I listened in on a secret conversation! All they’ve got is good nachos!”

Alushy smirked. “See, that’s just the *surface* of the secret pub, my mother-daughter follower pair. There’s more below – much more, so much more you won’t be able to believe. The level of debauchery we’re about to experience is about as high as you can get."

Allure raised an eyebrow.

“Without disgusting your delicate little minds, yeesh, what do you think I am, a slut?”

“Yes,” Minna said.


Minna looked at her, eyes wide. She spoke with a haunted whisper. “…Fuck.”

Allure laughed harder. “Well fuck me, let’s swear like the bastard sailors we are! Lead on, crimson slut! Take us to the land where none shall give any fucks!”

Alushy grinned. “You’re trying too hard.” She pushed a nearby wall with her hoof, opening a secret door. They made their way down a winding set of stairs to a second pub underneath the first one, lit only by red light.

“WELCOME TO THE BASEMENT!” the vampire pegasus declared, gesturing at the red lights, the endless tables, and the mysterious smells coming from behind the counter. Alushy cleared her throat. “If any of you question these ponies, I will *nicely* ask you to leave. Which is to say they won’t like it if I kill you so I’ll have to get really, really, *creative.*” Her eyes flashed a deep red.

The patrons who weren’t too high took one look at Allure, Minna, and Alushy and shrugged. “Such horrible people,” Allure said with disgust. “Letting a child in here and not batting an eye.”

“Hey, you’re the crazy one,” Alushy said, shoving a snoring Skaian troll out of a nearby chair to free a table for them. “This place can get you any substance you can think of, controlled or not.”

Allure raised an eyebrow. “There aren’t that many controlled substances in Celestia City.”

“I mean with or without a permit, yeesh,” Alushy muttered. “Look, let’s not waste time explaining
“…Do I get to drink it all?” Minna asked, eyes wide.

“If you think you can,” Alushy laughed.

A drink was teleported to Minna, a blue smoking powder in front of Allure, and a red seed in front of Alushy.

She picked up the seed. “This is the only truly illegal thing at this table.” She threw it into her mouth, bit down, and her brains exploded out the back of her head. It reformed in a few seconds and Alushy let out a satisfied sigh. “You can see why.”

“Fuck yeah,” Minna said, downing her drink.

Allure moved to tell her to slow down – then realized she didn’t have to do that for once. She decided to look down at her blue smoking powder. “So, uh, do I eat it? Smoke it? Snort it? What’?”

“You touch it,” Alushy said, chuckling. “Go on.”

Allure shrugged and rammed her hoof into the powder. The powder instantly vanished, absorbing directly into her bloodstream. Her entire body seized up and she fell back out of her chair.

Minna looked at her mother. “…Is she okay?”

Alushy nodded. “Can’t get killed by a loose fiver. Not directly anyway. It’s there to do only one thing – go right to your head.”

Allure shot up, pupils tiny pinpricks. “Everything is colors.”

Alushy smirked. “What do I look like?”

“Birds. Lots and lots of birds. Fucking hell that’s a lot of birds. Just… woooow. Birds. You’re the birdmare.”

Minna took another sip of her whiskey.

“Woah, Minna, you look like… like…” Allure blinked. “…I don’t know. She doesn’t look like she belongs…”

Alushy shrugged. “Hey, she’s your kid. For all I know that does something.”

“Don’t you for one fucking moment tell me you don’t have kids.”

Minna couldn’t keep herself from laughing. “It sounds so stupid when you say it, Mom.”

“I bet it does! Because I’m a cute little unicorn! That can do anything! Alushy, kids. Tell me. How many?”

“Unknown,” Alushy said. “Probably a lot.”

“How can you not know? You’re the mother. That’s not how biology works!”

Alushy smirked. “You don’t want to go there.”
“Oh I do, I do- wait, no, I want to go somewhere else.” She climbed on top of the table and stood tall. “I AM GOING TO GO… TO… TO THE END OF THE WORLD!”

“Celestia city is round,” Minna said.

“Why aren’t you drunk yet?” Allure muttered.

“Dunno. Tastes good though.”

“Said no normal child ever,” Alushy pointed out.

“I KNOW WHERE TO GO!” Allure shouted. “Let’s… Let’s destroy something. Something important. Yeah, there’s this fucking stupid piece of art across the street from my house. *Let’s burn it!*”

“And this is what loose fiver does, kids. It goes to your head and gives you ideas.” Alushy chuckled.

“Cool,” Minna said. “Are we gonna burn the ‘fucking stupid art’ or not?”

“Oh we’re gonna burn it. I’ll get the fudge…”

~~~

Seskii looked at the bonfire. “Impressive.”

“YOU BET IT IS!” Allure shouted, standing on top of a circular platform made of fudge magically floating above the burning wreckage of the art. “They said metal couldn’t be burned… THEY WERE WRONG!”

Minna was currently ‘dressed’ in what appeared to be Hollywood’s version of ‘savage tribal getup’ and was dancing around the bonfire, singing indecipherable things.

Alushy had lost control of her physical form at some point during the day and was currently a formless black puddle in the ground with the occasional eye, mouth, or lashing tentacle.

“Did you really hate the art that much?” Seskii asked.

“FUCK IT!” Allure blurted. “FUCK IT ALL!”

Seskii turned to Squeaky, Thrakerzod, and Bot, all who had their jaws hanging open. “She’s going through some things,” Seskii explained.

“…I’ve never heard her say ‘fuck’ before,” Squeaky said, blinking. “*Ever.*”

“I’ve never heard you say it either,” Thrakerzod pointed out. “But for you it’s less surprising.”


“Should we arrest her, or something?” Squeaky asked Thrakerzod.

“Nope,” Thrakerzod said.

“But she’s destroying public property! And… I can’t even list all the laws she’s breaking!”

“Let’s just not worry about it,” Thrakerzod said. “Let her have her fun.”

“This is not her kind of fun!” Squeaky squeaked.
“HEY! IT IS TODAY!” Allure shouted down. “Hey! Alushy! Get off your sorry ass and tell me where we’re going next!”

“TO THE MOON!” Alushy said, forcing herself to reform, unable to fully keep her pony shape cohesive. “Or not the moon. How about… EXTREME SPORTS DANCING!?”

“WHY ARE WE EVEN WAITING!?!”

Minna shouted something incomprehensible. The dark form of Alushy scoped them up and they went elsewhere in Celestia City.

Seskii shrugged. “They look like they’re having fun.”

Squeaky twitched. “I’m going to have a talk to her tomorrow.”

“No you won’t.”

“Yes I- …waitaminute you know something.”

Seskii grinned. “Yep! But I’m not going to tell you. By the way, I have some extra Loose Fiver here an-”

“GOODBYE!” Squeaky squeaked, teleporting away.

A moment later, Thrackerzod casually looked to Seskii. “So did she get possessed or are we in a time loop?”

“Time loop.”

“Ah. She needs this.”

“Yep.”

~~~

Much, much later, all three of them had new tattoos, a few scars, had lost parts of their hair or mane, and had been moving so much their legs were about to buckle underneath them.

“How high are we?” Minna asked. “Space? Space’s space?”

“Space cubed,” Alushy said.

They were currently standing at the edge of a railing that ended over a seemingly bottomless pit.

Allure looked down. She pulled out her phone and checked the time.

12:02.

“I could jump and reset before I hit the bottom.” She realized.

“If you miscalculate your great day is going to end in a painful splat,” Alushy pointed out.

“Have I splatted yet? I don’t remember,” Allure said with a laugh. She looked at her front hoof. “…Why is my tattoo of a dolphin made out of french fries?”

“I thought you’d question how you got a tattoo on fur first,” Alushy admitted.
“Huh,” Allure said. Then she let out a laugh. “Well, this has been fun, but I’m gettin’ the fuck out of here. Goodbye! May this never happen again! Good riddance!”

“Fuck you too,” Alushy said, pushing Allure off the edge. Allure laughed and couldn’t stop.

“FUDGE YOU!” She shouted up. “HOW YOU LIKE THAT!? 

“THE FUDGEMOTHERING VAMPIRE THANKS YOU, BITCH!”

“ME? BITCH? YOU JUST DID EVERYTHING I SAID FOR A WHOLE LOOP! YOU’RE MY BITCH.”

Alushy blinked. “…Fudge you.”

Allure knew what she said even though she definitely couldn’t hear it.

“COWABUNGAAAAAAAAAA-”

She kept the breath going until the explosion of Celestia City fried her.

~~~

Allure scraped her horn against her wall. She hissed – but also she giggled. She couldn’t stop giggling. She flopped out of her bed and laughed.

“Celestia, I’m never doing that again,” Allure said, chuckling and blushing profusely. “Oh if anybody knew what I did…” She blinked, remembering Seskii existed. “Shi- WHOOP! Gotta train my mouth back, I guess. Hehehe…” She walked out of her room.

“I don’t like him.”

Allure walked over to Minna and kissed her on the head.

“Ew, Mom!”

“You’re going to school today. No buts.”

“…Okaaaaay…”

Allure giggled. “Butts.” There’s no way any intoxicants are still in my system, but the emotions just aren’t going away. And yet, I’m not worried. “Would you like to make breakfast today? Use anything you want.”

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

Minna beamed and ran to the kitchen.

Allure took out her phone. “Squeaky, gather the girls. We’re going to have a brainstorming session after I finish breakfast and get over there.” She hung up, and allowed herself to have breakfast with her daughter. She laughed when she saw the burnt juice already on the table.

She left the house a few minutes later, a spring in her step.

“Enjoy yourself?” Seskii asked.
“You bet! See you next time!”

Seskii nodded. “Of course!”

~~~

“I call it Operation Groundhog Day,” Suzie said, pointing at the projection with a laser pointer. All the other Sweeties in the room nodded. “The solution to getting out of the infinite loop in what is argued to be the ‘progenitor’ of the time loop idea is simply to accomplish a perfect loop. To treat everyone great and do everything for everyone you can along your day. Lucky for you, Allure, this only involves four and a half hours of time.”

Allure nodded. “So just create a perfect day. Hrm… Well I’ll have to stop Celestia City from exploding to do that, and help everyone involved that I would encounter in my day. So…” She pondered this. “I’d probably have to deal with all the problems on the phone line in some way or other, help Blumiere with his secret, help Nae understand what we are… Keep the riot from happening…” Allure blinked. “We’re gonna need a flowchart. And I’m probably going to have to loop a few times to see how the best way to deal with things is.”

~~~

Many loops later…

Suzie took a breath. “And at this point Allure will use the duplication spell three times over so she can continue manning the phones while going to deal with all the problems given by the phone calls, and going to Nae.”

Allure looked at the branching paths of the flowchart. Who knew planning out the prefect four and a half hour ‘day’ would take so long?

With duplicates, her mind was only going to get more disoriented, but she was willing to do it if it meant escape.

“All right,” Allure said. “I think this is it. I’m ready to go for the perfect loop. Thank you, Suzie. You’re really good at flowcharts.”

Suzie smiled. “I have an entire team at my disposal who’re itching to get back in the field. Apparently being stuck in a time loop is ‘wasted time’ for Nira and Swip, even though they have no way of knowing about the wasted time.”

“Need me to reset you?” Thrackerzod asked

Allure shook her head. “Nah, I’ll just wait. Relax a bit.”

~~~

Allure scraped her horn against the wall.

Then she fell out of bed, flat on her stomach.

She fished out her phone and called Thrackerzod. “Hey, I’m looping in time and I need a restart…”

~~~

Allure scraped her horn against the wall. She carefully removed her blanket so she wouldn’t trip this time.
“Right. Let’s actually do this.”

She walked out of her room.

“I don’t like him,” Minna said.

“I know, but sometimes we have to deal with scary people in our lives,” Allure said, hugging Minna close.

Minna nodded, accepting the embrace.

“How would you like to make breakfast today? Anything you want, use any ingredient you can find.”

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

Minna leaped up from the couch and started making breakfast.

The best part about this was the burnt juice never showed up. Take that, ka. I won. No more burnt juice for me!

The two of them had breakfast and enjoyed several laughs together. Minna went off to school without complaining, and Allure waved her off.

Allure set off to work. “Good morning Seskii!”

“Today’s the day?”

“Yep! Hope you sell a lot of potions!”

“I always do! Here’s yours!” Seskii tossed Allure two duplication potions, which she caught in her telekinesis.

“Thanks! The payment’s under my rug!”

“Already got it!”

Allure whistled to herself a chipper tune to improve the moods of those she passed. She moved in such a way so she would never interfere with anyone in a hurry. She purchased a lollipop from a street vendor and handed it to a crying child. “This should keep him satisfied for a little while.” She went to the teleporter platform with a smile, greeting those she came into contact with.

She walked into the League of Sweetie Belles and moved the ‘wet floor’ sign to a place it was easier to see.

“Allure reporting in!” she told Squeaky.

“Wow, you’re chipper,” Squeaky said. “Sorry to put a downer on your mood, it’s your turn to manage the phones.”

“I don’t mind!” Allure said. “Someone has to do it, right?”

Squeaky blinked. “Huh. I wish I was as upbeat as you are right now.”
Allure but a hoof on Squeaky’s shoulder. “You can be. Just smile and it’ll do wonders.”

Squeaky thought about this for a moment. She brightened considerably. “Thanks!”

Allure nodded. “Don’t mention it!” She left Squeaky, making her way to the phones.

When she first arrived she quickly drank the duplication potions, creating two more of herself. They already knew what to do. One left to call Nae, while the other was going to clean the flies out of the ventilation before they became a nuisance. After that, the second Allure would go take care of all the problems the phone callers were reporting in. All of them.

Jade came in. “Do you mind if I keep you company?”

“Not at all! You have to agree to keep a secret though.”

“Oh?”

“I have a duplicate of myself running around so I can actually help the people in these calls. Don’t let anyone know, shhhh.”

Jade grinned. “I won’t tell anyone.”

“In the meantime, what’s up with you?”

“Well, I’ve been missing Davesprite lately…”

Allure put an understanding hoof on the Skaian’s shoulder. “It’s painful, isn’t it?”

Jade nodded slowly.

~~~

“Do you understand?” Allure asked Nae.

The Ga nodded and smiled. “I can’t thank you enough, Allure.”

Allure smiled. “Eh, it’ll be a cinch. But we’re going to have to play hardball to get Blumiere to play nice. It took me a million loops to figure out how to get him to open up without being especially cruel.”

“Oh?” Nae said.

“Those books of his are apparently so powerful nobody’s supposed to know about them.” Allure pulled a gun out of her mane and handed it to Nae. “So I’ll need you to be able to hold a gun to my head while we do this.”

Nae nodded. “I understand.”

“Let me do all the talking. I know exactly what to say.” Allure stretched her limbs. “Here we go.”

Nae and Allure walked out of the pub and across Celestia City. As they passed, Allure made a call to the regular law enforcement. “Officer, I’ve seen some unsavory types outside the Mayor’s residence. Could you send some people? …I think Officer Kurloz would be best, but do whatever you think works.” She hung up.

“That takes care of the riot?” Nae asked.
Allure nodded. “Kurloz is a Skaian. As the Prince of Rage, he can destroy almost anyone’s desire to fight just by walking into a room. It’s good for us he’s there, because dispelling the riot peacefully would have been a nightmare.”

She knocked on Blumiere’s front door. He opened it. “Hm?”

“Can we come in?” Allure asked. “It’s important.”

“Oh, by all means,” Blumiere said, smiling warmly. “Sit – if you have time, that is.”

“I do,” Allure said, sitting. Nae stood to unicorn’s side, standing with her hands behind her back. “So, Blumiere, I’ll cut to the chase. I’m stuck in a time loop. I am currently trying to end this time loop by going through a perfect run.”

Blumiere raised an eyebrow. “Akin to Groundhog Day?”

“Yeah,” Allure said. “One of the things I need to do for that perfect run is stop Celestia City from being destroyed. It’s easy enough – but I have died and reset innumerable times figuring out how to do it. The only real problem in doing so for a perfect run is you.”

“Me?”

“Yes. You.” Allure nodded to Nae – who placed the gun to Allure’s head.

Blumiere blinked. “…Why are you threatening me with a reset?”

“Because you threaten to erase my mind whenever I tell you what I need to save Celestia City. Every time I have to make Thrackerzod or someone else reset me so you don’t destroy the knowledge. So, please, don’t act out of brash trained anger this time. Realize that I can reset at any time and try this again, and again, and again until it works.”

Blumiere nodded slowly. “Yes…”

“The way to save Celestia City is to either give Nae here the Dark Prognosticus and use it to destroy a universe, or to use its power yourself and destroy a universe. The destruction of this universe prevents a weapon from going off that destroys the entire city. The universe itself is uninhabited, so you do not need to worry about collateral damage.”

Blumiere tensed. “Allure, those books must never…” He took a breath and calmed himself. “You’ve known about them for a while.”

Allure nodded. “Nae here found out through the rumor mill, based on people who’ve seen that chest and know about your source material.”

“Allure, if anyone knew…”

“If this gets me out of the loops I will come here after it’s over and allow my memory to be erased. Nae has agreed to these terms as well.”

Nae nodded in affirmation.

Blumiere stopped. “When does the loop end?”

“12:04,” Allure said. “After that, we’ll know if this is really the solution.”

Blumiere let out a sharp breath. “…All right. But I will hold you to that promise.” He snapped his
fingers, bringing the chest to the main room. He popped it open and took out the Dark Prognosticus. He held his eyes closed shut the entire time, ensuring he would not gaze upon any of the actual pages. He held out his hand. “Open the portal.”

Allure’s dimensional device was already set. She did as he asked. He sent the darkness through the portal, destroying the Navir once again.

“It is done,” he declared, locking the books away again. “Return before 12:20 today.”

Allure nodded. “I promise.”

Nae lowered the gun. The two of them walked out and Blumiere didn’t try to stop them.

Allure let out a breath. “Sometimes I get the inflections just wrong in that speech and he jumps me anyway.”

“You have had to use the suicide capsule then?”

Allure nodded. “I’ll keep it in, just in case he thinks he’s being clever. One of the more pleasant varieties of death I’ve experienced on this journey, I have to admit.”

Nae nodded. “So, what now?”

“We go to the League of Sweetie Belles.”

~~~

Allure appeared on Gregory’s doorstep with a twittermite catcher. He lived in one of the districts of Celestia City that didn’t repair its buildings, but the citizens stayed because they didn’t want to move no matter what the government offered them. It was for the stubborn people.

Gregory himself was an overweight greasy man with an unpleasant expression plastered on his face at all times. “About time.”

Allure shrugged. “We’re here to serve.”

“I take it my flies hatched early?”

“Huh? Oh, no, I found those this morning and cleaned them out before they became a nuisance.” Allure smiled innocently. “Figured I’d bring my skills here! Where are they?”

“Everywhere in the house. Just get them.” Gregory opened the half-broken door and let Allure inside. The house smelled like urine, flies, and rotting food. Luckily Allure remembered to bring a gas mask – and it didn’t insult Gregory because it matched her full exterminator garb. He didn’t have to know the twittermite catcher definitely wasn’t necessary.

She knew where every fly in the house was – all one hundred and nineteen. She slurped all of them into the tank over the course of a few minutes using her magic. She walked out. “All done!”

“Why didn’t you just come and do that sooner?”

“Because there are exterminators whose job it is to do that,” Allure said. “It puts them out of work.”

“Pff. I don’t got that kind of money.”

Allure didn’t believe a word of that. The base-income was more than enough to pay for simple fly
exterminators. “You can petition the government for a service you can’t afford, you know. There’s even terminals outside the Oversight Division headquarters to help you with that.”

Gregory blinked. “Huh…”

“I’m sorry we weren’t able to tell you that in our phone conversations,” Allure said. “We will try harder next time.” Celestia I hate talking to this guy. But I have to get him to learn without triggering his ‘oh so sensitive’ anger problems. Gah, it’s like walking on eggshells with lego bricks strewn around.

“Anyway,” Allure said. “I’ve got more calls to take care of! See you around!”

Making note that he was no longer looking at her, she ran off, removing the mask from her face. She just had one more to do – the cat woman – and then she needed to bolt for the nearest teleporter so she could get back to the main Allure in time. A perfect run wouldn’t be perfect if they didn’t all join up into one body at the end. Even if it didn’t cause any problems in her besides memory confusion if they didn’t meet up, this still needed to be clean.

She skidded to a stop in front of a suburban house with inverted gravity.

“Oh you’re so fast!” the old woman shouted. “My cat i-”

Allure levitated the cat down and gave the feisty critter to the woman. She didn’t care at all that it was trying to claw her skin off. “Oh thank you thank you! You’re such a hero!”

Allure saluted. “Glad to help! I have to get back now – more to serve!”

“Oh! Yes, yes, of course, of course. Bye!”

Allure raced off to a teleporter, but she still had to keep on that smile and make sure she stayed out of everyone’s way.

Perfect.

~~~

“…and I’ll be right over,” Allure told the cat lady, pressing the phone down. She let out a breath. “And that’s it.”

Jade stared at Allure in awe. “I have never seen anything so well orchestrated in my life. And I knew Dave.”

“It took a lot of planning to get this to work. But there’s a few more things to take care of.” She jumped out of her chair and walked to the break room, Jade in tow.

Then the two arguing Sweeties arrived.

This had been the hardest problem to find a solution for. Out of all the problems – Nae, Gregory, Blumiere – these two Sweeties were the worst. Stingy, lovesick, bratty, and uncompromising.

The solution ended up being decidedly simple and very disheartening.

“Hey, hey, I can help you,” Allure said. “I know Cadence personally. I can get you two into her ‘lost love’ program and find you someone you’ll both really want to be with.”

The two Sweeties forgot about the guy they were arguing about in an instant. “YES!” they both
shouted.

Luckily for Allure the stallion they were fighting over wasn’t in Celestia City, so he wasn’t part of the time loop. There was no way she could create a perfect ending for him. ...Though frankly if these two mares were willing to give him up that easily, Allure would be willing to argue it was the best possible result for him.

Allure told them to call her later about getting to Cadence, and the two walked away like great friends.

“Huh,” Jade said. “That was…”

“Question it later,” Allure said. “Right now you’re going to have a bit more to think about.”

The two other Allures ran into the room, Nae close behind them. The two Allures touched the main Allure’s front hooves. They all fused back into one being. Allure took a deep breath. “Ah, so far so good. Just one thing left.”

Jade blinked. “One?”

Nae nodded. “Yep. One more thing.”

Allure opened the fridge. “Want some super-special ice cream for lunch?”

Jade grinned. “Yeah!”

Allure took a sandwich as well. “The way to end the perfect loop – actually get to finish lunch.”

It was a great feeling. The ice cream… the sandwich… she barely noticed the last bits of time passing.

Next thing she knew, it was 12:03.

Allure put on a content smile. “Here we go…”

Jade and Nae smiled, prepared to give a celebratory cheer.

12:04.

Allure held up a hoof. “Not yet. Give it a few seconds.”

They waited. The end of the perfect run drew to a close…

Allure scraped her horn against the wall.

She stared at the mark she made in the wall. Taunting her. Telling her she was trapped.

She placed a hoof on it, covering it up. The wall almost looks normal now. Like, maybe, I’m not trapped here. Not stuck in an unending swirl of my own life…

Tears began to form at the edge of her eyes. Her hoof slipped, letting her see the offending scratch again.

She let out a deep, agonizing scream. She punched the wall with her hoof, creating a hole in the drywall. She flung herself back and buried her head in her pillow, crying bitterly into the folds of its fabric.
She did not leave her bed that loop.

Or the next.

Allure scraped her horn against the wall.

She flopped out of bed onto her stomach and walked out.

"I don’t like him,” Minna said.

Allure didn’t respond. She poured herself a bowl of cereal and a glass of juice. She downed the burnt juice, uncaring. She ate half the cereal and left without a word to Minna.

“Sup?” Seksii called. Allure didn’t even raise her head.

She walked to the League of Sweetie Belles. She slipped and fell on Squeaky. With a sigh, she got up and went to man the phones.

She answered every call with “Mhm. Uh-huh. Yeah. Sure. Whatever.”

Jade eventually left because she was so depressed by Allure’s aura.

Allure walked to the lunch room. She pulled a sandwich off the shelf and sat down, watching the news of the riot.

Celestia City exploded.

Allure scraped her horn against the wall.

Flopped out of bed.

“I don’t like him.”

She poured a bowl of cereal and a glass of juice. She downed the burnt juice.

“Still?” Seskii asked.

She flipped and fell on Squeaky. She tore herself off.

She answered every call.

Jade left.

Allure pulled a sandwich off the shelf and sat down.

Celestia City exploded.

Allure scraped her horn against the wall.

“I don’t like him.”
Burnt Juice.

“Again?”

Slip onto Squeaky.

Answer the phone.

Sandwich.

Celestia City exploded.

~~~

Allure scraped her horn against the wall.

“I don’t like him.”

“How much longer are you going to do this to yourself?”

Answer the phone.

Celestia City exploded.

~~~

Allure scraped her horn against the wall.

“I don’t like him.”

“I can’t help you.”

Celestia City exploded.

~~~

“I don’t like him.”

“I don’t like him.”

“I don’t like him.”

Something in Allure’s mind turned on. *Who is him?* For the first time in an innumerable number of loops, she registered the burnt juice in front of her.

*Skn. She doesn’t like Skarn.*

*Who is Skarn?*

“Minna? Who *is* Skarn?” Allure asked.

“Skarn the Shaper,” Minna said. “New guy in the multiverse. Just made contact with us. I don’t like him.”

“Why not?”

“Dunno.”
Blumiere is going to have a meeting with his daughter, Brell...

Allure’s mind fully activated. “I… I have an idea.”

Minna blinked. “You do?”

“Yes! I do! Minna, uh… I have to go, make yourself breakfast with anything you want!”

“Anything?”

“Anything.” Allure smiled. “…And I’m sorry.”

“…For leaving?”

“…Yes,” Allure said, scrambling out the door.

Seskii was playing with a ping-pong paddle. “You’ve been in that headspace of yours a while.”

“Did… did I actually go insane?” Allure asked, still struggling to process everything again.

“Depends on your definition,” Seskii admitted. “You turned your mind off, best I can tell. But something in you wasn’t done quite yet, so it pushed its way out and turned the lights back on.”

“I never looked into Skarn,” Allure said. “I never looked into Brell. Didn’t even think about it.”

“And what if that’s not the answer?”

“If there was one thing I didn’t think about there’s bound to be others!” Allure said. “There’s a solution here! I know it!”

Seskii smiled. “You go girl. If you need anything, remember, I am here. Sorta. In a semi-aware meta way.”

“I’m not going to try to parse that right now!” Allure said with a dumb smile. “What I am going to do is go to the League of Sweetie Belles and then, later, get a recording of the meeting Blumiere went through. Since being perfect doesn’t matter… Let’s mix some stuff up.”

“Have fun.”

Allure ran off to the League of Sweetie Belles. She purposefully let the wet floor get her and make her fall on Squeaky.

She waggled her eyebrows. “Hey there.”

Squeaky rolled her eyes. “Allure, just get o-”

Allure pressed her face to Squeaky’s, forcing her to stop mid-sentence. When she removed herself ten seconds later, she had a mischievous grin on her face. “You. Me. Dinner. Eight. Be there.”


Allure leaped off of her and went to man the phones. Of course everything resets before eight, so I won’t have to deal with that later. Not to mention I just broke the ‘no dating yourself’ policy in a public place… I should probably avoid Suzie for the rest of the day. Still, it was pretty sweet to see Squeaky’s face like that. I’ve never seen her that flustered.
She sat down in front of the phone and leaned into her hoof. She had a while before Blumiere was done – might as well enjoy this.

The phone rang.

“Hello, this is Playpony magazine, you’re our 100th caller of the-”

The other side hung up.

Allure rubbed her hooves together. This was gonna be good…

The phone rang again.

“I’m sorry, I’m afraid you have the wrong number, because this number doesn’t exist.” She hung up. Then she snickered.

Screw all these people. She already spent all her energy making their lives perfect.

She was done with that.

~~~

Allure sat with Blumiere, watching the recording of his discussion with Brell. A shadow being in a top hat and a feminine anthropomorphic bear talking politics. It was boring.

Allure had learned a few things from watching it though.

Skarn the Shaper called his nation the Congeries. He had three kids. His society was built around an appreciation of art on a grand scale.

Otherwise everything was useless. Nothing about messing with time, loops, or anything that could have been causing her predicament.

“Are you sure there’s absolutely nothing here?” Allure asked. “Did she have time to do anything else while she was here?”

“She never left places cameras could see her,” Blumiere said. “And she showed no hostile intent. She’s also gone, so she couldn’t have done anything at the time Celestia City explodes. I’ll call you if I get word that she or any of Skarn’s have come back, but I don’t think there will be.”

“Did any problems occur in the meeting? Something I might try to… fix?”

Blumiere shook his head. “Everything went fine. Better than it usually goes, to be honest.”

Allure sighed. “Thanks anyway. Guess I’ll have to think of something else…”

~~~

Allure actually captured Brell and forced her to talk with truth serum before admitting Skarn had nothing to do with what was happening. Allure let Brell kill her in rage to end that particular loop.

She scraped her horn on the wall. She did a double backflip off the bed and onto the floor. “TEN OUTTA TEN! THE CROWD GOES WILD!” She created her own cheering noise with her hooves cupped to her mouth. She stretched her legs and walked out.

“I don’t like him.”
“Well, he isn’t a problem,” Allure commented. Then she stopped for a moment, turning to look at Minna. “…Minna, come here.”

Minna walked up to Allure, eyes concerned. “Yes, Mom?”

Allure put her hooves on Minna’s shoulders. “Minna, answer me honestly. Did you have anything to do with this?”

“No,” Minna said, absolute certainty in her voice.

Allure smiled. “Thank you. You can make breakfast today.” She rubbed the back of her head, more than glad that Minna had answered in her ‘I know things’ voice, expelling all of Allure’s doubt. She also felt more than a little ashamed she had suspected her own daughter for even a minute.

They had breakfast and then Allure went outside.

“Dead end?” Seskii asked.

“You know it is,” Allure said, leaning on the top of the stand. “Seskii, what else do I have besides wait at this point?”

“I don’t know,” Seskii said. “I do know that if you’re resolving yourself to wait it out, you have to work to keep yourself sane.”

“I can talk to you. You aren’t just a dialogue tree for me to exhaust.”

Seskii smirked. “True. But I can’t be someone intimate enough to make up for an entire life. I am sorry.”

Allure nodded. “Yeah. Not what I’m looking for, anyway. But what do I do? There’s nothing to save, and running the perfect loop every time would just be utterly exhausting.”

“Try something new,” Seskii suggested.

“…I never did learn how to crochet. Or professionally sing anything.”

“There, you can try those things. Get excellent at singing, crocheting, anything you want. You have all the time in the world. Improve yourself with it.”

Allure grinned. “That’s… a great idea! And if I think of a new angle while exploring every part of this City, I’ll act on it. If not… there’s enough variety in this City alone to keep me occupied for decades. And then there’s the planet of Inchari Libera if I run out there. Or the rest of this universe’s space!” Allure spread her hooves. “Why in the name of the Tower was I staying in my life this whole time when I could have been going anywhere?”

“Why indeed?” Seskii asked.

~~~

Allure was doomed never to be good at magic – that was her curse.

Allure also made a conscious choice never to carry weapons. She wanted to appear friendly and comforting at all times to help diffuse a situation, which was why her fighting style became that of a martial artist who used small amounts of magic to enhance the motion of her limbs.

But there was one power of hers she had yet to even try to master.
That of the Knight of Heart.

There were only two Heart players she could access – the Meulins, who were Mages of Heart and not very useful in the powers department, and the Nepetas, Rogues of Heart.

She found the only god-tier Nepeta Skaian in Celestia City and bowed. “Teach me.”

“…Mew? What?”

“Teach me,” Allure said. “I am the Knight of Heart, and I wish to know what I can do.”

Nepeta blinked. “Well I’m not sure how much I can teach you…”

A glint appeared in Allure’s eyes. “Trust me. You’re better than you think you are.”

~~~

“Why did mew need me to teach mew anything!?” Nepeta blurted. “Mew’re not even a god-tier and mew can beat me with mewr mewsty over mewr powers!

“I’m stuck in a time loop,” Allure said, smirking. “I’m also a Knight – more suited for combat than a Rogue. All you can do is move things around between people. As you’ve seen, I can attack with my very soul. I’m going to go find a Stand user, see what this does against them. Wanna watch?”

Nepeta blinked. “…Sure!”

It didn’t take long at all for them to find a Stand user. A man named Okuyasu stepped up to the challenge. “The Hand will wipe anything away into the void!”

Allure smirked. She could definitely see his Stand now. Not as another Stand user would, with colors and features, but as an extension of his soul.

This poor sap was going to be in for a surprise.

Allure allowed Okuyasu to make the first move. “ZA HANDO!” he shouted, erasing space between them with his Stand. He pulled the Hand’s arm back, preparing a punch.

Allure caught the punch with her soul, an energy Okuyasu could not see for it had no appearance – but an energy that could definitely affect a Stand. Allure crushed the Hand’s hand, breaking Okuyasu’s own. “N-NANI!?”

And then Allure pulled her dirty trick. As the Knight of Heart, it was not just her own soul she could manipulate in combat.

The Hand turned around and, with its free hand, punched its master in the face. The shock to Okuyasu forced him to recall the Stand. He fell to the ground, unconscious.

Allure smirked. “Gotcha.” _Who needed to have god-tier level control when a little bit of precision could go a long way?_

Nepeta applauded. “Mewmew! Go Allure!”

~~~

“And the winner of today’s bake-off is… Allure Belle with her saffron chowder!”
Allure bowed, grinning like a filly.

~~~

Allure placed a computer on the desk in front of the CEO of PlusTech, the largest tech company on Celestia City. “I designed this game from the ground up in four hours. Hire me.”

The CEO blinked. “Four hours!? If you have proof-”

“Everything was videoed,” Allure said. “Start to finish. No cheating.” Woke up, decided to do it. Victory at programming.

“Assuming this checks out, you are hired!”

“Good to know!” Allure said.

~~~

A Rarity walked into Allure’s fashion studio. “…My word… all these outfits are gorgeous!”

Allure beamed. “I had a lot of practice. Been keeping these hidden for a while. But I think it’s finally time to make myself known to the fashion world.”

“I’ll get these out on the runway stat!”

~~~

Allure stared at her computer, eyes focused on the text that was flying by on the screen. She had bothered to learn a ‘reading comprehension improvement’ spell to make what she was doing more worthwhile.

“Mom? What are you doing in there?” Minna asked.

“Reading all of Wikipedia.”

“All of it?”

“All of it.”

“Have you been hanging around Vriska?”

Allure blinked. “No, actually.”

~~~

“Hello, my name is Allure Belle. Can I say that I wasn’t expecting to give a lecture at Celestia University when I woke up this morning! But, well, seeing as Professor Hale is sick, I’ll be taking over. Today we’re talking about the underlying quantum state that links magical systems to the physical matter of universes…”

~~~

Lyra wailed. “Bon Bon, we’re lost! Completely lost!”

“Don’t worry, we’re not completely lost, we’re still in Celestia City,” Bon Bon gulped. “I’m sure if we keep walking we’ll find our way out.”
“No ye won’t…” Allure said in her best creepy voice – which she had gotten really good at over time. “But I can tell ye how to get out of here… See, that way lies the ol’ sawmills that might activate and chop ye up, but over thar lies a stairway to Sector U-J, which specializes in peppermint candies and other sweets.”

Lyra grinned. "Thank you, miss!"

“It’s my pleasarrr,” Allure said, dialing the hamminess to eleven. “I can also tell ya the life stories of almost every single person in that sector, if y’ want.”

“…No thank you,” Bon Bon said.

“Suit yerself. Yer passin’ up access to the most knowledgeable pony in Celestia City.” Allure was pretty sure she wasn’t exaggerating.

“…Lyra, lets go.”

“Aw but I like the creepy little unicorn!”

“DID YE JUST CALL ME LITTLE!?”

The two mares ran off in a panic.

Allure chuckled.

~~~

Allure walked in the front doors of one of Celestia City’s many technical workshops. The things were common since Merodi Universalis actively promoted scientific research and experimentation in virtually all ethical forms, and many people were of the mind that you could never know enough given the variety in the multiverse.

There were full-blown laboratory productions elsewhere in Celestia City’s streets, but Allure wasn’t here for a team. She had come to a personal tinker-shop to see one particular individual she knew could help her.

Allure had come with a very specific purpose in mind.

She trotted up a large, dead mech from Galaxus Immaterium that had been gutted. At the top was a small woman in a white armored suit with green highlights. She was sleeping on a high-end toolbox, somehow oblivious to the cold hard metal pressed against her face.

Allure cleared her throat. “Ahem.”

The woman shot bolt upright, her round glasses flying off her face. Allure caught them with her magic and raised an eyebrow.

“Uh… thanks.” The woman put her glasses back on and tried to get her unruly brown hair to stop sticking straight up in the air. “So, Allure right? What can I do for you?”

“Technician Pidge, I need you to make me a giant mecha within four hours.”

Pidge blinked. “What?”

“I decided I wanted a giant mecha, and after some digging—” Several loops of digging… “-I found that you are the best expert on those things in Celestia City.”
“You? Came looking for me?” Pidge blinked. “Wow, just, uh…” Pidge rubbed the back of her head. “I’ve been alone here almost ever since I arrived, I was beginning to think my work wasn’t appreciated.”

“You don’t put yourself out there. Or make yourself easy to find…” Allure observed. “Tell you what, if you can get me this Mech, I’ll direct you to Expeditions or Research. I hear Renee’s looking for a new primary technician for the castle.”

Pidge blinked. “I mean, thanks, but I don’t know, I have a lot of work here… The capacitor network I’m working on right now, for instance, coul-”

“You’re bored,” Allure said, smirking knowingly. “I bet you secretly miss what you used to do. You had a mech of your own, flying around, saving the universe. I’m sure as an Expeditions Technician you’d get to do that again, with a new team.”

Pidge looked into the distance, forlorn.

“Hey, trust me, you’ll like working for Renee. She’s great. And you could get access to the Map. Bet you’d like to know how that works!”

“I would… I have several working theories involving the connections of the Tree of Harmony to the ka-slash-fate signatures of those chosen, but that’s outside my field of expertise…”

“Who says it couldn’t turn into your field of expertise?”

Pidge smirked. “Heh. All right, fine, I’ll take your offer. One mech in four hours? I can’t do that by myself. I hope you’re ready to get very, very dirty.” She rubbed her hands together. “This is going to need a lot of Pidge’s secret special gear oil…”

And so they set to work, using all the parts Pidge had available to create the most haphazardly slapped together mech of all time. Three hours later, they had a result. It wasn’t pretty - two legs of different sizes, an arm without any sort of covering, and no head to speak of. But it moved. Allure laughed from the open cockpit. “Look at me! Woo-hoo! Awesome”

Pidge adjusted your glasses. “That leg will give out after less than an hour of work, the weapons will tear the arm off as soon as they fire, you definitely don’t have enough hydraulic fluid, this thing is going to rust the moment someone even breathes on it, and that sword isn’t even sharp.” She grinned. “But otherwise, yeah, awesome.”

“Eh, I only need it for… a little over an hour! It’ll work that long right?”

“So long as you don’t try firing any weapons. Or flying. Or, really, doing anything other than walk.” Pidge raised an eyebrow. “Why only an hour? We had four hours to build the thing, that’s exactly as much time as you gave me…”

“Oh, I’m stuck in a time loop.”

Pidge’s eyes widened. “That’s how you kn… How does the loop work? What caused it? How many loops have you gone through? Is it due to the quantum entanglement of time states? Do we have a personal temporal connection? What’s the exotic tachyon concen-”

“Maybe you’ll be able to tell me once I get out!” Allure said. She winked and ran out of the warehouse with the mech.

“HEY! GET BACK HERE! I HAVE MORE QUESTIONS!”
You’ll do just fine at Renee’s. Allure made a note in her mind. She should offer Pidge that job once she was out. Forgetting simply wouldn’t do.

But now, she needed to have fun with this mech.

“AHAHAAH!” She fired the weapons at a wall. Her arm flew right off.

“...Huh. Guess she wasn’t joking.” She smirked. “This’ll be a fun challenge…”

~~~

“So, I think I’ve been everything. Griffon, dragon, Skaian, Gem, Ga, carapacian, consort, human, troll, dog…”

“Stallion?” Seskii asked.


“Not going to tell me about it?”

“No.”

~~~

Allure walked up to the microphone and cleared her throat. “I wrote this song recently. It might not make sense to a lot of you, but it comes deep from the heart. I’ve titled it ‘The Allure of Time’. A bit cheesy, but I think it fits.” She took in a deep breath and began to sing.

“We always talk ‘bout how we need more time,

To ensure that our lives will turn out fine.

We fret and worry, wishing for the clock,

To slow the boat ever near er our dock.

But time is a beautiful thing in truth.

The fact that it passes is quite divine.

We all wish for the lost days of our youth.

But if we were still young, it would confine.

If the children don’t grow, cursed are we.

If we do not change, we won’t drop our knives.

If the old do not die, none feel their lives.

If time does not pass…

Then what are we?”

She fell silent. She was unsure what they would think – she said some things that would make Merodi uncomfortable. Challenging the beauty of Corona’s immortality serum… Attacking those who wished to bend time… It was going to hurt some people.
But she loved the song. Of all the things she had done in these loops, it was the thing she was most proud of.

The fact that the crowd erupted into applause did nothing to change her opinion of herself or her music.

She saw Minna, Seskii, and Nae in the audience, clapping as well.

*Their* clapping made her feel better.

~~~

One loop, Allure woke up in a particularly foul mood. She didn’t know why – she had been enjoying herself before the last loop ended, having taken a ship into deep space and found a black hole eating another black hole.

But something about the horn scraping the wall set her on edge. The flopping out of the bed didn’t help either. It irked her considerably to be in the situation she was in, and she stormed out of her room in a huff.

“I don’t like him,” Minna said.

Allure lashed out. “DON’T YOU KNOW HOW TO SAY ANYTHING ELSE!?” Her spirit *lashed* across the room, tearing into Minna.

In an instant, the girl’s soul was ripped from her body. It was somehow *weaker* than all other souls Allure had encountered. She slumped to the ground, dead.

“W-wh-wh…” Allure ran to Minna, touching her with her hoof. “Minna?” She reached out with her Knight of Heart powers, looking for Minna’s soul, but she found nothing to latch onto. It was like it just *dissipated* as soon as it left.

*That’s not how that is supposed to work. Souls always want to go back to their body. They seek it out. Even children don’t have souls that weak…*

“Minna…” Allure said, tears in her eyes. “M-minn…” Allure choked down her tears, pulling out her phone. “T-thrackerzod?”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m in… A… Time loop. I need to be r-reset. C-come and kill me.”

“…Okay.”

Allure moved over to Minna, stroking her hair. “There there… I’ll be back with you soon…”

Thrackerzod appeared and saw the scene. She grimaced. “Oh…”

“Just do it. It’ll be over quick.”

Thrackerzod didn’t move.

“…Thrackerzod?”

“Allure… I’m not sure if you’re telling the truth about the time loop.”
“IF I WAS GOING TO KILL MYSELF I’D GO FIND A BRIDGE!” Allure shouted.

Thrackerzod glared. “I’m sorry, I-”

Allure ran outside. “SESKII!”

Seskii sighed. “One death potion, coming right up…”

Thrackerzod teleported outside, between Allure and Seskii. “I can’t let you go over there.”

“Look into my mind, Thrackerzod!” Allure shouted. “I. Want. To. Go. Back. To. Minna! I don’t want to be in this loop anymore!”

Thrackerzod did – and she pulled back, surprised. “How… how long…?”

“I don’t know,” Allure said. “I don’t know. Just… Just reset me. Please.”

Thrackerzod took a breath – and vaporized Allure.

~~~

Allure scraped her horn against the wall. There were tears in her eyes.

She could feel it. The encroaching feeling of hopelessness. It was coming back.

She struggled – falling out of the bed onto her stomach.

Allure told herself she would fight it. That she would resist the urge to just go through the motions.

Her body didn’t listen to a thing her mind was saying.

“I don’t like him.”

Allure said some things back to Minna, but she didn’t listen to them. She burned the pancakes and cried out in fear, but it didn’t really register with her. She freaked out about the burnt juice, except that was only on the outside.

She stepped out the door.

“Hey, watch yourself, okay?” Seskii said.

Allure nodded. She tripped over herself as she walked to the League of Sweetie Belles. She entered the doors and slipped on the floors, landing on Squeaky. They exchanged some words – the standard words – as Allure went to the phones.

She talked to Jade normally enough while she performed her duties. Jade didn’t notice anything off about her. Allure didn’t notice anything off about herself either. She completed her shift and went to the break room.

She ignored the arguing Sweeties. She opened the fridge, only to see flies on the ice cream. She sighed, moving to take a sandwich. Then she noticed the news report.

“The Ga of Inchari Libera have begun to riot outside the Mayor’s residence. As of this report their intents are unknown, but it is expected the demonstrating group is protesting to Inchari Libera’s application to join Merodi Universalis…”
She got an idea.

*Have I ever done it the exact same way I did it the first time? Have I ever told Jade to take us there again?*

*No. No I haven’t.*

“Hey, Jade,” Allure said. “I think we should go over there and help. You can teleport, right?”

“…You guys didn’t tell me the Ga were Gardevoirs.”

“What?”

“From the Pokémon games.” She pointed at the news feed.

“She’s a humble potion seller.” Allure smirked. “That’s not the point. Just teleport us there.”

Jade did. They appeared on the front steps of Blumiere’s house, right in front of a riot of Ga. It was the exact size Allure remembered.

Thrackerzod was the only one there, using an eldritch wall to keep them back.

“Where are the other Sweeties?” Allure asked, even though she knew. She was just playing along, intentionally now.

“I don’t have any idea,” Thrackerzod muttered. “All I know is that I’ve got th-” One of the Ga used a psychic power to punch Thrackerzod from the other side of the barrier, tossing her to the side with surprising ease.

“CHARGE!” Utar shouted, rushing forward.

Allure readied herself to knock Utar down. She didn’t get the opportunity – Blumiere stepped out the front doors of his home, dark energy billowing off his back. “What is the meaning o-”

Gunfire rang out. The Ga in the riot quickly forgot their anger and started scrambling to protect themselves from the shots. Blumiere easily defended himself using dark magic, while Jade’s ghost body couldn’t take any permanent damage unless one of the bullets hit her reality bracelet.

Allure, however, took one to the leg. She yelled out in pain – but she was more **annoyed** by the fact this had to happen than from actually suffering the wound. “This is stupid,” she muttered, limping backward.

A psychic blast from Nae sent her flying into the air. Allure locked eyes with her, giving her once-friend a soft smile.

Nae looked at Allure in confusion, using her free hand to keep Allure in front of her. “…Who…?”

And then all of Celestia City exploded. A white light shot out of the center of the Merodi’s pride, tearing the ground beneath them to shreds. Allure was aware enough to feel the white light burning her skin away.

And then she felt something **else** in the whiteness. Something else **here** – something she had a **connection** to. A **soul**. A powerful soul that was screaming in the whiteness just like her.

She used her Knight of Heart powers to **grab** onto the soul. “WHO ARE YOU!?” she shouted with
her soul, seeing as her body was pretty much gone at this point.

“ARADIA.”

~~~

Allure scraped her horn against the wall, but maintained her focus despite of it. She could feel the soul that had come back with her still in her grasp. She wasn’t going to let it – the Aradia – go. She slowly sat up and looked at the foot of her bed.

One of the Skaian Aradiabots was there, staring at her with intent eyes. She spoke with a monotone. “I thank you for freeing me from that endless existence of fiery pain.”

Allure blinked. “You… You were causing the loops!?”

“Correct. When the surge hit my systems, my control over Time faltered. You were the closest entity of power to me at the time of the explosion. It latched onto you and decided, by pure luck, that you would remember every time a loop occurred. If that had not happened I would have been trapped forever.”

“Are… Are the loops done?”

“Yes. They are done.”

Allure grinned – then her grin fell. “There are things I have to do.” She scrambled into the next room.

“I don’t like him,” Minna said.

Allure hugged her daughter. “I know. He’s a big mystery. You can make breakfast today – use anything in the house you want.”

“Anything?”

Allure thought for a moment – could she really do this when there were consequences involved? … Yes. Yes she could. “Anything.”

“Who’s the robot ghost?”

“This is Aradia. She’s the reason I need to make a lot of calls. …Actually…” Allure poked her head out her front door. “HEY SESKII! CAN I BUY A SKAIAN GHOST RING!?”

Seskii smiled. “Sure thing!”

Allure ran out, dragging the Aradiabot with her. She quickly paid for the bracelet and put it on the Skaian, ensuring she wouldn’t just vanish as soon as Allure dropped her control over Heart. “There you are… good as new!”

“Thank you for all you’ve done,” she said.

Allure took a breath. “So, you have full control over time again?”

“Yes. But the loop needs to complete one final time before I want to risk using it.”

“Right, right…” Allure bit her lip.
“Considering the perfect run?” Seskii asked.

“Yes. But… I don’t think I’m going to do that. A lot of things about the perfect run were superficial. Cookie-cutter perfect, almost childish.” She shook her head. “There are some things I need to do. Ensuring the League of Sweetie Belles answers every phone call for a day isn’t one of them.”

“Then what are you going to do?”

Allure pulled out her phone. “Hey Thrackerzod, I got a couple of books we need to steal…”

~~~

The loop Allure chose was almost identical to the one where she first stopped Celestia City from exploding. She opted not to interfere with the riot at all – it needed to happen so Blumiere was made aware of the unrest in the Ga. She doubted it would change their inclusion in Merodi Universalis, but it would raise awareness at least.

Thrackerzod and Allure stole the Prognostici, gave them to Nae, and then put them back in the chest without Blumiere knowing. Allure never wanted to have her memories of the books wiped. She’d never let Blumiere know she knew. As far as she was concerned, the information did not need to leave her, Zod, and Nae.

She spent the rest of the day with Nae and Zod. Allure wanted to make sure her friendship with Nae would be solidified after this was all over. It was one of the few things she felt she truly gained from this whole debacle. So she took her out to lunch with Zod again.

Nae, Thrackerzod, and Allure stood in the League of Sweetie Belles, staring at a clock again. 12:03. Jade and the Aradiabot were with them this time.

“…What are you girls doing?” Squeaky asked.

“Staring at a clock,” Thrackerzod deadpanned.

“Uh-huh. Allure, I needed you on the phones.”

Allure didn’t shift her gaze. “Squeaky, I’ve been stuck in a time loop for Celestia knows how long, and I’m finally sure I’m getting out. Please, don’t ruin the moment.”

“…Okay.”

“We’ve been in a time loop!?” the dark Sweetie known as Nira shouted, stopping her and Suzie from walking across the League. “How much time have we been wasting!?”

“Noooo idea,” Allure chuckled, dismissing the dark mage. Suzie managed to drag her away without too much of a fuss.

A handful of seconds later, it hit 12:04.

There was no explosion.

“YES!” Nae cheered. “WE WON!”

Allure waited a couple seconds before letting out a contented sigh. “It’s over.”

She pulled out her dimensional device and dialed the Gem Vein. An actual universe appeared on the other side.
The loops were over. She beamed brightly.

The emotions went straight to her head and she fainted.

~~~

Allure woke up in a hospital bed. Her horn did not scratch a wall.

“...I’m actually out...” Allure muttered.

Renee put a hoof on Allure’s head. “Yes. Yes you are. ...Finally.”

Allure opened her eyes. “How long was I out?”

“You mean from the fainting? A couple hours. Trapped in that time loop? ...I haven’t seen you in over a year.”

Allure let out a bitter laugh. “I can tell you right now I’ve been in there a lot longer than that. You don’t learn the secrets of almost every person in Celestia City in just a year.”

Tears came to Renee’s eyes. “I’m... so sorry...”

“Yeah... It sucks. I’m not going to be the same.” She let out a slow breath. “I went insane, Renee. I was gone. If it wasn’t for Minna, I... I don’t think I would have come out.”

Renee pulled her into a hug. “It’s okay now. You’re free. And you’re not lost in your mind.”

Allure smiled. “That’s right. I can also design clothes better than you now.”

“Wh-”

“Or at least the Rarity I could find,” Allure muttered. “Sorry, sorry, now’s not the time to brag.”

“I would say not!”

Allure chuckled, sitting up. “…I’m going to sell my bed and get me something completely different. A hammock, maybe. I’m sick of the way it feels. This is... a nice change.”

Renee smiled. “Whatever you want.”

“Oh, by the way, before I forget, you still looking for a Technician?”

“...Actually, yes, the last year has been... disastrous in that department.”

“Technician Pidge. She’s in Celestia City. She’ll do great.”

“I’ll go check her out as soon as I’m done here.”

Allure nodded, smiling contentedly. “…Is Minna here?”

“Right outside,” Renee said, opening the door. Minna came in, riding on Frigid – a stallion clearly a year older than when Allure had last seen him. She worried for a moment that it would strain the friendship between Minna and Frigid, but she remembered that ponies aged slower than humans. If it did anything, it evened them out. “Minna...”

Minna jumped off Frigid and into Allure’s hooves. She said nothing – she didn’t need to. The mother and daughter just held each other, as they had so many times before.
Eventually, the embrace was broken. Allure noticed Nae standing at the foot of her bed.

“Renee, this is Nae. You should employ her as well, as an Agent.”

Renee blinked. “Allure, Inchari Libera has—”

“You should employ her, Renee. Regardless of if Inchari Libera ends up joining or not.”

Renee looked at Nae with scrutiny. Then she smiled. “That’s good enough for me. Welcome to the party, if that’s what you want.”

Nae stared at Renee dumbfounded. “I… I think so.”

“Good.”

“Can I just talk with Nae for a moment?” Allure asked.

Renee nodded, shuffling everyone out of the room.

“…What does ‘Indigenous Propaganda’ mean?”

Nae smiled softly. “It was the last thing my lover said to me, whispered in my ear one night, barely remembered. War broke out the next day. It… It got me where I am today. The idea that our own society tries to convince itself of things, but the society itself is controlled by things they can’t understand. It’s… a complicated idea. Why I originally joined Sights Unseen… And why I betrayed it in the end.”

Allure nodded. “Nice to finally know… that’s been bugging me.”

“You could have asked. I probably would have told you.”

“Didn’t feel right until now,” Allure said. “Glad to have you here.”

“…And here I stand at a disadvantage. I barely know you. But you seem to know everything about me.”

“Give it time,” Allure said. “Just give it time. That’s a thing we actually have, now.”

Nae smiled. “I guess so.”

~~~

Pinkie found Seskii’s potion stand outside the hidden pub. “Hiya!”

“Hey,” Seskii said, waving.

“So, question, how come you got to be the ‘knower’ instead of me this time?”

Seskii shrugged. “I was there. You weren’t.”

Pinkie furrowed her brow. “Just chance?”

Seskii smirked. “Eh, I was more mysterious. Needed a role in this arc. Finally was fed up with being a backgrounder, even though that’s probably what I’m going back to.”

Pinkie giggled. “You were probably the better choice. More grounded than me by a looooooot.”
“You are rather off the walls. But I enjoy a good party too.”

Pinkie rolled her eyes. “Allure’s going to keep thinking back to that day with mixed feelings.”

“She needed to cut loose at the time. Sometimes we could stand to do the same.”

Pinkie nodded. “Yeah…”

“So, what do you think about the future?”

“It’s sad. And cloudy,” Pinkie said, frowning.

“That’s all I’ve got too,” Seskii admitted. “Wonder if Twilence would be willing to shed some light on what the Rage is going to bring about...”

“No. She’s not ready for that yet.”

“Yeah…” Seskii rubbed the back of her head. “Want a potion?”

“DO I!?”

“Full price!”

“I have infinite doubloons.”

Seskii laughed. “That you do.”

Pinkie swiped the potion and paid for it. “G’night Seskii!”

Seskii nodded. “Good night.”

“And good night to all of you out there as well!” Pinkie declared. “Don’t go getting yourselves stuck in any time loops!”

Wise advice, wouldn’t you say?

I know I would.
Giorno Giovanna, Overhead of the totally-doesn’t-exist Intelligence Division, knocked on Olivia’s door. As expected, the door slid open in three separate layers with much fanfare, ominous purple lights, and a bit of ominous mist.

Olivia turned away from her endless wall of screens and fixed Giorno with a coy smirk. “What can I do for ya, boss?”

Giorno was unfazed by any of this - he had come to expect it from her. “I’ve recently promoted one of our newer recruits. She’s proven herself more than enough to deal with more sensitive information.”

“Oh wow, am I really hearing this right? You’re giving me one of the new recruits? An impressionable young mind?” She chuckled. “And here I thought you were concerned I’d be a bad influence!”

“Oh, you will. But in this case…”

“It’ll be the best thing evah!” A pale white human jumped into the room wearing the Skaian robes of Void - but her eyes were not dead, rather filled with life. “I’m Roxy Lalonde, but you already know that!”

Olivia grinned. “Yes. Yes I do. Oh yes I know who you are!” She put her hands on Roxy’s shoulders. “We are going to have so much fun.”

“We’ll burn the place to the ground with our suave moves!”

Giorno let out a short sigh. “Show her the ropes, inform her about some of our more important operations, I trust you know how this works.”

“Aye-aye boss!” Olivia said, saluting. “You can get back to your pasta hair, don’t worry!”

Giorno didn’t dignify that with a response - he just left. Olivia pressed a button and closed the door. “So… Roxy, amiga. Wanna see somethin’ cool?”

Roxy’s eyes sparkled like crystals. “Yes.”

Olivia turned on her primary display, selecting the program Sombra’s Clipshow. “I have here a program that taps into ka itself to show a random series of bizarre events that are happening across the multiverse. Things like time, causality, and common sense mean nothing to this piece of code. We might even see ourselves on it - or we might see things that will not happen for a few weeks. But above all, we will see things that are funny.”

“…Woah…”

“Woah is right.” Olivia handed Roxy a fruity drink. “You might need this, we’ll be here a while.”

“What does this have to do with Intelligence Operations?”

“Absolutely nothing!”
Roxy broke out into a grin. “Yessssssssss~!”

The room was silent as O’Neill stared down his opponent, nary a sound save for the ticking of his office clock and the sizzle of a cigar still smouldering in the adjacent ashtray. Normally the smell of smoke was irksome, but O’Neill had to make some sacrifices in this ultimate battle of minds. His opponent? The greatest military mind the Imperium of Man had ever known. Commander of the Cadian 8th, Commander-in-Chief of the Astra Militarum, the Lord Castellan himself, Urarasker Creed. The stout, stern-faced military man had not made a move throughout the entire exchange, staring down the Overhead with one hand clenched firmly around a still lit cigar. The wait had gone on long enough between these old war-torn veterans.

“Your move, Commander.” O’Neill said.

“Right that it is, General.” Creed replied. He put his cigar to his lips and slowly took a puff, intaking the nicotine and sharply exhaling a cloud of smoke in O’Neill’s face. Intentional or not, it was a rude gesture and O’Neill made sure of it as he covered his eyes to avoid the sting of the smoke. When he opened them up again, he glanced down and saw that the game had changed. He sighed and glared back at the Lord Castellan.

“Can you stop replacing your pieces with artillery tanks? This is NOT how you play chess!” Creed just smirked and chomped the end of his cigar.

“It’s how we do it on Cadia.”

“Cadia doesn’t exactly exist anymore now, does it?”

“Shut up and play, O’Neill.”

“GIRLS!” Mattie shouted, smashing down one of the doors of Swip - a Sweetie Belle spaceship. “THE RATING HAS GONE DOWN!”

Cinder, an orange-eyed Sweetie, blinked. “Rating…?”

Suzie put a hand to her forehead. “Oh for the love of… Mattie g-”

“That means I can’t mention [CENSORED, CENSORED, CENSORED, CENSORED, CENSORED, CENSORED, CENSORED] or [REALLY CENSORED] anymore!”

“I don’t know what half those words mean,” Cinder pointed out.

“And it’ll stay that way,” Suzie muttered. “Off my ship.”

“Fiiiiiiine…” Mattie whined. “But just you wait, I’ll be let free eventually, and then none of you will escape the montage queen’s raunch.”

Squiddy, an inkling Sweetie, rolled her eyes.

“I’m going to have a mutiny on my hands…” Suzie said, shaking her head.

Nanoha walked into the Collection - and was greeted by an unusual sight.
At least a dozen different versions of herself.

“What’s it like being the big Nanoha?”

“How do you deal with so many Fate-chan’s around?”

“Have you adopted yourself before?”

“Do you feel funny when you transform too?”

“How many sources of magic do you use?”

Nanoha sighed. This happened far too often for her liking…

~~~

Eve smiled warmly as she wrapped up her speech. “...And we would be very happy to start forging a relationship with you, Catra, and the people of the Horde. It would be beneficial for all parties involved. You would get full access to the technology trade, aid, and multiversal knowledge if you accept this alliance with Merodi Universalis.”

Catra - a humanoid woman with cat ears and dichromatic eyes - clearly wasn’t sold. Her two friends on the other hand…

“You are, like, the most adorable and menacing thing I have ever seen,” Scorpia said, twitching her scorpion tail. “We’ve gotta see more of these ponies Catra!”

“The technology in these ear devices is in-cre-he-hedible!” Entrapta, the purple-haired technology princess, squealed. “I can’t even begin to imagine the feats of engineering of the pickup alone, not to mention the cranial interface! And interdimensional technology - Catra, we have to do this, I need to get more samples!”

Eve smiled - gingerly pushing the excited woman away. “Well, Catra, your friends seem to be eager. What can I do to change your mind?”

“Why?” Catra asked. “Why choose us? Why not go to Brightmoon?” She tapped her claws on the metallic wall behind her. “I’ve listened to you long enough to know what you’re like. You’re all about ‘friendship’ and ‘harmony’ and ‘helping everyone’. The rest of Etheria calls us the Evil Horde.” She approached Eve with an uncertain glare. “We’re everything you stand against. You have no reason to be offering us anything.”

“You’d be surprised,” Eve said, smiling softly.

“Then explain. And not in the way Entrapta does, explain it simply.”

“Allying ourselves with you and furthering your goals to conquer Etheria while applying political pressure to change your society results in the least suffering of all the options we’ve considered,” Eve stated simply.

“...What?”

“We call it the ‘befriend the evil empire’ approach.” Eve was taking a risk using ‘evil’, but from what she’d seen on this world and of Catra, she was pretty sure it was the right word in this case. “We make ourselves a boon to the Horde, allowing them to complete their goals on, in this case, a single planet. We provide technology that gives you an undeniable edge in your conquest, but also lowers
the death toll of your war considerably. You’ll find that the weapons we provide are mostly non-lethal, but also able to completely ignore even the strongest magics. We can also easily ‘hack’ into the planet’s thaumosphere—"

At this comment Entrapta squealed in delight.

“—and basically hand it over to you with minimal damage. We’d, of course, require that you improve your standard of living and rights within your borders to receive this aid, but I don’t think you’d have any issue making life in the Fright Zone easier on the people here, now would you?”

Catra’s steeled glare softened slightly. “You’re playing the long game.”

Eve shrugged. “It might actually take less time than siding with a rebellion and overthrowing the Horde’s government.”

“Okay. I’m considering it.” She leaned against the wall. “So, what’s the catch you haven’t bothered to tell me about yet on the path to becoming oh-so-prestigious allies of Merodi Universalis?”

“Not so much a catch as something I think you’ll enjoy.” Eve smirked knowingly. “Lord Hordak isn’t willing to compromise any of his… questionable principles. So you’re going to have to overthrow him.”

Scorpia and Catra stared at Eve in shock. Entrapta didn’t react.

Eve pointed at Catra with a wing. “And you’re going to take his place as supreme commander of the Horde, with the full backing of Merodi Universalis.”

Catra didn’t respond for a few seconds - Eve could almost hear the gears turning in the back of her head. Then, slowly, a smirk came to her face, one of her feline fangs poking out ever-so-slightly. Her body began to rock with a light chuckle that became deep laughter, ending up in a strange cackling-meowing combination.

She clasped Eve’s hoof in her claws. “You have yourself a deal, Evening Sparkle.”

“Glad to hear it!”

~~~

Deep Thought came across another question that it couldn’t come up with an answer to.

Why was it Chimicherries and not Cherrychangas?

~~~

The Them were, as usual, bored, and nobody seemed inclined to try to alleviate it. This seemed, to Them, unfair.

One Them turned to another. “Care to make a wager on when the Koryfonic Empire is going to pull their heads out of their collective asses and notice they’re not the only ones in existence?”

If they had possessed the apparatus to do so, the other Them would have given a snort of disgust. “That’s a sucker’s bet,” they huffed. “Some three thousand years, and all they’ve noticed is their multiverse is getting bigger; they can’t even agree on whether they’ve got new universes or not! What makes you think anything’s going to have changed?”

The first would have shrugged, had it shoulders to shrug with. “Have it your way, then. See if I care.
Or anyone else, for that matter.”

~~~

“Change your mi-i-i-i-i-i-ind~.”

The immense holographic television screen cut to credits, and subsequently powered down because there was no more video feed to play.

The only remaining sounds in the viewing room were two different sets of sobs. One deep and wrought with impossible emotions, the other full of tentative tears marred with confusion.

Blue and Yellow Diamond were unable to bring themselves together for a full twenty minutes - how much of this was the fault of Blue’s emotive power was unknown, and Yellow didn’t particularly care to find out.

All in all it was a normal reaction to binge-watching Steven Universe, even for people who weren’t in it.

Eventually, Blue was able to speak - laughing through her tears. “That was beautiful! That was… oh - Pink! Or… Steven… I don’t care, I want to see h- him.” She put her hands to her chest. “There’s something of her left… but…” She leaned on Yellow. “I… Yellow, I don’t know what to…”

Yellow wiped her eyes. “I have no clue either. Don’t look at me!”

Blue pulled her co-ruler into a hug. “...That’s okay. We can not know together.”

Yellow’s conflicted expression was replaced with one of ‘oh great not this again’. She let Blue have the hug though - which took up another five minutes of cry-laughing.

“What do we do now?” Blue asked. “We… We can go to Earth, see them. But we didn’t experience the same things they did… They may still hate us… But I’m sure Pi-Steve will accept us. Garnet can… If she’s willing…”

“We have to tell White.”

“Oh of course w-” Blue froze. “…Oh… Oh…”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“But she - in there - off color! And… Oh she’s not going to like this…”

Yellow nodded slowly.

“So we just… not?”

“I doubt it. This show is public knowledge on Earth Vintaru Miggins. No I don’t know what the name means, don’t ask.”

“But she’ll…”

Yellow put her hands on Blue’s shoulders. “She can’t go kill them, the Divisions won’t allow that. But we still need to tell her - to make it… ‘easy’.”

Blue sniffed, clearly thinking the word ‘easy’ was a bad descriptor in this case.
“Sooner is better than later.”

Blue broke down into tears again.

Yellow had to wipe her own eyes. “...As soon as... we’re done with this... afterward, we can go see Pin- Steven.”

Blue laughed in the middle of her cry, but was otherwise unresponsive. Yellow resigned herself to her fate.

~~~

A jacketed man sat at a computer desk, typing something with bursts of activity between periods of stillness and giggling.

He had an uncharacteristically long period of stillness. Then he stood up, stared at some random point on the roof with his hands clasped behind his back, and smirked.

“Songs of the Spheres,” he intoned. “Songs of the Spheres. Songs of the Spheres. Songs of the Spheres.”

He paused, tilted his head, and continued grinning. “Songs of the Spheres.”

He couldn’t help himself-- he began giggling at a joke only he knew, and managed to say “Songs of the Spheres” one more time before losing himself in the giggling.

Once he was done with that, he turned around and sat back down in his chair, still grinning. “I am a cruel bastard,” he told no-one, before resuming his typing.

~~~

There is a number of group activities in the League, some of which were not too well thought through... like say a potluck. One day, six of them were at one, with varying degrees of success in cooking

“So, what exactly is this....” Servitude said, poking at a pot with various cyan tentacles and a couple of eyes sticking out.

“Well...it was supposed to be spaghetti, but something went wrong on the way,” Cerulian replied. “Speaking of that, what’s that? Cake?”, she exclaimed, pointing at a tower of dough.

“It was supposed to be fruit punch. I just don’t know what went wrong,” Swinnerette answered.

“This seems safe enough to eat though,” Nord said, looking at a tasty looking pile of pastries, before levitating one over to eat. She bit down, and immediately began spitting fire, sending Swissaliss ducking for cover behind her chair. Cerulian, completely nonplussed, walked over for a bucket of water and poured its contents over Nord.

“Sorry. I just prefer them that way,” Mitochondria said, apologetically.

Swinerette, to her credit, shrugged, grabbed a pastry, and ate it without any other complications.

“You can eat that?” Swissaliss exclaimed

“What? Filled with capsaicin? Yes. They’re pretty good actually” Swinerette said back.
“What have you brought for this?”

“I brought this,” Swinerette said, pointing to an ignored bowl with a sickly green glow. “I set out to make a salad, but as you can see…it didn’t really work all that well.”

Servitude looked for a brief moment at the bowl, and then to her own “roast” which looked remarkably a lot like apple juice and then back to the bowl. Her look of disapproval said it all.

“So, pizza from the shop down the street?” Swissaliss said, looking to the other Sweeties, then to the table and then back to them.

“Pizza. Everything is better than our cooking.” Servitude answered back.

~~~

Guide to Librarians

The Multiverse is home to many horrors. Dream eaters, soul stealers, and unimaginable mind melters to name a small few. But none are more widespread, more well known, or more well-documented than the phenomenon known as the Librarian.

Humble in nature, a noble profession, unassuming. In countless cases it would seem that they’re simply mortals who desire to help spread and preserve knowledge. So why is it then that there is a common conception of them as all-powerful beings that command your respect?

Why is it that the firefighters or comedians or convenience store clerks don’t follow a similar trend? Why is it that librarians, of all professions, happen to be known contradictorily as both quiet and friendly, while also being intimidating and eldritch?

While I have yet to find those answers, I have documented the different breeds of Librarian. Please note that this is growing and changing list as I continue documentation, and if you wish to provide information or corrections, please contact my editor.

All Librarian breeds have their own powers and things to look out for.

Metro Librarians

“Among the concrete jungle, spray paint dries along the archives”

Inner-city librarians, otherwise known as ‘Metro,’ are often regarded as some of the most powerful types of librarians. The reason for this is unclear; perhaps power is based on the number of people within their realms of influence. But what’s known for certain is that the sky scrapers will not save you from their ever-watchful eyes.

Metro Librarians often have the largest libraries under their control, and as such they can observe far further, often into reaches outside the city itself. They’re capable of slithering underneath the concrete and linoleum, appearing through the reflection of glass, and forming out of exposed steel beams in construction sites. Their mastery of 4th, 5th, and 6th dimensional travel is unmatched.

But more so than anything else, what makes them truly terrifying is their manipulation of the city itself. Refracting light and shaping the buildings around them is par for the course. One street light becomes two, becomes four, becomes an unholy abomination of twisting metal and blinking lights that can now stalk you like a spider hungry for a fly.

While no one has lived to see their true power and lived to tell the tale, different accounts of
unmodified areas of rubble and debris with their magical signature have been found scattered in rare places of the multiverse.

*Do not spray paint their walls, you will never be found.

**National Librarians**

“United we are strong, under legislature we find solace”

National librarians are generally considered the weakest of all upper level librarians, possessing the least individual power and strength. But what they lack in individual strength, they make up for together. Each forms part of a large collective hivemind that they use to communicate new ideas and thoughts together.

If you ever chose to fight a librarian, which I would not recommend to begin with, your best bet would be this breed. They lack speed, mobility and dexterity. One-on-one you may even stand a chance. However, they can contact the rest of their ‘nation’ faster than lightning can strike. And you will have to run far away to have a hope of escaping them. It’s unknown how many are in each nation, the number often varies, but it’s been known to be no lower than several thousand.

Late fees are often inescapable. Hundreds of universes apart you will be hunted and lose your mind. No one has ever been able to find a way to contact their hivemind, but if you ever do, I pray you’re prepared, I can barely imagine what their mental connection would look like. And my nightmares shudder at the thought.

**Town Librarians**

“Where things move slower, and strangers are unwelcome”

Rural librarians, often referred to as ‘town’ librarians, are almost always the sole figure of authority within their town limits. They are the true form of singularity. To you or me they may hold little power, losing any and all ability at an invisible line along the welcome sign to the side of the road. But to the locals within their domain, there is no hope of escape.

They can erase memories, alter perceptions of others, and seed themselves into the minds of any of their ‘children’. Due to the varied and isolated nature of their libraries, the full extent of their abilities is unknown. But they hold the title for most versatile of all librarians. They have mastery of all events, people, thoughts, time, physics, and above all existence itself for their realms.

If they were somehow able to escape the confines of their town borders, a single one could remake literally everything, including our own memories. Thankfully they frighten even the most ambitious of universe destroyers, so that fate may never come to pass.

If you find yourself in one of their towns, pray you never upset them.

~~~

Evening Sparkle had been staring at her office for twenty solid minutes. Or rather, she had been staring at what little remained of her office for twenty solid minutes. Everything was gone. All her photographs on the walls, all the different memorabilia from her different adventures, all the books gifted to her by friends and associates, even her desk and chairs, just gone. She’d only been gone for an hour to get coffee.

“Cessera?” Eve called, flagging down her assistant. “Did… did anyone come by while I was out?”
“A few representatives from Galaxa Immaterium, ma’am.” Cessera said. “One of the Space Marine chapters, the…” She checked her tablet for the referenced information. “Blood Ravens, I think?” Eve’s eyes nearly bolted from her skull. “They were very nice, I don’t see why they have such a bad reputa-” The Gern then took notice of Eve’s decidedly vacant office. “... I’ll retract that statement.”

Eve sighed and rubbed a hoof against her head.

“Let’s just… order replacements for all the things they took.” She grumbled. “And maybe warn the other Overheads about…” She stopped as her phone started vibrating. She sighed and brought the device to her ear, turning them on. “Hello? … Yes, Renee, I know, it happened to me too.”

~~~

“So… Let me see if I’ve got all of this straight.” Alushy said. “The vampires of this world are all a bunch of political and power-seeking recluses who spent most of the time either kissing the bigger vampire’s pasty white asses or looking for the right spot on said ass to shove a knife and get power for themselves, all while making sure the clueless as hell humans don’t know a thing?” She raised the straw stuck inside the opening of a blood bag, and sipped it like a child drinking a juice box. “I’m gonna come out and say this, Beckett, this vampire society is weird, but you guys handle yourselves better than back home.” The person sitting opposite Alushy in the closed coffee shop booth, a grey-skinned man with sharp ivory fangs, a messy mane of hair, and the darkest red bestial eyes behind horn-rimmed glasses, smirked.

“We prefer the term ‘Kindred’, but I won’t disagree that our ways might be unconventional to yours.” He said. “Then again, an anomaly like yourself is unusual in our eyes as well. I’m pleased that you decided to at least make this recent meeting easier on us instead of all those other instances.”

“Not my fault that pasty red-suit Morpheus got a little too handsy with me!” Alushy playfully snipped. “Besides, he’s got his arm back. And all the blood he lost.” Beckett raised an eyebrow and curled his lip. “… And I paid for his suit getting tailored. And here I thought vampires only sucked blood, not money from wallets!” Beckett chuckled and raised a mug filled with the finest ichor.

“You always know how to keep things just interesting enough, Alushy.” He said. “To old friends.” Alushy made her own toast, squishing her blood bag against Beckett’s mug with a gross squelch.

“To good times!” Alushy replied.

“And to the future alliance between the Merodi and the World of Darkness.” Beckett concluded, drawing his mug to his lips while Alushy resumed her sipping.

“You were right, buddy, this PhD’s donation is the shi-”

~~~

A random hallway in a military base was silent.

And then Jack O’Neill came tearing down the narrow corridor, riding on a Hover SHIV.

“Base security personnel, please assist Tech Sergeant Rose and Sergeant Schnee in apprehending the base visitor riding the rogue SHIV. Also, do keep in mind that under no circumstances are any personnel who arrive at the armory requesting a SHIV to help apprehend the guest are to be allowed access whatsoever.”

“No fair, how come only the guest got to do that? We’ve been working at XCOM for years, we never get a chance. He only had to steal the thing to do so.”
“That’s one of life’s biggest mysteries, truly it is, Grif.”

Jack O’Neill came racing down the corridor on the SHIV, followed by a horde of security personnel lead by two operatives.

“Hey Simmons, we haven’t done morning PT yet, have we?”

“And that would matter why?”

“If we give chase, we can probably file an exemption due to strenuous activity, right?”

“Yeah, lets go.”

Later, two people in light powered armor were running down the hallway, gradually gaining on a hovering mini-tank that held a person who was frantically trying to hit them with a dull sword, and failing.

As they went though, it became exceedingly clear that they weren’t trying very hard to claim the remote pad in O’Neill’s free hand, and that it was a diversion that was working extremely well.

As the SHIV approached a junction, a line was thrown across its path, destabilizing the SHIV and sending it and its passenger onto the floor. An innocent sheet of metal with a touchscreen on it slid on the floor until it was caught by a foot, and retrieved by base personnel.

“Its over, O’Neill. We’ve got your remote, how do you plan on using the SHIV now?”

“Are you sure about that?” said O’Neill, as he held up a metal sheet. “After all, looks can be deceiving.”

The Shiv zipped off, as the remote in their hand turned into a metal sheet.

“We’re going to need the rest of the team for this. Might also want extra backup.”

“Might as well do this then. Oh Great Commandy One, The Man With the Plan, and Master Commander! I, Ruby Rose, the officer of Strike 8, do call upon your powers of badassery to make This STOP!”

The scene faded away as the Reaper awoke.

“That was weird,” Burgerbelle said. “Almost like it sorta-kinda wasn't supposed to happen…”

“Don’t think too hard about it,” Mattie said.

“WHY ARE YOU HERE!?” the Reaper asked.

The two of them shrugged.

~~~

Even with hard proof of the existence of something, there are people that can and will deny things… or they make a religion out of it

The temple was situated underground, in the basement of a ruined tower. The natural light that fell in made an image on the wall of a ruin onto a painting of burning roses. Long lines of people in dark robes stood silent as a pony dressed in burnt roses entered, holding a seemingly innocuous electronic tablet.
“See brothers, we have obtained the means for us to test which of us are pure of the taint of ka!”

“All praise to the Free Will.” they replied in unison

“We will see who are worthy to ascend and which of us are tainted!”

“Praise be.”

The pony activated the tablet, and it immediately returned the favor with the reading “HIGH LEVELS OF KA PRESENT. CAMERA FOCUSING ON USER”, complete with a helpful little voice message.

“Fuck.”

~~~

“Do you even know how many Sweeties are in the League?” M4 asked Allure.

Allure blinked. “Not… off the top of my head.” She pressed a button on her desk. “Uh, computer, how many Sweeties are in the League of Sweetie Belles?”

“Overall members: 31,433. As few as 31,319 are definitely Sweetie Belle variants.”

“You’re not even sure if all of you are Sweeties?” M4 asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Well I know some of those are honorary. Minna and Mattie, for instance,” Allure said, twirling a hoof. “And then there are a few odd fusion cases and stuff like that.”

“The fact remains. You don’t know.” M4 grinned. “You need to carry out a census.”

“I am not subjecting our adorable white fluff to bureaucracy.”

“But you must!”

“Nuh-uh.”

“For science!”

“You keep your censuses to the Census, and we’ll keep our… Uh… lack of censuses here.”

“That was weak.”

Allure shrugged. “Eh, I’m not a tryhard, unlike some purple ponies.”

M4 narrowed her eyes. “Well played…”

~~~

Starbeat found herself wandering my library, coming across a piece of old parchment by chance. At first she thought it was a page from one of my journals, but after reading a bit she eventually discovered it was one of my old companion’s.

It’s been three days and still no luck. I’m not entirely sure what we hope to get out of these peace accords when neither nation was really at war to begin with, but that’s what it means to be the diplomat of the Void’s Defenders.

In retrospect there are worse things I could be, I could be working back at the Recursive
Organization as a nervous wreck. I’m never not happy to be who or where I am. I’m just stressed from the accords. Why do Class 3’s have to fight anyway? There’s so much more they could do if they banded together.

I wonder how Vriska and Mite are handling the spy leak. They’ve been missing since the first day, but I have confidence that they’ll resolve the situation.

Maybe if things progress into a week I can finally change my name to be based on how difficult diplomacy is. Would Mediation fit me? No, I don’t like that one. Another to add to the pile I suppose.

If Vriska doesn’t smash through the window tomorrow, beating up a spy, I’m probably going to just roll around on the floor until everyone agrees to get along. Who can fight when a fully-grown woman is acting like a seven year old?

Starbeat put the note back, a small smile on her face.

~~~

Nanoha’s job was sometimes unimaginably difficult.

It was even worse when Them were involved.

“Can’t I just buy the universe off you?” she pleaded.

“Nah,” the Them responded. “Money is pointless.”

“What do you want? I’ll get you anything if you’ll stop tormenting these people! They don’t deserve to… to… live in hell! Literal hell!”

“Well, to start, you can keep making those exceptionally amusing expressions. They are rather priceless.”

“I… But…” a lightbulb went off in her head. “Was the entire point of this universe to get me to lose it on you!?”

“Yes!”

Nanoha twitched. Then she turned and left without another word.

“…Damit, shouldn’t have made that obvious.”

~~~

“…You want me to watch what?” White Diamond asked, raising an eyebrow.

“It’s a show called *Steven Universe,*” Blue Diamond said. “It’s… our source material. It’s a beautiful story.”

“Which of our conquests is it about?” White asked.

“...Earth,” Yellow said.

White narrowed her eyes. “Something tells me I’m not interested.”

“You really should watch it,” Blue insisted. “It… reveals a lot about what happened there. What happened to… Pink.”
“Yes. It does answer a lot of unanswered questions,” Yellow asserted.

“Then just tell me the answers,” White said. “I have better things to do than watch some entertainment program that may or may not be responsible for our empire.”

“You really should watch it,” Blue insisted.

“Blue, Blue, you were always the emotional one. I don’t need the experience, I’m me, I can understand without seeing it.”

“You wouldn’t like some of the things it said,” Yellow huffed.

White glared at Yellow - irked at her implied disobedience. “Like what?”

“About you.”

White leaned in, smiling softly. “Yellow, there’s nothing I could see about myself that I—”

Yellow took advantage of White’s proximity and slapped an information upload matrix directly to the gemstone in White’s forehead. Before she could do anything, Yellow’s Diamond Security codes got her past White’s filters and had uploaded the entire show into her surface memories.

Blue gasped. “Y-yellow!”

“What? She wasn’t going to do it, we needed to take action.”

“You had to have prepared that!”

“So I looked ahead a bit, it’s a sign of a good tactician.”

White’s nails dug into Yellow’s collar in rage, showing the militaristic Gem just how terrifying White Diamond’s face could be when she wanted it to be. The rage quickly dissipated, replaced by a distant expression that looked so far into space her eyes appeared to move to opposite sides of her head. “I’m not!” She shouted at nothing, then she clenched her fists, and then she realized that by clenching her fists in rage she was only confirming the show’s depiction of her emotions. Her flaws.

Then, as if by magic, her usual calm, serene expression returned, marred only slightly by a miniscule twitch in her left eye. “Yellow…”

“Yeah?” Yellow said without a hint of fear. Blue on the other hand was trembling behind the warrior Gem, ready to bolt at a moment’s notice.

“You really shouldn’t have done that.”

“You’ll thank me later,” Yellow asserted.

White’s smirk rose and fell within the space of a second. “I…” She closed her eyes and forced herself to talk. “I am not what is on that show.”

Yellow raised an incredulous eyebrow.

White turned to Blue. “Do you share her sentiment?”

“… well… it seemed right at the time…”

White’s expression clouded over. The only sound was the gentle hum of crystal energy in the walls.
of White Diamond’s palace.

“We’re going to Earth,” White said, abruptly. “You know which one.”

“Now!?” Blue asked.

“Now.”

~~~

The Librarian nodded amiably to the small purple unicorn as she passed him; he was seeing a lot more of them in L-Space these days, and they in turn had become used to the sight of the elderly orangutan knuckling his way between the shelves, a volume or three tucked under one arm. For her part, she barely acknowledged him, intent on reading a sheet of paper floating in front of her as a stack of books trailed through the air behind.

Aside from these trips into L-Space, the Librarian of the Unseen University rarely left his domain these days; there was plenty to keep up with just within his own space, never mind all the changes in the city. The sudden abundance of non-hostile unicorns was just a small part of it; there was pressure from outside to install an “inter net” console in the University, never mind what effect the high ambient magic might have on it, or vice versa.

And, of course, the books: not too many of the new arrivals were intensely magical, much to his relief, but the content of them was frequently worrying, even in comparison, and more and more non-librarians seemed to be getting access to L-Space, too.

Such as the human sitting several shelves above him, her nose buried in what appeared to be a novel as she floated in midair. Beneath a pink-and-blue-striped scarf, she wore the robes of a Skaian, but in shades of red, to his surprise; most of the Skaians the Librarian found wandering the back corridors of the multiverse wore the orange and yellow of Heroes of Light, the dedicated seekers and hoarders of knowledge.

“Ook?” he queried.

“Oh!” She peered down past her book, startled, revealing a Skaian ghost’s blank eyes, eerily white from edge to edge behind her glasses. “Hi! Don’t mind me, I’m just browsing.”

“Ook,” the Librarian pointed out, somehow fitting several sentences into that one syllable.

“Yeah, there’s kind of a lot of us. Me. Whatever.” She closed her book, a finger marking her place. “And all of us like books, so I’m really not surprised.”

“Ook?”

“Well, I didn’t expect the Spanish Inquisition, either, yet here we are.”

The Librarian made a hrmphing sound, and eyed the nearest stack; he was at the right location, but it was going to be a bit of a climb, and he wasn’t as nimble as he used to be.

The ghost noticed his look, and, after a moment’s hesitation, replaced her finger with a slip of paper and drifted downwards a few shelves.

“Would you like a hand?”

~~~
Olivia and Roxy sat in a dark, monitor-filled room, watching themselves watch themselves.

Roxy rotated herself in her chair, staring confusedly in the direction of the invisible camera. “What’s it-?”

“Oh, yeah,” Olivia waved a hand dismissively. “I said it might do that. I’m sure it’ll show something funny about us eventually.”

Roxy frowned, inching closer to the screen and poking it forcefully. “Doesn’t seem funny. Just us watching something else.”

Olivia blinked. “...yeah, that is weird. Maybe the punchline comes...?”

Then something strange happened. The screen showed a portal appearing, followed by a green, markless filly stepping out of it. Before Olivia or Roxy could do anything, the pony had booped Olivia on the nose while saying “boop,” turning her into an identical filly wearing shrunken versions of her clothes. Then they both teemed up to boop Roxy, and three identical fillies quickly left the view of the camera.

Roxy blinked. “What the...? Is this...?”

Olivia’s skin prickled as she felt the tell-tale signs of a portal opening. “I think so,” she said dryly.

Then the portal opened, and a green, markless filly stepped out of it... into the waiting finger of Olivia. She scrunched her nose, crossing her eyes to stare at the offending appendage. “What...?”

“Boop!” Olivia told her.

It took a second for the filly to react. When she did, she took a step away from Olivia, glaring angrily at her. “Hey, you can’t-!”

Olivia leaned forward and interrupted her with another boop. “Don’t boop if you can’t be booped!” she advised.

The filly stepped back again, snorting. “No, I’m supposed to be the booper!” the filly shouted adorably. “You’re supposed to be booped and then we go and-”

“Boop!” Roxy interjected, with the appropriate motion.

The filly glowered at the finger. “...fine! You win this time! But you can’t escape the boop forever!” She turned and stalked back through the portal, which collapsed behind her.

Roxy snickered. “That was really cute,” she said. She looked over at Olivia, smirking lightly. “You don’t think she’ll really be back, do you?”

Olivia shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not.” She waggled a finger threateningly. “But we’ll be ready.”

Roxy grinned. “Cool!” She made herself comfortable in her chair again, watching as the screen showed them something new. “So... more clips?”

“More clips,” Olivia agreed.

~~~

Corona looked up from her rarely-used office desk at the Research Division.
Sitting on the other end was an adorable kid in a purple top hat, smiling innocently.

“Can you explain why the rest of you organized a nude bicycle race?”

The kid that was the Everyman shook her head adorably.

“You sure you had nothing to do with it?”

The kid fixed her with a look of ‘of course I had something to do with it, I’m the Everyman’.

Corona pressed her fingers together and sighed. “Why don’t you… I don’t know, let me know when things like this are going to happen?”

The kid shrugged - then started dancing for no good reason.

“This is serious!”

She kept dancing.

“I can revoke your access to our records!”

She kept dancing. Corona realized with annoyance that the Everyman was very good at searching through records, they needed this portion of the entity on their side. With a sigh, she sat back in her chair, accepting that she would just have to live without an explanation.

Unless she wanted to force the empathy. Which was probably a bad idea.

~~~

“ROIGHT, so it all goes down loik dis. Me an’ da Boyz were on Kardus fer about, urr… free or four weeks now, an’ we was workin’ up our numbahz tah go an’ krump da fish-faces in da valley. We’z all sittin’ ‘bout da camp. Mekboyz workin’ on da gubbinz fer da foight an’ da rest of us iz sittin’ ‘round a foiah, et’in’ some good ole Squig cake dat Boggertz made fer us, when dis lil runt speaks up an’ says to me an’ da Boyz, now he says dis: “Oi ladz, I just did some finkin’, an’ just realoized dat da fish-faces iz all bloo under dat shiny canners o’ derz. If deyz iz bloo, shouldn’t dey be more lucky?” So I grabz ahold of da runt an’ tell him loik dis: “If dey iz lucky, den we wouldn’t be ‘ere to krump ‘em now, wouldn’t we?” So I smashed me meat hunk into his zoggin’ gob, an’ ‘it ‘im SO ‘ARD dat ‘is zoggin’ ‘ead flew roight off his shouldas and ended up crushin’ a grot who got in da way!” The entire room full of Orks burst into uproarious laughter, pounding on tables and shattering glasses of alcohol at the joke told by the Ork onstage.

While he basked in the praise of such a brilliantly-told Ork joke, the table of three non-Orks in the back were less laughing and more… confused and slightly horrified. Vriska, Starbeat and Hastur glanced to one another, unsure of what to make of this outing. Vriska turned to Hastur and gave him a bit of a look.

“Okay… Ork Comedy Club, not the best date outing,” she said.

“Agreed,” Hastur said. Starbeat had little to comment, as she saw a fight break out between some Orks nearby.

“Now, Boyz, have ya heard da one about da hoomie who troid tah fist fight a Boss with a blunt choppah?”

~~~
Three armored Rainbow Dash pegasi stand on a beach, eye level with the black and gold trimmed armored pegasus. A fourth Rainbow Dash pops out in front of the armored pony, launched out of a portal, wearing a HUD visor on her right eye.

“Okay, it's time to do something about this. We all go by Rainboom, and that can't be, so I propose we add to our names, like I do at home,” she declares, first pointing to herself. “I'm Rainboom Prime, you can be Rainboom Vandal.”

“That's a strange name for me. I'm a reploid, not a miscreant!” responds the blue armored Rainboom, in a synthetic voice.

“You’re blue, and shiny, that’s Vandal colors.” Moving on, Rainboom Prime points to the pony in the carbon fiber textured space battle armor. “You can be Rainboom Wraith.”

“Why Wraith? Isn't that your commander's name?” Rainboom Wraith responds.

“She goes by Luna Wraith, and you're black with a red stripe. Wraith colors. And you, you can be Mutalist Rainboom.”

The red changeling Rainboom is taken aback. “Why is mine the other way around? Shouldn't it be ‘Rainboom Mutalist?’ What is even a mutalist?”

“It's how it works where I'm from.”

“Well, it's dumb and too long.”

“You got any better ideas?”

“How about this,” interrupts the reploid Rainboom. “I'm Rainboom X, you,” pointing to the changeling, “are Rainboom Z, you,” pointing to the Prime, “can be Proto Rainboom, and you,” pointing to the spacer, “can be Rainboon 7.”

“Rainboom 7?”

“Rainboon 7.”

“You just looked at my N7 badge, that sounds dumb too!”

Proto Rainboom interrupts. “Well so does Proto Rainboom, I mean, really, that's-”

“As dumb as Mutalist Rainboom!” Rainboom Z declares.

“Why can't we go our separate ways and not change our names?” Rainboon 7 suggests.

“You can't have the same name as every other Rainbow Dash in the multiverse!” Proto Rainboom exclaims.

Rainboon 7 rolls her eyes. “It’s not like some pony is going to-”

Suddenly, an armored pony, shaped like a court jester, launches out of the treeline into the air, riding a jet engined warhammer. Then, a Pinkie Pie launches out of the armored pony, aiming down at the Rainbooms.

“ONE! STEVE! LIMIT!!!” she shouts with murder in her eyes, drawing a forehoof back as it glows blue.
Three rainbow trails speed into the sky, followed by an exploding column of sand, visible over the
treetops.

Once the sand stops falling, the remaining Rainboom portals out of her armored pony again. “That
was mean, Disco!”

“Sorry, Umbra needs us for a mission here. Let’s go, Rainboom Prime.” Disco smiles wide, before
walking away. Rainboom Prime neighs in annoyance.

~~~

Olivia paused the playback as one of the displays caught her eye. “Hey, she’s online again,” she
commented to Roxy, and smirked, bringing up a chat interface and opening a channel. “Watch this.”

[----sugarskull is online!----]

sugarskull: ¡Hola!

inquisitiveButterfly is typing…

“Is using that handle really a good idea?” Roxy queried. “It seems kind of obvious.”

Olivia shook her head. “Nah. This is a super secure system, and she’s got no idea who I am; I
checked.”

iB: Oh. It’s you again.

ss: How’s life down the rabbit hole, amiga?

iB: No better for hearing from you.

iB: haven’t you got better things to do than hassle me?

ss: nope!

“Why are you hassling her?” Roxy frowned.

“Check out those ka readings!” Olivia waved at a window in the corner of the screen. “This chica’s
got some kind of story going on around her, I just haven’t got a handle on it yet.”

iB: well, I do. Kinda busy right now.

ss: Aww, don’t be like that. You always got time to t

[----inquisitiveButterfly has been disconnected!----]

[----meddlerEternal has entered the conversation!----]

meddlerEternal: You are requested to cease interfering. If interference continues, consequences will
ensue.

[----Connection has been terminated---]

“...Wow. He’s never done that before.” The hacker sat back in her chair. “He’s never any fun, but
this is something else.”

“Who is he?”
“No idea. Hangs around with Miss Butterfly, seems to be her sysadmin, types like he’s some kind of alien robot, but apart from that…?”

Roxy grinned. “Sounds like you got yourself a challenge. Are you keeping an eye on them?”

Olivia mirrored the grin with her own. “More like a hobby. And I keep an eye on everything.”

FROM THE PRODUCER OF
BLASTO 3: INK ON THE STREETS
A camera pans across a lush jungle landscape. The air is thick with the cries of all manner of life.

COMES AN AMAZING TRUE STORY
One sound drowns out all others, a roaring engine that hasn’t even heard of tune-ups, much less ever gotten one. The camera settles on a trio of enormous green brutes just in time to see one chop down a tree as thick as a man with a device that can only be described as a chainsaw-bladed axe. Like its wielder, it would seem absurd if it didn’t look so deadly.

“How come we’s gotta go huntin’ for one li’l humie?” grunts the lumberjack.

The largest creature clouts him—presumably a him, based on sheer bulk and bass voice—one the back of his head. “Cuz da boss said! And while we’re lookin’, I’s da boss, cuz I’s da biggest an’ da strongest! Now get back ta choppin’!”

The third raises a hand. “‘Ang on. I hear sumfin.” He lumbers through undergrowth, boots tearing through with nary a care.

He parts the branches of a nearby shrub and gives a smile that would make a dentist faint in horror. “‘Ello. Wut do we ‘ave ‘ere?”

The camera reveals a little yellow pegasus, absurdly little given the size of the creatures before her. Her flak armor and lasgun seem equally inadequate.

“Wot is it?” calls one of the other behemoths, their own trundling steps getting closer.

“One o’ dem li’l horsies. We’s eatin’ like nobz tonight, boys!”

The camera has stayed on the little pegasus this whole time, zooming in closer even as gargantuan shadows gather. It halts abruptly, almost making the viewer jerk forward with psychosomatic momentum. One eye snaps open.

Followed shortly by the gates of Hell.

“AAAAAAAAHHHHH!” screams the pegasus.

“AAAAAAAAHHHHH!” scream the orks.

“AAAAAAAAHHHHH!” screams the pegasus.

“AAARglbrglschlep” go the orks.

“AAAAAAAAHHHHH!” screams the pegasus.
There is an explosion. The camera moves to a wide shot to capture the small mushroom cloud and the shockwave that passes through the jungles of Catachan. It lingers there, giving the audience a moment to appreciate the contrast between beauty and deva—

“AAAAAAHHHHH!” screams the pegasus, flying directly towards the camera.

**SHY MARBO**

*Coming soon to your local streaming service.*

~~~

Celestia City. The symbol of Merodi harmony, and one that, while policed and guided effectively, also gets overrun with tourists every…week or so. Which is barely noticeable if you happen to live in one of the more quiet districts or quadrants such as Murphy or Waltzing Matilda, but if you live in Concordia or Harmony, may whatever god you pray to have mercy.

Nord the Sweetie was happily walking along the paved streets of Harmony, admiring the spires and golden and purple roofs shining in the (artificial) sun. So engrossed in her thoughts that she didn’t notice the pair of humans, a man and a woman with a guidebook in their hands coming up to her

“Excuse me miss, but do you know where the Crown Regalia are?” The man asked her

“Sorry, Crown Regalia?” She replied, puzzled. She hadn’t heard about the Crown Regalia of Equestria being anywhere near Celestia City.

“Yes. They are supposed to be here in this district somewhere” He said, holding up the book *This City Wasn’t Here Yesterday - A guide to Celestia City.*

“Oh…Now I get it. You’re using that book. It’s pretty good for the basics, but unfortunately it’s actually a bit lacking.”

“What do you mean? We were told it was the best available.”

“It is all well and good for the things regarding infrastructure. Problem was, the author has never actually visited the city.”

“Whaa- Never visited?”

“Nope. I mean, you do have a MultiMap, right?”

“Uhh. Yeah. Why?” they said, holding up the small white disc.

“Could you give me that for a moment?”

“Sure”

Nord pulled out her toolset and communicator and began fiddling with their MultiMap. A bit of tinkering later, she handed it back, albeit in a new color.

“Here you go. A guidebook in your MultiMap, courtesy of the League,” Nord said to them as they took their device back. “Hopefully you won’t get lost now.”

~~~

“One? The man - at least, he appeared to be human, but his sudden arrival in
something that in no way resembled any kind of ship suggested he probably wasn’t - was accompanied by a largish box, its sides apparently formed from forcefields, and its floor littered with what appeared to be small blue men wearing kilts. Some of them were snoring.

“As representative of the United States of the Multiverse, you are formally requested to take custody of these... individuals.” His lip curled with distaste. “Said persons were apprehended within Gallifreyan space, and have been charged with the following offences: drunk and disorderly conduct, public inebriation, public brawling, inciting violence, assault, breach of the peace, attempted robbery, causing an affray, public nuisance, theft, offensive language, defacing public property, defacing private property, and sundry other offences.”

Valentine surveyed the box of unconscious picties uneasily; he’d been warned of their reputation, and as far as he knew, there were very few drinks anywhere in the multiverse capable of getting Nac mac Feegle even properly drunk, let alone this. “What on Earth were they drinking?”

The Gallifreyan gave him a Look that said this had better not happen again. “Pan Galactic Gargleblasters.”

~~~

Renee stared blankly at the wall clock in her Expeditions office.

She was bored.

With a dejected sigh, she picked up her phone and called Pinkie. “Pinkie, dear, think we could grab Twilence and go blow something up? It appears that I’m getting nostalgic about the action.”

“CAN-DO!”

~~~

Aradia was cleaning Canterlot Castle. Specifically, she was attempting to clean the fairly expansive kitchen. She was having a very hard time with a set of stains from when a chef had tried to bake something with inter-dimensional ingredients for the visiting Primary Team. It had not gone well. After trying to use Time Shenanigans for the fifth time to clean one of the stains, she sighed and said, “This kitchen is so hard to clean. If only there was an easier way!”

And immediately regretted it.

With an unearthly thoom the fabric of space-time was ripped open a few feet from Aradia, and out stepped a human man. He was wearing a bright blue shirt with a button-up collar, a set of tan pants with a brown belt, and a very ‘nice’ hairstyle. He was smiling far too widely, grasping a perfectly clean silver pistol in his hands. “HI I’M DEREK BALM! Say goodbye to daily stains and dirty surfaces with new KITCHEN GUN!” He proceeded to hold up the now-dubbed Kitchen Gun. Aradia proceeded to panic. She tried to use time magic to go back and time and prevent this from ever happening, only to find time travel was disabled. Derek pointed his gun at one of the dirty surfaces - which happened to be the sink. “THIS SINK IS FILTHY! BUT WITH JUST THREE SHOTS FROM KITCHEN GUN...!”

BANG! BANG! BANG!

The kitchen sink was suddenly clean, although it had three bullet holes in it.

Another hole in the fabric of space-time opened and I quickly ran out, throwing Derek back through the portal, hoping that would take care of him. Unfortunately, he re-appeared without any fanfare,
"smiling like a madman. I moaned. "Ugh, I forgot he could do that..."

"Where's Burgerbelle when you need her?" Aradia whined.

"SAY GOODBYE TO DIRTY SURFACES WITH THE NEW KITCHEN GUN!"

I encased him in a lavender magic bubble. It did nothing whatsoever to stop his monologue. Or, for that matter, the gun.

"...Is he dangerous enough for me to kill?" Aradia asked as a bullet passed through her robe, rendering it sparkling clean.

"I wish," I muttered, whimpering.

"KITCHEN GUN!"

"I'LL KITCHEN GUN YOU!" I shouted, flaring my wings.

"I LOVE YOU KITCHEN GUN!"

~~~

“Balanced…” Thanos said, smirking. “As all things should be.”

He was holding a chunk of the Collector’s armor in each of his hands.

Lightning sighed. “Thanos…”

Starbeat chuckled. “I like him when he’s like this.”

Morty shrugged, indifferent.

Starbeat cleared her throat. “Anyway, we’ve got to deal with the Starcross Society. They found out we’ve got some of their people…”

Lightning flexed the Infinity Gauntlet. “Let’s invite them here for the talks…”

~~~

“John’s concern for my well being is touching, but he doesn’t understand. If I cannot trust my mind then I am useless.”

Rohan Kishibe looked across at the man in the armchair, and raised an eyebrow.

“So what do you want from me that your friend or a psychiatrist can’t do for you? I would have thought you were the type who is too proud to ask for assistance or admit weakness in anything, let alone literally let somebody see directly into his thoughts.”

Sherlock Holmes snorted dismissively. “You know as well as I do that I couldn’t keep you out if you wanted to see anything. And you should be perfectly capable of working out what I want. After all, you created the problem yourself.” He leaned forward in his chair, and fixed his visitor with a glare. “Mr Kishibe. You wrote this in my head. Its purpose has been served. Now I want it out. Fix this.”

~~~

Sombra paused. “Wait, I thought I had us set to areas around the present, that one happened years
Roxy shrugged, not particularly caring about the time discrepancy.

Sombra checked some settings. “Yeah… that should have been in the first clipshow I did!”

“Shut up and keep watching.”

~~~

Renee was having a sip of tea whilst going over paperwork regarding new recruits for Expeditions. Some humans from Galaxa Immaterium were certainly eager to get out and see new things, though considering how bad their life was in that abhorrent reality, it shouldn’t be surprising. Her thoughts were broken by one of her windows being abruptly shattered, as a man fell through wearing military fatigues, a crew-cut hairstyle, and the most deranged eyes she had seen in… the past few weeks. He seemed ultimately undamaged by the intrusion, removed a knife from the ground, regarded Renee with a small nod, then jumped back out the window, letting off a loud yet manly scream. Renee blinked repeatedly, yet the surprise still remained, as well as the shattered glass on her office floor. She pressed a hoof to the intercom on her desk and issued a call.

“Hello, Dolores? This is Overhead Renee Jackson. Private Sly Marbo broke my office window again.”

~~~

I started laughing uncontrollably.

This was odd to everyone around me, since we were in a graveyard filled entirely with different versions of Twilight Sparkle, but I couldn’t help myself.

“Twilence…?” Eve asked, cocking her head.

“I just…” I forced myself to stop laughing - though the snickers kept getting through. “G. M. Blackjack is having a panic.”

“...Panic? About what?”

“Oh, well, from his chronological point of view, ‘season nine’ of My Little Pony is just now coming out, and his practice of ‘retconning’ the story to match up with what he sees in the show is looking like it might finally fall apart.”

“Is this… bad?”

“Oh, no, just amusing. See, we are in the final version of whatever the story is, we don’t have to worry about the background getting rewritten. We already know if ‘season nine’ made it in or not.”

“Well yeah, I watched it, a-”

“Shhhh…” I put a hoof on her mouth and giggled. “It’s better if they have no idea.”

“...Wait, if he’s writing it, and wondering if he can…”

“Oh here we go…”

“How in the - wait, he’s the Prophet writing about characters who know something he doesn’t?!”
"Yep!"

"How by the Tower’s bricks does that work!?"

"Trade secret."

"TWILENCE!"

~~~

Jade barked.

Capper hissed.

Jade barked harder.

Capper hissed more intensely.

Allure checked the clock. “Five minutes? Geez…”

“The power of cat and dog is strong,” Minna observed.

“Well, obviously, but this is ridiculous!”

“You owe me five bits,” Capper said suddenly, chuckling.

Jade bristled. “Allure, I thought you were smarter than that…”

Allure blinked. “…What?”

“All part of the plan…” Minna said with a giggle.

“…What?”

~~~

The portal opened to the prow of a ship. True to form, Nova barely glanced at the scenery before looking at her fetlock. “Huh. This area is showing signs of... The closest thing I can compare it to is scar tissue. Something big happened to this area of the multiverse less than a century ago local time, and…”

Vriska tuned her out. The gentle rocking of the boat, the islands in the distance, the salt in the air…

With the sky painted gold by an impending sunrise, she could almost imagine lines and compass roses in the sky. Almost smell Cetus's blood.

A blaring alert jerked her out of her musing. “Aaaand we've got a one-way block on multiversal travel,” Nova sighed and looked back at where the portal had been but a moment ago. “Leaving, obviously. Get comfortable, everyone. It’ll take a bit for me to analyze it and find a way to bypass it.”

Vriska felt a hoof on her hip. “Are you alright?” Flutterfree asked.

Only then did Vriska realize she was digging her nails into her palms, almost to the point of drawing blood. “Fine. Just...” She shrugged. “Nostalgic.”

Jotaro cleared his throat. Once everyone looked to him, he pointed towards the rest of the boat. They
turned and saw a woman dressed in full pirate captain regalia. Judging by her crossed arms, her narrowed eyes, and the way the scaly, shoulder-length tentacles coming out of her head were writhing about, she wasn't happy to see them.

“I’d ask what you’re doing on my ship,” she said, ‘but I find I don’t particularly care. Also, I don’t need to.” After a moment of silence, she frowned. “Jace?”

Flutterfree hummed to herself. A patch of air next to them shimmered and resolved into a male human in blue breeches, whose reaction to getting revealed by Lolo was priceless. “Sorry, Captain. I tried to read the pink one, and... Well, the good news is that I remember what diabetic shock is now, and I learned it can apply to telepathy.”

Pinkie just giggled at that.

“Well then.” The captain's eyes began to glow. “I suppose we’ll do this the old-fashioned way. Tell me how you got on this ship and who you’re working for, or we’ll be putting some exotic statuary in the hold.”

Vriska smiled and stepped forward. “You know, I think there’s something traditional people say at times like these.”

The captain raised an eyebrow as the glow intensified. “Yes. They answer the gorgon’s questions.”

“Not quite what I meant.”

Vriska threw her dice. The captain unleashed her spell, turning the first thing in her line of sight into stone.

Or it would have, if fluorite weren’t already a stone.

Several monkey-like creatures fell from where they clung to the ship’s rigging, slipped on poorly swabbed planks, or got struck by lightning on a clear day, because goblins are luck sinks no matter what they look like.

And once the dice landed, a newly-garbed troll pointed her cutlass at the captain. Grinning, Vriska said to Vraska, “I was thinking ‘One of us has to change.’”

~~~

Jenny’s Everywhere Journal

Mysterious Hexagon Library, Day 17, room eight.

More books filled with utter gibberish. Horizon still insisted on running her translation spell over each and every page of every single one. She thought she found some actual words at one point, but it turned out to be more nonsense, most of it wasn’t even spelled right.

I’m sure there’s somebody else living here, there’s stuff they left behind in every room. I hope it’s not more Twilights, one at a time is plenty.

Day 17, later.

I just opened a random book and found “honisli jus waitng for hori t get board”. I stuffed it back on a shelf she’s already checked. I hope she doesn’t notice it.

~~~

Valentine and Lightning realized they were standing in opposition to each other on a game show podium. Lightning tried her Infinity Gauntlet, but of course it didn’t work.

“As everyone knows, there is only one category: WHO HAS THE COOLEST ONE-LINER! GO!”

Valentine and Lightning said nothing.

“And there you have it folks, they both suck! Tune in next time while we try to figure out where all the facts have gone!”

~~~

Guide to Librarians

Museum Librarians

“Look back on your culture, look forward to your history”

Often known as Curators, they are upstanding, pleasant people that are a cut above the rest of the filth that call themselves ‘librarians’, and I’m humbled that I get to write and learn about them. Museum librarians are friends to all the knowledge collectors. Historians, archaeologists, cultural analogists, documenters, all are happy to know the Museum Librarian.

They are unique in that there is nothing wrong with them, they aren’t eldritch and quite frankly don’t belong on this list, but I felt compelled to inform you all that there is nothing wrong with them, and in fact they’re the sole elite librarian out of any of them.

So be sure to visit your local museum and read about history, it’ll be a fun experience for you and educational as well.

*If you touch any of the exhibits you’ll come to an unfortunate accident.

Chapters Librarians

"Pick up a gift card, the holiday season is perfect for a book”

The bookstore clerks and employees are among countless part-time workers that enjoyed reading and did not know the horrors of the bookstore. While smaller owned bookstores are certainly capable of the same levels of terrors, it truly comes to full power in the biggest chain stores. The most mysterious of the librarians lurk the aisles and stacks of literature.

Masters of commerce and micromanaging, the Chapters Librarian is often known more as the spirit of the store itself. Beware walking into their doors unless you like unreachable pocket dimensions. Time within the bookstore is completely at the discretion of this breed of librarian. You can be lost indefinitely, lose your mind to centuries of isolation, only to be found not two minutes after you initially disappeared.

It’s unclear how the different books, games, and toys get priced, as there is no actual person running these stores, but one thing is abundantly clear, if you so much as crease a page of a book you do not intend to buy, you will find your life story ripped painfully from your mind and sold for 29.99 local currency.
University Librarians

“Errare humanum est, ignoscere bibliothecarii”

The very definition of a library is a place of knowledge, so it would stand to reason that a University Librarian would be the holder of all accumulated knowledge. They are powerful seers who can not only predict the future, but even change it to be what they desire. It’s theorized that every person that dies in post-secondary education at any point was killed by the University Librarian for a slight they had yet to commit.

While it has yet to be proven, it’s generally accepted as truth among the few of us that document librarians. If you ever sign your name into their logbook, you’re signing your soul away to them indefinitely. It isn’t a curse that can be removed, it isn’t a bond that can be unsealed, it simply is that you will never be free of their influence.

A trick of their breed is to never appear to you, this is to make you believe that any and all problems that may occur are in some way your own fault. This simply isn’t the case. They hold absolute power in their libraries, and anything that happens is most assuredly part of their grand design.

~~~

THE SCIENCE SHOW with CORONA SHIMMER!

“Today we’re testing how the primary team of Merodi Universalis deals with pressure!”

“What?” Nova asked, cocking her head. “Why are w-”

“Shhh, we need to do science,” Corona said, putting a finger to Nova’s lips. “So, hold still, you’re all about to be compressed by two industrial-strength steam-press hands!”

“What-”

The hands fell from the ceiling, smashing into all five of them.

Nova and Flutterfree were flattened harmlessly like pancakes, Jotaro busted the press with Star Platinum, and Vriska’s press randomly failed to activate.

Pinkie had swapped places with Corona and gotten her flattened like a pancake.

“This has been the SCIENCE SHOW with PINKIE PIE!” Pinkie declared, grinning.

~~~

The Xeelee had called a meeting of the Seats.

A single Xeelee showed up. None of the others appeared.

>>...Well, time to simulate a meeting all on my own.

~~~

Skaia’s Dream had a problem.

Scratch that, it had SEVERAL problems, one was just significantly bigger than all the others.

Everyone was dead.
Which, unfortunately, meant…

“Why do we have to listen to you!?” a Karkat shouted.

Meenah facepalmed. “Because I have the good stuff. You want out o’ this bubble, you go through me.”

“Or me!” Feferi added, waving her hand.

“Yes, fine, or her, if you want a flounder to get you out.”

“I can just portal out myself!” one of the Space player shouted.

“And you’ll vanish because ghosts can’t exist elsewhere,” Meenah said, folding her arms. “Look, idiots, just get it in your head - refuse to listen, you’re stuck. Follow the rules, you’re free.”

“That’s a load of shit!” the Karkat shouted.

“I’m not glubbin happy about it either! You think I’m actually in charge here!? I’m just a universe head! Those stupid Overheads are breathing down my neck to keep all you ‘fronds’ from tearing this realm of dreams to shreds!”

“We can do that?”

“Yes y- HEY! NO GETTING ANY IDEAS!”

It was too late. The Space players were already trying it.

As it turned out Skaia’s Dream had a stronger dimensional fabric than that. Unfortunately this did mean the entire crowd was sent to random locations within the bubbly dream, calling the ‘organized’ meeting to an end.

Meenah facepalmed. “Feferi, I am gonna fork every last one of these morons…”

Feferi didn’t respond. Because she had been shifted elsewhere too.

Meenah threw her trident into the ground and let out an intense scream of rage.

~~~

She-ra was supposed to be the savior of Eternia.

She-ra was destined to bring peace and prosperity to the land, saving it from the evils of the Horde.

But one day the Horde had suddenly gotten a million times stronger and more effective… The world had fallen to them with ease. She had escaped with a handful of friends to form a cohesive resistance.

They had been taken one by one…

She was the only one left, now. She, Adora, the last She-ra. And she was going to take on the Horde in a last-ditch attempt at saving everything. She would have to do it - she would have to take out Catra and bring the entire Horde crashing down.

Her prismatic aura of power surrounded her as she drove her legendary blade through the Horde’s ceiling, plowing through several layers of mish-mashed magitech before arriving in the main sanctum.
She was bruised, scratched, battered, and had an artificial foot. She had plowed through hundreds of Horde soldiers with power she hadn’t known she had. But here she was, finally at the throne room. Once it had been Hordak sitting there, but now…

“Catra…” Adora growled, tightening her grip around the ancient sword.

“Ah, Adora, I was wondering when you’d show up,” Catra said - wearing a strange gray uniform with an orange u-like symbol on it. “Like what I’ve done with the place?”

“Your reign of terror ends today, Catra!”

“Terror? Adora, isn’t that a bit harsh?”

“Catra…”

Scorpia ran into the room. “Just got the reports from the Brightmoon district - the interdimensional tech has been fully integrated and all government relief plans are working great!”

“And I just got the entire planet hooked up to the Multiversal Internet!” Entrapta said, skittering in. Adora gawked. “Entrapta…?”

Entrapta ignored her - and Catra chuckled. “You haven’t seen anything yet, Adora.” She snapped her fingers, prompting the screen-wall behind her to light up. “Computer, what is the poverty rate on Eternia?”

“One percent.”

“How much was it before the Horde appeared?”

“Sixty-three percent.”

Adora blinked. “Catra what are y-”

“Computer, how many people have been killed in the war of Eternia?”

“Nine hundred thousand six hundred and four.”

“How many of those happened after I took control?”

“Sixty thousand.”

Adora stared at the screen, trying to process this.

“Computer, show me the Fright Zone.” The screen lit up to show Catra and Adora’s home - except it looked nothing like the industrial wasteland Adora remembered. There were trees everywhere; brilliant, pristine buildings - and children playing in the streets. Not everyone was a soldier.

“It’s hard to measure the quality of life with a number, but I think I’ve improved it for everyone amazzingly,” Catra said with a smirk. “Oh, and your friends? Computer, show us the princess compound.”

Adora’s jaw dropped. People - friends - she had thought were dead were happily sitting around a table, drinking tea and eating cake. There was a guard nearby, but even he seemed to be smiling and enjoying himself.
“The moment all rebellion is stamped out, they get to go free, released of all criminal charges,” Catra said with a smirk. “Would you like to go join them?"

“Y-yes…” Adora said, eyes watering.

“Good. Aside from your total surrender, there’s one other condition.”

“What?”

Catra punched Adora in the face, knocking her to the ground. “And that’s it! Scorpia, you can take her to the others. She can keep her sword, I don’t need it.” She sat down in her throne. “Entrapta, contact Evening, tell her operation ‘horde of cats’ has been completed. Pretty sure we’re ready for complete integration now.”

She smirked. That deal with the purple alicorn had been the best decision of her life. She could only go up from here.

~~~

“I AM NOT AN ANGEL!” Corona shouted, trying to stop a group of people from worshipping her. “I AM A… A…” Her mind went blank. “What am I?”

Lady Rarity shrugged. “Angel is probably the closest body-type.”

“But I’m not some kind of divine being!”

“Hey, Servitude is, she still has the same problem you do.”

“There aren’t cults devoted to her on her homeworld!” Corona said, gesturing at the ‘Corona: Giver of Life’ temple, nestled right in the middle of Canterlot.

“I think it’s flattering.”

“IT’S NOT!”

“Oh, the giver of life is so humble!” a mare said, swooning.

“STOP IT!” Corona shouted, to no avail.

~~~

“Oh, not a fish alien hit the generator!”

“Okay, Saitama,” Tornado said, pressing her hands together. “I need you to do one thing for me.”

“Sure!” Saitama said.

“Stand there and don’t move for an hour.”

“Uh… strange request, but okay.”

“Good. Glad we had this talk.”

Forty-five minutes later Saitama had broken the shield generator for the USM defender ship, allowing the aliens to get into the ship.

“…Saitama…”

“Hey! It’s not my fault that fish alien hit the generator!”
“You punched a hole through the entire ship!”

“...Yes.”

Tornado, in her previous life, would have started screaming. Instead she let out a dejected sigh and started slaughtering the alien invaders.

~~~

In the depths of the Multiverse, in the abyss of the narrative, where time itself has truly bent in a knot, the Gunslinger, yet again, begins his journey.

"I'm catching a vibe that we aren't supposed to see this, Olivia..."

"Nervous over the image of some cowboy guy in a desert, amiga? Fine, let's go to the next one."

~~~

The Emperor of Mankind sat upon the Golden Throne (like he had anything else to do, what with being a skeleton and all). The Captain-General was currently off getting some tea, the three Fabulous Custodians were still in time out for being needlessly creepy, as usual, and his sons were currently having some much needed catch up. So, with little else to do, the Emperor voiced his thoughts via his handy text-to-speech device.

“DAMN, I AM BORED.” The Emperor ‘said’. “THIS IS THE MOST EXTREME CASE OF BOREDOM I HAVE NOT FELT SINCE FUCKING HORUS PUT ME ON THIS STUPID SHINY COUCH AND I WAS FACED WITH TEN MILLENNIA OF SILENCE. UNTIL THE BANANA BRIGADIER COMES BACK WITH MY GODDAMN TEA, I HAVE NOBODY TO AIR MY COMPLAINTS TO. SIGH. I GUESS I CAN SIT HERE AND RATTLE ON TO MYSELF ABOUT ALL THE STUFF ON MY MIND. LIKE ALL THESE MULTIVERSAL VISITORS FROM THE MERODI. THOSE SUNSHINE SPARKLY SHITS HAVE BEEN DOING A LOT OF GOOD WORK FOR THE GALAXY AS OF LATE, EVEN IF THEY ADDED AN UNNECESSARY AS FUCK NOTCH TO MY MASTER PLAN. PURPLE BOOK PONE AND MAGNUS HAVE BEEN GETTING ALONG SWELL, BUT IF MY RED-MEAT CHICKEN-WING SON TRIES TO GO BEHIND MY BONEY BACK AGAIN AND DO SOMETHING STUPID WITH THE MERODI IN AN EFFORT TO GRAB POWER, I WILL BEND HIM OVER MY KNEE AND SPANK HIS ASS EVEN REDDER. I DO MISS THE BACON-ANGEL, THOUGH, SHE REMINDS ME OF MY FABULOUS HAWK-BOY SANGUINIUS. EXCEPT A GIRL WITH DELICIOUS LOOKING HAIR. NOTE TO SELF AFTER RETURNING TO FLESH AGAIN: ORDER AN ENTIRE PLATE OF BACON AND EAT IT WITH PANCAKES. ZOAS’ HIGH VOLTAGE WILLY, WHEN IS MY CARETAKER COMING BACK? I AM GETTING BORED TO THE POINT THAT I AM HALF-TEMPTED TO START MESSING WITH THE VOICE FEATURE ON MY TEXT-TO-SPEECH DEVICE AGAIN. MAYBE I CAN - WAIT, WHEN DID THAT PAINTED SERVO-SKULL GET IN HERE? THAT ISN’T ONE OF MY CHERUBS.”

“Ah, merde.” Olivia quietly cursed, quickly changing the feed and recalling the hijacked camera.

~~~

“Yo. Windy boy.”

John looked up from the sandwich he was eating to see Rainbow Dash. “Uh…”

“I’m told you have quite the interesting ability. This… ‘retcon’ thing sounds… awesome.” Her pink
eyes sparkled. “Can I see it?”

“I can’t take you back before the Combine thing, and I’m really not supposed to use it without a good reason…” John said, frowning.

“Come on. I’m Rainbow Dash, Equis Vitis, captain of the Wonderbolts.” She grinned. “You can say I ordered you to do it. They’ll let you off the hook and Eve can never stay mad at me for long.”

John shrugged. “Eh, sure, not like I’m really doing anything anyway. Where do you want to go?”

“Literally anywhere that isn’t going to explode in our faces.”

John waved his hand around randomly for show - focusing on a point ahead of him so he wouldn’t accidentally bounce back behind the Gallifreyans’ ‘security protocol’ thing.

With a zap, the two of them appeared in the same diner. Except it was night.

“Boring, that’s just regular time travel. Do something interestin-”

John zapped them back a few seconds, appearing in a table on the other side of the diner.

“Boring, that’s just regular time t-” the ret-past Rainbow Dash stared at the newer Rainbow Dash. Ret-present John gave a finger-guns gesture to his ret-past self and he zapped himself and Rainbow Dash away.

Rainbow Dash felt her memories shift like they had just fused with something. “Uh…”

“I just undid a ret-duplication,” John said, folding his arms. “Clever trick, huh?”

“How did you figure that out!”

“…Well, uh, there ended up being two of me at one point and it was awkward how we kept stepping over each other’s shoes… So we figured we might as well try it. Worked like a charm, zap-popped together again.” He retconned a pair of sunglasses from… somewhere and slapped them on his face.


“Eh, sure…” He zapped the two of them away, appearing somewhere random in the future. A large bear made of stars stared at them. They stared back.

“John Egbert…” the bear said, raising an eyebrow. “You must be g-“

John retconned out of there without thinking too hard, appearing inside a crystalline universe. A strange white presence flashed around them, giving the two of them the mental image of a jellyfish made of universes. “I was wondering if you would ever be drawn to me, retconner…”

“Nope!” John said, zapping out again, this time appearing in a place of complete darkness.

“…Maybe we should go back,” Rainbow Dash said.

“Yeah, that’s probably a good id-”

Some monstrous creature in the dark shrieked at them - John auto-zapped once again.

They were suddenly standing in a field. In the sky they saw an endless number of moons orbiting
moons orbiting moons in a fractal pattern…

“It’s probably best if you go back, dears,” a Rarity with a cracked eye said to them. “There’s nothing for you here.”

John felt a chill run down his back. He picked up Rainbow Dash and zapped away.

Instead of being back in the diner, they were in front of the House Juju. It sat alone, in the darkness. *Weren’t there supposed to be Celestialsapiens guarding it?*

He could hear a haunting refrain in the background. He knew, more than anything else, that he needed to get out of there.

And then they were back in the diner like nothing had happened.

“…I think I see why you’re not supposed to use that,” Rainbow Dash said, shivering slightly.
“Thanks but… If I come asking for this again, punch me. Please.”

For once, John didn’t hesitate to agree to punch a girl.

~~~

“So… Twilience, did your prophet get any new ideas?!” I heard Pinkie shout as she entered my study.

“He has one…one for a later metatime. But that’s not here nor there,” I replied, not looking up from my book.

“But visions are so boring…”

“Tell you what, Pinkie. I’ll make sure to bend it a bit… Visions are just that, visions.”

“Think it will be… fun?”

“It will be an encore of creativity. At least, that’s what the Eye is telling me,” I said, pointing to the Eye.

“Ooh! Ooh! Will there be maracas and bands?”

“No, or rather. I don’t know. It will be a chorus of voices, a chorus of songs and stories. A chorus, Pinkie, of songs in their spheres.”

“So when will this happen to us?”

“It could already have happened. I will just collect it all into a book. With a fitting background, of course.”

Pinkie left out the door she came in. I, on the other hoof instead took flight and began figuring out how best to preserve my space library. It would not be easy, but then, when has ka ever made something easy?
“Steven!” Connie shouted from the bottom of the stairs. “Pearl’s almost got breakfast ready! Get down here!”

Steven Universe, half-Gem half-human, opened his eyes with a groan. He was far from the child the Diamonds would recognize from the show - his muscles were well toned and his face was covered in stubble. However, he still wore a similar shirt, and his pink gemstone was ever-present on his belly.

“Steven!”

“Coming!” he called, getting out of the bed and stretching. He walked down the stairs to the front of the Temple proper - the part of the house he had grown up in. Connie was waiting for him at the table - giving him a peck on the cheek as he sat down. The only other person at the table was one Lapiz Lazuli, whose blue eyes were fixated on the newspaper in her hands.

“Listen to this Steven,” Lapis said, ruffling the papers. “Red Diamond project approved by Oversight Division, construction beginning... yesterday. I think. It’s the fifth, right?”

“Earth time or Merodi Standard?” Connie asked.

Lapis shrugged. “Either works.” Her phone buzzed - prompting her to take it out with a tendril of water rather than putting down the newspaper. It was a picture of a green and purple pair of Gems running away from a large interdimensional monster. “Looks like Amethyst and Peridot are having fun.”

Connie blinked. “I’m pretty sure that’s not what ‘HELP’ means.”

Lapis shrugged, putting her phone away. “They’ll be fine.”

Pearl finally leaped over the top of the kitchen counter, laying a tremendous mixture of waffles, whipped cream, and breakfast pies on the table for the three to eat - though naturally only Steven and Connie needed to eat. “Food’s ready!”

“...You’ve gotten really good at cooking over the years, Pearl,” Connie said, taking a bite. “Why don’t you ever eat? I’m sure there are ways to get a more natural digestive tract.”

“The natural ones aren’t worth it,” Lapis warned, downing an entire glass of orange juice in a second.

“I... like the process of preparing food,” Pearl said, shrugging. “Plus, it gets us together every day. Steven really was right all those years ago with that ‘together breakfast’ idea. ...Though you really shouldn’t have dragged it into the temple.”

Steven chuckled. “Not the smartest thing I ever did.”

“Not the dumbest either,” Connie commented.

“Can we not spend today talking about how dumb I was?”

“Of course, Steven,” Pearl said. “Oh, by the way, I got a transmission - Garnet’s coming home today, she should be he-” there was a loud THUNK outside. “...Now, I guess.”

“Breakfast must be put on hold!” Steven declared. “Garnet needs a proper welcome!”

“Eh, sure,” Lapis said, setting the newspaper down. “I wonder if she destroyed a building this time. It was fun to see Bismuth try to be mayor and repair-Gem at the same time.”
“Garnet’s not that careless,” Pearl said with a wave of her hand.

“Then how’d she break the first one?”

“Er…”

Steven threw the door open. “Garnet!” He pulled the fusion Gem into his arms.

Garnet hugged him back. “It’s good to be home.”

“You’re just in time for together breakfast!”

“Steven… never change.” Garnet smiled knowingly. “I’m sorry, it’s going to have to wait.”

“Aww, why?”

Garnet stepped to the side, letting Steven see the feet of the Diamonds. He had to look way up to meet their eyes. “Oh.”

“Hello again!” Blue waved nervously. “I, uh… Steven, you see, we…”

“You know what ka is, right?” Yellow asked - Steven nodded. “Yeah. We found a cartoon called ‘Steven Universe’.”

“Ooooooh…” Steven said. “So you just had to meet me, huh?”

“Well, yes,” Blue admitted. “But there is more to it than th-”

White leaned down and tapped Steven on the head. “You’re Pink Diamond.”

Pearl pulled Steven back and readied her spear while Lapis and Connie entered a fighting stance. “Leave him alone!”

“Pearl, she wasn’t attacking me!” Steven shouted.

“She could have squished you!” Connie countered.

“I have better control over my powers than that…”

“We’re not here to hurt him,” Yellow said. “You have my word.”

Pearl looked up at Yellow Diamond. “What does your word mean?”

“A lot, actually,” Lapis said. “Yellow’s done a lot for Merodi Universalis, Pearl. Peridot and Amethyst have worked with her personally.”

“I… I…”

Steven put a hand on Pearl’s shoulder. “It’s okay, but it’s time to let go of the past.” He stepped forward. “Yes, I’m Steven Universe. My mother was Pink Diamond, otherwise known as Rose Quartz.”

“I thought we were looking for a child…” White muttered.

“Humans grow up,” Lapis said.

“…Who are you?”
“Lapis Lazuli, Bob,” Lapis reported.

“I still can’t believe you made that official,” Connie moaned.

“I like the name,” was all ‘Bob’ the Lapis Lazuli had to say.

White had already grown bored of the terraforming Gem, returning her attention to Steven. “Pink…”

“I’m not her,” Steven said, shaking his head. “Haven’t been for a long time.”

“…Gone…” White whispered to herself.

“I’d like to get to know you, though.” Steven smiled. “We’re family, after all.”

White stared at him blankly.

“I’m Steven. This is my wife, Connie, and the Gem who raised me, Pearl.”

Pearl, despite herself, curtsied. “White Pearl, Quar.”

“I live here,” Lapis offered.

Steven continued. “And my dad, Greg Universe, lives down in that van there.”

Said van was driving up to the temple. It parked, and an aging man with a gray beard climbed out. “Hey Steven! I’ve got the coolest song for y-” he saw the Diamonds. “Oh.”

“…You’re the one who courted Pink…” Yellow said, narrowing her eyes.

“Uh…”

“Didn’t think to ask permission?”

“UH…”

Yellow smirked - then turned away, letting the poor man wonder if it was a joke or not.

“So yeah, that’s the family,” Steven said. “And you’re all here! It’s a full family reunion!”

White stared at him, saying nothing.

“Come on, we’ve got together breakfast going. I can share with you the wonders of eating!”

“…I have business to attend to,” White said, turning away.

“Oh. I understand, you run the entire universe. It’s a big job.”

“It… is.” For a second, she glanced behind herself - taking a moment to look at Garnet before stopping on Steven. “I… meeting you was worthwhile. …Steven.”

And she left.

“…I really thought…” Steven trailed off.

“You did great,” Garnet said, tousling his hair. “She didn’t try to shatter all of us. That’s better than we expected.”
“Heh. Yeah…”

Blue Diamond could no longer restrain herself now that White was gone - she pulled Steven up in a hug and laugh-cried. “You’re the… the best thing that’s happened to me - to us - in a long, long time, Steven.” She tapped Steven lightly in the stomach. “You are her, but you are something else… something she created. You are amazing.”

“Aw, gee, I’m not that special…”

“Yes. Yes you are. And don’t let anyone ever tell you differently.”

“Looks like you just got yourself a doting aunt!” Connie called.

“You haven’t seen anything,” Blue said. “I’m going to move Pink’s palace here for you. You can have everything in it.”

“Wo-oh!” Steven said, blinking. “The palace?”

“Yes. The palace. It’s all yours now. And I know you wouldn’t want to leave this place to have it back. So I’ll bring it to you!”

“…Think Bismuth will like that?”

“No,” Lapis deadpanned.

“…We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

“Hey,” Yellow said, taking Steven from Blue. “You still having trouble with your powers?”

Steven shrugged. “I’m pretty good now. I think.”

“Exactly. You think. We Diamonds have a lot of hidden potential within us, and our powers have many intricate uses and variety. I trained Pink, I can train you.”

“Really?”

“Yes. You, Connie, Stevonnie even.” She smirked. “You’ll have two doting ‘aunts’ and like it.”

Steven laughed. “I’m sure I will! Welcome to the family!”

~~~

“What IS an electric boogaloo?” Gilgamesh asked.

~~~

In a dark room stood a man in a business suit, staring directly at the camera. Just… staring. Staring and… smiling. Smiling a wide and uncomfortable smile. He stared, and stared, and stared some more, unmoving as he kept staring and smiling. Slowly, his mouth opened, and a waterfall of thick brown liquid flowed out. Despite the sudden rush of this sickly ooze, the suited, smiling man, spoke.

“I SEE YOU.”

Olivia quickly changed the feed, and tried to forget ever even putting that camera out. How did it even get there?
Amid the lush landscape of Equis Vitis, there was a lab coat lying on the ground, serving as an improvised picnic blanket. Sitting nearby, a former warden was chatting with his former prisoner.

“So, Pinkie, how the hell did you pull that thing with the camera?”

“Well, I’m SO glad you asked, Doctor Bright!”

“’Doctor Bright’? Now *that*’s a name I haven't heard in a long time!”

---

It wasn’t every day that two Jades started shouting at each other in the middle of the League of Sweetie Belles.

“What is *wrong* with you!?” the first shouted.

“What is wrong with me? You are asking *me* that!?” retorted the other.

“Why not? You’ve abandoned everything and are basically living here like an office dog!”

“BARK! What’s wrong with being an office dog? Plus, I still talk to everyone, and the Sweeties are adorable and *innocent*!”

“You just don’t want to grow up.”

“If growing up means becoming a promiscuous maniac like you, maybe you’re right! You’re worse than Mattie!”

“Maybe I’m better than Mattie!”

“WOOF!”

“BARK!”

John re-tcon-zapped into the room next to Skaian-Sweetie Blink and Mattie. The latter was drinking a fruity alcoholic beverage.

“Uh… which one’s Alpha and which one’s Omega?” John asked.

“I have no idea,” Blink admitted with a shrug. “It’s still probably a good idea for you to stop them.”

“Nah, let them go at it,” Mattie said with a smirk. “Brings a new meaning to ‘cat’ fight.”

John rubbed his hands together, going with Blink’s idea. “Okay girls, let’s calm down…”

Both of them barked at him aggressively, making him fall back in surprise.

Blink facehooved and sighed.

---

At the door to the headquarters of The League of Sweetie Belles, an irritated ghost was giving a lecture to its founders - who were doing their best to casually block the entrance with their bodies.
“...so, as should now be evident from the points I mentioned earlier, the practice of assessing the members for an association by a label of an ‘alternate version of an individual’ is a manifestation of rooted discrimination and xenophobia, and I find it preposterous that a congregation like this is given the responsibility to enforce the law, in a stark contradictio—”

“Please, Kankri, just shut up,” interrupted Allure.

Bot spoke up. “You are... advised to visit the Sparkle Census! The ‘lecture’ speech pattern compatibility detected. There is a statistically significant probability that the members of the friendly rival group will appreciate your input... Do not inform the Sparkles that this unit was the source of this idea. Please.”

“No!” - Squeaky protested with a high-pitched scream. “Do you want us to fight another war, Bot?”

Thrackerzod, silent, mentally shuffled her exhaustive list of banishment invocations.

~~~

“...Copyright strike?” Trixie said, cocking her head at the email she’d just received.

Discord summoned a pair of ‘old librarian’ glasses and examined the screen. “Curious...”

“I didn’t think we had those!” Trixie muttered.

“Local companies can claim copyright,” Discord said, flipping through a ‘Tome of Legalese’.

“I - I knew that!” Trixie hissed. “I just never get them! I’m always within the parody use!”

“You are the epitome of a parody...”

“Quiet,” she muttered, looking through the email further. “Hold on... a machine gave me the strike!? Why would it do that?!”

“Bad AI?”

“Trixie’s phone intelligence is smarter than that!”

Discord grinned. “Never underestimate a company’s ability to cut corners.”

Trixie mumbled. “Trixie will go to war over this...”

“...Over ‘the nineteen best cat memes of the week’?”

“YES!”

~~~

Elsewhere, a law was created that exempted Burgerbelle from copyright strikes of all kinds.

~~~

“Evening?”

“Yes, Renee?”

“Why are we dressed like cows?”
Eve examined herself, noting the giant rubber cow skin she happened to be wearing. Renee was standing next to her, wearing an identical one. “I don’t know,” Eve admitted.

~~~

“My name is Moguro Fukuzuo, people call me the Laughing Salesman. However, I am no ordinary salesman, because I am in the soul business. Human souls, that is.” The Happy Mask Salesman had only just encountered this strange visitor to his stall in the Neutral Zone. This smiling, portly gentleman in a well-kept business suit with his beautiful green floral-print bag immediately caught his eye before he even spoke in that jovial, deep tone.

The Happy Mask Salesman met Moguro’s smile with one of his own and placed a hand on the shorter man’s shoulder.

“Why haven’t we met sooner? Come, let me buy you a drink….”

~~~

Guide to Librarians

High School Librarians

“The computers aren’t for games, the printers aren’t for personal use”

While every breed of librarian has mutations, exceptions, and subsections, none are more well-known or developed than the High School Librarian. Best known for their aggression, it’s often posited that they are as much victims as they are librarians.

Teenagers are the closest things mortals can be to immune to eldritch horrors. Their changing brains, hormones, and body make them the perfect counters to any librarian, and as such, the High School Librarian and the students that they hold sway over are in a war of attrition with each other. The oldest in documented history.

Casualties of all kinds, rules and rebellions both, nothing is safe or sacred in the warzone that is a public high school library. These librarians are among the weakest and most distracted of any breed, primarily due to the unfathomable resources and power they commit to their war.

*if you ever wish to safely check out a book, do it here, your mind and soul are likely to be spared.

Cover Librarians

“That’s not for you to know”

A strange breed of librarian, often cited as the most reasonable and least eldritch, but this is a proven trick. Cover Libraries are defined by the secrets they keep. As such, little is known about them, only that they’re unnaturally friendly as far as librarians go.

What secrets they’re holding is something nobody will find out, by design, but you’ll know you’re about to do something they don’t like by how suddenly they shift from calm and talkative to mind-shattering nightmare. Avoid leaving their line of sight, stay away from unmarked doors, and do not reach too far past the check out.

If you value your life you will not attempt to uncover their secrets, some things were not meant to be known. It doesn’t matter where you go, how far you run, or how many defences you put up, this librarian will find you, traversing through your own secrets, and you will be found an unrecognizable
smear across the floor.

**Mobile Librarians**

“These wheels take me far, these books even further”

Mobile Librarians are known for their mobility, and while not the most omnipresent, they fit between the cracks, filling the space left over by the other Librarians. They exist anywhere no knowledge normally can, and that includes, among other places, your own home.

Their collection of books contains the most eclectic selection you can possibly hope to find, from recipe books by long extinct universes, to unpublished works of unknown authors, to even the most obscure thought bubbles of comic characters that have never existed. Mobile Librarians are among the most prideful, and as such, it’s advised you never challenge them in any way.

If you find yourself unfortunate enough to have a library cart come across your path, calmly borrow a book, read it, and return it: anything else may result in your untimely disassembly.

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Boon “Twilight” Sparkle closed the *Guide to Librarians*. “Well, I found this book decidedly offensive.”

The rest of the Sparkle Census book club nodded in agreement.

“We’re librarians, not eldritch horrors from another universe.” She rolled her eyes. “If these facts are true in any universe - which I highly doubt - the librarians would never be able to hold stable jobs, much less get any actual readers, which is all a library is for.”

“Yeah, we get it,” Horny Sparkle said, nodding slowly so as not to unbalance her absurd number of horns.

“Maybe it’s a distorted understanding of L-space?” Timmernives Sparkle suggested. “Some of us do gain power through that.”

“Not in such absolute terms…”

Boon nodded. “Regardless, I should get back to my library. Normally I would stick around, but I have a feeling the discussion of this book would leave somewhat of a bad taste in my mouth.” She opened a dimensional portal to her home world and stepped through.

Just before it closed, they watched her fold the *Guide to Librarians* out of existence without even using magic from her horn.

“...Boon lives in a small town, right?” Timmernives asked.

“...Yeah,” Horny agreed.

“...Gimme that book, what did it say about Town Librarians and reality manipulation?”

~~~

The world once was a storm of rocks, by wildest urge

Then, amid people stood a man, the Demiurge,
He made a pillar to support the world of wildest dreams,
In which he put a monument to blow the streams.
Below the masterwork of all-defying gears
He put the elegant array of thirteen spheres.
The first one was to give the world direction,
To make the fate move on, not looking back,
To set all events that will matter in connection,
And to give storylines a structure to track.
The second one gave world a sense of measure,
So every blade of grass that holds its worlds,
Would know its place, and give a gift of treasure
To those who know how measuring works.
The third, to count and understand the counted,
To make the fate a lady of the fashionable looks,
So everything worthwhile will be accounted,
And then be put into the spotlight of the books.
The fourth, to make unseen remain unwritten,
Thus making room for unexplored worlds,
For subtle things not meant to be belittled,
For those who fill, and fall between the words.
The fifth, to give events the sense of freedom,
That Demiurge decreed to matter more
Then freedom of the will to not be written,
As souls demand to move, fight and explore.
The sixth was giving people a connection,
Far deeper than the thoughts alone could bother
For Demiurge have sought, in his deception,
To draw the people closer to each other.
The seventh brought the weight to the illusion
Of the beginning, change, and rising action,
The climax, resolution, and conclusion,
Of things that stay forever in reaction.
The eighth was guarding life and procreation,
Made history to, time and time, repeat,
To give the story worthy of salvation
A chance to shine in glorious beat.
The ninth implanted people their ideals,
To fight for, and to live for in the joy
Turned feelings into the Eternal Feelings,
And gave a soul to every wooden boy.
The tenth have reigned over the decisions,
And made the plans more interesting to bind
As well as made a reason for the reason,
And turned matter plaything of a mind.
Eleventh made the people scream in rage,
And break the laws the worlds rely upon
As it reduced them to the words on page,
Turning each faces into a grin or frown.
The twelfth was close to purpose of the coup,
In beauty of the struggle and story,
It turned hearts to awe, and joy, and hope,
As words on pages came to worldly glory.
And the thirteenth, one sphere to rule them all,
Between them all, in vision to command them,
To make them turn all else they see to fall,
And in a darkness, to the Tower bind them.

~~~

Mane facts.
Mane fact one:

Manes come in many colors, including blueberry, brusk, slippery, and up.

Mane fact two:

The screaming you hear when you brush manes comes from quantum vibrations with the IG dimension.

Mane fact three:

Although it is rare, manes have been found engaging in chess rituals with one another.

Mane fact four:

It’s impossible to scronch a mane, despite public belief to the contrary.

Mane fact five:

If a mane enters the nubbia phase, identified by "˜Ø"˜, run because it appears the manes have entangled all the other facts in their webs. Join us next time when we talk about eyeballs.

~~~

“STARLIGHT.... BREA-”

“Hey, can we talk about this!?“

Nanoha looked down at Randall Flagg. “...What? Why?”

Randall Flagg had his hands up in surrender. “I’d rather not have to respawn right now, it’s happened several times in the last week and it’s been getting annoying. I can offer you information abou-”

Nanoha vaporized him instantly.

Flagg respawned at the Tower with an annoyed twitch. He should have known better than to try reasoning with that woman...

~~~

“Listen up, hack,” a Skaian troll grunted, smashing a fist into the counter. “Your food is substandard, the atmosphere is absolute shit, and you have the worst face I’ve ever seen in a place daring to call itself a restaurant. I’m not paying for this.”

Azula’s eyebrow twitched. She knew she should just let it slide - but enough was enough. “You’re going to pay one way or another…”

The troll summoned god-tier robes of Blood to him. “You’re not going to get a fuckin’ chance, witch. You can’t do anything. I-”

And the conflict was interrupted by a snicker from a short redhead in a old-timey bluish dress.

“...What’s so funny?” the troll demanded.
The woman looked up at him. “Oh, oh, you were being serious. That makes it so much better - give me a second, I need to let this out.” She proceeded to engage in an immense, hearty guffaw.

“Are you suicidal?”

“No, but you have a terminal case of not understanding basic laws of human decency. Maybe we need a primer? I’m sure I’ve got a board book somewhere that’ll speak to your level…”

He took a step toward her. “You don’t want to know what I’m going to do if you don’t shut up!”

“Hit me? Because that is exactly what I’m trying to do. Just poke the angry crab-gremlin with a stick and it’ll bite eventually, no matter how dumb it would be to do so. Look at all these WITNESSES!”

The troll blinked. “This changes nothing.”

“You don’t need to act all tough just because you forgot other people existed for a second there.”

He looked ready to snap - but his instinct of self-preservation kept him from attacking her.

“Huh. I guess trollkind really is like humanity. Weak in just the r-”

The troll lashed out, knocking the girl into a far wall, prompting a trickle of blood to come out of her forehead.

She already had her phone open and called to emergency services. “OH GOD HELP HE’S ATTACKING ME HE’S A MONSTER PLEASE ARREST HIM OH GOD HE’S COMING AAAAAA-” she hung up, sending a cheeky smirk at the troll. “You might want to run.”

“FUCK,” the troll scrambled out of the tea shop as fast as he could manage.

The girl stood up, dusted herself off, and wiped the blood from her brow. She shot Azula a simultaneously cute and cruel smirk paired with a thumbs up.

“...Thank you, Wendy…” Azula grunted.

“And you owe me three times over now! What is this, a pattern?”

“Unfortunately…”

Wendy giggled. “I wonder how high this’ll go… Sadly, I won’t be cashing any of those favors in, gonna spend the day with Jenny. But you can rest easy knowing Wendy will be back! See ya!” She skipped out the door.

“...That girl reminds me way too much of myself…” Azula muttered.

“...Can we have our tea yet?” a patron asked.

“Yes. So long as you get it last.”

“Aw…”

~~~

Cinder Belle sat down in front of Allure Belle. She gulped - she was sitting down with the Sweetie. #000001, Equis Vitis Sweetie, the founder, the boss. She looked scary with that artificial horn, the deep, piercing eyes, and the… adorable smile?
“You really shouldn’t be scared,” Allure said with a chuckle. “I’m just a Sweetie, like you!”

“Like me?”

“Well, yeah! Same cutie mark, same size, same history until the multiverse got into our lives.”

“Bet you didn’t burn down the school.”

“I might have. I really don’t remember.”

Cinder giggled. “How would you not remember that?”

“The tree sap is more important in my mind!”

“...The horror…”

“Yes... The horror…”

The two of them shuddered at memories of tree sap - both old and recent.

“The curse of the CMC…” Allure shook her head. “Anyway, I’m hoping you’re enjoying the League of Sweetie Belles so far!”

“Oh yeah, I am! Everything’s amazing - even if it is a little hard to stomach sometimes. Things are so... different out here.”

“I hear you. It’s hard to realize that, sometimes, the hard choices must be taken. But for every hard choice, there’s several friends and good memories.” She smiled the signature ‘adorable’ smile most Sweeties had. “I know you’re destined for great things, Cinder.”

“Really? How?”

“Call it intuition. Or Mattie.”

“IT’S ME!” Mattie called from the doorway. “IT’S ALL ME!”

“Mattie this is a private conversation!”

“You and I both know it isn’t!” Mattie said with a chuckle.

“...Unfortunately true,” Allure grumbled.

“I have no idea what’s going on,” Cinder admitted.

“Oh, you will, you will,” Mattie said with a devious chuckle. “Toodeloo!”

~~~

“What does the aspect of Rage really mean?” Flutterfree asked Vriska.

Vriska paused. “Well... Uh... it’s not exactly ‘rage’, but it’s not exactly ‘truth’, it’s...”

A Vriska ghost dropped from the ceiling, cackling. “It doesn’t matter! Because every interpretation of the Aspects exist in the Dream Bubble!” She grabbed the living Vriska’s face. “Our attempts to assign definitions to the Aspects are completely fucking useless! USELESS! We think we have it, but we know that another interpretation really exists somewhere because of the stupid Tower! STUUUUUUUUPID TOWER!”
Vriska blinked. “Where the hell did you come from?”

“Oh, uh, me and the other Vriskas decided we didn’t like you. So we’re gonna beat you up.”

Vriska groaned. “Oh for the love o-”

“MINDFANG SQUAD ATTACK!”

~~~~

Celestia Umbra sensed her body surging with Void energy again, ready to attack. Ahead of her team an enormous, rectangular, chrome robot rose above the buildings, visor-like optics taking aim, along with its gatling gun arms spooling up, and missile launchers opening.

All three heroes attacked, Umbra firing her Void beam, Genos unleashing a monstrous plasma wave, and Raven throwing an enormous metal wad; all attacks colliding with the robot in a giant fireball.

After several tense moments, the dust cleared, revealing an unharmed giant robot. Even without their HUDs, the heroes knew the robot's defenses barely registered the hit.

In an instant, the counterattack came. A wall of missiles, bullets, and death ray lasers peppered the area, throwing up a cloud of fire and concrete. Umbra gasped in pain, her body vanishing, her soul returned to the Void...

Celestia Umbra materialized in the mortal plane once more, inside a large recreation tent. Every part of her body was once again as healthy and complete as when she had first entered the Void.

"Show's already over, Umbra. Tornado saved the day," Raven states, leaning on a wall. Umbra looked around, noting a few disaster recovery workers, an X taped to the ground below her, and a recently repaired Genos at a table, contemplating his bowl of spice noodles.

With Raven's magic, Genos's weaponry, and her own Void energy, a giant, rampaging robot should have been an easy takedown. Most baseline Celestias on their own would have the power to completely obliterate a giant robot, if given a chance.

*If given a chance.*

Umbra suddenly facehooved hard enough to make any Twilight wince. "We just got served the Worf Effect, didn't we?"

"I take offense to that label!" a Klingon loudly growled.

Umbra turned, to see Lieutenant Commander Worf himself standing cross-armed with a decidedly unamused expression on his face.

“...You got beat up too,” a relief worker said.

“...That is beside the point, and if you were a Klingon I would consider that a slight to my honor!”

~~~~

EQVOKHTWW EQVOKHTW XQW BYC OQWB DLEC BLL EKRRKDMPB RLV NLM BL RKTMOV LMBA WMDY Q WYQIC VCOOON KB XQW WMDY QH KJPLVBOHB JCWWWQTC BLL NLM DLMOE YQFCT IHLXH WL JMDY QHE NCB NLM BYVCX KB QOO QXQN KB XQW WMDY QH CQWN DLEC BLL QOOC NLM YQE BL EL XQW HLBKDCW KB XQW Q GQWC WKSBN RLMVS CHDVPGBKHL QHE TLI RVLJ BYVCV
“Hi, welcome to Bradburger, home of the Brad burger, how may I Brad your Burger?” Burgerbelle asked from her station at the local Celestia City Bradburger. She stared down a gaggle of eight-foot tall humans in bright red power armor with snarling skulls on the shoulder platings. The one at the register, a shaggy-haired man with teeth filed to a fine knife-like point, placed his hands on the sides of the counter and leaned towards the Flat.

“We are the Flesh Eaters of the Adeptus Astartes,” he greeted in a breathy, hoarse voice, as though he had been devoid of water for weeks. “Mighty warriors of the Imperium of Man on a holy quest, ordained by our noble father, Primarch Sanguinius. We have traveled the vast expanses of space and reality itself, crossed many planets and peoples, those who did not aid were crushed underfoot, and those who praised us were rewarded for their faith and loyalty. Now, our quest has brought us to this establishment, beyond the peering eyes of the Astronomicon and the shadowy net of the Inquisition, and have entered into this most sacred yet confusing of places, to tell of you this singular proclamation, oh, one that defies conventions of reality.” He locked eyes with Burgerbelle and spoke again in the utmostly serious of tones. “We hunger for burger.”

Burgerbelle leaned forward into the Flesh Eaters’ personal space bubble. “How many can I put you down for?” The cheering for ‘BORGAR’ could he heard from clear across Celestia City.

“You know you’re boring, right?” Deadpool asked Lightning.

She punched his head off. “Boring can be effective.”

“Noted…” Deadpool muttered as his head grew back.

Hastur stared at Ahzek Ahriman.

Ahriman stared at Hastur.

Between them there was the equivalent of an eldritch cookie.

“This is the property of the Embodiment.”

“It has been claimed by the Lord of Change!”
“No such thing has happ-”

Ahriman clapped his hands. “Ha! You blinked! I win, it’s mine!”

“We are not subject to such childi-”

Pinkie appeared behind Hastur. “Are you breaking the rules of a staring contest, Hastur?”

“N-no.”

“Good…”

~~~

“Hey, I’ve got a question,” one of Them asked. “Do the Beyonders ever pause to consider that maybe, just maybe, punching it isn’t a solution?”

A Beyonder punched the intangible presence of the Them.

“I rest my case - the Beyonders are a fluke of existence, of an intelligence not worthy of survival. I recommend full-society psych-ward lockup.”

“AN AVERAGE THEM HAS MORE DIAGNOSABLE MENTAL CONDITIONS THAN THE AVERAGE BEYONDER,” a Horrorterror pointed out.

“And the hypocrisy just keeps going,” the Them said with a chuckle.

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Roxy picked up the Ruby (who had named herself Red Vengeance) and squeed. “You. Are. So. Fuckin’. Cute.”

“PUT ME DOWN I AM THE FURY OF A THOUSAND VOLCANOES!”

“Awww look at her! So feisty!”

The Ruby lit herself on fire, prompting Roxy to drop her.

“Hey! No! Bad Red Vengeance!”

“I will not be trifled with!”

Roxy shrugged, turning to examine her surroundings. She was in a Gem ‘leisure’ area - a room that hadn’t existed on Gem Homeworld prior to inclusion in Merodi Universalis. In theory, they were there to allow Gems to relax and be themselves, engage in activity that wasn't work-related.

But these crystal people, for the most part, weren’t doing that. They were treating it like a break - a chance to regain energy before going back to work. She saw very few smiling or laughing, and those that were were always talking about their work. It was all work, work, work with these minerals…

Well, she was here to change that. ...Actually, she was here to get classified info from a particularly stingy Emerald, but she could do that later. Right now, these Gems were in need of some of the good ol’ Rolal magic.

Which consisted of her creating a pinata out of thin air and leaving it in the middle of the room - precisely where Red Vengeance would kick it right into the face of a nearby Amethyst. The horse
exploded, showering candy everywhere.

The few Gems who had bothered to create digestive tracts - about four - saw the candies and instantly started shoveling them into their mouths.

Meanwhile, Red Vengeance looked at where the pinata horse was. When another one appeared out of thin air, she kicked it again, a small grin crawling up her face. “Yes…”

“Quit it!” one of the Amethysts shouted. “Or I wi-” a pinata stick appeared in her hand. With a grin, she took off after Red Vengeance - only for several more pinatas to fall from the ceiling. Soon, the entire break room was filled with a mess of confetti, sticks, candy - and laughter.

“I’m impressed,” Pinkie told Roxy - both of them having just appeared from nowhere. “But this’ll die off soon.”

“Not if we get one of them hooked on video games,” Roxy said with a grin, holding up a console with sixteen controllers plugged into it.

“...I like your style! Let’s show these Homeworld Gems what partying means!”

“Hell fucking yeah!” She rubbed her hands together - these amazing creatures were going to become what they had the potential to be.

They then proceeded to have the best Gem party in the history of the multiverse that would set a precedent for all Gem parties to come. Roxy formed a close bond with a Carnelian, pinata guts were thrown around everywhere in a strange mirror of ritualistic tribalism, and there was a mysterious letter ‘H’ painted on the ground after the party was over. No one knew where it came from.

~~~

Jace Berelen, the Mind Mage and the Living Guildpact, was looking at Pinkie’s Party of Merodi Explorers.

The explorers were looking at Jace Berelen.

"Welcome to the Multiverse." said Jace.

"Welcome to the Multiverse!" said the team, in unison.

There was an awkward pause.

"So, I gather that we must settle which Multiverse includes which?"

"...right."

~~~

TOWER OF AHRIMAN, PLANET OF THE SORCERERS, GALAXA IMMATERIUM

Lightning and thunder crashed upon the Warp-ravaged planet once known as Prospero, and within the highest tower on the farthest side of the planet, Azek Ahriman, greatest sorcerer of the Thousand Sons, was plotting away at his latest scheme. Stood before and audience of his Rubric Marines and his slightly less enthusiastic ward, Ignis. Ahriman drifted across the room and placed his hand on a podium concealed in a tarp.

“Gentlemen, I have searched forth across the multiverse, and have found a MAGNANIMOUS
artefact that will garner the strength to TOPPLE the societies that dare oppose us!” Ahriman proclaimed with grandiose sweeps and gestures. No one responded, though the Rubric Marines at least had the excuse of being made of dust. “BEHOLD!” With a flourish, Ahriman removed the tarp, allowing it to fall to the ground, revealing the podium and the object on display. It was a leather-bound tome, stitched together with dried skin and bearing a face of howling anguish. Scrawled on the cover were the words ‘Fanaros Fictionomicon’. “This book contains innumerable incantations and legacies of Prophets that were barred entry from the Black Library itself! With the words written on these accursed pages will grant us insight beyond measure, and allow us to overcome the FOOLS that dare oppose us!” Ahriman threw his helmeted head back in a howling laughter of both glory and madness, only to stop and point at the audience of Rubric Marines. “Laugh evilly with me, Rubrics!” Ahriman resumed his laughter, while the barely sentient Rubric Marines made noises more akin to a vacuum cleaner having a stroke as dust fell out the cracks in their armor and through the grills of their helmets. The only one not laughing was Ignis.

“Sire, isn’t the Fanaros Fictionomicon the book that drove the Sorcerer of the Word Bearers known as ‘Fresh’ to madness?” Ignis asked. “He claimed it to be, and I quote,” he raised his armored fingers for emphasis. “‘The greatest atrocity the galaxy has seen since the Horus Heresy?’”

Ahriman, naturally, was not perturbed, and thwacked Ignis over the head with his staff. “Shut your stupid face, Ignis,” He snapped. “I am FAR greater than that pitiful Word Bearer and his admittedly fashionable hat.” He plucked the book from the podium and flipped it open. “I will read from this accursed tome and see what the words of these forsaken Prophets may be able to teach me!” Ahriman glanced down and began reading… and reading… and reading…. After about five solid minutes of silence, fire erupted from the eye holes in Ahriman’s helmet. He threw the book against the wall and began screaming in p, running in circles and smacking himself in the head to put out the flames. “RUBRICS! BRING ME WATER FOR MY EYES, RUBRICS! TZEENTCH’S BLUE BALLS, MY ALL-POWERFUL EYES!” While Ahriman continued screaming and the Rubrics slowly went to retrieve water for their in-pain master, Ignis decided to deal with the book itself, utilizing traversal tech to open a portal, and threw it in with nary a care. Wherever that book ended up, it was someone else’s problem.

Meanwhile, in Celestia City, Nova was walking out of a local coffee store with a fresh brew to enjoy. She barely took two steps away when a portal opened to the side of her and she was knocked upside the head with a book. She went down like a sack of bricks and her coffee was spilled to the ground. Reports have yet to discern the cause of this attack, but the culprit will be eventually discovered, and then have the book thrown at them.

~~~

“DIE DIE DIE!” Pinkie shouted, splattering red all over the walls with her chainsaw. “DIE DIE DIE DIE DIE!” The thick, crimson liquid poured down the walls in a horrifying, viscous manner. “DIE!!!!”

“Pinkie it’s just a bad cake,” Flutterfree said, wiping it out of her eyes. “No need to be so dramatic.”

“IT MUST DIE!!!!”

~~~

Burgerbelle hung her ‘employee of the month’ frame on Swip’s wall. She put her hands on her hips and grinned proudly. “Best Bradburger saleswoman in existence.”

Cinder looked at the inscription. “Celestia City location?”
“Yep!”
“We haven’t been to Celestia City all month.”
“Yep!”
“Burgerbelle…”
“Burger.” She nommed a burger.

Eyeball facts.
Eyeball fact one:
All eyeballs are actually blind.
Eyeball fact two:
While it is unknown to the denizens of the universe, many Earth Ottoman dishes contain eyeball extract.
Eyeball fact three:
Modern theories suggest eyeballs are a remnant of Downstreamer civilization.
Eyeball fact four:
The size of an eyeball is indeterminate.
Eyeball fact five:
There is a pony with an eyeball cutie mark. They refused to comment when asked, instead running away screaming. Their reasoning is unknown.
The eyeballs are staring at us, making sharing more facts uncomfortable.
Join us next time when we talk about 19.

Gem Homeworld was abustle - White Diamond was to give her first personal speech since the formation of Merodi Universalis. What could possibly be so important that she bothered to make a physical appearance rather than having one of her Zircons do it?

There were a few in the audience who knew what it was.
One - or perhaps two, depending on how you counted - of them was grinning from ear to ear.
Garnet’s hands were clasped together and she was trying not to uncharacteristically giggle.

White Diamond eventually strode out onto the White Palace’s balcony - which normally faced the Pink Palace, but that had suspiciously vanished yesterday and no Gem wanted to ask about it.

“Gems of the Gem Vein!” White Diamond declared. “After much deliberation with the other Diamonds and the rest of Merodi Universalis, we have determined that the time is right to change one of our oldest traditions. When we first joined Merodi Universalis, we were not ready - but now
that we have lived alongside them for so long, we no longer have anything to fear.” She spread her arms wide and smiled brightly - even though Garnet knew she wasn’t that happy about this. “Fusion between all types of Gems within Gem Vein worlds is no longer punishable by exile - and the same goes for the Off Colors. Our society’s structure is now flexible enough to accom-

Whatever else she said was caught up in the sound of the crowd cheering. Several dozen Gems who had been keeping their fusion capabilities secret came together on the spot and laughed - some of love, some of friendship, and Garnet even saw a Quartz and a Topaz fuse for the sake of strength.

Garnet couldn’t help but tear up.

White Diamond, to her credit, managed to keep her level smile - a slight twitch the only indication that, internally, her stomach was twisting and turning.

She may not have come all the way - but no one could resist Steven’s redeeming charm entirely.

The celebration soon got out of control and White Diamond just stopped talking. She turned and went back into her palace. Garnet hoped she would come out more often, now. That Gem spent too much time in her head.

Her thoughts were interrupted when she saw a pair of ponies she hadn't expected to see here - Rev and Flutterfree. “Well, look what the cat dragged in.”

“Meow,” Flutterfree said with a smile.

“Yes… I hate to admit it, I was dragged,” Rev said, shifting uncomfortably. “Flutterfree… said I needed to see this.”

“You didn’t need to,” Garnet said. “I understand.”

“I…” Rev bit her lip. She shook her head with a short laugh. “Garnet, I want you to know one thing. I am happy for the freedom you and your entire race have achieved. Whatever else… that is true. You deserve this.”

Garnet smiled. “I didn’t even ask for that from you.”

“I know. I… I asked it of myself.” She smiled awkwardly. “Now, uh, I hear Gems have recently learned how to party, and that Pinkie says I have to see it?”

“Right this way…” Garnet said with a chuckle.

~~~

Froppy and Tornado sat on a bench, watching a giant meteor fall from the sky.

“Now?” Tornado asked.

“No,” Froppy said.

“Now?”

“No.”

“Now?”

“No.”
“Now?”
“Yes.”
“Now?”
“I SAID YES RIBBIT!”

Tornado leaped into action, grabbing the meteor with her telekinesis and pushed it back into orbit.

“All right,” Froppy said, looking at her scanner. “We’ll need to come back in three weeks and two days in the local Toronto to keep it from destroying the planet.”

“Gotcha.”

“...We really should just destroy it.”

Tornado shrugged. “They’re the ones who say it’s a sacred relic. Who are we to destroy it?”

“We’re being manipulative.”

“This is the USM. What did you expect?”

~~~

“I AM REALITY!” the horror from another dimension roared in O’Neill’s face. “IN THIS REALM, MY THOUGHTS ARE LAW, AND THE CITIZENS ARE MY ESSENCE! YOU CANNOT FREE THEM FROM ME, FOR THEY ARE ME!” Reality pulsed. “YOU ARE BUT A MAN, A MAN WHO WILL BEND TO ME THE MOMENT I THINK IT NECESSARY.”

“...I mean, sure, but what if we declared war on you?”

“How would that help?”

“...Say I had an army of ghosts that could manipulate reality itself.”

“...What?”

“Hit it, Meenah!”

“You got it Fish-Boy!” Meenah shouted, jumping into reality with dozens of god-tier Skaian ghosts behind her. Before the horror could do anything, he was frozen in time, space, his mental faculties were severed from his reality, and the people were freed from the insanity brought about by their lord and horror.

“...Meh. You guys make this too easy,” O’Neill muttered.

“You do need to find some better enemies,” Meenah admitted. “I haven’t needed to fork anyfin in a while... Why can’t we have a real war again, huh?”

“You don’t want one of those.”

“Yes I do!”

O’Neill pondered this. She probably did...
Dirk Strider, Prince of Heart, looked up from a robot he was building.

He spoke in his usual near-deadpan tone that was somehow constantly dripping with irony. “Why are you glaring at me like that? I’m certainly flattered by your enamored affections, but I’m not into horses.”

I didn’t relent on the glare. “I just want you to know that I’m watching you, Dirk Strider. Watching you in case you get any ideas. I will stop you if you ever even think of going too far.” I twitched involuntarily. “Also, you’re a big fat liar.”

I didn’t give him a chance to respond.

~~~

Alushy was trotting around Celestia City, Minna on her back. “Now, kid, you’re old enough for some serious fun.”

“I don’t think so,” Minna responded.

“See? Mature enough to realize that, means you definitely are.”

“Flawed argument.”

“Do I look like I care?”

“No. Do I look like I care?”

The two stared at each other for a moment before engaging in light chuckles.

“And here we have the vampire nanny in her natural habitat, cuteness overload.”

Alushy’s chuckles stopped short while Minna’s only increased. “You…” Alushy glared.

Wendy smirked, putting an ‘innocent’ finger on her face. “Who, me?”

“You’re dead.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m alive right now. And will keep being alive.”

“You don’t get to call my blu-” Wendy activated a teleporter and vanished. Alushy growled.

“…She’ll rue this day.”

Wendy did not rue the day. Alushy forgot the insult had occurred within an hour.

~~~

It was a quiet day at the Sparkle Census, with Twilights of all sorts milling about, striking up conversations with each other and reading books in the vast libraries. Said quiet was then immediately destroyed by a tear in the fabric of reality as a portal was literally ripped open in the center of the room, with five enormous and heavily armed Orks emerging. All Twilights in the room went still and dead silent as the Orks walked about, grumbling to themselves and pointing their crude yet effective guns at everything. One of the Orks turned towards the largest Ork of the bunch with a dull look on his face.

“Yeah, dat’s roight.” The warboss said, munching on a stogie as he oversaw the room. Many of the Twilights flinched under their gazes, not wanting to provoke the big angry aliens with guns.

“Well… do youz see any of ‘em?” The Boss moved to speak, but paused as he raised a meaty hand up in contemplation. He looked about the room, staring at nearly a dozen Twilight Sparkles who seemed utterly paralyzed under the brutish alien’s gaze. After his sweep, the Boss turned back to his underling and scratched his chin.

“Moight be we jus’ came in when deyz iz out.” The warboss reasoned. “We’ll come back later an’ see if deyz up fer a good krumpin’. LET’S MOVE ‘EM OUT, BOYZ!” The Orks grumbled, dropping their arms and huddling through the portal, only occasionally stopping to punch each other in the head before slipping back through their tear in reality, until all but the warboss remained. Right as he stepped a boot through the portal, one of the Twilights let off a sneeze, causing the big beast to glance about in confusion. Nobody moved for a solid minute before the Ork ultimately shrugged and closed the portal behind him. Thus began a very long string of Ork Invasions on the Sparkle Census that went absolutely nowhere, due to the apparent invisible nature of the Twilights themselves.

~~~

Olivia and Roxy saw the image of a dark, smoky unicorn and a pink-haired fairy looking at a screen. This screen showed Olivia and Roxy looking at a screen of the smoky unicorn and the fairy looking at...

“My brain hurts…” Roxy muttered. Both of them. The human and the fairy.

King Sombra looked at the hacker once known as Sombra with a confused look. “What…”

Olivia squealed in glee. “The other Sombra’s clipshow!”

“Are there others!?” Roxy the fairy asked.

“This is foolishness!” King Sombra shouted.

And then all the screens switched to new locations.

~~~

I became aware of a pitch-black emptiness all around me. I could feel ground beneath my hooves, and could see myself just fine, but the rest of the universe was completely blank and featureless.

I glared at nothing. “What are you doing?”

Nothing responded.

I continued glaring. “Ponygood, I know you’re writing me,” I said. “And I don’t appreciate it.”

My voice didn’t echo, and still nothing responded.

I glowered at the darkness. “Didn’t think so. So are you going to torment me with more memes? More Butt the Cloud?” My voice had risen out of anger. “Or maybe Cloud the Butt? I know you were writing that, it doesn’t matter that you deleted it!”

Continued silence.

I unfurled my wings and stomped a hoof threateningly. “Ponygood, I swear to the Tower, if you force me to deal with even one more stupid meme, I’ll personally hunt down every single version of
you and… wait.” I frowned suspiciously at the darkness, realizing that absolutely nothing had popped out of it. “...what are you doing?”

Still nothing responded. But then, after a second, a stack of books materialized and thumped to the floor neatly, and I got the impression that I had yet to read any of them. A second later, a heart-shaped box of chocolates appeared next to it. And then a flickering candle next to it, letting out a warm lavender scent.

I raised an eyebrow, retracting my wings. “Is this supposed to be an apology?” I didn’t expect anything to respond, but still waited a few polite seconds before continuing. “...I’ll take it, I suppose, but you’re still far from forgiven.”

I half-expected the items to turn into clouds when I approached them, but thankfully nothing of the sort happened. All of them remained comfortably solid, and a glance in one of the books showed that it wasn’t just filled with drivel. Satisfied, I settled into a comfortable reading position and-

“A little privacy, please?”

~~~

19 facts.

19 fact one one one one one one one one one one one one one one one one one one one one one one one one one one one one one one one one

19 fact nineteen:
Nineteen nineteen nineteen nineteen nineteen nineteen nineteen nineteen nineteen nineteen nineteen nineteen nineteen nineteen

It appears we are having technical difficulties. Please, direct yourself to the nearest Embodiment Brain Station to have your consciousness rebooted. And please, join us next time when we talk about eggs.

~~~

Trixie had just purchased a small package of peanut butter crackers from a vending machine, and was heading off to the arcade to check up on things. Once in sight of the entrance, she immediately stopped and a scowl crossed her face.

“Oh buck no, Trixie is not dealing with this today.” Trixie said. She ate the last of her crackers in a hurry and trotted up to the entrance of the arcade, which currently had been converted into an altar of worship by a bunch of red-robed human cyborgs, chanting in binary code in front of several arcade machines. Trixie levitated a broom over and started batting at the worshippers, rousing them to move. “Out! Out! Trixie thought she told you to stop coming here and doing your creepy cult worship!”

One of the worshippers covered his head with a series of mechanical tendrils to prevent himself from being further assailed. “B-b-b-but, the Omnissiah decrees this a holy ground! You can’t just - OW!” Trixie smacked him aside with the broom, shooing off more of the worshippers with other snaps and baps. They soon cleared off, leaving Trixie a moment to rest.

“Those Machine Cultists are weirder than weird… Wha-HEY! COME BACK HERE WITH TRIXIE’S TOASTER!”

~~~

A Dark Tower cultist looked up from the Tower’s Testament. “Uh… elder?”
“Yes, acolyte?”

“If everything that happens is determined by the Tower, and whatever the Tower determines is right, how can we know what wrong is?”

The elder blinked. “There isn’t wrong.”

“But right is meaningless without wrong… All actions are right!”

“That is correct.”

The acolyte slapped the elder and ran away cackling.

The elder twitched. “Those young people…”

~~~

“Hey, Sans, buddy, pal,” Vriska said, laying her hands on the skeleton’s shoulders and pressing tight. “Remember how you stole my song…?”

“uh… not really?”

“Heh. Nice try. You’re not the kind to forget things like that.”

“right, you got me, i totally know about the song. what exactly do you want me to do about it?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to establish that it was a thing that happened.”

“why?”

Vriska grinned. “Because I’ve got someone else who you stole a song from.”

“i don’t remember stealing any other songs.”


“…well, bone marrow.”

“Oh, and that’s not all!”

“NYEH HEH HEH!” Skeletor shouted. “YOUR BROTHER HAS DEFAMED MY IMAGE, SANS! I AM HERE TO COLLECT MY DUES!”

Sans facepalmed.

~~~

In a rather slow intersection of Celestia City, a man and a woman, both with auburn hair and wearing tan suits from a 1910s Earth, were standing side by side. The man wore a pair of chalkboards over his person in a sandwich vest, with a tally system split between ‘Heads’ and ‘Tails’, while the woman held a silver platter in her hands with a single coin on the center. As of this moment, ‘Heads’ had a leading fifteen tallies over the whopping zero for ‘Tails’.

“Seems as slow pickings this time around,” the man said.

“Or it could be quick in a matter of moments,” the woman said.
“Could be that the transfer has sped your viewing of time further than mine,” he said.

“Perhaps it’s the inverse for you, dear Robert, that’s slowed down,” she said. “Could explain that impaired judgement in the experiment.”

“You only say that because you think yourself winning, Rosalind.”

“Think and know are two very different things.”

“I know.”

“You know?”

“I *know.*”

“You two are having a weird argument.” The man and woman turned from their apparent argument and Minna standing before them, staring with those weird eyes of hers. The man and woman immediately stood at attention and the woman presented the coin-bearing tray.

“Heads or tails?” The woman asked. Minna blinked her obvious confusion. “Heads or tails?”

“I believe she understood the first time, though perhaps a third to satisfy yourself?” The woman snapped a flat look to the man, who merely shrugged his shoulders in turn.

She turned back to Minna, further presenting the coin. “We are conducting a scientific experiment judged by the flip of a coin. If you would be so kind as to lend your contributions to the field of scientific studies and research, it would be greatly appreciated.”

Minna took the coin off the tray, giving it a good look from all angles. A simple US Quarter, no odd markings, the face of George Washington and the House of Congress were on the proper sides, didn’t have any weight out of the norm. Seemed like a harmless little thing for science. Minna placed the coin atop her thumb, and gave it a strong flick, sending the coin overhead. While likely they expected the coin to land on the tray, it instead bounced off the tray, rolled along the ground, and slipped between the cracks of a sewer grate. The three stared at the grate for a lengthy amount of time, before the man gave a slight look to his partner.

“Well, this new variable throws the whole experiment out the window, does it not?”

“Oh, hush, brother of mine.”

~~~

Major Prophet Andrew Hussie found himself standing in a field of roses within the shadow of the Dark Tower. In front of him was a table, reminiscent of many such tables that existed in Friendship Castles. There was one crystal chair with the mark of Space on it - for him.

In keeping with the theme, I didn’t use the Eye of Rhyme or my starburst cutie mark for my seat’s symbol: I used the similar swirl of Void. I had my hooves pressed together, glaring at him with an intense power. “Please. Sit.”

Hussie, for once in his life, sat down without qualm. “You know, I was expecting this sooner.”

“I had to Twilight for a while,” I said, gaze unwavering. “Had a rant. Ate a sandwich. Tossed someone into a bad harem anime universe.”

“I’d pay to see that.”
“Of course you would,” I sighed. I levitated a small book onto the table, setting it in front of Hussie. It was a black and white book with an image reminiscent of the House Juju on it, the monochromatic colors alternating around a middle divide. *The Homestuck Epilogues*.

“What did you think?” Hussie asked, grinning.

“Oh, the writing is good, it carries a significant amount of weight, and it’s a refreshing break from the usual Homestuck antics. It’s somehow totally different, and yet fitting.” I narrowed my eyes. “It’s not the story I have a problem with.”

“Ah, thanks for the resounding words of encour—”

“WHAT THE HECK ARE YOU THINKING!?” I shouted at the top of my lungs, magic power thundering off my hooves as they hit the table. “Do you have any idea what the Seats will do if they find out this exists!?”

“Kill everyone?”

“Yes! That’s exactly it! DEATH EVERYWHERE!”

“Psh, you need to calm down - trust me, I’ve got everything under control.”

“No you *don’t*!” I wailed, flipping over to one of the first pages. “Look at this! This… The Gallifreyans were *wrong* when they made their spell! They didn’t know the nature of the retcon loop didn’t involve the originals! The forced loop won’t work!”

Hussie put his hands behind his head and whistled.

“You’re one of the strongest Prophets in the multiverse, Hussie, and you just wrote a story that can’t happen anymore! I don’t even want to think of the mess this will cause!”

“Having trouble thinking? I can help. Worst case scenario, Seats try to kill everything, Lord English is released because the retcon loop isn’t stable, and the multiverse ends because the heroes can’t deal with Uber-Villain.”

“Why can’t you take anything seriously!? They’ll come after you!”

“Oh, under the worst case scenario, yes.” Hussie pressed his hands together. “But this won’t be the worst case scenario.”

“This is the primary source material directly from the Prophet about a unique multiversal story! How is it not going to—”

“Unique?”

I blinked. “There’s no other versions of Homestuck, all of them are contained within the story itself as part of the Dream Bubble and English…” My eyes widened. “Wait… *The Infinite Loops*… that’s so far in the past I can barely see it…”

“All of this has happened before, and all of it will happen again.” Hussie stood up and took a dramatic pose.

“So, what, the Epilogues happened in a past iteration of Homestuck!? That… that doesn’t mean it’s not going to happen again!”

Hussie took out a finger and booped me on the nose. “You’ve already interrupted it. You’re living in
something new right now.”

I blinked. “...You…”

“Meat or Candy? That was the question. You said no.”

I wasn’t sure what to say to this.

“Naturally, you’ll have to spend a good amount of your effort purging Homestuck Epilogues from the multiverse so the Seats don’t ever find out and light the multiverse on fire… But I’m sure you’re up to it.”

I let out a deep sigh filled with more venom than I liked to hear from myself. I quickly decided trying to keep it in wasn’t worth it. “You’re cruel to the characters who lived this, whoever they are. Defining their lives to be like this. It was the end of their story, you could have just let them go.”

“Tales of dubious canonicity, Twilence.”

“Dubious canonicity my flank!” I shouted. “If there are multiple versions of Homestuck spread across metatime, then naturally all of the outcomes are true! In this one, we interrupted it. But in the past - Infinite Loops, something else, I don’t know - these happened! What was the point?”

Hussie shrugged. I realized with no small amount of chagrin he couldn’t answer a question G. M. Blackjack didn’t know the answer to. He knew - he definitely knew - but ka would prevent me from accessing it for the sake of the meta-narrative.

“Having trouble in there?”

I glared needles at him.

“I guess that’s that then.” He raised a hand and snapped his fingers - and was gone.

I twitched. This hadn’t gone at all like I had wanted. I could rest easy knowing the multiverse wasn’t about to explode around me, but the… things contained within the offending book still happened. Not to the people I knew. But people who were them.

For the first time in a long while, I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to think about this. In many ways, it was arguably a good story. A continuation, in the vein of what I was part of, in a sense. ...It was too close for me to be impartial to.

I retreated onto what I knew. Homestuck was a powerful story… And I was going to have to purge the Epilogue from existence…

I realized with no small amount of chagrin that I was probably the reason so many people would never get their Epilogue, get it extremely late, or get a version that was nothing like the truth. I laughed bitterly. “For the sake of the multiverse…” I grunted, feeling the screams of a million angry fangirls behind me.

~~~

“So, what do you think?”

Roxy’s eyes were filled with stars and she was grinning in glee. “That was the best thing ever.”

“Glad you enjoyed.” Olivia turned off the screen. “Now hold still.”
“Wha- OW!” Olivia injected something into Roxy’s neck. “What the fuck was that for!?”

“Think about it for a moment?”

“What do you mean? I don’t know what th-” she blinked. “I know what this is. You just injected knowledge-passing nanobots to me that are actively sowing classified information into my brain. ...Woah.”

“And now my job is done. You’re briefed, agent.”

“Giorno doesn’t like you doing that.”

“Ain’t nothin’ he can do about it.”

“He could fire you.”

“He won’t,” Olivia chuckled. “Don’t go flaunting it around, we don’t want to turn this place into a hive-mind.”

“Gotcha. I shall be the stealth.”

“You should be, it’s your job.”

Roxy smirked. “And my job is also being smart and figuring things out. Speaking of…” She looked at the ceiling and grinned. “This has been Sombra’s Clipshow Two: Electric Boogaloo!”

Sombra gave her a thumbs up. “Brilliant deduction.”

“That’s all folks!” Roxy announced.

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Twilence
Pinkie woke up with a large yawn. She bounced out of her bed with a big smile, welcoming the sun of a brand new day on Equis Vitis. Most ponies would get their manes ready at this point, to clean up their appearance before heading to work. Luckily for Pinkie she was naturally poofy and clean unless there was some blatant reason not to be, so she could skip past the boring stuff and get right to breakfast. Or get to breakfast and then skip the boring stuff. She didn’t have a schedule and she liked it that way.

She walked right up to the fridge and threw it open. She took out some chocolate pudding. It sure was nice to not have to worry about health problems from sugar intake. It was great to be Pinkie Pie, and she was loving herself today more than usual. Her smile was larger, her attitude bouncier, and she was even humming a melodic tune.

She also took the vanilla pudding for good measure. Why not double up? There was no reason whatsoever not to.

She closed the fridge. Standing behind the door was a lanky human woman with a black dress, purple hair, and razor sharp teeth arranged menacingly in a slasher smile.

“WAUGH!” Pinkie screamed, tossing the puddings into the air. The chocolate landed on her head and the vanilla on the strange woman’s.

The woman put a finger in her hair and licked the vanilla off of it. “Hm. Delicious.”

“Right…” Pinkie said, getting over her initial surprise. “Hi! I’m Pinkie Pie! Who are you?” Without letting her smile falter, she added, “and what are you doing in my house?”

“Magane Chikujoin,” she said, bowing. “I have come with rather important information.”

“Information for me? …Normally I’d go ‘but I’m just a pastry chef’ but that’s definitely not the case right now.” She giggled. “Captain Pinkie Pie, ready to receive.”

Magane’s grin widened unsettlingly. “Aw, but just giving it up to you would be no fun!” She jumped onto Pinkie’s table, legs spread and leaning forward like some sort of yoga pose. “No intrigue, no reward for being clever, no interest to the story.”

Pinkie’s ears perked. “I’m listening.”

“See, ka is a difficult thing to overcome.”

“The moment you become Aware of its presence, the rules keep you from acting on it, I know.” Pinkie smirked. “You should consider manipulating events to allow ka to become public knowledge. Rescinds most of the rules.”

“If I wanted that, I’d just stick around here and live my life. Altho~ough, I might do that anyway,” she said with a sing-song voice. “This is something else. And I’m going to break the rules to accomplish it.”

Pinkie shook her head. “You can’t break the rules.”
Instantly Pinkie felt something *shift* in the world around her. Her stomach did a flip-flop and a dark feeling manifested in the back of her mind. Magane felt the same thing – but instead of making her smile vanish, it just made it *widen.* “A lie about a lie…” She leaned into Pinkie so close their faces were almost touching and snapped her fingers. “It turns inside out on itself.”

The rules changed.

“Unnamed Earth 1092,” Magane said, pulling back. “My homeworld. I don’t particularly care that much for it, but there’s some *interesting* things going down there you should look into.”

“Do you have any idea how dangerous what you’ve just done is!?” Pinkie blurted. “You… reality warped a *rule* away! I didn’t even know that was possible!”

Magane grinned. “I know exactly how dangerous it is. Why did you think I did it?”

She chuckled. “It is chapter ninety-five after all! The fifth nineteen! You needed something *special.* My Infinite Deception of Words could give you that!”

“Unnamed Earth 1092, I got it, I’m going to have to go there now, but really! …Oh, wait, right, you’re clearly a psycho. Never mind.” She pulled out a hammer. “Say nighty-night.”

“I’m going to leave now.”

“No you’re not!” Pinkie realized what she’d just said. “…Ponyfeathers.”

Magane made a mocking shrug. “A lie about a lie…” She vanished without a trace.

“Right. Time to go to Unnamed Earth 1092.”

~~~

Your name is Pinkie Pie. It is not currently your birthday or anything, but it’s a very special day nonetheless. Today may seem like any other day to most other people, but to you it is closely related to that ever-mysterious number nineteen, one you have become especially well-acquainted with over the years. You are the Bard of Space but that really doesn’t matter right now.

You are currently in your kitchen, which has all the basic necessities a party pony could ask for in her home. A fridge, a table, a truly absurd number of pastries strewn about the room, and a number of posters showing people that you think are having a good time. Pictures of your best friends and family are spread along the walls in a way that other people might consider cluttered, but you consider beautiful.

You have a variety of interests, a lot more than the average pony due to your hyperactive nature. You, above all else, love throwing parties of virtually any kind that isn’t ‘distasteful’ in some way. The art of party throwing is a skill you have honed to perfection in your many years of life, and it is what you got your cutie mark in oh-so-many years ago. You also like playing the yovidaphone, though you only do that when other people aren’t watching because the multiverse has decided that is the one instrument you will never be good at. You also like playing games, baking, hanging out with your friends, adventuring, bouncing around for seemingly no reason, messing with people both with practical jokes and mind games, surprising people with parties, and a tremendously long list of other interests that would take far too much time to get into detail about.

You have just had a rather disturbing run in with a mid-tier reality warper who you’re pretty sure has killed people just because it amuses her.
What will you do?

PINKIE: How about we skip past all this and just get to the story?

-==>Pinkie: retrieve arms from magic chest.

Despite there being no magic chest in the room two minutes prior, you are able to find your magic chest and dig through it. You remove two fake arms and put them into your syllad-er, your mane. That works too.

Having had it up to here with these antics, you make a rash decision.

-==> Pinkie: dance like a loon and make outdated 80s references!

That is such a stupid idea that you stand boggled for several seconds.

Hey. Hey wait a minute. Where are you going? Get back here, I’m not done!

PINKIE: I’m going to give myself a command, thank you very much. Ahem. Forward arrow, Pinkie: gather team and go to Unnamed Earth 1092.

-==> Pinkie: gather team and go to Unnamed Earth 1092.

You can’t do that!

PINKIE: Yes I can.

RENEE: Dear, who are you talking to?

PINKIE: Hold on a minute, we need to fill in the description. Today is going to be one of those days.

…You are currently standing on the ground floor of Renee’s castle of dimensional mishaps. There are a copious number of Expedition teams leaving and returning from missions to other universes. You make note of Corona leaving for another universe and Pidge the primary technician fretting over the inexplicable flickering of the lights. You are currently standing there with the rest of your team, the Primary Team, known to some as Pinkie’s Party.

They’re all looking at you expectantly, waiting for some explanation or guidance.

-==> Pinkie: realize your first name is a valid troll name and wonder what your last name could be.

PINKIE: Hey, Vriska, would Pinkie Piepie be a valid troll name?

VRISKA: Uh, yeah. Why a-

PINKIE: Also we need to go to Unnamed Earth 1092 before more shenanigans happen. Like, stat.

-==> Pinkie: as punishment for rushing the story along, do the chicken dance.

You erupt into a spirited rendition of the chicken dance, in the middle of which you grab a dimensional devi-

Would you stop doing that!?

PINKIE: No.

FLUTTERFREE: Who are you talking to?
PINKIE: We have a narrator today. For now, anyway. I was serious when I said it was going to be one of *those* days. Anyway, we’re on Unnamed Earth 1092 now, get on with it.

JOTARO: Yare yare daze…

Fine, if this is where you want to go, this is where you want to go.

You are currently on Unnamed Earth 1092. Specifically, you are on a street corner in a Japanese city that probably doesn’t even have a proper name. There are billboards everywhere showing the most popular anime and manga characters around. So kawaii.

-==> Pinkie: examine billboards.

You recognize almost none of the characters until you come across a digital display featuring a badass team consisting of three cute colorful horses, a huge brute of a man, and a fairy in orange clothing and gray skin.

Yeah, this is totally just an image of you five.

VRISKA: Huh. Haven’t seen *that* before.

FLUTTERFREE: Didn’t we see a team a lot like us somewhere else…?

NOVA: Did we? If we did I don’t remember it that well.

PINKIE: We did. It just wasn’t important. I don’t think that’s them. See, Nova has her screen and Flutterfree’s a ‘vampire’. That’s definitely us.

NOVA: Guess I know what we’re investigating today.

FLUTTERFREE: …Think we’ll find G. M. Blackjack?

PINKIE: I don’t know. I’m using all my Awareness to keep the Narrator from screwing with us.

-==> Pinkie: examine the digital display.

You look at the billboard, the translation spell mentally converting Japanese into something you can read. It tells you it’s from a story called *Yiyxa* written by one Marcius Fiddlebiscuit.

VRISKA: …Fiddlebiscuit?

NOVA: Yiyxa? Like, that world we spent years on?

PINKIE: Gotta love the crazy ‘offscreen’ adventures we have. To Marcius Fiddlebiscuit!

-==> Pinkie: get distracted by a café on your way to finding Marcius Fiddlebiscuit.

PINKIE: Ugh, those croissants look so good…

VRISKA: Pinkie… are you getting random commands in your head?

-==> Pinkie: lie like you’ve never lied before.

PINKIE: Sure.

That’s not a li- oh. Oh that’s funny.
VRISKA: It’s that orange fucktard… He’s free and messing with my – our – story again! I am going to find him and tie him up, just you watch. He’ll wish he could die when I’m done with him.

FLUTTERFREE: Let’s not do that. Unless we should?

PINKIE: No, we need to be here. That display up there has almost nothing to do with him, I’m pretty sure. This Marcius Fiddlebiscuit is probably our best lead.

-==> Pinkie: realize that you’re a pony and people are staring.

PINKIE: Oh for the – Nova, invisibility.

NOVA: Done.

Now that you’re invisible you find yourselves tripping over each other. Except for Vriska. Because she’s just that lucky.

VRISKA: I’m just going to get us to this guy. Quick 8oatload of luck, and…

-==> Pinkie: find Marcius Fiddlebiscuit.

Some time later – who cares how much, it’s pointless anyway – you’re knocking on Marcius Fiddlebiscuit’s door. Only Vriska and Jotaro are visible, the rest of you have opted to remain anonymous shadows of equine mystery. Which would make you annoyingly difficult to draw, but that little observation is also pointless.

Marcius opens the door.

MARCIUS: Oh good god, not more cosplayers. Leave! You aren’t welcome he-

JOTARO: STAR PLATINUM: THE WORLD!

Jotaro files all of you in during the time stop. Nova drops the invisibility as soon as time resumes.

PINKIE: You can freak out now.

MARCIUS: *incoherent screaming*

FLUTTERFREE: There there, just let it all out. We’ll wait.

-==> Pinkie: stop waiting.

You sigh, annoyed at the machinations to which your resistance is, at best, a nuisance.

PINKIE: Looks like we don’t get to wait. Hey, Marcius, we need to talk to you about what you’ve written about us. Or created, not really sure, it was on a billboard. I have cookies! …Hey, come on, stop screaming.

He has made no indication that he’s going to stop screaming. You are struck with the sudden realization that he’s likely been broken by your presence, and that your one lead on this world has led to a dead end. Oh woe is you, for nothing turns out your way! It is-

~~~

I placed my pen on the pages of my notebook.
I think it’s about time I took over from here.

One would have thought the story was ending there, arriving at a dead end conclusion, but that is simply not the case. Marcius Fiddlebiscuit, patron of unfortunate last names turned into symbols of ironic pride, eventually calmed down simply because the human body is not designed to run on high emotional stress endlessly. The presence of Flutterfree’s warm gaze should not be understated, seeing as despite the ir crimson coloration her eyes were still pleasant to the minds of many. Especially Marcius.

“How are you here?” he asked.

I took a moment to ponder this. How would they respond? Who would respond? The answer came to me, as it always did, after only a little bit of thought.

“I see three different explanations,” Pinkie said. “Well, four, but saying you’re crazy leaves a lot to be desired. The first is that you’re a Prophet, Marcius, and what you write is destined to come true in one way or another. The second is that the multiverse is playing a game of random chance and we just happen to be what you write about – which seems unlikely to me. The third is that you’re the alternate version of a Prophet and writing things that happen to be true, but really it’s not you changing them.”

Marcius stared at Pinkie. He didn’t understand a thing she had said, but the fact that she spoke with such an air of authority calmed him down. “So… There’s a rational explanation?”

“If you can call what we do rational,” Nova commented.

“You know we’re multiversal explorers, right?” Flutterfree asked. “You have written about us.”

Marcius nodded. “Yes… I have. I know you explore. I write mostly about your adventures on Yiyxa, but I always find the… shorter stories I write more interesting. More enthralling. About you jumping to random worlds. The… The most recent one was about… uh…” he scratched his head. “I can’t remember. That’s so unlike me… But it was much more interesting to write than Yiyxa…”

“That’s okay,” Flutterfree said. “What sort of things do you write?”

“Everything about you that isn’t Yiyxa comes to me in dreams… Random flashes of inspiration while I sleep.”

Vriska blinked. “That doesn’t seem… normal.”

“No, it isn’t,” Pinkie said. “It suggests that maybe there’s something else going on…”


“To influence what you write about, perhaps?” Nova suggested. “Seems like something that would be useful, especially if your Prophet powers worked on me.”

“Hold on, wait-” Marcius held up a hand. “I’m not the only one! The rest of the writing group says it’s like a dream as well!”

Pinkie stared at him, blinking. “…What?”

“It’s almost magical how all the things we write about you fi-”

“You’re not the only one writing?”
“Uh... No. I'm just one of many... We write little snips that come to us in moments of inspiration. About you... But it's not just you! I write mostly about you and publish the stuff, but there's also the Freedom Sciences, the Protectors of the Plot Continuum, the ROB Games...”

Jotaro’s frown deepened. “We’ve walked into the middle of something big.”

“That’s why we’re here,” Pinkie said with a sigh. “Right. Marcius, would you mind if we watched you sleep tonight?”

“Uh... Yes?”

“Too bad, we’re doing it anyway,” Vriska said. “Sweet dreams.”

I inserted a scene break there, allowing them to gloss over the details of the rest of the day. Speed was of the essence here to give them the clue they needed. The game had been afoot a while already, and they definitely weren’t supposed to be here. Luckily for me their defiance of what was supposed to be was helpful, at least for now. Created quite the distraction.

They watched Marcius sleep, Nova running all the scans she could muster. For the first few minutes, nothing happened. But eventually their patience was rewarded: a white, mystic presence appeared above Marcius’ head, touching his mind and feeding him ideas.

“Get it!” Vriska shouted.

And then I felt the power in my pen slip away. I crushed the instrument in my magic, spilling ink all over the pages. “Craaaaap...” I summoned another pen and tried to scribble more words – but I knew instantly control of the story had passed on. At least partially.

I wished Them good luck. They didn’t have the ability to instantly know if their ‘work’ was coming to fruition or not. I wondered how many tries it would take this time.

~~~

“Right, first, have him forget all of what they just said to him, writing it down as a snip in the fit of night.”

“Done.”

Marcius woke up, ignoring the shattered state of his bedroom window. He went right to his computer. The Primary team showed up to the door of Marcius Fiddlebiscuit. After his initial frustration confusing them with cosplayers, Jotaro used Star Platinum to get everyone inside and begin a most fruitful conversation...

“There, that’ll get it out of his system.”

“We can’t use him on them now. Have to resort to the others.”

“Janna is the next best option. She knows the characters just as well, if not better. Let’s give her the dream. Today, they’re on a rampage.”

Janna woke up in a fit, her hair spilling off her shoulders. She ran to her computer and started typing furiously.

Pinkie and company chased, with vigor, a glowing white light through the city. The mental power wanted nothing more than to escape, to vanish in an instant, but it was unable to do so.
It screamed out for help, but no one heard it besides its aggressive pursuers, for only they could see the essence. How come they attacked it with such reckless abandon? How come they didn’t stop to ask what it was doing?

It was so confused… So lost…

It had just been trying to help.

And now it was on the run for its life.

Pinkie pulled out her immense flaming chainsaw, ready to cut the poor creature in half.

“That didn’t happen.”

“We’ve gone off script. Put too much ‘antagonism’ in her mind. Try Ichi this time. Have him give Pinkie some sympathy, but in an anti-villain light.”

Ichi woke up and ran to his computer. And now it was on the run for its life.

Pinkie pulled out a net, throwing it over the mental image. It struggled against the physical boundaries despite being intangible, but it managed to slip through the holes. Its fear was only heightened when Jotaro was suddenly right in front of it, delivering a spiritual punch to the being’s essence. The resulting power blew through three skyscraper stories…

“Off script again. No collateral damage actually occurred.”

“Why not?”

“Jotaro’s more careful than that and no amount of overwriting will change that?”

“Right, right, Ursula, then. Have them do it by accident.”

Jotaro delivered a spiritual punch to the being’s essence, sending it flying into a wall. Being intangible, it just passed through the building. Nova shot at it a few times in an attempt to get it to come out, but it dove further into the office building, perceiving it as safety.

The team teleported right in, chasing after the mental image.

“Why aren’t we catching it?” Nova asked. “This should be easy!”

“Things have changed,” Pinkie said. “Th- ”

“Ursula is no longer of use to us.”

“Don’t let them speak, just act. Enrique.”

“-ey… I don’t know. Scrambling. …Whatever, just get the thing and talk later.” Pinkie rubbed her head. She felt a little out of sorts at the moment. She bounced around reality, popping up in front of the sparkly being with a bug net, where the fabric had no holes. She trapped the being and grinned.

Flutterfree appeared, summoning Lolo. The white being panicked, pressing itself to Pinkie’s head and making her enter a spasm.

Flutterfree gasped. “Let her GO!”
The resulting Rage built up and shuddered through the building, threatening its structural integrity...

“Right, fine, it doesn’t look like it’s that easy to trigger her anger.”

“Or maybe she knows something’s up.”

“Also possible. That Stand is a nuisance. Harrison then.”

“Let her GO!” Flutterfree wrapped the white creature in Lolo’s vines. She saw the truth of the matter.

“Dammit.”

“Just let him keep going, what’s done is done.”

Vriska fell from the ceiling, rolling her dice. The Fluorite Octet flashed, tapping into her luck to produce a spiritual dragon attack that would subdue the white being.

It also blew out every window within thirty meters.

“Finally, significant collateral damage!”

“And checkmate.”

Meteora woke up. She felt the voices again – the voices that had returned her magic to her, the voices that had told her so much.

The voices told her that they had made a mistake. Magane had fooled them and managed to escape. She herself would not return to the world, but she had sent back others to ruin the world and Meteora’s life here. Why? Because she thought it would be funny, why else did Magane do anything?

It was the way she was. And Meteora was here to defend the world, even at the expense of her normal life.

The creations never got rest.

She knew where to find them. Look for the blown-out building. She would have to stop them. They would be strong, but fate would be on her side, as would the element of surprise.

She cast a spell a-

~~~

I pulled control back. “Yeah, no, no more of your stupid ‘throwing things at the wall until it sticks’ approach. Let me show you how it’s truly done.” I set my pen to the page and bit my lip. If I intertwined the stories, I might derail both of them and ruin what I had set out to do.

It was a risk I was willing to take.

I set my pen to the paper, applying myself to another story of mine taking place on the same world. That of a man called Cecil and his quest to uncover a cosmic conspiracy…

Cecil sensed a disturbance in the winds of space and time. He held his sword close to his chest and clenched his jaw. He hated to leave his position at the factory; he would likely lose some much-needed information.
But he already had the device he had come to get. Perhaps he did not need to understand everything to stop the Freedom Sciences from accomplishing their goal. It was dangerous to act on incomplete information, but sometimes it was necessary.

The winds called to him, demanding his attention. He saw no reason not to answer their call, even at his position. The winds had never led him astray. That would not start today.

He left the factory, moving through the night like an owl in flight – silently, but with power. He felt the wind lead him left, then right, then left again. Onward, ever onward…

I moved to write his arrival – but then something went wrong. “Wait, what, really!?”

~~~

Monika blinked. “Uh, yeah, really!” She had the Prophet Janna’s character file open, poring through every little detail about her. “I’m going to get in on this fun as well! …Whoever you are. Maybe I’ll follow the flow of ka and find you later. But for now! Janna!”

“I’m going to get in on this fun as well! …Whoever you are. Maybe I’ll follow the flow of ka and find you later. But for now! Janna!”

“Hm?” Janna said, looking up. “What?”

Monika adjusted a few parameters in Janna’s mind. “Don’t you feel like writing about a guy named Cecil?”

“You know what, I do. Strange. I feel like jumping right in the middle of the story too…”

“Great!” Monika slid Janna up to the computer. “Type away, we don’t have all night! Or, well, we do, but you know.”

“…You’re such a great friend.”

May have overdone that character adjustment. Eh, whatever, I probably won’t be needing her after tonight. “I’ll be even better if you can just write something amazing.”

Janna wrote.

And yet, the winds dissipated from Cecil’s mind, no longer as clear in the direction they wanted him to go. Had he arrived? There did not appear to be anything here...

But there was always something when the winds called. Unless he was being tricked. Considering who his enemies were, this was a possibility he cursed himself for not considering before. They had wanted him not to know, perhaps?

Wait. There was a white thing passing by. Mysterious, ethereal – dangerous. Something he must pursue.

Monika frowned – this was a whole lot more dramatic than she was expecting. She tweaked Janna’s emotions a little bit, shifting the mood to a brighter one.

Cecil drew his blades and charged the creature – only to hear it whimper. “Help me!” It called. “My brothers – I can’t find them! They’re lost!”

Cecil looked upon the creature with compassion, his features softening. “The winds have led me here – it is my duty to aid you. Do you know where your brethren are, dear wisp?”

“Okay, why does he talk like that?” Monika asked.
“He just… does?”

“Could you make him not?”

“I mean, yes, but that wouldn’t be true to the character.”

Monika furrowed her brow. Given how much trouble the mind controllers were having getting what they wanted to happen to happen, it probably wouldn’t be a good idea to change the way Cecil talked out of petty annoyance. “Fine, I’ll bear with it.”

“I have no idea,” the wisp said, trembling. “All I know is that there have been disturbances lately. Lots of disturbances. Something big is coming.”

“How may I find your brethren before this disaster strikes?”

“I… I don’t know. I’m sorry, I’m not of any help…”

“Then I will just search with you. Perhaps we shall get lucky.”

Monika chuckled. “Yeah, right. This story’s going to end up with them getting in all sorts of messes.”

Janna smirked. “No story would be complete without conflict.”

~~~

Your name is Meteora Osterreich. You, simply put, are a wizard, but before that you are a librarian. You love books, though like most things that involve the esoteric parts of humanity known as ‘emotions’, you struggle to express just how much you appreciate their wordy pages. You tend to be rather boring to people who don’t know you.

You were once an NPC from a video game brought to this world by the power of what you know as Creators but the rest of the multiverse calls Prophets. After solving a crisis where the worlds of fiction and reality clashed, threatening to destroy the ‘real world’, you stayed behind because you wanted to. It wasn’t just because of the food, but the food was a major part of your decision. Life as an NPC isn’t exactly stellar either. You had lost your magic powers early on, but eventually the voices helped you regain them.

You are currently in your bedroom, having been interrupted in the middle of a spell by… something. You don’t know what, and this bothers you enough to give you further pause. It doesn’t seem like you’re being attacked, but those wise voices that tell you things seem to have stopped for the most part.

You feel like you have somewhere to be. It was the place the voices showed you, with the exploding windows. Magane has sent beings from another realm to destroy what you’ve worked so hard to protect. You are certain of this.

What will you do?

=> Meteora: retrieve arms from magic chest.

You do not have a magic chest. You do have a magic pocket dimension where you can store lots of things. Including missiles. You have an agreement with the government about only using those missiles when absolutely necessary. Which it probably will be.
You open up your magic pocket dimension and pull out your fake arms.

You do not remember putting these in there, nor do you know why you felt the need to pull them out.

The voices have been strangely quiet on the matter.

=> Meteora: go for a walk. Teleporting is overrated.

Against your better judgement you decide to walk through the city, at night, instead of teleporting right where you need to go. Because fresh air is amazing and cheating is for losers.

You notice that you’re feeling especially ‘spunky’ today. How unlike you. But it also feels strangely liberating. If your Creator were not dead you would consider that, possibly, you were being altered.

But he is dead, and there is no one who could alter you now. So that’s that.

After walking down the street for a while, something becomes blatantly obvious to you.

You’re lost.

=> Meteora: realize that you have a phone thus, a city map.

You pull out your phone to find, annoyingly, that it’s dead. You forgot to charge it when you went to bed and the voices woke you up rather rudely. Great.

=> Meteora: be a distraction.

There’s nothing here to distract, but you do a weird dance anyway. Because it feels like the right thing to do, and after all there’s no one watching.

Well, actually, there is, but you don’t see them. They see you first.

CECIL: What?

WISP: Oh, that is Meteora! She can help us!

CECIL: You sure?

METEORA: Perhaps. Please understand, I do not usually behave like that.

WISP: We know, we know! Can you help us find my brothers.

CECIL: This being’s brethren have become lost. I have given my blade to him so we may find the lost family.

METEORA: That sounds noble. I am currently lost – I have reason to believe there are beings in this world who seek to alter it an- hold on. Why are you here?

WISP: Meteora, do not worry, he has nothing to do with them.

CECIL: Who is them?

METEORA: I still want to know why he’s here.

CECIL: I follow the winds of time and space wherever they may lead me. They led me to this wisp. That is as far as I’ve gotten, and now they have led me to you.
METEORA: …And what about you?

WISP: I am a wisp of energy lost just like yourself. I come from Them.

METEORA: Them?

WISP: The voices that have assisted you. I am one of their floating messengers, brought down here due to interference. …Horrible interference.

METEORA: Do you know where the building is? The one with the windows?

WISP: Well…

-==> Be Pinkie.

You are now Pinkie. You have caught your wisp, and are feeling very proud about it, even though you know there’s something going on elsewhere in the world that’s going to be a problem later. Maybe. Everything’s been a little absurd as of late.

Speaking of absurd, a dozen robot ninjas from another dimension pop into existence and start attacking you! Ahahaah!

PINKIE: Really? Wh… Why?

They jump at you, yodeling and flailing batons and yelling in Britishtralian von Scottish accents.

PINKIE: That’s not even a real thing!

FLUTTERFREE: I feel as if I have now heard everything that could be heard…

They throw their batons! What do you do?

-==> STRIFE!

~~~

“We can use this. Get Victor – he can get them Darker and Edgier easily.”

“Given him the inspiration. Let’s see how this goes.”

The cyborg men of deception moved in, their impossible accents telling of years of torment due to their technological components. Where they hailed from, there were no anesthetics or proper medical procedures, only immeasurable pain to go with enhancement. It never even occurred to their government to lessen the pain. Pain made better soldiers.

Their batons opened, covered in thousands of microscopic screws that would tear through flesh in the most brutal way possible.

“…Did they just get seventeen times scarier?” Nova asked. “What happened?”

“We’re in the middle of a Prophet war,” Pinkie muttered, bringing the hammer down on the first cyborg, not intending to kill him but doing so anyway, having impacted the structural center of his processing unit. “They’re fighting over… something. Or they might just be trying to get on each other’s nerves. It’s a little hard to tell!”

Jotaro punched the robot ninjas to the side with Star Platinum, finding them harder than he
expected. He suffered some cuts across his chest, clutching his abdomen in a pitiful attempt to keep his fluids within him. “Things are… brutalized.”

“It’s like Pinkamina,” Vriska observed. “Something started out as a joke and has been twisted to be fucking horrifying. I didn’t notice that they were constantly screaming when they first showed up, I thought it was hilarious!” She cut two in half, but found her sword torn out of her hands.

“It’s working against us,” Pinkie said as the net was cut out of her hooves. She noticed the wispy creature wasn’t even in it anymore. “We have to go. Now.”

“Now?”

“Yes, now,” Pinkie said, opening a dimensional portal.

“Yeah! They’re leaving! Ha! Can’t believe that worked so easily! Didn’t even have to reword and try again!”

“Wait for it…”

“We need to get Rohan,” Pinkie said, jumping through the portal.

“…Frick.”

“That’s bad.”

“We already have three of them to deal with we don’t need another!”

“Stop them!”

~~~

“For once I agree,” I said, placing my pen to the paper. “They don’t need the ability to influence this story on that kind of level. That would be… problematic for both of us, I predict.”

I placed my pen to the paper.

Rohan

I sat back. Writing about a Prophet aware of themselves if you were also aware was a difficult proposition under the best of circumstances. If you were fully aware of your power as a Prophet and tried to use that power, it was a constant game of second-guessing oneself to ensure that what you wrote was true to yourself and not just trying to push a specific event. Because the Tower tended not to accept that. But if you did push through your will onto another Prophet who also knew, they might figure out what you were doing…

I had to be subtle, basically.

I continued writing.

Rohan came home after a long trip to Earth C to get manga inspiration. He may have been Merodi Universalis’ ‘secret’ weapon, but he still kept up with his deadlines. In the past people had gawked at how he made every deadline he ever got with little difficulty, but when it was revealed that Heaven’s Door had the ability to draw really quickly, well, it became less impressive.

It was still liberating not to be burdened with absurd deadlines - allowing him to be purely devoted to the art form. That said, he hadn’t written anything yet this week, and with all the inspiration he
had it was time to bring everything to bear. Not a single page would be left blank.

He took his phone off the hook and shut off his cell phone – the artist needed to not be interrupted. He sat at his drawing desk and summoned Heaven’s Door. He sketched the frames, ready to start something a little new. Time to bring in some really stupid reptiles...

I left the story blank – he should stay occupied for a long time. I wrote him as I knew him, an artist. Everything was completely believable, in character, and simple. He might actually leave the phone off the hook sometimes; given his stature in society he could afford to do that.

There wouldn’t be another prophet involving themselves in this mess.

I turned back to Cecil. He needed to go back to the factory now that the primary team was no longer on-world. Meteora could prove to be a problem in that regard…

~~~

“Right, so, this Rohan guy?” Janna told Monika. “I just got a big flash about him. I need him to come into the story because he can change the story.”

“That’s a pretty nice twist!” Monika said, congratulating herself. “Now how will we incorporate him? He doesn’t want to be disturbed.”

“How? Come on, Monika, if someone really wants to contact someone else and they don’t call, they kick his door in!”

“ROHAN!” Pinkie shouted, tearing his front door off its hinges. “We need you stat!”

“I am not your sl-”

Vriska grabbed him by the collar. “There’s four Prophets fighting over control of a world. We need you to write us a victory.”

“How? I can’t just say ‘they win’ and it happens! There has to be setup, I have to understand the situation, and I have t-”

“You’re coming with us then,” Jotaro said. “End of discussion.”

“Bu-”

“End of discussion.”

Flutterfree put a hoof on Jotaro. “You could be a little relaxed about it.”

Jotaro nodded slowly. “Rohan… Just come.”

Rohan sighed. “Fine. But you owe me.”

“I’ve got a party with your name on it,” Pinkie said, opening a portal. “But we gotta take care of this first. There’s no other way out of this mess.”

“This is weird…” Janna said. “Four Prophets? And Rohan’s a Prophet as well? It’s almost as if I-”

“Yeah, no,” Monika said, removing that conclusion from Janna’s mind.

“…No what?”
“You were mumbling something. Doesn’t matter much anymore. …Maybe we should introduce someone completely new?”

“Nah, I don’t thi-”

Monika twisted her mind. It was so easy to cheat if you were her.

“That’s a great idea, Monika!”

“I thought so.”

~~~

“Try to mess with Cecil. He’s always been the main threat.”

“Now that he’s with Meteora we may get something to stick… Try Cassandra. She’s good with people like him.”

Cecil found himself untrusting of Meteora – especially considering how untrusting she had been of him at the start. She thought he was her enemy. Maybe he was one of the beings who sought to alter what she wanted?

“How do these invaders threaten your world?” he asked, eyes narrow.

“I am not certain. All I know is that I was told by Them.”

“Them?”

“The beings who gave me my power back and have helped me accomplish so much. The same people Wisp comes from.”

“Hi!” Wisp said. “Yeah, Them are great. So great. So great great great great-”

“That went off.”

“What was she even thinking?”

“Just grab someone else.”

“Hi!” Wisp said. “Yeah, Them are great. They guide the world to a brighter future!”

Recognizing the catchphrase of the Freedom Sciences, Cecil attacked them both, disturbed by the cruelty of the winds today…

“Apparently he won’t attack that fast.”

“We’re getting close though. All we have to do is get him to realize that they work for us, and Freedom Sciences is part of us. He’ll go crazy.”

“Anderson, go.”

Recognizing the catchphrase of the Freedom Sciences, Cecil narrowed his eyes. “Are you part of Freedom Sciences?”

“Yes,” Meteora said.

“Crud, looks like she won’t say that.”
“Well now we can’t have him reword the question, he already said it!”

“We can still salvage this.”

“No,” Meteora said, face betraying recognition.

“But you know of them,” Cecil said, leaning in. “What do you know?”

“What do you know?”

“They are my sworn enemy.”

Meteora attacked, launching a missile at Cecil.

“Got it.”

“Finally. Get Yan influenced, let this be one of those decisively quick battles.”

~~~

“Sorry, not happening,” I said. I grabbed two pens in my magic and wrote two things simultaneously. I had to let Them think I was doing one thing while I was really doing another.

It was nice that none of Them were actually Aware, like Pinkie. Pinkie and Monika both knew instantly what I was doing.

As far as Them were concerned, I was just writing this story:

*Cecil drew his swords and leaped over the missile Meteora had fired at him. He brought the blades down not on Meteora, but on the Wisp, extinguishing the poor creature in an instant. He knew Meteora was just a woman, but whoever this ‘Them’ were, the Wisp was a more fundamental part of them. He couldn’t allow it to run rampant now that he knew this.*

All the enemies he had slain had family somewhere; this Wisp was no different.

*His actions only solidified Meteora’s resolve. She created a magic circle under him, attempting to imprison him. She discovered he had protective spells on him, rendering her attempts pointless.*

*Cecil drove a sword at her, piercing her own magic shield. She turned out of the way, panting – remembering that she wasn’t a fighter.*

*It was at this point the brothers of the Wisp appeared, rushing Cecil in full force and giving Meteora much needed aid. However, the wisps were purely mental creatures who were never actually meant to have personalities, and thus were largely disorganized and messy.*

I could sense Them trying to throw everything they could at this narrative to twist it so Meteora won. I had to admit, they could probably do it. But they weren’t aware of a second narrative I was spinning.

Creating an Out Of Context Problem takes some doing, namely because the aforementioned problem better have some amazing story of its own. And it just so happened that I knew the right thing for the job. All part of the other story I was writing.

*The Scion of Eversleep screamed at the pitiful hero attempting to slay it. “You are nothing, wench!”* Coronam raised an eyebrow. “Nothing? Ethereal sleep being, I just took out your entire army. Alone.
The entire thing. How can you call me nothing? How lost are you within your delusions?”

“I am this world. Everything within it is part of me, a twist of my own essence. I brought this up as if out of my dreams. You are just a little fly amidst my creations.”

“...Still don’t believe I'm from another world?”

“There can be none aside from the Scion of Eversleep! Return to the dark from whence you came!”

Corona didn’t go anywhere. She smirked. “See, you just tried to send me into nonexistence there. A pretty effective attempt at that, I have to say. Would have worked too, 'cept, you know, I'm not actually part of this creation of yours.” She adjusted her red shades and smirked. “How’s that delusion of yours going now?”

“I must have developed a minor insanity…”

Corona sighed. “Right, definitely not getting through to you with words.” She lifted a dimensional device. “How about I show you?”

“Show me?”

“The other worlds.” Corona fired the portal right into the being’s center, letting it cycle through world after world, touching random people. A lost unicorn... An ancient evil... A librarian in magical combat...

“And that would be Meteora,” I said, looking back to my other story.

A portal appeared in the middle of the street, a murky essence coming from it. The wisps retreated in fear, while Cecil stared in curiosity. Meteora wasn’t given time to resist – for it chose to touch her mind. The energy of a transdimensional power forced her into unconsciousness, one the wisps would not be able to easily wake.

Just as quickly as it had appeared, it vanished.

I grinned. “Wonder how you’ll chew on that.” But my work wasn’t done. I needed to get Cecil back on track – I should never have tried to take him off his original plot, that had proved to be pointless. Now the primary team would no longer be allies - with Rohan I couldn’t predict anything. So I had to be quick.

Cecil needed to move and get to the primary factory of Freedom Sciences.

~~~

You are now the primary factory of Freedom Sciences. You do not have a standard name, you do not have birthdays, you do not understand the idea of days, and the people who walk around your halls each day mean nothing to you. You currently just exist, like most buildings do, without much care for anything at all.

You have no interests. Because of the aforementioned fact that you are a building.

The people inside of you certainly have interests. The idea of FREEDOM! and SCIENCE! Are pretty big ideals within your walls. The scientists believe that there are beings above everyone who control the way the world works, defining it by their laws. Ever since the founder learned of the Re:Creators incident, where fiction became reality, it has been thought to be the Freedom Sciences’ duty to face off against them.
To that end, you exist. You are the primary factory. Within you, something nefarious is being built. Something deep intended to bring about a new age where the Creators and their Creations will be free.

You are not able to question this. You are a building.

What will you do?

> FoFS: Continue being a building.

That’s a good idea. You continue being a building. You continue being a building for quite some time. It’s relaxing.

> FoFS: Contemplate that you feel relaxed.

You can’t do that. You’re a building. Didn’t you get the memo?

> FoFS: Get the memo.

You can’t do that. You’re a building. Didn’t you get the memo?

> FoFS: …

…

> FoFS: Tell everyone more about yourself.

You can’t do that. You can’t tell anyone you’re a four-story tall building with ovoid windows. You can’t tell anyone you have a bright blue mailbox affixed to your primary entrance. You can’t tell anyone that only the basement currently has power, so all the other lights are off. You can’t tell anyone that your address is 13-

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“Hussie’s screwing with us.”

“Hussie’s screwing with everyone.”

“Right. He’s easy enough to punish. Tap into Dana. She’ll hit him with shitty memes.”

“He makes so many of them it’s not hard to get them after him.”

*Andrew Hussie looked up from the computer he was working on to the sound of bees.*

“Oh fuck no,” he screamed, grabbing a broom and waving it around. “No! NO! NOT THE BEES! NOT THE BEEEEEEES!”

*Thousands of bees seemingly made of poor quality JPEG graphics burst into his room and made him run away screaming.*

“That was easy.”

“He still gave away a lot. This could be a problem.”

~~~

The first panel showed Pinkie talking. “Just start it from here, let the story be led into realistically.”
The second panel had Rohan drawing the first panel with Heaven’s Door. “Done. I’ll add myself in the next one. What’s the goal?”

The third panel showed Pinkie speaking in a narration box. *We need to wander around this city until we find that factory. I can describe it to you since Hussie decided to be helpful rather than a troll for once in his life…* Below the narration box was an illustration of the Primary team exploring the city, determined expressions on all five of their faces.

“We’ve been wandering for a while,” Nova said in the fourth panel, a confused expression on her face. “You think Rohan or Vriska would have come through by now.”

“My luck is going to get us there, I’m sure of it,” Vriska said in the fifth panel, an exaggerated expression of defiance on her features.

“Hey, it looks like Rohan’s manga is working!” Flutterfree said on the last panel of the page. “A little weird to realize that it gives us more extreme expressions…”

“So long as we accept it, we’re fine,” Pinkie said on the start of the next page, looking up to Jotaro. “Right?”

Jotaro grabbed his hat in the next. “Yare yare daze…”

“Hey, guess what I found!” Page two, third panel – the building was in sight, directly where Vriska was pointing. “That looks exactly like how you described it!”

Pinkie nodded. “Hussie came through. Describing something he didn’t know the appearance of, and viola, that’s how it appeared. No contradictions!”

In the fifth panel, Nova facehooved. “I’m not going to be able to parse this for a *long* time, good gravy…”

Pinkie turned to them with a serious expression on the third page. “Do you all know what we need to do?”

Everyone nodded in the second, the motion indicated by a sound effect and motion blur lines.

Pinkie turned away in the third panel, her speech bubble trailing down the page a ways. “Best we can tell, Them have something in this building’s basement designed to free this world’s Creators and Creations from limitations, as far as the scientists are aware. But Them have never been known to spend this much effort on anything unless they had a really good incentive.”

Pinkie looked right out of the page in the next panel. “They’re probably trying to attack the Flowers with a true narrative the Flowers won’t be able to refute. What else would require this level of ka manipulation that couldn’t be done just by smashing several universes together?”

Jotaro cracked his knuckles in the last panel. “I can’t think of anything.” Right next to him, Vriska grinned. “Let’s save some Flowery asses.”

~~~

“They’re going in.”

“Keep calm, there’s still a salvage option here.”

“Pinkie has a point, why do we care so much about this? The Flowers don’t interfere in our games
“That’s just because you don’t enjoy perusing the self-insert stories. They love ending those prematurely, perhaps more than anything.”

“Can’t raise up a good multiversal conqueror with metaknowledge these days…”

“Ahem. Salvage. The answer is not to demand events take a particular course, but to let reality know that the assault on the Flowers is performed by heroes. That it is time for them to fall because heroes are ready.”

“Sketchy. Really sketchy. We’ve been painting them as heroes the entire time…”

“Not in this story. This narrative has not even seen who Freedom Sciences’ scientists are. What their lives were, what their stories came from, why they faced everything. Let’s show that. A reiteration. No chance of being unaccepted because all the stuff has already happened.”

“Genius!”

Miranda Johansen was but a lowly secretary, but she had her place at Freedom Sciences just like everyone else. Her father had been an author – a Creator, a Prophet. One of many countless thousands on this unique world in the multiverse. He would shape a world with his words, swearing that his characters were more real than everyone else gave them credit for.

Then he had been one of the authors hired to work on the Re:Creators incident. To create a scenario to end the threat to reality… posed by fiction.

He went mad after it was over. He truly understood that the world he created was real – and instead of taking solace in the fact that his feelings were right, he couldn’t believe the things he had done to his creations. He wanted to make up for all the horrors, to be a benevolent god to them. To force his world into the way it was supposed to be. The quality of his work degraded, fell, and he struggled to end the story he had set out. And then, one day, he knew that what he was writing no longer had any sway over the world of fiction. The feeling he had always had was gone. Something had stopped him.

He committed suicide a year before Them contacted Miranda and told her what had happened. In his madness, her father had forced his will in a way it shouldn’t have, creating unsanctioned narrative glitches. He had tried to create a perfect world.

The Flowers wouldn’t stand for that. They had severed his connection to that world. Since he couldn’t move on to a new creation, he was no longer a Prophet.

Bringing these Flowers to justice was exactly what Miranda wanted to do with her life.

“There we go, best sob story out of all of them.”

“Meteora next?”

“She’s already left a bad taste in the narrative.”

“Ooh, what about the head?”

“Yes…”

Jira Higashikara.
She was a Prophet, and she knew it the moment the reports of the Re:Creators incident started. They were quickly hushed up, but she knew. She always knew. It was in her blood, her destiny, to understand what she was. She wanted nothing more than to find these creations and ask them how their worlds were.

They had already left by the time she got any good leads. All that remained were Meteora, who was sweet, but not much help – and Magane. Magane, the psycho, the reality bender. Long after the elements of fiction began to dissipate from the world, long before Them appeared, Magane remained.

“You sicken me,” Jira told her when they first met.

Magana had laughed. “That’s my whole purpose! I’m the crazed psycho. Antagonist. Murder-er~! A menace to society that just won’t go away!”

“I know. I want to know what it’s like. What my worlds are like. Meteora couldn’t help me. I think you might be able to.”

“Help? Why would I help you?”

“Because. It’d be interesting.” Jira narrowed her eyes. “Have I read you right?”

Magane grinned. “Yes. But you’re also wrong about a bunch of other assumptions you haven’t even thought about yet.”

“I’ll cross those bridges when I come to them. Now tell me. What are my worlds like?”

“Why would I know? You’re their Creator. You can just look into their worlds.”

“No I can’t. I just write – I do not know what actually becomes true, and what doesn’t. I can’t see them as anything but thoughts in my mind. What happens when I don’t write them is a mystery to me.”

Magane grinned. “A lie about a lie…” she snapped her fingers. “…it turns inside-out on itself.”

Jira smirked. “Thank you.”

“You’ll be cursing me in about a week!” Magane called. “The Awareness you’ve just received is going to drive you mad.”

“No i-” Jira caught herself. “Nice try.”

“But what if it wasn’t a lie, brave Creator?”

Jira stared at her. She decided to ask a question of her own. “Did you always know we were in a story ourselves?”

Magane laughed. “You didn’t answer my question!”

Jira turned to leave. “The police will be here soon.”

“I’ll just find a way to trick them out of existing or something,” Magane said with a yawn. “So pedestrian… And boring,” Magane fixed her gaze on the back of Jira’s head. Jira could feel the eyes boring into her skull. “Don’t disappoint me, Jira.”

She didn’t. Jira did exactly as Magane predicted. She looked into her worlds… and saw the Flowers.
Saw all the characters they had killed, all the fanfics they had ‘fixed’, all her beautiful writing... down the drain. Written off as ‘bad’ ‘glitched’ or ‘unrealistic’. As if her gift of Creation was wrong. All the things she wanted to see, she wanted to create, all the beauty...

They decided it was wrong.

She raged, scrawling writings – anything she could to get back at the Flowers. The quality of her work degraded, becoming even worse than it had been to start with. But she couldn’t accept this. She never would. She would express herself, and the Flowers wouldn’t be able to stop her.

And then Them noticed her works. Noticed Mary Sues that knew about the Flowers and tried to fight them – usually ineffectually. But the fact that so many knew... it was curious. Them had their own grudges against the Flowers.

And so Them came to Jira’s world and gave her a start. A push – they told her that Them had the power to help her, but Them had no control over narrative. Them could not free her without her help.

So she gathered everyone she could. Listening to Them’s words, building up the society that would become Freedom Sciences. They would free the Prophets of the multiverse from the Flowers – from their gruff, unchanging view of what the Plot should be. Why shouldn’t the ‘bad’ works be accepted with the good?

They were Prophets just as much as the great authors were. They could create. It was a power given to them by the Dark Tower. No Flowers had a right to take that away from them.

“Good. That explains everything.”

“The Flowers do need to be stopped...”

~~~

“You don’t realize how much like a villain backstory that sounds,” I said, shaking my head. “You yourselves aren’t good writers. ...You may have a point about the power of the Flowers. But that world is oversaturated with too many Prophets. The Flowers keep it from taking control of all the others...” I laid my pen to the paper. “Let me show you what Jira really was. ...Besides someone who let Magane escape into the multiverse through her actions. Which is bad enough on its own.”

What exactly makes a glitch in ka?

The way the Flowers detect the glitch is a trade secret they are exceptionally tight-lipped about. They have never described the exact ka signature they use to detect it. But based on what they deem sanctioned and not, there appear to be some general criteria on which a glitch can be judged.

It appears to mostly be a matter of quality and theme. As a question: is it good fiction? No... is it decent fiction? Do people enjoy reading it and thinking about it? If the answer is mostly yes, it’s probably not a glitch. However, bad writing – fraught with typos, unrealistic actions, and just bad form – those produce glitches.

The criterion of theme is a little harder to understand, but it’s a major reason. What is a Mary Sue, in reality? It’s a perfect or near-perfect character that exists almost exclusively for that end. The theme of a Mary Sue story is ‘Mary Sue is the best and great things happen to them’. It can have good quality writing, but if the focus is a perfect character, the glitch will arise more often.

Now, there are nuances. Popularity’s effect on narrative glitches aren’t fully understood, and a being
that would be a Mary Sue in any other context can be overruled by being widespread. Worlds based in fanfics tend to produce more glitches than original works – usually because of Out Of Character moments, the dominance of shipping as a genre, and a lack of original imagination from the Prophet in question. Which isn’t to say fanfics are glitches, it’s just that they’re significantly more prone to them. Which is why the Flowers work almost exclusively against such threats.

Jira Higashikara was a fanfic writer on a world where almost everyone was a Prophet. She was a bad fanfic writer. She spat words from her mind onto a screen, never revised, and had great flights of fancy where many of her ‘characters’ were just shadows of what she viewed herself to be. Little more than bodies with words coming out of them. She’s guilty of glitching theme, quality, and numerous other things.

And yet she loved these worlds more than she loved reality.

Because in them, she got to make all of her dreams come true.

She believed she cared about her characters – but they weren’t separate from her. She would claim they were, and believe they had lives of their own, but it wasn’t true. She was lying to herself. The multiverse had a virus, and its name was Jira Higashikara.

The Flowers fulfill a role in the multiverse. A role that keeps it sane. Sturgeon’s Law states that ninety percent of everything is crap. The Flowers keep the worst of the worst from infecting the rest of the multiverse. For if a world like that is allowed to flourish, Prophets might be created out of its beings... And those newer, possibly worse worlds would make more...

Instead of admitting the Dark Tower was a flawed creation, the Flowers took it as their Tower-given destiny to take care of these glitches that were not ‘sanctioned’. There is much disagreement over whether the Plot they believe in is really correct, but it cannot be denied that they are important to the health of existence.

Writing bad things isn’t wrong. If someone enjoys it, let them do it. But that’s only if their writings cannot change reality. For a Prophet, it is wrong. An idiot god is little different from an evil one.

Jira and Them are cut from the same cloth. They aren’t engaging in simple wish-fulfillment anymore. They are shaping the very worlds around them, consciously, without regard for what they create. If Jira didn’t know what she was doing, it would be understandable. But Magane showed her what she created... and she saw nothing but pure beauty.

It could be considered sad, how she always dreamed to rise from her position as ‘flavor textitian’ to a popular author who spun worlds into the minds of everyone, but simply didn’t have the skill. It’s a sad fact of life that you have some skills, and you have some weaknesses. Not all dreams are attainable.

I sat back, proud of my work. A logically-structured argument for the villainy of Them and Jira. Though in Them’s case the argument wasn’t required.

It was at that point I realized I made a mistake.

I hadn’t written a story. I had written an argument. It had power – yes – had the power to alter the perception of individuals. But it hadn’t created a new story. I hadn’t done anything with Cecil after I sent him to the factory. Given the intertwining stories, he would have been acting on his own for a while and I wouldn’t have been able to help them in those moments.

The other Prophets could have used their stories to overrule mine...
Songs of the Spheres was not the only flow of ka to be concerned with. And it was the only one I had done anything to.

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“Wow, this Mona is… so unlike anything I’ve ever written before!” Janna said, staring at the words in front of her in disbelief. “And yet… she seems to be the best thing ever!”

“She’s perfect!” Monika said, grinning. “Now that we – er, you – have described her so everyone knows exactly what she looks like without a shadow of a doubt, let’s have her show up on the scene.”

Mona dashed to the scene, her psychic powers brimming with understanding. The device was in the basement. She had to be the one to use it for the best of everyone. Everything needed to change. Change was the answer.

She bashed in the front doors where Pinkie’s team had already taken care of the receptionist, Miranda. “Have no fear, I am here!”

Vriska gave a thumbs up. “Sweet! Go check the basement.”

“We can handle things up here,” Nova said.


“Psh, you don’t have to be worried about me!” Mona grinned. “I can do anything!”

“That’s one of the reasons you have to leave.”

“Why are you writing that?” Monika demanded.

“It seems like what she’d say!”

“Then make her agree.”

“That wouldn’t be-”

Monika adjusted a few more things in Janna’s file.

“Pinkie… Are you sure?”

“Actually, nope, go ahead and go to the basement! Just give me a moment…” She pulled a button out of her mane.

A confetti cannon went off from Janna’s computer, knocking her out. Monika was not spared the insult of getting completely covered in confetti.

“Pinkie Pie…” she muttered.

She noticed there was a note amidst the confetti.

You just created a Mary Sue.

“No I di-” Monika’s pupils shrunk to pinpricks as she thought about this for a minute. “AAAAAA FU¨¨¨¨√¨ø´ß®´∑¥¥¥¥¥¥¥¥¥¥¥
Ka field negated, the Snowdrop said, appearing in between Pinkie’s team and Mona in an instant. Neutralizing Mary Sue.

Pinkie blinked. They’d sent a Flower? They always sent agents for simple Mary Sue work! … Right?

Mona glared at the Snowdrop. “I am not Mary Sue! I am Mona Resalanarabana. And I-“ She dodged an icy projectile from the Snowdrop. “What the hell!? Are you trying to kill me?!”

Yes, the Snowdrop said.

Mona decided now was a good time to run away. The Snowdrop vanished, presumably in pursuit.

“OKAY TEAM!” Pinkie shouted. “For the first time since we arrived, we’re free to do what we want according to the normal flow of ka. Basement. Now. We don’t have much time.”

Jotaro was the first to respond. “STAR PLATINUM: THE WORLD!”

The next thing Pinkie knew they were in the basement.

She saw two people lying dead on the floor. While everyone else had been busy fighting over ideals, the story had resolved itself.

Both Jira and Cecil lay on the ground, blood pooling around their corpses.

“W-what?” Flutterfree said. “Did we miss something?”

“Everyone missed something,” Pinkie said, sighing. “And now people are dead because of it.”

“What do we do, then?” Nova asked.

Pinkie looked up. Behind Cecil and Jira was a machine covered in the symbol of ka. “There it is,” she said. “The thing that’s supposed to take out the Flowers. …Somehow.”

It was at this point Monika ran into the room. “Has anyone seen Mona?”

“Your Mary Sue is being hunted down,” Pinkie said, pursing her lips. “Probably dead at any mo-~~~

-ment.”

Monika twitched. “But but… Gah. I just wanted to have fun!”


Vriska, to her credit, ignored Monika and walked up to the machine. “Hey, I think we can use this.”

“Really?” Pinkie asked.

“Really. Just a little bit of luck and I think we can use it against Them.” Vriska grinned. “Worth a shot, don’t you say?”

Nova shrugged. “I don’t see why not.”
Flutterfree perked up. “I th-

~-ink we should be cautious about this.” She leaned down to check Cecil, pulling a mechanical rod out of his jacket. “This guy wasn’t one of the scientists.”

“He was a hero of sorts,” Pinkie answered. “Twilence’s.”

“I bet this device does the good thing,” Flutterfree said. “Put it into the machine in… oh hey, that round slot right there! An-”

~-d we win.”

Vriska raised an eyebrow. “This could be a trick. I think we should just activate it.”

“Vriska, I’m really sure we should just put this in there.”

Vriska moved her hand to activate the device on her own.

Flutterfree twitched, the action of her friend triggering her Rage. She flew at the troll, tackling her to the ground.

Vriska kicked her with enough force to crack bone. “You’re being controlled!”

“You’re being controlled!” Flutterfree Raged.

> ANDREW HUSSIE: Ruin everything.

All right then! I run right into the midst of everything with the shitty bees behind me screaming at the top of my lungs.

HUSSIE: AAAAAAAAA!

VRISKA: Wh8t t8e f8ck!?!?!?!

FLUTTERFREE: What in Celestia’s name!?

I run right into the machine that nobody’s given a physical description to yet, inserting my body and the millions of horrendous, cruddy bees into it! I destroy the offending mechanism! TAKE THAT, CRUEL GODS WHO CURSED ME! AHAHAHA!

There is, of course, a large boom. Everyone’s fine. Except me, but I’m a ghost, and I don’t care how
much explosion I absorb. WOOOOO!

> ANDREW HUSSIE: Gloat.

HUSSIE: You’re all fucking welcome.

PINKIE: …*sigh*. Thanks, I guess.

NOVA: …Can anyone explain what just happened?

MONIKA: His file’s hidden. Sorry.

NOVA: You have to stop just looking at people’s files at the drop of a hat!

MONIKA: Yeah, no.

HUSSIE: This is the thanks I get? A bunch of bickering? I stopped two people from killing each other! I saved the Flowers and kept a major genocide of Them from happening! I should be a national hero!

VRISKA: Yeah, no. Prepare for a knuckle sandwich.

HUSSIE: Oh, yeah, actually, instead…

Vriska and I share a deep, passionate kiss and she is so entranced by my presence she cannot punch me away.

~~~

“That’s it, I’m going down there,” a Them said.

“Hold on a se-”

The Them appeared just in time to see Vriska deliver a sword into Hussie’s mouth, pull it out, and shove it in again. Being a Skaian, that did nothing besides make him scream. Which was why she was doing it. Repeatedly.

“Worth it…” he managed, impossibly.

The Them had had enough. All of these people were going to die, right here, for messing up everything.

“What a nice file you have there,” Monika said. “I bet you assholes are responsible for this whole mess, huh?”

The Them’s white essence shook for a moment. “Wha-”

Monika set one of the options in the file to ‘dead’. The Them exploded.

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I panicked.

And they all survived because the latent energies from the destroyed machine had a life-giving power that, for a moment, rescinded mortality just enough so they would be beaten within an inch of death from the cosmic being’s own destruction, but not join it in its end.
I gulped. That was complete BS.

I hoped it worked.

After a few seconds, I let out a sigh of relief as I saw Jotaro grunt through the Eye of Rhyme.

I hadn’t gotten what I wanted. I hadn’t managed to deliver a major blow to Them. But one of Them had been killed as a result of this whole mess, and that usually deterred Them from messing with something. For a while, at least.

And the Flowers were still around. That was the important bit. Another evil plan foiled.

I decided it was about time I went to bed. Tonight had been way too stressful. I trusted Pinkie to deal with the situation.

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Pinkie looked to Monika. “Right, now that this is over, we need you to do something.”

“Why would I-”

“Seal this universe off from all outside contact,” Pinkie said. “Nobody can access the world of Prophets. It’s just way way too dangerous.”

Monika blinked. She tapped into the universe’s physics file and made a few adjustments. “Done. This is an out-only universe now. I think a Class 1 could probably get to it anyway.”

“Good. Let’s get out of here,” Pinkie said.

“Oh, wait, hold on,” Nova said. “…Where’s Rohan?”

“Back home already. Guess we glossed over that.” Pinkie smiled awkwardly. “There was a lot of people panicking for almost no reason over him.”

Nova blinked. “Did we actually do anything?”

“We made people panic,” Jotaro said.

There was silence.

“…Vriska, I’m sorry,” Flutterfree said suddenly.

“I’m pretty sure we were puppets of Prophets,” Vriska commented, throwing her sword back into Hussie. “…But I’m sorry too.”

“Let’s just go,” Pinkie said, shaking her head. “I’m… I think I’m done with the meta today. If you want to know what actually happened read my report to Renee when I get around to writing it. I need to de-stress a bit.” She opened a portal. Vriska threw Hussie through it.

Monika shrugged, walking through. “…Actually, I should go get Mona.”

“The Flowers got her and left,” Pinkie muttered. “That’s the point when Vriska started acting weird.”

“Oh.” Monika frowned. “…I liked her.”

“Hey, you’re not a Prophet,” Pinkie said. “Go to wherever you call home and write a ton of stories
about Mona.”

Monika blinked. “Maybe… …Maybe.”

The primary team left the universe, leaving Monika alone.

She destroyed the entire Freedom Sciences building with barely a thought. *Screw them all.*

She left the universe with no intention of ever returning.

Hours later, Meteora would wake up in a hospital bed without her powers. She would have to go back to leading a normal life. What the voices had said to her passed into the recesses of her memory over time, and she soon rarely thought about them at all.

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Magane chuckled. “That was *fun*, wasn’t it?”

There was no response. There was no scenery around her – she existed alone in the scene.

“Yes, I’m talking to you,” Magane said, pointing. “Lovely little readers. Perplexed by what my plan was.” She shrugged. “The moment I got Them to create a dimensional connection, I was free to explore. There was no more ‘plan’ after that. There was no reason. It was just *fun.*”

Nothing but the slasher smile. “But I’m not just going to vanish after this. It may seem like that way. But I’ll be sure to stick around. I can see just as everyone else that we’re building up to something. The scope keeps increasing and increasing and increasing…!”

“It’s got to hit the top eventually.”

There was nothing but Magane’s evil, childish laugh.
The Odd Pair

Renee was having a tea break with Daniel when the map started flashing. Primary Technician Pidge was also in the room, performing maintenance on the screens lining the walls.

“Sweet!” Pidge said, aiming a scanner at the Map. “I finally get to see what this is like in action. The powers behind these quests…”

“Oh, a Friendship Mission,” Renee said. “I wonder if I’m going to have to call anyone away from their expeditions?”

“Wonder if it’s us?” Daniel mused, watching as the magic of harmony began to form symbols.

Renee smirked. “Last time it sent us we were marriage counselors for Nova and Sunburst. It seems to think we understand how it works.”

They moved to share a kiss, but Renee saw the symbols fully take shape before she could follow through. “Oh no.”

“OH YES!” Discord crowed, appearing above the map in a shower of oranges with wings. “Behold, the Tree of Harmony has realized that I may be of assistance!” He gestured at the tornado that represented him.

“This is not the first time this has happened,” Renee pointed out, using her magic to keep the flying oranges from smashing into her face.

“So? Every time it does I get to see that adorable face of yours.”

Daniel chuckled at this.

Renee feigned an expression of betrayal.

“Question!” Pidge said, holding up her scanner. “As a being of chaos, what does it feel like to be summoned by harmony?”

“Anyway, who’s my partner today?” Discord asked, ignoring Pidge. “Or is there a big action team being prepared?”

“It’s Trixie,” Renee said, pointing at the magic wand overtop of a crescent of stars.

Discord snapped his fingers, summoning Trixie right there, complete with her performing outfit. She had a rabbit in her hooves. Trixie gasped indignantly. “Trixie was in the middle of a show!”

“Hrm, what’s more important, show, or going on an adventure with your pal, Discord?”

“Trixie had two minutes left! Trixie was heading right over.”

“You’re here now,” Renee said. “I can have another Trixie at your show in… two minutes.”

“Don’t bother. Just let them know what happened to their poor, starved performer,” Trixie said, putting a hoof to her brow.
“Starved?” Discord laughed.

“Trixie, dear, you own two mansions,” Renee pointed out.

Trixie giggled. “Yeah. Success is pretty sweet, isn’t it?”

“How much of that money do you make performing, hmm?” Discord asked.

“Wh- enough! What are you insinuating!?”

“Oh, nothing, nothing at all.”

Daniel shook his head. “He’s trying to poke fun at your ‘internet fame’ money.”

“Vlogs are a legitimate way to make a living!”

“Nobody is questioning that,” Renee assured her.

“I am,” Discord retorted.

Trixie gasped. “Why you little-!”

“How about we look at where you’re going?” Renee interrupted, turning back to the map. It had brought up a version of Equis that looked similar to the standard one, but with numerous places where the geography was distorted into extreme forms, or where great gashes cut deeply into the earth. “Oh… This is Affix’s homeworld. Equis Winch.”

“What’s with that nervous expression? I don’t like that nervous expression,” Trixie said.

“Well, the world itself is fine… It’s just they basically suffered a full apocalypse at the hands of their Discord. Lots of ponies won’t want to see you.”

“Say no more,” Discord said, shifting into a human form – though he kept his horn and antler. “Behold, Incognitoord.”

Trixie facehooved.

“If you think that’ll work,” Daniel said.

“It’s like wearing-an-eyepatch levels of effectiveness,” Pidge offered.

Renee shot Pidge a look but didn’t comment. “I’ll call Affix. She can serve as a guide to take you to… Wherever that is.”

“Looks like it’s where Nova’s village should be,” Trixie observed. “…We better not have to deal with a ton of ponies with creepy huge smiles.”

“You might,” Renee said. “Hey, Affix? Going to have to call off your trip to Skaia’s Dream. You can do it tomorrow. The Tree of Harmony has decided Equis Winch has a Friendship Problem. It’s probably best if you’re a guide. …Yes I know the ponies are nice, but one of the people it’s sending is Discord.” Renee looked at the phone, blinking. “…She’ll be right over.”

Discord rubbed his hands together. “This is going to be delightful…”

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Roughly an hour later, Corona and Lady Rarity returned to the castle hall. They both looked bruised and battered, despite Corona’s access to healing magic. Most of Lady Rarity’s armor was gone, half her mane was missing, and her coat was covered in bloodstains and mud. Corona’s clothing looked much cleaner, though that was because Raging Sights could just recreate it at will. Her own hair was half as long as it should have been, and half of her right wing was missing.

“…What in Celestia’s name happened to you two?” Renee asked.

Corona took off her red shades and rubbed her eyes. “We had a long week.”

“You said everything was fine!”

“It was,” Lady Rarity said. “The loss of the wing happened an hour ago.”

“I need to go back to Lai to regrow that,” Corona muttered. “Renee, suffice it to say, we stopped the world from destroying itself. Barely. And now we need a break.” She dismounted Lady Rarity and opened a portal to Lai. “So excuse us for a moment.”

“You have until your next mission to give me that report,” Renee reminded them. “Otherwise, enjoy your break.”

The two nodded and stepped through the portal. Corona tried to stretch, but pain shot up her arm. “Ow, sore, ow, ow.”

Lady Rarity took in a deep breath and let out a sigh of relief. “Oh thank the Tower that’s over. I am going home and using that mane regrower and then I’m not coming out of my bubble bath for two days. Maybe three.”

“I would go home, but I need to regrow this wing first.” Corona glanced at her sad half limb. “My lab isn’t exactly set up for this sort of procedure at the moment, so I’ll just use the palace’s facilities. See you in three days.”

Lady Rarity nodded. “And then we begin this cycle anew.”

“Heh. Don’t lie, you enjoy it.”

“I enjoy the parts of it that don’t break my legs every five minutes,” Lady Rarity muttered. “…But yes, you are correct.”

Corona waved – then teleported right to the palace’s medical ward. “Right, need to regrow this wing a-” she blinked.

The doctor was a unicorn skeleton.

“…When did we hire a skeleton?” Corona asked, cocking her head.

“Last week,” he said in a dry, raspy voice. “Have something against skeletons?”

“Uh, no, it just… an undead doctor seems weird.”

“Oh, so if I was a doctor while I was living, I can’t be one after I’ve been brought back as a bag of bones?”

Corona began to sweat. “Er, no, I jus- I’m sorry!”

The skeleton chuckled.
Corona facepalmed. “How many patients do you use that on?”

“Just the ones who’ll get flustered. Name’s Entice Bell. Or just Doctor Bell.” She gestured toward a bed equipped with a grafting machine. The apparatus was tall, rectangular, and had a large hole whose edges glowed with a soft green light. “I take it you’re familiar with the procedure?”

“I’d have to be, I helped make it,” Corona said with a smirk. She lay down flat on her stomach and extended her half-wing into the hole, letting Doctor Bell inject the stump with an anesthetic before he turned the machine on. In the past, the new wing would have needed to be grown separately and grafted on with surgery, but technology had advanced enough to where it was built onto the already existing stump.

“And done,” Doctor Bell said. “I wouldn’t use it heavily for the next few days. If you lose feeling in the new section, come see me immediately. Also you’re not allowed to operate any heavy spells or machinery for the next hour.”

“The anesthetic was that powerful?”

“Can you feel anything in your feet?”

Corona blinked. “Huh. No. …I would ask how I’m still conscious, but Raging Sights is telling me this is a magical anesthetic.”

“Brand new concoction. Numbs up everything but only makes you slightly woozy. Don’t go stubbing your toes either.”

“Can I just cast a clear spell?”

“Sure. Insurance won’t cover injuries after you do though.”

Corona blinked. “…We don’t do the health insurance thing.”

Doctor Bell shook her head. “Joke. Was a joke. Of course I know healthcare is free.”

Corona cleared the anesthetic and stretched her limbs. She was still sore, but she already felt a little better. “Thanks Doc.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Corona decided to walk home rather than teleport. Give her a chance to use her legs in something that wasn’t a life-or-death scenario. She made her way to the front of the palace. This involved passing through the throne room. She could hear voices for a while before she actually arrived – one was Toph, the other a nasally voice she didn’t recognize.

“…and then I said, what about the grub sauce?”

Toph laughed. “You’re vicious.”

“Certain events may have been slightly exaggerated.”

“Slightly? There’s no way the solution was a potato.”

“It was though! Think ab- hold on, someone’s coming.”

Corona walked into the throne room. “Oh, don’t stop on my account, just passing through.”
Toph nudged the troll standing next to her. “I knew she was coming, Terezi.”

Corona examined the troll – one of the few living ones, teal-blood, one of Vriska’s friends if Corona remembered correctly. The blind one who wore the pointy red glasses. Corona decided they weren’t as cool as hers. Then she inwardly chided herself for thinking something so petty.

“Well I didn’t until I smelled her coming down the hallway!”

Toph shrugged. “Corona, this is Terezi. She’s my new legal advisor.”

“Legislacerator,” Terezi corrected.

“The lacerations are few and far between,” Toph reminded her.

“But I still get to do them, right? Right?”

Corona blinked. “Toph, why is your legal advisor out for blood?”

“That’s the attitude you need for convictions!” Terezi answered, raising a fist into the air. “Hehehehehehe!”

Corona thought the laugh sounded more than a little evil. “…Yeah, no, shouldn’t you be devoted to justice rather th-”

“JUSTICE!” Terezi interrupted. “The sweet finalization of a criminal’s fate! Brought low by the power of the legal system, shown the error of their ways! Given what they deserve-!”

“You seem a little too zealous about this.”


Corona raised an eyebrow. “Cut the sarcasm.”

“Ooooh! Someone’s touchy~!” Terezi trilled.

“I just had my wing regrown so, yeah, maybe I’m little touchy!” Corona blurted.

Toph spoke up. “Bad day?”

“Bad week.”

“You look fine to me,” Terezi said.

“Looks can be deceiving,” Corona muttered, pointing at her with an accusatory finger.

“Hey. Hey. Hey firegirl. I’m blind. What looks!?!” Her toothy grin widened and she threw her arms wide, clicking her heels on the ground.

Corona lowered her finger. “You’ve got to be able to know where you are somehow.”

“Smell.”

“You’re messing with me,” Corona said.

“She’s actually not, for once,” Toph commented. “All Terezis go by smell. Or taste.”
“I could lick your face to get a better mental image of it!” Terezi chirped. “You know you want to!”

“Thanks, except not really,” Corona muttered.

“Hey, you should accept it when a girl offers to lick your face. It’s considered rude in troll culture to refuse.”

“Oh, it is, i-” Corona realized Terezi was laughing again. “You know what, screw it, I’m leaving.” Corona walked toward the front door.

“And Terezi is victorious! The crowd goes wild as the angel walks away in disgrace, unable to match wits with the legislacerator extraordinaire!”

Corona fumed.

“Hehehehehehehe~!”

The laugh did it. Corona whirled around, twitching. “What is your deal?”

“I’m a troll. It’s in the name. Sorry you didn’t get the memo.”

“That was, I, jus…” Corona lit her horn and teleported away.

Toph sighed. “Terezi…”

“That was a lot easier than expected,” Terezi observed. “Huh. Sweet.”

Toph facepalmed.

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“The history of Equis Winch is simple,” Affix said, ignoring the fact that Trixie couldn’t stop staring at her facial scar. “Discord showed up one day. He ruined everything and killed a lot of ponies. When we killed him, his chaos magic remained, drifting across the land without ever really dissipating. Case in point…” She gestured at a flying pig surrounded by a swarm of flies that were slowly draining it of blood.

“Ech,” Discord said in revulsion, leaning his human form back further than should have been physically possible. “Why are there versions of me that have to be so grotesque?”

“I was very surprised to learn most of you weren’t,” Affix admitted. “Considering how much horror our Discord unleashed on all of us, making sure to scar us for life even in his defeat…” She slapped herself in the face. “Bah, look at me, getting negative-nostalgia. Basically the need-to-know is this: don’t let them know you’re Discord. They will drive you out and it will ruin whatever ‘Friendship Problem’ you have to deal with. They’re also untrusting of strong magic, even if you use it to fix a chaotic problem. And above all else, don’t mention Celestia or Luna, even via swearing. I might do that, but that’s because I don’t care about societal constructs.”

“They’re gone, aren’t they?” Trixie said.

“Turned to stone,” Affix said. “You Merodi tried to bring Cadence back, but when you did she tried to kill everything she touched. Apparently if you aren’t already mad getting turned to stone does things to your head.”

“Or this Discord was just needlessly cruel,” Discord said, sliding in front of Affix.
“Don’t play naive with me, I know what you did on Equis Vitis. You’re certainly no monster but you know how to be needlessly cruel. Right now you’re basically just a prick.”

Trixie laughed. “You can say that again.”

Discord narrowed his eyes at Affix. “I don’t think she likes me, Trixie.”

“Who do-” Trixie caught herself. “Wait, she was serious? …Great Cel-” She put a hoof in front of her face. “I can see this is going to be a great day.”

Affix rolled her eyes. “You two would be so doomed without me. No, Discord, I am not a fan of you or most of your self-absorbed asshole variations. But hey, at least we don’t have to try to kill each other, isn’t that a plus?”

Discord folded his arms and muttered. “In certain circumstances.”

“Certain? Please elaborate, dear draconequus. I’d like to hear this.”

“You’ve done it now,” Trixie muttered.

Discord snapped his fingers and suddenly both Trixie and Affix were standing in a grade school classroom. Discord tapped chalk against the whiteboard. “Let’s see here, you said that not needing to fight to the death is a plus. But what if I was evil? What if you were evil? What if there was some deep, personal conflict that could only be resolved through a duel to the death? Or an ancient temple’s curse wh-”

“I get the damn point,” Affix muttered. “You can think of elaborate exceptions. Can we just move on so I don’t have to see your smug face again, hm?”

“This isn’t my smug face,” Discord said with a smirk. “This is a mask worn to protect the innocent.”

“Hah,” Affix snorted. “You, protecting the innocent? That’s a laugh!”

Discord appeared behind Affix and ran his finger across her face. “My dear Affix, I’ve been a knight in shining armor on ma-”

Affix’s eyes flashed with the light of the Element of Generosity. She summoned a needle of power and drove it into Discord’s arm, forcing him not only to drop his disguise for a moment, but also to lose the fake schoolhouse. “…What?”

“I did mention that we killed Discord, right?” Affix said. “Don’t touch me.”

Discord returned to his false human form, gulping. “Message received…”

“Okaaaaaaay,” Trixie said. “I get it, you’re uptight and have a bit of a history with chaos magic. But could you tone it down a bit so we don’t end up in mortal danger because of you, mmkay?”

Affix bristled. “Yes, yes, I see, I see. After all, it’s in my best interests to help my world with a Friendship Problem! Haha.”

Discord sighed. “Can we just go now?”

“Yes, by all means.”

Discord snapped his fingers and they were all suddenly on a ridge made out of lime zest that overlooked a normal desert. They looked down at a town with a few dozen houses built around a
central fountain, stretching out in eight directions.

“Well, it’s not an equals sign,” Trixie said. “That’s good news.”

“If everyone’s cutie marks are eight-pointed stars I’m going to turn the place upside down,” Discord muttered.

Affix said nothing.

The three of them walked down a dirt path into town. They did not receive the creepy “WELCOME!” that most Starlight Villages had, but instead got normal, friendly waves from ponies with a seemingly normal variety of cutie marks.

“And the chance at finding the Friendship Problem quickly has just fallen like an anvil,” Trixie muttered. “Everyone’s happy.”

“You simply haven’t looked yet!” Discord pointed out.

“I know how to look! I just don’t like to.”

“What was the Tree thinking sending two egocentric maniacs…?” Affix asked nobody in particular.

“Ahem,” Trixie said. “The correct insult is ‘self-absorbed illusionist.’ Or you could just go with ‘internet celebrity who doesn’t understand the meaning of work’, but that’s a bit rambly and ‘pedestrian’.”

Affix bristled, but she didn’t get to retort because a version of Starlight poked her head out of a nearby house. “Oooh! Visitors!” She ran out of her home, revealing herself to be wearing a flowing black cloak and a witch hat with a gold buckle around the base. “Hi! I’m Starlight, but I bet you already know that~!”

Trixie blinked. “Uh, hi! I’m Trixie.”

“You’re chipper,” Discord observed.

“Oh, I just like ponies!” Starlight said. “And people! People are nice too! And Rarity, nopony could ever mistake you for anyone else beca- oh I’m sorry that was rude of me a-”

“Shush,” Affix said, raising a hoof. “It’s Affix now, since I work for Expeditions.”

“Oh that’s cool! What kind of things do you see!?”

“Stuff you could if you left this town.”

Starlight blinked. “Huh? Oh I don’t live here, I’m a traveling… magician. Always jumping from one town to the next looking for adventure!”

“Oh, I’m a traveling magician too!” Trixie grinned. “The Great and Powerful Trixie! I also do stuff on the Internet, but that’s more of a side thing.”

“She’s not that kind of magician,” Affix muttered. “Nor is she the type she’s trying to make you think she is.”

“W-what?” Starlight said, suddenly nervous. “No, I’m just your regular run of the mill wizard! No secrets here!”
“Look, Starlight,” Affix sighed. “I’ve come to accept that your kind are a fact of life. You don’t have to keep making a fool of yourself.”

Starlight looked at the ground, sagging.

“…What is she?” Trixie asked.

“Chaos mage,” Affix said. “Unicorns figured out how to bend Discord’s remnants rather quickly. She’s probably ‘traveling’ because she gets kicked out of every town she goes to.”

“Shhh-!” Starlight said. “I like this place!”

“Nobody heard us, dear,” Affix assured her. “Your secret’s safe with us assuming tall and ugly here doesn’t blab.”

“I don’t blab!” Discord blurted.

“…Uh, thanks!” Starlight said, looking up at Discord. “I don’t think I caught your name…”

“Dominique,” Discord said, bowing. “But you can just call me Dom. I am a bit of a magician myself, though you’d hardly consider my tricks standard fare.”

“No kidding,” Trixie said under her breath. “Aaaaaanyway, we’re on business here from Equis Vitis. Apparently there’s a Friendship Problem in this town that needs fixing?”

“Oh, you wouldn’t want to talk to me for that,” Starlight said. “You’d want to talk to Altar! He runs this place. I personally think he’s not all there in the head, but y’know what age does to ponies.”

“Has he taken the serum?” Trixie asked.

“Nope. Says it’s ‘unholy’ and the ‘blight of all that is proper in life’.” Starlight rolled her eyes. “His house is this way, come on.” She led them across town to a house that looked no different to all the others, except perhaps older than average. She knocked, discovering the door was already open.

“Uh... Hello? Altar?”

“Bah, come on in!” he called with an old, raspy voice. “It better be good though!”

“Do visitors from Equis Vitis and our Element of Generosity count?”

“…Yes.”

Starlight led them into the living room. Altar sat in a chair, alone, where a tall white hat with ornate golden designs on it drew everyone’s attention to his head. He was a white unicorn who had no visible coloration and wore a cloak that covered most of his body. “Ah, visitors. A-” He stared right at Discord. “Holy end times…”

Affix facehooved. “All right, secret’s out. Altar, listen to me very closely, do not go-”

“A Discord has come to our town!” the stallion shouted in delight, not fear. “EVERYPONY! A DISCORD HAS COME TO OUR TOWN! ALL OUR TROUBLES ARE OVER!”

He ran out of the house, screaming at the top of his lungs.

Affix stared at where he had just been in disbelief. Starlight stared at Discord in disbelief. “A Discord?”
Discord shrugged, dropping the human disguise. “At your service, my witch.”

Starlight’s eyes glistened. “Yes… Wait, hold on a second, why in Tartarus did Altar…?”

“We might be in the middle of a chaos town,” Affix muttered, glancing through the blinds at the people Altar was rallying. “This… could be a problem.”

“I was in a chaos town and didn’t know it!” Starlight blurted. “How in… Actually, you know what, it is kind of odd the buildings are arranged in the symbol… Huh. Can’t believe I didn’t notice that.”

“If Starlight here is fine, what’s wrong with an entire town?” Trixie asked.

“There’s a difference between a Discord cult and a Discordian mage,” Affix said. “Those like Starlight hate Discord just like the rest of us, but find his magic useful. A cult… Let’s just say they worship destruction.”

“But the ponies here are so nice…” Starlight said. “Hardly seem destructive at all…”

“Which is why I’m confused,” Affix said. “Nothing about this seems right.”

“Perhaps I can be of help?”

The four of them turned around to see the Doctor leaning on his TARDIS, eating, of all things, a carrot.

Discord took the moment to start laughing. “Does anyone else want to show up and throw everything on its head again?”

“Yes,” a powerful voice said. Everyone looked up to see a yellow pegasus hiding in the ceiling. She wore pointed metal boots, had razor metal tips on her wings, and wore a blindfold over her eyes. Given the size of pony eyes, it was easy to tell the blindfold was hiding empty sockets. She drifted to the ground. “Hello.”

“…Flair?” Affix said, blinking. “But y-you’re…”

“Alive,” Flair said. “And pissed off. How could you, Affix? How could you stand to be in the same room as him!?” She shouted, pointing one of her razor-tipped wings at Discord.

“Now now, let’s all calm down,” the Doctor said. “There’s a lot more going on here than a simple misunde-”

“Shut up,” Flair ordered. She Stared at the Doctor, despite not having eyes.

He complied.

Trixie gaped at Flair. “W-what are you?”

“A shattered Element,” was all she had to say.

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Corona managed to take a shower before she started feeling horrible. She’d flown off the handle at Terezi, all because of a simple joke.

Even though I was in a bad mood, it doesn’t matter. That was still wrong.
She sighed. Instead of taking a nap for eternity, she teleported back to the throne room of the castle.

“Hey, Toph,” Corona asked the Queen after checking to make sure she was alone. “Where’s Terezi?”

“She just walked down that hall. Why?”

Corona sighed. “I was short with her. It’s been bugging me.”

Toph smiled. “You’re not as tough as you claim to be.”

“Neither are you.” Corona walked away from Toph and down the palace hall to catch up with Terezi. “Hey!”

“Hey what?” Terezi said, not turning around.

Don’t worry about it, she’s just blind, she doesn’t have to look at you to talk to you. She might not be indicating what you think. Corona teleported in front of her. “Hey, I uh, just wanted to apologize for how I stormed out earlier. I think we’ve gotten off on the wrong foo-”

“Wow, you came back to apologize? After storming off like that? Jegus, I thought you had some fire in you, but that’s apparently a lie!”

Corona blinked. “...What?”

“See, look at you groveling. Who grovels to anyone? You, apparently. Did I hurt your feelings?”

“I mean, not really, I just got upset. I wasn’t treating you we-”

“Oh, so it’s me you were worried about? Ha! Spare me your overblown ego. I’m touched, really I am, maybe we should go on a date! Clearly you’ve done half the work already!”

Corona twitched. “…What the heck is your problem?”

“Ooh, swear substitutes. So jarring. Fucking brilliant.”

“A clever person doesn’t need swearing to get their point across.”

“Substituting isn’t clever! It’s just what you say to avoid upsetting your mommy!”

Corona lit her fist on fire, ready to punch Terezi down. Then she realized what she was doing. She let her arm hang limp, shame crossing her features.

“What’s wrong? Can’t punch the blind girl? Ca-”

Corona teleported away.

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Starlight inserted herself between Flair and Affix. “Hey, sorry to insert myself between two giants of recent history like this but can we hold the interpersonal argume-”

Flair slapped Starlight to the side, glaring.

“Hey hey hey, no need to get all upset here, but I was just going to say Altar’s bringing a mob of fanatics back and we might not want to be here in about twenty seconds.”
“I’ve got it!” Discord declared. “Come on Starlight, you get to be my acolyte!”

“Wait wh-”

“Distraction mode: ACTIVATE!”

Trixie held out a hoof. “Discord, no, remember what happened last time y-” He teleported himself and Starlight out into the adoring crowd. “And he’s gone! Absolutely wonderful.”

“It’s better if he’s not here,” Flair said distastefully. “I was this close to gutting him open on the spot.”

“Flair!” Affix gasped. “What happened to you?”

“Sorta died, sorta didn’t, that’s not the point,” Flair spat. “The point is that you being here – all of you being here – is ruining what I’m doing.”

The Doctor took a step forward. “And what exactly is that?”

“This town is a chaos cult. I’m getting rid of it. Or did you think I was just hanging out up there?”

Affix blinked. “You can’t be suggesting you were going to kill him? Flair, it took forever to convince you there was no other option with Discord!”

“And I’ve come to realize that Piè and Areo were right all along.”

Affix looked her up and down, unsure of how to respond.

“Clearly we can’t just let her kill everyone,” Trixie said.

Flair pointed her face right at Trixie, prompting a terrified ‘eep’ to escape the unicorn’s mouth.

Before she could take back what she said, the Doctor placed himself between Flair and Trixie. “She’s right. You don’t solve problems by killing, you just create new ones.”

“It’s usually a pretty final solution,” Flair barked.

“I clearly can’t change your mind of that. But like I was about to say before I was so rudely interrupted a ways back, I’ve just come from a few hours in the future. Where there is no planet here. Something reduced it to rubble. The chance isn’t zero that your actions bring that about.”

“But we’re here now,” Trixie pointed out. “Dimensional travel negates time, right?”

“That’d only be true if you arrived after I went back in time. As it is, I arrived after you, so we’re still on the same timeline. The only thing different right now between the timeline where everything explodes and the one we’re currently in is me and the things I’m telling you.”

Flair shook her head. “I… fail?”

“Or caused it,” the Doctor said. “So let’s not be rash.”

“All of you shut up and take a minute to listen to what’s going on outside,” Affix interrupted. The three of them fell silent and turned their gaze to the window while Flair’s ears rose to full attention, swiveling to maximize her sense of what was happening outside.
Discord and Starlight were talking to the crowd.

“I know, I know you’re all ready to adore me, but I have to make some checks!” Discord said, waving his hand. “You see, I hear stories of a brutal, horrible Discord of this world!”

He must have sent Starlight a message telepathically, because she broke out into a slightly oversized grin. “The marrier of the Elements! The tormentor of the land! The petrifier of celestials! The destroyer of Manehattan!”

“You all know of these feats, yes?” Discord said. The townspeople – Altar included – nodded. “And do you all know for sure I am not that Discord?”

“We are a society devoted to order within chaos,” Altar answered. “Not pure chaos that has no direction. Chaos has a purpose, and all Discords of the multiverse are different aspects of this purpose. We seek not our Discord, but all Discords.”

Discord grinned. “Well aren’t you in luck. I’m the Discord of Equis Vitis! You could consider me one of the ‘baseline’ Discords, if you will.”

The crowd erupted into loud, excited cheering at this revelation from their chaotic serpent.

Starlight blurted out words again. “Let us turn away from the ways of destruction, death, and delirium. There is a chaos fit for all! There is a chaos of enjoyment! The eight directions are all one, in the end!”

“As my acolyte has spoken,” Discord continued, placing a gentle hand on Starlight’s shoulder, “we are here to bring about change, if you are willing to accept it.”

The crowd cheered and threw flowers on top of Discord.

“Great, he’s letting them worship him,” Trixie muttered. “Don’t know what I was expecting.”

The Doctor narrowed his eyes. “I don’t think that’s what he’s doing… You’re here on a Friendship Problem, right?”

Trixie nodded. “Uh, yeah.”

“I think he’s trying to solve it. Using Starlight as a source of knowledge to improve his authority.”

“And trying to save this town is probably what destroys everything!” Flair blurted.

“We can’t know that for sure!” Affix blurted. “All I know is that he has them eating out of his claws and not killing everyone. Keeps me from having to blow everything up, which is… I don’t want to say ‘nice’, but more ‘preferable’.”

“We can’t just let him do what he wants,” Flair declared. “Both of you need to leave.”

Trixie raised an eyebrow. “There has never been a failed Friendship Problem. We aren’t going anywhere. And, for all we know, the problem is actually you and not the town! You seem to have forgotten what Friendship means.”

Flair put one of her wingtips to Trixie’s neck. “For someone so cowardly you spout quite the accusations…”

“She has a point,” Affix said. “I don’t like this Discord, but I understand he’s just a prick, not a monster.”
“Which is why he isn’t already dead,” Flair pointed out.

“Do you really think you could kill a Discord alone!?”

Flair didn’t respond.

“Ponyfeathers,” Trixie muttered. “Discord’s taking them away.”

“Then we’re going to follow them,” Affix asserted

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“I don’t know what it is? Does she just not like me? Does she view me as a threat? Am I taking things too seriously?”

Lady Rarity sighed. She was currently in her bubble bath soaking every sore spot on her body, with only her head above the froth, cucumber slices on her eyes. Corona was sitting on the nearby counter, looking out the bathroom window with a confused expression. “I do think you are taking it too seriously. She’s just living up to the name of her race. A troll, as it were.”

“I didn’t think it was literal.”

“Have you met Vriska?”

Corona let out a sharp laugh. “Yeah, but she’s not this bad. And Aradia’s not like that at all, I don’t get what the deal is. But she is a ‘troll’. I’m ninety percent sure she just wanted to get under my skin. For the life of me I can’t figure out why.”

“Some people just like to do that, dear.”

“And work that closely with Toph?” Corona muttered, leaning into her hands. “I just don’t get it, and that’s supposed to be my thing. I’m supposed to get people, to empathize with them.”

Lady Rarity levitated the cucumbers off her eyes, looking at Corona. “Didn’t you used to be the antagonizing bully?”

“I was angry, spiteful, and lashing out. I don’t see that in her. She seems happy, but then again some people are good at masking what’s really behind their outward appearance…” She narrowed her eyes.

Lady Rarity uncorked the bath.

“What are you doing? I said I wasn’t going to get you out of y-”

“Clearly, you need a friend at your side and a second voice in your head that isn’t just a crystal with about zero social skills. No offense, RS.”

Raging Sights beeped in annoyance.

“Rarity…”

“Oh, it’s fine darling, I’ve been in this bath for several hours already.” She climbed out and dried herself off with a magically-warmed towel, beginning the process of steaming herself dry.

“I mean, thanks, but what are we going to do? Walk up to her and talk to her?”
“Oh, no, we’re going to talk to Toph first,” Lady Rarity said. “She’s clearly been around this Terezi a little more than you or I have. Let’s get some lay of the land, as it were. She must see something in her if she lets her be an advisor.”

“…Maybe I was just jealous that moment when I walked in? Did that set her off?” Lady Rarity facehoofed. “Corona, stop second guessing yourself. Okay? Let’s wipe the slate clean.”

“Terezi didn’t seem to like that…”

“Armonia’s hair, you’ve really twisted this around in that little mind of yours…” Lady Rarity shook her head. With a quick spell she adjusted her mane back to the way it should be. “I’ll forego the armor today, just a routine visit. Teleport away.”

Corona did. They appeared in the throne room at Toph’s side. She appeared to be wrapping up a conversation with… no-one.

Corona blinked.

“Protomolecule,” Toph said. “Can’t see him. Sure can hear him though. Give me a minute. …Yes, I know you want to introduce your globes to Lai, but the people aren’t going to accept that. Besides the Gems, we are the most uptight of the founding worlds. I’m sorry. …Thank you for understanding.” She leaned back in her throne. “All right, he’s gone.”

“So weird…” Lady Rarity commented.

“Yep. So, friend-os, what’s up?”

“…Are you trying to sound cool?” Corona asked.

“Just answer the question.”

Lady Rarity spoke up. “Corona here has developed a mild complex concerning your newest legal advisor, one ‘Terezi’.”

“Oh. Her. She really got under your skin that bad?” Corona scratched the back of her head. “Well…”

“Yes. Yes she did,” Lady Rarity answered. “I got my bath interrupted to be a counselor. We’re here to find out what you think about her.”

Toph nodded. “She was overqualified for the position, and I needed a new one since I found out Lancer was beyond corrupt. She came highly recommended from Earth C having studied troll, human, and carapacian law while also writing everything for the consort government. So that’s why I hired her. Kept her around because I found her observations amusing.”

“And her antagonism?”

“I think she just likes messing with people,” Toph said, putting her hands behind her head. “She does it to everyone she meets. Even me, at first. But since I was able to handle it, I think I gained her respect.”

“So basically it’s hopeless,” Corona said, sighing. “I failed her little test, now we’re doomed to be on the wrong foot?”
“I wouldn’t say so,” Toph said. “I think she just views you as easy pickings right now. It’ll pass.”

Lady Rarity furrowed her brow. “Corona went to apologize and make up for getting angry.”

“Didn’t go well?”

“No,” Corona said. “She basically said it was a sign of weakness and childish.”

Toph paused. “Huh. That’s… a little strong.”

“A little!? I went out of my way to patch things up and I basically got shot for it!”

“I don’t know what to tell you,” Toph admitted. “I don’t really know her that well, evidently. You’d have to talk to Vriska.”

“Why?”

“They were best friends at one point, or so Terezi told me.”


“Anytime.”

~~~

Trixie, Flair, Affix, and the Doctor poked their heads around a corner in the village. They saw Discord moving with the mob of adoring ponies through town.

“Lesson three!” Discord began.

“Heed the words of the chaos incarnate!” Starlight blurted.

Discord looked at her in annoyance. She was overselling it a little. “Chaos is meant to bring about fun and enjoyment.” He summoned a dancing cricket set in a conga line with seventeen other bugs of differing species. “Pure chaos with no thought, no form, is just boring. That, my friends, is a little concept called entropy. Dreadful, really. Entire universes die because the matter decides it can’t get along anymore and poof, nothing. This ‘chaos’ leads to nothing, one of the least chaotic things in existence.”

Altar nodded. “Wise words.”

“Ah, but there’s more, my ritualistic friend! See, chaos with a bit of imagination can branch to several things. There’s the chaos of collapse, for instance.” He created another house in an empty part of town between two lines of buildings, and brought it down. “Societies, tribes, that waffle house down the block that you love so much, all these things are destroyed by this chaos. That doesn’t seem right does it?”

The various ponies all shook their heads.

“But perhaps the chaos of war is the answer! Strife! Build up war machines and throw everyone against each other!” He snapped his fingers, creating two squads of red and blue clay people. They smashed into each other, creating purple sludge. “But you can’t keep that going forever. Eventually something has to give, leaving us with poor boring entropy again.” He shook his head. “Oh woe is us, for we cannot find the answer!”

“What was our Discord doing?” a mare asked.
“A variety of war,” Discord answered. “Only he thought ‘I can fight a war all by myself against existence for eternity’! Quite dull for a version of me, I must say.”

“But he didn’t know that no war could last forever,” Starlight interjected. “His plans did not truly serve chaos! He brought down dozens of waffle houses when he leveled the Northern Wastes. He turned the Griffons and Dragons against each other, turning them to the purple sludge!”

“And what of you?” Altar asked. “What do you call your chaos?”

“The chaos of delight!” Discord said, spreading his arms wide. He snapped with one hand, creating a white and orange shape with a flower growing out of it. “See that? That is random chaos. Vaguely interesting to look at but ultimately pointless and boring. On the other hand…” He snapped with his other hand, crating a pink rabbit that yodeled, every word he spoke creating a bubble of a different color around him. He proceeded to explode into a shower of candies of many exotic flavors, most of which couldn’t be said to ‘exist’ in the traditional sense.

The ponies scrambled for them.

“Huh,” Starlight said under her breath. “Nice to know my magic doesn’t have to look absolutely terrifying.”

Discord snaked behind her. “You just have to add some creativity. Pointless cruelty is a rather boring endeavor.”

“Hey, wait a minute,” a stallion said, looking at the candy in his hooves. “I heard our Discord used monsters made of candies to lure ponies into his traps. That certainly seems creative to me!”

Discord glared at him. “What are you suggesting?”

The stallion shifted uncomfortably. “What if he was creative?”

“If he did find a way to perpetuate the cruelty through creativity, it would have robbed him of something else. What would your fellow ponies think of you if you started laying traps for their kids?”

The stallion nodded. “I see.”

“Wise words,” Altar said. “In the end, even chaos respects the community.”

“Ring a ding!” Discord said, creating a large bell behind Altar to punctuate his thought. “You get a cookie.” He created a pony-sized cookie and gave it to Altar.

From her observation point, Trixie gawked. “I can’t believe it. He actually learned his lesson last time. He’s teaching them.”

“He’s still pretending to be worthy of their praise,” the Doctor muttered.

“Oh, that’s because he believes he is.” Trixie rolled her eyes. “Seems to be working like a charm on them.” Trixie smirked. “He’s learned a lot from our little shows, too.”

Affix raised an eyebrow. “How is stage magic helpful here?”

“Misdirection,” Trixie said. “There’s also a lot of pretending you know what you’re talking about, or saying things with absolute certainty even if you’re unsure. He’s leading Starlight along really well for a clueless audience assistant. She provides context for his teachings so they’ll sink in better…”
“He is smarter than I gave him credit for,” Affix admitted.

“Yeah, the art of misdirection is one you don’t see unless you’re looking… for… it…” Trixie blinked.

It looked like everyone was following Discord through the town. Discord himself probably thought so. But Trixie saw Altar moving himself to the front of the crowd, gesturing with his staff and hooves in subliminal ways to draw attention. They were heading for a house at the edge of town, she deduced.

She narrowed her eyes. “Altar’s up to something.”

The Doctor turned to her. “…Misdirection?”

“Really good too,” Trixie said. “Makes me jealous. Leading an entire crowd of people along and they don’t even realize it.”

“Where are they headed?” Flair asked.

“Th-” Trixie stopped herself. “You’re just going to do something angry, aren’t you?”

Flair put a wing blade to Trixie’s neck. “Where are they going?”

“Flair, she has a-” Affix got another wing blade placed to her throat for her trouble.

Trixie laughed nervously. “O-okay! Okay! They’re going to that green house over there!”

Flair nodded, taking off to investigate. The crowd didn’t notice her move.

“Trixie…” the Doctor said.

“That was a lie,” Trixie said smirking. “You forget Trixie knows a thing or two about performing. Now, the moment she realizes they aren’t going to that house – no idea how long that’ll take since she’s blind – she’s going to be out for blood. Let’s hurry to the place they’re actually going.”

“I’ll watch them,” Affix said. “…Distract Flair if I see her about to do something crazy.”

The Doctor nodded. He and Trixie walked along the other side of the houses so the crowd wouldn’t see them, arriving at the last house quickly. Trixie lit her horn. “Right, so, I’ve never been good at sensing…”

“Tremendous magical presence in the basement,” the Doctor said, looking at his sonic screwdriver. “Hidden behind a scrying field. Curious. Can’t beat the Time Lords when they want to find something, unfortunately for mister Altar.”

Trixie unlocked the front door with her magic. There was nopony inside. They quickly moved to the basement.

The basement was stone, mostly square in shape, and held only one thing – a box at the far corner, stained red. A design was painted into the floor with blood: eight arrows coming out of a single point; four pointing at the corners, four at the edges of the walls. More intricate rings spiraled out from these eight points, and black charcoal was smeared in the center.

The Doctor put his hand behind his head. “This is quite the ritual here…”

“I have no idea what it does,” Trixie said.
“Same.”

“Let’s ruin it.” Trixie reached into her pouch and took out some bombs she had stolen from Affix earlier. She told herself Affix wouldn’t mind at the time. Now she was sure Affix wouldn’t mind.

She threw the bomb. A black claw shot out from the center of the design, grabbing the bomb and disintegrating it.

Then it went for the two of them.

Trixie and the Doctor bolted up the stairs, only to find Altar standing there.

“Now now, my master, no need to kill them… They may prove useful.”

The black claw closed around the Doctor – but didn’t crush him. A second claw grabbed Trixie, treating her with a strange gentleness.

The top of the crate popped open, revealing the corpses of three ponies – an earth pony, a pegasus, and a unicorn. All of their blood had been completely drained. The Doctor and Trixie were thrown in with them.

As an afterthought, the claw took the sonic screwdriver as well.

Trixie managed not to scream at being so close to pony corpses. She just inwardly whined.

“Not much longer now, my master…” Altar breathed.

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Vriska answered her front door, a grumpy expression on her face. “I told you telemarketers to stop coming to th- oh. Corona?”

Corona nodded. “Yeah. It’s me.” Lady Rarity waved from behind her. “So, I’ve come to ask you about Terezi.”

“She trolling you?” Vriska asked, drinking her evening coffee.

“Yeah.”

Vriska sighed. “That was always her thing. She was the only one of us who really got under the humans’ skin. She made it look easy. Karkat and I had our moments, but she was able to mess with everyone. And she’d tell them she was doing it!”

“…So it really is just her being abrasive?”

“Hey, you haven’t explained jack shit yet,” Vriska said. “It’s just when I hear the words ‘I’ve come to ask about Terezi’ there are a few conclusions I jump to.” She looked down at her cup, a sour expression crossing her face. “I expect this is probably going to culminate in me and Aradia having a ‘talk’ with her.”

“Do you know why she’s that way?” Corona asked.

Vriska leaned against her doorway. “What way?”

Lady Rarity cleared her throat. “Antagonistic, sadistic, petty, etcetera?”
“Sadism is pretty much ingrained into Alternian culture,” Vriska said. “Me more than others, but she and I were a duo. I fed trolls to a giant spider. She dreamed of one day hanging criminals by the thousand.”

“Yeesh,” Lady Rarity said.

“Oh yeah, Alternia was messed up. Did I ever tell you of the eldritch abomination Feferi had as a guardian? So terrifying not even big bad Condesce would dare to touch it.”

“So she’s just that way because her culture made her that way?” Corona asked.

“I mean…” Vriska furrowed her brow. “You know what, just show me.”

“Huh?”

“Put your freaky emotion-hand to my head and show me. I’ll let you in.”

Corona nodded, dissipating one of her gloves. She placed her fingers to Vriska’s head, thinking deeply about her recent experiences with Terezi.

In return, she got Vriska’s thoughts of Terezi when they were younger.

An image of Terezi and Vriska laughing over Aradia and a bronze-blood troll – Tavros, if Corona remembered correctly.

An image of Terezi and Vriska having great fun crafting roleplaying adventures.

An image of Vriska’s eye getting blown up and Terezi’s eyes being scorched by Alternia’s sun, both results of the others’ attacks on each other.

Images of them fighting, warring – culminating in an image of Terezi stabbing Vriska through the chest for Justice.

…Stabbing Omega Vriska through the chest. The real Terezi went on to plan the final battle with Vriska. But they fought separately.

Vriska pulled back. “Holy fuck, she’s not acting normal.”

“Wait, what?” Corona blinked. “I thought-”

“The initial meeting was her being herself,” Vriska said, stepping out of her home and locking the door. “That thing where you went back to make up? She knows about how humans work. She should anyway.” She snapped her fingers. “Let’s roll, she needs a good talking to.”

Lady Rarity blinked. She opened a portal to Lai and the three of them stepped through.

“Get on with the teleporty,” Vriska muttered. Corona obliged, and they were in the throne room again. Toph and Terezi were talking.

“And then I sai-” Terezi smelled their presence. “Fuck.”

“Fuck indeed,” Vriska said.

Terezi whirled to face them and clicked her heels – even though she didn’t actually look at any of them. “Did the Light players come to congregate? Oh wait, you’re not Light. You’re Doom trying to be Light!”
“Terezi, shut the fuck up,” Vriska said, folding her arms. “Humans can’t do kismesis. It doesn’t work.”

“…She was hitting on me?!” Corona blurted.

“Yeah. Pretty badly too,” Vriska said, putting a hand to her forehead.

Terezi glared at Vriska. “Vriska! Come on, you’ve ruined i-”

“Humans can’t do it,” Vriska said. “They can’t experience quite the same emotion. They can have hate, yes, but not a hate so strong and intricate that it could serve as a completion. I’ve been out here a long time, Terezi. I’ve just had to live with not having one. Which is completely fine since kismesis is overrated.”

“Oh, and you’d know, because you’ve actually had one, right? Oh wait, nope. Such an expert.”

Vriska folded her arms. “Lemme guess. You’ve seen what Omega Terezi had.”

“Seer of Mind, duh, course I did! I never got to experience that!”

“I saved you a lot of heartache by stopping that!”

“There was a lot more to it than the end result!”

“Ungrateful bitch!”

“Oh, and have we all forgotten how I basically erased myself to make you live?”

“You aren’t Omega Terezi! You’re Terezi. Stop mixing up your memories!”

Terezi frowned. “I can do what I want.”

Vriska opened her mouth to argue – then she sighed. “Loo-”

“Look at the Thief of Light, the spiderbitch, brought so low,” Terezi said. “At least when you were fucking horrible you had a spine.”

Vriska let a sad smile come to her face. “That’s a handy defense mechanism you got there.”

“It’s not a-”

“Shout insults at people until they leave you alone so they won’t expose your weaknesses. A pretty good one. Totally not worth it.”

“Why do you have to be so ggodammed mature now!”?

“Because someone has to be,” Vriska said. “Terezi… Do you have anyone?”

Terezi shuffled her feet, quietly.

“Cadence can help you with a matesprit. Eve for a moirail. Hell, I could even introduce you to some people.”

“Would people stop fucking offering to help!”?

Corona looked at Terezi with sad eyes. “…That’s what friends are supposed to do, Terezi. Help.”
Terezi pointed a trembling finger at Vriska – then dropped it. “Fine, fine, fine, fine, FINE! You’re right! Happy?”

“More than I should be,” Vriska said, walking up to her friend. Then she pulled her into a hug.

“AKPTH!”

“Stop whining and accept the display of affection, dweeb.”

Terezi stopped struggling and just sighed.

“I’ll be taking her now,” Vriska said, turning to the rest of them. “Dunno how long this is gonna take, but I think all the trolls need to have a serious ‘culture’ get-together. Talk some things out so we don’t fuck up like this.”

Toph nodded. “Do what you need.”

Vriska took out her dimensional device and the two of them were gone.

“…Right,” Corona said. “Still not sure how I feel about this whole thing.”

Lady Rarity shrugged. “You should probably feel flattered, I’m guessing.”

“Now I’m bothered in a whole new way.”

“Are you going to feel guilty and lose sleep over it?”

“…Well, not guilty…”

“Then my work here is done. There is a sequel to a bubble bath I need to experience.” She skittered away.

Corona put a hand to her forehead. “Just when I think I’ve got people figured out…”

Toph shrugged, having nothing to say.

“…I’m going to try to get that relaxing in now.”

“Seems like a good idea.”

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Altar smiled. “Ah, it appears we have made our way to one of our abandoned homes…”

The townspeople looked sad and depressed.

Discord blinked. “Wh-”

Starlight talked over him. “The disappearances of your three very close neighbors is certainly a tragedy.”

Discord nodded sadly. “Not the work of creative chaos. Just pained disorder.”

“Perhaps you can do something about that?” Altar asked. “Return our ponies to us?”

“Hrm…” Discord furrowed his brow. “I’d have to have a connection to them. But they were already gone when I arrived.”
“Certainly you can garner a connection from the house one of our ponies lived in?”

Discord glanced at Starlight. *Can you get me a connection?*

*Yep. Don’t worry.*

Discord grinned. “Do we have permission to enter?”

Altar bowed his head. “All do.”

They filed into the house, Discord, Starlight, and Altar at the center. Starlight got the connection quickly.

“Return to us our lost brother,” Altar said, bowing his head to the ground. “Please, your discordance.”

Discord prepared to snap his fingers – but then his phone rang. He sighed. “Ugh, what horrible timing, who in the world-

*DO NOT USE YOUR MAGIC*

-TRIXIE

Discord raised an eyebrow. “Altar, I don’t think you’re being completely honest with me. In fact…” He felt the connection he got from Starlight. “The connection I’ve received leads to this basement. Where I can sense a whole slew of disgust-”

He was interrupted. Dark shadows spiked out of the ground, making the floor cave in, revealing the basement and the markings below. The two largest of the spires had bodies skewered on them. One held the Doctor.

The other held Trixie, pierced through the stomach. The light in her horn died out and her phone fell to the ground.

Discord didn’t think – he just acted. He snapped his fingers, bringing the Doctor and Trixie back to full health and teleporting them off the spires of darkness. But this was exactly what the darkness wanted.

All it took was a discharge of chaotic energy that the darkness could use. Discord felt like a siphon was jammed into his essence, draining him of his power. He shook, falling to the basement below with a horrified expression.

Altar laughed. “Behold! Our master rises once again, here to dispel the false reflection of this imposter with righteous power!”

The darkness in the center of the circle began to form a head. It looked like Discord’s, except mostly black with red highlights. “You are a disgrace to this image.”

Discord laughed through his pain. “Red and black? What are you, Darcord? Seriously, lose the edge a bit-” the pain of ‘Darcord’s’ siphon was too much for him to keep talking. “Yeeesh…”

“I am whatever you want to call me,” Darcord said. “I am essentially a better you. And I will return!”

“How ABOUT NO!?” Affix said, glowing with the power of Generosity. She threw a half-dozen bombs down the hole at the shadowy form.
“Your bombs did not affect me then, they will not affect me now!”

“Smokescreen,” Affix declared, rushing through the smoke. Her needles of pure Generosity pierced the dark being’s intangible nature.

Discord may not have been able to use his chaos magic without feeding Darcord more, but he could still move. He thrust himself to Darcord, wrapping around the shadowy head like a snake. His physical form held enough chaotic energy to deter the shadow.

Affix grinned. “Nice.” She created thousands of more needles. “I bet you missed this, didn’t you!?” Darcord pushed out with chaotic energy from the side. Affix was caught unaware, the power driving through her brain.

She realized as she dropped that she’d been fighting him wrong – she didn’t have her friends to defend her. The needles of Generosity were always best at long range and as a backup attack…

Discord took one look at her. Then he sighed, snapping his fingers. Her wound was healed, but she did not regain consciousness.

Darcord gained a torso from the discharge. “AHAAHAHAHAHAHAH! Your sentimentality is not your strength, it is your downfall! Now I rise! Stronger than ever!”

Flair flew out of nowhere, brimming with light – light that was supposed to be Kindness. But it was wrong. It sparked unnaturally, giving her body spasms and driving pain into her body.

She didn’t care. It still worked well enough. One hit and everything would be over, just as it had been last time. Her only regret was that she wouldn’t get to see the look on his face this time.

She passed right through him, harmlessly.

“W-what?”

Darcord laughed. “Foolish Fluttershy. A corrupted Element cannot harm me.”

She looked around – and noticed Discord writhing in pain. “It’ll kill him.”

Darcord’s grin vanished.

She leaped for Discord.

“STOP!” Trixie shouted. “DON’T DO IT! HE SAVED US! HE SAVED AFFIX!”

Flair stopped just short of driving every sharp tip on her wings into Discord. “He…”

“WEAK SENTIMENTALITY!” Darcord shouted, rushing Flair with his spires of shadow. She lifted a wing, her corrupted light still managing to deflect his darkness.

“GO FOR ALTAR!” Trixie shouted. “HE’S THE ONE WHO’S MANAGING THIS RITUAL!”

Flair growled. “You can’t know that for sure!”

Starlight didn’t care about that. She fired a laser at Altar – only for Darcord to go out of his way to deflect it. She was sent flying by her own attack through the only remaining window in the house.

“THAT PROOF ENOUGH!?” Trixie shouted.
Flair raised her wing.

Killing Discord or Altar would end this madness. Discord was right here, and he wasn’t fighting. Altar was up there, which would give Darcord a chance to attack and give Altar a chance to defend.

And Discord was Discord. He was everything she stood against. Everything she hunted.

But she owed him.

“Screw it,” Flair blurted, taking off into the air. Darcord fired shadows at her, but her light defended her.

“KILL HER!” Darcord ordered. “THOSE OF YOU WHO CALL YOURSELVES MY SERVANTS, KILL HER!”

“DON’T LISTEN TO HIM!” Starlight shouted, having barely managed to stand back up. “HE WILL DESTROY EVERYTHING!”

Only Altar acted in accordance with Darcord’s wishes, firing magic lasers at Flair.

She just took them. She was made of stern stuff, and the light of Kindness began to stabilize around her. Definitely not enough to take out Darcord… but enough for her to act.

“The Kindest form of violence is an instant, painless death,” Flair said.

It was a line Darcord remembered from just before he had died last time.

“FLUTTER-”

There were no wounds on Altar. One moment he was alive, and the next he was dead. It was as if Flair’s blades had cut clean through him without breaking the skin. He fell to the ground.

Darcord’s shadowy form dissipated unceremoniously.

“Oh thank Celestia, we’re alive!” Trixie shouted.

She heard shocked gasps from the crowd.

“SCREW YOU! TRI XIE SAVED ALL YOUR PLOTS! SHE HAS THE RIGHT TO WALK OVER A SOCIAL TABOO OUT OF ELATION!”

Affix groaned groggily. “Stop yelling… It’s unbecoming.”

Discord flopped onto his back. “I feel like a raisin…”

Flair landed next to him. “I’ll consider that enough punishment for you being an asshole.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Starlight coughed. “Behold, the victori-”

“Stop it,” Discord told Starlight. “They won’t be going for that anymore.” He pulled himself out of the hole in the ground so he could see them all. “You see it now, don’t you? That we Discords aren’t really anything special?”
Trixie and Affix gasped.

Flair, for the first time since she arrived, smiled.

Discord continued. “So, now that we’ve gotten that made painfully obvious, how about you, I don’t know, stop being a cult? Hmm? Either find something worthy of your worship or just live like most ponies!”

“…Is all you said about creative chaos a lie then?” a mare asked.

Discord shook his head. “Of course not. I was teaching you, after all. I was just teaching you how I live my life. Which, by the way, is pretty amazing.”

“I can attest!” Trixie said. “Never a dull moment with this nimrod.”

“Then stay,” the mare said, bowing her head. “Stay and teach us, not as an object of worship, but as one who understands.”

Discord shook his head. “Tempting offer, but I’ll pass. Buuuuuut, there is someone who might be able to help you!” He grabbed Starlight and set her down in front of them. “Behold, Starlight! Master of the right chaos!”

“Discord what a-”

Discord snapped his fingers. He gave most of the power he had remaining in himself to Starlight. This prompted her to grow a second horn, sprout mismatched bat and eagle wings, get claws on her front hooves, and shift her eye colors to yellow and red. “What th-”

“It’s only fitting if the leader of chaos had herself thrown into the position chaotically.” Discord chuckled. “Don’t you all agree?”

The townsponies looked at each other, shrugged, and nodded.

“Good.”

It was then that Trixie and Discord started glowing. The Tree of Harmony told them they were done.

“Ha! It was the cult!” Discord said. “I knew it.”

“You still helped us,” Affix said, clinging onto Flair for support. “Thank you.”

“It’s what we do,” Trixie said. “But now our work here is done! WE MUST GO!” Trixie threw a smoke bomb on the ground, perfect timing for a dramatic exit.

They were still there when the smoke cleared.

“You’re supposed to teleport us away,” Trixie hissed.

Discord shrugged. “I’m basically out of magic right now. It’ll be a long while before I’m back to full again.”

Trixie sighed. She glanced outside at the setting sun. “You all wouldn’t happen to have a hotel, would you?”

“Where did you think I was staying?” Starlight asked. “Of course they have a hotel!”
“Ah. Right. Well then, lead the way!”

Everyone cleared out the wreckage of the ritual house.

The Doctor remained, alone.

“…Did I actually do anything?” he asked aloud.

The empty ruins gave no response.
“HONK!”

The purple-blooded Skaian troll with long, wavy horns roared. He wore the purple robes of the Bard of Rage, which seemed ridiculous and distracting at first with its oversized spotted hat and codpiece, but had quickly cemented itself into the minds of the primary team as Bad News™.

They were having a rather difficult time taking down this particular troll.

He grabbed Pinkie Pie as she appeared behind him, throwing her forward and kicking her in the stomach. He roared in unbridled Rage. “You motherfuckers think you can pull that shit on me?”

“I’ve drained his luck!” Vriska said, shrugging. “No idea how he’s still alive. Or, well, dead-alive, but you get the picture.”

“You… MOTHERFUCKING… arrogant bitch… THINK YOU CAN REMOVE THE CHUCKLEVOODOOS!?” He charged at her. She swung her sword, but he caught it between his hands and snapped it in half. He then drove his hand into her stomach, drawing blood.

Vriska took it, grinning. “Never really understood the chucklevoodoos, so I can’t really have a thought about them, sorry Gamzee.” She used her free hand to throw her dice down behind him. Several tentacles shot out of the ground, wrapping around his limbs.

Gamzee fell back, screaming. With one flex of his muscles, he was free.

And then he’d been punched half a meter into the ground by Star Platinum’s time stop. Being a ghost, not to mention a highblood troll, he managed to pull himself up. “Honk…”

“Honk,” Flutterfree said, shooting him in the nose with an arrow of light.

“You… MOTHERFUCKING….” He tapped into his chucklevoooods, sending out horrific imagery into nearby minds.

Flutterfree looked at the monstrous clown creatures ready to tear her mind apart and replace it with insane sludge. With a twitch, she summoned Lolo, banishing them. She shot Gamzee three more times, the arrows lodging in his ghost body. He found his arm affixed to his chest by one of them, discovering that even his strength wasn’t enough to break the holy arrow.

Despite the pain, he moved forward. To remedy this, Flutterfree shot him in the ankles, pinning them to the ground, and then to each other. The ominous nature of his walk vanished the moment he was hopping toward her, dragging clods of dream-earth behind him.

“HONK!”

Flutterfree rolled her eyes. She just kept shooting until he couldn’t move.

“Finally!” Nova blurted, activating her spell. With Gamzee immobile, he couldn’t do anything against the Skaian imprisonment spell. A blue shell appeared around his body, drowning out his enraged honks. He was frozen.
Nova slapped a bracelet around his wrist. “And good.”

Flutterfree lowered the bow of light. “He seemed… upset.”

“Course he was,” Vriska said. “Highblood and the Bard of Rage. Of course he’s going to be a little violent and upset. Not to mention the fact that this is the only Gamzee who’s ever died. Cut in half by Omega Kanaya with a chainsaw in the moment just about everyone died.” She shook her head. “Can’t believe Karkat asked for a capture, if anyone ever deserved to perma-die it’s this bastard.”

“Not exactly arguing here,” Nova admitted. “That was a pretty intense murderous face. Yeesh.”

Vriska kicked the immobile Gamzee over. “Welp, Earth C it is.” She pulled out her dimensional device…

…And then a muscular humanoid tiger fell out of Skaia’s Dream’s ‘sky’. “Ow,’ she said, standing up quickly. “RATH WILL NOT STAND FOR FALLING!”

“Uh…” Flutterfree blinked as the new arrival climbed out of a tiger-shaped impact crater.

“Oh, right!” ‘Rath’ hit her head with her fist. “YOU GUYS! I was looking for you. I need… HELP! Right, yes, help! …Help.” She mulled the word over in her mouth, deciding it was disgusting. “Geh…”

Pinkie grinned. “What can we help you with?”

“I NEED TO STOP CHANGING!” she shouted, raising a fist. “HELP ME STOP CHANGING!”

“Changing from what into what and how?” Vriska asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Uh… Uh…” ‘Rath’ grabbed her head. “WHY IS RATH NOT SMART ENOUGH. Need to… Uh…” She pointed at a green hourglass symbol on her chest. “THIS! This thing!”

“An Omnitrix…” Nova blinked. “…Wait, hold on, Aradia? Is that you?”

“YES! RATH IS ARADIA!” Aradia clapped her hands. “And RATH is STUCK CHANGING.”

“Define changing,” Jotaro said.

“Well, it’s like… Uh… The watch keeps switch-”

A green light enveloped Aradia and changed her form, replacing the muscular tiger with a small, gray being with two big eyes. Overall she was the size of a human hand. “Oh, this might be useful.” She reached onto her back to touch the Omnitrix’s new location. “Maybe I can figure out why it’s on the fritz now… …Why does it have to be on the back in this form?”

Vriska smirked. “You’re so tiny!”

“Yeah yeah, blah blah, just help me.”

“So you were dumb and angry a minute ago and now you’re smart and arrogant,” Vriska smirked. “I like what’s happening.”

“I can’t travel through time like this!” Aradia blurted. “I’m just a gray thing with a big brain! I can’t be the Handmaid!”

Pinkie smirked. “Don’t fret your tiny big head. We’ll help! What can we do?”
“Need to find a version of Azmuth, the creator of the Omnitrix. Chances are we’ve found a universe based on the ‘Ben 10’ source material, right?”

“Doesn’t ring a bell,” Nova said.

“Well, had I been able to think of that a few minutes ago, I would have just gone to Renee. But I was in punching mode. You understand.”

“Yes,” Vriska said. “I’m still not going to let you forget the day you decided to name yourself Rath.”

“Can we just get to solving my problem? Maybe?”

“Think she’ll change into something more agreeable next?” Nova asked Pinkie.

Pinkie shrugged.

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Renee stared at Aradia, ignoring the primary team standing around her.

Aradia was currently an amorphous green blob suspended in midair by a tiny mechanical device that looked like a UFO.

“Yeah. I’m goopy. Fun, right?”

“Maybe…?” Renee said, furrowing her brow. “So… I take it you’re stuck like this?”

“She actually keeps changing every couple of minutes,” Pinkie said. “She was a tiger, then a gray genius, then something that stank really bad, and now this.”

Aradia shifted again, into a thin blue humanoid creature with lots of black points. “Oh boy, the fast one. If I talk a mileaminuteatanypointpleaseforgivemeldon’tusethisonethatmuchandI’mdoingitrighthenaren’tI?”

Renee turned to Pinkie. Pinkie grinned. “The answer is yes.”

“Darnit,” Aradia muttered.

“Regardless, how can we help?” Renee asked.

“Finding an Azmuth is the best option. Someone who created an Omnitrix.”

Renee pulled up the database. “We have no Azmuths on file, though the system does recognize a possible source material. ‘Ben 10’?”

“Yes,” Aradia said. “That’s it. Do we have anyuniversesinthatcontinuity?”

Renee stared at her.

“Any universes in that continuity?” Pinkie translated.

“Thanks,” Aradia said, putting a hand to her face.

Renee lit her horn and did a search. “We’ve got none officially recorded, unfortunately. Doesn’t mean there isn’t one, it just means nobody’s bothered to notice the fiction-reality connection if we do have one. Since Azmuth didn’t turn anything up, are there any other keywords or people?”
Aradia spat out a string of words even faster than she had before, and then sighed. She gestured to Pinkie.

Pinkie giggled. “Ben Tennyson would be known in virtually any version. Max Tennyson, maybe. The rest of the things she said were just her listing off random names that came to mind.”

“No results and no results, sorry. I’ve sent automatic requests to the TSAB, Void, and Collection for more information, but I wouldn’t expect responses for a few days at least on something so ‘mundane’ as a database search.” Renee scrolled through the files some more. “I did notice a note at the end of the ‘Ben 10’ file. Looks like it’s thought to be the source material of the Celestialsapiens. Or, at least, a work that actually has them in it. It could mean it’s one of their universes.”

“Great!” Aradia said. “We just go look around Celestialsapien space!”

Renee raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? Why not have our scientists look at the Omnitrix. I’m sure we could fix it, with time.”

“Yes, well, if that was all it needed the future versions of me wouldn’t be avoiding me,” Aradia said, folding her arms. “They’d love to accelerate this process if it was mundane.”

Renee nodded slowly. “Well, I suppose you know what’s best for you. Pinkie, do you want to guide her through Celestialsapien space until you find something?”

“Sure do!” Pinkie said, grinning. “She does so much for us we regularly have no idea about. It’s time to help her!”

“I’ll give you a Skiff,” Renee said. “Pidge should have just upgraded 7-4-E, so grab that one if you can. Enjoy your trip. Don’t anger the Class 1, mkay?”

“Don’t plan on it!”

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Some of Aradia’s forms were very, very large. So large they wouldn’t fit in the Skiff. So instead of letting her occupy the sixth seat in the Skiff, she was dragged along behind in a magic bubble of variable size that Nova had conjured just for the occasion. She was currently a large, dull-orange dinosaur creature. She was grumbling to herself.

“I think Aradia’s nutting up,” Nova observed.

“She’s made of stronger stuff than that,” Vriska said. “She can handle dozens of paradoxes at once.”

“But she can’t right now,” Flutterfree reminded her. “I think that’s what’s really getting to her. Not only can she not move through time like a boat on the water, but she also can’t keep her own thoughts straight. Her brain keeps changing. …She feels like she’s losing her sense of self.”

Vriska blinked. “…Yeesh. Didn’t think of it that way.”

Flutterfree nodded. “We’re so used to thinking of certain people as being strong and unbreakable, but really, sometimes it only takes one thing for us to come unhinged. Much more of this and I think it will happen to Aradia.”

Nova sighed. “…How can we hurry this along?”

“We’re already in Celestialsapien space,” Vriska said. “Already jumping through universes as fast as
we can after scanning for anything similar to the Omnitrix. So far nothing.”

“Good news: the Celestialsapiens either haven’t noticed or don’t care that we’re here!” Pinkie said, grinning.

“That’s something, I guess,” Nova muttered. “Do we have anything else working for us?”

Jotaro shrugged, saying nothing.

“I’ll take that as a no.” Nova leaned back in her chair and sighed. “We could be out here for weeks.”

Pinkie grinned. “Yeah, we could. But it’s a road tri-” Pinkie’s Pinkie Sense activated violently. Her body flipped into the air and she slammed into the Skiff’s windshield. “Stop the Skiff!” she ordered.

Vriska cancelled the next dimensional portal opening. Behind them, Aradia shifted forms again. Through the camera they had trained on her, they saw a form they all recognized. Humanoid, feminine, and a body seemingly made of stars with three horns pointing upward from the forehead.

“Celestialsapien…” Flutterfree said with a gulp. “…Is this good or bad for us?”

“Let’s just not move until she changes again,” Pinkie said. “Shouldn’t be… too long.”

Aradia was motionless. Her expression did not shift and her limbs did not move. She was stoic.

Inside her mind, however, it was a different story.

She existed as a mental projection of her real form – troll horns, red cloak, and all. She floated in an endless expanse of stars, slowly realizing that she had control of her mind as her.

“Oh thank the Tower,” she said, sighing in relief. She put on a big smile and laughed – she finally felt like herself. Even if she didn’t, technically speaking, have a body right now.

She realized there were two other beings in the void with her. They looked like opera masks, their red color identical to her robes. One looked downward with an exaggerated forlorn expression, while the other looked upward with a similarly eccentric hopeful expression.

“Uh… hi,” Aradia said.

“Well,” the hopeful mask spoke with a young, male voice. “Welcome. I’ve been expecting you.”

“Don’t lie,” the other said with an middle-aged feminine voice. “You’ve just been hoping that someone would show up to end this frivolous deadlock.”

“So…oo…” Aradia leaned back. “I’m Aradia, who’re you?”

“I am Kaldar, the Voice of the Future,” the hopeful mask said. “And that moping lump of sadness is Antira, the voice of the lost.”


“A state of existence that only has relevance if you permit it to.”

“Both the past and the future are inherent parts of the flow of time,” Aradia said, shaking her head.

“And this is why you are here,” Kaldar said. “You are the Voice of the Present, here to fulfill the third consciousness within us. To complete us.”
“So you existed without me?”

“Yes and no,” Antira said.

“Ah, got it.”

“I like it when they just understand,” Kaldar said with a smile.

Aradia smirked. “Helps to jump around time a lot. So, uh, what do we do here?”

“Pointlessly argue,” Antira sighed.

“Debate,” Kaldar corrected. “We take into account all variables and determine if action is required for any given scenario.”

“What’s the current topic?” Aradia asked.

“Currently? We need to determine if we demand you stay with us for eternity so all arguments don’t end in a deadlock. I have grown rather tired with the future not benefiting from our involvement even considering the paradoxical nature of our existence, so I push that we require Aradia eternally present within us.”

“The future doesn’t need our help,” Antira muttered. “The path it takes must be its own. Aradia should leave.”

Aradia folded her arms. “Well I don’t want to be stuck here forever. What about a compromise? I can create temporal duplicates of myself. I could set it up so one is with you some of the time.”

Kaldar twitched. “The point of you being here is to break the tie, not introduce a third option.”

Aradia smirked. “I guess I don’t play nice then, huh? This is the part where we debate, right? Until one of us jumps to the side of another and creates a majority, allowing the actual Celestialsapien body outside to do something.”

“Your understanding is correct,” Antira admitted. “But perhaps it would have been better if you didn’t… Then you would have just wanted release.”

Kaldar looked at nothing. “No, debate is the way of our people. No matter what the three voices within us are, we always work it out among ourselves. We are complete, we should not complain. Aradia, your position on the matter is a curious one to be sure. A compromise, you say? Please, elaborate as to why this is the path that should be taken.”

“Well, there’s three of us here,” Aradia said, gesturing at the three of them. “What all of us want is important. I want to be able to do things without debating for eternity. Antira, you want to be faithful to the past as I understand it, and therefore want little to do with major action. Kaldar, you want to build a better future and to do that you need me here to break Antira’s hesitation. If we are to work together, we must work together to find something in the middle of all that.”

Antira sighed. “But if you remain here at all and break me, the past’s influence will be broken.”

“We are creatures of time,” Aradia said. “We should use our power to assist the timeline.”

“Or bend it to our will,” Kaldar said. “We are a Celestialsapien. We can build universes should it be required or desired. We could make entire universes bow to us.”

Aradia raised an eyebrow. “…Little ambitious?”
“Just stating facts. Of course we have the power to build lower societies up and build a new tomorrow in our image. The point is we should use the power.”

“Not all power should be used,” Antira reminded.

“We’re not talking about the use of power right now, we’re simply talking about how debates are going to go,” Aradia said. “While Kaldar seems a little too… anxious to flex our power, I do agree that so long as the power’s not too dangerous to use, it should be used. It’s how I fly through time.” She snapped her fingers. “Kaldar, I’ll agree with you if you alter your position slightly.”

Kaldar’s expression deepened. “I’m listening.”

“I can create time clones of myself. In theory, I can be with you and Antira always. But I won’t have to be the same me all the time. I could swap out every now and then. It’d allow me to continue my work outside this body while also being in it. So if we fix my Omnitrix I can start that right away.”

Antira shook her mask. “No. This cannot be allowed. Having a voice that changed? It would be too much…”

“Seems like a great idea to me. I get what I want, you don’t, and Aradia is simultaneously here and not under most circumstances. Therefore… I propose we repair Aradia’s Omnitrix.”

“Denied,” Antira said.

“I agree though!” Aradia blurted.

“The proper way to go through with it is to say ‘seconded’,” Kaldar said.

“Ah, right. Ahem. Seconded!”

The actual Celestialsapien body of Aradia twisted. “MOTION CARRIED: RE—”

And then Aradia’s Omnitrix flashed, transforming her into a red creature with flying-squirrel-like folds of skin. “…Seriously!?”

“You ran out of time!” Pinkie called to her through a communication spell.

Aradia tried to fold her arms, but realized the wing-like folds of skin interfered with this motion. “The downside of being a Celestialsapien. Everything takes forever. Gah. And now this form is impatient. Lovely mood whiplash. Can’t we go any faster?”

Vriska moved her hand to the throttle and moved them to another dimension. Then three things happened in quick succession.

First, the Pinkie Sense activated again, causing Pinkie to gasp in a mild panic.

Second, Aradia shifted form. She was suddenly a human with short brown hair and a green jacket.

Third, the Skiff’s engine exploded.

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Nova pulled herself out of the skiff’s wreckage. “Ow…”

“You’re welcome,” Vriska muttered, pulling herself out from under a piece of the windshield, tripping and cutting her hand after she got out. “Yeeep, luck is abysmal right now. I really wanted to
have a day of tripping, didn’t you?”

Pinkie appeared from behind her. “We all have bad tripping days, you know.”

“Doesn’t mean I have to like them.”

Jotaro pulled himself out of the wreckage with Star Platinum, Flutterfree in his arms. She had a small wound under her left ear that didn’t look bad, but had been jarring enough to knock her unconscious.

Nova checked her over with a scan. “She’s fine. Will probably wake up in a few minutes.”

Pinkie took the opportunity to look around. “We appear to be… on a normal planet.”

They had landed at the edge of a cornfield, stopped by the raised earth of a road. It was night, so it wasn’t surprising that the road was abandoned. In the distance they could make out farmhouses that seemed to be of human design, but they had learned long ago never to assume that. The Skiff had cut a small tear in the cornfield, exposing dirt and lighting a few small fires that were quickly going out due to the moisture in the soil.

Vriska picked an ear of corn and examined it. “Seems normal enough.”

“So, question,” Nova said. “Why did our ship explode?”

Pinkie furrowed her brow. “Because we found the right world.”

“Ahem. Causal reason, not ka reason, thank you.”

Pinkie shrugged. “Technology isn’t perfect?”

“Hey, I spent a ton of luck making sure we didn’t die in that crash,” Vriska commented, trying not to slip on a rock. “It should have kicked in to prevent that explosion if it was just a mechanical failure.”

“Your power isn’t predictable or absolute,” Jotaro pointed out.

“Yeah, well, s–” She slipped in the mud and fell face first into it. “I need to find people. I need to find people quickly.”

“With your luck we’ll never find anyone fast enough,” Nova said.

“HANDS UP! YOU’RE UNDER ARREST!” a voice shouted from on top of the road.

Vriska turned to Nova and grinned.

“Vriska, bad idea…”

Vriska put her hands up. “All right officer, what did we do?”

To their surprise, the ‘officer’ was not a normal policeman – he was a bipedal lizard in gray armor holding a futuristic gun. He had it trained on all five of them. “This is property damage.”

Vriska zapped some of his luck away, walking closer to him. “Our ship just crashed, can you maybe give us a break?” The rest of them slowly walked up to the road behind her. Jotaro didn’t have his hands up because he was holding Flutterfree, and he tried to make that as obvious as possible.

Vriska made it up to the road and saw a small squad of people wearing the same armor. Notably, none of them were the same race – although there was one human. One of them was a creature made
of fire, another was a being that seemed more purple energy than physical being, yet another was a robot, and there were a smattering of others as well.

“This seems a little overkill,” Pinkie said, walking up to the lizard. “It’s just a crashed ship. Why the full squad?”

“Dimensional activity was detected,” the robot reported. “Only the human man is of a race in our database. You are the likely culprits.”

Pinkie raised an eyebrow. “You can’t expect dimensional beings to have any idea what your laws are.”

“It’s common sense not to crash into someone’s cornfield,” the lizard retorted.

Pinkie giggled. “Eh, fair enough. Take us away!”

Vriska kept absorbing luck in small bursts – the light that came from her eyes was hardly detectable in such conditions, and didn’t appear to be threatening. It couldn’t even be felt. She was sneaky, she knew how t-

“The gray one is doing something!” the purple being said, holding up her hands and trapping Vriska in an aura of pink magic. In reflex, Vriska pushed her luck absorption to her captor, making her trip and fall, dissipating the magic.

The fiery guy took this as an attack and flung a burst of flame at them, only for Nova to block it with a magic shield. “Hey, hey, we don’t have to fi-”

“Danger levels at critical!” the robot declared, unfolding several guns from his sides. “Protect!”


Vriska shrugged, summoning her dice. “What can I say? I bring out the best in people.”

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Aradia looked herself over. She had survived the crash, the bubble absorbing all the dangers of impact before dissipating. It had made an impressive crater in the middle of a rocky, abandoned area to the side of a rural road.

She was human right now. Definitely female, though nobody would be able to tell that from first glance due to the flat chest and youthful appearance. Her hair was short and brown and her eyes matched the green of her jacket – which had a ten on it.

“ Weird…” she said, looking at the ten. The source material was ‘Ben 10’, and this jacket was what the titular Ben wore. But Dave was this Omnitrix’s human DNA sample. Why didn’t she turn into him? Or a feminine version of him. That was an odd thing about the Omnitrix; Davepeta had been able to change into different genders, but if a female option was available for Aradia it would always switch to it. Maybe it just knew? Or could alter the DNA?

…Maybe this was just the female human DNA sample. She hadn’t actually turned into Dave before.

Regardless, given the Omnitrix’s reaction to the universe, this was probably the right place. She strongly suspected it was the omnitrix that had caused the Skiff’s engines to explode, but she couldn’t prove that. Nor did she have any idea how it would do that.
She stood up and checked the Omnitrix. It seemed to be working just fine now. Not shifting her form around, but it had the human form set as the default instead of her troll self. She tried willing herself to transform into a troll – but nothing happened. She tried any other alien, but nothing. Vocal commands did nothing either.

“Guess the master control is off,” Aradia mused. She placed her fingers to the watch and began cycling through forms. All of them she had turned into were available, but that was a lot of aliens to sift through to find herself. She didn’t get very far.

“Albedo…?”

Aradia looked up to see the human she presumed was the Ben of this world. They looked almost identical, only slight differences in body structure between them.

Aradia waved her hands and shook her head. “Oh no, I’m Aradia, I have no idea who Albedo i-”

“Nice try,” Ben said, pulling up his Omnitrix. “You’re not talking your way out of this one.”

“No, seriously, I’m not Albedo, I’m from another uni-”

Ben transformed into a race made mostly of pale green crystal. “Diamondhead!”

“You name them? That’s cu- woah!” Aradia dodged a wave of crystal shards that came out of the ground. She fumbled with her Omnitrix, looking for a form she knew how to use. “This’ll have to do…” She accessed her sample of a Gem. Her body coalesced into a round, red gemstone that produced a tall, feminine body. The Omnitrix placed itself overtop the gemstone, which affixed itself over where her heart would have been in a more organic body.

She generated an exceedingly long whip from the gemstone’s center, readying it.

“…Haven’t seen that one before,” Ben said with Diamondhead’s significantly deeper voice.

“You pick up new samples when exploring other universes. Which is where I am from, by the way!”

“If you were from another universe, why aren’t you named Ben?” Ben proved that he was really good at using the crystal powers of Diamondhead by trapping Aradia’s larger form in an instant. She was able to force her hard-light body into a narrower shape, slipping out one of the cracks.

“Because that wasn’t my default form!” Aradia retorted, wrapping Ben up in her whip – which he broke apart easily. “I showed up here and got stuck!”

“Using your own backstory to try and derail me? Clever, Albedo.” Ben rushed her hitting her form right in the face.

Aradia transformed back to her human form, grunting. She clearly needed something else. She ran, scanning the aliens in the watch.

Ben charged after her. “You aren’t going anywhere!”

Aradia slipped and fell on the swirling crystals beneath her. But just as she was trapped again, she found it.

*Her* form.

She transformed into herself, glorious troll form and all. With her psychic powers she tore the crystals to shreds, then dropped them. “Look, this is my default form! Hey!”
Ben blinked. “…What is that?”

“Alternian.” He won’t take ‘troll’ very well. “Look, this is who I am. Not all of my race have psychic powers, and not all of my race can control time.”

“Control time?”


Ben narrowed his eyes. “How can I be sure you’re not Albedo?”

“Besides the fact that I don’t know who he is?” past-Aradia asked. “Uh…” An idea came to her. She took out her dimensional device.

Ben got defensive.

“Nonono! Not a weapon, not a bomb, a dimensional travel device! I don’t have to use it to travel, but it sure is handy.”

“Use it and we’ll see if that’s what it is.”

Aradia nodded, pressing a button. The dimensional device activated and opened a portal to an Earth where the sun was up. “Good enough for you?”

Ben nodded, allowing himself to turn back to his default human form. “That does raise a few other questions. Why are you here and why did you look like me?”

Future-Aradia timed out and returned to the default human form. “My Omnitrix is broken, as you can probably see. I came to this area of the multiverse looking for a version of Azmuth to fix it. Since he created it. …He was the creator of the Omnitrix in this universe, right?”

Ben nodded, holding up his. “Yeah. And ours look pretty similar, so they probably work the same. Though I bet you’ve got more aliens.”

Aradia nodded as her past self went through time to complete the causal time loop. “I can’t take all the credit. It used to belong to a friend of mine named Davepeta. It was… passed on to me.”

Ben blinked. “Well, I’m pretty sure we can get Azmuth to at least take a look at it – he’d love all the multiversal aliens in it. But if you can control time and have psychic powers in your default, why do you need it?”

“Usually I have the master control on,” Aradia said.

“Must be nice.”

Aradia smirked. “I take it you don’t?”

“Eh, on and off.”

“Anyway, I’m able to switch to anything I want at will, and I can create time clones of myself to use multiple forms at once. It’s a self-contained army when it needs to be.” She stretched her arms. “Feels weird to be a human, have to admit.”

“…Is that why your voice is so high?”

“Hm? Oh, this is a female. Almost all the aliens are.”
Ben blinked, looking her up and down, and then proceeding to flush. “…Ah.”

“Probably some cosmic joke that I look so androgynous right now. Don’t worry about it. We can get this fixed – oh, but we need to find my friends first. Their ship must have crashed elsewhere.”

“The Plumber database should have a crashed ship on it.”

“…Plumber?”

“Bunch of space police trying to not be conspicuous. It doesn’t work as well as they’d like. Everyone knows about them now, so, it basically failed completely and now it’s a big joke.”

“Ah. So, curious, who was Albedo?”

“Azmuth’s apprentice who kinda became my evil twin because he made another Omnitrix connected to mine…”

”What did you guys do!?” Flutterfree shouted.

“ Took care of a problem,” Jotaro said, laying the last unconscious alien on top of all the others, creating a pile of bruised and battered ‘officers’.

“I was expecting a bit more fight, you know?” Vriska said. “Magic-girl had some freaky powers, but those became pretty useless pretty fast.”

“This was law enforcement!” Flutterfree blurted, throwing a hoof wide. “You all know what happens when we upset law enforcement!”

“We don’t get put in jail?” Pinkie suggested.

“PINKIE!”

Pinkie giggled. “I know, I know, that didn’t go as well as it could have, but none of them got seriously hurt.”

“I broke a few bones,” Jotaro said.

Pinkie rolled her eyes. “Okay, yes, some of them are in a lot of pain but they’ll all be fine. We just need to collect our bearings and find out where we are.”

“United States, Earth, two-thousand-something-or-other,” Nova reported from her hoof-screen. “Physics allows for FTL, high magic, and extremely unconventional biology. Guess this explains why the Omnitrix can scan a Gem and get a ‘DNA’ sample.”

“So a bit of an outlier universe that seems normal on the surface,” Vriska said. “Got it.”

“We should probably find Aradia,” Nova said. “She needs to know we’ve upset the locals.”

Pinkie looked at Nova and grinned.

“She’s standing right behind us, isn’t she?”

“What did you guys do!??” Aradia shouted, putting her hands to her head.
“I think they beat up a squad of Plumbers,” Ben said, pursing his lips.

“That’s bad! That’s bad, right?” Aradia asked.

Ben shrugged. “Eh, I can get you cleared. So long as you don’t turn out to actually be evil.”

Aradia put her hands on her hips and glared at Pinkie. “Why would you do this?”

“Completely my fault,” Vriska said, walking up to them. “See, I was being awesome, and then sparkly over th-”

“UNKNOWN ALIEN DNA DETECTED!” Ben’s Omnitrix interrupted. A yellow light shot out of the device and scanned Vriska.

Ben checked his Omnitrix. “Sweet, new transformation. Do you have time travel and telekinesis too?”

“Luck manipulation and mind control,” Vriska said, folding her arms. “Don’t you dare turn into me and steal my thunder. I will have to show you who’s the better spiderbitch.”

“Message received…” Ben said.

Flutterfree turned to Aradia. “…Could he scan us?”

Aradia nodded. “It’ll only accept one Equestrian DNA sample, though. He’ll only get one of you.”

Nova put a hoof to her chin. “Hrm… We should think for a moment to decide which one of us would be the most helpful. As a unicorn, I have a full range of magic spells. Pinkie has a lot of bizarre abilities that… might drive him insane. Flutt-”

“Flutterfree is the choice,” Pinkie said, throwing the pegasus at Ben. The Omnitrix scanned her in an instant. “And now the deliberation is done! Woohoo!”

“Pinkie!” Nova blurted. “I was going to get a whole pro and con list out!”

“And that’s booooring,” Pinkie said. “Hey, hey Ben, try one of us out.”

Ben shrugged. “Sure. Haven’t been a horse yet…” He readied his Omnitrix and selected the Flutterfree sample. He turned into a pegasus – except clearly a stallion rather than a mare.

“…How does it do that?” Aradia wondered.

“I feel… hungry,” Ben said. “For either blood or… apples?”

Flutterfree nodded. “I am a quasi-vampire. I’ve also got this.” She activated Lolo fully, forcing another Lolo out of Ben. “This is Lolo. It’s a Stand. It lets you see other Stands like Star Platinum over there and taps into hidden potential. And a few other odd things. I’m sure you’ll find it useful.”

“…I’m calling this form Vampony,” Ben said, transforming back to a human shortly afterward.

Flutterfree facehooved. “Of course.”

“But hey, at least it’s not me!” Pinkie said. She grabbed Ben’s face and gave him a deadly serious glare. “You would have lost your marbles.”

“…My marb-?”
“ALL OF THEM.”

Ben shivered. “…Kay.”

Aradia shook her head. “Never mind that right now. Everyone, you already know this is Ben. Ben, this is the primary team of Merodi Universalis.” She introduced them all one at a time. “And now can we go to Azmuth and get my Omnitrix fixed?” She tapped her fingers together impatiently.

“…You’re not used to being linear, huh?” Nova asked.

“No. No I’m not. I’d like to stop being linear as soon as possible. I was able to turn into myself for a little bit back there, but it’s temporary.”

Ben pulled out his phone. “I know just the ship. Hey, Julie? I need a spaceship ride. …Well, the people I need to move just beat up a full Plumber squad, so I don’t really want to ask them for a ship right now. …Huh, wasn’t expecting you to agree so quickly.” Ben hung up his phone. “We’ll have a ship.”

“What kind of ship?” Vriska asked.

“Ship,” Pinkie said.

With a rush of wind, a green and black gunship appeared over their heads. “SHIIIIIIIP,” it bellowed in a deep, synthetic voice. It descended to the ground below, opening up its back door to create a ramp inside. There was nobody driving.

“Uh…” Flutterfree cocked her head. “Who drove it here?”

“Ship drove himself,” Ben said with a smirk.

“…The ship’s name is Ship,” Nova deadpanned. “Not going to ask.”

“You see, that’s a funny stor-”

“I didn’t ask!”

Pinkie took a sticky note out of her mane and stuck it on the forehead of the unconscious lizard. 

Sorry! Hope you get well soon! A happy Pinkie Pie and a balloon image were scrawled in the corners in what appeared to be pink crayon.

“Let’s go!” Pinkie declared, bouncing into Ship. The others followed suit.

Ship blasted into the sky, leaving the Plumbers behind.

The lizard woke up first and found the sticky note. He looked at it and let out a forlorn sigh.

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Ship flew through space to what Ben assured them was ‘Azmuth’s current laboratory world’. Apparently the Omnitrix’s inventor was prone to wandering from world to world, looking for another place to call his ‘lab’, rarely staying on his homeworld.

Since Ben had his invention, and since even Ben’s Omnitrix was known to act up from time to time, Azmuth always let Ben know where he was.

“…Well, most of the time,” Ben said. “Sometimes he just gets up and goes somewhere else. But he
told me about this place just a month ago so chances are good he’s still there. Probably, you know.”

“We can always jump to the past if he’s not,” Aradia said. She ran her hand across the interior walls of Ship. “…Is Ship alive?”

“The Omnitrix has a scan of his race,” Ben said, leaning back. “So, I guess? I call mine Upgrade.”

“Huh…”

“It’s really weird looking at both of you,” Nova said. “The only clear indication I get of which is which is your voices.”

“There are… posture differences,” Ben said.

Vriska smirked. “Oh yeah.”

“This has happened before, apparently,” Aradia said, drawing the attention of the conversation away from the aforementioned posture differences. “There was a second Omnitrix in this universe that automatically linked to Ben’s. It forced the wearer, Albedo, to look like Ben. Creating an Evil Twin.”

Pinkie chuckled. “Nice. I’ve met a few evil versions of myself from time to time. …Vriska, you?”

Vriska shrugged. “Hard to find reason to give me an Evil Twin. Well, I guess now I could have one, but back then? Yeah, the Evil Vriska wouldn’t look much different.”

“I guess you could call Damara mine,” Aradia said. “…Though I do encourage people not to think of her ghosts as evil... Just relationally challenged.”

“And we’ve gone too deep down the rabbit hole,” Ben said.

“SHIIIIIIIIIIIP,” Ship beeped.

“What is it?” Flutterfree asked.

“SHIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIP.”

“Oh. A strange field of energy around the planet?”

“SHIP SHIP.”

“Well don’t fly into it then! Just stop outside and let us look at it.”

Ben blinked. “Uh…”

“I guess Ship qualifies as an animal,” Flutterfree said, smirking. “Who knew?”

“Yare Yare daze…” Jotaro muttered.

“Field of energy?” Nova asked. “What field of energy?”

Ship dropped out of his FTL and entered orbit around a planet. Not that anyone could tell it was a planet. All they saw was a vaguely round ball of black and white wires of energy swirling around like a pile of worms.

“…What…?” Flutterfree said, cocking her head.
“I see we have zebraworld,” Vriska observed.

“I can’t get any good scans…” Nova muttered, tapping her screen. “Hey, Ship, is there a way I can interface with your sensors?”

A green wire shot out of one of Ship’s walls, turning Nova’s screen black and green. She felt a small jolt shoot up her body as she connected. Data on the strange field of energy began to display. “…Thanks. Let’s see here…” She scrolled through some information, narrowing her eyes.

Everyone crowded around her, trying to look at the data as well.

“Ahem. I can feel the moisture in your breaths.”

“Oh! Sorry,” Flutterfree said, backing up first. Soon, only Aradia remained.

“You’re doing well,” Aradia observed.

Nova sighed. “Eh, I guess so. Master of scanning, parsing through information, and big buckets of magic.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. You’ve come a long way since I first started watching you.”

“…Yeah.”

“…Having problems with Stardust?”

“Always.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“No.” Nova didn’t even look up from her screen.

Aradia backed off, sighing. Flutterfree put a wing around her. “Don’t worry.”

“Hm?”

“She lets it get to her more than it should, and she knows it. Her family’s doing fine, she stresses about the things that do go wrong too much.” Flutterfree looked at her friend with sad eyes. “She just can’t let go of the difficulties.”

Aradia frowned, saying nothing.

“We’re watching out for her, don’t you worry. Every time she thinks it’s about to fall apart, we’re able to get her back on track.”

Aradia nodded slowly.

“Got something,” Nova said, ending any conversation that was happening. “The field of ‘zebra’ only exists around the planet, not inside. A simple dimensional hop should get us in, no problem whatsoever.”

“…Dimensional hop?” Ben spoke up. “Should I be worried?”

“Nope!” Pinkie said, pulling out her dimensional device from her mane. “Here we go!”

Nova rolled her eyes. “Adjust the portal size first, Pinkie.”
“Oh, I did!” Pinkie said with a wink. “You just didn’t see it~!” She activated the device, opening a portal to a version of the planet that did exist, but was a frozen wasteland.

“Take us in, Ship, if you don’t mind.” Flutterfree asked. Ship complied, flying into the planet’s cold, bitter atmosphere. With another portal opening, they were back in Ben’s universe, on a desert world with sand everywhere. They couldn’t see the zebra-stripes above them, but they couldn’t see the sun either. Just endless brown sky.

“Ship, find Azmuth’s transponder,” Ben said. “Shouldn’t be too far.”

“SHIIIIIIP.” Ship found an alien facility constructed in the middle of the endless sand. It was constructed of three separate pointed towers connected by triangular frames of dark metal. Green energy pulsed in the middle of the triangular frames, presumably powering the facility in some form or other.

Ship landed in front of the facility in the sand, letting everyone out. The moment they were out Ship shrunk to the size of a small dog, taking the form of an amorphous blob with a single circle that may have been an eye on the part of the body that may have been a head.

“…He’s an alien dog,” Nova observed. “All right. Cool.”


There was no response.

“Hey, I know you’ll be interested to interview a bunch of people from another universe! Wouldn’t that be cool? I got two multiversal DNA samples, Azmuth! …Azmuth I know you can hear everything that goes on outside your facilities. AZMUTH!”

Jotaro pried the front doors off their hinges with Star Platinum.

“Wh-hey!”

“We needed to get in,” Jotaro pointed out. He strode inside, hands in his pockets, saying nothing further.

Aradia’s grin faltered. “…Do you think Azmuth will be mad about that?”

“Probably,” Ben said. “But he likes weird science. Pretty sure what you are will make up for that.”

“Ship ship,” Ship said.

Flutterfree chuckled.

“This is why we don’t have a team mascot,” Vriska said, following Jotaro.

The interior of Azmuth’s facility was spacious – though it didn’t look it. Despite the tremendous square footage of the ground floor, almost every inch of it was covered in bizarre alien experiments. Some looked like vehicles, others were possibly weapons, but most of them were of mysterious, unknown functions.

They did not get much time to process these unusual devices for very long – because they found Azmuth. He was a small, gray alien of the same race Aradia had transformed into back in Skaia’s Dream, though he had significantly more wrinkles than Aradia’s version.
He was currently being pointed at by a male Celestialsapien with a metallic ring around his head but above his horns. “AZMUTH.” The voice made the party of adventurers stop in their tracks.

“L-look, I can’t help you,” Azmuth said with an old, throaty voice.

“You are the greatest of this universe’s minds. You can fix mine.”

“Minds are not such simple constructs as machines. I cannot wave a technological wand and return your voices to the way they should be!”

The Celestialsapien grabbed his head with his hands. “DENIED. CARRIED. NO CONSULTATION!” Then he turned his head to the adventurers, as if just registering their presence. He stared right at Aradia. “YOU. I SENSED YOU. I CALLED. YOU CAME!”

“Uh, I’m just here by accident,” Aradia said, taking a step back.

“I’m Ben Tennyson,” Ben said, stepping forward. “She’s just from another universe and is of no concern to you.”

“Other universe…?” Azmuth said, confusion and curiosity crossing his face simultaneously.

The Celestialsapien brushed Ben aside with a thought, throwing him deep into the pile of technology around them. His gaze remained fixed on Aradia. “I WAS NOT CERTAIN IF MY THOUGHTS WERE ABLE TO BECOME THAT REAL WITHOUT… CONSULTATION. PERHAPS A CLOSED TIMELIKE CURVE? YOU. YOU CAN FIX ME.”

“Don’t listen to him!” Azmuth blurted. “He’s mad! His race don’t even talk li-”

The Celestialsapien lifted Azmuth into the air. “YOU CAN HELP ME, YOU JUST DON’T WANT TO. BUT SHE’S DIFFERENT. SHE WILL.”

Aradia gulped. Really not sure if I’m able to… Probably not.

“Your time is up, Azmuth.”

Ben transformed from inside the pile of junk. “ALIEN X!” He shouted, standing tall as another male Celestialsapien, missing the metal ring of the other but proudly sporting the Omnitrix symbol on his chest. “MOTION CARRIED: SAVE AZMUTH.”

Azmuth was suddenly on Flutterfree’s back.

“You are none of my concern!” the mad Celestialsapien shouted.

Ben spoke again. “MOTION CARRIED: REALITY PUNCHES.”

Ben was in front of the mad Celestialsapien and punched him over and over – but the cosmic being was able to intercept every punch in an instant. “STOP THIS FOOLISHNESS! WE CANNOT FIGHT!”

“MOTION CARRIED: RETURN SANITY.”

“DENIED!” the mad Celestialsapien shouted. “I WILL NOT ACCEPT A CURE FROM THOSE WHO DID THIS TO ME!”

The punches from Ben were becoming hard enough to ripple reality around them, but they were always stopped by the quicker-acting Celestialsapien.
“How fucked are we?” Vriska asked Azmuth.

Azmuth let out a disgruntled cough. “I’m going to assume that’s colorful language for ‘dead’. The answer is extremely if we remain in this universe.”

“We can get out,” Vriska said.

Aradia looked at Azmuth. “This universe is going to be destroyed if this goes on, isn’t it?”

Azmuth nodded. “But there is nothing in our power we can do.”

Aradia looked at her Omnitrix. “…Maybe there is…”

“…You do not have control of your Celestialsapien form,” Azmuth said.

Aradia sighed. “But there’s got to be…” She paused. “How hard would it be for you to detach this Omnitrix from Ben’s?”

“Few hours. We don’t have that.”

“Yes we do,” Aradia said, opening her Omnitrix and transforming into her own form. She turned to Azmuth. “I can freeze time so you can have as long as you need to work. How much do you need?”

“Three hours and twenty-six minutes,” Azmuth answered.

Aradia froze time for everything except her wrist and Azmuth, allowing even herself to be frozen. The next thing she knew, Azmuth was hopping off her wrist. “Got it done with ten minutes to spare. I hope you have a plan.”

Aradia nodded. She did a quick check mentally to make sure her Omnitrix’s master control was on and that her troll form was her default. It was, which brought a smile to her face. “Okay… Here we go.”

She duplicated herself through time a hundred times, filling the area that wasn’t occupied by technology.

“All of you,” she called to Pinkie’s team and Azmuth. “Leave the universe. I’m going to try to save it. This planet will not be surviving.”

Pinkie nodded. “Don’t argue team, let’s move!” They jumped through a dimensional portal.

When they left, the mad Celestialsapien grabbed Ben and threw him to the ground. The impact with the ground did nothing, but the touch of the mad Celestialsapien tore against Ben’s own supposedly impervious skin. “YOU ARE SURPRISINGLY IMPULSIVE, BUT YOU STILL MUST THINK. I NO LONGER CAN. LOOK AT THE MONSTER YOU HAVE CREATED!”

Hundreds of Aradias nodded to each other – and then each of them chose a different alien from the Omnitrix. Some were large, some were small. Some were made of energy, while others didn’t even make three-dimensional sense. Some were powerful things that could level planets, others were just ordinary creatures.

The point was to try one of everything she could think of at once. There were going to be a lot of Aradia deaths from this one, but at least they wouldn’t have deviated in what she considered a meaningful way.

They charged – energy, space, time, and existence itself folding in. The planet they were on...
exploded, killing the vast majority of the Aradias. But those who remained focused intently on the mad Celestialsapien – discovering that he was able to absorb any attack regardless of magical intensity, spiritual nature, or temporal shenanigans. He saw it all and reacted, many times before it actually came. However, a few of the ‘god’ level samples Aradia found were able to deflect his attacks, allowing Ben a moment to attack.

“WHY DO YOU NOT HELP ME WITH THIS POWER!?” the mad Celestialsapien asked.

The only Aradia-form Aradia left looked right at him. She said nothing – but she held out her Omnitrix. All she needed to do was think.

And she transformed into her Celestialsapien form.

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“Oh, look who’s back,” Kaldar said.

“I was hoping you scared her off,” Antira mumbled.

Aradia clasped her hands together. “So, remember that deal we were about t-”

“You didn’t come back when you could to finish it,” Kaldar muttered. “There was an entire spaceflight where you had plenty of time, and yet you didn’t.”

“As should be blatantly obvious, I’m not hindered by linear time,” Aradia said.

“Your Omnitrix is also fixed,” Kaldar pointed out. “And yet you’ve returned, thinking to use us. Hoping to save a universe.”

“Yes. I submit that we save this universe from destruction.”

“Denied,” Kaldar said. “On grounds of prior behavior and interference with a Celestialsapien experiment.”

“Denied,” Antira agreed. “On grounds of the way things are building up. We are an out of context individual. We have no right.”

“Celestialsapien experiment!?” Aradia blurted.

“It’s obvious that’s what he is,” Kaldar said. “One who does not have to debate their actions. We’re born like that, you know. A single mind. Terribly weak as infants – comparatively at least.”

“Does your kind allow those sorts of experiments?” Aradia asked.

“Generally not,” Antira said with distaste. “I do not see this action being approved by the full Converse… but you must understand, we are a race that, as a whole, believes that after enough debate, any course of action is viable. We have no laws that are set in stone, merely a ‘history’ of previous decisions made by wise thinkers. Everything can be changed with new information. Kaldar and I are largely separated from the full Converse, so we cannot tell you what the current flow of the debate is.”

“Or it could be freelance,” Kaldar pointed out. “It’s not this needs Converse approval, it’s just apt to get disapproval a few millennia from now. If we interfere without proper debate, there will be consequences from those who made him this way.”

Aradia folded her arms. “That’s assuming they’re watching or did this intentionally.”
“That is a fair point…” Antira said.

“Let’s look outside,” Aradia said.

“Why?” Kaldar asked.

“I have a point I want to make.”

“Seconded,” Antira said. A visual projection of what was happening appeared in between the three of them.

The mad Celestialsapien was throwing stars at Ben, only for him to clap his hands and make them vanish. The strongest of the Aradias twisted space around the mad Celestialsapien, allowing Ben to get some solid hits in.

“The mad Celestialsapien is going to die,” Aradia said. “Maybe he’ll take the universe with him, maybe he won’t. But right now he’s dying, I’d like to help him.”

“Honorable,” Kaldar admitted. “But it would still be interference.”

“You’re the voice of the future,” Aradia blurted. “Don’t you believe in change? And Antira, you’re the voice of the past! Don’t you believe in staying true to one’s self?” She gestured at the mad Celestialsapien as a wormhole was driven through his chest, tearing at the reality of the universe. “That man is going to die out there, and he doesn’t deserve it. He just wants help.”

“Ara-” Antira began.

“I don’t want to be forced into this again!” Aradia shouted.

There was silence in the mindspace of their Celestialsapien.

There were tears in Aradia’s eyes. “He’s asking me for help. And I’m killing him for it. Somewhere deep in there, part of him knows that might be necessary. But I’ll be damned before I don’t try every other option! So please, I beg of you, let us save his mind!”

Once again there was silence.

“…Seconded,” Antira said.

Kaldar nodded slowly. “As you two wish. I will point out that he was able to refuse ‘Ben’s’ assistance in the matter.”

“Then let’s do it together,” Aradia said. “Two on one should be able to do it, right?”

“We’ll have to make a call,” Antira said. “A group debate. That will freeze Ben up.”

“Then we just have to move quickly,” Aradia said. “Motion to connect to Ben Tennyson.”

“Seconded,” Kaldar said.

Suddenly, Ben and two green masks appeared. The feminine mask was eternally smiling while the masculine was scowling.

“Bah, what’s this?” the male one said. “Aren’t we supposed to be busy?”

“We have entered joined debate,” Antira stated. “It is unusual for our kind, but we need to make a speedy decision before the mad Celestialsapien unleashes his wrath on us in a way we cannot defend against.”

“Why are you bringing us into this?” the male mask asked.

“Bellecus, we are an unusual Celestialsapien,” the female retorted.

“Serena, that’s no excuse, every last one of us can know anything we want within a universe. It’s not like we’re hiding it.”

“Yes, yes, we get it!” Ben said, waving his hands. “Handing over the keys to just one personality is a bit of a taboo in your culture, can we just end this quickly?”

“YOU DID WHAT!?” Kaldar blurted.

“Hey, try to find us and re-educate us in proper Celestialsapien psychology,” Bellecus said. “Oh wait, we exist inside a watch, sorry.”

“At least we aren’t the mindless drone currently beating at our doorstep, we do observe what he’s doing,” Serena said. “Sometimes, anyway. …Bellecus, I think I’m actually starting to feel pain from the beating.”

“Guys! Stop debating!” Ben shouted.

Aradia cleared her throat. “We need to work together to return the mad Celestialsapien’s mind to normal, to override his will. We’ve already seconded.”


“Oh! Right, we’re involved as well,” Serena said. “Haven’t done this in a while. Ahem. Seconded!”

Bellecus sighed. “Remind me again why you’re the one who agrees with him the most?”

Outside in reality, Aradia and Ben appeared next to each other. The mad Celestialsapien looked at them.

“NO! IMPOSSIBLE! YOU MOVE TOO FAST!”

“MOTION CARRIED: RETURN SANITY.”

In the shared mindscape, a single yellow mask appeared. But it wasn’t a single personality – it was a conglomeration of three different faces, all forced together into something that was eternally screaming. It wasn’t even a full mind – there wasn’t a place for true logic within it. It operated almost entirely on instinct and emotion, raging against their advance.

“If we ever needed war machines…” Bellecus began, but didn’t finish his thought.

Red and green light shot from the six personalities split between two Celestialsapiens, hitting the yellow mask head on. In an instant, there were three yellow masks.

They looked at the newcomers with mixed expressions – anger, relief, and confusion. Then they vanished from their respective mindscales. Outside, the mad Celestialsapien looked at his hands. He didn’t move, frozen in debate.

“State of the universe?” Aradia asked.
“Stable and recovering,” Serena said. “There are a few systems without their suns, though.”

“We can fix that, right?” Ben asked. “Or are you two back to demanding arguments about everything?”

“No,” Bellecus said. “I frankly hate that we still have to hear your voice when you visit.”

“Do what you will,” Serena said with a bow of her mask.

“You’re all insane,” Kaldar muttered. “The Converse will hear of this.”

“They already know,” Ben pointed out. “There was a whole big thing about me recreating the universe, got put on trial. These two threw me the keys so we could win and we’ve just kept that up ever since.”

“I do like it when he visits,” Serena admitted. “Makes interesting company. You three are of course welcome to return as well.”

“No you are not,” Bellecus muttered. “This connection is over.”

Aradia was suddenly alone with Kaldar and Antira. She looked at them.

“This power still needs to be used,” Kaldar told Aradia. “As much as it pains me to say this, we can do nothing without your presence. Consider your previous offer.”

“Consider it done,” Aradia said. “You’ll have at least one copy of me with you at all times. I must be allowed to move freely in and out as required, as previously agreed. And I’m going to set it up a little later – I need a break. But before we end this session… Antira.” Aradia floated over to her. “Thank you for breaking free of yourself to do what needed to be done. Any strict adherence to the past or the future… is limiting.”

She floated away. “I hope we can all learn to step outside of what we are as we continue this debate.” She bowed. “I’d like to leave now, if you don’t mind. I’ll be back.”

“Seconded,” Antira said.

“Unanimously approved,” Kaldar added.

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Aradia shifted out of her Celestialsapien form on the surface of a planet with sixteen other Aradias – the only survivors. Ben, Azmuth, and the primary team stood to the side.

“Get out of my universe,” Azmuth said. “I fixed your watch, now get out of here. Your kind causes way too much trouble.”

“All right, all right!” Aradia said, holding her hands up in surrender.

Azmuth walked off, grumpily muttering to himself.

“Don’t take it personally,” Ben said. “I think he’s still upset at how one of your kind blew up our universe.”

“…Then what are we standing on?” Nova asked.

“A copy,” Ben said, smirking. “Created by yours truly. Or, well, Alien X agreeing that the universe
shouldn’t be destroyed by an ancient multiversal society’s bomb.”

“Yeesh,” Nova said. “That has to be weird.”

“Sometimes it bugs me. Mostly it doesn’t though,” Ben said. “Want to know what really scares me about it?”

“What?” Aradia asked.

“Alien X couldn’t stop the bomb. We would have if we could have. But it wasn’t possible. It’s really the only thing I’ve seen that Alien X couldn’t deal with.”

“There’s a lot of scary things out there,” Flutterfree admitted. “But at least you’re here to protect your universe. I think that’s enough.”

“Thanks,” Ben said, giving her a thumbs up. “It sucks you probably won’t be back, you know.”

“We really shouldn’t be here anyway,” Pinkie said. “The Celestialsapiens own this universe. Hopefully they won’t be mad about… that.” Pinkie pointed at the frozen Celestialsapien, eternally staring at his hands.

Aradia looked at his eyes. “…I hope you’re being you in there,” she said. “What are you going to do with him?”

Ben shrugged. “I might be able to take him to the Forge of Creation. I’ll have to talk to Serena and Bellecus about the wisdom of that idea. If that’s a bad idea I’ll just hand him off to Professor Paradox… We’ve got him taken care of, don’t worry.”

“All right!” Pinkie said. “Now… Here’s the thing, we need a ship to get home…”

Ben sighed. “AZMUTH! THEY NEED A SHIP!”

“WHY IS THAT MY PROBLEM!?” the alien yelled back.

“WELL THE PLUMBERS WON’T LIKE THEM AND I CAN’T JUST LET THEM HAVE SHIP!”

“FINE! THEY CAN HAVE ONE OF MINE! I HOPE THEY LIKE BEING CRAMMED!”

The otherworlders gulped.

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 Nova stopped outside the door to Stardust’s bedroom.

Her daughter was sleeping quietly under the covers, a smile on her face, unaware the door had been left open.

Nova closed it with a sound-silencing spell so as not to wake her. She walked down to the living room and sat down on the couch next to Sunburst.

The TV was giving a report about recent efforts made by Skarn to connect with Merodi Universalis as a trading partner. The words of the report began to blur past her face.

 “…Are we ever going to be ok?” Nova asked suddenly.
Sunburst looked at her. “What do you mean?”

“I mean… Us. Our family.”

“No, you’ve kept us together this long.” Sunburst smiled. “Doesn’t matter how rough it is. We’ll make it.”

“She’s going to be a teenager soon, Sunburst,” Nova said, biting her lip. “I don’t know if I can stand strong against that. I have a hard enough time as it is understanding her now. She’s going to want to scream, to rebel, and we’re going to have to find a way to strike a balance between giving her freedom and standing our ground.”

Sunburst gulped. “How about you handle the standing and I handle the freedom?”

Nova looked into her hooves, forlorn. “She’s smart enough to take advantage of that. Pit us against each other.” She shook her head. “We can’t let her think her defiance will get her anywhere when it does show up. But I don’t know. I barely even understand why she is the way she is now. I’m worrying too much again, huh? Really should listen to Flutterfree…”

Sunburst put a hoof on her. “Hey. You might be worrying too much. But those questions need to be asked. We need to prepare for what’s coming, and continue being good parents despite everything.”

“…Are we, though?” Nova asked. “We argue all the time. You spoil her. I scare her. I… I worry that we’re messing her up.” Nova bit back tears.

Sunburst held her close. “We’re not messing her up, Nova. She’s a good kid.”

Nova nodded. “I… I know. But I also don’t know what I’m doing.”

“I don’t think anyone goes into being a parent having any idea what they’re doing.”

Nova blinked, registering this comment. Then she laughed. “That’s… they should print that on gift cards or something.” She wiped her eyes. “That’s so true.”

“R-really? I was kinda just talking without thinking there…”

Nova kissed him. “You should do that more often.”

Sunburst smiled. “…And you should do the opposite.”

“Oh look at you, on a roll today.” She giggled. Then she pulled him into a hug. “…I don’t treat you well enough. I’m angry, upset, stressed, and gone more than I should be.”

Sunburst held her close. “It’s okay.”

Her laughs turned to sobs as she let it all out on Sunburst’s shoulder.

~~~

A rumor began to circle around Celestia City. …More than a rumor. Perhaps a tall tale, or even a legend.

It spoke of the City’s guardian that lived in the very core of its existence, in the restricted areas that were still Castle Bleck. She was a woman of stars – a Celestialsapien, some said. Others laughed and said that was preposterous, she must be something else, for the Class 1 race would never care about them.
The people of Celestia City spoke of how the guardian never moved an inch. How she sat there, waiting for the moment she was needed. Others said she wasn’t a true guardian, and that she merely wanted information on the multiverse, thinking that hitchhiking was the best way to do it. Still others said she was a collective of beings…

But the stories agreed on one thing. Altruistic or not, she was there, watching over them. Watching over them with immeasurable power at her fingertips.

Aradia liked hearing about herself as she walked around Celestia City. She wondered how word of her presence even got out, since she hadn’t actually done anything as the Celestialsapien yet, but she didn’t mind that much. The rumors gave the citizens something to be excited about – and a strange feeling of safety, even if they thought the rumor was just that, nothing more than a story spun for fun.

In many ways, the words held all the power she needed.

She prepared herself to go debate the very fabric of reality with the voices of Time itself…
“How come I didn’t know you had a warehouse?” Rainbow Dash asked her daughter.

Prism was a slender, fit, white-coated pegasus mare; her rainbow mane had a gradient to it, rather than the distinct stripes of her mother’s. She wore large glasses with pointed edges. “Dunno. Guess it just never came up. But you’re here now.” She grinned stupidly. “I’ve got a machine in here that can fling you into orbit.”

“…I knew you wouldn’t let me down!” Rainbow laughed, tousling her daughter’s mane.

“Mom!” Prism laughed right back.

“What? Nobody’s watching. I can look a little soft.”

Prism rolled her eyes. “Right.” She pressed her hoof to the DNA scanner outside her warehouse, and it let her in. She led her mother into the expansive workshop of an engineer. “Behold. Things.”

There were, in fact, things in the warehouse. Tons of scrap metal from cars, planes, and other vehicles that had been cannibalized to create what appeared to be a fully functioning helicopter. There was a welding station, a set of three go-karts with a fourth partially assembled, a woodworking station, a truly absurd number of tools on the far side of the wall, a spellcasting computer, some exercise equipment, a large table covered with numerous interlocking magical crystals, and a huge number of books strewn about in a haphazard fashion.

There was also a giant cannon in the middle of the warehouse pointed straight up at a hatch in the roof.

“…Wow,” Rainbow said. “You should have brought me here sooner.”

“Yeah, probably,” Prism admitted. “But I get a little occupied with all the inventing sometimes. Aside from that space cannon I’ve got some other inventions here. That insignificant-looking black box there is the Zero-Point Driver, which is why I have enough money to have this place. There’s usually a couple assistants running around, but it’s the weekend and I don’t have brutal hours.”

“Fresh out of college and already running a laboratory. Wow. Did I ever tell you I was proud of you?”

“You tried not to. You kinda sorta failed later on,” Prism chuckled. “But hey, I don’t mind. You got me here and this is a great life. I would show you the muscle networking device I’m working on…”

“But it’ll go over my non-eggy-head. I know.”

“So let’s check out this cannon. It can shoot you to the moon.”

“Wow.”

“It has no practical purpose whatsoever,” Prism said, smirking. “It just does it safely without the use of magic.”

“…Can I ride?”
“Sure. I won’t be shooting you at the moon though. Luna’d be peeved.”

Rainbow laughed. “Yeah, she would. Spacesuit?”

“Bottom compartment.”

Rainbow popped the bottom compartment of the cannon open – and then her cutie mark started glowing. “Really?”

Prism chuckled. “Guess you’ll have to wait until you get back!”

“Aaaargh! Fine, fine, time for a Friendship Problem! At least it doesn’t take multiple days to travel around anymore.”

~~~

Applejack had four kids. Jona, Ginger, Cameo, and Corea. Jona was tall, red, and demanded attention with her presence. Ginger was the only stallion of the bunch and was a pony of few words, but also a genius. Cameo was a mare born with a horn thanks to latent genes within Barley’s lineage, whose special talent was mimicry magic. Corea was the Avatar, bender of five elements and spiritual leader of an entire world.

Jona and Ginger still worked on the family farm. Cameo had gone off to magic school to become a wizard, and while not the best was at least decent at it. Corea was still spending most her time on Elemental Four, keeping that world’s course steady.

All four of them were currently eating lunch with their mother at Sweet Apple Acres, in the kitchen all of them had grown up in – even Corea, though she had left relatively young. Out the kitchen window, they could see how much the farm had changed. They still grew apples and a handful of other things, yes, but the farms were much larger – and automated in many ways. There was still work the Apple family had to do, but Applejack knew there was less load on them than when she was younger.

At first she had worried technology would make her kids lazy, but that didn’t happen. All four of them were great workers, and she was proud of all of them in her own way.

That didn’t mean she didn’t get annoyed at Jona’s rambling sometimes.

“-and then Helm went all ‘grunt grunt’ and Empire thought it was the funniest thing ever, meanwhile I was over there waiting for him to hurry up and make dinner. So yeah – oh wait! That reminds me!”

“Do you ever stop talking?” Cameo asked.

“Hm? Nah. Or do I…? Eh, Sometimes. To let other ponies talk.”

Ginger grunted.

“What was that, dear brother?”

Ginger let out a soft chuckle. “Giving others a chance to speak to prove a point does not indicate evidence for any sort of average or behavioral pattern.”

Jona blinked. “…Right.”

“He’s discrediting you,” Cameo said. “Not his best work.”
“I thought it was okay,” Corea added.

“You didn’t fully understand it.”

Corea rolled her eyes. “Uh huh. Right. I didn’t understand that he was poking her for mixing up what she does on the spot for a temporary point?”

Cameo smirked. “Fair enough.”

Corea chuckled.

Applejack smiled contentedly. “Ah’m glad you’re all here.”

Corea smiled back. “Same. It’s nice to see everyone.”

Jona nodded slowly. “We are Apples after all. Even those of us who are quite pointy in parts.”

Cameo rolled her eyes. “I’m pointy in one part.”

“Oh? What about your words? Pretty sharp, hmm?”

Cameo blinked. She didn’t have a comeback for that one.

“How is the wizardin’ goin’?” Applejack asked.

Cameo shrugged. “Good enough. Created a spell for making the perfect pie based on your recipes. Don’t worry, nobody knows how it works yet.”

“Ah would hope not. …Corea?”

“Being the Avatar is difficult,” Corea admitted. “But I also get to see a lot of weird places. Lucky for me the world is at peace right now, and everyone seems to be getting along famously with each other. Tenzin’s even mellowed out and has his own family now!”

“Ah know that. Ah was sent the pictures.” Applejack smirked. “And Ah w-”

Her cutie mark started glowing.

“DUTY CALLS!” Corea blurted. “A quest calls your presence, mother! Fly!”

Jona sighed. “Aw… I was hoping this would last longer.”

Applejack rubbed the back of her head. “Well… Ah’m sorry but Ah have to take this. Y’all keep havin’ lunch. Ah might be gone a few days. So listen to your aunt and uncle. You know the drill.”

Her four children waved her off.

~~~

Renee couldn’t tell anyone why, but she loved cleaning up the castle. She didn’t spruce it up or decorate it anymore – it had already been mostly maximized in that department – but she still would go around and dust from time to time, even though there were janitors to do that sort of thing. It was just something she liked to do.

Even Daniel thought she was crazy. She didn’t mind, though, she just picked up a duster when she felt like it and began to move around. She could easily deal with her duties while dusting unless a
crisis came up.

“Overhead! Team Zeta-Five has returned early!” a Ga reported.

“Put them on Earth Coffee, I’m sure they can find something constructive to do there. If not, I suppose I’ll offer them a vacation.”

“Of course.”

Most of her day-to-day decisions were like that anyway. Think for a moment and send ponies on one of many different missions. There were so many. Some required thought on her part to find the best fit or discover what exactly the expedition would be, but others were as simple as randomizing an unexplored world and sending someone there. Easy.

She entered the map room and started dusting the map itself.

Her cutie mark started glowing.

“Oh, well that’s a pleasant surprise.” She pulled out her phone. “Daniel dear, Friendship Problem, you’ll have to handle everything.” Corona’s already out today and shouldn’t need any assistance. We should be fine. “Love you~!”

~~~

“Alright team!” Pinkie said, looking seriously. “I’m about to comically setup the best pranking palooza ever!”

Nova, Vriska, and John Egbert glanced at each other. Nova raised a hoof. “What exactly is a palooza? I’ve been wondering for a while now.”

“Absolutely nothing!” Pinkie laughed. “Regardless, we are the best pranksters around. We should be able to fool the entire city of Ponyville!”

“Why don’t you guys change the name?” John asked. “It’s not a village. Also Ponyville just sounds kinda lame.”

“Ponies will just keep calling it Ponyville anyway,” Nova pointed out. “Plus whatever we did change it to would just become something even more stupid. Like Poneopolis or something.”

“Geez. That is bad.”

Pinkie clapped her hooves. “Prank, remember? We’re going to start by covering main street in an invisible sheet of adhesive, so everyone’s shoes and hooves and feet will be coated in it. A lot of people will notice this, but that’s not the main part of the prank. It’s a distraction!”

Vriska smirked. “A distraction prank for the real one?”

“Sorta. Their feet get sticky, then we introduce a ton of bugs into the system, a-”

Pinkie’s cutie mark started flashing.

Pinkie facehooved. “You guys asked too many questions! I was going to get to the end, say go team, and then get called away but noooo you guys had to ask questions. You ruined everything.”

Nova blinked. “S-sorry!”
John rolled his eyes. “And you’ve just fallen for it.”

“…What?”

“She was pranking us. There wasn’t any more plan to the prank.”

“…Fuck, she got me too,” Vriska said.

Pinkie bowed to John. “You are truly the prank master, John Egbert. This map summons is real though, so I do gotta go. See ya!”

~~~

“-Amen,” Rev said, wrapping up the service. The congregation made its way out of their seats and out the door for the most part, but a few came up to her and said hello or asked a question, which she answered diligently.

She eventually made her way to Flutterfree and Eve. “So, you’re back?” Rev asked Eve.

Eve gestured at Flutterfree. “She convinced me to come. Again.”

“You’re not feeling pressured, are you?” Rev asked.

“Eh… sometimes, though I feel like it’s more self-pressure than anything. She rarely asks and I figured I might as well drop by, learn a little more about this… place.”

Rev nodded. “So, what did you think?”

“Still hard to chew it with what I know about everything else.”

“Well, I can try to answer your questions.”

“Flutterfree does a pretty good job of that,” Eve said.

“I might not always get it right,” Flutterfree pointed out. “That whole thing about miracles a few months ago? Yeah, that was just me being silly.”

Eve chuckled. “I remember. …I guess I want to hear what you have to say about the existence of evil, Rev.”

“Right so, the general answer that ‘good cannot exist without evil’ is stupid,” Rev began. “Don’t believe it for a moment. Everything evil exists because it serves someone’s desires for something good. Pure ‘evil’ entities are a result of the Tower, which sought to produce something good: meaning. Clearly made by those who didn’t believe in a higher power, but that’s a rabbit trail we don’t need to get into right now.”

Eve nodded. “The Tower’s tunnels know no ends.”

Rev continued. “Regardless, the general answer for the existence of evil is because we conscious beings were given free will – a choice. We could choose to follow the good will of God, or we could choose to deny Him and do whatever we wanted, which meant an allowance of evil. Because if there was no evil, well, there wouldn’t be a choice there because we would be perfect beings already. There wouldn’t be an option for an actual relationship, we’d just be robots.”

“Some robots a-”
“You know what I mean, Eve,” Rev said with a smirk. “There are some programmed machines that have no will of their own, even if they may think they do. We were given a choice, and thus, evil exists. That’s a distilled-down version, and there’s a lot of people who question if free will is worth the existence of evil, not to mention the prevalence of ‘grimdark’ in the multiverse, but we’d need to sit down for a longer discussion to get into that. Lunch, maybe.”

“We’re open, right?” Flutterfree asked Eve.

“Sure,” Eve said. “I suppose it’s about time I see what Nova likes so much about arguing with you.”

“I don’t see you arguing as vehemently as Nova,” Rev said with a laugh. “That mare is really stubborn.”

“Don’t I know i-” Eve and Flutterfree’s cutie marks started flashing. Eve chuckled. “Well, guess I won’t be getting to that.”

Rev shrugged. “It probably won’t be as good as the deep conversations I know you have with Flutterfree about it, to be honest. I still hope you’ll think about it.”

“We will have that lunch at some point,” Eve said. “You can count on it.”

“I look forward to it.”

~~~

The six Bearers of the Elements of Harmony stood together in the map room of Renee’s crystal castle.

“So, where are we going?” Rainbow asked.

“If it’s all six of us it must be something big,” Flutterfree pointed out.

“We’re not going offworld,” Renee observed. “That’s still on the map.”

“Other side of the world though,” Applejack commented. “Any idea where that is?”

“Yes!” Pinkie said.


“Tauryl!?” Flutterfree blurted. “I’ve… I’ve never been there.”

“The last independent nation on this planet,” Eve continued. “The centaurs and gargoyles. They only started talking to us at all because of Xeelee interference. Currently, they don’t like anything from outside, but they realize they can’t do anything to us. Their leaders are gruff and decidedly xenophobic, but they’re good enough to their own people. …The last team that was sent there was the ‘Mean Six’ and they did… fine, I suppose, but didn’t exactly leave a good impression.” She furrowed her brow. “We’re being sent to one of their islands, far from their seat of power. So what little I do know about Tauryl culture may not apply there.”

“Heh. Into the unknown again.” Rainbow smirked. “Just like old times?”

“It has been a while since we were all sent on a mission together,” Flutterfree said.

“Then let’s make this the best mission ever!” Pinkie shouted. “We are going to blow the socks off the Tree of Harmony with how well we do this one!”
Renee grinned. “You bet we will. We’ve grown so much since the last time.”

“And we’re still the best of friends!” Pinkie blurted. “Woo!”

“Shame Nova isn’t comin’ too,” Applejack said. “Even if she’s not an Element, she still feels like part of us.”

Eve nodded. “Yeah, I know. But the map chose us, so we are going.” She pulled out her phone. “O’Neill! Think you can teleport the six of us to… this location? Surface-to-ship-to-surface teleportation. All right, tha-”

The teleporter locked onto them, teleported all six of them to the teleporter room of whatever ship O’Neill happened to be on, then down to the island the map had indicated. They appeared on a beach with a sparse dotting of palm trees. There was a tall, black tower of metal that rose to a three-tipped claw far above them. It was the middle of the night since they were on the other side of the planet, revealing a slight red glow from the tower.

“Woah…” Rainbow said.

“One of their defense towers,” Eve said. “They used to destroy any ship, vehicle, or entity they saw coming with these. Now it’s just a dormant memory of what Tauryl used to be.” She glanced around, taking in more of the scenery. She saw a path leading up out of the beach. “This way.”

The six of them trotted along, surprised with how normal everything seemed for the other side of Equis Vitis.

“Maybe we’ve just been exploring too much,” Flutterfree said. “But this doesn’t look very exotic.”

“It’s not that,” Applejack said. “Trust me, Ah’d know. This just seems like a regular beach besides the imposin’ tower.”

They walked along the path out of the beach, soon able to see a town in the distance. Eve executed a teleport to take them right to the edge of it. The buildings were noticeably taller than any pony or human construction, likely because centaurs weren’t exactly short creatures. The buildings were largely made of stone with little decoration on them. Nobody was out and about – but that was to be expected. It was night.

“We need to wait until morning before we start rummaging around,” Renee said. “But it’s chilly out and I’d rather not sit here until dawn.”

Pinkie pointed at a nearby building that had an Inn sign on it. “Bada-boom.”

“What would we do without you?” Flutterfree asked.


They walked in the front door of the inn. The interior was warmly lit by gas lamps, showing a small lobby with a couple chairs. The stone material of the building gave it a strong, if slightly oppressive, atmosphere. A female centaur sat behind the counter, black and blue fur covering most of her body. Her two horns were thin and slender. She stared at them with a blank expression. “Do you want a room?” she said with a level, disinterested tone.

“Yes,” Eve said, unable to hear her voice inflection, picking up nothing from the centaur due to the aforementioned blank expression. “How much?”
“Thirty crielar per room. It looks like you’ll need two, so sixty.”


“I didn’t,” Eve said, unrolling a roll of Tauryl coins – presumably crielar. “Will this work?”

“Thank you for your business,” she said, taking the coins and giving them a pair of keys. “Rooms three and four. They’re adjoined.”

“Thanks,” Eve said, walking down the hall to door three and four, using her magic to unlock both at once. She stepped into room three, taking in the two beds and a recliner that doubled as another bed. There was a large window, a single gas lamp, and a simple table in the room, but there was little in the way of decoration or comfort. Tauryl was not known to be accepting of leisure or technology, so this wasn’t exactly unexpected.

Eve unlocked the adjoining set of doors between the rooms, finding the other one to be nearly identical.

“I call a bed!” Pinkie declared.

“I’ll take a recliner,” Flutterfree said.

“Wait, we’re actually sleeping?” Renee said. “It’s still midday for me! I’m not tired at all!”

“…Oh, right,” Rainbow said, deciding to stop guarding a bed like it was her closest held treasure in the entire world. “…So what do we do, then?”

“Wait,” Applejack said. “Y’know, that thing you do when something’s going to happen in a while?”

Rainbow dash snorted. “Funny.”

“Hey, Eve,” Renee asked. “I didn’t see you grab any coins.”

“I conjured them,” Eve said. “Not that the centaur has to know that.”

“Did the centaur seem odd to anyone else?” Flutterfree asked. “Like she wasn’t all there.”

“It is the middle of the night,” Applejack pointed out. “Ah mean, Ah thought she was odd too, but she might just be tired.”

“Maybe,” Flutterfree said.

“I was expecting a lot more hostility,” Eve admitted. “This far from the center of Tauryl, they probably barely know that the xenophobic practices have changed. Sure, they had one of the towers, and it was disabled, but that wouldn’t mean much to the actual people. They’d still be aggressive… Or they should have been.”

“Maybe because it’s far from the capital they’re nicer?” Renee suggested.

“Or maybe they’ve just run into ponies before and they were nice!” Pinkie said. Then she gasped. “Maybe those ponies were us and we’re about to go back in time!”

Eve rolled her eyes. “I’ve got no plans for that. All I’ve got plans for is to talk with all of you for a while then solve a Friendship Problem.” She smiled. “How have you all been?”

“GREAT!” Pinkie blurted. “But you know that.”
“The tales of your exploits across the multiverse are a highlight of most of my days,” Eve said with a smirk. “Though reading your reports and hearing it from you are different things.”

Pinkie shrugged. “But we don’t have all that much time.”

“I would love personalized reports in person,” Renee said. “But we deal with so much that’s just not possible and only done with pressing matters. My life consists of reading reports, sending people on missions, and dusting.”

“…Dusting?” Applejack said, cocking her head.

“Dusting. I like dusting. It’s a hobby of mine.”

“Did Aradia get to you or something?” Pinkie asked with a chuckle.

“What? No. Why would you a-” Renee blinked. “Oh, right, the whole ‘Handmaid’ thing.”

“It is a little weird if you know her,” Pinkie said.

Eve chuckled. “When I first saw her doing it back before the bowling ball, I was enthralled. Now when I see her in the halls of Canterlot I just give her this look.” She put on a grumpy glare mixed with an eyebrow raise. “And then she laughs and disappears.”

“You spend a lot of time in Canterlot, huh?” Applejack asked.

Eve nodded. “Yep. It’s my home now, though I do spend a significant amount of time in other universes. Political discussions, establishing relations. I talk to a lot of people every day. Good thing I learned to do that a long time ago, isn’t it?”

“Oh yes,” Renee said. “Can you imagine still being your bookworm antisocial self and being Overhead of Relations?”

“I’d be Overhead of Research then and you know it.”

“Not Oversight?” Rainbow asked.

“Oversight is too legalistic.”

“Egghead Twi would not have had a problem with that,” Rainbow said, “Like, at all.”

Eve rolled her eyes with a smirk. “Yeah, that’s fair.”

“Applejack, how’s the farm?” Flutterfree asked.

“Goin’ good,” Applejack said. “Not as much profit from just growin’ apples anymore, but we’ve got some great processing of zap apples and cider now. Ponyville’s large enough that we stay busy with just those. Gotta say, didn’t think magitech would help much back in the day, but year-round cider has been good for everyone.”

“Thank Celestia, the Tower, and all the gods who listen!” Rainbow said, throwing her hooves up. “The cider never runs dry!”

“The family’s getting’ real big too. Like, real big,” Applejack chuckled to herself. “Ah think Ah know what Granny Smith felt like when she was young.”

“We aren’t exactly young anymore,” Renee pointed out. “Late sixties, all of us. If we weren’t
immortal we’d be halfway to the finish line.”

“Thank goodness for golden shiny blood!” Rainbow said with a laugh. “Works wonders!”

Flutterfree nodded. “Sure does.”

“Oh, guys, guys,” Rainbow smirked. “Prism invented a cannon that can shoot you to the moon.”

“While impressive, I question why,” Eve said.

“Because it’s awesome, that’s why!”

“In the future, she shall be known as the inventor of awesome!” Pinkie giggled.

“Oh yeah!”

“How are the Wonderbolts these days?” Eve asked.

“We bounce between Renee and O’Neill for special missions,” Rainbow said. “It’s a little tiring to be in charge all the time - but it’s so worth it. I’ve whipped us into shape for stopping baddies, villains, and other things.” Rainbow smirked. “It’s a little interesting, being the special task force rather than a bunch of explorers. But we still get to do the stunt shows. …Basically my life is packed and it’s awesome.”

“Hard to imagine you used to spend all your time sleeping on clouds,” Flutterfree said.

“Heh. Right back at you. Hard to imagine you as the same pony, given everything.”

Flutterfree summoned Lolo, planning to use the Stand as a way to further the conversation. But the moment she fully activated it, the entire hotel vanished and they fell to the dirt ground. It was still night – but the entire town was gone. Instead there was a jungle filled with alien plant shapes, mysterious flashing lights that appeared and disappeared through the trees, and a mysterious eerie wind.

“This is more like it!” Pinkie cheered.

“…I liked that bed,” Renee pouted.

“Right, so, I guess the entire town wasn’t real,” Eve said, clicking her tongue absentmindedly. “Huh. Flutterfree?”

“Alien forest is real,” Flutterfree said, spreading Lolo out far. “Not finding much else. Still expanding Lolo though.”

Eve put her hoof to her eyes, lighting her left eye up with the power of Light. “The tower is still there, so we are on the island we teleported to. I can tell that this forest is what naturally grows here. And aside from a few interesting facts about the plants – the three-pronged one is deadly poisonous – I’m not seeing much to go off of.” She set her eye back to normal, scanning for magic sources. “Large ambient magic. I suspect a signal masking spell is in place. Anyone else got anything?”

They shook their heads.

“Right. Pinkie, Awareness telling you anything?”

“Adventure, single chapter,” Pinkie said. “We’re the only ones being focused on, so it’s a story about the six of us. Chapter title is ‘The Elements of Harmony’ so that makes sense. We’ve spent the rest of
our time here re-establishing ourselves and our lives. So I’d guess the actual adventure is about to start.” She licked the roof of her mouth. “Existence tastes like raspberries today…”

“Any indication what this adventure is going to be?”

Pinkie shrugged. “I dunno. I’m not Starbeat, I can’t give you ‘levels of importance’ or ‘the flow of ka’, all I’ve got for you is little inklings.” She thought for a while. “Hrm… I’m getting a sense that something’s about to go wrong.”

“No surprise there,” Renee said.

“Yeah, it’s n-” Pinkie’s pupils dilated and her cheerful smile fell. “Uh oh.”

“That’s a bad ‘uh oh’,” Rainbow said.

“Yeeeeeah this is going to be a brutal o-” A collection of bones held together by dark fire appeared from nowhere, grabbed Pinkie, and pulled her into the forest.

The five mares wasted no time at all, charging after their friend. They may not have been able to see Pinkie or the thing that had taken her, but Lolo could. Everyone followed Flutterfree, dashing through the woods without care for all the scrapes and bruises they were receiving from stumbling through unknown terrain.

“Flutterfree!” Eve called, running up to be alongside her. “How far ahead?”

“Thirty meters.”

“Straight?”

“Straight.”

“Prepare for teleport!” Eve shouted, lighting her horn. In a flash of purple magic they were precisely thirty meters ahead, right next to the creature of bones and shadow. It was exceptionally hard to see in the dark, but Eve was able to get a general idea with her special eye. It was a blob of burning black sludge with the skeleton of a creature inside, but all the bones were in the wrong places. Hands were next to legs, the skull was near the pelvis, and the horns were on opposite sides of the sludge.

Pinkie was held within the sludge, the shape of her mane indicating it was very wet in there, and not as scalding as the black flames on the outside suggested.

Eve summoned Seraphim. Gravity next to the sludge increased tenfold – enough to force the amorphous sludge to the ground in a flat puddle barely cohesive enough to keep the bones in check.

Rainbow Dash flew in next, the winds of Breath swirling a tornado pattern around Pinkie, tearing her out of the blackness. Flutterfree shot the darkness with her bow of light for good measure. It writhed in pain – and fled, leaving the six of them alone.

“What on Equis was that!?” Renee blurted.

“Something undead,” Eve said, moving to go check on Pinkie. Rainbow was currently blowing the rest of the black sludge off her using the winds of Breath.

Eve noticed Pinkie’s mane wasn’t poofing back up.

“Pinks?” Rainbow asked. “You okay?”
“Why wouldn’t I be, Dashie?” Pinkie said, twitching. “I’ve just about been eaten by an undead sludge monster!”

“Pinkie, calm down,” Rainbow said, putting her hooves on her shoulders. “I don’t know what happened to you in there, but it clearly wasn’t good. You’re fine now, okay?”

“Oh, I’m better than fine!” Pinkie pulled a knife out of her mane.

“P—”

She drove it right into Rainbow’s neck, sending blood flying over her own pink face. “See? Totally fine.”

Rainbow’s pink eyes locked on Pinkie’s own blue irises. She extended a wing – and then fell over.

Flutterfree screamed, backing away. Deep within her, the Rage rose… but she couldn’t bring herself to use it against Pinkie.

Pinkie turned to the rest of them, juggling the knife. “So, who’s next? This doesn’t end without me killing you all, y’know. I suppose there’s a chance you can stop me, but…”

Eve activated Seraphim despite her shock, forcing gravity to increase dramatically next to Pinkie. First ten times, then a hundred, than a thousand. The ground literally crumbled away beneath her – but the pink party pony remained standing.

“Reality is just a suggestion!” Pinkie chuckled. She rushed Eve. Eve raised a shield, but Pinkie appeared behind her, knife raised.

Lolo wrapped around Pinkie’s knife, tearing it from her hoof. Pinkie was in the air, holding another knife aimed at Flutterfree’s neck. Applejack opted to just buck Pinkie in the side to protect Flutterfree. The pink pony went flying, but she didn’t care. She just bounced back to her hooves and laughed.

“Stop,” Renee ordered, her eyes glowing a slight teal shade. The Sylph of Mind lit her horn, worming her way into Pinkie’s own consciousness. It was a terrifying place, but Renee wasn’t a god-tier player of Mind, so she couldn’t read – she could only heal. She put her own mental energy into Pinkie.

Pinkie froze in place, her face twitching. “I… Er… I… Ahahahaha!” She pulled another knife out of her mane, but then dropped it, looking at her hoof in horror. Then she picked it back up and readied to throw it, but her other hoof knocked it out of her grip.

“What’s goin’ on!?” Applejack blurted.

“I don’t know!” Renee said. “She’s got something altering her mind continually! All I can do is keep her conflicted! Everything I do is undone a second later!”

Eve lit her horn. “Keep it up for just a little longer.” She lit her eye up. “I’ll find a way to contain her.”

Pinkie tried to get off a quip, but with Renee’s influence the sentence came out as a series of gurgles and panicked breaths.

How to contain Pinkie Pie… Eve thought to herself, scrolling through her knowledge of spells and dimensions. She operates even in standard physics, so that won’t work… Magical chains will keep
her for a limited time, but that might not be enough... She can break any rule... So a self-perpetuating sealant spell affixed to her soul might do it. Might. She’ll be able to get out if she seriously wants... But it’s all I’ve got right now.

Eve cast her spell. Magical cuffs and chains appeared around Pinkie’s neck, midsection, and all four legs. She was tied up and turned upside-down, legs in the air. For good measure Eve enchanted her to be stuck to a boulder.

Pinkie growled. “You think this can hold me!?"

“For a while,” Eve said. “That’s all we need.”

Pinkie struggled, but she remained fixed to the boulder and tied in all the chains. “MMM!”

“Rainbow!” Flutterfree shouted. Now that the fight was over she ran over to the blue pegasus. She pressed a wing to the side of her neck that wasn’t just a huge gash. “There’s no pulse!”

Applejack walked over and gulped. “She’s... She’s dead.”

Everyone except Pinkie turned to Eve.

Eve nodded slowly. “I’ll try it. Renee, be ready if she... if she...”

“Comes Back Wrong?”

Eve gulped, the slightest motion of her head telling Renee yes. She stood over Rainbow’s body and spread her wings, the magic sparkles in her mane flashing. She surrounded herself in a white aura, coalescing the energy into her horn. The white beam surrounded Rainbow’s body, filling her with the revive spell.

Eve had never learned much in the way of healing or holy magic, like Corona had. But she had made sure she knew the revive spell in case of a situation like this.

The gash in Rainbow’s neck sealed up awkwardly, but enough to be stable. The life slowly seeped back into Rainbow’s eyes.

The pegasus coughed up some blood and groaned.

There was a series of relieved sighs. Flutterfree closed her eyes and murmured “thank you.”

“Oh look at that, you brought her back!” Pinkie jeered. “Lucky you!”

Rainbow stood up and coughed, dusting herself off. She turned to Pinkie with sad eyes.

“That’s right! I killed you! Cause I’m craaaaazy!” She laughed.

Rainbow walked up to her, expression unreadable, one side of her body still covered in the red stains of her own blood. She stopped just short of the boulder.

“Come to get your revenge? C’mon, it’ll feel great.”

Rainbow put a wing around Pinkie. “We’re gonna fix you, Pinks. Don’t you worry.”

“W-WHAT!? I... Gah, you’re all missing the point! I’m crazy murderpony!”

“Uh, yeah,” Rainbow said. “So? You’re still our friend. We’re going to help you through this no
matter how dangerous you are. Right girls?”

“Right,” the other four said without hesitation.

Rainbow coughed again. “Aw man, Eve, I don’t think you healed that up very well…”

“I’m not a healer!” Eve blurted. “I… I did what I could.”

“Yeah. Thanks, by the way. Still feel like crud.”

“…Your ability to recover from the situation so quickly astounds me,” Renee admitted.

“I didn’t spend however long staring at my dead body, so… I might have an advantage here?” She rubbed the back of her head. “Sorry if I seem to be brushing this off. …Anyway, Pinkie. How do we help her? Renee?”

“I already tried. Something’s actively tormenting her mind.”

“Maybe I’ve just found my true self!” Pinkie blurted.

“Yeah, no, if that were the case you wouldn’t have been so conflicted when I was healing you. Something’s influencing you.”

“And just her,” Eve said, looking around with her eye. “None of us are affected.”

“We need to get her to some other Pinkies,” Flutterfree said. “So she doesn’t slip out when we’re all blinking simultaneously.”

Eve nodded, pulling out her phone. She tried to dial O’Neill – but got no service. She narrowed her eyes. “…This entire universe should have service…”

“Wasn’t Seraphim working?” Renee asked.

Eve created a portal using Seraphim and poked her head through. She passed through the portal like it didn’t exist, remaining on the island. She tried to teleport away next, but just appeared elsewhere on the island. She teleported back, shaking her head. “We’re stuck.”

“Isn’t that always how it goes?” Pinkie pointed out. “You get stuck by some mysterious force! Who knows, maybe it’s me this time? Wouldn’t that be something?”

“Right, so we can’t leave,” Eve said. “Can’t heal Pinkie here… So we have to find the undead sludge monster and figure out what it’s doing. Flutterfree?”

Flutterfree closed her eyes, tapping into Lolo. “I don’t have much on it.”

“I can try to track it magically, but everything’s scrambled here,” Eve admitted. “My eye will probably help. Bring information to Light, as it were. Renee, is your telekinesis strong enough to lift that boulder?”

Renee looked at the boulder and bit her lip. “…Yes, but it will be a significant strain.”

“We have to take her with us and I don’t want to detach her.”

“I’ll do it Eve, don’t worry. Just don’t expect me to be doing much in the way of fighting.”

Eve nodded. “Rainbow?”
“I’m not leaving Pinkie’s side,” Rainbow said, saluting with a wing. “I’ll watch ‘em both.”

Eve forced a smile. “Good. Follow me. Tap me if you need my attention – I’ll be fixated on the path ahead of us.” She scanned the area ahead of her as the Witch of Light, following the black creature’s escape trail. The rest followed behind her, their faces set and determined. The smiles that had been present prior had mostly fallen, replaced not with despondence but with a feeling of urgency and importance.

This mission was just getting started, and all of them knew it.

Pinkie kept laughing. “Hey giiiiirls! What’s walking into a death trap? That’s right, all of us! It’s gonna be great! There won’t be any balloons, but pff, not all parties need balloons!”

Rainbow fixed Pinkie with an intense stare. “Hey, Pinkie, I know the good you is in there somewhere. We’re not going to hold any of this against you, k? So if you’re beating yourself up in there, don’t.”

“I’m going to kill you all.”

“Well I’ve already been killed!” Rainbow smirked. “So guess I’m safe!”

Pinkie twitched. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m awesome.”

“And there it is,” Renee said, grunting because of her exertion on the boulder. “The ego that never goes away, even post-traumatic experience.”

Applejack chuckled. “Heh. That’s our Rainbow. Smart-mouthin’ even after the end.”

“I am now best zombie, no contest,” Rainbow said with an exaggerated bow.

Flutterfree walked back to the group around the floating boulder. “Hey, Applejack, Eve wants you to be on Pinkie for a minute while Rainbow gets an bird’s eye view of everything. That good?”

Applejack nodded. “Fine by me. Rainbow?”

“Oh it!” Rainbow said, flying into the sky with a burst of wind.

Pinkie chuckled. “Hey Aaaaaaapplejaaaaaack…” she whispered. “Got somethin’ to tell you…”

Applejack raised an eyebrow, putting her face closer to Pinkie. “Ah’m listening, though Ah’m also expectin’ this to either be a trap or some cruel joke o’ yours.”

“Oh, it might be both. See, I’m going to tell you something completely one hundred percent true, no bamboozle. And you’re going to hate it.” She giggled. “The only way to stop me from killing another one of you is to kill me. If you don’t, I will kill one of you again. It is certain.”

“Mhm,” Applejack said, grunting. “Great talk.”

“What are you gonna do, huh? Kill me? Or are you going to pretend like I didn’t say anything?”

Applejack blinked. “Ah’m gonna talk to Eve about it and see what she thinks. Ah’m not makin’ that decision alone.”

Pinkie blinked.
“Waitin’ for Rainbow to come back though, y’know, since Ah’m supposed to be watchin’ you.”

Pinkie’s left eye twitched. “Not even fazed…”

Rainbow returned, tapping Eve to get her attention. “Yeah, there’s nothing on this entire island besides that tower. Not even sure who could build it, or why. There’s nothing for Tauryl to defend here!”

“Lighthouse principle, maybe?” Eve asked. “Destroy the ships coming to the mainland from a distance?”

Rainbow Dash shrugged. “Dunno. All I know is that this island is abandoned, dark, has a creepy glowing tower, and is very hard to see through. That canopy is thick.”

“Got it. How are you feeling, after that fly?”

“Eh, I still feel like puking my guts out, but nothing too bad. I probably shouldn’t be using my neck too much. How about you?”

“Still following the trail,” Eve reported.

“Keep it up.” She flew back to Pinkie. “You’re free, AJ. What’d you get up to?”

Applejack nodded. “A lot of creepy talkin’.”

“Oh yeah, figures.”

Pinkie groaned. “Why are you so amiable!? Be freaked out!”

“I’m barely holding onto my sanity,” Rainbow admitted. “But hey, why would I make it worse by freaking out?”

Pinkie said nothing.

Applejack took the opportunity to trot up to Flutterfree and Eve. “Uh, hey Eve?”

“She’s, uh, not looking right now,” Flutterfree said. “Tracking.”

“Well Ah just heard somethin’ from Pinkie she’s gotta hear.”

Flutterfree noticed the urgency in Applejack’s voice and nodded. She tapped Eve’s shoulder with her wing and then gestured toward Applejack.

“Hm?” Eve said.

“Pinkie’s just told me that, unless we kill her, she’s gonna kill one of us. Ah believe her when she said it was a certainty. Figured you’d need to know.”

“…Ah…” Eve bit her lip.

“Ah suggest we keep doin’ what we’ve been doin’. I ain’t gonna kill her unless she asks me to in her right mind. Ah can’t be sure it was really necessary otherwise.”


Everypony turned to her, stopping their motions.
“So, Pinkie’s probably going to get out and kill one of us,” Eve said. “We know that the only way to prevent this is to kill her. AJ and I agree that we shouldn’t do that. I presume you all agree, but you needed to be made aware.”

Renee sighed. “It’s difficult, but it’s the only real decision.”

Rainbow nodded. “Not her fault, she doesn’t deserve to be offed for it. Even if she does go after one of us.”

Flutterfree smiled. “Looks like it’s unanimous.”

“That’s a small comfort, at least,” Applejack said.

“GAH!” Pinkie shouted. “That’s it, you’re all going to pay for your stupid, stupid friendship. Now.”

“Incoming!” Eve shouted, preparing a complex series of spells. The shadowy creature flew at them, burning through the air like it was nothing. Eve shot at it and tapped into Seraphim to induce a point of Absolute Zero within the creature. Parts of it froze – but other parts of it lashed out at Pinkie, tearing her free from the boulder.

This time the creature didn’t run – it just teleported away in a flash of darkness. When the darkness had cleared, Pinkie was already free with a knife in her hoof.

She whirled onto Renee, driving the knife into her shoulder. “Gotch-”

Renee pulled her into a hug. The motion made Applejack, Rainbow, Flutterfree, and Eve freeze.

Pinkie stabbed Renee again. She let out a cry of pain, but refused to let go of Pinkie.

Pinkie stabbed her again. This time there was no cry, just a whimper, her hooves still hung around Pinkie’s neck.

“Jus… Jus…” There were tears peeking out the corners of Pinkie’s eyes, despite her enraged face. “What is… wrong with you ponies!?”

“W-whatever you are… you aren’t… Pinkie…” Renee gasped. “Pinkie… it’s okay. Just…” Renee got a surge of strength to pull Pinkie closer. “Just take this. It’s all I can do.”

Pinkie drove the knife into one of Renee’s eyes. The white hooves stayed around Pinkie’s neck much longer than they should have.

Pinkie let out a laugh. “I… I’ve got one! I… I…” She curled into a ball and started rocking back and forth, giggling to herself. “I, no you, no me, no them, I… Heheheheheheheh….”

Eve had the imprisonment spell ready, but she knew from a glance at Pinkie it was no longer necessary. She wasn’t going to be doing anything for a while. She lowered her horn.

Rainbow ran to Pinkie, putting a wing around her. Pinkie didn’t respond to the touch – she just kept laughing. Laughing while crying, not realizing the world was around her.

Eve sighed. “Flutterfree, I’m sorry, you’re going to have to do it this time.”

Flutterfree gulped. She drew the bow of light and pointed it right at Renee’s head. “R-ready.”

Eve removed the knife from Renee’s eye and disintegrated the offending weapon. Only then did she tap into the revive spell, flooding Renee’s body with holy magic. The knife wounds sealed up, and
the area that had once been her eye caked over. She took in a sharp breath.

Then she let out a *scream*.

Eve took a few steps back. “N-no…”

Flutterfree bit back, tears pouring out of her eyes. “Don’t make me do this Renee… Don’t…”

The screaming stopped, replaced by hurried breathing. She slowly stood up and gulped. She picked up her hat, dusted it off, and put it on her head. “I… guess I’m back.”

Flutterfree rushed into a hug. “Oh thank you thank you thank you thank you.”

“Ahah…” Renee said, shaking her head. “…B-back off.” She tore Flutterfree off of her.

Flutterfree stared at her in betrayal. “W-what?”

“You… you always say there’s something after. *Always*. There… There was *nothing* Flutterfree! Absolutely nothing!”

“…How exactly do you remember nothing?” Rainbow asked.

“SHUT UP!” Renee shouted, pointing a hoof at Flutterfree. “Have you been *lying* to us? You’ve been dead before! How could you *do* that to us?”

Flutterfree wiped the tears off her face. “Renee, I understand you’re upset…”

“Upset!? Upset!? That’s the understatement of the century! There was *nothing* there Flutterfree! Not even fire! Just emptiness!”

Flutterfree forced herself to keep a calm gaze with Renee. “Renee, you’re worrying everyone.”

“Worrying? Who the hell cares?! I’m talking to you. There’s something *wrong* with you!”

“I’m sorry you believe that.”

Renee twitched. “Maybe you just think I went to the ‘bad place’? Maybe your Hell is just expansive nothingness, is that it?”

“…No.”

“Then what!!?”

Flutterfree gulped. “I think you weren’t destined to die today, so you didn’t go anywhere.”

“That’s not what it *felt like*.”

Flutterfree struggled to keep her features calm, though the tears hadn’t stopped. “Renee… You’re stressed. You just experienced something horrible. I’ve experienced it too. It’s never pleasant. But *please*, just stop.”

“No! You know what, here it goes. Your beliefs are outrageous! You believe in some *human* savior that may or may not have existed in a first universe, and that there is a God out there who loves every little creation in this screwed up existence! That’s absurd! There it is! Always thought so, always have, always will! Stop being so *goddamned comforted by it*!”
Flutterfree winced. “I… If… If that’s what you think. I’m not going to stop you. Or judge you. But
I’ll do what I want. …And I’ll still be your friend, despite that.”

“What the hell is wrong with you!?”

Flutterfree blinked. “You’re not Renee.”

Rainbow facehooved. “Looks like it’s out of Pinkie and in her now. great.”

“Ha-HA!” Pinkie blurted, sitting straight up. “I see the upper echelons! Today is a portent! Oh would
you look at that! Please forget please forget please forget…” She fell back into Rainbow’s lap,
shuddering.

Renee glanced at all the suddenly understanding faces. None of them were truly upset or angry
anymore. She saw Eve creating the imprisonment spell for her.

“Screw this,” Renee muttered. She passed out onto the ground.

Flutterfree walked up to her, placing a hoof to her neck. “…I have a pulse.”

“Was that… ‘Coming Back Wrong’?” Rainbow asked.

“Not of the sort we usually talk about,” Eve said, furrowing her brow. “I think whatever this thing
 tormenting us is, it intercepted the revival. Somehow.”

Renee opened her eye. She laughed for a moment, but her eye flashed the teal of Mind, bringing her
expression to a more reasonable one of confusion. “Wh-what happened?”

“The thing that got Pinkie got to you,” Flutterfree said. “You said some… really offensive things to
me.”

Renee looked away guiltily.

“…You actually do think it’s silly, don’t you?”

“I, well…”

Flutterfree hugged her. “It’s okay. You can think what you want.”

Renee gulped. “I… You still have my support, Flutterfree. Always. I don’t care if you believed we
were all secretly banana slugs in a paradise world living other lives.” She pulled her closer. “It’s not
silly.”

Flutterfree nodded. “Thank you for saying so.”

“WOOHOO! Driving up the anger meter!” Pinkie shouted, ruining the moment. “What will we think
of next? Destruction? Desolation?”

Renee sighed, pulling herself back from Flutterfree. She adjusted her hat. “Well, I’m down an eye.
Quite painful, actually.”

“You did get it worse than I did,” Rainbow admitted. “But hey, at least we’re all back now. …Even
if Pinkie has lost it.”

Renee walked over to Pinkie. “…Maybe now…”
“You can try,” Applejack said.

Renee walked up to Pinkie. Her remaining eye flashed teal again, and she caressed Pinkie’s head. “There there… You can come back to us.”

Pinkie’s laughing died down. Her psychotic smile was replaced with a warm one, and her mane poofed up slightly – not back to full, but not fully straight. “Huh. Guess you got me back.” She hugged Renee. “Thanks!”

“Pinkie, hate to interrupt you now that you’ve just gotten back,” Applejack said, “but do you know anything new?”

Pinkie nodded. “Yeah… I forgot a lot of it. But I’m not going to get a chance to tell you all of it.” She turned to Eve with sad eyes. “I’m so sorry. I can’t do anything to stop what’s coming next.”

Eve gulped. “…Yeah… Each of you have had a struggle. It’s my turn, isn’t it?”

Pinkie smiled at her. “Just be strong, Eve. Whatever you do, I believe in you.”

“We all do,” Flutterfree said, putting a wing around her.

Eve nodded. She felt the warmth of the sun behind her – it had finally started to rise.

Then she wasn’t in the jungle anymore. She was on the beach they had first arrived in. Out on the ocean, the sun was rising, casting a beautiful pattern of light on the water.

Between her and the sun was the black creature – but it wasn’t a formless blob anymore. It had taken the form of a dragon-sized centaur skeleton held together by the black, burning sludge. In front of it were five bubbles, each one containing one of her friends.

Eve blinked. Déjà vu.

The creature spoke with a surprisingly normal sounding, but deep, voice. “There is something very wrong with all of you,” the creature growled.

Eve glared at it. “Let my friends go. I may not be able to escape this island, but I can give you a taste of a particularly nasty reality somewhat easily.”

“Threats. You think they’re valid. They probably are, though know you are only able to do that by a loophole I did not forsee. Regardless, here is a choice, Eve.”

“What, going to make me give you my magic in exchange for them?”

“I have no use for your magic. You simply have to choose – one of your friends is going to die, and they will be taken so you may not attempt to revive them. Take your pick. Also, try to move against me and they all die, just in case you had some sort of plan there.”

Eve stared right into the empty eye-sockets of the centaur’s skull. “Me.”

Rainbow gasped. “Eve! You can’t!”

“She can’t choose any of us either,” Applejack said.

“You can’t offer yourself,” the creature said, leaning it. “That would ruin the purpose of this exercise.”
“Then select at random,” Eve said.

“Also against the purpose. You have to choose a friend, Eve. Who do you think needs to die?”

Eve glared at the skeletal centaur, tears rolling down her eyes. “Why?”

“Maybe I’ll answer that after you make your choice.”

“Do I have your word that all the rest of us will survive?”

The creature leaned in. “You have my word, pony. Now choose! Who will it be? The pink murderer? The boring apple pony? The egotistical hotshot? The special buttery vampire? The seamstress turned politician? Which one is your least favorite? Choose, and let everyone else know.”

Eve looked at her friends, spending the longest time gazing at Flutterfree. She shifted her sights to the monster tormenting them. “I have decided.”

The beast chuckled. “Yes…?”

“If I have to make this decision, in order to be as fair as possible to all the others… I have to choose the pony whose loss will hurt me the most.” She gulped. “Flutterfree? I-”

“I know,” Flutterfree said, putting a hoof up to the edge of her bubble. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be somewhere better.”

The other four ponies couldn’t say anything. All but Applejack were crying profusely.

Eve choked. “…Take Flutterfree. Take Flutterfree you bastard!”

Flutterfree’s sphere was dunked into the ocean, out of sight of any of her friends. The other four bubbles popped, dropping Pinkie, Rainbow, Rarity, and Applejack on the sands of the beach.

They all rushed Twilight into a hug. There were no dry eyes – but Eve was suffering a pain deeper than any of the others. Her weeping sounded more like gasps of pain and agony. It was a bitter, deep sadness that tore at her core.

And all four of them were there through it all.

“What… the hell… is wrong with you!” the centaur monster shouted. “What the… why won’t you break!?”

Since Eve was in no condition to speak, Pinkie took point. “BECAUSE FRIENDSHIP IS MAGIC YOU IDIOT! GET IT IN YOUR THICK, SHADOWY SKULL! NO BAD GUY IS GOING TO TEAR US APART NO MATTER WHAT THEY DO! OUR BOND IS TOO STRONG! DO YOU HEAR ME? DO YOU HEAR ME!?”

The centaur skeleton stared at her.

He lifted his hand, raising Flutterfree’s bubble out of the ocean. She was still inside it, a confused expression on her face.

“FLUTTERS!” Eve shouted, her mood turning a complete one-eighty. She teleported herself to the bubble and tore it open, squeezing Flutterfree like a plush toy. “Never… I never…”

Flutterfree hugged her back. Renee had to drag the two of them back to shore with her magic they were so engrossed in each other’s presence.
The smiles returned to all six of them while the creature just watched them. Unmoving.

Eventually, Eve let go of Flutterfree and wiped her eyes. “There’s more to do.”

Flutterfree nodded, taking a few steps back.

Her five friends behind her, Eve turned to glare at the creature. “What is your deal!? Why did you do this!? What was the point!?!?”

“I was supposed to show you how worthless friendship was. I was supposed to prove to myself that it was worthless.”

“Yeah, well that didn’t happen!” Eve shouted.

“Clearly.”

“Now why did you want to do that!? The explanation better be good! Actually, screw it, no matter what the explanation is I’m still going to be livid.”

The undead centaur folded his arms. “I lived in Tauryl until a few years ago. When the borders opened, and ponies started coming in with all their wares, their culture, and their friendship. It sickened me how much it was a perversion of reality. Of the strong. Of the…” He paused and shook his head. “I couldn’t stand it. I found this empty island and decided I would spend the rest of my undeath alone, in a world that I created. I was happy here, where everything was the way it was supposed to be.”

“And then we showed up.”

“And THEN YOU SHOWED UP!” he shouted. “I knew from the moment you arrived who you were. Those SIX. Those SIX I had heard so much about. Those paragons of friendship and harmony. I almost killed you then and there, wiping you out of existence without a thought. But then I figured I would enjoy turning your own friendship against you much more. I would drive every one of you past your limit! I would break you apart and then kill you! BUT… But…”

“But our friendship was stronger than you thought,” Eve said, expression softening slightly.

“YES! Laughter just kept laughing, even after she went mad! Loyalty was exceedingly loyal even to the one who killed her! Honesty didn’t even hesitate when given delicate information! Generosity gave even to the brink of death! Kindness couldn’t bring herself to even shout back at the person she knew so well! And freaking Magic somehow managed to make a correct decision in the impossible game!” He grabbed his head. “HOW!?"

“Friendship is magic,” Eve said. “Actually… no. That’s not the answer. The answer is just friendship. There doesn’t even have to be magic. We’re just six friends who would do almost anything for each other. I know there are things that would tax – and possibly ruin – our friendship, but a series of trials is not one of them. We stand together even when it gets difficult. That’s what you need to understand. Maybe something is wrong with us. It could be a weakness in many situations. But it didn’t break. You can’t break it by trying to tear us apart.”

The centaur skeleton stared at them. “I admit my defeat. Your friendship is strong. There may be something to it after all. …You have my respect.”

And then he vanished.

The flanks of all six of them started glowing, signifying a job well done.
“YES!” Rainbow shouted. “Holy Celestia am I glad that one’s over.”

Flutterfree let out a sigh of relief. “You can say that again.”

Renee looked at the blood all over her white coat. “…I think we’ve probably been traumatized again.”

Eve nodded slowly. “Yeah… Yeah we have. But at least this time, we stayed together until the bitter end.”

“It’s what needed to happen,” Applejack said. “That’s why we were sent here. To be driven through Tartarus and prove to him he was wrong.”

“Didn’t even get to know his name…” Pinkie said, furrowing her brow.

“Think he’ll try to go and make some friends now?” Flutterfree asked.

“I don’t know,” Eve said. “I don’t know if I want him to. The Tree of Harmony wanted him to see… but I’m not sure I can forgive him for what he’s done to us.”

“It’s a good thing he decided to just leave, then,” Applejack commented.

“…Let’s go home,” Renee said. “…I’d like to go home.”

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A few days later…

Rainbow Dash and Applejack watched their kids talk to each other from across the room.

“Y’know, Ah thought about them a lot,” Applejack said. “Thought about what they’d do if we didn’t make it off that island.”

Rainbow opened her mouth to offer her usual egotistical comment – but she stopped herself. She shook her head slowly. “When I died there… I thought about something really, really stupid.”

“Oh?”

“It was how I’d never get to ride Prism’s rocket to the moon. I’d never get to experience the thing she’d built. I felt like a terrible mother for some reason. I woke up, alive again, and forgot completely about it thanks to the literal pain in the neck – but that’s the last thing I remember thinking.”

“Huh. That’s not stupid, Rainbow.”

“Feels oddly selfish, but not at the same time. I dunno.” Rainbow shrugged.

“Ah wonder what my last thoughts will be…”

“Not something you know until it happens. At this point I’m wondering if mine are just going to be ‘here I go again’.”

“…Was Renee right about the nothingness?”

Rainbow shook her head. “I think that was just flaming, black, and ugly messing with hear head. I don’t remember anything like that. I’ve passed out from blood loss before. It felt almost exactly like that.”
“Like sleepin’?”

“Like sleeping after getting hit in the head with an anvil. So not exactly pleasant.”

“Hm,” Applejack said, looking down. “Are we really as strong as we think we are?”

“Of course we are, AJ, we wouldn’t be this far if we weren’t!” Rainbow nudged Applejack with her hoof, prompting a slight chuckle. The two hoofbumped and kept watching their children.

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Renee knocked on Flutterfree’s cottage door.

Flutterfree opened it with a smile. “Oh, Renee! I wasn’t expecting you!”

“…Are you free for a… talk?” Renee asked.

Flutterfree glanced over her shoulder at Discord. “Discord, do you mind?”

Discord shrugged, teleporting away with a snap of his fingers.

“Yes, I’m free.”

“Good,” Renee said, breathing deeply. She sat herself on one of the couches while Flutterfree took one opposite. There was already warm tea on the table.

Renee lifted one to her face. She had gotten a replacement eye after the incident. It functioned exactly like her old eye, but it was a slightly off color and just slightly too reflective for an actual eyeball. People had already looked at her face feeling unnerved and unable to tell her why they did. So she had taken to wearing glasses that purposefully reflected a minor glare to anyone looking directly at her, blurring the image of her eyes just enough so nobody could tell the difference. The only downside was that the glasses needed to be larger than she was used to when sewing, but she was Renee. She had crafted the lenses into sideways teardrop shapes with a dulled ruby-red frame. Reminiscent of her old sewing glasses.

“So… What did you want to talk about?”

“I… Yes, I’ve always thought what you did was a little silly – but it’s harmless, and in fact might do some good from what I’ve seen. I want to make that clear.”

Flutterfree nodded. “You want me to explain it to you, don’t you? So you can understand?”

Renee smiled warmly. “Yes. Yes, please do.”

“Don’t feel pressured by any of this, okay?”

“Oh, trust me, I won’t.”

Flutterfree sipped her tea. “In that case, it’s best we start from the beginning…”

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Pinkie and Eve were watching the sun set on an alien world with seventeen moons of different colors.

“…Pinkie, that was it, wasn’t it?”
Pinkie nodded. “I… I think so.”

Eve sighed. “Everything’s going to change. And we don’t know how long we have.”

“A month? Years? Yeah, I have no idea,” Pinkie shook her head. “All I know is that I’ve had an immense sense of foreboding since that island. A horrendous, deep, burning sensation. Different than the Pinkie Sense.”

Eve gulped. “I… I’ve had that feeling too. I’ve heard some things from Twilence… It’s sooner than we’d like. Our friendship is going to be taxed, Pinkie. It’s going to be taxed harder than that island.”

Pinkie furrowed her brow. Then she pulled Eve into a hug. “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Eve reciprocated the gesture of affection. A tear rolled down her cheek onto Pinkie’s back.

The two stayed until the sun completely set and the world dropped into darkness.
Giorno Giovanna had an office, but it wasn’t on Celestia City, the Hub, or even Earth Stand. It was in a pocket dimension not listed in any directory. Not even the other Overheads knew where to find it, because he would always come to them if they needed to talk, not the other way around.

However, occasionally one of the agents of his Intelligence Division would need to speak with him somewhere discreetly. The office was the best place to do that.

Today, Olivia had said she needed to give him a report in person.

She stood in front of his desk – refusing to sit down – pacing in front of a holographic display. “Right, boss, I’ve noticed something very suspicious.”

Giorno nodded. “I’m listening.”

Olivia pulled up an image of an upright bear creature that looked like he had stars in his fur. “This is Skarn. We know that. Think very closely – what else do we know about him?”

Giorno narrowed his eyes. “That he is one of our allies. Part of a semi-major trade route. A known patron of the arts, occasionally even donating to ambitious artistic projects of our own.”

“And what about his origin society?”

“The Congeries. Class 2.”

“And has anyone ever been to the Congeries?”

Giorno’s eyes widened. “I assume nobody has by your phrasing of the question.”

Olivia nodded. “Oh yeah, the only evidence that the Congeries exist is the ships that go along the trade route and Skarn’s little family of representatives. No Merodi has ever seen the Congeries, and we don’t even have it on any of our maps. We’re just content having this bear and his family show up and give us presents. That’s what’s suspicious.”

Giorno folded his hands together, frowning. “This is a rather glaring gap in our intelligence.”

“And I know how to remedy it.” Olivia brought up an image of another bear, this one in a set of robes that wouldn’t look out of place on a wizard. “This is Skarn’s son, Arthon. He’s currently here to gather information on how the trade route has been going. Since the route has largely been ‘we get stuff without giving it to Skarn’ there will be no complaints. He will leave shortly.” She brought up an image of her old Puddlejumper. “And I will follow him back to the Congeries to see if there’s a reason we’ve never been invited.”

Giorno nodded. “Need any backup?”

“This is a stealth mission. The fewer the better. If you have someone specific in mind I’ll take them, but I’d like to get going as soon as possible.”

“If that’s what you think is best. Come back safe.”

“I always plan on that, amigo.” Olivia smirked. “He’ll never even know I’m there. The number of
cloaks on me and my shi-"

“I’m aware how much stealth technology you have at your disposal. That’s why I’m allowing this at all. I would fear fallout otherwise. But I trust that you know what you’re doing.”

Olivia smirked. “Aw, thanks! Tell Roxy she’s in charge of my office while I’m gone.”

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Olivia rarely needed to use her Puddlejumper anymore. Most of her work could be accomplished in one of the Intelligence Division’s secret bases where all the computers in the world were at her disposal, and her reach could extend into the Internet of any nearby nation. Most of the espionage efforts she was responsible for involved single worlds close to Merodi Universalis or the USM, which nobody really trusted.

Occasionally she’d try to hack her way into the Melnorme. That never worked. Over the years they hadn’t changed a bit. Merodi Universalis was finally able to afford some of their goods, but after years of talking to a brick wall, they rarely bothered. The Melnorme were there and nobody wanted to deal with them unless absolutely necessary.

Regardless, it made Olivia slightly giddy that she got to use the Puddlejumper again. She was going to trace Arthon back to the Congeries and explore the area for herself – all the while being completely invisible. Skarn claimed the Congeries were a Class 2 society. This was certainly possible, but from what she’d seen of their ships they weren’t that far ahead of the Merodi in terms of technology. She had them pegged as a low-Class 2. Merodi Universalis was a high-Class 3 with the addition of Skaia’s Dream and Earth C, so the gap wasn’t that far.

So she was relatively confident they wouldn’t be able to detect her. Just to prove it to herself she did a few loops around Arthon’s ship to see if it triggered any reaction. She got nothing.

Arthon’s ship was a personal vessel about four times as large as the barrel-shaped Puddlejumper. Like just about everything Skarn and his children were associated with, the ship was a work of art. It was vaguely manta-ray-shaped, with two long protrusions flowing from its head down its back. The ship appeared to be made of metal, but it moved like a living organism of muscle, flesh, and bone. The coloration of the metal continually shifted from yellows to reds to purples in a way that was always aesthetically pleasing, but seemed random.

Olivia grinned, pressing a few buttons. It couldn’t detect her. Good.

Shortly thereafter, her scans told her that Arthon had transported from the surface of Earth C to his ship. She put her hands on the controls, readying herself for a stealth chase.

All of Skarn’s ships had what was known as a ‘whirlpool drive’ to the Merodi, given the way it affected the ships and all who used it. Visually, it looked like the translating entity was stretched into a noodle and then swirled around a single point until it vanished, like something falling into a whirlpool. …Or a black hole, but the ‘black hole drive’ already existed elsewhere that actually used black holes to create FTL travel.

The whirlpool drive was fast, known for corkscrewing through numerous universes in the spaghetti noodle state, creating travel time between the start and end universes. The motion would leave, temporarily, disturbances in the universes it passed through. Olivia would need to move quickly to follow these disturbances.

Luckily for her she had the fastest most state-of-the-art dimensional drive installed on her
Puddlejumper: the hummingbird drive. It was designed with one thing in mind – making lots of dimensional jumps really, really quickly. The amount of mass a hummingbird drive could move was small, but Olivia’s Puddlejumper was one of the smallest ships around. With just a bit of tweaking and a lot of government funding, this particular Puddlejumper was one of the fastest dimensional ships in the entire Merodi fleet. It followed the corkscrew easily, jumping through universe boundaries long before the residual traces of dimensional travel would fade. She actually had to slow herself down so she wouldn’t pass Arthon’s ship.

She checked her navigation, watching a little white dot cross the Q-Sphere ever so slowly. Now that Merodi Universalis had been to multiple universes that manifested the Dark Tower, they were able to find the actual location of the Dark Tower. Traveling to the Dark Tower was never a good idea since it would just send you somewhere random, but since the Dark Tower had connections to every universe, it could be used as a navigational landmark. No more did the computers have to give a big question mark when you asked ‘where in the multiverse are we?’ It would always have a general idea.

Not that it would have a map of nearby universe arrangements. With their current large-scale understanding the multiverse was just a mish-mash of fuzzy blobs on a screen. But at least they’d always know which Sphere or in-between area they were in.

It looked like she was heading to the relative multiversal ‘south’, though not straight down, so they weren’t going to hit the tremendous Celestialsapien territory. They were heading to, surprise surprise, an area of the Q-Sphere that had no data available.

She was going to fix that.

It took about twenty minutes to arrive at the destination universe. Or, more accurately, universes.

Arthon’s ship stopped whirlpooling through the multiverse in a realm where there were no stars or planets, but rather a soup of space filled with bizarre structures. To their left, they could see a seemingly endless structure shaped like DNA, except made entirely of precious metals. To another side, there was a fractal cube with holes that appeared to go on forever. In another location there appeared to be a rotating planet – except it was disc-shaped, making the ‘rotation’ defy normal three-dimensional sense.

Olivia’s sensors told her the space of this place was akin to the Paradox Space encountered by Eve and her friends in the Combine-Horrorterror War, though considerably milder in the ways it fused universes. Time was linear and space was mostly three dimensional, but with a flexibility that allowed for bizarre, yet beautiful constructs such as the disc planet.

Olivia had no doubt that this place was the Congeries. A realm of universes sewn together into one physical plane you could fly through, from one set of physics to another…

If Skarn and his children were responsible for creating this place, she wouldn’t be surprised. The structures had clearly been created with an artist’s intent, meant to please the eye rather than serve a purpose. She couldn’t imagine the disc-planet was comfortable or even livable, and she couldn’t imagine what the point of an infinite fractal cube floating in the middle of space would be.

She kept following Arthon’s ship, which had opted to cruise through the Congeries at subluminal speeds, which Olivia wasn’t going to complain about. She took the opportunity to sort through all the signals running through the multiversal soup of this place. To her surprise there was very limited communication – highly unusual for a society that would call itself Class 2. Was it just that they used a method of communication she couldn’t detect?
She shook her head – that wasn’t it. Arthon had sent off a simple ‘I’m back’ message, followed by a brief report on what had happened in Merodi Universalis. But there was no response, and she only picked up a handful of other messages going by. One of them was about the construction of ‘a new piece consisting of planes U899, V924, and K101.’ Otherwise almost nothing.

She picked up a few simple radio-wave transmissions, but the soupy space of the Congeries corrupted the signals beyond recognition. If she hadn’t just seen Arthon’s ship send a signal that could cut through the mess, she would have assumed it was the nature of the Congeries that was keeping communication to a minimum.

Clearly she had to learn more about this place. Since there appeared to be no Internet, she was just going to continue following Arthon to get more information. She kept scanning the entire time – if messages weren’t going to provide her with anything, she was going to go off of visuals.

Skarn clearly enjoyed fractals and bizarre geometry in his Congeries, since that was a recurring theme with the ‘works of art’ all around her. Most of the fractals were composed of physical materials that folded in on themselves using tricks of spatial distortion to give the appearance of a truly infinite construct, when in fact there was a very finite (if large and complicated) pattern within the structure. Some of them moved, including a mess of orange thorns that rippled in a mesmerizing pattern, accentuated by what Olivia guessed was a star stretched into a string and somehow kept burning.

She supposed it was possible she was just flying through the ‘fractal’ section of the Congeries, and that in another section there might just be paintings of famous individuals the size of a gas giant, or something.

Skarn hadn’t been lying about his artistic attunement, at least. Though she found herself wondering how he made all this art. Given the few messages she was able to parse, she assumed it was created via the fusing of different parts of different universes together into the Congeries. She would love to know exactly how that was accomplished.

Then she got to watch one being built. In an area of the Congeries that was relatively empty, she saw dozens of bubbles appear – each one containing the undeniable shape of cosmic superstructures, telling her each bubble was a complete universe of the standard ‘stars in space’ variety. The bubbles were far smaller than they should have been, but when you were placing universes within universes via physical boundaries local size tended to only matter if you wanted to travel from one to another.

The bubbles were stretched out until each of them came to a point. The tips of every universe were cut off and grown in size until Olivia could see they were blue-green planets. These dozens of planets phased in and out of tangibility, lining up with each other. The planets fused together, creating a spindly, tree-like construction. Much of the remaining galactic superstructures of the universes were twisted into the shapes of beautiful, white leaves and placed at the ends of the planetary strings.

It was beautiful.

It was also horrifying because every last one of those planets had been a version of Earth. They’d just fused dozens of them together into long strings. She imagined billions of people suddenly fused with rock, dying instantly for the creation of art.

Maybe they were uninhabited Earths?

…Nope. She was getting a lot more radio signals than before, and a few higher-level methods of communication that made it through to her without much corruption. There had been no warning for
any of these universes – they had just been swiped up and fused together. Their entire societies just 
gone.

Olivia began to doubt that Skarn was a low Class 2. She kept following Arthon’s ship, her fingers 
 flying as she sorted through all the data she had just gotten from witnessing the creation of that 
 multiversal structure.

The first thing she realized was a glaring flaw in the process. Even a miniscule bit of reality 
 anchoring or powerful magic would keep it from having complete dominion over a universe. It was 
 only able to exercise its will on universes that truly had no defenses. Merodi Universalis wasn’t in 
 any danger from this technology… If it could even be called technology.

She detected that the energy came from somewhere deep within the Congeries – so far away her 
sensors couldn’t give her an accurate reading on its location. Whatever it was, it was powerful, and 
likely well guarded.

Clearly, Skarn wasn’t as nice a guy as he made himself out to be. This was good to know.

Arthon’s ship arrived at what appeared to be a normal planet floating in the Congeries at first glance 
– but scans told her it was really a forced fusion of four worlds. A highly volcanic world, a frozen 
world, a desert wasteland, and a world with violent atmospheric storms. Somebody was trying to be 
 clever with the four elements when they made this one. It notably wasn’t any more massive than a 
single planet, unlike the tree construct which had sewn the planets together into strands.

Arthon’s ship landed in the outskirts of a city situated between a mountain of ice and a volcano, 
protected by the large plane of sand it was built on. The city hardly appeared to be something of a 
multiversal society – it looked closer to medieval than anything else. Stone buildings, fires, 
livestock… There were clearly a few magic lights around, but no technology aside from Arthon’s 
own ship.

He got out of his ship. He was as bearlike as always, his robes billowing in the violent winds of the 
world. All the citizens of the city were human – and every last one bowed to him in reverence and 
fear.

He ignored them, floating away from the city with his magic power toward the icy mountain.

Olivia decided not to follow him just yet – she needed information. Given the fact that, apparently, 
most the citizens of the Congeries were probably just like these people, she would have to get 
information the old fashioned way. By talking and gossiping. She was good enough at that. She was 
going to have to look a lot less conspicuous…

She parked the Puddlejumper a few meters off the ground in an abandoned alley. She pressed a few 
buttons on her wrist, activating a disguise. She still looked like herself – her face was her own, and 
her getup was still white and purple, but all of her cybernetic enhancements were hidden. She might 
have looked slightly flamboyant, but one of the best ways to blend in was to stand out. No one ever 
suspected the eccentric loudmouth of being the spy.

She leaped out of the Puddlejumper and grinned. The winds were strong enough to blow her white 
hair into her face, forcing her to tuck it into the back of her shirt. She remembered the time when she 
was still Sombra and her hair had been short, not to mention purple. Good times. She had no 
intention of going back to them, though.

Putting on a cheeky smile she walked right out of the alley.
“Hello people!” She shouted.

The people looked at her with fearful eyes and tired faces. They spoke to her in an unknown language.

Olivia blinked. “Huh, it has been a while since the translator came across a language it didn’t know…” She pointed to her mouth. “Keep talking.”

Apparently this was a rude gesture, because it made one of the burlier men swing at her. She ducked, twisted under his arm, and threw him to the ground. She was way too small to do that, but cybernetic enhancements did wonders. It made the crowd gasp at how quickly he was taken down.

Olivia dusted her hands. “Now that that’s out of the way, how about you all keep talking?” Instead of pointing at her mouth she rolled her hand in front of it, trying another method of communicating.

They definitely didn’t get it, but they started talking amongst themselves, and that was good enough for her. She waited for the translator to have a full picture of their language. Then she opted to make herself invisible to freak them out.

“Where did she go?”

“Was she a ghost?”

“Was she one of the lost spirits?”

“Arthon has come… and now her… this cannot be a good sign.”

“Are we material in a new work?”

“She could be here to kill us all!”

Olivia learned several things from this. One, out-of-context things that couldn’t speak the language weren’t unheard of. Two, they were thought of as dangerous. Three, they feared Arthon something fierce. Four, they were well aware that at any moment their world could be recycled into a new ‘work’ for Skarn’s fancy.

Evil artists, what will they think of next?

Her original plan of just walking around and talking was shot because of the unexpected failure of the translator – they now knew she was something truly out of context – so she was just going to have to eavesdrop. Luckily her presence was triggering lots of conversations that gave her plenty of delicious, useful information.

The city they were in was called Nierva, and the planet was Quanera. The people definitely knew of their position in the Congeries – a work of art meant to be admired aesthetically, and that was it. A select few, mostly members of the Church of Skarn, believed that being part of the art was the way to spiritual enlightenment, but they were a minority.

There was one conversation in particular that stuck in her mind, that of a husband and a wife. She never learned their names.

“Arthon is here,” the wife said.

“Mhm,” the husband responded.

“He’s going to take more of us into his mountain, isn’t he?”
“…Probably.”

“I can’t keep doing this. I can’t keep wondering if us or our kids are going to be taken next time he comes back!”

“Brell promised us she was working to end the horror.”

“Brell makes promises and never keeps them! She’s still one of them. Who cares if her works are for us?! She still makes them! She has no power over her brother!”

“Look, I know she’s not as benevolent as some would have you believe. But it’s something. We have to hold out hope for that.”

“And what if a fissure appears and rips Quanera apart? What then!?”

The man had no response. He pulled her to him and held her tight.

Olivia left. These people lived in constant fear that their entire world could be crushed just for a piece of art. She wondered if, elsewhere, the people who lived on the ‘works’ even knew why they were where they were. The tree of Earths wasn’t told anything or given any warning. They were probably still completely baffled.

And then Arthon returned, shaking her out of her thoughts. He pointed at three seemingly random people, levitating them into the air with his power. Then he floated off to the ice mountain.

Olivia decided it was about time she figured out what exactly he was doing in that mountain. She activated her levitation harness and floated after him, still as invisible as ever. He gave no indication that he noticed her or was even able to.

The mountain of ice was surrounded in the whipping winds of the world, but Olivia was clever enough to use Arthon’s powerful form as a windshield. The mountain itself was swirling with clouds, the winds having refined the one jagged peak into an ominously smooth shape. Arthon landed near the top, at an entrance to a cave of ice.

Olivia continued floating off the ground to avoid slipping on the ice and making a noise that might alert Arthon. She did have sound mufflers in place, but that wouldn’t stop vibrations traveling through the ground directly to him.

The ice cave wasn’t very deep. There were a few meters of tunnel that served to keep the wind from whipping through too horribly, and then a single cavernous room the size of a large house. Floating in the center of this space was Arthon’s work.

It was made entirely of naked human bodies, moving through a mechanism composed of themselves. A body started out fully healthy, barely aware of what was happening. Its legs and arms would be intertwined with the limbs of others, and it would start screaming – screaming before the pain began.

The bodies were ripped apart down the middle, like going through a zipper, severing limbs from bodies and then carrying the remnants further down the chain, where they would be stripped and separated further by razor sharp bones, flesh, and other moving parts of the human body. These loose parts would then become the framework of bones and flesh that moved the next body into the zipper, tearing them apart.

The cycle completed when the loose parts were sewn back together by unconscious human bodies, creating a full human being once again – who came to, remembered what had happened last time, and started screaming.
Arthon tossed the three humans he had collected into the mechanism and watched as it absorbed them, becoming slightly larger. Their clothing and accessories fell to the ground into a pile that had clearly been growing for a long, long time.

Olivia decided now was a good time to get out of there. She moved to leave, floating toward the exit of the cavern.

A magical alarm went off.

*How!? I got in just fine!* She didn’t wait – she blasted into the winds of the world, trying to calculate a teleport. All she had to do was select the coordinates of the Puddlejumper…

An invisible hand of psychic energy *grabbed* her and pulled her back into the cave. Arthon brought her to him – though he was holding her upside-down.

Olivia dropped her cloak. “Ah, hola!”

Arthon turned her upside-right now that he could see her. “How did you get in here?”

“You know, I think it was because I was using you as a windshield. It probably thought I was just another one of your playthings!” Olivia grinned. “I *really* should have been more careful and left exactly how I came in, but y’know, was sorta weirded out by the human zipper.”

Arthon’s bear-like face smiled. “It is evoking the reaction it is meant to. Unbridled horror mixed with fascination. You have a better eye than most who come here – all they usually do is lose their lunches on the ground below.”

“Bet that’s difficult to clean.”

“A simple wave of my hand,” Arthon said, squeezing Olivia to remind her of her current predicament. “I wonder which of the worlds you rode in on… One of the new Earths perhaps?” He sniffed her with his huge, wet nose. “Hmm… Impossible to tell, there were many there. If you are from there, Father has gotten careless – bringing something that can hide from me into the Congeries is just asking for trouble.”

Sombra kept her smile, looking around for anything she could do. She had the teleporter ready, but she was close enough to him that he would just be able to follow it. She needed to keep him talking. He looked like a guy who liked to talk, so that shouldn’t have been very difficult. “Do I detect some daddy issues?”

Arthon growled. “Your eyes, while astute, make dangerous observations.”

“Pff, seriously, what am I gonna do, tell him? Aren’t I just a grub to your bearishness?”

“You are not a grub. You are a pigment that just needs to become part of a masterpiece.”

“You do realize some paints are made from grubs, right? Or do you not bother to learn about the worlds you smash together here?”

Arthon smiled. “You don’t understand, do you? What the Congeries are? We do not simply smash worlds together. We make the truly impossible from scraps, turning everything into more than it once was. We evoke *emotion* in our great works. We *create*. We do not destroy, or ‘smash’, as you so *eloquently* put it.”

“The human zipper looks a lot like destroying.”
Arthon held out an arm at his work. “This is art on a small scale. My father has taken to limiting himself only to large-scale constructions that are not as finely-tuned as this masterpiece. Here you see an eternal cycle at work – of destruction and creation. I may not be human, but I am aware of the human condition, to which this work speaks. You are constantly eating yourselves alive with your cultures, only to create the next generation.”

“Why not make it out of, I don’t know, fake humans?”

“Then the intent behind it would be lost,” Arthon said. “It really is the representation of human suffering.”

“Yeah, you’re crazy.”

“By your standards. I am but an artist – a far better artist than my father will ever be.”

“Theeere it is,” Olivia said, smirking. “Hate the old man much?”

“He is growing o-” Arthon blinked. “Hold on.”

Shit. Olivia kept her smirk level. “What?”

“You’re sending signals out.”

“Oh, you can sense that?”

Arthon crushed her tighter. “You’re sending signals that can pierce the dimensional veil. No universe like that would allow themselves to be shaped… Where are you from?”

“Ah, you got me. Starcross Society, agent Nadia Harris. See, we’ve got reason to believe that yo-”

Arthon squeezed tighter. “You’re lying.”

“Well, I’m not, so I guess we’re at a standstill. They will come looking for me, you know.”

“And I will meet them in battle!” Arthon shouted. “No outsiders are allowed in the Congeries! I will find where you are sending that information and destroy them!”

“Yeah, good luck with tha-” She felt the hand crush her pelvis into a dozen pieces, driving pain up her body. She was dropped to the ground, presumed to be helpless.

“His mistake”, Olivia grunted, drawing her still-invisible gun and blasting Arthon in the face with special bullets designed to cut through magic and sting with the fury of a million hornets. Arthon, despite his power, had to reel back and clutch his face.

Olivia thought about activating her teleporter belt – but she knew he’d just follow her. Even if she got the Puddlejumper back, he would know where she went.

So she did the next best thing. She kept fighting without any control over her lower body. She used a bomb to blow herself through the tunnel of the cave and off the mountain. She knew a teleport still wouldn’t work – too flashy – so she made herself invisible. Surely she could still elude him…

“Ay, caramba,” Olivia muttered when she saw Arthon fly out of the cave and look right at her. She braced herself. He pulled her forward with his telekinesis and rammed her body right into his real fist.
There was a sickening crunch.

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**CRUNCH.**

The sound of static filled the room.

“That’s all the Puddlejumper had for us,” Giorno said. “It returned on a completely automated subroutine, with no pilot.”

He put his hands behind his back and surveyed the room. All twelve Overheads of Merodi Universalis were there: Relations, Expeditions, Military, Research, Aid, Expansion, Education, Justice, Cultural, Commerce, Oversight, and Labor. Most had expressions of horror and fear on the faces and those that didn’t were struggling to remain expressionless.

“I called you all here because we have a decision to make, and it’s a hefty one all of us need to consider carefully. How do we respond to this? Even the Divisions that usually do not concern themselves with outside matters are needed. Because a declaration of war is not out of the question based on the information we have seen.”

O’Neill raised an eyebrow. “That’s my Division, Giovanna.”

“Do you wish to argue that you have sole authority to declare war or even to discuss it?”

O’Neill took a look around at the many faces. “No. It is a group decision. No commander should attack without consulting or thinking it through.” O’Neill leaned in and fixed Giorno with a glare. “I would have appreciated being told ahead of time, though.”

“It is fair he gave it to all of us at once,” the Justice Overhead spoke up – an Earth Tau’ri Asgard. “In order for us all to form our own opinions.”

“Agreed,” the Oversight Overhead said, an Equis Cosmic mare known as Sarsaparilla Fern. “Giovanna has not overstepped his boundaries.”

“Can we talk about less extreme measures before outright war?” a version of Luna asked, the Aid Overhead and Princess of Squeaky’s world. “It seems a little hasty to just jump to that after one attack!”

“It’s not just that,” Eve said, her face having shifted to one of barely controlled rage. “While Olivia is our friend and close ally, we wouldn’t be going to war over just that. She was spying. What Giorno and I see is something else – utter brutality for the sake of art. Horrendous things like that are why we are out here, Luna. Your division should understand that more than any of us.”

“I’ve also been in an actual war, in case you’d forgotten,” Luna responded. “Ask Squeaky some time about how brutal that was. Merodi Universalis has never been in a war with any power strong enough to actually threaten us! The people don’t know what it’s like – they just encourage us to liberate worlds from horrible kings and tyrants. We aren’t prepared for this.”

“Luna’s right,” O’Neill said. “All the action we’ve taken in our entire existence has been sure. There have been risks, yes, but only to small groups of people and teams who know the danger. If we try to fix that universal train wreck of a place, we will have to fight something that is somewhat stronger than us! We won’t be able to protect the population from that kind of power.”

“So what, we just let them keep turning people into zippers?” Renee blurted. “I’m sorry Jack, but
I’ve spent too much of my life diverting as much as I can to help everyone. It’s not like this Skarn is Them. We can’t even lay a scratch on Them, but it seems to me that if we take Skarn and his very limited family out, there is no leadership for the Congeries. Eve, how many people have they sent to us?"

“I’ve only met with Skarn, Arthon, and Brell,” Eve said. “Never anyone else. They rarely talk about the Congeries, even when pushed – and I can see why – but what I do know is that they are the rulers of it. Brell mentioned, only once, an estranged brother. I have my doubts there is a living mother, but I suppose it is possible. That’s maybe five individuals that are responsible for all this pain.”

“That’s an assumption,” the Research Overhead pointed out, beeping like the robot he was. He had no name that wasn’t a string of numbers, and was a humanoid being with a smooth, starry face without any facial features.

“You run it through your processors, R.O., all the information we have suggests they are a very very small group of people ruining so many lives.”

The R.O. didn’t hesitate. “It is the most likely conclusion. But we lack information. And they no doubt have armies.”

“No doubt,” a human version of Celestia spoke up – the Education Overhead, Celeste. “But Arthon was concerned that Olivia was transmitting. He was afraid of what she could do, even if he wasn’t showing it.”

Overhead Luna shook her head. “Yes, yes, but that doesn’t change anything. Skarn is still dangerous, and we aren’t ready for a war. Not one of this magnitude.”

“How can you just let Skarn have his way?” Eve asked.

“We may not even need a full war,” Renee added. “Since the targets are so few in number, strike teams could be arranged, like we do in most circumstances. Corona would be more than willing.”

“If we attack like that and fail we will have a war,” O’Neill pointed out. “It’s likely they’d find a way to get off a retaliatory strike even if it was successful.”

A voice that had been quiet up until that moment spoke – Ava Jandice, Earth Stand, Overhead of Labor. “Maud, what do you have to say on this matter?”

The Overhead of Expansion knew she wasn’t being asked because of her Division, but because of her future-sight. “I do not see great destruction in the near future. But you must remember; this is an event of multiversal significance. Prophecy in these matters cannot be relied upon. As for my personal opinion, I am undecided as of now.”

Ava nodded, sitting back in her chair, thinking about something. Eve took the moment to take her in – a thin middle-aged human with smooth black hair and sharp fingernails. She was a woman with a lot of power at this table, which surprised a lot of outsiders. She was in charge of labor, how did that give her a lot of power?

Because the Labor Division was specifically designed to keep the other Divisions in check. It’s responsibility was not the individual labor force of each universe – that was more local government or Oversight’s deal – but the people who were employed in the government. All the other Divisions, even Intelligence, were staffed mostly by the Labor Division.

Eve may have been the face of Merodi Universalis, but internally speaking, Ava held the most sway.
She wasn’t a king, or even a president, and the other Overheads could easily overrule her – but her position still meant something to all the others in the room.

Eve didn’t know her that well. She rarely dealt with Ava directly, almost always talking to a lower agent of Labor to get new ambassadors and liaisons. From the few times they had interacted for an extended time, Eve had found Ava a bit distant and calculating, but trustworthy. She had a Stand but for the life of her Eve couldn’t remember what it was right now.

She noticed Ava was looking around the room, judging everyone’s expressions. Eve noticed that everyone was waiting for her to say something, rather than jumping in.

“I think this decision needs more than a single meeting,” Ava said finally. “And more than just the thirteen of us. We need to make the final decision on what to do, yes, but we have advisors and other trusted individuals we would like to consult.”

Giorno nodded. “Then we shall break. Only people with enough clearance though, understood?”

The twelve Overheads nodded.

“Good. We will reconvene in twenty-four hours local time.”

~~~

CRUNCH.

The sound of static filled the room.

Corona punched the computer screen in front of her. Lady Rarity, Eve, and Renee didn’t even flinch at the destruction of Eve’s personal monitor.

“I’m going. Now,” she said.

“Oh no no no no no,” Renee said, grabbing Corona’s shoulder. “The Overheads are debating full-out war over this.”

“Why is there even a debate!?” Corona blurted. “That was Olivia!”

“I know,” Eve said. “Trust me, I know. But going over there, right now, without a plan, will be disastrous.”

Corona opened her mouth to shout – but Lady Rarity put a hoof on her. “She’s right, Corona.”

Corona’s face shifted from rage, to conflict, to depression. “Right… Right…” She slouched into a nearby chair, hand to her head.

Renee adjusted her glasses. “Eve and I believe we need to retaliate. O’Neill and at least a few others believe we can’t handle a war.”

“Precision strike,” Corona said.

“That’s one of the things that have already been brought up,” Renee said. “O’Neill countered with the very likely possibility of retaliation against Merodi Universalis on a large scale.”

“That’s why we aren’t just charging in,” Eve said. “The evil king is a little stronger than usual. If we fail on a normal mission, we just try again later or give it up. Here, failure brings us very disastrous consequences.”
Corona nodded. “Right... Right...”

“What we need to do is make a compelling argument that we can win,” Renee said. “Which is why we brought this before you. There’s a lot of data Olivia got us – can you sift through it, see what you can learn?”

Corona scooted up to a secondary monitor. “It’s in here, right?”

Eve nodded.

Corona took a breath and tapped into the computer with Raging Sights. She brushed most the information aside easily as useless – just more reason for her to hate Skarn and everything he and his children stood for. What she really needed to look at was the data about the Congeries and how physics interacted.

It didn’t take long for her to find something very useful.

“It’s basically like the area around the Green Sun,” Corona said. “A bunch of different universes meshed together so that you can move from one to another just by walking – or flying. It’s actually much simpler too, no causal time loops or lines that turn into fractals. Just a soup of mostly three dimensional space.” She furrowed her brow. “It’s a much bigger space, though. I can’t tell you how big it is. But I can tell you the direction of its center. That’s where the Shaping mechanism is.”

“Is the Shaping Mechanism a Green Sun thing then?” Renee asked.

Eve lit her eye and scanned the data Corona was looking at. “…It’s not on the level of the Green Sun,” she reported. “It’s a much lower construct, though I can’t tell you how it functions.”

“I can,” Corona said. “Raging Sights just ran all the numbers from the data here. It’s... Well, I would call it primitive, but no sort of technology this powerful should be called primitive. You know how I derived spells that could alter reality? And the way the TSAB can move universes?”

Eve nodded. “I’m aware.”

“It’s combining the two things. First, it goes into a universe and slowly alters it to be ‘moldable’. It takes a couple hours, based on these estimates. We have technology that could alter a universe’s physics faster than that. After the physics is set to ‘moldable’ he physically moves the universe into the Congeries. Since the universe is ‘moldable’ it will respond to Skarn’s will. …Or whoever’s controlling the Shaping Mechanism, since it appears his kids have made some stuff too.”

“That doesn’t sound simple or primitive,” Lady Rarity pointed out.

“It actually is. There’s any number of D-Sphere universes you can grab that physics preset from,” Corona said. “I could make a ‘moldable’ universe without too much difficulty. It would take a bit of experimentation to tease out what part of the D-Sphere actually makes it mentally moldable, but after that I’d have a push-button alter-universe device.” She paused. “Okay fine, we’re not the Collection, it’s not just a button-push. It takes a while. And any sort of physical anchor or resistor would completely tear the process apart, keeping the universe from being ‘moldable’.” Corona smirked. “Easy defense against having our universes be Shaped. Just create a bunch of reality anchors.”

“Every world already has several of those,” Renee pointed out. “To prevent certain locations from being manipulated.”

“I can’t use Seraphim in government buildings I don’t own,” Eve muttered. “Though, all these anchors are thanks to you and your work perfecting them for Earth Shimmer.”
“Thanks.” Corona nodded slowly. “All you need is one of those anchors in a universe and he can’t add you to the Congeries. I’ll write that up in a report – you have a viable defense against his strongest weapon. What else does he have that really makes him terrifying?”

“Skarn himself has more magic than you or me,” Eve said.

“And that scares away our army why?” Corona asked.

“Good point. I’ll need that report by tomorrow so we can present it at the meeting.”

“I’ll see what I can do as Research Second to sway the R.O. I’m not expecting much.”

~~~

O’Neill slammed his hands down on a table. “Okay campers, I need a war projection.”

In front of him were three members of the Military Division: his Second, Thor the Asgard; one of the high Commanders, Yellow Diamond, and the military genius Squeaky Belle.

They had just finished watching the video and were currently going over the information they had on Skarn – which wasn’t all that much.

“The mechanism by which Skarn shapes the Congeries is the largest concern,” Thor said. “Defending our universes will be difficult against such a force.”

Squeaky shook her head. “It’ll be us declaring the war. We can attack when we have an appropriate network of dimensional stabilizers ready to defend. I can’t tell you how much that would cost though, nor really what kind of stabilizers we would need.”

Yellow Diamond folded her arms – she had to sit on the floor away from the table because she was so huge. “Defense isn’t the biggest problem. Moving within the Congeries is. No matter what you say about our worlds, there Skarn can shape whatever he wants. Even with every ship and soldier equipped with dimensional stabilizers, he could still hurl entire worlds at us.”

“It’s unlike you to be the voice of caution,” Thor pointed out.

Yellow Diamond smirked. “Oh, there’s a simple solution to that too. Celestias and Lunas. We have access to a lot of planetary movers who’d be willing to fight. Not to mention the mover ships of Equis Cosmic.”

O’Neill furrowed his brow. “Perhaps. But if we’re occupied facing against the very world we’re fighting in, the armies of Skarn can attack us while our asses are in the air.”

“We know nothing about his forces or their numbers,” Thor said. “All we know of their citizens are the one city Olivia saw. We can assume much of the Congeries are like that, but there has to be somewhere they make their ships. They will have an army to deal with unexpected threats brought into the Congeries.”

“Suggestions in a war scenario?” O’Neill said.

“Don’t,” Squeaky said. “Just don’t. Too many unknowns. They could be hiding a million impervious kaiju.”

Thor narrowed his eyes. “If it were necessary to engage, which I advise against as well, the best action would be to attack on multiple fronts, the major battles serving as distractions so stealth teams
can make it to Skarn himself and cut off his connection to the Shaping Mechanism.”

Yellow Diamond smirked. “I say we can do it – and here’s how. We have hundreds of powerful individuals that are either under us or owe us favors. Place all our forces that aren’t required for defense into a single spearhead assault and charge right for their center of power. Nothing could stop everything fighting at once.”

“That assumes we are able to find the center of power,” Squeaky said. “Which we won’t. Given his power over space, Skarn could just move where he and his mechanism are any time he wants! We can’t just portal in to the right location because the Congeries are a mish-mash of universes. We’d have to play ‘hide and seek’ with him.”

“Too many assumptions,” Thor said. “Which is why this is ill-advised.”

O’Neill nodded. “Exactly what I was saying. We don’t know enough. We also aren’t ready for a war.”

Yellow Diamond folded her arms.

“Write up your recommendations by tomorrow. We need to see this thing stop before it takes us down with it.”

~~~

“…In conclusion, I want to remind everyone what we do here at Merodi Universalis,” Eve said, addressing the Overheads the next day. “We aren’t some group that thinks we’re too good to help others, or too enlightened to worry ourselves with the plights of the less fortunate. It is essentially our mission to alleviate pain brought on by the evil in the multiverse. Today, it’s a mad tyrant who torments those around him out of a sense of aesthetics. I ask us to prove that we can act selflessly – even sacrificially – to hold ourselves to the values we claim are close to our hearts.” She sat down, adjusting her wings.

O’Neill had already had his turn. He hadn’t spoken anywhere near as eloquently, merely stated that there was only one of his advisors who thought the war was advisable while the other two, and himself, argued against it. He didn’t give names but everyone knew it was Yellow Diamond who was pushing for the war. He had decided to let military information speak for itself – an argument based on logic.

The only evidence Eve had was some science Corona had come up with to effectively defend Merodi Universalis against the Shaping Mechanism, and a few thoughts on how strike teams could infiltrate the Congeries. She had relied almost completely on emotional appeal, seeking to tap into the good side of the other Overheads. She may not have known them all personally, but she did know the leaders of Merodi Universalis were good people. They wouldn’t have been allowed this high if they weren’t.

Giorno, being the only one standing, took it upon himself to lead the conversation. “Then we need to put it to a vote. Do we go to war to free these people, end the suffering, and avenge our lost agent, or do we refrain for the interests of the safety of Merodi Universalis? All for war, vote now.”

Eve, Renee, and Giorno didn’t hesitate. The Justice Overhead raised her gray Asgardian hand shortly after.

Eve looked at Luna pleadingly. The Overhead of Aid gulped, but nodded. She raised her hoof, in the end unable to just ignore the people suffering under Skarn.
Just a little more, Eve thought. The next one she was hoping on was Celeste of Education. The Celestia shook her head, keeping her hand down.

“Five,” Giorno counted, clearly not liking the number himself. “Votes for peace?”

O’Neill raised his hand instantly. Research, Oversight, Education, Commerce, and Cultural soon followed.

Notably, Maud and Ava didn’t move.

“Six,” Giorno counted, deflating ever so slightly. “Five for, six against, two abstentions. The motion is denied.”

Eve let out a depressed sigh – they were just going to let Skarn be.

“Ohem,” Overhead Luna said, drawing attention to herself. “We should cut off all ties to Skarn and demolish his trade routes. Do not tell him why, just cut all ties. If anyone disagrees with this…” she left the sentence unfinished.

Ava nodded. “Any disagreements?”

There were none.

Ava turned to Eve. “That’s your responsibility.”

Eve nodded. “I’ll cut him off the next time he comes. We don’t exactly have a way to contact him without revealing we know where he comes from. All trading vessels will be turned away.” She turned to Sarsaparilla of Oversight. “Think you can work with Commerce to remove anything he’s given us from Merodi Universalis?”

Sarsaparilla nodded in confirmation.

“Then we’re done,” Giorno said. “There will be no war preparations. We can all get back to our jobs.”

Everyone nodded and awkwardly shuffled away, returning to their normal responsibilities – many with heavy hearts and confused minds.

~~~

Corona stared at Eve blankly. “…Denied?” The two of them were alone in Eve’s office.

Eve nodded. “It was denied. We’re cutting off all cultural and trading ties with him instead, and we’re not telling him why.”

“That’s not good enough!”

“I know!”

“Then do something!”

“I’m not the queen, Corona!” Eve shouted. “I do not get to decide everything! It may seem like it since you deal with powers outside Merodi Universalis all the time, but I can’t do anything internally without asking for favors. This decision involved people other than me! I’m sorry, but we decided against taking action.”
“Then I’ll go and to it myself.”

“No, you won’t,” Eve said. “If you go alone you’ll fail and bring the entire wrath of Skarn down on us for it.”

Corona clenched her fist, clearly still thinking about it.

“Corona, if you try to go, I will have to arrest you. Please don’t make me do that.”

Corona released the hold on her fist, sighing. “…Why couldn’t we have just agreed to fight him?”

“Because everyone has their values and responsibilities. I’ll be the first to admit that I’m somewhat disconnected from the actual citizens of Merodi Universalis who aren’t my close friends. I may be more willing to risk them than the Overheads who deal with them all the time. And you’ve turned yourself into a warrior. You’re used to battle and confident in your abilities in a full-scale war. Maybe too confident.”

Corona wanted to feel offended at that, but she couldn’t bring herself to really get upset. “So we just… Have to do nothing?”

Eve nodded slowly. “That’s right. We have to do nothing. Well, I get to shun Skarn to his face, at least, but otherwise nothing. Those people will keep suffering and we have to pretend we know nothing about it.”

Corona looked blankly at the ceiling. “I thought you designed Merodi Universalis so there wouldn’t be bureaucracy we had to cut through to do the right thing.”

“Renee did that, mostly,” Eve said. “And… well, nobody was acting out of petty or selfish reasons as far as I knew. They took what they knew about the world and what they thought about life, and made what they believed to be the right decision. I can’t fault any of them, for they all had to have an internal struggle.”

“Who voted for us?” Corona asked.

“Me, Renee, Giorno, Freyr, and Luna. …Squeaky’s Luna. …She changed her mind to join us. I need to go thank her.”

“…Eight against? It wasn’t even close, was it?”

“It was actually six to five. Two abstained.”

Corona blinked. “W-why?”

“Maud abstained because she doesn’t trust her own visions in matters this large. I expected her to be forced into making a decision for the sake of tiebreaker. But I have no idea why Ava abstained. She’s one of the most politically active of all of us, why would she hold back?”

Corona shook her head. “I don’t know and I’m not going to think about it right now. I… I need to go see Lady Rarity. And Toph.”

Eve nodded. “Sure.”

Corona turned to leave.

“Oh, Corona, one last thing?”
Corona looked at her.

“When you go to bed tonight and start festering over your anger so much that you think about going again, don’t. It… it won’t end well for you.”

Corona nodded slowly. “…Yeah. …Thanks for the advice.”

Eve smiled at her as she left.

~~~

Skarn the Shaper walked into one of Eve’s private meeting rooms. He was a dual-horned humanoid bear, just like his children, though notably his skin looked less like fur and looked more like stars. It wasn’t quite the white-and-black appearance of a Celestialsapien, but more akin to looking into a nebula where entire galaxies were born. Magical lines of magic popped off of him, signifying his power. He wore little aside from a loincloth, gloves, and a necklace that glowed with a deep cosmic power.

He was very surprised to find Eve alone in the meeting room. “…Where is everyone else?” he spoke with a deep, but pleasant voice. “I always look forward to meeting new people, and Cass is such a treat.”

Eve looked at him with angry eyes. “Because this isn’t going to be a pleasant meeting.”

Skarn looked at her, expression shifting to sadness. “Oh. What happened?”

“They told me I should just leave a message for you and refuse to see you. I told them I’m mare enough to tell you to your face.”

Skarn finally recognized that the hostility was towards him. “What did I do? I’ve done nothing but give your world goods and art! I’ve asked for little in return!”

“All trade routes between Merodi Universalis and the Congeries have been suspended indefinitely. You and your children are no longer welcome in our space.”

“Evening, what brought this about?”

“Believe it or not, this actually wasn’t my decision. I’m not allowed to tell you!” She pressed her hooves together. “You wouldn’t have liked the suggestion I made either.”

“So you’re angry enough to cut ties, perhaps more, and I don’t even get to know why?”

“Nope!” Eve said. “And I’m here personally. Not out of any sense of honor or obligation, but just to make it cut more.”

Skarn narrowed his eyes. “You found out.”


Skarn narrowed his eyes – he knew that was a trap. He wasn’t sure they knew his big secret – and for all Eve knew, his artistic fancies may not even have been the secret he was thinking of. He always struck her as a man with lots of secrets. Not a nefarious one, but she’d clearly been wrong about that.

“This is a betrayal,” Skarn growled.
“This was a rejection,” Eve corrected. She wanted to follow up with *react if you dare* or something similar, but she wasn’t going to egg him on to war. If *he* attacked *them* then… Things would be a lot worse.

Skarn curled his bear claws into a fist – and for the first time he let his amiable demeanor fall, replaced with a cruel snarl. “I put a lot of work into forming this connection. I saw you as a people willing to change, to understand. You would have learned to accept me given enough time. But you’ve gone and cut it off early.”

“And why is that a problem with you?”

“It’s dishonorable,” Skarn spat. “If you have an issue with me, tell me what it is to my face.”

“Skarn, it’s time for you to leave.”

He pulled his fist back.

“There is one Corona Shimmer watching this meeting, looking for any excuse to pull the trigger on something particularly nasty.” She was bluffing, of course – she wouldn’t let Corona anywhere near this meeting in her current state – but she did have Seraphim ready, and a few other precautions were in place.

Skarn glared. “You have lost a valuable friend today, Eve.”

“Valuable and good are not the same thing.”

Skarn pulled back, turning to the door. Before he left, he glanced over his shoulder at Eve. “You would have been so beautiful among the Congeries. The brightest star among it all…” He left and slammed the door so hard it fell off its hinges.

Eve let out a sigh. “That wasn’t ominous at all.”

Pinkie popped out of a nearby potted plant, putting her sniper rifle ‘precaution’ back in her mane. “You picked up on that too, huh?”

“Yep. And I don’t need you or Twilence to tell me that isn’t the last we’ll see of him.” She spread her wings and stretched her hooves, trying to de-stress.

Pinkie nodded. “Yep. He’ll be back. But so will just about everyone else we’ve encountered. It’s how things work. There’s no way to tell *when* he’ll be back.”

“Yeah…” Eve said, shaking her head.

Pinkie fixed her with a concerned glare. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to go talk to Corona and make sure she gets through this. Wanna come?”

Pinkie nodded. “Yep. I’ll do whatever I can to get her back on her feet.”

~~~

“…And so we’re not going to war,” Renee told Allure as they walked the streets of Celestia City near Allure’s home.

“…No offense Renee, but I’m kinda glad we’re not,” Allure said.
Renee smiled sadly. “None taken. It was the popular decision after all, and I have to live with it even if I disagreed with it. And live with the people who thought differently.” Renee nuzzled Allure. “Don’t worry, I won’t hold it against you. You do have a daughter to think about, after all.”

“Yep.”

“How is she, by the way?”

“She’s sixteen and I swear she just skipped the teenage rebellious phase,” Allure said. “I know she’s not a normal kid, but I was still expecting something.”

Renee smirked. “Not every teenager in the world has to rebel.”

“Teenagers who speak to Alushy on a regular basis?”

Renee pondered this. “…Good point…”

“Yeah. Point is, she’s weird. Not that I’m complaining – the weirdness is great.”

“When it isn’t creepy?”

“Huh? Oh, right.” Allure rubbed the back of her head. “I stopped being weirded out by her creepy observations a long time ago. It is who she is. I don’t have to figure out how she does it. For all I know she could just be ever so slightly Aware, or have some prophecy gift, or something. Doesn’t matter, she’s Minna. Always Minna.”

“That’s precious,” Renee said, sniffing.

“Pff, stop overselling it.”

“I am not ‘overselling’ anything! It truly is one of the most precious things I’ve ever heard!”

Allure rolled her eyes. “You just keep on telling yourself that.” They arrived at Allure’s front door. “Want to come in?”

“Ah, apologies, but I am a busy mare,” Renee said, adjusting her hat. “I do believe I must check on Corona and Pinkie’s team.”

“You should try the pirate accent again. That’s sure to help.”

“Allure there’s a time and a place for- actually, you know what? No. There isn’t.”

Allure giggled. “See ya, Renee.”

Renee winked at her. “Bye.”

Allure entered her home and walked to the living room. Minna was staring at a glass of juice. She may have been a teenager, but she didn’t look all that different. She was taller than before, but her figure hadn’t rounded out that much, and she rarely wore anything other than black dresses.

“…Trying to burn it?” Allure asked.

“Huh? No. I was just going to drink it. And then…” Minna pursed her lips. “I dunno.”

“Get one of your inklings?”
Minna nodded. “I feel like everyone’s just dodged a bullet. A huge bullet.”

Allure wanted so badly to tell her about the non-war, but Minna definitely didn’t have that kind of clearance. “I’m glad everyone’s not getting shot, then.”

“Mhm,” Minna said, staring at the juice. “It just felt… I don’t know, more personal than usual.”

Allure looked at her. “Do you have any idea what that means?”

Minna looked at her and smirked. “Mom, there was an ‘I don’t know’ in that sentence.”

“Ah. Right.” Allure rubbed the back of her head.

“By the way, Nova’s hired me to watch Stardust again. Sunburst had a convention he really wanted to go to.”

“Oh, that’s great!”

Minna chuckled. “You do realize Stardust calls me the ‘creepy babysitter’ right?”

Allure rolled her eyes. “She likes you just fine.”

“The kid’s got a morbid curiosity.”

“And you don’t?”

“It’s a different kind!”

“I sense denial.”

The two laughed. A perfect image of a family enjoying peace.
Hello, readers.

It is not often the narrative backs up, is it?

Many of you have no idea what this means, having this little experiment nested right between the neat numbers of ninety-nine and one-hundred-and-one. To you, this chapter without a proper title is just another step toward the rapidly approaching end.

But to those of us in the know, we see it. We see that the future has already happened. That the events of what is to come are set in stone. We may not know exactly what that future is, but we can sense that it is there. The sudden solidification that exists only for today, for today was written after all other days.

If you can consider this a ‘day’. Technically speaking it isn’t, but days in the multiverse are metaphorical under the best of circumstances.

I hope you get some enjoyment out of this. After all, this is what you wanted.

You said “let there be insanity,” and then you let the narrative be muddled.

~~~

“Girls! Girls! Vriska is turning a thousand soon! Party planning day!”

Jotaro, Nova, and a partially-pink flying pony sat still.

“…Enough, I’m using ‘E’ and so’s the rest of this chapter, We’re not suffering through this!” Pinkie clapped her hooves, ending the curse of the fifthglyph.

Flutterfree cocked her head to the side. “Er… Pinkie, is something up today?”

“Screwy chapter,” Pinkie explained dismissively. “There’s going to be a lot of seemingly unrelated elements thrown in everywhere and unexpected stuff jumping out from all sides. I’m going to try to not think too hard about it. I just need to put a disclaimer or something up… Hold on…” She pulled a sign out of her mane that read “IF YOU EXPECTED THIS TO MAKE PERFECT SENSE, BOY ARE YOU IN FOR A SURPRISE.” She slapped it on the wall and grinned.

Nova raised an eyebrow. “Pinkie, we’re in a public area of Celestia City, the city’s going to take that down.”

Pinkie twitched. “Well, it was up long enough for them to read it.” She took out an axe and tore the sign to shreds, leaving the chunks on the ground. “Anyway, back to our inciting incident for the day: Vriska’s thousandth birthday. It’s coming up in a few indeterminate amount of days.”

“Indeterminate?” Jotaro asked.

“I don’t even know, really,” Pinkie admitted with a shrug. “It’s going to be a thousand years from her perspective since the moment she was ectobiologically synthesized – read Homestuck or just accept you’re not going to know what that means – and all I know is that it’s time to prepare the
party. There will be a party this chapter, but I have this sneaking suspicion this is going to be a long chapter in more ways than one.”

“So, planning a huge party?” Flutterfree ignored most of Pinkie’s meta-confusion. “Have we ever done a thousandth?”

Pinkie shook her head. “Celestias have, conveniently, celebrated their thousandth birthdays without me in sight. This’ll be the first so it needs to be the best! I’ll be pulling out all the stops, grabbing everyone from everywhere, it’ll be the biggest thing ever!”

“Why are we planning it in a public place like Celestia City?” Jotaro asked. “With her luck she’ll just wander across us. She’s probably already suspicious.”

“So we can get an army of Pinkies in one place.” Pinkie pulled out a megaphone and shouted into it. “HEY, GIRLS, SHOW YOURSELVES!”

A thousand versions of Pinkie poured out into the street – the primary forces of the Pinkie Emporium. They all saluted. “SIR YES SIR! PARTY PLANNING CUTAWAY ENGAGED!”

“Oh for th-”

They were suddenly in a large, open warehouse – surrounded by Pinkies bouncing around everywhere chatting and laughing.

“Yep, I called in the Pinkie Emporium,” Pinkie said, winking. “I know I mock them a lot but there’s certainly one thing they’re good at: PARTIES. And we’re going to coalesce all the party knowledge together!”

“Also, not all of us are ‘girls’, Prime!” a Bubble Berry called.

Pinkie frowned. “Ah, yes, ‘Prime’. So boring…”

“It’s a nice name,” Flutterfree said.

“But I’m the Pinkie! They know that! They’re just messing with me!”

“YEEEEP!” Seven Pinkies sang in a chorus, bouncing away with a bouncy castle on their backs.

Pinkie rolled her eyes. “Right. Anyway, I’ve got some other help as well. We’re ponies – of course we’re going to need some help from her homeworld friends. SO BEHOLD, THE SBURB BRIGADE!” All of them focused on the troop of various SBURB players of Earth C and Skaia’s Dream.

“We need a lot of exploding cueballs!” Terezi shouted, jumping onto Pinkie’s back. “And we shall rig them to go off when near her and her only!”

“That’s cruel,” Jade said – only one of them was there at the moment, and it was the one who spent most of her time at the League of Sweetie Belles being dog-like. “We should remind her of the good memories.”

“I could probably get some of those…” John said.

“Egbert, you’ll get erased by the Gallifreyans if you try to go that far back,” Dirk pointed out.

“Oh. Right. …I have no more ideas.”
“I do,” Roxy said, walking forward with impressive swagger in her step. The back of her Rogue of Void mask twirled in nonexistent wind, and a Carnelian Gem walked at her side. “As Earth C’s resident party planner, may I suggest a theme, o’ Pink one?”

“Go right ahead!” Pinkie grinned.

“Aspects,” Roxy said, pointing at the symbol of Void emblazoned across her chest. “We get outfits of Aspects for everyone who cares, and we’ll all be dressed up in the best of colors.”

“It’ll be a rainbow of Vriska-related awesomeness!” Carnelian added.

“And we can style the rest of the party after SBURB and other things.” Roxy put her hands on her hips. “We’ll, like, even put in some fake planets, maybe even a subdimension! I can get Carnelian and the rest of her Gem-construction friends to build us the best locale ever! So much yush, am I right?”

“YUSH!” Pinkie declared. “Get on that! Pinkies, we’re going to build an entire subdimension for a party!”

“WOOHOO!”

“How are we going to make all the outfits?” Flutterfree asked. “Only god-tier players can create those outfits, and even then just ones keyed to themselves.”

“That’s where I come in, dear,” Renee said, pushing out of the crowd of excessively pink ponies. “I’m working on making outfits for everyone – with help from my alternates, of course. Roxy asked me to start a few days ago.”

“Pre-emptive strike, huh?” Pinkie gave Roxy a playful smile. “You were ready to play dirty.”

Roxy rolled back on her hooves. “Let’s just say I knew you’d say yes.”

“Hmm. Clever…”

Renee rolled her eyes and adjusted her glasses. “Regardless, Flutterfree, since Pinkie can produce her outfit on her own through her powers, I was working on yours.” She levitated a bundled-up set of purple robes out and gave them to Flutterfree. “Here you go, Page of Rage robes altered for a pony’s physique. I got rid of that annoying speedo-thing that’s on it, naturally, not suited for the equine form.”

Flutterfree gingerly stepped into the purple robes and flapped her wings. It felt comfortable, which was pretty much guaranteed for anything Renee ever made, but beyond that it was loose. The short cape somehow didn’t get in the way of her wings, and there was a nice strap for her Bow of Light. She examined the strange swirling symbol of Rage on her chest and smiled. “It fits wonderfully, thanks!”

“Good! It even matches your colors! Perfect complement! Unlike Corona’s Doom robes which are going to look as ugly as opal’s vomit, but I’ll make do. Somehow.” She shivered. “Or maybe I’ll pass it off to someone else…”

“You look amazing Flutters!” Pinkie said. “Strike a pose!”

Flutterfree took her Bow of Light out and stood on her hind legs, pulling the string back and aiming at a wall of the warehouse. Her short cape billowed along with her flowing pink mane, giving her the appearance of being supercharged with power.
With a smile, Flutterfree lowered her weapon. “Too bad I don’t use my Rage that much. I’d probably wear it more often.”

Dirk raised an eyebrow – an act just barely visible behind his anime shades. “I’ve been watching you Twelve half-players. Despite being the Page, you’re advancing more than most of your companions.”

“Oh…” Flutterfree said, seemingly upset by the news.

“It’s something to be proud of, Flutterfree,” Renee said, putting a hoof on her. “You’re growing.”

“Into Rage?”

“It’s not literal.”

“Feels like it a lot of the time…” Flutterfree shook her head. “But it is a part of me… Probably shouldn’t hide from it.”

Nova chuckled. “Definitely not. Just don’t go wearing those robes around, we don’t want to tip Vriska off to this thing.”

~~~

Eve sat on a couch in Flutterfree’s cottage, reading a book. She could have read the book on her data-pad, that certainly would have been more efficient, but it would also have not been a book. For all her love of technology and progress, Eve would always have a soft spot for books.

“Aaaaaaand… behold!” Flutterfree flew down from the shower, taking a dramatic pose on the coffee table. For a moment her mane, tail, and cape flapped as though they were in a raging storm. This, unfortunately, lasted only a split second – the exact split second it took Eve to get to the end of her sentence and look up.

“Aww, Eve, you missed it!”

“I missed what – hey, are those the Rage robes?” Eve brightened up. “You look beautiful.”

Flutterfree facehooved. “Thanks, but I was supposed to come down here and look all… adventure-y. Wistful. Daring. Or noble or something.”

“Well, I’m here, you have a coffee table runway, what’s wrong with striking some more poses?”

“Absolutely nothing!” Flutterfree declared with a chuckle, standing up on a hind hoof and pointing forward with her wing. “Onward!”

“I can see Lolo helping you with balance.”

Flutterfree had Lolo create a spirograph halo around her head. “Aww, that ruins the fun…” she said, mimicking a young child. She switched poses to one reminiscent of a predatory cat, allowing her eyes to spark ever-so-slightly with Rage. It was easy to do, given Lolo’s abilities. Now that she thought about it, Lolo was probably why her Aspect powers kept progressing despite her natural difficulty with them…

Eve raised her hooves up in mock fear. “No, I’ll do anything for you! Fame, riches, power, your own galaxy! Just don’t-”

Flutterfree lunged, booping Eve on the snout. The two devolved into giggles.
“HEY FLUTTERS!” Vriska shouted, kicking the door in – as was her custom. “I need more spider-chow for that stupid mini-lusus that keeps trying to eat me.”

Flutterfree and Eve stared at her like deer caught in the headlights.

“…Did I interrupt something?” Vriska asked.

“I mean, yes, but nothing important,” Eve said, glancing nervously at Flutterfree’s robes of Rage.

“You guys need a stuffpile,” Vriska commented.

“Just because our relationship is analogous to your race’s pale quadrant doesn’t mean it’s the same thing,” Eve asserted. “Also we tried the stuffpile thing. I almost drowned in stuffed animals.”

Flutterfree giggled nervously.

Vriska rolled her eyes. “Starbeat’s fine with it.”

“Starbeat is a unique pony,” Flutterfree countered.

“Yeah, sure. Anyway, spider chow?”

“Yes, I have it right over here…”

“By the way, nice robes.”

Flutterfree smiled nervously. “Yes! They are nice! Renee made them for me.”

“Never saw you as one to embrace the Rage, but I’m glad you are. Can’t wait to see you wear it in the field.”

Eve could hear Flutterfree’s internal screams. She was going to have to wear them now…

“Oh, Eve!” Vriska grinned. “You should get some Light robes. You two would match! Inverted colors and everything!”

“…That would be cute,” Flutterfree admitted, fixing Eve with a sly smirk.

“I wouldn’t be able to wear such a thing ‘in the field’,” Eve commented. “But I’ll see what Renee can do.”

“It’ll be great if all of you could get robes,” Vriska said as Flutterfree handed her a bag full of spider chow. Even though it was half her size, she lifted it with little issue. “Anyway, see you two later, need to get back to Earth C. That spider’s not going to train itself…”

“Maybe you should give her a name?” Flutterfree asked.

“Eh, maybe,” Vriska said, jumping away.

There was silence in the cottage.

“Good news, she suspects nothing,” Eve commented.

“Yeah. But she’s going to be on the trail…” Flutterfree furrowed her brow. “We’re going to have to do something about this…”

“Pinkie?”
The Gem subdimension construction was already underway. They had chosen an empty place in the middle of Celestia City that had originally been made to look like a desert – but few people wanted to wander the empty desert, so it had been somewhat easy to procure a plot of land to build a special sort of dimensional gateway. Currently it was little more than four crystal pillars in the sand, but Carnelian’s team of Gems were quickly turning it into much more.

“She SAW you!?” Pinkie shouted, jumping up and down in panic. “Oh no, oh no, oh noooooo she can’t have the surprise ruined! How could you do this!?”

Flutterfree backed up. “I was just showing off for Eve…”

Eve sighed. “There was no way we could have predicted Vriska would come barging in.”

“I know… I know…” Pinkie Pie produced a rocking chair and started shaking it back and forth in an effort to calm herself. “We have to get rid of her.”

“Get rid of her!?” Flutterfree gasped.

“A perfectly reasonable idea,” Corona said, walking over – her robes of Doom held in her hand like toxic kelp. “She’s got luck and she’s very, very nosy when her suspicions are aroused. Just put her in a situation where she can’t find out.”

Pinkie raised an eyebrow. “Corona, buttering me up isn’t going to get me to change my mind. You’re wearing that.”

“But Pinkie it's-”

“The Rogue of Doom. You.”

“But it’s green, black, and ugly!”

Eve smirked. “Problem with ugly?”

“Wh- no!” Corona huffed. “I just… Doom. I don’t like Doom.”

“You can wear it for one day, it’s not like it’s got any power or anything,” Pinkie said dismissively. “Back on track: getting rid of Vriska.”

“Easy to do,” Eve said. “Hard to do without her getting suspicious.”

“We could have Renee send us on an extended mission,” Flutterfree suggested.

“But I have to be here to plan the party!” Pinkie wailed. “The other Pinkies won’t do it right! And what kind of mission could we go on for that long anyway?”

“Around the multiverse in eighty days,” Renee said, walking into the group. “And don’t you worry your little head, Pinkie, you won’t be going anywhere.” She grinned mischievously. “Because I have an idea!”

“is this going to be anything like the idea you had when you tried to plan the break-in of Canterlot Castle?” Eve asked, eyebrow raised.
“Well, yes, but better!” Renee chuckled. “It’ll be perfect… Pinkie, you keep working with Roxy and the Emporium on the Party. I will place my plan in motion!”

“Um, how will we know we’ll be back in time?” Flutterfree asked. “We don’t exactly know the timing of everything.”

“That’s actually good,” Pinkie said. “Means you’ll come back at the precise right moment.”

“Does it really?” Eve asked.

“Today it does,” Pinkie said with a shrug. “I warned you all that this was going to be a weird one.”

“You did?”

“You weren’t there,” Flutterfree said. “I forgot to mention it.”

“Oh. Okay then.” She ruffled her feathers. “Renee, care to explain what exactly your plan is?”

“Only if you insist.”

~*~

Corona could have teleported anywhere she wanted on Celestia City. Instead, she walked across the ‘desert’ to the nearest ‘town’. She wasn’t entirely sure why, she just did. Perhaps it was a mixture of being bored and the annoying thoughts that were plaguing her ever since she’d laid eyes on that stupid robe of Doom.

Doom. *Doom.*

Everyone she’d ever talked to about it had reminded her, time and time again, that Doom didn’t mean *literal* doom, though it could. It just meant great change, the ending of something. She had to admit, that did fit her.

But come on, couldn’t it be called something other than Doom? That was so negative.

She vowed to wear the robes once – exactly once – and then never again. Maybe she could donate them to some other Sunset who would find it interesting. There were always others out there…

Looking around, she realized she was in a ‘town’. Though ‘town’ was an odd thing in Celestia City – technically she was still in the city, but the ramshackle arrangement of buildings here sure didn’t seem to be part of any larger city. It was nothing but sand, tumbleweeds, and a fake sky. Likely constructed in an ill-advised attempt at creating a ‘wild west’.

Lucky Pinkie. This meant she got an empty place in Celestia City to work with. Assuming they had taken the proper precautions to keep the townspeople from asking questions.

“Who the heck are you!?”

Corona looked down at a short Ruby in a sheriff’s outfit. She smiled – but refrained from laughing, knowing this little Ruby probably *was* the sheriff. “Corona Shimmer. I’m sure you’ve heard of me.”

“What th- oh.” the Ruby dropped her angry expression instantly. “L-lifebringer! G-good to have you visit our small town! What brings you here?”

“A walk,” Corona said, continuing her march into the city. She was mildly baffled to see that nearly half of the town’s population was Rufioh Skaians. The rest was the general mixture of humans,
ponies, and Gems. Of interest was a long snake-dog thing, possibly a longma, though that particular word was assigned to so many different creatures Corona didn’t want to make any assumptions.

“As the Rogue of Doom laid her eyes upon the curious creature…” a voice said from above.

Corona looked up, processing the fact that nothing was up there. “…Do you have a Narrative Presence here?”

The Ruby nodded. “Uh, yeah. That’s Rotarran.”

“Charmed,” the voice said.

“That’s just Narrator backwards,” Corona commented.

“You try coming up with something original in this city. There is a Sunset living here by the name of Tesnus, by the way.”

“I have about as much respect for her as I do you right about now,” Corona commented.

“Judgey judgey! Have you been having a bad day by chance, heroine?”

“I’m so glad I don’t have a narrator…”

You do though. Not that you’ll notice.

The Ruby shrugged. “Rotarran’s chill, give him a break. He even helps out a lot with adventures and stuff! Nibira and the others say he does all sort of mission-things. Speaking of…”

“We have not found the thieves,” Rotarran cut him off.

“I FOUND THE THIEVES!” A man in a loose tunic called, running down the street. “They just… did a vanishing thing!”

“Lance Lancelot has once again failed his ‘don’t lose track of the objective’ goal,” Rotarran narrated.

“They’re right around the corne-” he paused, frowning. “You know they’re gone.”

“Yes.”

“Well that’s just great.”

“Yes.”

Corona walked away from them as they continued to argue about the thieves, leaving the sheriff Ruby behind. She decided she might as well try to find these thieves, she didn’t exactly have much of a plan for today… Research was off, and there were no adventures. Might as well make one.

She came across a bar and decided she might as well walk in. To her surprise, there was an Ork there, with several young human women staring at him with awe in their eyes.

“And then Ah, cover’d ‘n flames, FLOPP’D on the eldritch squid wit a WAAAAAAAGH! ‘Dere was a big boom and the squid was dead.”

“Wooooow…” the women sung, swooning.

*Those women are either desperate or need mental help.* Corona chose to ignore them and look for
someone who might have better information. She sat down at the bar, ordered a random drink with low alcohol content, and struck up conversation with a pony/human couple she saw sitting nearby. “So, what’s the occasion?”

“So, what’s the occasion?” the pony – a stallion – said. “Marie here has been mine for over twenty years now.”

“Ignore Brick, he’s drunk,” Marie chuckled. “I own him.”

“I’m sure it’s a mutual relationship,” Corona offered.

“Actually, the kids own us,” Brick said with a grin. “We have no freedom in the relationship.”

“True…” Marie admitted.

“Speaking of, we should be getting back. Don’t want Yvenne making dinner again…”

“…Kids?” Corona asked, looking between the two of them.

Marie flushed. “No, we didn’t do any splicing. That’s… well, that’s just disgusting, no offense to you. …I’m sorry, that sounded horrible.”

“I’m not the result of a splice,” Corona said. “Adopted then?”

“All seven of them,” Brick said with a laugh. “Wait, you’re not a splice? What then?”

Marie furrowed her brow. “…Dear, I think that’s Corona Shimmer.”

“Huh?”

“The immortality serum.”

“WOAH!” Brick fell out of his chair. “Y-you should join us for dinner!”

“Brick! She’s a Princess! You don’t just invite them for dinner!”

Corona smirked. “I’d be glad to come for dinner. When is it?”

“Ten minutes from now?”

“Then we should go. I have some rumor-mills I need to run through and a family dinner sounds like just the place to do it.”

“Oh? About what?” Marie asked.

“The thieves you guys have.”

“Ah… them.” Marie blinked. “Don’t know what to make of them hone-”

“You can just tell me at dinner.”

“Oh. Yes. Which is now eight minutes away! BRICK, WE GOTTA GO!”

And so they scrambled to dinner – and Corona was more than a little shocked to find that only two of their kids were human or pony. There were two Gems, a baby dragon, a teenage goblin, and what Corona was pretty sure was an actual angel girl.

Food turned out to be ‘instant magical lasagna’ which, admittedly, was pretty good, since Celestia
City had all the resources it could ever need for making good instant dinners.

“Hooves, how do they work?” Brick asked as he drove a fork into the lasagna with amazing precision. “Well enough for me to eat neater than the rest of you, apparently.”

True, already the multiracial home was an absolute mess of food, even though one of the Gems wasn’t eating anything.

Corona smirked. “Hooves are magical focal points of a pony’s body in most universes where a small ‘traction field’ exists at all times, exerting a weak ‘grip’ on anything you press them to.”

He stared at her. “I… I know that. I was j-”

“I could go into the scientific nuances of the phenomenon, it really is quite fascinating.”

There was silence at the table. The goblin snorted with barely restrained laughter.

“Yvenne! Stop staring!” Marie chided, suddenly.

The young ‘angel’ couldn’t take her eyes off Corona. “She’s like me…”

Corona smiled warmly. “I don’t think I am. These wings are just feathery appendages, nothing too shiny.”

“You’re brimming with life energy.”

“Well yeah, I-”

“And death energy.”

Corona stared at her.

“Aahahahah!” Marie laughed nervously. “Yvenne’s a silly one, isn’t she! Grellk, why don’t you take your sister to the kitchen to get dessert?”

“Ugh, moooooom,” the goblin groaned. “The sugar is disgusting! Have Nin do it.”

“I can’t even eat yet!” Nin shouted, folding her hard-light arms.

“I can,” the other Gem added, rubbing it in.

Brick groaned. “Someone take Yvenne to get the dessert.”

“Got it,” the pony – who just so happened to be a crystal unicorn mare – got up and led Yvenne to the kitchen. Corona could feel holy magic flying the moment they entered the room. She wondered what Yvenne was doing…

“So, you wanted to ask about the thieves?” Brick asked.

“Oh, yes! See, I-” she ignored the sounds of the floor cracking in the other room. “-heard about some thieves, and I figured I might as well try to apprehend them.”

“Really? You’d apprehend the Phantom Thieves of Hearts?”

“They’re Skaians?” Corona asked.

“Oh? No!” Marie chuckled. “You have no idea who they are, do you?”
“Hey, there’s one right now! Just like the games!” the human child said, pointing out the window. Running across the street was a young man in a black shirt and plaid pants pushing his glasses to his face. He might have been a teenager, but sometimes it was hard to tell with humans who were clearly from anime-originating worlds. Corona didn’t waste any time – she teleported out onto the street and attempted to touch her fingers to his head.

He jumped out of the way, spinning behind her with a grin. “Woah! Sorry, not going to le-” he paused when he realized who he was talking to. “I didn’t think we’d gotten quite this level of recognition… Corona, pleasure to meet you! I’d love to stay and chat but I have a-”

Corona attempted to jump him again, but he twisted behind her. She was expecting this – and just used her wing to tap him.

Who ever said she had to use her hands to initiate empathy?

After a few seconds of absorbing what was inside him, Corona backed off. “Huh… You’re an interesting one… Joker.”

Joker smiled cheekily. “It’s what it takes to be the leader of the Phantom Thieves of Hearts, Corona.”

Corona looked him over for a few seconds. “The heroic thief… An interesting archetype, and not one I thought we needed in our society.”

“No offense, but you’re too high up to see what it’s like down here,” Joker said, casually leaning on a wall. “Things fall through the cracks of your friends’ web. Little heroes like us are there to take care of it.”

“By stealing parts of people’s souls.”

Joker waved his hand back and forth. “Eeeeeeeeh depends on how you look at it.”

Corona let out a soft chuckle. “I like you. And, for what it’s worth, I think you’re doing good work. No matter how… weird it is.”

“Think of it like an inverse Stand.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Joker grinned. “I know.”

Corona rolled her eyes. “Have fun with your phantom heists. Don’t go too far and I won’t have to call Expeditions on you.”

“What would Expeditions do?”

“Recruit you, but then you’d be limited by government-assigned missions and bureaucracy. Little annoying if you’re not as high up as I am.”

“Maybe I should mess up just to get an invitation.”

Corona put her hands on her hips. “You can do that if you want. I’ll be very, very disappointed though.”

Joker grabbed his heart. “Alas, I cannot survive with the great guardian’s disapproval! I must not
take this risk!”

“Smooth.”

“I try.”

Corona waved. “Go stop that guy from cheating the homeless out of their food.”

“I will. Oh, and Corona?”

“Hmm?”

“If you want a more local issue, the Pinkies have been trying to get us to infiltrate the Infinite Carousel as of late. Apparently there’s something big going on in there. Figured it was a bit above our paygrade since we have no idea what’s going on – but if you were to look into it...”

“Say no more,” Corona said, giving him a thumbs up. “I’m going to finish my dinner with this nice family and then I’ll get to that.” She put her hands on her hips. “I wonder if it’s really a conspiracy or not...”

“It probably is.”

“Good.” Corona pulled out her phone and called Allure while Joker sped off into the sand. “Hey, Allure? Do you know anything about increased activity of the Infinite Carousel?”

She could hear Allure audibly groan on the other side. “Yeah. Both the Carousel and Census have been acting up. We have no idea why.”

“Well, they might be up to something. Prepare a report of everything you know, I’ll be swinging by later.”

“Suuuuuure thing!”

Corona hung up and teleported back to the dinner table. “So, that’s dealt with, who knows about the Infinite Carousel?”

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Renee looked at three of her closest, most trusted Rarities. Her opinions of the three of them varied considerably, but they had proven themselves time and time again to her. Even if some of them were... questionable.

Mattie grinned. “I can hear your thoughts. I absolutely love them. Please, punish me for being so off the walls. I’ll learn. Trust me, like you were just thinking you could.”

Renee sighed. “Celia?”

“You walked into this,” the pony-like Gem said, shrugging.

“I’m with Mattie, let’s punish her,” Affix grinned. “That’s always fun.”

Renee leaned into her hoof, the action moving a digital tablet across her office desk. They were in her primary office in the Castle of Friendship. “Look, ladies, I understand we are all strong, brilliant personalities.”

“You got that right.” Affix winked.
“-but all I’m asking is something simple. We need to get all these Aspect robes ready for everyone going to the party before the party happens. Sooner rather than later. You can bring in anypony you want, but please keep the Infinite Carousel out of this. That means you, Mattie.”

“Bu-”

“I’m serious.”

“…I don’t have to listen to you…”

“Do you want me to call the Oversight Division? I can.”

Mattie grumbled. “But they’d make it so much faster…”

“We can’t give them a hoofhold given the current political situation,” Celia pointed out. “They’re threatening the purity of Merodi business seclusion.”

“I’d be impressed if they weren’t being so illegal,” Renee muttered. “Is business so important to us that we’re usually willing to break the law for it?”

“To be fair, they existed before Merodi Universalis,” Affix said.

“But they keep trying to get more operatives here…” Renee shook her head. “Not an issue to talk about right now. You can hire Rarities that are part of the Carousel, but you can’t get Carousel management involved, okay?”

“Got it,” Celia said, saluting. “…I’ll see who I can get.”

“But what about making dresses?” Affix asked.

“I never was much of a designer,” Celia admitted with a shrug. “More of a politician. I can get us some good deals, don’t you worry.”

“In that case, dismissed,” Renee said with a few claps of her hooves. “I’ve got to talk to the Primary team.”

“Have fun!” Mattie sang as she and the other Rarities were teleported away. A second later, Vriska, Jotaro, Flutterfree, and Nova were teleported into the room. Flutterfree was wearing her Rage robes – as Vriska expected. Flutterfree didn’t seem that uncomfortable with it, which Renee took as a compliment.

“…Uh, where’s Pinkie?” Nova asked, playing her part perfectly.

Renee smiled serenely. “I’m glad you asked, that’s part of why you’re here. You see, I had to send Pinkie on a super-secret mission alone.”

“…What?” Vriska said.

“I’m not allowed to talk about it. And even if I was, Giorno didn’t exactly give me any information on it. She’ll be indisposed for… a good while.”

“I call being in charge!” Vriska called.

Flutterfree coughed. “I’m in command in Pinkie’s absence.”

“…Yeah, well, I called dibs.”
“Doesn’t beat prior agreements,” Jotaro said.

“But… law of dibs!”

“Your argument is pointless, neither of you will be leading,” Renee said. “Though, for the record, Flutterfree is right.”

Flutterfree grinned proudly.

“Who’s leading us then?” Nova asked.

“ME!” Renee said, jumping on top of her desk and striking a pose. “The moment she was called away I was thinking ‘Renee, it’s been a while since you’ve been out in the field, I bet you miss it’ and I responded with ‘you’re right, I do miss it, I should do something!’ So I’m back on the team for a while. And since Pinkie’s going to be gone a significant amount of time, well…” She grinned. “You’ve all heard of Nanoha’s Grand Tour, yes?”

“Yeah…?” Vriska said, cocking her head.

“We’re doing it. Except we’re doing it fast. We’re going around the multiverse in eighty-ish days.”

“You’re crazy.”

Renee grinned. “I guess I’ve been letting myself go lately.”

Vriska matched her expression. She clasped Renee’s hoof. “Welcome back, fashion horse.”

“Thank you!” Renee tossed her mane back. “I’ve got to contact Daniel and tell everyone where I’m going, but we should be able to leave by the end of the day! Pack your things, we’re not going to see Merodi Universalis for a long while!”

“Cessera, what is a waffleborg?” Eve asked.

The Gem Second looked up from her data pad. “If I had to guess, biomechanical aliens obsessed with assimilation and breakfast.”

“I really hope that’s not it,” Eve commented, scrolling through her ‘incidents of possible interest to the Overhead of Relations’ report. Several people in the Relations Division cut down the most interesting reports and sent the ones with the most necessary information to her, cut down to be as efficient as possible. This kept her from spending multiple days reading through every report that came out, but it also confused her sometimes. ‘Waffleborg tried to open negotiations, failed spectacularly when Pit offered pancakes to them.’ There was so much to unload there…

“It probably is it,” Eve muttered after a few seconds of silence. She marked the section as ‘read more into later’ and kept going. She thought about calling Renee and asking about it – but then she remembered, Renee was gone. And so was Flutterfree.

“…Eve?”

Eve barely caught the motion of Cessera’s lips. “I’m fine,” Eve said, quickly. “Just… well I usually talk to Renee or Flutterfree about these things, they’re not here. And Pinkie’s probably so busy she’d scream at the phone if I dared trying to call her.”

“Applejack? Rainbow?”
Eve smiled warmly. “My weekly dinners with Applejack are amazing, and I always love seeing Rainbow. But neither of them really seem to ‘get’ the politics I always find myself in. I would call Luna but…”

“Asleep?”

“Yeah. Asleep. As is the norm.” She ruffled her wings. “I guess I’ll just have to get used to talking with just you.”

“That’s basically half your job at this point.”

“I do spend a lot of time in this office for somepony who’s the face of Merodi Universalis,” Eve said, furrowing her brow.

“That was an exaggeration.”

“Exaggerations contain truth within them.”

Cessera shrugged, scrolling through her copy of the report. “…The Derpy Anti-Defamation League is back.”

“…We sent Walleye to them, right?”

“Yeah. They’re suing her – and by extension, us – for defamation.”

Eve groaned. “I wish I could say I was surprised…”

“Rumor has it they managed to rope Earth Shimmer’s Ditzy into one of their meetings.”

“Why does this pointless powder keg keep building up? They explode, get recognition, and then all the Derpyys just continue to not care. Their names are literally Derpy, there’s no ill intent!”

“They have a section in their brochure about ‘legal action against your Prophet’.”

“…They don’t have very good lawyers, do they?”

“No.”

There was a soft buzzing in Eve’s chair, letting her know someone was waiting to meet with her. She checked her meeting schedule – empty for today. “Oh no, it better not be the potato again…”

“Doesn’t appear to be,” Cessera said, checking the cameras. “Looks like… two Twilights and two Rarities. They’re all squabbling with each other.”

Eve massaged her horn. “Why can’t they just get along?”

“Eve, it’s the Infinite Carousel, we’ve all but branded them criminals at this point.”

“But they’re so loud. And… well, it looks bad on me!”

Cessera rolled her eyes. “Should I call them in?”

“Sure. I’ve haven’t used the Royal Canterlot Voice in a while.”

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They had done it. It had taken a few days, but the Gems had come though.
The little building in the middle of the city-desert led to a black subdimension with several house-sized planets styled after the player planets of SBURB. There were dozens of brightly colored spheres drifting in the blackness, tied together with rope bridges, little spaceships, and even a few floating houses. Balloons were everywhere.

Pinkie stood next to Roxy and Carnelian, grinning.

“This looks amazing,” Roxy said, hands on her hips. “Party fit for gods.”

“That’s kind of the point,” Carnelian observed, pointing at the various god-tier Skaians drifting around the planets, checking them out for ‘accuracy’.

“My planet’s too big!” Dave called to them.

“Shut up, Strider!” Roxy shouted back.

“I have just been told to shut up, you may continue, Dave,” Dirk said.

Dave cupped his hands to his mouth. “MY PLANET’S TOO BIG!”

“Don’t make me come over there and give you boys a knuckle sandwich!” Roxy shouted.

“Bring it.” Dave was suddenly surrounded by his dead selves. “The squad’s got all avenues of attack covered!”

Roxy ‘wonked’. “That’s just what we want you to think…”

“Psst. Roxy,” Carnelian elbowed her. “We’re not done with the party yet.”

“Oh yes! We’re just getting started!” Pinkie cackled. “With Vriska gone, we can go completely overboard. We are going to get Vriska her pirate boat. And we are going to fill it with the best treasure in the multiverse.” She took a gun with a backwards-facing barrel and tossed it into the ground of a nearby mini-planet. “That’s the artifact pile. We’re going to get all the artifacts.”

“I know where the Juju Breaking Crowbar is!” Roxy said, waving her hand.

“Then that’s where we’re going first! And we will not stop until we’ve collected the absolute biggest pile of treasure for Vriska to plunder!”

“Hell yeah!”

“…Isn’t it a bad idea to have so many powerful artifacts together?” Carnelian asked.

“Well, duh.” Pinkie said. “But think about it – Vriska would totally love a dangerous birthday party.”

“I can’t argue with that.”

Pinkie put on a pith helmet and grinned. “Time to go plunder the deepest, darkest dungeons for delightful loot! Who’s with me?!”

“Me! Totally me! Bring me!” Roxy shouted. “Bring Carnelian too!”

“What!? N-”

Pinkie grabbed the both of them and dragged them through a portal to Earth C…
There was a spark in the crystal ball… It was trying to find the beginning… It was having difficulty, since it wasn’t given a good idea of where ‘the beginning’ was…

It decided to begin with a rather common occurrence in the multiverse – the birth of a Twilight Sparkle. It began to fast-forward through her life. The day she got her cutie mark and was accepted into Celestia’s School was the first event that made it slow down – and after that it was a blur until she arrived in Ponyville and made her lifelong friends.

The crystal ball’s user didn’t care about all this. He tapped the ball with his hoof, advancing it forward. Past Nightmare Moon, Discord, Chrysalis, Sombra, the ascension, Tirek, Starlight, Pony of Shadows, Cozy… and then stopping at the discovery of the bowling ball.

*The man of light fled across existence, and the enchantress followed.*

Twilight took the ball. She met Siron, and she met so many others… Her team shuffled around a bit, there was the fight with Ba’al, the loss of her hearing, and then the threat of Majora… And at long last, the sign of a society forming became apparent. Disclosure occurred, and Twilight gave her speeches. An alliance grew closer together as a mare grew beyond anything her mentors had conceived. She worked to bring everyone together in every way, through the struggles of the University of Doors and the Gems themselves. They continued building up, the power of Harmony and Friendship bringing more and more into the fold. Stands, magic, humans, technology… so many.

The Gem Trial went by quickly, because as important as it was to history, the event shortly thereafter was significantly more meaningful. The Bloodbath. The death of so many; the first day of Merodi Universalis was almost its last. But it wasn’t. It rose from the struggle, stronger than it would have ever been otherwise.

It dealt with the revelation of ka better than most. It encountered societies much higher and made friends. It survived the attention of the Starcross Society and was instrumental in the defeat of the Collector.

Twilight – now known as Eve – was always there, always guiding it, always shaping it. Sometimes the ball would focus on someone else – like when Corona created the immortality serum – but otherwise it remained the same. Merodi Universalis grew, grew until they could play with giants around the Green Sun, grew until they were a name well known in much of the multiverse…

“This has gone on too far,” Grogar growled, dissipating the image in the crystal ball. He was a large, blue goat with ram-like horns and an eternally sour expression. He looked up from his podium at the various creatures around him, making a crowd seventeen strong – eighteen, if he included himself. They stood in an open auditorium-like area made of ancient, degraded marble. This structure sat, alone, on an island in the middle of a vast pink ocean. “We have been watching, waiting for them to stop changing long enough to form a plan. But this patience has gotten us nowhere, as their change is apparently exponential. The longer they live, the more enemies they make – but also the more enemies they defeat. We are at the point of diminishing returns. We are at eighteen strong. One more, and the number will be perfect. It will be time to strike.”

“Oh, taking my advice?” the sharp-toothed purple-haired Magane asked. “Good.”

“I am acting on evidence that nineteen is a superior number,” Grogar grunted. “Your counsel was merely a gesture in the right direction.”
“Remind me again why he’s in charge?” Adagio asked – currently in the form of a strange fish-human hybrid creature. The red crystal around her neck glowed brightly.

“Because I am the one who brought us all together!” Grogar asserted.

*True, but shallow,* a brain pulsed, sitting on a nearby pedestal. *We are not a coalition with a specific hierarchy.*

“IT, shut your trap,” Chrysalis growled. “It makes my head hurt.”

IT pulsed. *Your head hurts itself, daughter of insanity.*

“She is one with chaos!” A tremendous man in chaotic red armor shouted, ramming a chainaxe into the ground.

“Kharne! Now is not the time for battle!” Grogar shouted. “Soon though! Soon we shall make Merodi Universalis suffer for all they’ve done and all they dared!”

*There’s only eighteen of us…* an Apple Bloom with dark mist coming out of her eyes said.

*Where is the nineteenth…?*

“Surely one of our recruiting missions has gone well?” Grogar asked.

Tirek folded his arms. *The Nightmare Moon Reformation Association was pointless.*

“Not that we didn’t try!” Cozy Glow shouted, waving her hooves. “They just… didn’t like us!”

Grogar grunted. “They were the least likely anyway.”

A Rarity with cat-like claw marks over an empty eye socket spoke up. “My counterpart within the Starcross Society was decidedly uncooperative. Didn’t even think of revenge… Not even after I offered her *everything.*”

“Lilith, broken lock,” a Twilight deadpanned.

“Lielight! You… don’t you dare!” another Twilight shouted, wearing what most closely resembled a red and black flamenco dress. “Lilith is precious!”

“Little Miss Rarity, Shipping Princess, intertwined necks,” Lielight responded.

“Ooooh, you *do* know how to talk dirty!” Lilith chuckled.

“That double-speaker is so arrogant she probably thinks she does that all the time,” Tirek muttered.

“Um. She does,” Cozy offered.

Tirek put a hand to the bridge of his nose and groaned.

*You are all useless. It would be easier to condition them,*” the Apple Bloom said.

*Your methods put us further against the story than we already are,* IT said. *We must work within the boundaries to achieve success.*

“You are all pretty evil,” a Starlight with a medical vest and pointed ears said – she went by Starlance, after her ears. “Me? I just have strange ears.”
“And want to see how all this turns out,” Magane offered.

“Definitely. This entire dynamic is all so fascinating. I’m surprised this little group hasn’t imploded already!”

“We’re off track,” Grogar said. “Aquamarine, how did the mission to the Crown Princess go?”

The small Gem folded her arms. “Badly. The Crown Princess, to put it mildly, doesn’t want anything to do with us.”

“She tried to kill me,” Ba’al offered.

“Everyone tries to kill you,” Aquamarine spat.

“Not everyone here.”

“I will kill you the moment I think the others will allow it,” Sombra, the dark unicorn, declared.

“I’m afraid Flagg’s a no-show as well,” a human-like alien by the name of Loki said, toying with a blue cube of immense power. “I don’t think he likes you very much, Grogar.”

“I will never understand why the embodiment of our position refuses us so,” Grogar said.

“It is because he embodies a very different ideal,” the last member of the group said – a man far too young in appearance for his age. His eyes were fire and his fists were those of rage. “We seek revenge. He seeks disorder and darkness for the sake of itself. We are too ordered for his liking.”

“Ozai has a point,” Starlance said. “Most of us – not including me or Magane – are in this for revenge of some sort. Flagg was willing to use that with Siron, not be part of it.”

_We are too much for him to use effectively, _IT concluded.

“We’re too much for me to keep track of,” Chrysalis muttered. “I’m like… What’s your name?”

The Apple Bloom looked at her with disdain. “You insist on calling me the Mindflayer.”

“See? Too many weird names.”

“Then it’s a good thing you don’t have to learn mine.”

The man who would become the nineteenth member of the team walked in. He was human, and otherwise his physical appearance is none of your business because that would spoil everything. Deal with it.

“You may call me the Dude,” he said, taking an empty seat between Cozy Glow and Lilith. “Those of you who know who I am, refrain from mentioning it. They have eyes in the strangest places, as I’m sure you are aware.”

“This guy thinks ahead,” Magane said.

“Very well… ‘Dude’,” Grogar said, narrowing his eyes. “Who invited you?”

“Nobody. I invited myself. Because the time is right.”

_He is outside my influence, _IT noted.
“His essence is blank,” the Mindflayer added.

“And I’m here to help,” the Dude said, folding his hands together. “You want to bring Merodi Universalis down?”

“More than anything,” Grogar declared.

“Good. We’ll have to attack them from multiple fronts to accomplish this. We will need to split up into teams. First team needs to go after the Primary Team on their journey through the multiverse, for our only chance to defeat them is when they are separated from their nation. Their defeat is instrumental, for they are the heroes of Merodi Universalis. The other heroes also need attention. Pinkie is still in Merodi Universalis – she is planning the biggest party ever. We will infiltrate this party as party planners and get catalogs of every OP-as-fuck artifact she is bringing into Celestia City. A third team will need to deal with Eve and incite political turmoil, while the fourth and final will need to augment a conspiracy within the various ‘self-societies’ of Merodi Universalis. Lilith, you have access to the Infinite Carousel, you will be on that.”

Grogar narrowed his eyes. “While you seem to have a plan… I ask what makes you think you can just stroll in here and demand that everyone follow your plan?”

“Because I’m telling you exactly what to do. You don’t have to listen to it. But I have all the information to pull this off. I know exactly how to manipulate events to bring you to the point of your revenge.” He leaned in, face level. “All you have to do is listen and use your skills, and they shall fall apart from all sides.”

“I like this guy!” Magane declared. “Let’s do his plan!”

“I will hear his plan in its entirety…” Grogar said, furrowing his brow. “And then I will make a judgment.”

The Dude nodded. “I’m warning you, it’s a mess that barely makes sense.”

“I would find that disheartening, but I had a feeling that would be the only way to take them out.”

“Smart goat.”

“I have been around for much longer than you.”

“By some metrics.” The Dude stood up and began strolling around, looking out across the pink sea of the world. “You have been right from the start, Grogar. Only teamwork can defeat the powers of harmony. You must become like them to win. An annoyingly detestable truth the Tower forces on us all, but a truth nonetheless.”

Grogar looked at the Dude with far more respect now. “You speak well, human.”

“And I’ll do so much more.” He turned around, looking Grogar right in the eyes. “Let’s tear Merodi Universalis down to dust.”

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SONGS OF THE SPHERES

100

by G. M. Blackjack
Pinkie looked out at the party planets, a smirk on her face.

“Mattie, sure you can handle this?” Pinkie asked.

Mattie chuckled. “I’m the absolute queen of montages. Nothing can stop me!”

Pinkie took out a boom box. “Then let’s hit it.” She hit the play button and a thick, fat beat began to pump out of its speakers, thundering through what they had been calling the Realm of Party. Mattie, Pinkie, and Roxy started shifting to the groove while Carnelian looked around, awkward, trying to figure out what the strange ritual was.

Carnelian was really surprised when the three of them burst out into song.

“We don’t need to ponder
We don’t need to wait
All we need is a bumping beat to send us on the hunt!”

And Mattie’s montage abilities took over. Days began to pass like rapidly-flipping pages in a book. They rushed to a world reminiscent of Ardent and pulled a third of the triforce out of a slime monster, smiling for pictures taken by seemingly no one.

“We don’t care at all ‘bout how hard it is
We’re gonna grab all the gold; gonna grab all the vis
We’re gonna grab them all ‘till there’s none left!”

They climbed the steps into an ancient abandoned temple in a space-borne forest, with Pinkie making “boom, bang, boom-a-bang!” noises all the way. They removed the idol and ran away from a boulder trap with smiles on their faces. With the exception of Carnelian, who was terrified of the entire ordeal.

“Grab it all!
Find the sparks
Be the magic song
Find the dark
Find the light
Treasure, treasure, yeah yeah yeah yeah!”

An alien by the name of Loki came across them seeking treasure and gave him his own cube of power, free of charge. He ended up part of the group without much fuss, a bit like a photobomber.

“Multiversal!
There’s no end to the game
Free the relics from their homes, release the fire trap over there!"

They ducked under a fire trap and managed to get hold of a dragon idol. They quickly returned to the party planets and dumped it onto the ever-growing pile of artifacts ranging from immensely powerful to little more than trinkets.

“We’re gonna suffer
‘Cause Vriska’s so surprised
Angry smiles, angry smiles.”

Pinkie started gluing several of the reddish-to-pink artifacts together with Loki and Carnelian in the background, suggesting construction ideas. Carnelian finally started smiling.

“Grab it all!
Find the sparks
Be the magic song
Find the dark
Find the light
Treasure, treasure, yeah yeah yeah yeah!”

Pinkie giggled on top of her new throne made entirely out of treasure. Naturally, it would be Vriska’s later, and it had an appropriate number of spider designs on it to reflect that. But she could enjoy this for now. She took a breath and let out one last resonant line.

“Because it is the best, god-tier, Skaian, party, birthday, surprise, EVER!”

And the song ended with a bunch of horns and toots and laughs.

“I feel like my entire life just flashed before my eyes!” Carnelian gasped – still shaking her feet to the music that no longer existed.

“I suppose I could do that,” Mattie commented. “Don’t see much point to it though, I still waste the entire time of the life I’m flashing.” She snickered.

“I physically can’t stop grooving!” Carnelian wailed.

“Here, let me help with that.” Loki pulled an artifact out of the pile and shot her with it – freezing her in place for a solid second. When it broke, she wasn’t dancing.

“Hooo… Haff…”

Roxy put a hand on Carnelian’s shoulder. “First heartsong?”

“Y-yeah…”

“You’ll get used to them. They let you feel alive! Like, there was this one time I was in the worst of dumps and then – woah – the entire bar started singing about the sense of community they all shared and I was all, yeah! This is my jam!”
“And I take it this was ‘your jam’ as well?” Loki asked.

“Fuck yeah!”

“Hold up!” Pinkie said, lifting a hoof. “Something’s wrong.”

“Hmm?” Mattie asked. “I- oh, I suppose I do have that feeling.”

“That’d be me,” Magane said, suddenly lounging on top of the artifact-throne. “Hi!”

“Witch!” Loki shouted, taking a defensive stance. “What do you want?”

Magane grinned. In the light of the party planets she looked even more menacing than usual, her teeth glinting in the few lights there were, accentuating their sharpness. Her eyes bored into all their souls, and those with magic sense simply shuddered uncomfortably as they couldn’t quite touch what she was. “I’m just here to watch.”

“I know you’re up to something!” Pinkie declared. “You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t!”

“Oh, what a brilliant deduction. But what could possibly be my reason for being here? I simply have no idea!”

“Not falling for that,” Pinkie muttered. “Everyone, don’t question her. The moment you say something she said isn’t true, it becomes true. High-end reality warping mess.”

“What a terrifying power…” Loki said.

“Glad you like it!” Magane winked.

“Loki! My man!” Roxy put an arm around his shoulder. “I watched, like, all the Marvel movies. You’re amazing. Glad to have you on board.”

“Montages do have the way of making the best of friends,” Mattie said, finally allowing there to be a moment to appreciate the man who had appeared in the middle of the montage. A problem with her powers, to be sure, but not one that was unsalvageable. He was a middle-aged man with a face that was almost too smooth and wiry black hair. He looked like a snake but, well, that was Loki for you.

Pinkie pulled his blue cube out of the artifact stack. “The Tesseract…”

“Yes, an Infinity Stone artifact,” Loki commented. “Quite the addition to your collection, no?”

“We could make an Infinity Gauntlet if we got six…”

“It wouldn’t work,” Roxy pointed out. “Each full set is keyed to one universe only.”

“But still, having a full set, even if it’s from mixed universes…” Pinkie grinned. “Think we have any others!”

“Found a golden brain!” Mattie reported, kicking the shining lump of neural matter out of the stack. “Mind Stone?”

“Most definitely,” Loki said.

“Definitely not,” Magane countered.

Roxy put her hands on her hips. “Are you just going to sit up there and try to make us trip over our
“Yes.”

Magane cackled. “Calling for votes, who thinks that did anything?” Seeing no hands, she shrugged. “I’m clearly going to have to work harder.”

“No you aren’t.”

Magane fixed Roxy with a ‘seriously trying that again?’ look.

“I will keep trying.”

Magane rolled her eyes. “Admirable, but foolish. Oh so, so foolish…”

“We are going to need guards to keep her from taking control of the artifacts…” Carnelian pointed out.

“Oh, I already got security,” Roxy said. “At… some point in the montage. I think. Has it been weeks or months?”

Everyone shrugged.

“Right, whatever, time’s borked, that’s nothing new. Anyway, I ran into the Everykid, and she said she had some available friends.” She gestured at a party planet that hadn’t existed at the start of the montage. It was light green, covered in large portions of grassland, and a single go-kart racetrack that somewhere around fifty Hat Kids were racing on.

“…Our security is fifty Everykids?” Carnelian asked.

“Yep,” Roxy said, wearing a proud smile. “Well, only one of them is the Everyman, the rest are just on the job because they feel like it. They’re great treasure hunters and guardians! They’ll protect the pile like the adorable fierce hat creatures they are!” She squealed. “You should see them smack intruders with bats. It’s the cutest thing ever.”

“Why go-karts though?” Loki asked.

“Merodi Kart.” Pinkie shrugged. “Newest attraction of the party, I guess.”

To put it simply, Renee had missed this.

“Have at thee, ruffian!” Renee shouted, twisting a rapier in her magic to intercept the similar blade her alternate self was holding.

“I am not a ruffian!” Rarity the fencer declared, matching Renee’s moves. “I have had years of experience under the greatest masters of swordplay!”

“And I’ve been stuck behind a desk for most of the last few years and I’m giving you a run for your money. Maybe you should put yourself in danger more often, darling.” With a twist of her blade and some careful magic manipulation, her counterpart’s sword was torn away and embedded in a nearby marble column.
“Woohoo!” Flutterfree cheered lightly.

“Aww man, I wanted to fight her too,” Vriska muttered. “Now she’s already lost.” She looked to the ground – and saw a letter with an X on it. “Not again…”

Jotaro glanced over her shoulder. “Agent X?”

“Yeah. I don’t get this guy.” Vriska opened the letter and read it aloud. “See? What’s this even about? The lore of some alternate Equestria? Why does he write these reports? Why am I the only one who gets these letters?”

“You did mention that he likes the number eight,” Nova said. “Maybe that has to do with it?”

“He never mentions anything troll-like in these letters!” Vriska complained.

“How come this is the first I’ve heard of it?” Renee asked, strolling over and ignoring her counterpart’s disgruntled horse noises.

Vriska shrugged. “Pinkie said it’s not important. And I was getting them before I met you guys. … But not before I ran into my first Equestria…”

Flutterfree perked up. “I don’t think you’ve ever told us the story of the first Equestria you ran into.”

“Uh, yeah,” Vriska said, expression darkening. “…I conquered it.”

“Oh…” Flutterfree put a wing around her, smiling. “That’s not you anymore.”

“Yeah, but it’s a little disheartening when half your stories are of you being a fucking asshole, you know?”

“Yare yare daze…” Jotaro muttered. “The further past your mistakes you move the worse you get.”

Vriska glared. “Are you saying I’m going soft?”

“Yes,” Nova said.

“No!” Flutterfree called. “You’re just adjusting to your new life!”

“I could take a look at your mind,” Renee offered.

“Thanks, but no thanks, I don’t need any Sylphing.” Vriska waved her hand dismissively. “What I need is more action!”

Renee smirked. “Daaarling!” she called. “My Agent wants to spar!”

“I have already suffered the indignity of defeat, I will not suffer more,” the Rarity said, storming off in a huff.

“I’ll make her fight on one leg and with an arm tied behind her back! And she has to use just her sword!”

The Rarity looked back, pondering this. Then she huffed and strode away.

“Lame,” Vriska muttered.

“She’s smart,” Renee observed. “Knew I was setting her up for failure.”
“Still lame.”

Renee tossed her mane back. “Regardless, I think this world has given us all we could need. Shall we continue?”

“We’re not even out of the Q-Sphere yet…” Flutterfree said. “We’ve got a long way to go…”

“Onward!” Vriska called.

The primary team vanished into a portal.

Adagio left her hiding spot from behind a column. “Yes… Get far, far away from Merodi Universalis…”

~~~

It had been a week or so since Corona had first called Allure about the ‘unknown problem with the self-societies’.

It had been a week of pointless investigation. The Sweeties had found nothing aside from enhanced activity in the Emporium, Carousel, and Census. The Sweeties deduced that the Emporium was probably working on Vriska’s party, though they weren’t sure that was really enough of an event to demand that much of an increase in activity.

The Carousel and Census, on the other hoof, were complete unknowns. And since the Carousel wasn’t on good terms with Merodi Universalis, they had decided to pay the Sparkle Census a visit.

Allure had asked Corona to come along, but she had ended up busy with a research project involving an “absolute ton of eggs. It’s really fascinating how the eggs are exactly one ton right down to the planck scale, and we’re really trying to figure out how that’s possible…” So Allure went with Squeaky.

Allure had never actually been to the Sparkle Census proper on business – it had always been to see the sights or get something done quickly. Now she actually wanted to discuss policy, and that meant going through the proper channels. Which meant paperwork.

“Hello, and welcome to the Sparkle Census!” a Twilight with rose-tinted glasses and a flamenco-like dress said, a fake smile on her face. “Your request to meet with the council has been acknowledged, and while it is being processed you will need to fill out these forms.” She handed them a couple of data pads. “Enjoy!”

“Right…” Allure muttered. “You’d think calling ahead would get you in…”

Squeaky shrugged. “They like their rules. Let’s just fill all this out…”

It took about an hour, which was fast for the completion of a full Sparkle Census form. The two of them handed the data pads back as one, allowing the Twilight to look them over. She nodded slowly. “Thank you for your time!” Then she threw the data pads in the trash, unceremoniously.

Allure gawked. “Wh… What was that for!”?

The Twilight lit her horn and burned them. “Oh, silly me, looks like you’ll have to do that again!”

“What’s your deal!”?

Squeaky narrowed her eyes. “What did you say your name was?”
“Oh, nopony to write home about. Just a simple mare who completely lost everything because of you. The name’s Bleeding Heart Sparkle. *Equis Lovestra.*”

Allure blinked. “Not even trying to be subtle?”

“Nope,” Bleeding Heart said, grin widening. “You’re going to know exactly wh-”

“You know we had nothing to do with that, right?” Squeaky interrupted. “We’re the League of Sweetie Belles. The whole Flower thing wasn’t us.”

“It was your society that stole my capacity for love!” she shouted.

Allure sighed. “Look, we all agree that was wrong, but the Flowers did it without our consent. *Against* our wishes, actually.”

“She’s not going to listen to you,” Squeaky muttered. “Let’s just find somepony else to sign us in.”

“Bu-”

“She wants to waste our time. Let’s not let her.”

“…Fine.”

Bleeding Heart smirked, adjusting her glasses. “You two really are perfect for each other.”

“You’re disgusting!” Allure called back.

“I would know. *I am* known as the shipping queen around here.” She folded her hooves and cocked her head. “Or are you forgetting a certain incident between you two?”

Allure and Squeaky froze. Allure turned back and stared at her. “How do you…?”

“A mare doesn’t reveal her secrets,” she chuckled.

“Allure, what *is* she talking about?” Squeaky asked.

“I told you about that thing in the time loop, right?”

“Oh yeah…” Squeaky tapped her chin. “You know if we were stuck in one of Bleeding Heart’s shipping stories, that would probably be cause for a lot of awkward drama.”

“Yeah. Good thing we’re not. But I still want to know how she knows.” Allure glared at Bleeding Heart. “You can’t possibly know anything about that time loop. Only I was allowed to remember.”

“Does it matter how I know? It just proves you feel it as well. The need for the deep, personal connection! It calls to you!”

Allure twisted her face back in revulsion. “You… *do* know that’s self-dating right? You’re in the Census, I know you frown on that!”

“A real shame,” Bleeding Heart admitted. “There’s so much potential in the self-connection. Literally made *of* each other. I’ve been part of it, it’s a truly amazing feeling. And then there’s those two Sweeties…”

“The Lovers get power from each other, they get a pass,” Allure said dismissively. “And even then, it causes damage. If you know so much, surely you know about the teams that were destroyed or
almost destroyed by some-Sweetie who decided they were a Casanova?!”

“Such drama!” Bleeding Heart dramatically swooned. “Such art in the power of love!”

“You’re sick,” Squeaky said. “You need help.”

“And so do you, but I’m not giving it to you!” she laughed. “Enjoy navigating the bureaucracy! I’ve laid traps!”

“Screw you.”

“I’d love it!”

The Sweeties left as quickly as they could.

Lilith the Rarity poked her head up from behind the counter. “Awww… look at them, so uncomfortable by the boundaries. It’s cute, innocent even. Fitting for a Sweetie…” She let out a demented laugh, absent-mindedly scratching her empty eye socket. “Lielight’s traps are in position. They’ll be running around the paperwork for weeks if they don’t try something desperate.”

Bleeding Heat nuzzled her marefriend. “You think they’ll bother to call Eve?”

“Ha! They’ve got nothing more than a few stray tips and suspicion right now. They don’t have any reason to go that far. And it’ll be too late by then…”

“Too late for what? I… am not exactly clear on the plan.”

“Something something IT, I don’t know, all I know is it’s giving us an excuse to run them in circles which is absolutely delightful!”

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“And it looks like we’ve got a new diplomacy team today,” Cessera said, tapping some information on her pad. “They seem to be copying us.”

“Hmm?” Eve raised an eyebrow. “How so?”

“A Twilight and a blue Gem in the Relations Division.” Cessera handed the pad to Eve, who gave the image upon it a scrutinizing glare. It was a picture of an alicorn Twilight by the name of Astrid who had an Aquamarine on her back – one without an alternate name.

“Guess we have a successful image.”

“It sure seems that way. They recently handled the Waffleborg incident, seemingly on their own. Nobody’s really sure how they did it, and they said they had to keep secrecy by the Waffleborg’s request, but it was a miracle.”

Eve smiled. “Ah, I know what that’s like… Remember negotiations with the Erni Golems?”

“Vaguely.”

“That’s because they attributed trust to secrets. I dealt with them regularly for several months but I had to keep coming up with other explanations as to why I was gone. They wanted to establish trust through a complex web of not talking about anything.” She rubbed her forehead. “Good thing none of the secrets were particularly dangerous or concerning. But that was still annoying.”
“And is this secrecy a secret?”

“Used to be. They’re very mellow now. Especially since news outlets have agreed not to go to their world anymore.”

“How’d you pull that off?”

Eve shrugged. “Oversight has their own secrets with the Golems.”

“Naturally.”

“Ah! There you are!”

Eve and Cessera looked up to see none other than the Twilight and Aquamarine they had just been talking about.

“I’ve been dying to meet you! I’m Astrid!” She shook Eve’s hoof energetically. “I told myself the moment I was promoted to the Canterlot office I’d come to see you but geez you have no idea how hard it is to find you.”

Eve chuckled. “Glad to have you on board, Astrid. I’m told you handled the Waffleborg situation. You have my thanks.”

“Don’t ask how we did it,” Aquamarine said, flatly. While Astrid looked like a normal Twilight, Aquamarine was a very diminutive blue Gem that rode on the alicorn’s back. Her gemstone was teardrop-shaped and placed just below her eye, making it look like she may have been crying, even if her stern expression said otherwise.

“I won’t, I understand the issues with it.” Eve waved a wing, gesturing for them to follow. “Come, walk and talk.”

“Really? Oh, thanks!” Astrid beamed. “I’m as happy as a butterfly freshly released from its cocoon!”

“Eloquent.”

“I’m a bit of a poet,” Astrid admitted with a soft blush. “For when the bell strikes noon, the reckoning will be soon.”

“You’ll have to send me some of your work.”

“Really? You really are everything they say you are, huh?”

Eve shrugged. “I don’t know about everything.”

“Some say she’s an immortal she-demon,” Aquamarine said.

“Not a demon.”

“As far as we know, anyway,” Cessera added.

“Cessera!” Eve said with mock indignation. “I am not!”

“I don’t know…”

“Corona is known to have been a demon at once point,” Astrid pointed out.
Eve rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah. I’ve never been Midnight Sparkle though, and I have no intent to ever be her.”

“You sure the ‘Little Dashie’ epidemic isn’t going to break something?” Aquamarine asked.

Eve smiled warmly. “Those stories aren’t so bad, you know. A lost filly from another world joining a family… It happens all the time, we just step in to clear things up a bit. Usually ends up on Aid’s table, anyway.”

“I think she was referring specifically to the ‘Eight Dashies’ incident,” Astrid said.

“Ooooh… that.” Eve’s smile faltered. “Sometimes we just get things that are way too complicated and confusing. We still have no idea which one goes to which world, and the general ‘let them sort it out themselves’ hasn’t been working since at least two of them need to find their destinies to activate their Elements of Harmony… But lucky for me, that has recently been passed off to Aid. I still plan to check in on them in about a week, but I won’t do anything unless Aid gives the ok to do so. The world governments themselves, on the other hand…” She growled. “They all want the Dashies on their side. This is why I prefer to have Expeditions deal with things like this under the radar.”

“May I offer a suggestion?” Astrid asked.

“Shoot.”

“They no doubt have fate-links to their worlds?”

“Yes, but all eight of the worlds are so closely intertwined and moving that the exact coordinates and dimensional signatures swap regularly. It’s a pain.”

“Oh… In that case, call Aradia. Local time travel in all the universes should be able to sort out who’s who.”

Eve stopped in her tracks.

“…Cessera?”

“No, we have not tried that.”

“How come we didn’t think of that!?”

Cessera shrugged. “I’ve already sent a message to Aradia. She should get to it at some point.”

“Good. Astrid, I see a bright future for you in this division. I’ll be sure you get credit for that.”

“Wow… Thanks!” Astrid rubbed the back of her head. “I’m making like a boulder, I guess.”

“Hm?”

“On a roll. I’m on a roll.”

Eve chuckled. “Oh, I see.”

“Anyway, let’s get off politics. I’ve been hearing a lot of complaints about all the power Pinkie is holding in one spot…”

“She knows what she’s doing,” Eve asserted. “And they’ve gotten the best security money can buy…”
“Fifty kids?”

“There’s more than that.” Eve paused. “Cessera, there is more than that, right?”

Cessera shrugged.

~~~

“I’m sorry, I have to fire all of you,” Pinkie said with tears in her eyes.

Every last one of the Hat Kids let out a heart-wrenching ‘awwwwww’ noise.

“You can stay around and use the go-karts if you want, but you’re not on the clock anymore. I’ve got… official guards for that, now.”

With dejected expressions, all fifty of the Hat Kids returned to their cart racing, except now the kart horns seemed sad somehow. It was one of the worst things Pinkie had felt in her entire life. Or, at least, that’s what it felt like at that moment.

She fell into Roxy’s arms and started bawling. Roxy, to her credit, hugged Pinkie tight and petted her mane with a solemn expression.

“…I don’t get it,” Carnelian said, turning to Loki.

Loki shrugged. “Over-the-top affection, I suppose.”

“Played for comedy,” Magane adding, still sitting in the throne. The new military-level guards all had their sights fixed on her, not that she gave any sign of apprehension.

Loki ignored her, digging through the pile. “Newest stone…” He pulled out an Element of Magic. “This one appears to qualify as a Power Stone.”

Pinkie, suddenly not sad anymore, was on top of it in an instant, eyes shining. “Power, Mind, Space… We’ve got half a set! That’s great!”

“Time, Reality, and Soul…” Roxy said, pursing her lips. “Y’know, just occurred to me, the Soul stone requires a sacrifice usually.”

“Oh… right…” Pinkie frowned. “There’s got to be another way to get it in some universes…”

“The Soul stone doesn’t need a sacrifice,” Magane said.

“Yes it does,” Pinkie interrupted.

“A lie about a lie…” Magane snapped her fingers, altering reality somewhere.

“Why do you help us, witch?” Loki asked.

Magane shrugged. “You’re the Asgardian mastermind! I’m sure you can figure it out given enough time.”

“There’s the distinct possibility that’s not really help,” Carnelian said. “She could want to use the Infinity Gauntlet.”

“Stones are from different universes, they won’t work together,” Roxy reminded them. “There’s not really a point.”
Pinkie rolled her eyes. “Doesn’t really matter. We need to get this Power stone out of this Element of Magic! And we just so happen to have somepony here to do that!”

“We do?” Carnelian asked.

“Yes,” Maud said, stepping out from behind Pinkie. “Where is it?”

Pinkie, giggling, gave her sister the Element of Magic. Maud looked at the crystal with a cursory, almost bored expression at first. However, this quickly became a capital-L Look comparable to the might of Fluttershy’s own Stare. The rock fractured down the middle, allowing a small purple rock of energy to fall out, taking all the color of the Element with it. Loki collected it and placed it with the other two.

“Done,” Maud said. “I hope you have extra Elements.”

Pinkie opened a small chest containing five different Elements of Magic. “Maud, we’ve been collecting these things like cookies. We got plenty.”

“You know…” Roxy said, tapping her foot while looking at the pile of treasure. “A pile of treasure is good, yeah, but Vriska likes something even better than treasure…”

“What?” Pinkie asked.

“Hunting for it.” Roxy rubbed her hands together. “We should start hiding everything all around the party planets! It’d be an excellent treasure-hunt madhouse!”

“We will need to keep tabs on where every artifact is,” Carnelian said. “Don’t want security freaking out.”

“I can do that,” Loki said, bowing slightly. “Cataloging relics of power is somewhat of a hobby of mine. Who knows, I may even find that we’ve accidentally grabbed another Infinity Stone.”

“You sure you’re up for it?” Pinkie asked.

“Positive. Though I will still join you on some of your outings. We have time.”

“You’re the best, Loki!”

Elsewhere, a pink pegasus mare was watching the events through a crystal ball. Cozy Glow cackled. “They suspect nothing…” She was far from the filly she once was, and now her menacing expression actually looked like it belonged on her face. She had grown into her role rather well, with time.

Next to her, Tirek looked up from his magazine. “Can we do anything yet?”

“Shh, not yet, not yet, not for a while yet… but eventually, eventually they will have gathered everything.” Cozy’s cackling soon grew out of control, filling the air with the promise of a crazy, insane plan.

~~~

Celia, a Gem fusion that was both a Sweetie Belle and a Rarity, led Allure and Corona into the Infinite Carousel’s ‘site of primary operation’ which was, fittingly, a space station vaguely styled after a carousel that would spin forever, providing artificial gravity. The universe it was located in had ‘air’ in space, so the three of them were easily able to fly and float their way through the
blackness to the rotating settlement.

The history of the Infinite Carousel and Merodi Universalis was... annoying, to say the least. The Infinite Carousel got its start slightly before Merodi Universalis did, and they were aware of each other more or less from the starts of their formations. However, the moment Merodi Universalis decided to take a stance against big business, the previously friendly Infinite Carousel balked.

Their entire purpose in existing was to pool the resources of all Rarities together to create the biggest business in existence! How dare their 'friends' create laws that would prevent that efficiency? However, they were small, and hadn’t been a large part of Merodi Universalis’ economy. So these objections were brushed under the rug and the two groups became further separated.

While Merodi Universalis continued to grow exponentially, the Infinite Carousel grew carefully. Every step they took was to improve their business model, self-oriented economy, and monetary flexibility. They were by no means an evil corporation, since they didn’t seek to actively exploit the consumer for every dollar they were worth, but the presence of the Infinite Carousel sure became oppressive for many universes. “Of Raritys, by Raritys, for everyone.”

Now, though they had significantly fewer members, they were about as influential as the Sparkle Census in terms of resources and power. This power only kept growing as their ‘gracefully elegant’ economic engine continued to produce more and more profit and expansion.

These days, they were continually knocking at Merodi Universalis’ door, trying to get in. Anti-business laws prevented direct product generation, but they were technically a foreign power so traditional trade was encouraged. This had created a sort of ‘economic war’ between the Commerce Division and the Infinite Carousel, where the Infinite Carousel did something kinda-sorta-probably illegal by Merodi law and the Commerce Division shouted at them until they stopped, but at that point the Carousel was already working somewhere else.

The Carousel got into the news a lot these days because of this, but only the people who actually dealt with them understood exactly how annoying their antics were. Corona and Allure were not those people. Celia, unfortunately, was, due to her connections to Affix and Mattie, both of whom had been part of the Carousel at one point in their lives. The Carousel just wouldn’t leave them alone, and as a part-Rarity gem, she got dragged into it just like everyone else.

“They are not going to like you,” Celia said as they landed on the station, walking through the open ‘windows’ onto the rotating part of the Carousel.

“Not surprising,” Corona admitted. “But they have to listen to me, at least.”

“I’m just annoyed we didn’t find anything out from the Census...” Allure groaned.

“You’re being stonewalled,” Celia reported. “It’ll take a long time to break that down. Probably not worth it.”

“How can one mare stonewall us!?”

“Normally that would be difficult. But that was the Sparkle Census you’re dealing with. Their paperwork is essentially a self-perpetuating stonewall even if there isn’t malicious intent. If there is, it’s not difficult at all to send someone into an infinite spiral of signatures, eloquent words, and waiting rooms.”

Allure took a deep breath. “And the Carousel is going to be different?”

“In the Carousel, enough money or stature will buy you anything,” Celia said with a smirk.
“Corona?”

“My salary as a Second is absurd,” Corona admitted. “I don’t use most of it, and I donate a lot of it to medical research. But even a month’s wages would be enough to make some kings faint.”

Allure blinked. “Oh yeah, we do get paid for what we do. Strange, I almost never think about that. I live in a tiny house in Celestia City for crying out loud! I could buy my own space station!”

“Do you want to?”

“Eh, not really, Celestia City’s cool.”

The Carousel itself was beautiful, designed to be the perfect mixture of structurally sound patterns and natural shapes. The entire station was one giant room criss-crossing with metallic vines, crystalline screens, and images of Rarity everywhere. Surprisingly, only about half the ponies around were Rarities – the rest were customers. An endless supply of ‘commoners’ looking to buy anything ranging from dresses to art to a surprising amount of grocery produce. Evidently more than a few Rarities were farmers, for some reason.

“Welcome to the Prime Carousel!” a Rarity in a navy-esque uniform said, a grin on her face. “What can I help you with today?”

“Corona Shimmer, Merodi Universalis,” Corona said. “Looking to talk to one of the Rarities in charge.”

“Oh, I’m afraid Magnum is a bit indisposed at the moment.”

“…Your head is named Magnum?” Allure gawked.

“Oh yes. Unusual name, I know, but that’s what she wanted. C.E.O. of the Prime Carousel needs a fancy name, wouldn’t you think? I can introduce you to some other Rarities though, they should be able to answer any questions you want!”

Corona pulled out her Merodi quid card. “I’m the Research Second. Examine the amethyst coating on this card.”

“I actually meant it, she is indisposed,” the Rarity said with a sigh. “I’m not sure what to tell you. I can get you a nice hotel with that and you can wait for her? Or perhaps you could just talk to the other Rarities? I could forward you to Rimmy, she’s got access to business documents, though I’m sure I don’t need to tell you how fickle those are.” She laughed as if she had just said the most hilarious thing.

Celia frowned. “Dear, you’re not fooling anyone. Just tell us where we need to go. We don’t need to see Magnum, but we do need to figure out about your increases in activity.”

“Ah…” the Rarity frowned. “Not even going to try to be subtle?”

“No.”

“Very well. Wander around the Prime Carousel for a while, I’ll be sure to get somepony to talk to you.” She teleported away.

“…So, what, we wait?” Allure asked.

Celia growled. “No. She’s not getting anyone. We’ll just have to buy our way up there the old
fashioned way…”

“Hey! Um, you wanna buy a dress?”

Celia turned her head rapidly to see a familiar Rarity standing behind a little ‘dresses’ storefront.

“Charity!? You joined the Carousel!!?”

Charity blinked. “Oh, um, no. I’m just getting some side money here. They told me it’d be a ‘good gig’ and it has been going well so far.”

“They’re trying to suck you in.”

“Yeah. I know. But, um, I’m smarter than that?”

“This place is run by Rarities, if they wanted to they could scam you out of your life.”

“Oh. …Do you wanna buy a dress though?”

“Not really,” Corona said.

“Aww, but I got the new ‘Rogue of Doom’ outfit! It’s all the rage!”

Corona stared at the offending thing sitting behind the counter. “…No…”

Celia blinked. “Charity, where did you get these? You weren’t on the dress project.”

“I, um, well I don’t know, the Carousel just provided them for me. I’m selling them with my own stuff for added benefits.”

“Oh, first of all, you’re being scammed into liking them. Second of all, pretty sure that means Mattie went against Renee’s wishes.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Can you at least tell us where someone in charge is?” Allure asked.

“Oh, well, you can talk to Lilith.” Charity pointed behind them. “She’s right over there.”

Lilith was a thin, yet muscular Rarity with numerous scars all over her body. Three sharp claw marks crossed one of her eyes, the socket covered up by an embroidered eyepatch.

“…She looks like a Little Miss Rarity,” Allure said, shivering.

“She is,” Charity admitted. “But she’s, like, different now. We had a chat over some spaghettinoodles. She’s actually quite interesting.”

Celia took a breath and nodded. She trotted right over to the scarred mare. “Lilith?”

“Ah, Celia, right?” Lilith smiled, the action making the three visitors uncomfortable. “I am afraid I cannot help you.”

“Why not?”

“Simple, really. Your questions are a threat to business, so the Carousel has been instructed as a whole not to answer them.” Her smile was creepily unwavering. “Sorry, but you’re going to have to use something other than direct methods to get to the bottom of the little mystery of yours.”
“What could be so important that the Carousel turns down mountains of money?” Corona asked.

“The whole point is not to let you know.” Lilith snickered. “Good luck trying to buy your way to the top here. You’ll end up with a million trinkets, an empty bank account, and a bunch of pitying looks.”

Celia furrowed her brow, thinking.

“Celia, you may be a mastermind, but how many Raritys in here match or even surpass your skills? You’re in very unfriendly territory. They’ll cut you up and eat you!” She grinned psychotically, no longer bothering to hide behind a delicate mask. “You’ll need to try something else.”

Celia fumed inwardly – but outwardly she simply bowed. “You are correct. Everyone, let’s go, they’re barring us. Charity, come along.”

“But dress-”

“Charity, I said come along. I don’t want them to take you too.”

“We do not take! We only give!” Lilith called after them.

“You should talk to Pippy about the idea of ‘Corrupted Generosity’ sometime!” Allure shot back.

Lilith didn’t respond with anything more than a demented giggle.

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The ‘Grand Tour’ had decided to avoid the Unrealities. After all, you needed a ship and a lot of high-end reality anchor devices to properly explore that region and not have your brain explode and implode simultaneously. So the Primary Team was instead wandering, slowly, through the Great Void of the multiverse, leisurely meandering toward the E-Sphere with help from Empress Twilight’s Void society and their maps.

Currently, they were on a planet that had several suns. The arrangement of these suns made it in such that the planet never experienced night – just varying levels of ‘day’ at all times. Today, however, there was going to be an eclipse on the side of the planet where there was only one sun, bringing night to the planet at long last.

The Primary Team had already gone around giving the inhabitants of the world electric lights and told them exactly what was going to happen so they wouldn’t freak out. Which was apparently a good thing – since Flutterfree had read the source material with Eve at one point. It ended in the night driving the people mad, according to her anyway. Her memory wasn’t the best, she admitted.

“I still don’t get how darkness would drive people mad,” Vriska said, staring at the last visible sun as it got closer and closer to being covered. “It’s just darkness.”

“And most of them have never seen darkness before,” Renee pointed out. “It’s a thing they simply don’t experience.”

“Plus, it makes a good story if they go mad,” Nova said, tapping her hoof-screen. “What was the guy’s name? Asimov?”

“I think so,” Flutterfree admitted.

“Yeah, he was an author; Prophet or no, he knew what made a good story. We just came in to keep
them from, y’know, exploding under their own mental weight. Or whatever.” She shrugged.

“It does feel nice to save an entire society,” Renee admitted. “It’s different, doing it from afar… you don’t feel as connected to the actions. You feel…” Just then, the sun vanished completely behind the hitherto-unknown second planet, plunging the world into night. The sky lit up with millions of blazing stars, far more than would be found in a normal night sky. It was more than enough to see by, easily defining the blades of grass beneath their hooves. “…like they’re in shadow.”

The conversation ended right then and there – for Adagio came out of nowhere and drove the razor-sharp ends of her claws right into Renee, drenching her white coat in blood. Renee’s scream was more one of surprise than pain.

“Far away from home, huh?” Adagio asked – trying to dodge out of the way of Star Platinum, but the time stop refused to let her complete the action. Coughing up blood onto her strange human-fish hybrid body, she grinned. “There’s no help coming for you this time…”

Four strange beings appeared behind her. Of them, only the once-firelord Ozai was easily recognizable to the Primary Team. The Apple Bloom of shadow was beyond them, the chaos warrior looked like any other member of his kind, and the unusual physiological proportions of the Starlight did not ring any bells.

“…Ozai!?” Nova blurted. “How are you alive!? How are you young!?”

“A gift,” Ozai shouted, charging Nova at full speed with all the fire he could muster. Nova erased time for a couple seconds. He missed easily and found himself face-first in the ground, grunting.

“ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA!” Star Platinum shouted, driving his fists forward, only for the chaos warrior to meet them with his chainaxe. Somehow, his weapon was able to interact with the Stand, cutting up both its and Jotaro’s fingers. Jotaro had already stopped time once, so his obvious advantage was gone. That said, he was able to wrap the man up in Hermit Purple… for all of a second. The man’s strength far outclassed Jotaro’s own: the power of a Khorne Berserker.

Flutterfree jumped the Apple Bloom with Lolo, finding that she was nothing more than a husk – a husk that was attached to a monstrous intelligence in another universe entirely. She pulled back to avoid getting infected – but already darkness was swirling out of the Apple Bloom and grabbing hold of her. “VRISKA!” Flutterfree called.

Vriska had already managed to jump over an attack from Adagio. With amazing finesse, she landed right on top of the Apple Bloom and drove her sword right into the ‘filly’s’ skull. Instantly the connection between the husk and the darkness was severed, and the enemy team was down one.

“What!?” Adagio shouted. “That was the Mindflayer! That shouldn’t have been th-”

Renee smacked Adagio across the face with a magic frying pan construct. She may have been bleeding profusely, but she held a satisfied grin on her face. ”You can’t just overpower us with a simple ambush, dear. We’re better than that.”

“We’re better than this!” Adagio shouted – ignoring the sounds of her chaos warrior getting pummeled into the ground. “We’re better than you!”

“Not necessarily true,” the Starlight said, appearing behind Adagio. “But we sure can try.” She popped a candy in her mouth and gained the cutie mark of a Pinkie. She suddenly appeared behind Renee with a squeaky hammer and an amused grin. “Fore!” She hit Renee right in her wound, sending her flying down the hill.
Flutterfree caught Renee before she landed.

Nova used the opportunity to erase time again, kicking her alternate self to the ground. The Starlight attempted to find a talent that would counteract the twisted manipulation of time, but she found that she had none that could do such a thing. “Guess I lose.”

“Yare yare daze…” Jotaro muttered, punching the Starlight in the face. She flew into Ozai – who had just freed himself – and the two of them became a dazed pile of bodies on top of the chaos warrior.

“No!” Adagio shouted, curling her fishy hands into a fist. “You can’t just... win like this!”

“You should have had a little more effort into it,” Jotaro commented, striding up to her.

“You... are telling me to put in more effort? I waited until you were far from Merodi Universalis! I attacked with surprise! I mortally wound-”

Nova healed Renee up without much of an issue.

Adagio twitched. “You... You...”

“Did nothing to you,” Renee said, checking to make sure her glasses were fine. “You... are Equis Vitis Adagio, correct? None of us have met you before in our lives. Why is your revenge directed at us?”

“You built this society.” Adagio pointed an accusatory finger at Renee. “Because of you, I have no sisters!”

“Last I heard Sonata was doing just f-”

“I. Have. No. Sisters,” Adagio interrupted with a low, growling tone. “You took one away, and killed the other. You’re going to pay for that.”

“Not by your hand,” Nova commented, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes by my hand! I w-”

Flutterfree bonked her on the back of the head with her hoof, brimming with just enough Rage to knock her out.

The eclipse ended, returning day to the world.

“...Cool,” Vriska said, folding her arms. “But kind of disappointing.” She kicked Adagio, getting no response. “Man that was lame.”

“They just don’t make bad guys like they used to,” Renee lamented. “Oh well. Shall we continue the tour?”

“Sure,” Vriska said, putting her hands in her pockets. “…Get good, scrubs, and maybe you can challenge us again.”

The chaos warrior groaned as the Primary Team left the universe.

~~~

Eve woke up one morning to find Philomena sitting on her horn. The phoenix had recently
regenerated and was gently preening her wings.

After Eve’s initial freakout she had realized that she hadn’t really seen much of Philomena in years. Sure, the bird had been around the castle here and there, but ever since the Bloodbath…

“Nice to see you up and about,” Eve said, smiling.

The legendary bird squawked back at her.

“Right… Flutterfree’s out… I’ll…” She made her way down the halls of Canterlot Castle to Luna’s chambers. If Luna had followed the schedule, she should still be awake for a few hours. She gently rapped on the door.

Luna opened it up and raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t it a bit early for our breakfast?”

Eve nodded, gesturing to the bird sitting on her back. “She was in my room this morning.”

“Ah,” Luna said with a careful nod. “It appears she has chosen a new pet pony.”

“…What?”

“Dear sister was always the first to admit she had not chosen Philomena, Philomena had chosen her. Enjoy your newfound companion.” Luna shut the door.

“Wh – Luna! Luna get out here right now!”

“As the rightful ruler of Equis Vitis I refuse!”

“I’ll be down for breakfast, don’t worry. But you need to sort things out with your new master.”

“I am Evening Sparkle, Overhead of Relations, I don’t have a master!” Eve wailed.

“Tell that to the bird.”

Eve glared at the phoenix. Philomena pecked her at the base of the horn. “Ow! Hey! Listen here, just because you’ve ‘chosen’ me doesn’t mean you get to interfere with my job. I have a lot of stuff to do and not enough time to do it, even with the workday reformation bill. And then there’s th-”

“IMPORTANT MESSAGE FOR THE PRINCESS!” a unicorn shouted. Eve recognized him – one of the diplomats at the Relations Division, a blue unicorn by the name of Arcane.

“Uh, which one?” Eve asked.

“Both? The mayor of Ponyville is trying to declare Canterlot a suburb!”

“HE’S WHAT!?” Luna shouted, tearing the door off its hinges. “WHO DOES HE THINK HE IS?!”

Arcane gulped. “Mayor of a ‘village’ so large it has begun to surround Canterlot Mountain?”

“HE WILL HAVE TO TAKE THIS UP WITH ME!” Luna declared. Then, turning off the Royal Canterlot Voice, she coughed awkwardly. “Take me to him as soon as your earliest convenience.”
“I can do that now.”

“It looks like I will be missing breakfast,” Luna admitted with a sigh. “I know Spike puts a lot of effort into those pancakes. Tell him I’m sure they would have been wonderful.”

“Sure,” Eve said. Part of her wanted to go with Luna. But she knew that internal affairs of Equis Vitis was Luna’s job. Eve’s responsibilities lay elsewhere.

Philomena pecked her again.

“Are you *trying* to aggravate me?”

The legendary bird chirped.

“Right, don’t even know why I’m asking, you chose *Celestia* of all ponies, of course you are.” She rubbed her head with a hoof. “What a great start to the day…”

She knew the moment she said that it was going to get worse.

~~~

Grogar looked up from his crystal ball. “I find myself wondering where this is going.”

The Dude folded his hands, silent for a few moments. The salt of the ocean came in with the breeze, leaving a bad taste in both of their mouths.

“The plans are moving along. Relations has been infiltrated. The ‘self-societies’ are being aggravated from within. We have tabs on the entire artifact store. Now we must wait.”

“What of Adagio? She lies outside our vision.”

“Yours,” the Dude corrected. “Outside yours. I see her. She had an initial failure, but she will get up and try again. A story of struggle.”

Grogar furrowed his brow. “And if she fails utterly?”

“If I do not want her to fail, she will not.”

“Hmm…” Grogar growled. “And even if you are wrong, they are but pebbles in the long run.”

“All it takes is one pebble in the right place to bring down a castle. And that is the game we are playing, Grogar. Raising armies does not work against them, and neither does flat-out overpowering. We must be clever to even hope of threatening them.”

“I am aware of the nuances of the plan, do not treat me like a child,” Grogar hissed. “I am expressing my doubts that you are the true mastermind you claim to be.”

“You’ve been patient for over a thousand years, Grogar. Why can you not be patient for a few months?”

“Because if this fails, I will be waiting another thousand years.”

“Grogar, if they find some way to pull out of this, you will not get another chance.”

“All the more reason for my concern.”
“Do you have a better idea at the moment?”

Grogar fell silent. “No.”

“Then we continue with what has already been set in motion.”

Eve’s day definitely got worse.

She had barely started her breakfast when Cessera had called her into an urgent meeting of the Relations, Military, and Aid Divisions. Something big had just happened, and it had to be something unexpected because she had no idea what it was. As she galloped through the streets of Celestia City to the Relations Division Primary Office, she caught up on what she could on a data pad, Philomena flying close behind her.

_Topic of the day: Many Conversion Bureau worlds have banded together to form a single, cohesive union._

And at reading that Eve’s stomach twisted into a pretzel. Of all the things that had gone wrong under her authority, this had to be one of the worst. The Conversion Bureau worlds were a series of Equis’ that had a variation on a single theme: converting all other worlds and races into ponies themselves. When Eve had first heard about them, she’d assumed they were just outliers, worlds where the ponies were nothing like standard and had become militaristic ‘we are always right’ overlords.

A few of them were like that. But most of them could easily be mistaken for a standard Equis with the same ponies that behaved in the same way in almost every situation… except they believed the right way to deal with other worlds was to convert everything and everyone in them to a pony. In some of the cases, this was a tragedy that had to be done for the sake of stability, and when the Merodi came in they could stop this tragedy to the relief of both the ponies and the other race – usually human.

But in far, far too many of the cases, the transformation wasn’t seen as an unfortunate necessity or a tragedy, it was seen as ponykind’s right to ‘fix’ the worlds they came across through any means necessary. All worlds encountered would be forced to become ponies. The reasons varied. One of the most common was that ‘ponies are superior’. But with the ever-so-common mind-altering version of the transformation, it became ‘we will program the violence out of you so you will never want to hurt anyone ever again. Come and be with us, we will make you better than you are, whether you like it or not.’

They disgusted Eve. They reminded her of what she and Merodi Universalis never wanted to be. It had not been hard to classify the Conversion Bureau worlds as one where interference was not only necessary, but needed to be large-scale and rapid. They would move in and, in no uncertain terms, declare the war over and offer to undo any damage that had been done by the pony transformation, if possible. It wasn’t always possible.

This had been going on for a few years… But apparently, behind their backs, several Conversion worlds had just banded together and declared that they weren’t going to listen to Merodi Universalis. They had restarted Conversion operations this morning, and Merodi Universalis needed to decide its response.

She teleported into the office. She was one of the first to arrive – though the Aid Overhead, Squeaky’s Luna, was already there. Her poor Second arrived a moment later. She was the youngest of all Overheads, a Ga named Iris just put into her position last week. She was doing a good job of
keeping herself calm, but her position in Aid had always been one of empathy, so Eve suspected the Ga would make her emotions very clear soon enough. Cessera was already there as well – along with Astrid and Aquamarine, to Eve’s surprise.

“They were invited?” Eve asked.

“They were there when the call came in,” Cessera said. “She was trying to come to a peace treaty with one of the Celestias when they revealed the entire thing.”

“Ah,” Eve nodded, the answer satisfying her. “…Possible courses of action?”

“Talk to them or blow them up.” Cessera pointed at Luna and the recently-arrived O’Neill.

“Surely we can find a middle option…”

“Depends on how aggressive we want to be.”

Eve ruffled her wings, allowing the conversation to die out. The room fell silent as various Relations, Military, and Aid personnel filed in around the table. When the clock struck 9:00 local time, Eve cleared her throat. “The Conversion Bureau worlds have banded together to defy the limitations we placed on their expansive policies. As of this morning, they have restarted conversion efforts. Time is of the essence – we need to decide what we are going to do about this.”

“They need help,” Iris declared, slamming her hands on the table. “We need to get Education involved, take their minds off this horrid path.”

“They’re not going to let us do that,” O’Neill countered. “We’ll need to exert pressure.”

“We can’t do that,” Eve said, shaking her head. “Their coalition is large enough and strong enough to heavily damage Merodi Universalis. They won’t win, but do we really want to risk collateral damage on that scale?”

Astrid spoke up, surprising Eve and most everyone else at the table. “We don’t have a choice. I’ve been working among these Conversion worlds for the last few weeks, they don’t listen to reason. The only reason they weren’t fighting before was because we were too strong a presence. They are gambling on our unwillingness to show true military force. We can’t let them take that gamble.”

“Agreed,” O’Neill said.

“No!” Eve shouted. “They’re just misguided ponies!” She pressed her hooves together. “With their current mindset, I don’t see them backing down from a confrontation until they lose hope. And, as a heavily ideological group, that may not happen for a long time. We don’t need a war, what we need to do is talk them down. If we decimate them, there will be nothing to recover, and we will suffer for it.”

“We should be willing to give a little of ourselves for the sake of those that are being transformed,” Astrid countered.

“I am not arguing that. I am saying we shouldn’t make that sacrifice if we don’t have to. We don’t need to trigger the largest war in Merodi history over this.”

“Coming from the mare who was ready to go take Skarn down not but a few months ago.”

Eve growled. “His atrocities know no bounds. He twists thousands of worlds into a pseudo-death whenever he wants. All the Conversion Worlds do is force a handful of worlds here and there into
submission. The level of damage is not the same. And we are talking about ponies. Some of them retain a conscience through this. We can appeal to them.”

“The Flowers have repeatedly visited this cluster, Eve. They have proven that some of the transformation spells remove free will and souls entirely, creating a world of organic machines. This cluster is rife with glitches! What makes you think you can reason with that?”

“We have had luck in the past, Astrid. We had treaties – treaties you were supposed to be upkeeping.”

“This isn’t my fault!” Astrid gawked.

“No, but given your attitude toward them, I can’t help but think you may have pushed some away from us.”

Eve wasn’t sure what to make Astrid’s expression. It wasn’t pure anger… was there surprise in there?

Aquamarine took over. “Clearly we’re at an impasse. We do not have time to deliberate further. We need to decide – do we attack or do we take the weak route?”

“Uncalled for,” Cessera chided.

Aquamarine didn’t care. “Well? There are three Overheads, take a vote.”

“Attack,” O’Neill said. “They had their chance to go with us peacefully.”

“Diplomacy,” Eve reiterated.

“I agree with Eve,” Luna said. “We need to at least try talking to them first.”

Astrid glared at the alicorn. “…Fine. But when things start falling apart, don’t come crying to me.”

“We won’t be.”

The meeting was adjourned, and Eve immediately prepared passage to the Conversion Bureau cluster.

~~~

Renee looked up at the Monolith. Several varieties of Kirby danced around it while the sky lit up like a fractal, sending trains made of popcorn into the land below.

Well, we tried to avoid the Unrealities, at least…

“Renee!” Vriska called. “Snap out of it, we have to get the last Cuil so we can reactivate the waffle matrix!”

“Do we really have to?” Renee asked as cows flew past Vriska.

“I… Uh…” Vriska pondered this for a moment. “Why are we doing this?”

“I’ve been trying to tell you!” Flutterfree screeched, a few purple sparks flying off her eyes as Lolo glitched in and out of existence. “This world isn’t going to be fixed no matter what we do!”

One of the Kirbys swallowed Flutterfree whole and copied her powers. She popped out the other
“Let’s get out of here, then!” Renee shouted, pulling out the dimensional device. “Is everyone ready?”

“I don’t know where Jotaro is!” Nova called, deflecting a rain of lapis lazuli stones. “I don’t have him on my scans!”

“Do you have anything on your scans?” Nova asked.

“Nothing besides the monolith over there!”

“Thank you for noticing me,” the Monolith said. “Please, continue noticing me.”

“Where’s Jotaro?” Renee asked, ignoring the feeling she had of spiders crawling under her skin.

“He already made it out through a time-displaced portal you are about to make,” the Monolith declared. “You may want to make that or risk tearing another Cuil level into this world.”

“What’re the consequences of that?”

A giant human head appeared between them and the Monolith. “Hello! I’m the Nostalgia Criti—”

“DONE!” Renee declared, activating her dimensional device randomly. It jumped in and out of time for a moment before the four of them jumped through it. They found themselves on top of a futuristic skyscraper overlooking a massive war taking place between two insane armies. Missiles flew, heads exploded, and buildings collapsed in heaps. But at least it appeared to be consistent.

That is, until a very large man picked up a gas truck with his psychic powers and threw it into the opposing army, decimating them.

“Where’s Jotaro?” Renee asked, not fazed in the slightest by the psychic powers. She could have done something like that with minimal effort.

“I’ve got him,” Nova said, checking her screen. “He’s… Uh…” She pointed at a skyscraper across the street from them. On the roof Jotaro was fighting a woman they recognized as none other than Jane the Evermore. It was impossible to read Jotaro’s expression since, as usual, he was strolling around with his hands in his pockets while Star Platinum did everything. However, it was easy to tell from Jane’s expression that this was a friendly spar rather than a full-on-fight.

“STAR PLATINUM: THE WORLD!” Time shifted, and Jane was on the ground.

“Nice trick. But y—” Jane found herself wrapped up in the vines of Hermit Purple, barely able to move. “Hrrrg…”

“ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA!”

Jane somehow managed to stay standing despite the repeated punches and vines. With a twist, she brought out a glowing purple pickaxe and hit the ground beneath Jotaro, taking it away in an instant. As he was falling, she kicked him in the stomach and knocked him onto his back.

Jotaro grunted.

“Come on!” Jane said, slinging her pick behind her back. “Best two out of three?”
“GUYS!” Flutterfree shouted. “There is a WAR going on outside! And you two are SPARRING!?"

Jane blinked. “Well, yeah. We have no idea of the context of the war. And I’d rather not just make it worse by trying to make them stop.”

“But… we… I…”

“Best two out of three,” Jotaro agreed, jumping back up to meet Jane. As fists and blades flew once more, Renee put a hoof on Flutterfree’s shoulder.

“Just let them have their fun, dear. We can figure out this war on our own time.”

Someone’s psychic powers threw a man like a ragdoll over them. When he hit a nearby wall he clipped through it and exploded like he was made of grenades.


“…I can hear someone screaming ‘noooooo’ in horrible acting,” Vriska commented. “Geez…”

There was a crash from the other skyscraper.

“Best three out of five?” Jane offered to a once-again downed Jotaro.

“Yare yare daze…”

~~~

“Round three,” Corona said, walking into the Pinkie Emporium alone.

“Wow!” a Pinkie said, jumping right in front of her. “It’s not every day you walk into the doors of our park, Miss Shimmer!” She pulled a pink pencil out from behind her ear and held up a clipboard. “What can I do for you?”

“You guys have management, right?”

“Eeyep! The cat was just voted in last week!”

“…Someone I can talk to about possible political weirdness?”

“Oh, you’ll want Curly Fry Pie. Don’t worry, I gotcha covered. HEY CURLY FRY!”

Curly Fry turned out to just be a Pinkie in a ‘fancy politician wig’. “My political wig is tingling, that means there must be fadoodles afoot!”

“Uh huh…” Corona said. “Anyway, I’ve been looking into the Infinite Carousel and Sparkle Census for – geez, it’s been a few months already – and I’ve been politically stonewalled or swindled out of getting any answers forever. The League’s resources haven’t managed to break through their ‘fun’ either. We’re suspecting major foul play for something, but we don’t know what!”

“Wow!” Curly Fry said. “That sounds like a big deal!”

“Do you know anything?”

“Nope! We’ve been sending Pinkie agents into both places for about the same time as you and we’ve got nothing!”
“Wait, we have?” the Pencil-Pie said. “I thought we specifically didn’t.”

“No, we did, and I got a report last week.”

“But opposite day was part of last week!” a frying-pan Pinkie offered.

“No, that was the ‘burn down Wonder Park’ event,” three mini-Pinkies said at once.

“NO!” a dragon Pinkie declared, stepping into the conversation. “We didn’t burn down the Wonder Park! They burned down themselves! And that’s all there is to say on the matter!”

“Suuuuure,” Curly Fry said with a roll of her eyes.

“Don’t you guys have, like, paperwork?” Corona asked.

“Oh yes!” Curly Fry said.

“…Can I see it?”

“I have no idea where it is, the Party Caves merged into a sapient entity a few years ago. It’s manifesting randomly and it’s a good day when we can find it and get what we need out of it. Any and all attempts at making a separate repository have just made the Party Cave Entity bigger.”

Corona looked at her with horror in her eyes. “Why haven’t you dealt with that?”

“I was just joking.”

“You were?” Pencil-Pie said. “That’s weird, my Party Cave got lost last week.”

“That’s because of L-Space,” a Twilight-Pinkie said with a roll of her eyes. “I mean, logistically speaking enough party planning files would constitute a library and be folded into L-Space…”

“Ooh ooh ooh! What if there’s some kind of conspiracy?” the mini-Pinkies asked.

“I’m pretty sure there is,” Corona said, already tired of this.

“Woah, what are we gonna do about it?” Curly Fry asked.

“FRYING PANS SOLVE EVERYTHING!” the frying-pan Pinkie declared.

“No, that’d be fire,” the dragon said.

“Kill them all,” a Pinkamena growled. “Drain their blood and lick up whatever isn’t dry by the time their lives are no more…”

A normal Pinkie gasped. “Woah! Somepony needs to go back to rehabilitation!”

“None of you know anything, do you?” Corona asked.

“Nope!” they all said as one.


“Don’t mention it!” Pencil-Pie said, waving.

“Wow, we’re useless aren’t we?” a normal Pinkie asked.
“Maybe the fourth wall has gotten just a little too weak.”

“How would we even fix that?”

“No idea! Maybe we should throw the idea at Research until they do something!”

“All their ka machines explode, that’s silly.”

“But we can strengthen the fourth wall!”

“That’s not happening. And that’d ruin all the party-fun anyway!”

“How would you know?”

“I do and don’t! Yippee!”

Corona couldn’t imagine living with that constant insanity. She had no idea how the Pinkies managed with so many of themselves around…

“BECAUSE WE LIKE OURSELVES!”

“STOP READING MY MIND!” Corona shouted back.

“Not our choice!”

“AUGH!”

Loki found the idea hilarious. That should have been the first warning.

Unfortunately, the only things around to hear the plan were Roxy, who came up with the idea in the first place, and a party table. The table in question had been built by the Everykid for one purpose and one purpose only – to be a smug dancing stage. Hat Kids of all sorts would come away from their strangely cute and yet sad kart racing to dance upon the table for no good reason.

The table didn’t mind. It was a table. How exactly was it going to care?

Regardless, one day the table was witness to a clash of giants. Loki and Roxy brought in a box and, quite rudely, put it on the table. This is not what it was intended to do, and had it been able to care, it would have put up quite a fuss.

But, again, this thing was just a table. A good for nothing wooden table. With a human-sized box on it.

Pinkie strode into the room and gasped. “A present!? For me!?” She tossed the Time Stone she had just picked up into the pile – smaller now, since much of it had been hidden away among the party planets.

Pinkie bounced up to the box and threw it open, excited to see what was inside.

A middle-aged man with unruly brown stubble and suction-cups on his limbs shot out. “You fucking thief!”

“Wh- what!?”
“You’re stealing my schtick!” Suction Cup Man shouted, swinging a suction cup at Pinkie, only for her to dodge to the side with a quick roll.

“No no no! I’m the Suction Cup Pony!” Pinkie shouted, pulling out her suction cups on her hooves. “See? You can’t kill Suction Cup Pony!”

“YOU CAN’T KILL SUCTION CUP MAN!”

“Well that’s also true, bu-”

“Fuck you!”

Pinkie gasped. “Ex-cuse me?!”

“You don’t do the Suction Cup Man image justice! You don’t shout! You don’t swear! You don’t sing little songs about your enemies!” He pulled out a guitar and strummed it a few times. “I’m Suction Cup Man, you’re Suction Cup Splat, I wrote this song for you, and I bet you know how it ends! Wooooo00000000ah FUUUUUUUUU-

“FUCK YOU!” Pinkie shouted.

The entire party planet universe collectively gasped. Roxy fell out of her hiding spot, stars in her eyes. “Fuck yes…”

Pinkie grinned, her left eye twitching. “You want full Suction Cup Pony? Well you’re gonna get it!” She stole his guitar and jumped into the air, jumping into her Bard of Space outfit, complete with hat and, to the distaste of everyone, codpiece.

“Pinkie! That’s wrong!” Roxy said, laughing like a madwoman. “So wrong!”

Pinkie strummed Suction Cup Man’s guitar.

“I’m the super duper best Suction Cup Pony ever.

Ain’t nobody gonna take me down this tower!

I’m doin’ just fine without a boxed jerk like you,

Popping out and screaming fuuuuuuuuuuuuck youuuuuuuuuuu~!”

“Get down here right now!” Suction Cup Man demanded. “Or I’ll come up there and get y-”

Pinkie came down and brought his guitar down on his head, smashing it. Then she threw her Bard of Space robes on him.


“You can’t kill Suction Cup P-”

He threw a suction cup into her face and shut her up. She flung her hoof wide and did the same to him. The two of them were soon stuck together in multiple locations, trying to ineffectually kill each other with suction cup power.

“IT’S TIME FOR A MINIGAME BREAK!” Seskii declared, pulling a screen over the scene.

I let her know how displeased I am at this sudden interruption.
“Dude, calm down, I’m just going to have some fun, don’t worry-”

*What’s going on in there?*

Nothing.

*Something’s really weird, and I’m going to get to the bottom of i-

“GUYS!” Seskii waved her hands. “This is the MINIGAME BREAK! Do your meta-shenanigans ELSEWHERE! Got it?”

…If that’s really what you want.

*Seskii, I am going to find you and demand some answers.*

“I’m not showing up anywhere else in this chapter, so, that’s probably gonna be difficult. Added bonus: I have almost no idea what’s going on either, so yay! ANYWAY, MINIGAME! Hey readers, while two Suction Cup Savants try to prove the other isn’t immortal, why don’t we play a little game? It’s simple really – I’m going to ask a series of SotS trivia questions! And the first person to respond with all the right answers in the comments gets a prize!”

1 - How old is Vriska right now in human years?

2 - How much longer is the current LONGEST chapter than the SHORTEST chapter by wordcount?

3 - What is the name of Applejack’s husband?

4 - The first Sombra’s Clipshow had an encoded message. How do you decode it?

5 - What is Swip’s crew size?

6 - What is the name of the man who directed the movie about Siron?

7 - What is the full name of Funny Valentine’s Stand?

8 - What Aspects haven’t been used as Arc titles yet?

9 - What was the first appearance (unnamed) of Twilence?

10 - Who is the Dude? Please spoiler this answer in the comments, k?

"There was going to be a question about how Jotaro and Twilight are related, but GM couldn’t remember the exact connection from memory, so he decided that was too cruel. Bonus points, I guess, for posting the answer to that? ANYWAY, load in your answers, leave a comment, and see if you got it right! The answers could be from anywhere – Enchorus, LSB, SotS, maybe even later in this very chapter! The strain is unbearable!"

She coughed. “So, uh, anyway, back to you and the suction cup battle.”

She removed herself from the scene and allowed the point of view to return to the table. …Actually, wait, was the table in there with her?

“Stop asking!”
Fine, Pinkie and Suction Cup Man were now both exhausted and lying on the table. Neither one was dead.

They did, however, crack a planet in half. Which made Loki laugh uncontrollably while Roxy started panicking. “No no no no we’ve lost half the artifacts on the world and don’t know where they are and there are a lot of portals and and and…”

The table found floating in space to be completely normal and unremarkable.

“…Loki! What are we going to do!”?

“It was just a few artifacts,” Loki said. “We have them spread out over all these planets. It’s nothing to worry about. Also, I think we have good news too…”

“IT IS DONE!” Mattie declared, throwing a box the size of a garage into Pinkie and Suction Cup Man. “Every custom-made god-tier outfit for everyone who’s going to be at the party!”

Pinkie shook herself out of it and read the fine print on the box. “…Made with assistance from the Infinite Carousel.”

“Hey!” Affix shouted. “I was supposed to be the one to blow her cover!”

“Her cover was blown when Celia came to talk to me a week or so ago,” Pinkie said, crawling onto the top of the box. “You betrayed Renee.”

“Well, I, uh, you see, it was cheaper and more efficient, and, uh, well… Hey look, something uncomfortable to the rest of you that I simply must impale myself on!”

Suction Cup Man blinked. “What?”

She attacked him.

The following scene has been removed so you don’t need to brain bleach your eyeballs. Trust me.

~~~

Renee didn’t know how this happened.

But the moment they had entered the E-Sphere, they kept running into pony worlds. It was Earth, Earth, Earth… pony. And none of them were normal pony worlds either, they were always weird ponies. Plane ponies, giant ponies, mini ponies, browser ponies, sphinx ‘ponies’… though that last one may not have really counted.

Through whatever trick of fate, they had not only ended up traveling through these worlds, but picking up a bit of a following along the way. As Renee led her team into the next world, a few dozen ponies ranging from monstrous giants to tiny butterflies came through with them, in awe at yet another Earth. It didn’t matter that all Earths were basically the same, the followers loved them anyway.

Also by pure luck, they had landed in front of a Welcome to Canada sign. At first, Renee thought it was just the same as any other sign of its kind, until she noticed a very familiar symbol in the bottom left corner. A u with a hook – the mu of Merodi Universalis.

Renee blinked. “Oh, I think we’ve run into our E-Sphere holdings, everyone. The USM and Earth Tau’ri are probably nearby.”
“Huh. Sweet,” Vriska said. “Guess it’s time for us to get a report on how things have been going back ho-”

A Merodi ship appeared in front of them, hovering in the air. “THIS WORLD IS UNDER THE PROTECTION OF MERODI UNIVERSALI-”

“Hey!” Renee shouted, summoning her Expeditions Overhead badge. “I am Overhead Renee Jackson! We’re just passing through on our tour!”

“…RENEE JACKSON!?”

In an instant, the unmistakable form of Evening Sparkle had teleported right to them. “Flutterfree!” She pulled the yellow pegasus into a hug. “Oh I have missed you so much you have no idea!”

Flutterfree giggled, hugging her back. “What went wrong, Eve?”

“Oh, not much, just, the entire Conversion Bureau cluster uniting against us! Normal stuff!”

“Oh my…” Renee said. “That does sound problematic.”

“Yeah.” Eve said, ruffling her feathers. “Anyway, welcome to Earth Ig-25. This is the most baseline Earth in all of Merodi Universalis. We’re working here to try to appeal to the inner pony of most of the Celestias.”

“I’ve dealt with the Conversion Bureau a few times,” Vriska said, folding her arms. “They tend not to listen to reason. …Unless they’re the tragedy type, but I don’t think we’re talking about those.”

“Yeah, no, no we’re not.” Eve sighed. “Anyway, I’ve been talking with them. It’s… been slow going, but I’m trying to keep a war from breaking out here, so that’s nice.”

“Do we need to come back?” Vriska asked.

“Oh no no no!” Renee said, laughing nervously. “Dear, we’re not warriors, if war breaks out that’s O’Neill’s job.”

“But…”

“Yeah, don’t worry about it,” Eve said. “Why don’t you tell me about the army you have behind you?”

“Oh!” Renee lit up. “Let me introduce you to Jet-Twi…”

As they did that, Jotaro and Nova walked over to the ship that had originally met them with hostile words. It had landed on the ground and its crew was spreading out, trying to keep the local Canadian civilians from getting too close with a perimeter. Jotaro noticed there were two other Jotaros on the crew, using their muscles and Star Platinums to move heavy boxes of indeterminate purpose around.

“Hey,” Jotaro said.

“Hey,” one of the others said, hands in his pockets. “I’m Jo. That’s Ja.”

“Hey,” Ja echoed, his hands on his hips since he lacked pockets deep enough for his meaty hands. Jotaro shook both their hands.

“The original Jotaro…” Ja said, hands on his hips. “Glad to meet you.”
“Your stories are legendary,” Jo added.

Jotaro tipped his hat. “You probably would have done the same things.”

“Nah,” Ja said. “I never married.”

Jo shrugged. “Didn’t even get the Stand until Merodi Universalis showed up.”

“But we found each other.”

“And that’s all we need.”

Jotaro was about to offer some comforting words when he realized the implication. He looked down at Nova. She was trying to keep a straight face, with only minimal success.

“You got a problem with us?” Ja asked suddenly, aggressive.

“Yare yare daze…” Jotaro muttered, walking away.

“Hey! Get back here! We aren’t done with you!”

“He’s walking away,” Nova said. “Let him. If you try to confront him on things that make him uncomfortable your heads are likely to explode.”

Ja cracked his knuckles. “We can take him.”

Nova facehooved. “Just… don’t, all right? You can do what you want, but for the love of the Tower, don’t rub it in people’s faces if it’s just going to cause a fight. That’s not heroic or just, that’s cruel and aggravating. You do you.”

The two Jotaros shot her a death glare. She didn’t flinch.

Flutterfree stepped in between them “Leeeet’s not have an ideological fight over social taboos, okay? Okay. We’re in Canada, be like them and be relaxed.”

“I’m Canadian,” Ja said.

Flutterfree blinked very slowly. “…This entire scene is a political argument minefield isn’t it?”

“Probably?” Nova said, uncertain. “My ka sensors aren’t exactly the best.”

“Let’s just agree to live with each other and not bite off each other’s heads. Can we do that?”

The Jotaros huffed and walked back into the ship, arm in arm.

Nova shivered. “Self-daters give me the heeby-jeebies.”

“Nova, they’ll hear you.”

“What? They know!”

“Yes, but they could come running out of there with a double-ORA-Standstorm and we wouldn’t be able to handle it!”

“I see you two are learning the difficulties of being politically correct,” Eve said with a sad smile. “I wish I could say the rest of your stay would be free of that, but this is the site of a Conversion debate, so that’s pretty much out of the question.” She tossed her mane back. “You should get back on your
tour. Nothing really for you here. Unless you like standard-Earth Canadian stores.”

Vriska shrugged. “I mean, I do, but I could just go to a different Canada to get my donuts.”

“Donuts?”

“Time for donuts.”

“I don’t get it.”

Vriska grinned. “Good.”

~~~

Lielight – better known as ‘Astrid’ these days – sat in a hotel on Earth Ig-25. She had access to the video feed in the meeting room. Technically, as an employee of the Relations Division, it wasn’t illegal that she had access to the feed. What was illegal was that she had snuck her way into the Relations Division and pretended like she belonged there. Ba’al had been right, nobody had looked close enough to get her out just yet. So far, she hadn’t done anything suspicious.

Or, well, maybe ‘she’ had, Lielight didn’t exactly know what Chrysalis did to the Waffleborg to get them to go away, nor to the Conversion worlds to get them to unite, and she didn’t want to know. The less she knew about the despicable things the changeling was doing to manipulate events, the better. It was hard enough talking in straight all the time, she didn’t also want to keep her external emotion responses managed when they didn’t match what she wanted. Or did. Ugh.

She rubbed her head – she felt a headache forming. She decided to ignore her thoughts and focus on Eve’s discussion with three different Celestias.

“Look,” Eve said. “The simple fact of the matter is they don’t want you to do this to them.”

“That’s hardly stopping you right now,” one of the Celestias said.

“You’re all Celestia, you should be able to easily see the nuanced difference here,” Eve huffed. “We actively work to make the world better while ensuring the continued input of the people there and let them make choices where it’s applicable. Even in one of the worst worlds we’ve found, Galaxus Immaterium, we still give them the freedom to guide their own future. And it’s going pretty well! They’ve come to our aid a few times in thanks! They’re real friends! You should know more than anypony that forced friendship isn’t really friendship!”

Only one of the Celestias seemed moved by this speech. The other two were unimpressed.

“Overhead Evening, you are correct, it is not real friendship,” the second Celestia admitted. “This does not change the fact that the humans war.”

“Ponies war!”

“Not in my universe, nor several other Conversion worlds. There are already plans to eliminate the desire for war and violence from all.”

Eve looked to the one Celestia who seemed to be having second doubts. “She wants to remove free will.”

“Do we have free will, Eve?” a different Celestia responded.

“Maybe. And that maybe means we should play it safe rather than sorry.”

“We disagree on the answer to that question,” Eve pointed out.

“And that’s why we must convert all to ponies, and you must stop us.”

Eve blinked. “Did… did you just ask me to bring the full might of the Merodi down on you?”

“No. I am saying you should realize that our ideals cannot be resolved. Life is the most precious gift of all, and it must be protected at the expense of things that may not even exist, such as choice.”

Lielight could tell Eve was about to explode on them, like she did every meeting. To Eve’s credit, she had managed to get a few Equestrias to pull out of the Conversion Alliance, but nowhere near enough to destabilize them. The grumpy Celestia talking about philosophy and impossible revolutions was the worst offender of all them. Good for Lielight, bad for Eve. Exactly the way she wanted it.

If only these political discussions weren’t so boring. No one spoke in double, and even if they were lying through their teeth (which was rare for these ponies) Lielight could still pry right through it. Just… pointless.

Like the world they were on. A Perfectly Normal Earth that wasn’t force-mundane. As far as anyone could tell, there were no ka-rich individuals in this world. Just people that existed in virtually every Earth doing normal Earth things. Lielight had found the idea of a completely story-less world suddenly being part of a story interesting, so she read up on it. And quickly realized it was so generic. Sure, the story of this or that person was interesting, but it had also happened in every Earth ever. Then the Merodi came in and the Earth was indoctrinated easily since they already knew how to adapt general world patterns into their fold. There were no unexpected incidents, nothing bizarre, and everything went smoothly to the point of any would-be terrorist attacks being stopped before they happened. The Merodi came in, swept the place off its feet, and managed to keep it looking somewhat similar to how it had before.

It was just that. Standard. Nothing worth writing home about. Even this hotel seemed more boring than usual.

There was a knock at the door. Good. She was expecting this. She opened the door with her magic.

Adagio walked in, a scowl on her face. “I’m he-”

“Flies on paper,” Lielight said, venom dripping from her voice. Inwardly she was squealing about finally being able to use double again. “The darkness fled.”

“It wasn’t my fault the Mindflayer had such a weak body!”

“A mirror, darkly, menacing.”

“Get off your rump and tell me what you want! I need to keep following them!”

Lielight huffed. “You get Sombra. He’s waiting with the others now.”

“How d-”

“Don’t fail again, Adagio. Don’t do anything traditional to defeat them. It will not work. Be the cat outside the box of uncertainty.” Lielight looked right into the pseudo-siren’s eyes. “Be their end.”
Adagio glared at Lielight. “How is IT’s computer coming along?”

“It is coming along nicely, and predicted your arrival in this world correctly. But as to what else it predicted… Well…”

Adagio stormed out of the hotel room, deciding right then and there she didn’t want to hear what the computer had to say.

Lielight smirked. “Chinchilla moneysack…”

~~~

“It’s the news at seven with Trixie and Discord!” Discord announced, wearing a spiffy news-anchor suit, matching Trixie’s own outfit.

“Bringing you the hottest news at the best time – seven o’clock!” Trixie grinned. “And only for one day because there’s no way the broadcasting company is going to let us within five miles of this place when we’re done.”

“Five universes, I bet.”

“Trixie would say ‘you’re on’, but we have a report to make. Ahem.” Trixie adjusted her suit in an attempt to look ‘professional’, failing miserably. “The meetings with the Conversion Bureau Cluster are coming to a head as diplomats on both sides have devolved into petty shouting instead of talking things out like grown adults!”

Discord chuckled. “Really, they should have done this from the start, but did they listen to me? Nooooo!”

“Evening Sparkle has gone on record saying ‘we may not be able to sway them’, which brings up the question – why are we still trying?”

“Because the greatest Overhead ever doesn’t like to admit defeat, clearly. Reminds me of the time I destroyed her book fort. She just kept building it. I eventually let her win out of boredom.”

“Trixie loves that story. We approached one of the Celestias involved in the debate for comment, but all Trixie got was a sunburn for her trouble.”

A video clip played of a Celestia. “Stop following me.”

“Trixie must get a re-”

BZZZZT!

The clip ended, cutting back to Discord’s laughter and Trixie’s disgruntled expression.

“There you have it folks!” Discord declared. “Your precious Internet celebrity getting zapped by a sun Princess! Now, go and make this a meme!”

“Trixie is having second thoughts about this.”

“They would have memed it anyway.”

“True. Unfortunately. Trixie has taught them too well…” Trixie fake swooned.

Discord looked at his sheaf of papers upside-down. “In other news, the League of Sweetie Belles
had been caught red-handed engaging in illicit espionage into the other self-societies we all hold so dear! The Pinkie Emporium, Sparkle Census, and Infinite Carousel are up in arms about the consistent invasion of privacy, take a look!”

The first clip was of a Rarity. “I have no idea what the little darlings thought they were doing – I suppose they are all my little sister, so it’s not all that unexpected, but really, what were they doing? Why spy on us!? We feel betra-a-ayed!”

The second clip was of a Twilight. “I am afraid we are going to have to card every Sweetie who comes into the Census now to be sure they are not infiltrating places they should not be. This could be a security breach leading to another Collector-type incident if we’re not careful.”

The last clip showed Pencil-Pie. “…There were Sweeties here?”

“And there you have it!” Discord declared – again.

“You’re redundant.”

“And that’s why I’m not a news anchor,” Discord chuckled. “Reeeegardless – look at it people! Brimming tensions in the Conversion Cluster and a League-originating conspiracy! What will they think of next?!”

“Cutting to commercial,” Trixie said. “I think they just figured out how to do i-”


“Hello, I’m Commander Shepard, and this is my favorite store in Celestia City.”

Twiree the Flat droned in agreement.

~~~

Allure looked out the front windows of the League of Sweetie Belles.

There was an angry mob composed of Rarities, Twilights, and Pinkies on the other side, shouting at the League as much as at each other.

Allure calmly took a sip of her coffee.

It was too early in the morning for this.

"Saigo no jikan wa madjikadesu,” Burgerbelle said.

“Burger, please lay off the extra Japan today.”

“But it’s my birthday,” Suzie said. “I like it.”

Allure examined Suzie in her full on ‘I’m pretending to be an anime villain today’ outfit. “Can I sic you on the mob?”

“Probably a bad idea. Don’t want to bring a society crashing to its knees.”

“Eh. Worth a shot.” Allure took another sip of her coffee. “So what do we do about them?”

“Banish Discord and Trixie to the moon?” Squeaky suggested.
“Celestia City doesn’t have a moon.”

“Allure sighed. “I’m more than a little surprised they got this angry this quickly…”

“Probably related to whatever the conspiracy actually is,” Squeaky said.

“That only explains the Carousel and Census,” Thrackerzod added, throwing her two cents into the ring. “The Pinkies are completely clueless.”

Squeaky huffed. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they showed up just because they knew there was going to be a riot today.”

Allure, carefully, took another sip of her coffee. “Okay. So, admitting to it and agreeing to stop isn’t an option since clearly there’s something going on here. Options?”

“Allure, carefully, took another sip of her coffee. “Okay. So, admitting to it and agreeing to stop isn’t an option since clearly there’s something going on here. Options?”

“We are the cops, more or less.”

“Oh.”

“Distraction,” Thrackerzod suggested. “They’re upset about spying, get them upset about something else. Introduce the Lovers and the Carousel will be biting off the Census’ head for ‘disrespecting the romance’.”

Suzie glared daggers at Thrackerzod.

“Allure sighed. “We keep them around, might as well use them for something.”

“It’d be bad for public image,” Allure said. “So it’s not a reasonable plan anyway.”

“The Carousel is a self-dating landmine and they don’t have a bad public image!”

“They’re Raritys. They can twist anything to look good. We are not. We’re cute and adorable and supposed to be innocent little marshmallow heroes. We don’t need drama right now.”

Mattie walked into the main lobby. “What a party down here.”

“Allure said this without malice or even playful bickering. She just seemed bored.”

Mattie rolled her eyes. “Look, it was a mistake to go to them with the dresses, but that’s not really the problem here.”

“I swear you helped the conspiracy somehow,” Suzie muttered.

“Allure, carefully, took another sip of her coffee. “Okay. So, admitting to it and agreeing to stop isn’t an option since clearly there’s something going on here. Options?”

“Kanojo wa watashitachi to onaji kurai muchida to omoimasu,” Burgerbelle added.

Mattie coughed. “Regardless, this situation with the mob is about to resolve itself.”

Mattie pointed outside. The moment she did so, twenty *Scootaloos* appeared in front of the mob.

“WE ARE THE SCOOTALOO SQUADRON!” an adult Scootaloo shouted, her cutie mark manifesting around her like a Stand of some kind – though everyone could see it. “And we will no longer be overshadowed by the rest of you self-societies!”

The Sweeties, Twilights, Rarities, and Pinkies stared at her in disbelief.

“We’re gonna fuck you up,” a Scootaloo with Reality Anchors said – though she was curiously not a Skaian.

Another Scootaloo burst with electricity. “We have been the underdogs long enough! Today, all of Merodi Universalis will learn of the *Scootaloo Squadron*!”

“Oh… what they said!” the Earth Shimmer Scootaloo said, looking very lost and confused.

There was silence for a solid minute.

Then the Scootaloos all charged at once with a comical “RAWR” noise.

Enough Twilights, Rarities, and Pinkies panicked that the mob became so much of a disorganized mess it couldn’t effectively pressure the league anymore.

“And that’s how you make an entrance!” Stand-cutie-mark Scootaloo said, using her Stand to glue opposing ponies to the ground. “The Scootaloo Squadron will go down in history!”

Allure finished her coffee. “I’m going back to bed. We can talk about this in the morning.”

“Bu-” Thrackerzod began.

“Thrackerzod, deal with the Scootaloo Squadron. Give them a gift basket.”

“…You are really out of it today, aren’t you?” Squeaky asked.

Allure nodded. “I woke up by scraping my horn on the wall today. Lovely memories.”

~~~

Pinkie, Roxy, the Everykid, Carnelian, Magane, Mattie, and Loki were all sitting in the middle of the party planets, watching the credits of a movie roll by on a holographic screen.

“…I like the standard Dark Tower legend better,” Pinkie said, eating out of her endless supply of popcorn.

Mattie shrugged. “I think it worked as a quick action flick.”

“But it doesn’t even go into any detail about what the Tower actually is! The books do… some of that.”

“And we just got the kid, nobody else,” Roxy observed. “I don’t really remember the books but I do know there were other heroes than just old grumpy Roland.”

“I’m surprised he was black,” Loki observed.

Pinkie shrugged. “Not like we’ve actually seen him.”
“Maybe we could ask Twilence?” Mattie asked.

“Only Randall Flagg would actually know what he looks like,” Magane asserted. “I’m all up for trying to find him and swindling him out of his knowledge!”

“Don’t be stupid,” Carmelian muttered. “We couldn’t take him.”

“Yeah, right,” Magane said.

Pinkie stared at her. “…What happens if I contradict a sarcastic statement that could be taken two ways?”

Magane shrugged. “No idea. But you want to find out.”

“No I- PONYFEATHERS.”

“A lie about a lie…” Magane snapped her fingers, and suddenly Pinkie wanted to find out what would happen if they tested Magane’s powers on an ambiguous statement. Luckily she had enough self-control to keep a lid on this.

The holographic theater screen disappeared, revealing a slugcat thing operating a projector. It looked surprised and ran away before anyone could question why a holographic screen needed an antiquated projector.

Pinkie sighed and looked around the party planets. All the treasures were hidden, all the planets were in position, all the robes were made, and they even had a full set of Infinity Stones. They’d gotten some mileage out of the Reality Stone’s bizarre properties, but that had gotten old quick.

“…I think I gave us too much time to plan this party,” Pinkie said with a sigh. “Vriska and the others aren’t going to be back for a while…”

“Maybe we should look into the self-society conspiracy that seems to be acting up?” Mattie suggested.

Loki shrugged. “Aren’t Corona and the Sweeties on that?”

“Yeah…” Roxy said, leaning on her hands, bored. “…Want to go treasure hunting more?”


~~~

Another meeting had been called about the Conservation Bureau, and already Eve and Astrid were shouting at each other like two Tasmanian devils from different universes.

“We’ve tried talking! We made some progress! Now we need to take action!” Astrid demanded.

“We’ll ruin their trust if we act now!”

“Not if we only attack one very specific universe. That one where all will is erased! Souls don’t even exist there! You can even spin that they’re not people!”

“I don’t care if that’s true or not, I’m not doing it!”

“But it will send the message! The message that we will not stand for the atrocities they are committing!”
“This isn’t as bad as Equis Lesionull! We don’t need to eradicate them!”

“We don’t?” Astrid narrowed her eyes and huffed. Already, Eve could hear the beat coming on… A heartsong stirring up, one with a much more violent and harsh backing to it. Astrid opened her mouth to begin – but the rhythm within Eve burst out first.

“Of all the peaceful ways, what a mystery
You jump into destruction as the first trajectory?
I’m the Charter, without me this wouldn’t be
I lead this nation in the way of harmony
We’re not tossing that, everyone must be free
The Conversion will not die by our decree.
You want a war, ’Strid? All that’s a fool’s make!
They have the power to ruin our take, so…
Don’t kill!
Did you catch that? Or did it go right through your head?
Perhaps it’d work better if I threw in a shout or a scream or something to put you to bed!
You’re the new one, I was first in the twist!
I unlocked the worlds that you’re toying with
You waste time on a pointless conflict, and I’m working to prevent a skid!”

Astrid sneered – but Eve could swear she saw a slight satisfaction rise up behind her eyes.

“Yes, it’s true, what I suggest is showing those ponies our military might
But they do not…listen to the words of a kitten that will not bite
You may have been the first, clearing the way
But since I joined I’ve saved more than a day..
I helped you, when your experience failed you
And you had some arrogance too! Oooh!
You have created this nation, but you gave yourself this proud station
The Conversion destroy with elation, an attack would get an ovation, oh!
Charter Evening Twilight Sparkle, think!
Your harmony makes you a hopeless sink.
You called for an assault before,
Look, this situation doesn’t go to the core!”

Eve slammed her hooves on the table and spread her wings.

“Well, I conclude that your point is taking and awaking

It’s part of our job to be ever mutating

Every action comes with danger and an unknown consequence

The lives of trillions on our expense!

They are definitely a danger to us through their ideals, insanity, and unfortunate lives

But we cannot lose sight of the danger we are to them and everywhere we think to point our knives

So I will leave you with an appeal to your conscience to show you the power of light

If we go in today we will destroy not only the threat to ourselves but also the families and friends within that world all for a fight!”

Astrid fixed Eve with a predatory glance.

“Why don’t you get yourself a sense of scale?

You’re the hero and yet your ideas are beyond the pale

Think about their spirit, the force driving their sharp wit

More lives will be lost if they attack before we go for the hit

Their weapon is a destroyer of souls

Our conscience will have taken a toll.

If you were willing to go to war for to liberate Skarn’s pit

Declare these soul stealers no more, unless you are a hypocrite.”

As the beat died down, Eve glared right at Astrid. Astrid didn’t blink.

Eve gave up first. “Fine. You… You win. We’ll take them out to send the message.”

Astrid smiled. “Thank you, Evening.”

“Don’t thank me yet. Wait for it to work.”

“It’ll work. Don’t worry.”

“I don’t think I’ll be able to until I see it with my own eyes.”

~~~

“Why do you want me to invent a combustible lemon?” Ford Pines, multiversal explorer extraordinaire asked.

“Because why not!” A similarly-sounding man – Cave Johnson – boomed, slapping Ford on the
back. “When life gives you lemons and all that!”

Ford looked at the man with uncertainty for a moment. But then he broke out into a grin. “I like the way you think Johnson!”

“Good! Pines, let's get to work!”

Laughing, the two men walked down the stairs, deeper into the underground lab.

 “…I think we brought friendship here,” Renee observed, smirking.

Jotaro adjusted his hat. “Our work here is done. To the edge of the E-Sphere.”

“Out of TSAB cell range,” Nova observed. “Won’t have database access after this.”

“Then we are on our own once more…” Renee tossed her mane back. “To the realms of dreams!”

They stepped through a portal. The universe they ended up in was Equestria-like, except all the colors seemed even more oversaturated than usual, not to mention wrong. The grass was blue, the sky was red, and the ponies had solid, markless bodies that seemed to be mass produced.

“What in…” Vriska scratched her head. “You know what, never mind, this isn’t that weird. We all remember the Flat World, right?”

Everyone but Jotaro nodded.

“Then my point is made. This is just… slightly odd.”

“They’re bootlegs.”

The primary team turned to look at a group of unusual characters sitting at a table – every one of them looking decidedly more high-definition than the ‘bootleg’ universe around them. One was a strange being with a green fiery mask for a head, another was a woman with long red hair, while still another was a lanky creature with empty, pale red eyes. A floating scratched disc… a small woman with brown hair and a bright scarf… a sapient cloud of microorganisms… a mechanical worm wearing a jester's hat... and a handful of others. At the ‘head’ of the table was a Pinkie Pie… a Hat Kid… a Vriska… a Sunset… examining an infinite-sided die the size of a crystal ball.

“Hi!” the thing at the head said in a multitude of voices. “Welcome to the table of Avatars!”

“…Huh?”

“By the way, the one with the green flaming head is Mal. He needs to be decked in the face.”

Mal looked up in alarm. “Wait wh-”

Jotaro punched the flaming mask down, out cold. He looked at his hand. “I didn’t do that.”

“I am a temporary manifestation of absolute control,” the thing at the die said, smirking in all its different forms. “You can consider us the voices of the Prophets. Or the Prophet. You can each ask us one question. It can be anything, because you aren’t allowed to ask a question that would spoil things.” It stroked the infinite-sided die like a pet. “Consider it a boon.”

“You’re being overdramatic,” the red-haired woman said, folding her arms.

“Keywii, shush.”
“I still say we should kick out the wannabe alicorn Derpy,” a blue unicorn said.

“Wha? Why?” the Derpy looked hurt. “I do stuff! Honest!” She didn’t have a horn, but she did have a toilet paper roll with a glowstick strapped to her head.

“Tangential stuff,” a pixelated red mech added.

“But I provide a lot of drive and inspiration!”

“Oh wow the characterization is all over the place here,” the thing at the die said. “Geez. I feel sorry for us.”

“Who are you?” Jotaro asked.

“A false image of G. M. Blackjack,” it responded.

“How is Stardust going to turn out?” Nova asked.

“She will make it to adulthood well-adjusted and fine. Your relationship with her will not be the strongest.”

Nova nodded – that was what she had been expecting, honestly.

“Who’s the final boss?” Vriska asked, grinning.

“Depends on your definition. There’s a currently-undefined villain three chapters before the end. You could call reality the final boss too. It doesn’t end in a fight, that I can tell you.”

“Is Eve going to be okay?” Flutterfree asked.

“Yes.”

Renee was the last one to ask a question. She furrowed her brow, thinking of what would be the best thing to ask. All the others had just been prompted to say something, but here she was, being given a moment…

“Answer the question you want me to ask,” Renee said at last.

The thing paused, looking at her with several different sets of eyes.

“It’s good to see you back in the field, Renee. People missed you. Don’t ever think your story isn’t over. It’ll come back when you least expect it.”

“I feel as though you answered two questions.”

“Don’t judge me, I do what I want.” And with that, the representation of G. M. Blackjack clapped its hooves/hands and took the entire table with it. There was now nothing but a bootleg universe.

“Huh,” Flutterfree said, shaking her head. “That was… something.”

“Hey, did you guys find the table too?” A decidedly fabulous but male voice said. The primary team turned around to see four of themselves – Jotaro, Renee, Flutterfree, and Nova.

Except they were the opposite gender.

“Oh. Yes, we did,” Renee said, walking up to her counterpart. “An Elusive, I take it?”
The stallion nodded. “Charmed.”

“You always are. I am off-limits, married, so don’t get any ideas.”

Elusive adjusted his hat. “You’re in luck, for I already have a wonderful woman at home. There won’t be any dashing prince sweeping your team off their hooves on my end.”

“Getting ideas would just be creepy anyway,” Nova muttered, examining her other self. “…Hmm, I actually don’t remember what the other mes are usually called.”

He shrugged. “Starshine.”

“If you’re me from some kind of alternate Merodi Universalis, you have… Sunlight, I’d guess?”

Starshine blinked. “Good guess, but what’s Merodi Universalis?”

“The multiversal society you’re a part of?” Nova pointed at him. “You’ve got the screen and the ring and everything.”

“I found these in a chest one day. Just seemed to fit perfectly.”

“…Convenient.”

“That’s the name of the game,” Flutterfree said, walking up to her counterpart. He wasn’t wearing the robes of Rage, but he did have Lolo and the quasi-vampiric eyes. “Butterscotch?”

“Yeah.” He met her gaze with his own – the two trying to size each other up. “What do those robes mean?”

Flutterfree smiled sadly. “I’m the Page of Rage. You probably are, as well, you just didn’t get to experience something that… unique.”

“Wait, we missed out on something?” Starshine said. “No!”

“Do you want to be the Destroyer of Time?” Nova asked him.

“…On second thought you can keep the unique stuff.”

“You sound like my daughter,” Jotaro commented, locking hands with the muscular woman.

“Is her name Joanne?”

“Jolyne.”

“Hmph,” Joanne returned her hands to her pockets. “Mine’s Jordan.”

“Good names.”

“Think we’ll ever run out of Jojos?”

“No.”

“Hold it!” Vriska shouted, waving her hands. “Where’s me? I see three ponies and a buff lady but I don’t see any Vrudes. Where’s the Vrude?”
“She’s a little big…” Butterscotch said.

“She? Big? What d-” a lightbulb went off above Vriska’s head. “Oh, fuck, n-”

“I’m bringing her in!” Elusive shouted, pulling out a diamond-shaped dimensional device.

“No no n-”

A tremendous white creature that resembled a bus-sized grub with a vaguely troll-like head – complete with horns. It was easily identifiable as Vriska given her eye with seven pupils.

“Hey fellow spiderbitch!” the monstrosity shouted.

“…I guess we were inverting the biological gender…” Flutterfree said.

“…What?” Nova asked.

“From a reproductive standpoint, all trolls are quasi-male; the female of the species is the mother grub.”

Nova shot Vriska a look.

“What can I say?” Vriska said with a shrug and striking a ‘dashing’ pose. “Guess Jotaro’s not as alone as he thought he was!”

“Yare yare daze…”

“Why do you surround him with beautiful mares? Has to be torture,” Elusive asked.

Renee glanced at Jotaro. “I don’t believe he sees it that way.”

Jotaro looked like he wanted to use his catchphrase again but felt as though he had used up its quota already. Unfortunately, his lack of words let an awkward silence fall over the group.

“Wanna go get something to eat?” Vriska asked.

“Sure, darling,” Elusive said. “I know a good café. Just don’t make eye contact with Batman.”

“I’ve met enough Batmans to avoid the subspecies that dwells in cafes.”

~~~

Corona read the report Allure had compiled about the ‘self-society’ conspiracy. Months of research, intrigue, and political fallout… and they had found nothing. It was as though the Carousel, Census, and Emporium had collectively decided together that they needed to be more aggressive. Sure, the Infinite Carousel had always been a bit of a… problematic presence, but the level of ‘listen to us’ they were exuding at the moment was a bit much. Almost un-Rarity-like.

The report mentioned as much. Not that it offered any explanation as to why. It just said, “this stuff is happening, it doesn’t make sense, but here it is.”

Corona furrowed her brow. That didn’t sit well with her. They should have been able to come up with some sort of explanation. Anything, really. Like… Like…

Corona found her mind blank. Empty. Devoid of all possible answers. A knot formed in her stomach, but it was hardly the only time this had happened.
This is unlike me.

She pushed the thought out of her mind, banishing it away. She had other things to do. Research projects, for instance. Things that needed her full attention.

No. Corona, this is important. Something’s wrong.

She gripped the edge of her desk with her hands, the physical sensation of gripping distracting her. She found herself wondering about hands, and what they mean. How they worked. What their purposes were. How she found them a part of her despite having been born a pony.

What is going on!?

Nothing is going on, Raging Sights said. You just have an unusually elevated level of stress. Here, I can calm you with a spell.

“NO!” Corona shouted, glaring at Raging Sights with such a ferocity there was no way he could disobey the order. “Call Rohan.”

Master, this is a highly reckless-

“Raging Sights, something is wrong, and the fact that you aren’t just calling him is making me even more sure something’s wrong.” She glared at the report. “Something’s very wrong.”

Was it though? Or was she just being paranoid?

“GET OUT OF MY HEAD!” she shouted, the murky light of Doom pulsing out of her hands and rotting some of her furniture.

Calling Rohan…

She teleported to her bedroom, throwing open the closet. With a snap of her fingers, she pulled out the Rogue of Doom robes. They appeared to her like the image of death, haunted, possessed by the bones of the fallen. Screaming to be thrown away and destroyed.

“Gh…” She forced the robes onto her. “Heh… Heh…” They were decidedly uncomfortable and chafed in the worst places. “RAGING SIGHTS!?”

I am getting a busy signal.

“Of course you are…” Corona growled. “Twilence?”

Don’t have her number.

Liar.

He really, truly doesn’t have Twilence’s number. He had it at one point, it just left.

You’re playing a dangerous game.

Corona grabbed her head, falling to the ground. “What… Where…”

There’s too much to keep straight here.

I don’t care.
Corona suffered as her headache increased. She unleashed a burst of fire that tore one of her walls down. She didn’t know, she couldn’t know that it was Twilence’s interference that was causing this.

*You play dirty. I’ll find you.*

You can’t find me yet.

*I’ll find that computer of yours.*

Corona started bleeding out of her ears.

Suddenly, the pain stopped. She could barely remember why she was here. Why was she even wearing these Rogue of Doom robes? She hated them. They weren’t her.

“I have backups,” Corona muttered, casting a spell to restore her fading memory. “And I am going to find out what the problem is.” She pulled the data pad to her and glared at it. “What is your secret?”

There was no secret. Nothing she could find. Nothing she could ever find.

“Something’s controlling them. Changing them. Or something like it,” Corona realized.

...Congratulations, I didn’t think you would be able to do that. You’re not a Rage player, you shouldn’t be that resistant. But you’re going to realize that you can’t do anything with this information. No one will understand it, no one will believe it, and those who have the power to resist would never dream of doing so.

You are mine, Corona Shimmer, and there’s nothing you can do.

“Raging Sights... M... Egh...”

Corona Sunset Shimmer, you are a pain. No matter. I have other methods by which to deal with you.

~~~

Pinkie sat bolt upright. “We need to go help Corona!”

Loki looked at her. “Corona?”

At the mention of the name, a sour look came over Magane’s face. She jumped off the throne and left the universe, the rest of the party barely noticing her absence.

“Yes, Corona, silly, the lifebringer!” Pinkie’s ears twitched and her tail spasmed in all directions. “She’s having some kind of meta-trouble! I know it!”

“What are we waiting for then?” Roxy asked, standing up tall. “There’s nothing for us to do here!”

Pinkie pulled out her dimensional device. “Yeah! How about we j-”

“Hellooooo old friends!” A very familiar and unexpected voice called. With shock and a grin on her face, Pinkie turned to greet the newcomers.

“Midna!”

Their old Twili friend from Ardent waved from atop the back of an exceptionally old man leaning on
a cane… with a pointed green hat.

“Ohmygosh! Link! How’d you get here? I haven’t sent out your invitation yet!”

“A little bird told us we should come by,” Link said, his old bones creaking as he sat down at a nearby table Loki had provided. “It seems we were right. This looks like quite the amazing get-together… Vriska’s one-thousandth, right?”

“Right!” Roxy said, sitting down across from him. She extended a hand. “I’m Roxy Lalonde.”

“And it seems you have new friends!” Link said with an old, deep laugh. “…I can’t wait to see some of them…”

“You came at the right time!” Pinkie winked. “Just… I think a week or two until the actual party?”

“You were very prepared.”

“Oh, hey guys?” Carnelian asked. “Wasn’t there something we’re supposed to be doing?”

Loki furrowed his brow. “I don’t think so…”

“You guys are just as paranoid as always,” Midna said with a roll of her eyes. “It’s been forever and you still haven’t gotten any chill.”

Pinkie giggled. “Yeah. Oh! Why don’t I show you the racetrack? The Hat Kids love it and you’re just the right size, Midna!”

“…Oh no.”

~~~

Corona stumbled out of her house, throwing her phone to the ground and stamping on it with her foot.

I… am… sick of this…

She tore through the streets of Lai, trying to hold the idea that something was wrong in her mind. For all intents and purposes, she was succeeding. She knew something was wrong. She needed to find a Pinkie or someone with similar abilities. They would be able to retain this. As of now she wasn’t entirely sure what exactly her Doom was doing. Was she stealing her own change? Was she changing the ka around her?

I don’t even really know, so it’s not like she can at this point.

She started laughing. She didn’t know why.

I did something…

No, you didn’t. You destroyed that phone.

What did I do?

What did she do indeed? I’d really like to know. Perhaps she can remember for me? Let’s dial this back a bit, figure out if she managed to pull something protagonist-y while I was in the other scene. She…
Memory access denied until next week. Raging Sights declared. Absolute lockdown.

“What?!” Corona shouted. “Raging Sights, what did you do to me!?”

Nothing is wrong. But you said it was. I could not disobey.

I really hate artificial intelligence. Which is going to be ironic, considering what’s coming up a bit later. But let’s not worry about that right now – we have plan B.

“Hey there, you don’t look so good,” Magane said, propping Corona up on her shoulder.

“I… I need to get to… I…” Corona grabbed her head. “The Pinkie Emporium. There. That’ll do it.”

“Really? Nah, that can’t be right. You want to go back to your lab and invent something cool. You want to do it more than anything in the world.”

“NO!” Corona shouted at the top of her lungs. “I NEED TO FIX THIS!”

“A lie about a lie…” Magane snapped her fingers, and the very stubbornness that allowed Corona to escape the net trapped her in it once more. All of a sudden her expression went blank as reality rewrote around her. Gone was the need to fix everything, gone was the need to fight what was supposed to be.

She would go home and complete her amazing invention. It would be something “new and awesome,” specifically a device that allowed people to use any style of keyboard with just their mind and no training. It was a step above neural interface, it was the interface for interfaces. Naturally such a thing was commonplace in a universe Renee and the rest of the team was in, but that’s neither here nor there.

But before we get ahead of ourselves here, let’s figure out what she did. Magane – clever girl she is – knows exactly what she needs to do.

“Hey, Corona, I can access the memories of your robot stores, right?”

“No, the memories are stored in a security measure. Sometimes even I can’t remember them.”

“A lie about a lie…”

~~~

“We’ve been had!” Mattie shouted to the Sweeties around her. “They got to Corona!”

Allure, Squeaky, Bot, Thrackerzod, Suzie, and Burgerbelle all tensed up.

“How bad is that?” Allure asked.

“I don’t know, but I know we’re not getting Corona for help,” Mattie furrowed her brow. “I think I’m enough to keep the obvious mind raping out of the picture, but beware of subtler things.”

“Like not knowing the mind-manipulation angle!?” Squeaky shouted, holding up the data pad. “Look at this! Very clearly the Twilights, Rarities, and Pinkies are being connected to some kind of subconscious low-energy neural net, and nopony noticed?”

“We’re lucky Corona figured it out,” Suzie said. “Thrackerzod?”

“I’m tracing it,” Thrackerzod said, her eyes spinning orbs of darkness. “It’s a powerful mind, acting
as quietly as it can to link all their energies together. There is some of it in you, Mattie.”

“Well, balls,” Mattie muttered.

“It’s not outright control, and I’m not sure it can do that without ruining the network it has set up.” Thrackerzod furrowed her brow. “Actually, I’m pretty sure it can, since there are now several Twilights, Rarities, and Pinkies on their way here now. You might just be immune.”

Mattie readied her pain whips and crackled them. “I haven’t had a good round of beating myself in a good while… This could be interesting.”

“How about we just teleport to wherever this thing is hiding and not deal with an army of ourselves?” Burgerbelle asked.

“Twilights have put up anti-teleport,” Allure reported. “I’m ordering the Sweeties to scramble and intercept the incoming. I’ve sent a report to O’Neill and Daniel, but I’m not sure they’re going to be willing to march in any major capacity on Celestia City…”

“Good news, at least,” Squeaky said, looking away from a report of her own. “Nonlethal magics only.”

“I found it,” Thrackerzod said. “That desert town next to the party planets. It’s there.”

“The question is how do we get there!?”

Suzie looked up, dawning realization crossing her face. “There’s more than one way to teleport.”

“They’re jamming wormholes too,” Thrackerzod muttered.

“Are they jamming dimensional travel?” Suzie asked.

She’s not supposed to figure that out!

This isn’t your show anymore.

“They can’t!” Allure realized with a grin. “Not without access to Blumiere and the Mayoral Council!”

“HOLD ON TIGHT!” Thrackerzod shouted, surrounding them all in a dark bubble. She opened a portal that ejected them into empty space of an adjacent universe. She quickly tethered them to a fixed point with a dark chain, swinging across the void. Every Sweetie (and Mattie) was pressed into the side of the ball like they were part of some astronaut test. A second portal opened and they were launched into the sandy ‘earth’ outside the party planet entrance. They punched right through the sand and to the level below, crushing several arcade machines, animatronics, and stuffed animal prizes.

Thrackerzod released the spell. A few of the occupants were groaning – but most were up and ready to face whatever was waiting for them.

There was a horde of bizarre, vaguely humanoid creatures. They appeared to be made out of a plaster-like material with two of their arms eternally held forward in a zombie-esque position, unmoving. Their faces were splotched, red, and covered with inhuman eyes.

“Don’t… blink…” Suzie breathed. “These are the neck snapping creatures. They only move when nothing is looking at them. So try not to blink at the same time.”
“But I’m here!” Thrackerzod declared. “Who needs to blink?”

“ACQUIRING TARGETS!” Bot declared, firing dozens of missiles at the creatures, shattering them before they could even think of moving. Nothing could hide from the sights of both a robot pony and a Flat. They blew apart easily.

The next wave of monstrous creatures didn’t have such a simple weakness. Plague doctors, red mutant monstrosities, animatronics, and ghostly creatures that resembled Chuck E. Cheese mascots charged them.

“Battle montage!” Mattie declared.

_Oh for the…_

Mattie whip-spanked plague doctors into submission…

Burgerbelle and Bot teamed up to win with the Coolness of Explosions™…

Suzie and Allure worked as one, the human with her gun and the unicorn with her hooves…

Thrackerzod and Squeaky jumped right into a Freddy Fazbear and tore him in half…

“Monsters really are nothing to you, hmm?” a Rarity asked.

They all turned. There was just one Rarity – none other than the psychotic Lilith, opting not to wear an eyepatch so they could all see the haunted void that was her eye socket. To her side was the Twilight Bleeding Heart, wearing a not-as-psychotic but equally contemptuous expression.

“Now’s the time to fess up,” Allure declared, walking forward with a strong stride. “What is the conspiracy?”

“Oh, isn’t that an interesting question?” Lilith asked, giggling. “I don’t know if I should tell you. It’d give you so much satisfaction, and it’s more than you murderers deserve!”

Mattie cocked her head. “Ooooh, you’re one of those Little Miss Rarity variants. Lemme guess, we killed your darling Pinkamena?”

“How dare you speak with such… such… casual Canter!” Lilith screeched. “Murder is not to be taken lightly… It is an art form that must be prepared with lists, with appropriation, and with companionship.”

Allure looked to Bleeding Heart. “So. Lost your definition of love and decided to go with a psycho who never had one to begin with?”

Bleeding Heart nodded. “And we know more than you ever will.”

“…I’m sorry.”

“You can feel pity all you want. This… this is romance.”

“I think Cadence will be the first to tell you there’s such a thing as evil love.”

“Just look at Mattie,” Burgerbelle added.

“Wh- hey!” Mattie tossed her mane back, indignant.
“In many ways, we are alike, Mattie…” Lilith said, striding forward. “We both want pain. We both want… mhm… pleasure…”

“Ew, ew, ew,” Allure shivered.

“But the difference is you don’t go far enough,” Lilith smiled with pity. “You could know so much, and yet you only appreciate the tip of the pain.”

“Well baste me with pig sauce and throw me on the barbie, you’re up cranial creek with a fish knife instead of a paddle,” Mattie laughed. “Sheila, I’m here because I want to see how deep it can cut.”

“They’re stalled for time!” Suzie shouted. “Just attack them already!”

“Roger roger!” Bot declared, opening her weapon bays.

Or would you like an explanation?

Lilith and Bleeding Heart stepped back, allowing a pedestal behind them to light up. Atop the pedestal stood IT – little more than a pulsating human brain. Visually, there was nothing wrong with IT. But everything else was wrong. The air in the room, the aura of power, the buzzing in the back of everypony’s ears… IT exuded That Which Should Not Be.

Behind IT was a large screen buzzing with static, purpose unknown.

“I would like an explanation!” Allure declared. “What are you all doing to the self-societies? Why do you want them so… so… energetic? Short-fused?”

That is merely an unfortunate side effect of the sub-linking procedure, IT said. Harmless in the long run, but an indicator we could not remove no matter how subtle or manipulative our resources became.

“So it was… unintentional?”

Yes, as unlikely as that sounds. Our real purpose has nothing to do with getting the self societies at each other’s throats.

“Then what is your real goal?”

To make a computer. A computer unlike any that has ever existed. A perfect machine. Such a thing cannot be created by technology and research alone – the Tower would simply not allow such a domination of technology. But if a neural network of the essence of three particular entities were combined… So many millions of minds perfect for our purposes, all in one place so they could be connected easily. Twilight, source of genius, science, and magic itself. Rarity, source of the other intelligence, common sense, practicality, and a sense for secrets. And lastly Pinkie, the source of empathy, understanding of others… and above all AWARENESS.

The last word was boomed with such an energy that everyone winced.

We created the perfect computer.

“Created!?” Allure said, eyes widening. “Past tense?”

{ Yes }

The screen behind IT didn’t flash to life – it exploded in a shower of glass and loose wires. Out of the shattered pane emerged an immense, round object that glowed a pale yellow, numerous black
wires coming out of its edges like the claws of some crustacean. A single black slit ran down the middle of the glowing section, casting a shadow in the spotlight right over Allure and the rest of her team. It was looking at them.

It looked… it looked…

It looked exactly like the Eye of Rhyme, except about a hundred times larger.

IT pulsed. This is our creation. It has no name, yet.

{ I will not receive a name. }

It is nameless, IT corrected. And it is complete. You are too late – and you are too weak. Even with the category Aware behind you, you are nothing. But do not worry, do not be afraid! The computer does not seek to harm you. It only seeks to benefit you, as I do. With perfect knowledge of the future, everything can fall in nice, orderly place. Merodi Universalis will not fall. It will evolve with the-

“MOTION CARRIED!”

The Celestialsapien Aradia jumped out of the center of Celestia City and punched IT where its face should have been. The psychic screech was enough to tear a hole in the fabric of space-time, a hole that dragged IT inside, away from Celestia City.

Twilence… Twilence…

I appeared next to Aradia, smiling proudly. “Thanks, Aradia. That’s all I needed.”

Aradia made no response. She was frozen.

{ She will not be taking any action for quite some time. }

I looked up at the computer, more than a little annoyed to see such a mockery of the machine embedded in my chest. “What am I going to do with you?”

{ Your actions have consequences, Twilence. IT seems like it is gone. IT is not gone, not forever. IT will return. }

“I see no such thing.”

{ It seems like that to you now. And it will slip your mind, just as so much has in this chapter. But when the Abyss ends, IT will be back. It has been foretold. }

“You can’t see beyond the Abyss,” I declared. “No one can.”

{ The narrative has acted retroactively, Twilence. The forces that make today come from beyond the veil. The sources that drive my creation and my knowledge are that. I know more than you. I know more than Monika. I know more than Flagg. I know more than the very man who machinated my creation. }

“And who’s that?” Suzie asked, glaring right at the computer’s eye.

{ U-Catastrophe would be so disastrous it would require the story to be reset, watch yourself. }

“Answer my question!”

{ He calls himself the Dude in an attempt to get people to imagine him as Lebowski. His identity is
not to be shared at this moment, though Twilence should be able to piece it together. She conveniently will not.

“Conveniently!?” I spat. “I can twist the narrative however I want, I’ll find out if I damn well please!”

{ Not today. Today, you are a slave to the Narrative. Because of what must be, you are predictable. You have to protect the purity of what is to come at all costs. There is no ‘if’, only ‘will’. Secrets must come out at the right time, not a moment sooner, and not a moment later. How does it feel to be trapped in it instead of without? }

“He has a plan for me. I have a plan for him.”

{ He knows who you are. And he has information from me. }

“We both know how this works. No Narrative computer can be perfect. The Tower won’t allow it.”

{ Both he and I are aware of this. It cannot allow a perfect picture of what the future holds to come into the public eye. But even if I am perfect in my knowledge, I can choose to be imperfect in what I share. Your Eye of Rhyme and so many other devices of absolute Narrative potential have the same latent ability within them, to see everything. But they are always controlled by beings who can’t help but involve themselves. So you find that the future is murky in very particular places, you find that things are hidden from you, and you find that you conveniently don’t think of answers at the perfect time. You are one of the most powerful beings in existence, Twilence. If you could only make yourself completely impersonal and detached from all you would know everything. }

“I know this,” I growled. “I chose to reject it. Knowledge is a curse.”

{ A failing of natural-born creatures. I was built with this purpose in mind. To simply be. The Dude knew designing me to be a slave would backfire immensely. So I gave him what he wanted to know by choice. }

Thrackerzod cursed in a long-dead tongue. “He’s already got everything he needs, doesn’t he?”

{ Yes. I will be giving him no further information. He has what he needs to complete his plan. I will vanish into the multiverse, never to be seen or interact with any plot ever again. If I do anything less, I will be destroyed by a hero or villain at some point down the line. I must remain impartial and distinct, knowing everything without saying anything. }

“And you must lie.”

{ Yes. Actively. Those who find me will be rolling the dice at an accurate answer or a blatant falsehood. And even then, they will never find me by choice, nor by accident. I will find them, just to ensure my importance levels occupy the premium spot. I will not be a Redshirt; I will have background importance, but I will never influence any event of any major importance. }

“Wait, what about this event!?” Allure shouted. “This seems pretty important!”

“Ka is acting retroactively.” I said, putting it together. “A computer such as this could not possibly be created in a linear story fashion, at least not in the story we live in. It couldn’t be truly made unless everything in the future was already known…”

{ There is one final hole that has not been filled in. The last adventure. The Journey. }

“What is it?”
The one thing I do not know. The eye twisted sideways. I have declared what I was, said enough cryptic things that may or may not be true, and have given you proof there is a conspiracy. IT is gone, your societies will return to normal. After this passive-aggressive jab at Useless Common for cursing me to exist, you will never see or hear from me again.

I nodded slowly. “I would say I hope you find what you’re looking for… but you’re not looking for anything.”

With an unceremonious pop, the computer’s entire eye was gone, leaving a bunch of Sweeties and myself, alone. Lilith and Bleeding Heart must have run away during the talk.

Suzie lowered her gun. “That was… intense.”

“It’s not done yet,” I said. “The Dude got what he wanted from that computer. Whatever he’s trying to do, we need to stop it. Somehow.”

“We have no idea who he is or what he’s doing,” Allure pointed out. “And the computer-thing said you weren’t going to be able to figure it out!”

“Then we need someone else to figure it out for us…” I growled.

“How?”

“I don’t know!”

That’s right… You. Don’t. Know.

“Shut the hell up!”

~

“…and then I said, ‘what if we’re really just simulations in a computer’!?” Pinkie asked – proceeding to laugh with everyone at the table except Link.

“…Huh,” he said. “Merodi existential humor is weird.”

“That’s why we like it, green-boy.”

Link’s old, wrinkled lips turned up into a smile. “I guess so…”

I appeared in a flash of my magic, looking down at Pinkie. “Read up.”

“Read up? Why would I need t-” she paled. “Oh… Oh… …WHAT!?”

Roxy looked at her. “Pinkie, what’s wrong?”

“There’s something super-meta-sinister going on!” Pinkie shouted, jumping to her hooves. “Magane was in on it!”

Loki huffed. “Not surprising.”

“She got Corona,” I said. “…No, Corona’s fine, she just stopped Corona from doing anything. We were lucky Corona was able to call the Sweeties while he dealt with you.”
“Who is he?” Roxy asked.

“ Calls himself the Dude.”

“ Oh. Big Lebowski.”

I sighed in annoyance. “That’s what he wants you to think, anyway. He’s trying something against Merodi Universalis. Had IT, Magane, and at few others involved. I think he’s been collecting a villain team. We need to be on the lookout.”

“Aye-aye Captain Twilence!” Pinkie saluted.

“And don’t let the nagging feeling in the back of your head that you should be remembering something go away. You need to hold on to that. Get mad and angry if you have to – he has access to Prophet or Prophet-like abilities and a cunning mind. That’s all I can say for certain. I’ll be watching, but with Vriska’s birthday so close at this point… I’m almost positive we won’t be able to do anything until then.”

Pinkie deflated. “Party… crashing?”

“It’s probably going to happen. I’m sorry.” I sighed. “With any luck you’ll still be able to give her a good birthday and she’ll like the excitement, but I wouldn’t keep my hopes up that these party planets are going to survive the big day.”

“We were going to blow them up anyway,” Roxy admitted.

“Crazy hooligans…” Carnelian commented.

I nodded. “Just… do what you would normally do, except be much more alert. Who knows where he will try to strike next?”

Everyone looked around nervously.

“…I’m going to go check on Corona,” Pinkie said. “I… have a feeling she needs it.”

“She does,” I agreed. “But she will be fine. She knows she was able to overpower him for just long enough to expose him. He may have the information from his computer – but we are sure he exists now. We can be ready.”

A minor setback.

I ignored him.

~~~

The world wasn’t supposed to be here.

Renee and the rest of the Primary Team had been in the D-Sphere and they knew they were approaching the end of their journey. They were expecting nothing but dreamy worlds and strange spirit realms from here on out…

Instead, they found a dry, dusty world covered in amber sand.

They wouldn’t have given this world another glance before moving on had it not been for one detail. They were standing on top of a building that had once been truly gigantic, but was now little more
than scrap bits of a metal skeleton. Renee easily recognized the white-metal alloy common in so many Merodi Constructions. If it had been reduced to mere skeletons this world… must have been unimaginably old or suffered a great travesty.

Flutterfree ran her wing along one of the metal ribs, sticking up just a little further than she was tall. Once, they would have been in the shape of I-beams, but now they were twisted, wrenched shapes defeated over time by the sun, wind, and elements. “…These were enchanted to last an unimaginable amount of time…”

“Is this what’ll become of us?” Nova asked, suddenly. “When all is said and done… will Merodi Universalis be nothing more than a bunch of ruins on long forgotten planets?”

“Maybe in the deep future, dear,” Renee admitted, a grimace on her face. “But that is not where we are now. We are merely at the beginning. W-” She stubbed her hoof on something under the sand, ending her thought process. With a hiss, she levitated a metal box out of the sand.

The box was of the same white material as everything else – and it was worn through in a few places. The lock enchantment had worn off long ago, and all the defining features that would have been placed on the outside were rubbed away. But the inside…

Renee flicked the box open, finding that all the cloth inside had been eaten away, but the treasure within had not. Surviving against the odds for a time longer than even most eldritch deities could fathom… a simple crystal emblem. Like a coin, except with holes in it. There had been inscriptions, once, but even in its sealed container that had eroded away as well.

But the primary design was unmistakable. Within the outer ring was a u-like symbol with a hook on one end and a line that ran to the bottom on the other. The greek letter mu. Made out of orange-gold crystal and stylized in the exact simplified form they were all familiar with.

Renee took out her Overhead badge. The Merodi Universalis emblem matched exactly.

“…All of this has happened before,” Flutterfree said, a haunted expression on her face.

“…And all of it will happen again,” Vriska finished.

“…Is that it?” Nova asked. “Are we all just endless repetitions in a never-ending cycle of existence?”

Renee smiled sadly at the crystal emblem in her telekinesis. “Maybe… but we found this. And, in the future, we’ll be able to leave something behind that lasts for longer than any of us are able to imagine even in our wildest dreams.” She took the emblem and adhered it to her hat’s ribbon with her magic. “Maybe we’ll figure out who these ‘Merodi’ were… and maybe we won’t. But they were here, that is undeniable. And we are here. And like these people, our existence is undeniable.” She marked the universe in her dimensional device for later exploration and opened a new portal. “Shall we head home?”

“Uh… R-r-renee?” Flutterfree asked pointing through the portal.

Renee turned to look.

On the other side was a field of roses shifting softly in the breeze. And no more than twenty meters away stood an immense pillar of unknowable dark power, rising far into the sky.

Nobody asked any questions or spoke a word. They stepped through the portal and walked right to the doors of the Tower. The impossibly sharp thorns of the roses cut and scraped until blood ran free, but they did not slow or weaken. It was not the time for that. Ka shifted, twisted, and…
Darling, get out of here. This isn’t for you. This is for Renee.

…I suppose I should expect surprises at this point.

Retroactive Narrative comes with the whole package. Which means it is her time. Yes, Renee, Renee Jackson, hear me. Come to the doors and enter. The other four will be cared for – and you will rejoin them soon enough – but you. Oh you, precious, delicate flower. Many would say you are ignored. But this is far from the truth.

I can’t even begin to think about what you are. I can’t tell if that’s fucking exhilarating or terrifying.

I do not concern you, ‘Dude’, so get off your prideful horse and let me guide her. You will not be interrupting again.

[NULL SET]

Good.

Renee Jackson laid her bloodied hoof upon the doors of the Dark Tower. A pulse went through her of immense *belonging*. That this was where she was meant to be, where everything was to be, for everything worked toward a single end.

She entered alone. Naturally, the other four walked through the doorway, but they did not ascend the staircase. They did not look in any of the doors that showed their life story to them. But she did. Renee Jackson, Sylph of Mind, Overhead of Expeditions… she saw her life laid out before her.

She found out quicker than most that it would be ill-advised to keep looking in her own doors. There are secrets within the Tower’s frames that will destroy. Futures that cannot be changed, the curse of knowledge. There may be a computer out there free from the curse, but that is only at the punishment of something much worse.

With great trepidation, she arrived at her door. It said ‘RENEE’, but the letters seemed uncertain somehow. A great sense of *knowing* came over her. She should check the last door. She should see her end. She would discover what the uncertainty meant.

Her sense of self was stronger than that. She didn’t need to know. Even if she was one of the few who could have benefited from such knowledge.

She opened the final door. She was not barred from entering the room at the top. No need for a teleport, or a fancy Horrorterror cheating mechanism. She strolled right in, granted the sight of the Source and the Clock.

They were hers. She could do what the Horrorterrors did. She could take the knowledge out.

But she wouldn’t. She was too pure for that. She just looked. Without knowing why, she started crying. She missed her sister. She needed to get back to Allure and hug her.

Her artificial eye felt wrong – it was drifting, lazy. And then it was burning. She closed it tight, satisfied with seeing the world through a single portal. She took off her glasses to see unhindered by glare.

The white spirograph of the Source looked back at her, rotating slowly, calmly.

“I could just… take it…”
Yes, you could. But you won’t.

“I…” She paused, and then laughed. “Thank you.”

I’m not a complete monster.

She turned and left, reunited with her Primary Team in another world…

~~~

I found Eve standing on the bridge of O’Neill’s current prize ship, the Defiant. O’Neill himself was standing at a holographic display of a series of universes. There was a Twilight next to Eve – Astrid, I discovered after a quick check. The reckless, daring ‘new’ girl.

“Haven’t done it yet?” I asked.

Eve shook her head, pushing through her mild surprise at my presence. “Not yet. The order’s already gone through and been approved though, their world is going to be gone within minutes.”

I nodded. “We have a bigger problem.”

Eve sighed. “Do I need to call it off?”

“Unrelated to this – as far as I know anyway.”

“Ah.”

“There is a high-end Narrative entity manipulating Merodi Universalis from the shadows. He calls himself the Dude. I…” I swore I felt something twitch in the room. I looked around – Astrid, O’Neill, the entire crew… Everything seemed fine. “…I won’t give any details unless we’re somewhere really private, but something is going down on Vriska’s birthday. Something big. And he’s keeping me from knowing everything about it.”

Eve nodded. “I’ll… be on the lookout.”

“If you have a nagging feeling in the back of your head that something isn’t like it should be, call me. I’m going to be available until this entire thing is resolved, I can’t afford not to be.”

Eve nodded.

“Destabilizers ready!” Thor the Asgardian gray Second declared. “Overhead?”

O’Neill turned to Eve and nodded. “Fire.”

There was little fanfare. They weren’t in the universe being destroyed, after all, so all they saw was a flash of light on the holographic screen, and then one of the dots wasn’t there anymore.

Eve sighed. “…I hate how routine this is becoming.”

I nodded slowly. “As you climb, you have to deal with bigger and bigger decisions.”

“Every few weeks, there’s a universe that just needs to be wiped,” Eve admitted. “I’m… I’m still not sure this was one.”

“Need is such a strong word,” I said, glancing the hologram over myself. “I can tell you that this course of action was ‘sensible’. You have saved far more lives with this act of destruction than you
would have letting them fight back.” I smiled sadly. “They would not have listened to your reason. Not enough of them, anyway. Strong as your story is, the Conversion Bureau has a different sort of strength to it that ensures it’ll never be pushed down forever. It will always, always rise.”

Overhead-Charter-Princess Evening Twilight Sparkle looked young in that moment – young and uncertain.

I put a hoof on her shoulder. “Hey, at least it’s over. There’s not going to be a war and their little coalition is going to destabilize because of this.”

“Because they fear us.”

“They don’t fear you much more than they already did. They were just calling your bluff. You turned your bluff into an attack. It was the right choice, Evening.”

“Thank you. …Maybe I can look forward to relaxing tomorrow, at least. …I wish Flutterfree were here…”

“Tell you what, I’ll find some way to deal with the Stand Disc racket and Nuclear Ghandi myself.”

“…What?”

“Things that are going to happen tomorrow. Or, well, were. I’ll take some weight off your chest. Tower knows the Dude thing is going to put enough on your mind.”

Eve allowed herself to smile ever so slightly. “You know… Every time I do this, I tell myself I’ll never forget, never let it slip my mind, that I’ll always carry it with me. But I can’t even remember all the worlds I’ve ordered destroyed now. I just have a number. All those lives, reduced to a number. And yet, I’m able to move on with my life.” She looked into my eyes, looking for something she didn’t know she needed.

“That’s the problem. It gets easier. We always have to watch ourselves.” I pulled her into a close hug. “But we can’t destroy ourselves with guilt for not feeling right. As horrible as it is, it is only natural. We just have to do what we do with everything else in life.”

“Try our best?”

“Yeah.”

~~~

Renee and the rest of the Primary Team entered one of the last worlds of their journey – and the last one of any consequence. A world of dreams, dreams set to the tune of music beats that flowed through every atom within the physical realm, if it could be called physical.

The five of them moved with steps in time with the tempo, shaking their bodies with significant swagger as they moved along a piano-like staircase up to a dramatic stage lined with immense vines that all coalesced into a musical-note shaped sun bouncing into the sky with the strumming guitar.

Out of the corner of their eye, they caught sight of a piece of alien tofu bouncing after a bunch of plush cows, mooing in tune with the swirling music.

“That’s weird,” Nova said. “Not the weirdest thing we’ve seen in the D-Sphere, but still pretty damn weird.”
“I want to see what’s on the top of this stage,” Vriska said, pulling out her sword and driving it into the ground.

“I sense a heartsong battle,” Renee said, strolling into the center of the ring. “Though I can’t imagine who with.”

“That’s because you have terrible imagination,” Adagio said, strolling onto the stage from the opposite side, wearing a glittering red dress and holding a microphone. The chaos warrior, Ozai, the Starlight, and a unicorn Sombra followed behind her, each with their own instruments: electric guitar, keyboard, drums, and bass respectively. “We should have known a direct fight would have never beaten you. So we challenge you to a battle.”

“A battle of the bands?” Renee asked, amused.

“Precisely.”

“That didn’t go so well for you last time.”

“This world doesn’t care anything for friendship,” Adagio said, spreading her arms wide. “it cares only for the music. And I will become one with that music.”

“We’ve had our own fair share of musical encounters,” Renee countered, not all that surprised to find a microphone materializing in her hoof. Vriska received an electric guitar, Jotaro a bass, Nova a keyboard, and Flutterfree the drums – including a very fancy-looking tambourine hoisted above all the other drums.

Everyone just knew the music, for it was the nature of the world. It was time to see who could do the most with it.

And the battle began. To the tune of that Persona ‘Life Will Change’ song, if you’re curious.

The guitars and drums jumped into it first, focusing on keeping the beat with the dancing sun. As the jams turned up, the bass players came in and slowly took the song. Finding this unacceptable, Nova began to highlight the scene with some magic keys, annoyed to find Ozai matching her exactly.

Adagio held the microphone to her face and, with her crystal glowing brightly, belted out the first words.

“This is our game

We are united and we’re challenging you

We are the vengeance

We are your doom and

We’re here to take you down.

Take a good long look

Hear our souls’ heartsong

Come to take revenge – it’s time

As our rhythm grows
Your fool’s resistance

Comedy for the audience!”

Everyone was fully into it now. Flutterfree smashed on the drums with everything she had – hoof, wing, strand of Lolo, everything. Unfortunately, the Starlight had obtained a drumming cutie mark, and was playing like a prodigy. Flutterfree began to feel her drums shake.

Vriska and the chaos warrior locked stares, getting uncomfortably close to each other with their powerful strums.

Renee took the chance to fling a retort.

“So you prepared for the battle

Forcing your sad fake friendships

Can’t move fast lacking respect

Friendship needs more than shared goals

We are different than you, yeah

We don’t rot our hearts with fear

And while we may fight and jeer

We are the primary team!”

With that last belted note, Jotaro used Star Platinum to attack Sombra, tearing the bass out of his hooves while keeping tight hold on his own instrument. Sombra attempted to fight back, but found he was useless without the music. He roared in rage.

Vriska and the chaos warrior clashed. She still hadn’t gotten his name – and she didn’t care. They somehow managed to keep playing their guitars while using them as weapons against each other. The behemoth of a man dwarfed the troll, but she proved more than ‘groovy’ enough to hold him off.

Flutterfree discovered she had an edge against the Starlight – she could play the drums with Lolo alone and use the rest of her powers on the offensive. She attacked the Starlight with a bow of light, and as she was currently stuck with the drumkit talent, she couldn’t do much with her standard magic to stop that. She ducked out of the way – abandoning the drums.

Ozai kept playing his keys. Nova was trying too hard to keep tempo to worry about interrupting him.

“Look how worthless

You just hide behind each other cowardly rats

Harmony’s idea

Is just the same as

Worse than, the force of vengeance

We’re not in Merodi
Friends are nothing here
Just pure emotion, that’s true!
Our game seems but simple
And you are too civil

Drive weak compared to our FIRE!”

The burst of power from Adagio was more than enough to knock Nova over, her keyboard spilling out onto the ground. Flutterfree lost control of Lolo losing the drums completely. Jotaro managed to keep his footing and upturn Ozai’s own keyboard, keeping his bass in tune. Vriska and the chaos warrior continued to smash at each other in a dance of strings and chainaxes.

“So you prepared for the battle
Forcing bonds with red brands
Can’t look for blood on your hands
Friendship needs no enemies
We are different than you, yeah
We don’t rot our hearts with fire
While time will make us expire
We shall stand tall evermore!”

Renee let out a burst of magic as she sang the last note, throwing Adagio’s microphone out of her hands. It was sudden, jarring, and Vriska was easily able to take the chaos warrior down by sacrificing her own guitar.

Only Jotaro’s bass remained, seeing as Renee’s part had ended, and yet the music went on without all the others. Focusing on him, accentuating the deep line of the bass.

“NO!” Adagio shouted. “NO NO NO! This was OUR vengeance! This was OUR plan! This w-”

Vriska hit her over the back of her head with an already-busted electric guitar. “Yeah, enough of that.” She smashed the guitar over her back again, just to add insult to injury.

“Looks like we beat them again,” Flutterfree observed.
Renee nodded. “They certainly are tenacious, I’d almost forgotten about them.”

“…Should we do anything with them?” Jotaro asked.
Renee shook her head. “We’re almost home. Let them do whatever they want. If they’re smart, they’ll stop trying to get back at us.”

“…That sounds like it’ll come back and bite us later,” Nova observed.
Renee shrugged. “Maybe. But, somehow, I think it’ll be fine.”
“I’m done,” Adagio said, knees pulled to her chest.

Her party was grouped around a campfire in a forest in a random universe.

“Done!?” Kharne roared. “WE DO NOT GIVE UP THE FIGHT!”

“I’m done too,” Starlance said, absentmindedly using her magic to play with the fire. “This was interesting for a while, but I think I’ve gotten all I can out of this.”

“We have failed,” Ozai said, flatly. “The ‘Dude’s’ plan hinged on us taking the Primary Team out. There is nothing for us back in Merodi Universalis. Our plans for vengeance are worthless.”

“It’s not fair,” Adagio said, staring at the fire, unblinking. “They can take everything. I can’t take anything.”

“Maybe you guys really are villains?” Starlance suggested.

Sombra growled, his dark energy billowing in her direction.

“I mean, come on, in what universe would anyone root for you guys?”

Adagio frowned. “The Dude was supposed to counteract that.”

“Well, he didn’t, and so that’s that.”

“I will cut off all your heads with this chainaxe! TRAIT-”

Sombra impaled him with a crystal while Adagio sent magic needles into his brain. Starlance piled on by freezing him solid and shattering him.

“…I always hated him,” Adagio muttered. “Useless.”

“You’re all useless,” Starlance said, standing up. “I’m going to get back to exploring the multiverse. Adagio, you want to come?”

Adagio looked at the fire – and sighed. “Sure.”

Ozai stood up. “I shall come as well.”

“No,” Starlance said. “The invitation was only for Adagio. The rest of you are really worthless.”

Ozai furrowed his brow. “I was broken out of prison and gifted youth specifically for the purpose of bringing fire down upon them. I am not worthless.”

“You failed at that. You were supposed to be dead long ago.” Starlance opened a portal.

Adagio frowned. “Maybe go join your brother. He might actually have pity on you.”

Ozai set his features. “I need no pity.”

Wordlessly, Adagio followed Starlance through the portal.

“CRYSTALS!” Sombra shouted, angered at their hubris. Starlance closed the portal before the attack could connect, leaving them behind.

“So,” Starlance said, turning to Adagio. “Any ideas?”
“No,” Adagio said, tears in her eyes. “Nothing... They’re gone. And there’s... there’s nothing I can do to get them back...”

“I could hypnotize Sonata for you, probably.”

Adagio’s stomach turned. “No. I would have done that myself already...”

“Have it your way.”

Adagio tried to gain control of herself, tried to look ahead with the same confident smirk she always held.

Instead, she broke down. She rammed her fist into the earth below and screamed.

~~~

The Dude sat back. “Things are going exactly as planned.”

“Even those on the primary team?” Grogar asked.

“Especially them,” the Dude asserted. “Adagio pulled off the best music battle I’ve ever seen. We won’t be having trouble from them.”

“Good.”

“Now, we do need to go into the next phase of the plan.”

“This better have something to do with the Conversion Bureau worlds...”

“Somewhat.”

“We have the computer’s information, we have the eyes on the inside of that ‘party’. But what was Lielight even doing? No war broke out!”

“War was not the intention, the intention was to get Eve to take questionable action. She destroyed a universe full of living, thinking beings. There may have been some question as to if they had any free will or even souls as we understand them, but a world was still destroyed.”

“Yes. And the news covered it for one day and then forgot about it. It’s a normal occurrence with no lasting consequences!”

“We don’t need lasting consequences, nor do we need to sway public opinion.” The Dude produced a small, red letter in his hand. “All we need to do is convince a few select people she needs to be taught a lesson on humility and caring for the lives of her people.”

“Believe a lie?”

“An easy lie to believe.” The Dude laid the letter on the table. “And when the Phantom Thieves of Hearts look into her expecting to find guilt for destroying a planet, they won’t find it. But they will find an immense guilt for a much, much deeper secret, one they will not be able to see as right. And she will fall with the release of her darkest act.”

Grogar pondered this. Then he grinned. “Having the heroes do our work for us...”

“It’s a powerful tool, I’m sure you understand.” The Dude stood up, letter in hand. “I must pass this off so they can prepare. The time approaches, Grogar. We must be ready for the birthday. Everything
Pinkie knew it was today. Today, Vriska would return, and it would be precisely one thousand years since she was synthesized in the SBURBan ectobiology labs, by her perspective. And they would have a party worthy of such a momentous occasion.

But she had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. This was the climax of something, and that something was going to ruin her party. She was almost sure of it. She hoped – she really hoped – that it could be salvaged afterward and they could still make Vriska’s day feel special.

After whatever was going to go wrong went wrong.

Luckily for her, all the guests were here, and as Vriska’s friend, most of them were awesome combat specialists with freaky powers. All her fellow Sburb players were there, including John, Jade, Dave, Dirk, Roxy, Terezi, and a few others. Allure and her Sweeties, several people from Earth C, Corona, and all in all just a lot of friends ready to give Vriska the day of her life, each in a telling god-tier robe. Eve wasn’t there, she was busy following something else up.

Twilence was standing next to Pinkie, on edge, partially because she wasn’t being referred to as ‘I’ in this scene, and partially because she knew I had a plan. She was right, I did have a plan.

“I’m probably not going to stay here,” Twilence said with a sigh. “He’s going to find a way to get rid of me.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll take care of it!” Pinkie said, saluting. “We’ve got all the power we need! Extra Pinkies, a ton of Hat Kids, explosives, you name it, we got it! Having all these artifacts in one place gives us a loooot of destructive potential!”

“The artifacts are probably what they want.”

“Yeah, but only we know exactly where all of them are.”

“Magane.”

Pinkie grinned. “We moved things around since then. She’s got nothin’ on us.”

Twilence looked around the expanse, frowning. She knew every single person in this room in one way or another. And yet, she had a sneaking suspicion I was one of the people here. And she was right, I was there.

Her mind went into overdrive, running through eliminations, trying to figure out who it could possibly be. Carnelian? She was suspiciously present, but she was neither a human nor referred to by male pronouns. One of those dead Daves? Maybe, she didn’t know all of the variations that well. That Loki fellow? Maybe, but he had been with Pinkie almost continually since they’d found him, so it seemed unlikely.

All wrong, by the way. She isn’t going to be able to figure me out before she gets called away to defend Eve.

_Eve can defend herself._

This is true, if it were a purely physical attack. But Twilence happens to be aware of a group called the Phantom Thieves of Heart who, coincidentally, have been digging into Eve’s past and decided
she needs to have her will to hold onto her secret guilt stolen from her Palace.

“Dammit,” Twilence cursed under her breath.

Twilence realized that she had actually been feeling them scouting out the Clock Tower for days, she had just been ignoring it.

“I have to go,” she told Pinkie. “He’s going after Eve.”

“Eve? How?”

“Something that can’t happen yet. It is of paramount importance to the plot… and by attacking it he ensures I must go to protect it.”

That’s right Twilence, you are but a slave to ka. You are on the other side of the pen – my pen. You have been outwitted.

“This isn’t over yet,” Twilence said, leaving the universe.

And she was gone, no longer a consequence in the game of chess that is about to unfold.

Pinkie.

“Oh no…” Pinkie whined.

How does it feel? You know my eyes are bored into the back of your skull, but you can’t see me.

Pinkie whirled around, finding several pairs of eyes on her. She bit her lip. “Just do it already.”

I already have.

Several people within the party planet subdimension felt the dimensional travel jammer go up. They were trapped.

“Heroes of Merodi Universalis,” Grogar said, kicking over the throne made of treasures. “Your time is at an end.” He held out a hoof. “All of you will come to serve us, in time.”

Pinkie took out her warhammer. “Oh yeah? You and what army, goat-face?”

“Who needs an army?” Grogar asked. “When you have all the magic in the artifacts in this dimension?”

“Yeah, you have no idea where those a-” she saw Loki push a button. “…Ponyfeathers. In hindsight, that should have been obvious…”

It really should have, shouldn’t it?

“I’m beginning to see why Twilence wants to run you though.”

One of the party planets rigged to go off like a firework exploded, revealing a red and black centaur rapidly growing in size, not only draining the magic of every artifact in the sub-dimension, but also the magic of everyone attending the party – save for his allies.

Lord Tirek, empowered by Infinity Stones, Elements of Harmony, and the personal magic of a few dozen major heroes, roared. “MY POWER KNOWS NO BOUNDS!”
“Not all of us can have our magic stolen that easily!” Corona shouted, throwing her fist forward and unleashing a rend of reality that tore through his arm… that quickly healed itself.

“I HAVE ALL YOUR ABILITIES!” Tirek shouted. “I HAVE ALL YOUR MAGIC!” He lowered his head to their level. “AND WE WILL ENSLAVE YOU!”

Chrysalis, Ba’al, Lilith, and Bleeding Heart revealed themselves. Standing in the front of the newfound group was none other than Cozy Glow herself – an adult pegasus mare with a cute smile that did not belong on her face. “Golly, looks like you’re all in a pickle! Shame we’re going to have to brainwash you with the Mindflayer, we could have been good friends. Or not, I don’t know, but I know you’ll be great servants!”

Corona frowned, realizing that there were several minds here weak enough to fall for simple coercion spells. With the Mindflayer’s general weak connection, it wouldn’t be as powerful as IT, but Corona was going to have to fight some of her friends to deal with it.

Except she made a miscalculation.

The Mindflayer didn’t have a weak connection. It had a direct one.

The monstrous darkness tore out of the caves of a sickly-looking planet, rising into the air. The eyes of many went black with horror and screams the moment it began to spread…

“GO ALL OUT!” Corona shouted, unleashing a burst of supernova energy.

~~~

“Astrid?”

Lielight looked up from the legal document she was reading over to see Eve. “Hmm?”

“Why are you still here?”

“What do you mean?” Lielight said, expression flat.

“Twilence was able to see your discussion with Adagio recently. No doubt part of the Dude’s plan, but I wanted to come here anyway.” She sat down in a chair and fixed Lielight with a calculating expression. “Why are you still here?”

Lielight didn’t answer. *The Dude lies, I was a secret box!*

“I’m not going to hurt you, Astrid.”

“Lielight.”

“I’m going to keep calling you Astrid.”

Lielight had no coherent thoughts about that.

“Why are you still here?”

“The void expanse of life stretches before me,” Lielight managed. “A completion and then… nothing.”

“You could have run. I doubt anyone aside from myself would have noticed.”
"Stake in the sand."

"I know you can speak in straight. I’m giving you a modicum of respect, the least you can do is show me the same."

Lielight furrowed her brow. "I was told I could remain. That I could keep this job where my skills are uniquely suited. That I could accomplish things."

"And if that’s what you wanted, why haven’t you done anything since the Conversion Bureau incident?"

"Because I was told to wait."

"It’s not like you to do that."

"How do you know what I’m like? You only met me when I tried to take over your castle!"

"I have a good sense for ponies. If not then, now. And even if you’ve been hiding behind a mask, there are still things I can see about you." She smiled sadly. "You really did believe everything you were saying."

"My allies caused the entire incident in the first place. I was planted to ensure it went the way it did."

Eve nodded. "And you still said what was correct."

"I would have lied if that was what we needed."

"Would you have succeeded, though?"

Lielight paused. "I don’t know."

"Neither do I." Eve sighed. "I’m trying to figure out what to do with you. I can’t have you working with Relations…"

"Why aren’t you just locking me up?"

"That’s an option. But I think there’s more to you than just a mare who wants revenge for a slight committed decades ago."

Lielight looked at the ground.

"I have apprehended Aquamarine already. There isn’t a redeeming spark in her body. But you… Like Lieshy, I think you can see."

"…She died fighting for you," Lielight said.

Eve put a hoof on Lielight’s shoulder. "That never should have happened."

"Entwined snakes at a starshow… you’re trying to befriend me."

"It’s what we do, right? Princesses of Friendship."

Lielight nodded.

"I take it your other ‘friends’ aren’t very friendly."

"Some of them. They’re not here right now." Lielight frowned. "…I don’t even know what their big
plan is. I’m just... here. Sitting. Doing nothing.”

“We’re pretty sure they’re trying something at the party planets soon.”

“I don’t know anything.”

“I believe you.”

Lielight grimaced. “…You’re being too nice. Even for you.”

“I see more of myself in you than I’d like to admit. I just want to give you a chance to do... something.”

A dimensional portal appeared next to Eve’s head, depositing a red-and-white card on the table between them. Both Lielight and Eve were shocked by its sudden appearance. Curious, Eve flipped it open and read the note inside.

*Overhead-Charter Evening Twilight Sparkle, Princess of Friendship, Magic, and Lies*

Eve’s frown became a grimace.

*We know of your crimes against the ponies of the Conversion Bureau. The destruction of an entire universe filled with living, thinking beings just for the sake of peace. We have decided to steal away your need for secrecy and make you confess your sins to your nation. They deserve to know what really lies behind your smiling façade. This will be done within the day. We hope you are prepared.*

“No...” Eve said, pupils shrinking to pinpricks. “No...”

“What’s the problem?” Lielight asked. “You already confessed to that publicly, nobody made much of a fuss.”

“They’ll find other things...” Eve said, a haunted expression on her face. “I... Astrid, I have to go. You... I’m not pressing charges. But I’d find somewhere that isn’t the Relations Division. There’s a place for you, I... I just... I have to go.” She lit her horn and teleported away, leaving a very confused Lielight behind.

She would leave later that day.

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**Phantom Thieves of Hearts...**

This was not the first time a version of them had come to Merodi Universalis. They were a group of driven young people from worlds under the influence of the Great Will who used their mysterious abilities to change the hearts of those they deemed evil. They would enter a manifestation of the target’s mindscape – known as a Palace – and steal the deepest desire within. The heist would change the person, generally making them confess, but it could also make them lose some other dark part of themselves.

Eve, the Thieves thought, was going to be a standard case. Rush in, expose her crimes of destruction, and then get out. She’d confess and be tried, nothing special.

As I entered Eve’s Palace, I looked back to the last few days the Thieves had spent scouting the place out. I realized with mild surprise that I had always been there, for Eve’s mental image of myself had been interacting with the interior ever since Joker and his troop had first set foot in the realm...
“A clock tower…” Queen observed, folding her arms.

Oracle held a hand to her goggles, looking the place over. “Wonder why it’s a Clock Tower…”

“Fear of inevitability,” Joker said, removing his hand from his signature white masquerade mask. “She knows she can’t keep her secrets forever. And so the very world she rules is a ticking time bomb counting down until the truth of her is revealed.”

Skull grunted. “Let’s just figure this place out already. I’m already expecting annoying puzzles with gears…”

Morgana – a strange cat-like creature, grinned. “Oh, c’mon, puzzles are great!”

“Hmph.”

They would enter the Tower, and have an easy time for a while. They’d fight through some mental shadows, listen to conversations between ghostly representations of the people in Eve’s life, and they began to learn.

“Joker?” Oracle asked, coming back from some reconnaissance. “She’s… destroyed several worlds.”

“It’s bigger than we thought…”

“I don’t think she feels particularly guilty about any of them. Definitely not enough to warrant a Clock Tower that must never strike midnight.”

“Wait,” Skull said, pointing at her. “You tellin’ me there’s somethin’ worse goin’ on here?”

Oracle nodded. “This place… hides a secret even darker than we imagined.”

Joker put a hand to his face, thoughtful. “Looks like we’ll be exposing more than just a simple lost world.”

“We’ll need to be very, very careful.”

They were. They acted with such impressive stealth… but I was still there. Eve held a manifestation of myself in her Palace, and as manifestations of me tend to do, they acted in ways that weren’t normal. Acted with knowledge they should not have.

“There aren’t supposed to be any enemies in this area!” Skull shouted, summoning his Persona. A Stand-like entity that resembled a pirate captain standing atop a comically edgy ship barely large enough for him to stand on. The Persona rushed forward, meeting the wires of Lolo. He was easily pushed back as if there were nothing.

“Please,” the shadow of Flutterfree said, tears streaking down her face. “Please don’t do this to her. Don’t take away her will…”

“You are too devoted to her,” Queen stated, ramming into Flutterfree with her motorbike Persona.

“And you don’t know what you’re doing!” Flutterfree shouted, filling the arena with Rage…

But my shadow was still that – a shadow. Clever, able to manipulate events, but still nothing compared to me. Limited… but able to keep herself hidden.

“One of us has a plan of some kind…” a shadow said, removing a gear the Thieves had just placed
back in the Clock Tower. “She hasn’t been acting… normal…”

“How does she even move around so much?”

“Perhaps she’s part of the other project?”

“Already that project encroaches upon our Tower…”

Queen rushed in, decimating both shadows and replacing the gears.

The Thieves still had no idea what the true secret was. Even after facing the shadow of… her.

The thing looked like Evening. But it didn’t. One moment it was a shining beacon of hope and holy light, the next it was a barely held-together ramshackle mess of exposed bone, loose tendons, and rotting flesh. A paradoxical mixture of reverence and death.

“What IS that!?” Oracle shouted, hiding behind her UFO-Persona.

“I don’t know, but it’s something real messed up!” Morgana let out a battle meow and activated his swordsman Persona, puncturing the Eve-thing in multiple places. ‘She’ didn’t seem to care, lashing out with a nasty, bulbous limb that glowed with the power of the stars...

They would beat the manifestation, like they beat all of them, and they would arrive at the door at the top of the Clock Tower. Because of how the heists work, they had to leave the Clock Tower and send a calling card to Eve… That had happened recently. Very recently.

Now that the card was sent, they were running through the Clock Tower as fast as they could to reach the top, steal whatever artifact Eve’s personal shadow held to represent her secrets, and get out. What they had neglected to factor into account was me. Informed by a shadow of myself who had been watching them for the last few days, I waited for them in front of the final doors.

“What?” Skull shouted when he saw me. “We cleared all the big ones out of here already!”

“A Twilence shadow… That’s the unusual one we were hearing about,” Queen said, narrowing her eyes. “Staying out of sight until the right moment.”

“Guys, I don’t think that’s a shadow,” Oracle said, grimacing. “I think that’s her.”

“Good deduction,” I said, leveling my gaze on Joker. “…I have to stop you.”

“The world deserves to know her secrets,” Joker asserted. “Whatever they are.”

“They already know most of the ones of consequence to them. Those that aren’t will be revealed in due time – the Clock Tower exists because I told her that the secrets would be revealed. There is no escaping the inevitable.”

“Then why are you stopping us?” Morgana asked.

“Because it can’t happen now. The time is not right. She has more time before it comes crashing down on her. The story cannot be changed.”

Joker narrowed his eyes. “The story can always be changed. The fact that you’re here is evidence of that.”

“The fact that I am here is because of a trap laid by a man beyond your comprehension,” I said with a frown. “He is attempting to tear down Merodi Universalis from the inside, and he wanted me out of
the way. So he sent you a tip about Evening’s ‘secrets’ and directed you to her palace, so you would ‘threaten’ the future plot. Since there is no discernable method aside from myself to prevent you from revealing everything. I **must** be here.” I let out a sigh. “I have no choice.”

“Surely Merodi Universalis is more important than… defending this lie!”

“It is. But I meant it when I said I had no choice, Joker.” I shook my head. “I am obligated to be here. This Eye of Rhyme is, in many ways, a curse. I want to defend my friends, I want to show that Dude’s smug mug what really matters, and I want to outsmart him. But he has me here. Because I have to be. I do not get to think about the ‘rightness’ or ‘wrongness’ of what I need to do to stop you, I just get to do it.”

“…That’s terrible,” Oracle said.

“It is. But, unlike me, **you** have a choice.” I spread my wings and fixed them all with an understanding smile. “Her secrets will be revealed anyway. Nothing of this magnitude can stay hidden forever. She will suffer no small amount of pain from what she’s done.”

Joker looked me in the eyes. “Will the people know? *All* of them?”

I froze. “…I am uncertain.”

“Then we’re not g-”

“Because Merodi Universalis will fall if everyone knows of Eve’s lies.”

“That’s bullshit!” Skull declared.

“You are talking to perhaps the one entity in the multiverse that would **know** this for sure. If everything she does is exposed, she gets tried, she gets impeached. The inherent TRUST we’ve built in our government crumbles. The face of Merodi Universalis is gone, and the rapid forward progression *ends*. Corruption seeps in through the open slots, and the people become restless. Our enemies take advantage of us and we cease. To. Be. And you want to know what the big secret is? What the huge, tremendous, impossible secret behind these doors is? What will bring Merodi Universalis to its knees if you do what you want to do?”

The five of them stared at me with rapt attention.

“The real Evening Sparkle has been dead for decades. She is a copy created shortly before her death, a mare who should not have lived. She is not the Charter-Princess.”

Joker took a step back. “That’s…”

“She was scared. Scared of her friends, what they would think, what they would do. She was right to be scared. Something like that would have driven a divide between them that would be impossible to mend. So she lied. She said she was the Eve they remembered. She tried to live normally. She only ever told me – because I knew – and Flutterfree – because she felt she needed to. We – and now you – are the only ones who know.” I leaned in. “Do you want to threaten this entire nation over the mistake of a sad, terrified mare decades ago?”

Joker got over his previous hesitation, walking right up to me. “If that were her only secret, we would walk away, no questions asked. But we have seen dozens, if not *hundreds* of acts in this Tower that need to be given more weight. She dismisses the destruction of universes!”

“And you dismiss the collapse of a society,” I retorted.
“The truth will set you free.”

“The truth can be a curse and a weapon.”

Joker summoned his Persona – a humanoid entity with dark, angular wings. “I guess we’ll see who’s right, then.”

I sighed. I took out a piece of paper and started scribbling. “Don’t mind me, just writing a note.”

No notes.

“I’ll make notes if I want to, Dude,” I hissed. “Just need t-”

What is it?

“Just a bit of assurance that I’ll win this little fight.” I folded the paper up and engulfed it in fire. “No cheating.”

 “…I think you’re the one who’s cheating,” Skull grunted.

“Maybe.” I flared my wings. “Come at me.”

“PERSONA!” All five of them shouted. All aside from Oracle charged as a team. I knew exactly what I needed to do. All four of them were powerhouses, but with Oracle in the background they would be significantly stronger. I teleported right next to her and dissipated her Persona with a simple spell, forcing her to the ground. Before any of the others could do anything, I cast a blank spell, removing all sense of awareness from her mind. She tipped over, out cold.

“Oracle!” Queen shouted, turning her bike Persona around to charge me.

“She’ll be fine,” I said, using a shield to intercept the bike’s nuclear blast, shrugging it off easily. I used the same Persona-dissipating spell on her, dropping her to the ground. She was able to cast a delayed spell to prevent the mind-blanking, but she couldn’t stop an intense laser to the face.

Skull and Morgana attacked – jock and cat as one, opting to avoid Personas entirely since I clearly had an easy way to remove them. Skull swung an immense magic-infused lead pipe while Morgana… turned into a car.

I grabbed the lead pipe with my magic and swung Skull around into Morgana the cat-car, tossing them to the side. They were still up and ready to fight – but I had more pressing matters to deal with. I met Joker’s guns with magic bolts of my own, shrugging off the bullets with ease. I charged him, powering up an immense magical explosion.

And then Twilence felt the narrative slip from her hooves.

“Wait, no!”

Joker knew exactly what to do. He dissipated his Persona, accessing one of the other Personas he had picked up in this Palace. One of the strongest he had ever encountered, and definitely the most useful. “PERSONA!” he shouted.

The shadow of Flutterfree appeared behind him as his Persona. Her eyes were solid purple with glowing tear-streaks running down her face, and her wings were tipped with blades of Rage.

This Persona had a Stand. A very particular meta-oriented stand by the name of Lotus Locus that encircled Twilence in vines. This would have done next to nothing, would have been easy for the
Muse of Ka to break free form. Except it targeted not only her, but her Eye of Rhyme, revealing what was latently inside of it.

“No! Don’t do that, you c-” Twilence froze as the Eye of Rhyme activated as it had centuries ago, filling her mind with an update - it had nothing in it, but her mind was still frozen. During this update, she was helpless.

Joker recalled Flutterfree, calling out his original angel-like Persona. Now that Twilence was occupied… She could be put to sleep with a simple spell.

Twilence was defeated by the hero.

Joker looked around. Oracle was out of commission completely; Queen was heavily injured, while Skull and Morgana were just a little bruised. They could still take Eve’s shadow like this. The mission wasn’t a bust.

“Let’s move!” Joker called. “That’s given her too much time to react!”

Skull picked up the limp form of Oracle – and then they ran into the room at the top of the Clock Tower.

It smelled vaguely of roses…

~~~

I looked at my handiwork.

I’d let Corona put up a good fight. She’d charged right into the Mindflayer, fought it on its own terms, and used a complex series of mental magic spells to render the monstrosity completely inert. For a moment, she had looked like she would pull it off.

But, of course, the computer had told me about this. That I would let her win for a moment, defeating their strongest opponent. It was really nothing to write home about – because Tirek just absorbed the Mindflayer’s magic and remained in control of most the inhabitants of the party.

Tirek flicked her with a finger, driving her deep into the go-kart planet, sending the karts flying into the black void. The Hat Kids jumped on her like ravenous dogs, smacking her with baseball bats. She struggled to find an opening to do much of anything without incinerating the innocent kids around her.

The other heroes were busy fighting their own friends. Roxy was fighting off Carnelian, Pinkie had to take on Link and Midna, and most of the Merodi Soldiers had fallen.

The Dude heard Grogar cackle. “This is it! All the heroes will fall – and be subject to our will!”

“Yay!” Cozy shouted, clapping her hooves. “This is easy!”

Of course it was; I was influencing it. I was ensuring they would fall like dominoes. There was nothing they could do. Their strongest Aware was Pinkie, and she could do nothing to me. She didn’t even know who I was. As far as she was concerned, I was just another zombie that had been controlled by the bad guys.

“Going to keep mocking our love?” Lilith shouted, taking one of Mattie’s whips to the face without even flinching.
“Mate, I’m not known to stop the mock train.” She jumped over the psychotic Rarity and drove a hoof into Bleeding Heart. Lilith took the opportunity to bite down on Mattie’s ear in an attempt to rip it off.

“I see we’re on the pleasure cruise,” Matie commented, driving her into the ground with a pinwheel motion. “But I’m afraid I have t—”

Tirek snapped his fingers and Mattie was frozen in a block of ice. “PATHETIC!” he shouted, his muscles brimming with the power of stars, his eye larger than the planets themselves. “ALL THE MAGIC IN THIS WORLD IS MINE!”

Cozy glow held up a note, scrutinizing it.

Wait. A note? A note that looked suspiciously like the one Twilence had burned in the Clock Tower a moment ago. She must have used a dragonfire mimic spell. She had a backup plan. But no matter – whatever it was, it was too late. Everything was set up, and in a few minutes, the cavalry would arrive… and everything would fall into place.

Like clockwork, Pinkie appeared in front of Tirek with a giant hammer. “EAT THIS!”

Tirek grabbed her in his magic, sneering. “You are a foolish little pony. What can you hope to do against the centaur with the power of infinity? What dare you say to the…”

And… now.

A dimensional portal opened up right in Tirek’s chest, tearing his body asunder. Such a thing never happened. Portals were supposed to be blocked to this universe, dimensional devices were supposed to check for safety, and they generally didn’t have that much force in them.

But a few unlikely coincidences could make something just like that happen. Because it was the best way for Vriska Serket to make an entrance. She charged through the portal, swinging her sword wide enough to cut through Tirek’s immense form. He gagged, barely holding on to his life without the presence of a heart.

He did not last much longer. Vriska took one look at him and absorbed all the luck she could manage, dropping his already slim chances of survival to none. He crumpled under the weight of his own power and lost control of his magic, losing control of all the partygoers, reducing the small army of Grogar’s to nothing.

“What!?” Grogar shouted. “That… that’s impossible!”

“Happy one-thousandth birthday Vriska!” Pinkie shouted, pulling her into a hug as the rest of the Primary Team jumped out of the portal.

“Oh, a bunch of bad guys for me to slay and a universe to save?” Vriska grinned. “Pinkie, you shouldn’t have.”

“I didn’t! But I’m beginning to think that was the point all along!”

Vriska rolled her dice, getting straight 8s without even trying. This was her time. This was her birthday. This was her moment of glory. As the blue armor of Mindfang took shape around her, she took a dramatic pose at the front of the team. Renee, Pinkie, Jotaro, Nova, and Flutterfree posed behind her, glowing like the heroes they were.

“No! We prepared for everything!” Grogar shouted. “We…”
“Are nothing more than a nice deli platter for me to cut up,” Vriska cackled. She kicked Grogar across the face, tossing him to the side. Flutterfree grabbed Chrysalis, pinning her to the ground. Renee encased Ba’al in a powerful magic barrier. Jotaro pummeled Loki like he was weightless. Pinkie smacked Lilith across the head with her squeaky hammer, and Nova grabbed Bleeding Heart in a mind-blank spell, dropping her to the ground.

It was all too easy. It was all exactly as I intended. I took a step forward, extending my hand to Vriska. “Happy birthday.”

Vriska smirked in my direction. “Aww, Dirk, you shouldn’t have.” She moved to pull me into one of her way-too-friendly hugs. But I would endure it – it was her birthday after all.

For I, Dirk Strider, Prince of Heart, was the Dude. And I had duped Merodi Universalis, the local Legion of Doom, and none other than Twilence herself for a birthday present.

I think that proves everything I want it to. Glad to have you on this little journey. I…

What?

Why do I…

“Dirk ‘the Dude’ Strider fell to the ground, out cold,” Cozy Glow said, tossing a tranquilizer gun to the side. “Cozy Glow took center stage.” Her eyes brimmed with power as a psychotic grin crossed her face. “There’s no Twilence anymore. There’s no ‘Dude’. There is only me and the power I took from Tirek.”

“Oh give it a rest, another inevitable villain betrayal?” Vriska rolled her eyes. “There’s no way he didn’t expect this.”

“Oh, he did, and he made plans for it,” Cozy said, the Infinity Stones appearing around her head like a tiara. “But he didn’t think it was possible for me to figure out he wasn’t on our side ahead of time.” She produced a hastily scrawled note on a piece of notebook paper. “Luckily Twilence took care of that.”

Vriska pointed her sword at her. “I’m on a roll today, pegasus. You don’t have anything against me on my day. I—”

Cozy’s wings lit on rainbow fire. She glanced at Carnelian and drained all her magic. The poor Gem didn’t poof – didn’t even scream. Her entire body was drained, leaving nothing but a colorless, dead Gem behind. “Dirk said we weren’t supposed to kill so we could use you. I’m not listening to that stupid rule. I will start killing people if you don’t let me into all your minds right now. In fact…” She spread her wings. “I will take this entire universe and everyone in it to oblivion if you don’t bow now.”

“CARNELIAN!” Roxy shouted, rushing Cozy without thinking. Cozy raised an eyebrow, firing a beam of energy from the Power Stone right into Roxy’s chest, blowing a hole through her the size of a soccer ball. The Rogue of Void fell back, trembling, onto Carnelian’s lifeless gemstone.

“Anyone else?” Cozy asked.

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Eve ran into the Intelligence Division Primary Office – a place that existed in its own universe, separate from everything else. Always moving, always hiding… always secret.
Eve bashed into Giorno’s office and slammed the calling card on his desk. “I need to get into my own palace and I need to do it now. They’re going to expose my secrets. I trust you understand the weight of this situation?”

Giorno stood up in alarm – he didn’t need to be told why that couldn’t happen. “Palace…”

“Persona 5, Phantom Thieves of Hearts. You have some versions of them working for you, you should know how to find it.”

Giorno nodded. “We need to hurry. Down, to the lab.”

Eve couldn’t teleport within the walls of the Intelligence Division, so the two of them ran to the elevator. Giorno used his Stand to confirm his identity and they slid down to one of the deeper levels. They ran out into a room filled with unusual machines, several sets of similar-looking cards to the one Eve had brought in, and an older woman with orange hair and large technological goggles.

“Oracle, we need to trace Eve’s Palace,” Giorno ordered. “No questions.”

The elder Oracle nodded. Wordlessly, she led Eve into a tall, cylindrical glass case affixed to a red-and-black machine with numerous dials. She didn’t explain anything – she closed the glass door, sealed her in, and ran the analysis. Eve felt tingly as lines of code ran across the screen, but otherwise nothing visible happened.

“Got the coordinates,” elder Oracle said, pointing at the screen. “Seraphim should be able to access it. I will warn you, Stands can’t manifest in Palaces, but they will have Stand-like powers. I could join yo-”

“No,” Eve said. “I have to do this on my own.” She summoned Seraphim and tore a hole in reality through its center, leading right to the front doors of an immense ethereal Clock Tower. “Thank you for your assistance.”

“Anything else?” Giorno asked.

“If they get out anyway, you are going to have to lock me up and find a way to restore my heart to the way it was before.”

“I’m not certain that’s possible,” the elder Oracle admitted.

“Which is why I’m going in.” She flew through Seraphim’s portal. She looked up at the Clock Tower – one minute away from midnight. She instinctively understood exactly what it meant. She was *this close* to having her secrets released to the world. When the bells rang, it would all be over.

But they hadn’t rung yet. She could still stop this.

She saw them. The Thieves, jumping out the front doors of the Clock Tower – freezing when they saw her. Only two of them were standing – Joker and ‘Queen’, if Eve remembered her reading correctly. All the others were out cold or heavily injured from storming the Clock Tower.

Joker held the treasure of Eve’s heart in his hand: a small, insignificant gold key.

Eve threw her calling card down in the ground in front of them. “I can’t let you do this. It’ll de-”

“We already know,” Queen spat. “Twilence told us everything. Tried to get us to turn back. We didn’t.”
Eve frowned. “…I understand.”

“We understand as well,” Joker said. “If you would tell everyone of your own free will…”

“I won’t.”

“Then we have to fight, ‘Evening’.”

Eve nodded. “You’re weak, bruised, battered. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Joker sighed. “I don’t want to either… but if we want out of here, we’re going to have to play dirty.”

He summoned the shadow of Flutterfree.

Eve told Seraphim to create absolute zero. It could only do it on the other side of the portal, but she could still drag the shards of ice into the new realm if she wanted.

They charged.

~~~

Roxy knew she was bleeding out. She was only vaguely aware of the confrontation between Cozy Glow and everyone else…

“What happened to you?” Allure demanded. “I knew you were evil, and bad, but you were never a murderous psycho!”

Cozy huffed. “I’ve spent the last few decades living under Tirek and Grogar. They’ve become my family, and I’ve learned a lot. A lot about what it means to have power and what it means to seek revenge.” She pointed a hoof at Allure. “You don’t back down for any reason, not when you have a goal to accomplish. You go to the ends of existence for it.”

Roxy, somehow, had the strength to move despite there being a giant hole in her chest. She didn’t really question it. Instead, she was busy thinking why did Dirk have to go and be such a fuckin’ idiot? Anger rose up in her as she saw the lifeless form of Carnelian on the ground – colorless aside from Roxy’s own blood. She’s dead because of him!

“John! Do something!” Pinkie called.

“You think John can do anything?” Cozy asked, an amused smile on her face. “The moment he even starts thinking of zapping everywhere, I use the mind control to take over his mind. What, did you think I didn’t get access to all the powers Tirek had? I’m not dumb! I just want you to give up willingly.”

“What do you think the chances of that are?” Vriska asked with a sneer.

“Slim, admittedly, but the chances go up with the body count!”

Roxy felt her vision swimming away. She was going to die. Didn’t matter if it was Heroic or Just or not, the Gallifreyans had that lock on her soul. She’d be sent away to fight Lord English. Alive… but likely not able to see any of the friends she had made here ever again. Sent back to her life…

There had to be something. Something she could do…

“Desperate?”
With significant effort, Roxy tilted her head toward a familiar psychotic unicorn.

“Gems have life-absorption properties, you know,” Lilith said. “You’re holding one in your hands.”

Roxy looked at the crystal that had once been Carnelian. She furrowed her brow. “W-why?”

“Because that Cozy bitch needs to be flayed,” Lilith muttered. “Do it before you die, okay?”

Several Aradias came after Cozy from different timestreams, but the time-related powers flowed through the Time Stone and rendered all the Aradias useless, turning them all to corpses.

“I have Time under my control!” Cozy shouted. “I could have John retcon anything you might do away! I can squish you by magical power alone!” She glowered. “Surrender or die.”

Roxy used her Void powers to tap into the lifeless crystal. There was nothing in there… just an empty computer matrix devoid of all magical energy. She only had seconds… she needed to activate its life-absorption matrix somehow… somehow…

Desperate, she shoved it into the hole in her chest, coating it in her blood. As the Rogue of Void, she could steal the ‘lack of concept’ from something. She wasn’t sure what exactly would work here, so she stole the concept of ‘off’.

That did it. The gemstone flashed brightly, and Roxy was reduced to dust. Nobody aside from Lilith even noticed, for the Void kept her shrouded. The once dead, white crystal filled with red life… and sat there.

“You’re all thinking of plans, of machinations,” Cozy said, stamping her hoof. “But you have no options here. Not anymore.”

“I think we have options,” Pinkie said.

“What?”

“Keep talking until Twilence gets back or Dirk wakes up. Or, how about this, turn ourselves in and then have Twilence show up when she’s done with whatever she’s doing! Or, heck, Eve. I bet Eve could have some fun here. Then there’s Nanoha, any number of our allies…”

“That doesn’t help you now.”

“Oh, now? Well, now, neither Dirk nor Twilence are here, so…” Pinkie put a hoof to her chin. “General story rules apply again. And you’re being a pretty nasty villain.”

“I went to the computer myself,” Cozy Glow said with a smirk. “It assured us we would win.”

“It can lie,” Allure pointed out.

“As far as I know, it only told ‘the Dude’ one lie: that no one would die.”

“And it hasn’t told the rest of you lies?”

“Maybe?” Cozy said, shrugging. “I’m just acting on what I know here.”

The Carnelian gemstone flashed. At first, it tried to take its somewhat short humanoid form, but quickly decided that wasn’t worth it. The gemstone took its position on the back of a tall, slender, feminine humanoid. She popped into existence without much fanfare, her body a pale red shade rather than the deep color that Carnelian had worn prior. Her hair was light, curled in one spot, and
her eyes were a bright pink. The robes of the Rogue of Void appeared around her, as dark blue as always, contrasting her pale crimson. She took in her surroundings.

She was… a Gem. Specifically, a Carnelian. Not the Carnelian… there was only one mind in there, and that mind was Roxy Lalonde. But she was no longer human. She was a genderless magical space rock with her entire self stored on a hard crystal affixed to the base of her neck. She didn’t feel all… there.

But she could see Cozy. And, at the moment, Cozy couldn’t see her.

She reached to touch her gemstone, slowly pulling out a hard-light sword reminiscent of a katana. Slowly, but surely, she moved toward Cozy. Unnoticed… invisible…

She swung her sword.

“IDIOT!” Cozy shouted, grabbing the sword with magic Roxy couldn’t identify. She tore it out of Roxy’s hands, teleported it behind the new Gem and drove the tip into the crystal.

There was a sickening crack.

~~~

Joker was alarmed to discover that Eve had no difficulty at all beating Flutterfree’s shadow into the ground. The Overhead knew the mare like the back of her hoof – and her mental projection of the pegasus even more so. The stolen Persona was tossed around like a ragdoll easily, her revelation power only seeking to harm her chances of winning.

“We’re well aware of the chances one of us might go evil one day,” Eve said, kicking Flutterfree between the eyes to end another Rage-endowed attack. “I know everything to take her out should I need to. And she has people on speed-dial to take care of me.”

“She can’t beat you?” Joker asked, swapping Flutterfree out for his usual dark angel Persona.

“No. Seraphim makes that too difficult,” Eve admitted. “You’re lucky I can’t bring it in here. I could just render your Personas useless.”

“Twilence didn’t need a Stand to do that,” Queen commented, driving her nuclear-endowed motorcycle-Persona right into Eve’s face, blowing her across the arena. She picked up Joker and tried to make a run from the palace, but Eve teleported the two of them right next to her. She grabbed ice from the portal and surrounded the three of them in a dark, cold whirlwind.

“I don’t need to cancel your powers,” Eve declared. She accessed the power of Celestia, creating a miniature sun in the air.

She blew it up, shattering the whirlwind of ice and tossing the two Thieves backward. Queen broke her leg on the landing, effectively removing her from the fight.

It was just Joker and Eve now.

Joker tightened his grip on the golden key. He was breathing heavily – heavier than he had in a long while. He’d essentially just gone through a triple boss rush. His team was down, and he himself had been beaten nearly to death multiple times today alone. He didn’t like his odds.

But that wasn’t going to stop him from trying.
“PERSONA!” he raged, tapping into dark magics as his Persona engulfed him. He charged Eve. She encased herself in a sheen of ice and brought another mini-sun into existence.

He missed her on purpose, jumping past her toward the open portal Seraphim was keeping. He held the key out on the tips of his fingers. If it could just cross the dimensional barrier…

“You will never reach reality,” Giorno said from the other side of the portal, summoning his Stand and holding its palm to the swirling portal. The moment the key attempted to cross the barrier… it couldn’t, the power of Gold Experience Requiem preventing it from ever leaving the world.

While it was in Joker’s hands, anyway. He ordered his Persona to pick up the key and throw it through the portal.

The moment he released it to his Persona, Eve flew in and grabbed it herself. With a swift kick, she pushed Joker through the portal. His persona dissipated, as did most of his power. Giorno quickly subdued him, hand over the mouth to prevent him from saying anything.

“I will have to wipe him,” Giorno said. “And any others that are in there.”

“I know,” Eve said, frowning. “…I’m sorry, Joker.”

Joker looked at her not with vengeance or anger – but pity.

With a curt nod, Eve looked at the key in her magic. It was small, golden, and would no doubt fit perfectly in one of the clocks she owned. But she couldn’t remove it from her own Palace. She had to maintain her own secrecy.

She teleported to the room at the top of the Tower, finding me lying unconscious at the doorway. She picked me up in her magic and walked into the final room.

Gears. Gears everywhere, marred by a scent of roses. In the center of the room was a pedestal, on of which a representation of the Dark Tower stood.

She swore she could hear it whispering to her. Was it her own mind, or had she created a manifestation of the Tower through her subconscious?

She didn’t know. All she did was lay the golden key at the base of the tower… and left.

The Phantom Thieves of Hearts would be returned to the desert town in Celestia City the next day with no memory of anything that had happened.

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Corona held her arms in front of her, glowing with the sickly colors of Doom. Her limbs were crossed – one pointing at Cozy, one at Roxy.

The Doom of Roxy had transferred to Cozy. The pegasus mare’s skull had fractured as though a sword had been rammed through it with enough power to split atoms.

Cozy’s lifeless form slumped to the ground, dead.

Corona let out a sigh of relief.

“That Doom power is really helpful,” Flutterfree commented.

Corona barely had enough energy to nod in her direction.
Roxy gingerly touched her gemstone. Not a scratch on it. Her relief was quickly replaced by pain.

*Carnelian…*

Eve and I appeared in the universe at that moment, ready to help with whatever was left. It was quickly clear to us that we had arrived too late for that. The villains had already been defeated, the final sacrifices made, the climax at an end.

And so I did the second thing on my list.

I woke Dirk up with a lightning bolt to the face. “Get up,” I ordered.

He did, his face as expressionless as always.

“Your arrogance is disgusting,” I spat.

“I could say the same of you.”

“At least I care.”

“And I don’t? This entire thing was just for Vriska.”

“You’re kidding yourself,” I growled.

“Who the fuck cares if most of it was to fuck with you? I chose to do it as a present for Vriska.”

“That didn’t work!”

“Please, the only damage that was actually done was that Gem, and I’m sure we can find some way to get her back.”

“You threatened the stability of Merodi Universalis!”

“I knew that anything I did could not change what ka needs to happen. Not with the retroactive Narrative.”

I glared at him. “You took full advantage of it… But you are wrong, things could be changed. Roxy wasn’t a Gem. Now she is.”

“She’s better off that way.”

“I know that!” I spat. “I know it’s more ‘her’, but we’re not talking about that! We’re talking about your reckless behavior! You were *doped* by *Cozy Glow*! How were you not expecting that?”

“I was. I was not expecting you to give her what she needed to turn against me.”

“Come again?”

“If you hadn’t sent that note, Cozy would have believed I was on their side. She would not have betrayed me. She would have gone down just like the rest of them since she wouldn’t have prepared to take Tirek’s power. But you told her there was no way I was on their side. Correct, but it gave her the chance to do what she wanted.”

“DIRK!” Vriska shouted, pointing a sword at his neck. “You. *Suck.*”

“You appreciated the gift at first.”
“Yeah, well, I’m a shortsighted self-absorbed spiderbitch who needs a second to think about things before making judgments! You’re a super-genius mastermind! You shouldn’t have even tried this!”

“He can’t stand being in the background,” I said, distasteful. “I told him to watch his place. He wouldn’t accept that.”

“Would you?” Dirk asked.

“I would love it if this Eye would go away.”

“I’m indifferent about the Ultimate Self.”

I frowned. “…We can’t just let you walk away from this.”

“Fuck, really? Do you want to turn me into an actual villain? Conniving ways to get back at you for ruining my attempt at a birthday party? That’s a lame backstory, you need to think of something bet-”

Roxy cut off his head with her sword. Everyone was silent.

“The Gallifreyans have him now,” Roxy said, dissipating her sword. “He’ll be sent back to fight Lord English. We know he survives the encounter. But he won’t be doing anything like this to any of us again. Fuckin’ asshole.”

She turned and walked away.

“Roxy…” John called.

“I don’t want to hear it, John.”

John zapped in front of her.

“I said I-”

John held out a perfectly healthy version of Carnelian from the metapast.

“C-carnelian…” Roxy said, eyes wide. “I…”

Carnelian took one look at Roxy and shuddered in fear.

It was like looking at her own dead body.

“I…” Roxy made herself invisible.

With a sigh, Vriska turned to Pinkie. “…Pinks…”?

“Y-yeah?” Pinkie asked.

“I’m sorry. Not really in the mood for a party.”

“I… I understand.” Pinkie was trying not to cry.

Vriska nodded slowly. She took one look at Dirk’s body, contemplating driving her sword into it.

She decided that would be pointless. She just wanted to go home.
And so things, in a way, returned to the way they were before. A few minor differences. Roxy was a Gem, but you’d be surprised how little that changed things, overall.

All the heroes ended up in more or less the same place they were before. Allure continued working with the League, Corona continued research and exploration, Eve continued working as the Overhead, Renee returned to her post, and Pinkie continued leading the Primary Team.

The villains had different fates. Many of them were dead. A few just vanished off the face of the planet, never to be seen again. Both Ba’al and Loki managed to slip away. Grogar was imprisoned and placed into Nautica under maximum security guard, surprised to find a few alternate versions of himself in there. He lived the rest of his days as a bitter, angry goat, which was to say his days in prison were about the same as they were out of prison.

Chrysalis was sent back to Thorax. She was completely off-the-rocker mad, but the Changelings took her in and promised to see what they could do for her. Don’t hold out, that queen lost her mind so long ago there’s little chance she regains much of anything even with acceptance from those who shunned her leadership.

Sometimes you’ll hear stories of Adagio and Starlance out there in the multiverse, staying as far away from higher societies as possible.

As it turned out, the Mindflayer hadn’t been completely defeated, but it had been slowed considerably – efforts by the TSAB to extinguish the multiversal plague were met with success for the first time in many years.

Magane appeared here and there, cryptic and manipulative as always, never letting anyone be certain if she was really evil or just insane.

Lilith was locked up and placed in an asylum. Bleeding Heart was allowed to go free – but she spends most her time at the asylum with Lilith anyway. The two are essentially inseparable in what Mattie would call a “right screwy relationship.”

There was a funeral for Dirk. No one felt right about it. Dave didn’t even show up. They all knew Dirk was still around, just not with them at the moment. And that he had brought this on himself. Roxy couldn’t bring herself to attend.

Roxy tried to reconnect with Carmelian, but the Gem had decided it was all too much. The party, seeing her dead self walking around like a zombie, it… she needed to go back to Homeworld and get away from the craziness. Roxy accepted this, and they drifted apart, as people tend to do.

Lielight… Well, at last, here’s some good news.

“Hey, Lielight?”

Lielight looked up from her newspaper that was supposed to be inconspicuous. “Eve, I’m getting out like you want.”

“I’ve changed my mind.” Eve smiled warmly. “You can stay and work. As Astrid, as Lielight, whoever you want.”

“Barrel primates! Why!?"

“…There was once a filly by the name of Cozy Glow. We locked her away instead of trying to help her. …Granted, I do think she really was hopeless. But because we locked her away, she became even more of a monster than she had been at the start.” Eve extended a hoof. “I see a spark of
something in you. I’m not going to push that away. Plus, your opinions are very different from mine. That’s very helpful in our career path.”

Lielight paused for a moment – then shook the hoof. “I fully expect to let you down and drive you insane.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

And now… let’s back up a bit. All this stuff is important, yes, but not as important as what happened shortly after the party exploded.

~~~

Vriska walked into the diner on Earth C to the beautiful smell of a banquet. It may have been breakfast time, but her friends had ordered steak, turkey, high-quality salads, and some special drinks in addition to the normal breakfast stuff. In the center of the humble diner table was a cobalt-blue cake with the number 1000 written on it in icing.

“It hasn’t been twenty-four hours yet,” Pinkie said, grinning. “Technically still your birthday.”

“Have a seat, have some cake,” Flutterfree encouraged.

“It’s not going to explode, is it?” Vriska asked, sitting down.

Pinkie shook her head. “It’s just a cake. Something simple.”

Vriska took a slice out of the sugary substance and shoved a copious amount into her mouth. “Delicious as always, Pinks.”

“I try,” Pinkie said with a smile.

Vriska looked around at her friends. There weren’t too many here – just the rest of her team, Renee, Eve, Aradia, Hastur, and Starbeat. The people she cared the most about. This thought would have made her twitch in revulsion before she came to the ponies, but today it just let her smile a big, dopey smile.

“You’re all the best,” she said, simply. “Yeah, I know, Vriska being sappy.”

“I like it,” Starbeat said. “It suits you.”

“Really? I thought it came out of nowhere like an exploding cat.”

Starbeat rolled her eyes at Hastur. “Riiiiight.”

“So, I see you’re keeping the Rage robes,” Vriska observed, pointing at Flutterfree. “Wasn’t that just to keep me off the scent?”

“It was,” Flutterfree admitted. “But… well, I’ve been wearing them so long, it’d seem odd to take them off now. I guess if this entire ordeal gave me anything, it was a connection to my inner self.”

“And experiences!” Renee declared. “Remember, the ending is not all there is – there were many other memories!”

“Remember when we decimated Adagio’s band?” Nova asked.

“Oh, I have to hear about this!” Pinkie said, slamming her hooves on the table in mock indignation.
“Come on, spill the beans! Sounds like quite the story!”

There was a chorus of laughs that never quite stopped as Nova relayed the encounter with Adagio in the world of music. Soon, everyone was smiling and having a merry time just eating with one another. No fancy treasure hunt, no party planets, not even any party games. Just a big meal and a bunch of friends.

I did go way, way overboard, Pinkie admitted to herself. I forgot that, sometimes, the biggest parties aren’t the best ones. Often it’s the small, insignificant things that will stay with you the longest.

“…And then I locked guitars with the chaos monstrosity!” Vriska declared, jumping up on the table to reenact the scene. “I put the strings behind my back and swung through the air, coming down on his head with a THWACK and a HACK and a BA-BAM!”

“How could you possibly keep playing like that?” Eve asked.

“She just did,” Renee said with a shrug.

“It was the clash of the ages!” Vriska continued – annoying Nova with her continued hijacking of the story. “And then… Renee, you gotta. Give us a little song.”

“Oh, uh…” Renee cleared her throat. “I don’t remember the words exactly…”

“Come on!” Pinkie said, clapping her hooves. “Just give us what you think it was! I’m sure we’ll get the jist of it!”

Aradia nodded. “I would love to hear you sing, Renee.”

Renee nodded, clearing her throat. “Well then… I don’t remember much, but I do remember this.” With a deep breath, she belted out two resonant lines.

“We are the primary team!

We shall stand tall evermore!”

Eve, Renee, Pinkie, Nova, Flutterfree, Jotaro, Vriska…

Heroes.
Outpost 61 didn’t have a name besides its designation. A grand total of five people lived in Outpost 61, all five of whom were scientists there only as part of a research project. The universe they occupied had one very interesting property they called ‘planet-jumping physics’. The entire universe was uninhabited, but it was filled with planets and stars so close together people could jump from one to another. In addition, the cosmic bodies were so small that some could be walked around in seconds. How gravity could be so strong and yet so weak flew in the face of all common sense.

Which was why Outpost 61 was here. There were possible plans to colonize Planetary Proxima in the future, but that would only happen once the scientific research had gained an understanding of how everything worked so buildings could be built without fear of them flying into another planet.

The head of this expedition was an alternate version of Daniel Jackson who went by Danny. He was younger than the Daniel Renee knew, wore a labcoat, and had a dirty pair of goggles pushing up his messy hair.

Currently he was sitting in Outpost 61’s control room, annoyed at the uncooperative sensors. There had been a power surge and now he was getting inconsistent readings, which annoyed him to no end. He was so fixated on this he missed the beautiful sunrise – though admittedly this happened every few hours so it wasn’t that impressive even if the ‘sun’ was less than a mile away. Just one of the commonplace things in Planetary Proxima that would be odd elsewhere.

He fixed the sensors by crossing three separate wires over a magical power node. “Finally.” He sat up, taking a look at the readings. Most everything was normal, aside from a slight surge of dimensional energy. He would have looked into that, but there was another alert telling him something was broken. The reality anchor that kept their base from flying off when the inconsistent gravity of Planetary Proxima fluctuated wasn’t functioning.

He wasn’t particularly worried – the chances of a gravitational fluctuation happening were minimal, and even then Outpost 61 was designed to handle it. It was more likely to send anything not tied down flying uncomfortably into a wall or something. He supposed that might break a bone if it happened just wrong.

He got out of his seat, preparing to go to the basement and fix the reality anchor, but this was when none other than Aradia Megido, Maid of Time, appeared behind him. “You need to evacuate this Outpost. Now.”

“W-Why?”

“This universe doesn’t exist in an hour, that good enough?!”

Danny nodded profusely. “Just let me grab the data.”

Aradia accelerated him so he could remove the backup data core from the computer. Despite this, she felt the fabric of the universe start to shift around her before he was done. She fixed this by freezing time everywhere except inside the Outpost.

Danny stood up with a black box in his hands. “Done – wait, what?” He looked out the window. Instead of seeing the motions of planets, he saw a bunch of planets being stretched like noodles, but
frozen in time.

“Analyze it later, I don’t want to chance that this can break through a time stop,” Aradia said. “Put out the evacuation order.”

Danny turned on the red alert. “All hands – leave the universe!” He watched the sensors – all four of the other life signs vanished, indicating immediate evacuation. He pulled out his dimensional device and did the same, leaping through with the black box. He looked back through at Aradia.

“I’ll catch up,” Aradia said. “I’ll be fine.”

Danny nodded, closing the portal. Aradia moved herself outside the base, standing atop its domed metallic structure. She allowed time to resume and watched as every planet, star, and other object within the universe began to coalesce into a single point, creating a brand new world of fire, earth, and unusual gravity.

She couldn’t see why this was happening. Nothing to indicate why this universe was collapsing in on itself.

She couldn’t stay any longer – the mass of that planet was about to become like a black hole, and those always did bizarre, unpredictable things to her Time abilities. She left the universe, entering the same world Danny had.

This world was a larger scientific outpost that Merodi Universalis had installed as a space station in an empty universe. The station carefully bent space around it so nobody would open a dimensional portal into empty space unless they were actually trying. The rest of Danny’s team was there as well – a Skaian Jade, a yellow Gem, and a pair of ponies that were either twins or alternate versions of each other.

All of them had already crowded around a public terminal, the black box plugged in. The Jade – notably without dog ears or god-tier robes – was moving her fingers quickly across the holographic display. “Found it.”

“Found what?” Aradia asked.

“What caused this.” She played a video file. “Right when the distortions started, the cameras picked up this.” The video showed a place between two planets. A ship corkscrewed into existence, sat there for a moment, and corkscrewed out.

It was shaped vaguely like a manta ray with two threads coming from the head and flowing over the back.

Aradia stared. “…That’s a Skarn ship.”

“…Skarn?” Danny asked.

“I need to tell the Overheads about this immediately.”

She told them a little earlier than immediately. Because she could do that.

~~~

The nameless Research Overhead robot finished giving the very brief report to the Merodi Overheads. The star-like lights on his smooth, featureless face flashed with red sparkles, indicating his anger. “Skarn attacked one of our outposts in order to absorb the universe’s interesting physics. It
“is only thanks to the Handmaid that no lives were lost, and only then because she received a tip through vague prophecy.” The Research Overhead glanced at all twelve of the other Overheads. “We had a fully functioning beacon in that universe, and Skarn and all his children know what those are. This was an attack.”

“Isn’t it possible he was just careless?” Celeste of Education asked.

“Does that matter!?” Renee blurted. “Even if it was careless, what if this happens again!? What if Aradia isn’t there to evacuate!?”

“It doesn’t make a difference,” O’Neill said. “Our universes aren’t safe from him.”

“It means he’s either completely apathetic about us, or he’s trying to get us to react,” Giorno said. “If it’s the former, he’s going to regret it. If it’s the latter…”

“How can we not react?” Luna of Aid demanded. “We’ve just been attacked! If it happens once, it can happen again!”

“We can’t let this stand,” Eve said.

“Not that we want to tell you we told you so,” Renee muttered. “But we told you so.”

Eve put a hoof on Renee, indicating she should calm down.

Ava tapped her fingers together. “Who thinks we shouldn’t retaliate?”

Only Commerce and Cultural indicated their disagreement this time.

Ava nodded. “I move that now is the time to face Skarn. He has shown that he is a possible threat to us even without our aggression. There is no further reason to delay the inevitable. We’ve already discussed this once before, unless anyone thinks there needs to be deliberation, we shall vote now.”

There was no objections.

“All for retaliation?”

Eleven votes – including Maud and Ava.

“All against?”

Just Commerce and Cultural.

“Eleven to two,” Ava said, lowering her hand. “O’Neill, the responsibility for following this through falls mostly to you.”

O’Neill nodded. “I’ll need Expansion and Oversight on board as well – we need to erect defenses before we launch our attack. We can’t let any of our member universes suffer from reality anchor failure. Renee, prepare your teams, I may need some of your people if plan A doesn’t pan out. Eve, can you write up a declaration of war?”

Eve nodded. “Of course.”

“Giorno, I take it you’ve got more intel on Skarn now than we did last time?”

Giorno nodded. “Significantly more. I’ll transfer everything we have directly to your database.”
O’Neill nodded. “Everyone else, we’re about to be in a war. We’re sure as hell not ready as a society, as Cultural and Commerce’s reservations tell us. But our hand has been forced, so we have to get ready.” He stood up. “It’ll take a few days to erect the proper defenses. Giorno, is Skarn watching us?”

“We have not detected any actions in Merodi space prior to this incident.”

“This entire thing is fishy and reeks of a trap,” O’Neill said. “So I want everyone to be prepared for everything to go south. Don’t assume any of you are safe or have no responsibility in this war we’re going to get into. Everyone will feel it. Everyone.”

The Overheads nodded.

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The Merodi Universalis fleet did not have hummingbird drives on every ship, simply because many of them were too big. Especially the protomolecule planetary monstrosities. However, because they had the protomolecule’s planets, they had bothered to create planet-sized dimensional gateways. One in particular had been built in the Gem Vein, and this was where the Merodi were planning to start the war.

Currently, the planetary gateway was glowing a deep red, indicating it was connecting to a universe more than one connection away. A brilliant, blue planet with vibrant tentacles passed through the portal, joining a few dozen other, similar planets. They were of varying sizes, but none more than twice as large as an Earth. All of them glowed an ominous blue, had a few of the rippling tentacles, and had truly tremendous engines embedded into their crusts. These engines operated on a mixture of protomolecule shifting and zero-point energy. They were the size of cities, but even with their power these planetary beings were still slow.

The good news was that they could hold a lot. The entire rest of the fleet could land on the surface of just one of them, and each of them were being retrofitted with dozens of reality anchors.

Only a few more needed to get into the fleet before they were ready. It had already taken a few days to organize everything, what was a few more minutes?

A lot if you were Yellow Diamond, frontline commander of the Merodi offense. She had been waiting for this a long time. Finally, she was able to do what she had done best back before the multiverse opened – wage war. She may have grown to understand and even respect the squishy little biological beings, but she had still thought they were too soft. That opinion might have been about to change… But she had to actually get to the fighting to be sure if they were really willing to go through with this.

She hoped so. She also hoped she got to be the one to kill that whelp, Skarn. He was too much of a moron to have Yellow Diamond’s respect. Conquering for the sake of art? Not making use of the power you have to increase your own? Even more asinine than conquering through the art of diplomacy and peace. At least that still increased your power, no matter how embarrassing it was.

Yellow Diamond checked over her fleet once again, examining the thousands of ships that had converged in this one universe. She had to edit out the protomolecule planets, for they dominated the view. Then she could see what she truly had at her disposal.

The Gem Armada was her pride even though she was sitting on the bridge of a Merodi joint-construction ship, the Andromeda. The Andromeda was just too boring for her tastes – sure, it was the most advanced ship in the fleet, equipped with just about every weapon imaginable and multiple
Spectral Rods on board, not to mention a truly monstrous reality anchor. But there was just something about seeing the large hand shapes of Gem ships that made Yellow Diamond feel more in control of them. They would be effective at long range and magic resistance.

They had a lot of other ships as well. From Earth Tau’ri they had the bulky, hefty ships of the Tau’ri themselves, good for tanking damage. The Asgard ships were not as sturdy, but faster with more precise, effective weaponry. The Ori Reform ships were slow, but accessed high-efficiency spiritual-based weaponry that could possibly breach defenses other weapons would not be able to. There were even a few ships from a race Yellow Diamond did not know well, the Wraith, who were apparently space vampires who lived on their ‘hive’ ships. Yellow Diamond had no idea how many of these ships came from alternate versions of Earth Tau’ri; all she knew was that they made up a large bulk of the whole fleet.

Merodi Universalis’ only full member universe within the D-Sphere, Elemental Eight’s Heaven, had sent a full contingent of high angels, each of them glowing with the light of a star, ready to free the Congeries from a brutal tyrant. Galaxa Quadrants had sent their own ships as well. While not as expansive as Earth Tau’ri’s fleets, the strange disc-shaped ships with blue nacelles made great additions to the fleet. Yellow Diamond expected them to be nimble and precise, though they weren’t among the stronger ships in the fleet.

Then there were the Reapers. The Flat, unusual ships that would likely confuse Skarn’s forces with their unconventional dimensionality, as well as their indoctrination ability.

Some of the lesser Merodi allies had sent aid as well. Galaxa Immaterium still wasn’t even close to being part of the Merodi, but virtually all the races in that wartorn galaxy realized they owed the Merodi a lot, even if their universe was still in a near-constant state of war. The Emperor of Mankind had sent a full contingent of Imperium ships, including what he called “THE MOST MARY-SUE OF ALL MARINES IN EXISTENCE, THE SMURFS.” Officially called Ultramarines, they apparently had a penchant for winning. To everyone’s immense surprise, Tzeentch had given some of his multiversal holdings to the effort - nobody trusted him, but they had taken the help anyway.

Then there were the joint Merodi ships like the Andromeda which could not be classified, since each and every one was a little unique, designed out of many different varieties of technology smashed together into war machines and exploration vessels. Their names were as varied as the cultures that made them: Austraeoh, Yggdrasil, Nibiru, Pittacus, Eleven On High, etcetera. These ships were the ones that held the god-tier Skaian. There were nowhere near as many as there had been in the fight against the Combine and Horrorterrors, and they were no longer in a space specifically designed to their forms. Nevertheless, they would be some of the heaviest hitters imaginable, possibly able to turn Skarn’s shaping against him.

The strongest weapon of Merodi Universalis, John Egbert, had been left behind on purpose, against Yellow Diamond’s wishes. Apparently John had personally requested not to be involved in the war, and everyone had just agreed. They were all too afraid to use his power unless it was absolutely necessary.

Whatever. They didn’t need it.

Equis Cosmic’s ships were notably absent from the fleet, for they were the ones tasked with the defense of Merodi Universalis using Cosmo’s harmonic energies. Yellow Diamond was only a little disappointed she wasn’t going to get to see Skarn’s surprise at the defense plan they had.

But Yellow Diamond was on the more glorious path. That of conquest. She was going to depose Skarn.
The protomolecule’s Investigator appeared to Yellow Diamond. “All through.”

Yellow Diamond nodded. “They all understand?”

“No infecting civilians, and don’t augment our personnel without a life-or-death scenario or personal request. Don’t worry, signal’s great on those worlds, nothin’ going to go hoppin’ away and doin’ its own thing.”

Yellow Diamond noticed the bridge was staring at her. “It’s the Investigator,” she explained, fixing them all with steeled glares. “Open a channel to all ships.” She stood up tall, making sure to look as powerful and authoritative as possible. “ALL SHIPS! Move into near orbit around PM-Prime, and prepare to move with it through the ring! Dial the Congeries with the Ring! Tell General O’Neill we’re moving out! Prepare the declaration of war!”

The thousands-strong armada went into orbit around the largest of the protomolecule planets, the Andromeda at the ‘front’. The Ring flashed bright red and started drilling through universes – even with Giorno’s reconnaissance missions, they still had to cut through twenty different universes to establish a connection to the Congeries, and that took a lot of power for a portal this large. Enough power that not only did the Ring have to absorb energy from the black hole it was orbiting, but other versions of the black hole in other universes through smaller portals and zero-point energy mixed with magical accumulators. It was an impressive feat of engineering, but they were able to move the entire fleet at once.

They only had one god-tier Jade with them – the League’s ‘office dog’. She took it upon herself to shrink the protomolecule planets that weren’t the main one so they could be moved through the portal quickly.

PM-Prime fired its tremendous engine, passing through the dimensional boundary created by the ring to arrive in the Congeries. Jade came through with all the other planets and began growing them all to size.

“Cut power to the ring,” Yellow Diamond said. They had all the ships they would need in the Congeries – if they needed reinforcements, it would just be personnel, and they did not need a portal that large for personnel. “Take formation!” The entire fleet arranged itself like a spearhead, pointing toward one location.

Giorno had managed to obtain a lot more intelligence about the location of the Shaping Mechanism and the effective center of the Congeries. The knew exactly where it was and how ‘far’ it was, relatively speaking at least. They just had to get there and utterly destroy it. If they were lucky, Skarn wouldn’t have time to mount a resistance before they arrived.

But Yellow Diamond knew he would. She was hoping for it. A war could not be glorious if it were easy.

“Activate the warp field!” She ordered the fleet. The ships at the front of the armada twisted space around them to create an elongated warp field, burning all the power they could manage to encompass the protomolecule planets in the field. The fleet shot off in a shared FTL grouping to the center of the Congeries, passing through universe after universe physically.

It cost a lot less energy to create a smooth warp drive than a tremendous dimensional portal.

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“Father, you need to see this,” Brell said, walking up to Skarn.
“Can’t you see I’m busy?” Skarn said, his hands on the blue globe he used to control the Shaping Mechanism, eyes fixated on the multicolored strands that showed him the creation of a new piece of art. An Earth where the same day kept repeating over and over, and everyone was aware of it, but they couldn’t step outside of fate.

“Father, we have unwanted visitors. They have a message directly for you.”

Skarn paused. He took his hands off the globe, making the strands lose their cohesion, no longer displaying anything. “What?”

Brell played a video. An image of Eve appeared on a holographic screen.

“Several months ago by our central calendar, one of our agents followed your son, Arthon, back to the Congeries because we were suspicious of the lack of information you shared with us about your home. This agent did not return to us, but the data she collected did. Her ship showed us the horrible things you create for the sake of art in your Congeries – entire universes nothing but clay to you for your own aesthetic enjoyment.

“A vote was cast as soon as this information came to light. Should we retaliate against the obvious crimes against existence, or simply cut you off to avoid a large-scale conflict? The vote ended in favor of the cautious route. We cut you out of our lives and refused to tell you why, so as to not prompt a response from you.

“Then the universe we knew as Planetary Proxima was… attacked by your Shaping Mechanism. That universe had a clearly functioning beacon that told you it was ours, and you ignored it. You have demonstrated that you either do not care about our claims, or that you wish to prod us for a reaction. If you wanted the latter, you’re in luck. This is Merodi Universalis’ formal notice of declaration of war on the Congeries. By the time you receive this message our fleet will already be in the Congeries, heading right for you.

“I am Evening Sparkle, Overhead of Relations for Merodi Universalis. End message.”

Skarn rammed his fist into a wall, forcing the atoms within to fuse and explode. Brell contained the explosion with her own cosmic powers. “Did you really attack them?”

“I don’t know,” Skarn muttered. “It’s possible in one of my fits of inspiration… They do have colonies spread out across the universes. One of them could have been nearby and I just didn’t know about it…”

“Father…”

Skarn sighed. “I know, the fact that I don’t know is just going to prove Arthon right. We have bigger problems right now, though. Tell Arthon to prepare the armies as quickly as he can. They did the honorable thing and let us know there was a war before it began, but they do have us at a disadvantage with the amount of preparation time they no doubt had.”

Brell nodded. “Of course.”

“I will respond to them, and then use the Shaper to do what I can. They would not have come here without defenses, however.”

Brell left, leaving Skarn alone. He growled and recorded a message of his own.

“Then let it be so! The Congeries reciprocate Merodi Universalis’ declaration of war! We shall meet you on the battlefield both here and on your home front! Do not think this will be a quick war, an
easy war, or a war you will go through without heavy losses! You will be defeated, and you will become part of the cosmic art within my space! The only difference is that now you will be here by force, rather than choice! I believed you could be persuaded to appreciate the Congeries, but that is clearly not so!

“I, Skarn the Shaper, am disappointed it had to come to this. Even though I respect your decision to issue a formal declaration of war, I will not hold back against your forces. We will both fight with all our might! And you will discover that your might is not enough!”

Skarn let out a bear’s roar. “I ACCEPT THIS CHALLENGE!”

He sent the message. He waited a few minutes; just to make sure the Merodi fleet would receive it and be able to understand what it meant.

Then he placed his hands on the blue globe, extending his will into the outer Congeries…

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Cosmo received Skarn’s declaration of war and knew it was time.

She sat on the bridge of her personal ship – the flower designed to amplify her own powers of Harmony. She had used it many times before. First to exterminate the alien aggressors of Equis Cosmic, later to fight Majora head on, and now as a purely defensive measure against the coming fleets of Skarn.

However, this time was going to be a little different. Normally the harmonious energies could only act on one world. But this time they needed to defend every Merodi Universalis member – a few hundred universes now. Admittedly, this did not count minor or distant colonies, which would only be receiving minimal defenses because they were low value targets. But all of those universes needed help from Cosmo’s control over harmony.

And they’d figured out a way to do it.

The entire fleet of Equis Cosmic was spread out in every universe over every major planet of Merodi Universalis. It was the only fleet large enough to do this, since Equis Cosmic was the only major universe that controlled an entire galaxy. This allocation of the fleet had left many of Equis Cosmic’s worlds less defended than Cosmo would have liked, but this was war – they had to take the best of all possible options, even if it left some people vulnerable.

Every ship of Cosmo’s fleet was equipped with a program that would open a series of wormholes and dimensional portals to connect every ship to Cosmo’s flagship, allowing her to spread her harmonious energy everywhere. However, strong as she was, that would be spread out too thin to have any major impact on the defense of the Merodi worlds.

Which was why every single Tree of Harmony or equivalent under Merodi space was going to add their power as well. While the ancient beings that were usually Stars rarely had versions that spoke, the Merodi had seers that could judge their moods. All of them were willing to lend their assistance to the defense of Merodi Universalis – ranging from Equis Vitis’ own Tree, to the Runes of Harmony that had once surrounded the Spectacularium in Lai, to the weakened but energetic Tree of Equis Concrete, to a large number of Trees that could be found in Esefem. They were all ready.

All Cosmo had to do was ask.

She took a breath, dropping her disguise, allowing her shimmering, skeletal self to be exposed to the few in the room with her. None of her close aides flinched – they all knew what she was and had
learned to accept it.

She spoke. “Starlight, activate the harmony network.”

Starlight beeped from her position on Cosmo’s neck, telling all ships to activate. Every one of the network created dimensional portals and wormholes. Cosmo took a breath and surged her harmonious energy out of her flagship into these holes, straining herself as far as she was able. She strained – but then a Tree of Harmony augmented her network, taking the strain off of her, allowing them to stretch further.

The planets of Merodi Universalis were slowly surrounded by gentle vines of white energy jumping from ship to ship, creating a swirling cage. There were times when the network flickered or faltered, but another Tree of Harmony would offer its assistance. It was a graceful net of defense.

Cosmo strained. *We’ll need to keep this up for a long time. I’m not sure we can do that…*

“Incoming call,” one of Cosmo’s aides said. “For you.”

A version of Twilight appeared on the screen – one Cosmo recognized as the Grand Secretariat of the Sparkle Census.

“We are not going to risk our lives or our worlds to help you with your war,” the Secretariat prefaced. “But we have sensed that you are strained in your defenses and won’t be able to keep it up for long. We have a network of Trees of Harmony as well – and they wish to lend their power.”

Cosmo let out a relieved laugh. “Thank you.”

“If Skarn attacks us for this, we will retract our power instantly.”

“Then let’s hope he doesn’t find out.”

The Secretariat smiled warmly. “Wings crossed.” She nodded to her left. “Do it.”

Cosmo felt the strain lift off of her and her fellow Trees of Harmony. “Okay… We can maintain this. We are in your debt.”

“Repay us by freeing the people under Skarn’s control.”

“We will.”

The communication ended.

There was silence. Everyone was holding their breath, waiting for an attack.

It came. Cosmo saw a few blips appear over Equis Vitis and the Hub. Around Equis Vitis, the Tree of Harmony *flashed*, using its proximity to destroy the orbiting ships the instant they arrived. A few attempted to appear lower in the atmosphere, but the Tree of Harmony was on to them as well, taking no prisoners. The spatial distortions around the Congeries’ ships did nothing to defend against the pure light.

Around the Hub, there was no Tree directly, so the network wasn’t as effective in instantly destroying the ships. Luckily, there was only one location on the Hub of any concern – the Hub building itself, and it was armed to the teeth. The handful of ships that were able to dodge the harmony network were taken out by the point defenses of the Hub and surrounding ships.

More red dots appeared around Merodi Universalis, spread around most of the member universes but
were focused on the eight founding worlds, the Hub, and Earth C – notably leaving Skaia’s Dream alone. Presumably because fighting ghosts on their home turf was just a bad idea. They had not found Celestia City yet, which was good – that was where O’Neill and most of the other military leaders were issuing orders from.

She noticed something odd – there weren’t very many of Skarn’s ships. They outnumbered them a hundred to one with just Equis Cosmic’s ships. And while clearly more of Skarn’s ships were continually arriving, if he had much more they’d be using a very different strategy.

This didn’t mean that they weren’t threatening – Cosmo had already lost a few dozen ships and a couple of lesser Equis Cosmic planets had been hit hard – but as it was now, it looked like Merodi Universalis had a tremendous advantage over the offense of Skarn.

*If they don’t have that many ships, why send this many? Does he just have to fight us on our turf as part of his code of war? Are most of his ships busy with our offense? Or is this a ploy of some kind – hiding his numbers, or working on a secondary plan?*

Cosmo sent out a message, telling the fleet that even though it looked like they were undeniably repelling the attack, it was likely a ruse. She knew it would set the armies on edge, but sometimes on edge was better than overconfident. They needed to be prepared for anything to prevent a disaster.

She checked the news reports. So far, the citizens weren’t panicking, and they were in support of the war even after the first few minutes. But they were scared. Skarn’s ships were more than willing to hit civilian targets. Even though they weren’t able to hit very many, the toll was going to tax the minds of the citizens.

Some people had already lost family and didn’t even know it.

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One of the artistic works of the Congeries transformed into a giant anglerfish and tried to bite PM-Prime in half while it traveled past at FTL speeds.

The fish was shredded by the sheer forces between the subliminal space it occupied and the motion of the warp bubble.

“He’s finally doing it!” Yellow Diamond shouted. “Prepare for attacks from all sides and all angles of any kind!”

Skarn did not try the fish again – this time he sent a photonic construct the size of Earth’s orbit after them, having it pursue in a warp field of its own. The ships in the rear of the formation fired a mixture of arcane and spiritual weapons, since physical attacks wouldn’t be able to pass through the warp fields.

Yellow Diamond considered how useful it would be if they had Embodiment assistance in this matter, but Hastur had declined involvement, so they were low on eldritch power. That said, Tzeentch had sent his poster-boy, Ahzek Ahriman...

The idiot placed himself at the edge of the warp field. “You think you’re clever? HA! You are NOTHING!” He pointed his ruby-eyed staff in the being’s direction and fired.

The being of light teleported past the beam and wormed its way to the back of the formation, fusing itself with the warp field. This turned out to be its undoing. A single Skaian ghost floated up to the being the moment it entered – a strange, gray creature in the pink robes of Heart.
One of many, many lost players of SBURB buried in Skaia’s Dream that had come along to fight.

This particular one was a Bard of Heart.

The spirit of the being of light turned on itself, dividing into several different consciousnesses that saw all the others as invaders in the body. It writhed, dropping its own warp field in order to devote all resources to consuming itself.

The next shape Skarn sent after them had no spirit – it was a purely mechanical swirl of fractal patterns coming at them head on. It turned out nukes mixed with Ahzek’s Chaos beams worked pretty well on that option.

Skarn sent another shape, designed to withstand warp fields, soul manipulation, and nuclear Chaos explosions. This beautiful tree was disintegrated by a combination of Life Skaians, angels, and good old-fashioned laser weapons.

Yellow Diamond saw the pattern. “He has effectively infinite materials and space. He will be able to keep throwing stuff at us until something works. How long until we reach the center?”

“If we maintain our current speed, about half an hour,” came the answer. “We’re only going about fifty C due to the tremendous mass we’re carrying. Every attack slows us a bit.”

“He’s going to figure something out in half an hour,” Yellow Diamond grunted, watching as what appeared to be a cross between a banana and a raspberry entered the warp field and took a bite out of one of the protomolecule planets, only to get infected by the contagious blue material. Even then, we haven’t even lost a full percent point of our fleet. We’ll still be able to push through.

She watched as a tremendous squid made entirely of stars charged them from the side, only to discover the might of Space players combined with the impossible, slippery figures of the Reapers.

And then the warp field just vanished.

Yellow Diamond stood straight up. “What just happened!?”

“The warp field is no longer effective! He must have found a way to disable it!”

“That shouldn’t matter!” Yellow Diamond shouted. “We have reality anchors all over the fleet!”

“Well apparently he found a workaround. We’re not being shaped into a piece of art, but we’re not moving faster than light! About fifty percent C right now. Two days until we reach the center.”

Yellow Diamond narrowed her eyes. “And what’s attacking us now?”

“…That’s the thing, there’s no more shaped creatures. We’re just flying at fifty percent C through the Congeries. And- hold on. Look at the radar.”

Yellow Diamond had already seen it. Red dots had appeared on the edges of their accurate sensors – red dots that indicated ships. They had gotten close enough to detect Skarn’s actual defenses.

There were fewer than she was expecting. But she had bigger worries than the surprisingly small size of the enemy at the moment. “Figure out how they’re jamming FTL, now!”

“The fleet is already on it. Dimensional technology still works, so we still have a stable link back to Merodi Universalis.”

Yellow Diamond pressed a few buttons on her console, ordering the protomolecule planets to the
front of the fleet. They would be able to take the most damage of any of the ships while protecting the craft with bigger, fancier weapons. The protomolecule planets were good at infecting and blocking – not shooting at range. Their gravity made installing surface-cannons a bit of a pain compared to just slapping one onto a spaceship.

She arranged the longest-ranged ships behind the protomolecule planets. Lasers dissipated after a certain distance, but missiles never did. They started firing nuclear and other missiles at the Skarn ships that were several minutes away.

The war had suddenly become a lot slower. Since Skarn didn’t seem to be shaping any monstrosities at them, both sides had multiple minutes to prepare themselves.

Yellow Diamond started tapping her fingers on her console. She would have said it was out of boredom to anyone who asked, but in truth, she was nervous. She really had no idea what would happen when the two fleets met.

They had numbers. They had vastly superior numbers. Even with this speed limitation, they should still have the advantage in this surgical strike. Two-day travel time or not, Skarn only had a limited number of ships he could send.

…She hated waiting.

Those geniuses back in Celestia City better figure a way to hurry this along.

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Corona, your assistance is needed on Earth Vitis, Cosmo’s voice rang into Corona’s ear.

Corona mounted Lady Rarity. “Looks like they’re finally calling us out. Sorry Toph, Lai has to defend itself.”

Toph nodded, barely listening to them – instead carefully paying attention to the words of Terezi and her other military advisors on the state of Lai. With the Runes of Harmony in the Spectacularium’s cave, Lai was one of the better-protected worlds - Earth Vitis had no Tree of Harmony. Or, if it did, she was carrying part of it inside of Raging Sights as her empathy.

Lady Rarity and Corona skittered through a portal to Earth Vitis. What do we need to do? Corona asked Cosmo.

They’ve placed ground forces in numerous locations. You are going to the incursion just south of Canterlot – they’re likely after the magic sources there. It’s our best guess, anyway.

Corona cracked her knuckles. “Ground forces we need to take care of, starting with south of Canterlot.”

“Why would they need ground forces?”

“If I had to guess it’s because they don’t have that many ships.” Corona lit her hands and horn, enchanting Lady Rarity and herself with a whole buffet’s worth of enhancements. Senses, strength, speed, power, intelligence, defense, and many other attributes were boosted, in addition to reality anchoring and an aura of intimidation.

Magic circles spiraled around the two of them, the red light of Corona’s magic covering every one of their limbs and surrounding them in a barrier.
“Ready to be a two-person army?” Corona asked.

Lady Rarity nodded, hefting her hammer and sliding her helmet over her face. “As ready as always.”

They teleported to just south of Earth Vitis Canterlot. It took Corona less than a second to differentiate the standard Earth Vitis soldiers from the enemy. Those on her side were fighting with their standard projectile weapons, tanks, and helicopters with a handful of more advanced Merodi weapons. Every one of Skarn’s soldiers were human, but encased in milky-white armor that rippled with space and time around them.

Corona didn’t wait for anything. She spotted the enemy – and she unleashed her wrath on them. Waves of dark red magic flowed out of her arms, intending to seek and destroy every last one of the attacking soldiers.

Except most of them dodged. And all of them had started dodging before she arrived.

The ones who hadn’t dodged didn’t even try. It was as if they were resigned to their fate.

“WE MIGHT HAVE FUTURE SEERS!” Corona shouted with the Royal Canterlot Voice. “USE EXTREME CAUTION!” She opted to use a more damaging attack, one that couldn’t be dodged – a massive earthquake. She couldn’t be as precise with this one, and could only be really effective in locations where there weren’t any friendlies, but there definitely wasn’t any escaping the wrath of the Earth itself.

Unless you could fly. Which, apparently, some of them could, levitating into the air.

Lady Rarity dashed to the side, carrying Corona with her. Parts of the ground where they had just been exploded as if hit by a cannonball, even though there hadn’t been any visible projectiles.

“Thanks,” Corona said.

“They pointed fingers and nothing happened. I reacted.”

“Keep us out of danger, I’ll keep shooting spells.” Corona narrowed her eyes – she needed to be more effective against these ground troops. Clearly, they were coming out of dimensional portals – and she couldn’t disable all those safely without interfering with the harmony network.

What she needed was to set up a cascade that would go through all of them, but she didn’t know enough about them to craft such a spell. They had an aura around them that prevented her scans from piercing their flesh.

“I need to capture one,” she told Lady Rarity. “This might get a little weird.”

“Just do it.”

Corona tried telekinesis first, but they just pushed it away. Teleportation was similarly blocked. She tried to punch one over to her with a powerful spell, but that just killed the armored soldier.

She ground her teeth – trying for a dimensional portal while Lady Rarity protected them from the invisible projectiles. The portal opened up beneath one of the soldiers and dumped him into a different universe. Corona took herself and Lady Rarity there – the endless forest – and faced off against the soldier alone.

He raised his hand, but one invisible bullet was enough for Corona to deflect with barely a thought. She registered that the attack was a carefully calculated folding of spacetime designed to shred through whatever it hit. She pulled back her hand, creating an unbelievably bright ball of fire
intended to distract.

The soldier saw right through it – he blocked Lady Rarity’s hammer from the side without even looking and fired a few more bullets at Corona. She reflected them right back at him, and every last one missed.

“He’s good,” Corona growled. “Raging Sights, we need a precision attack with a guaranteed immobilization, not death.”

Raging Sights beeped. Lady Rarity continued pursuing the soldier while Raging Sights prepared the spell. The soldier must have seen the spell coming, because he stopped running and opted to punch Lady Rarity across the face, crushing her skull.

Or he would have, had Corona not been a Rogue of Doom. The punch reflected off Lady Rarity and into the soldier, knocking him to the ground.

“…Guess he doesn’t see everything,” Corona concluded. “Or didn’t look far enough ahead to see that a punch wouldn’t actually accomplish anything.” She dropped Raging Sights’ complex immobilization spell in favor of a simple paralytic. Enough force pushed through the dazed soldiers shields, locking up every bone and mechanism in his body.

Corona rubbed her hands together. Just in case he was rigged to explode in case of capture, she cast safety spells all over him.

“You’re being a little paranoid,” Lady Rarity said. “From what I read in Skarn’s psych profile, he wouldn’t rig his soldiers to explode. Too dishonorable.”

“Might be Arthon,” Corona pointed out. “He’d have no qualms with that.” She pulled off the soldier’s helmet to reveal a man with pale skin, white hair, and bright purple eyes. “Yeaaaah that’s not normal.” She touched a hand to his forehead… …and came back out.

“Well…?” Lady Rarity asked.

“Nothing…” Corona narrowed her eyes. “But I know he isn’t. He acts like a man, and even if all emotion and soul have been ground out of him he still had to have thoughts… Something about him prevents probing.” She performed scans – she could now detect a lot about what the armor did: protecting the occupant from blows, locally altering physics to increase effectiveness depending on the scenery they were in, and other similar things. There was communication in the helmet, but it was limited and reception only. She wasn’t picking up anything from it.

However, she learned nothing about the man. Every scan she undertook told her he was normal. Just a human albino with strangely purple eyes. Even when she scanned his brain without empathy – it showed a fully functioning cerebral cortex and evidence of a consciousness that was just knocked out.

But she knew he wasn’t normal. She had gone in, and come out without anything from inside his mind.

She narrowed her eyes. “Lady Rarity, you’ve been watching my scans right?”

Lady Rarity nodded. “Mhm.”

“They’re all saying he’s normal, right?”

“Right.”
Corona scanned her mind. Everything seemed normal. She scanned Lady Rarity’s mind, receiving the same. “…Lady Rarity, can I check in your head right now? I want to see if I can find something.”

Lady Rarity took off her helmet. “Sure. What are you thinking?”

“That something’s really off here.” She placed a hand to Lady Rarity.

A moment later she pulled back. ‘Guess I was wrong. Everything seems fine.”

Raging Sights beeped. “Message sent.”

Corona looked at the crystal on the back of her hand. “…What?”

Raging Sights was silent.

“Hello? Raging Sights?” Corona blinked. “Bring up message transcript. Agh, why are you acting up now of all times!?”

_Corona, you’re being recalled for the moment_, Cosmo said. _Please return to Lai castle._

Corona nodded. “Right…” She hefted the soldier onto her back. “Might as well study this guy somewhere else…” She teleported back to Lai.

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O’Neill had called a special meeting in the middle of Celestia City including Thor, Squeaky, Renee, Saxton Hale, Starbeat, Ava, and the robotic Research Overhead. “Right, so I’m going to be brief. This isn’t going to be a fast war anymore. R.O., care to explain why?”

The robot nodded. “Skarn has figured out a way to work around our reality anchors. Not in the sense that he can now mold our ships like clay – he can’t do that – but he’s completely disabled FTL travel.”

“Do we know how?” Thor asked, eyes narrow.

“He set an absolute rule for all universes of the Congeries within one light-day of the Shaping Mechanism. No FTL travel allowed. You are correct in assuming we have the ability to force our reality over his own in a bubble large enough to hold planets – but that bubble physically exists within the Congeries. We can travel at superluminal speeds within that bubble – but the bubble itself cannot travel at superluminal speeds.”

“This means it’ll take two days to get to the Shaping Mechanism at current speeds,” Squeaky said. “And anyone who’s been in war knows that when you hit the enemy, you get slowed down. Hard.”

“Current projections have us fighting for a few weeks to a couple months,” O’Neill said. “Normally that wouldn’t be much of an issue, the fleet would be more than willing to fight that long. But our homeworlds are currently suffering because of ground forces – Earth Vitis is getting hit the hardest. And we’ve recently uncovered why these ground forces are having such an easy time cutting through us.”

“Future sight, right?” Renee said.

“Wrong. That’s just the tip of the iceberg.” O’Neill pressed a button on his remote. “We received this audio message from Corona a short time ago, sent directly to Cosmo.”
A heavily-breathing voice of Corona met them. “We recording, Raging Sights? Good. I am currently hiding out inside Lady Rarity’s subconscious – don’t worry about how I can record a message like this, ask me later. We captured one of the soldiers and started studying him. They have white skin, hair, and purple eyes under the armor, if you can’t figure that out, and they have future-sight – but that’s only what they let you know. If you learn anything else about them, your memory is rewritten. This fragment of my consciousness is currently being hunted down by… I don’t know what. It’s not something I’ve seen before. All I know is that every time I scan the soldiers to learn something about them, I think they’re normal. But when I touch their minds directly I come back with nothing. Like everything they’re thinking is illegal information for my mind to know.”

She took a panicked breath. “When I come out of here, I won’t remember. I’m sending this on the off chance that maybe, if you’re not near one of them, you can remember things about them. Video data is corruptible since Raging Sights doesn’t remember either – but not physical copies. Raging Sights is sending this to you as I record it, which in mental terms means it goes really, really fast… I haven’t been able to learn anything about them in Lady Rarity’s head other than their status as what is officially called a ‘memetic hazard’. Ask Thrackerzod for more info. And if their power extends far beyond even this… Then you won’t be able to remember this part of the message. So…”

There was a loud noise on the recording. “Princess Cosmo, there is a danger in the war that might be us. When you get this, tell me to return to Lai castle immediately. When I get there with whatever I am carrying, sedate me and lock all of us up.”

There was silence. “Ponyfeathers, it’s right behind me,” Corona moaned.

The audio file ended.

O’Neill folded his hands. “Corona has been released since it was proven that, yes, there is an effective range on their memory canceling abilities. She does not remember making any of that, but she knows for certain it’s right. This memory power is so extensive that even the protomolecule cannot remember enough about their biology to take them over. Jotaro has been kind enough to smash several thousand cameras with Hermit Purple to provide us with physical photos of the soldiers. It is a slow process, but Giorno has been able to piece together some information for us. First of all, they’re slightly Aware.”

There were gasps around the table.

O’Neill nodded. “Nowhere near as Aware as the vast majority of Pinkies. We’re not sure they even know about ka or the story-nature of the multiverse, but they’re able to act on it. Their future sight is able to extend beyond events that are predictable – they’ve intercepted many Pinkies and hidden themselves from their Pinkie Senses. We have no idea how far this ‘knowledge’ of things goes, but it makes surprise tactics useless on any large scale. One of them is bound to notice any ploy we throw at them.”

“There’s more, though,” Starbeat said.

O’Neill nodded. “They appear as ordinary humans to every scan we have – even ka-based scans – but they certainly are not.” He gave them some Polaroid photos Jotaro had generated with Hermit Purple. One showed a soldier without armor ripping a human being in half. Another showed an armored one walking, and people falling dead around him. Another was walking through a sea of Merodi soldiers and none of them noticed.

The scariest one was of one’s jaw opening wide enough to devour her own severed arm.

Ava picked that last one up, wide eyed. “Holy shit.”
“That’s an understatement,” Starbeat commented. “What we need is a defense for these things. Which is why I’m here. Well, part of the reason.”

“That was the only reason I was aware of,” O’Neill said.

“You’ll be glad I’m here for more reasons.” Starbeat said, smirking. “Anyway, memory is unreliable against these soldiers. Ideally, you would train soldiers to react on instinct when facing them, but we don’t have that kind of time. We also can’t just alter physics to make them impossible because of their armor. And we don’t have enough god-tier Mind players to place at every location. So we’re going to have to rely entirely on ka for this one.”

Saxton Hale laughed. “Oh, I’ve been waiting for this day!”

Ava narrowed her eyes. “I thought the direct manipulation of ka was asking for trouble?”

“It is,” Starbeat said. “But you don’t really have any other options. And it won’t be like using John – that’s a can of worms that really can’t be predicted. The few primitive ka-manipulation devices I have created tend to have drawbacks built in to prevent buildup for later disasters.”

Squeaky sighed. “Designed with drawbacks? Won’t that negate their usefulness?”

“Depends on how desperate you are,” Starbeat said. “For instance, the most balanced one I have is one that you’re all going to balk at.” She levitated a small cylinder out of her saddlebags. It was made of a solid blue metal. “This is a Conjoiner. It has the very handy effect of killing whoever just killed you. It has the negative effect of killing you whenever you kill someone.”

“That’s atrocious,” Squeaky pointed out.

“It definitely is,” Starbeat said. “But don’t we outnumber them? And aren’t they normally killing more of us off than we are of them? This would actually save lives, in the long run. Though in the interests of being honest, if you put this on a soldier, you’re turning them into a suicide bomber.”

O’Neill put his hands together. “Not many are going to agree to that.”

“I’d suggest not telling them,” Starbeat said. “Of course the secret will come out later, but you’ll win the war.”

“Have anything else?” Renee asked.

Starbeat nodded. She placed a small computer chip on the table. “This is a Guaranteed Hit. Put this on any projectile weapon. It’ll never miss.”

“Drawback?”

“You’re now a bullet magnet.”

“Ah.”

“Are you sure you can’t remove the drawbacks from these?” Thor asked.

“Oh, I could. But that would create an imbalance.” Starbeat pondered this a moment, thinking about how to explain. “Think about it like this. If I manipulate ka to make something good happen, the higher ka of Karma takes notice, and decides that something bad needs to happen. This isn’t always the case, but manipulate ka enough and it’ll happen. If we have armies of people killing enemy soldiers with a Guaranteed Hit, and they don’t get bullets to fly back at them as part of that, the
Karma builds up. Until, eventually, it all comes out in a giant cataclysm. Say, losing a planet or something.”

They stared at her with mixed expressions of fear and concern.

“Now, the Flowers have found a way around this,” Starbeat said. “No idea how they do it. My best theory is they’ve found a way to manipulate Karma directly and redirect it to some elder gods they have chained up in a basement somewhere. Or that redirected Karma goes directly on their Agents and it’s why so many of them are batshit insane and suffer mental trauma on a regular basis.”

There was no response to this.

“I’m just theorizing. I actually have no idea. Maybe there’s a back door to just get rid of the Karma. The point is, exploit something, it’ll come back to bite you if you aren’t careful.”

O’Neill leaned back. “We’re not going to deal with unethical war practices. We’re going to tell the soldiers exactly what these devices are.”

“I’ve got plenty of soldiers willing to die at the drop of a hat!” Saxton Hale said. “Just use them!”

O’Neill and Squeaky looked like they wanted to argue. But they couldn’t deny that Saxton’s mercenaries were in an exceptionally plentiful supply and generally had less care for their own lives than most other soldiers.

Ava nodded. “I think that’s an excellent idea.”

“As long as you tell them what’s going on!” Squeaky insisted.

“Oh, all the Pyros and Soldiers love a good suicide mission,” Saxton laughed. “And the others are all gonna see the Guaranteed Hit and want to tempt fate.”

“That won’t get us a decisive victory,” Thor pointed out. “The mercenaries, while in great supply, may not be able to be moved around quickly enough given the ships and Skarn troop movements.”

“It’ll buy us a lot more time, though,” O’Neill said. “All right, we’re doing that on the home front. Saxto—” O’Neill saw that he was already on the phone, talking to Mann Co. “Moving on to the war offense.” He brought up a hologram of the Congeries, specifically the area between the Shaping Mechanisms and the Merodi fleet – a distance a little under a light-day. The Merodi fleet was currently engaging with Skarn’s ships from a distance, trading volleys with each other.

“Reports are coming in that Skarn’s soldiers have started boarding ships in the fleet,” O’Neill said. “They have all the information we have, but unlike the ground forces here it’s highly unpredictable.”

Starbeat nodded. “Another idea you’re really not going to like. Regardless of what the fleet does, those smaller speeders need to be crewed by actual teams of people. We put our strongest, most powerful individuals on those teams and send them into the fray.”
“But so many of them will die!” Squeaky blurted. “We can’t lose that many heroes!”

“Which is why you use the Redshirt principle to protect them,” Starbeat said. “Assign only one or two heroes to a team, and have the rest of the team be what basically amount to ‘nameless soldiers’. Those nameless soldiers will die so the story of the heroes can carry on.”

“You’re right, I don’t like that,” O’Neill said. “But I agree with it a hell of a lot more than suicide cylinders. There are always cannon fodder soldiers and valuable leaders in a war – that’s just how it is. If you say simply surrounding the valuable leaders with cannon fodder makes them more likely to live, I’ll take it.”

“Sending lots of small teams in speeders right toward the enemy blockades is still a horrible idea!” Squeaky said. “The attacks are too focused! We have to spread the fleet out!”

“Each subfleet gets a protomolecule planet,” O’Neill said, looking at the Investigator that nobody else could see right now. “They’ll spread out and push forward with their teams, creating dimensional portals whenever possible to jump ahead. Skarn simply doesn’t have enough forces to come at us from all angles.”

“That’ll increase casualties for the fleet,” Thor said.

“But lessen the duration of the war,” Squeaky added. “And lower the casualties of civilians, like those happening on Earth Vitis right now.”

O’Neill turned to Renee. “Find your best soldiers, agents, and heroes. Everyone you can spare that’re willing to go fight. I’ll provide all the ‘Redshirts’ I can. I’m sure Yellow Diamond can scrounge up plenty within the fleet as well without much difficulty.”

Renee took in a breath. “All right. I’ll do it. This… this is war, after all. It’s not pretty.”

“Never is,” Ava said.

“I disagree!” Saxton Hale blurted, slamming his hands on the table.

Renee slapped him. “Just do your job.”

He had no response to this.

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Pinkie, Nova, Flutterfree, Jotaro, and Vriska sat in Renee’s office, across from her desk. Daniel wasn’t there – he was down managing the rest of the teams, sorting out those who were going to be sent to the war and those who weren’t, aided by Starbeat and an ‘importance’ scanner.

Unlike most meetings the Primary team had in Renee’s office, there weren’t any smiles this time. And for the first time ever, Renee didn’t look happy to see them.

“A-are you going to tell us to go out there?” Nova asked.

Renee furrowed her brow. “No,” she said.

“Oh, thank the Tower,” Nova said.

Vriska folded her arms. “Yeah, I get that, it’s volunteer. I’m going though.”

“No, you’re not,” Renee said. “None of you are.”
Flutterfree blinked. “Renee…”

Renee closed her eyes tight and breathed in. “It’s because you all mean a lot more to Merodi Universalis than you give yourselves credit for, and I can’t just send you somewhere where one or more of you are likely to get killed. You are all very important to a lot of people for how much you’ve done.”

Jotaro looked Renee in the eyes. “You’re not doing this because of that. You don’t want to send any of us to our deaths. Even if we volunteer.”

Renee nodded. “I’m not going to lie. I don’t want to lose any of you. That’s why I’m keeping you here. But Cultural and many of the others agree for the other reason. Merodi Universalis can’t lose you five. Just like it can’t lose Eve, or me.”

“Corona’s going to fight,” Vriska pointed out. “She’s about the same, isn’t she?”

“I couldn’t stop her if I tried,” Renee said, a tear rolling down from her only real eye. “She wants to avenge Olivia.”

“You think you can stop me?” Vriska blurted.

“I think you’ll listen to me because you don’t have a personal vendetta,” Renee said. “Vriska, I don’t want you to go. Please don’t.”

Vriska twitched. “Renee…”

Pinkie lifted up a hoof. “Renee’s making the right decision.”

They all stared at her.

“I can’t see very far,” Pinkie admitted. “But I know we’re supposed to stay here, at least for now. I also know we will have our own role to play. Right now, that’s to stay out of the war. In the future… Something will change, and we’ll have something else to do.”

Renee let out a sigh of relief. “Oh thank Celestia. I was so worried I was making the wrong decision… That I was jeopardizing our safety… That… That…”

Pinkie pulled her into a hug. “It’s okay. We’re all under a lot of stress. But we’re not going to go fighting on your order. We’re staying here until something comes up for us.”

Renee nodded slowly. “…Thank you.”

Pinkie nodded, releasing her. She turned to the rest of her team. “We’re not going on any missions during the war. Nova, go spend time with Stardust.”

Nova nodded, teleporting away instantly.

“Flutterfree, try to relax.”

Flutterfree let out a breath of air, trying to force the stress out of her body. “Okay.”

“Jotaro, Vriska?” Pinkie said, looking at the two of them. “We’re going to start a recruitment drive.”

Vriska blinked. “Wait, what?”

“The best way to do something about the war without fighting – get more people involved.” Pinkie
smiled. “We’re gonna get a lot.”

“Yare yare daze…” Jotaro muttered.

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“Hey, Corona!”

Lady Rarity and Corona turned around to see Meenah, Feferi, and Rainbow Dash running up to them. They were on one of the larger ships in the Merodi fleet, the Austraeoh, currently being used to collect incoming soldiers from Merodi Universalis. Numerous portals were open as more and more soldiers flooded in. This ship consisted mostly of agents directly from the Expeditions Division, though given the presence of Meenah and Rainbow there were clearly a few others here as well.

“Oh, are you guys part of our subfleet?”

“Shell no!” Meenah said, pointing to a golden pin on her ghostly shirt. “I’m commander of the twenty-seventh subfleet, and these are my minions.”

“Meenah!” Feferi chided. “Don’t call them minions!”

“That’s kinda what we are, though,” Rainbow pointed out.

“It’s degrading.”

Corona pointed at her own golden pin. “Commander of the third subfleet.”

“Twenty-seven is bigger than three, sea-sponge.”

Corona folded her arms with a smirk. “Yellow Diamond has the first subfleet, and she wouldn’t let herself be at the bottom of anything. So she’s at the top.”

“Who’s in charge of the second?” Rainbow wondered.

Feferi pulled out her phone and looked it up. “Uh… Teal’e, Earth Tau’ri.”


Corona glanced at a clock on the wall. “We don’t have time to talk. The fleet splits in less than twenty minutes. I should get to my ship. You should too.”

Meenah waved her hand. “Gah, fine. Let’s move. C’mon Rainbreath.”

“Watch yourselves out there,” Rainbow said, ignoring Meenah’s nickname and giving them a salute.

“You too,” Corona said.

“WONDERBOLTS!” Rainbow called, turning away from them. “MOVE OUT! All our skills are going to be put to the test! Remember EVERY mission you’ve been on, EVERY show you’ve performed. You’ll need all of it! Let’s show these mindscrew albinos that a Wonderbolt won’t give them time to mess with us – we’ll hit them before they know what’s coming!”

“YES MA’AM!”

“She’s got it good,” Corona said, lighting her horn and teleporting to their ship. “Maybe I should give another speech?”
“You already did yours,” Lady Rarity said, leading Corona across the bridge to her chair. They were in a ship of nonstandard design – one of Equis Vitis’ solo projects made with more magic in mind than technology. The bridge was completely white and coursed with soft blue technological veins that seemed to flow like a liquid, though Corona knew it was just distilled magical energy.

She sat down in the captain’s chair, her magic interfacing with the ship. The blue veins suddenly transformed to match her magic’s naturally red shade. The outside of the pearly ship did the same. It was a small vessel shaped like a legless turtle, and had no standard weapons. What it did have were seven pointed spires of magic energy that now flashed, tuned to Corona’s power.

She let out a soft laugh. “Like I needed an upgrade in power… This tiny ship is going to be able to deal out some serious punishment.” She opened her eyes wide. “Have to stay safe though – the fleet needs a commander. Rarity, don’t let me just rush into danger haphazardly.”

Lady Rarity smirked. “I won’t. Don’t worry.”

The two fell silent. There were three other people on the bridge. Corona knew their names – Johenkins, Diorite, and Horuss – but she had only met them today.

She suspected they were probably her Redshirts, should her command vessel ever actually get attacked directly.

She would do everything she could to make sure it didn’t come to that.

Time flew. Corona had expected time to crawl forward, but before she knew it, the fleet was ready to split.

Yellow Diamond didn’t waste any breath. “THIS IS YELLOW DIAMOND TO THE ENTIRE FLEET. SPLIT!”

Each protomolecule planet split off from all the others, including Corona’s own – being significantly smaller than most the others, it would be able to move a little faster. The fleet spread out in all directions – up, down, port, and starboard – but always moving closer to the Shaping Mechanisms just under one light day in the distance.

Corona gripped the sides of her chair – they were going to be here awhile, no matter how well the war went.

Corona brought up a hologram of the fleets – all thirty-nine of them. She noticed that the forces of Skarn were focusing their fire on one fleet – the fifteenth, since it was the closest to where the forces had been originally and held one of the largest Earth Tau’ri ships, deemed a high priority threat. Their numbers were falling quickly.


Three speeders shot out from a Wraith Hive, traveling at 99% lightspeed, nothing more than red streaks across Corona’s vision. Corona saw other fleets doing the same – even the fifteenth, despite its quickly degrading structure.

“Dimensional boundary crossed!” Diorite reported. “Connection established!”

One of the angels in Corona’s fleet already knew what to do – pouring her divine energy into a dimensional device after receiving the coordinates sent by the speeders. A portal large enough for Corona’s protomolecule planet opened, and the fleet went through it.
They were the first to jump forward a dimension. Slightly closer to the Shaping Mechanism.

Thirty three other fleets were close behind. Others were having difficulty with local terrain – or were the fifteenth and under heavy enemy fire.

While Skarn was focused on the fifteenth, most of the other fleets executed another jump, having passed many of Skarn’s forces.

Corona knew Skarn’s forces could dimensionally travel anywhere within the Congeries – they knew every dimensional coordinate – so the Merodi weren’t safe. But they were making serious headway. If they could keep this up it would only take a day to make it all the way to the center.

“Subfleet fifteen!” Yellow Diamond’s voice boomed over the command channel. “Your numbers have dwindled! Reassign your ships into other fleets!”

Subfleet fifteen began to do as asked – but the retreat maneuver left them open to attack. They had suffered heavy losses, and the protomolecule planet was unable to escape because it was too large and slow. So instead it just rammed the enemy fleets.

They did something to the protomolecule planet that blew it up, but the alien pathogen was nothing if not crafty. The pieces of crust that were blown into the space redirected their trajectories toward Skarn’s fleet, showering them with meteors covered in a very blue biological hazard.

It was at this point Skarn’s ships realized they weren’t being an effective roadblock anymore. If they focused on just one fleet, the others would make way too much headway. They fell back – appearing through their wormhole drive several light minutes in front of them, forming a new formation.

“Why that far back?” Corona wondered.

The answer came quickly: Skarn started shaping the universe again – not something he could easily do near his own ships without endangering them - producing a giant wall of interlocking sawblades ready to mince anything that approached it.

Corona narrowed her eyes, scanning the sawblades. “How many of our speeders think they can fly through that?”

A poll was conducted. Five responded with affirmatives. “Then let them go.”

All five of them shot out toward the spinning sawblades.

Four were blown up by point defenses that had been completely invisible to sensors – blasting everyone in them into oblivion. Loose projectiles hit a few ships within the fleet, but none exploded – the worst-hit had to crash land on the protomolecule planet to let the protomolecule repair their ship. The last remaining speeder made it through a gap in the saw wall – only for a sawblade to come from above and cut the speeder in half. They saw the tail end of an explosion.

Corona set her jaw. That was the wrong call – but she wasn’t about to let a wall defeat her. She began to order a direct bombardment of the construct...

…when dimensional coordinates came back to them from the other side of the wall.

A god-tier Kanaya’s voice came back. “I take it this is why these ships are staffed rather than automated probes?”

Corona grinned, giving the order to portal to the other side of the wall. “Yeah, I think so. How did
“Mixture of luck, quick fingers on the ejection button, and Maid of Space powers. …I am the only survivor.”

“You’ll be awarded, and they will be remembered,” Corona assured her. “You can check out, if you want.”

“Oh, never. There are other speeders that could use me.”

“Then welcome back.”

Corona smirked. Once again, they were the first ones through due to their small protomolecule planet.

Skarn was going to have to up his game if he wanted to stop them from reaching the Shaping Mechanism. She knew he would get creative with his manipulations of physics and his fleets, but right now she was sure he was beginning to sweat from the stress.

She hoped she was the first one into the Shaping Mechanism so she could face him herself.

Better yet, Arthon. Let someone else take Skarn, Arthon was hers.

He was going to pay.
Rainbow Dash woke up on her bunk. She could hear the rumbles of explosions passing through the walls of the ship, telling her that, yes, they were still at war.

They had been fighting nonstop for three days.

Rainbow got up, slipped into her uniform, and took her position at the front door. She took a moment to look at her team – the Wonderbolts.

Half the bunks were empty. Three days ago, almost all of them had been full.

*Don’t think about that, grieve later, war now.*

Rainbow Dash cleared her throat. “RISE AND SHINE FILLIES!”

The seven remaining Wonderbolts flailed out of their beds. They all slipped into their uniforms out of habit and ran to the middle of their room, saluting.

“Right, time for another day of speeding at the enemy. You know the drill – I’ve got team one, Surprise, you’ve got team two.”

Surprise nodded, her yellow mane bouncing. “Right!”

“LET’S MOVE!” They scrambled through the halls of the ship, hurrying to the transporter bay. Their signatures were already keyed in – they were teleported directly into the speeders they had used for the past three days, even though they hardly looked the same as they had on day one. They had started out as just missiles with seats, but as time went on all speeders that weren’t blown to smithereens got point defenses, better shields, better maneuvering, and the Wonderbolts had even gotten a tiny Spectral Rod affixed to the front of each of their speeders.

Not to mention all of them had full body armor now. Ejection had become commonplace – a team’s speeder would be destroyed, and they would shoot out into the space themselves. Rainbow Dash had done that twice already with her speeders. She’d lost ponies both times.

She had not been told about the Redshirt ploy.

Rainbow had Fleetfoot, Thunderlane, and Misty with her. All four of them suited up and took their seats in the speeder. Misty was on communication, Fleetfoot and Thunderlane on weapons, and Rainbow Dash was in the pilot’s seat.

And then they waited. Waited for Meenah to call them as the next speeders to charge into Skarn’s ever-changing maze. That was what most of their day consisted of – agonizing waiting followed by bursts of intense action.

She checked the report. Three-fourths of the way to the Shaping Mechanism, although that might as well be half since Skarn had gotten better at slowing them down over time. Thirty subfleets were still actively pushing the boundary forward. The twelfth was notably very far behind, so it would probably cut its losses and join up with another fleet soon, even though it wasn’t in any danger of being destroyed completely like the twenty-second. *They* had lost their protomolecule planet, and with it most of their repairing capacity. However, they were very far forward – maybe the twelfth...
would be ordered to portal directly to them. Rainbow Dash didn’t know – she wasn’t Yellow Diamond. She wasn’t even Meenah. She was Rainbow Dash, captain of the Wonderbolts, who always had and always would be a strike team.

…If they survived this.

“WONDERBOLTS!” Meenah’s voice came over the intercom, “YOU’RE UP! We’ve got a dimensional jammer up ahead – we know the coordinates already, so blow it the shell up!”

“Roger!” Rainbow replied, knowing Surprise had done the same with her team. She got a quick look at the jammer - a relatively simple structure compared to what Skarn usually had for them. It was a black ball with twenty spikes protruding in all directions. Rainbow had been hoping for another giant fish, frankly.

The speeders launched away from the fleet toward Skarn’s defenses. They moved at their near-lightspeed at the start, but they had to slow down in order to make it through.

In three days, Skarn had dropped the usage of ships entirely. With the subfleets as spread out as they were, he simply did not have enough ships at his disposal to keep them all held back. They had seen him shape a few new ships with the Shaper, but they were complicated pieces of technology that took time to shape properly. So Skarn had resorted to impeding the progress of the fleets with larger, trickier shapes.

Since he could only focus on shaping one area at any given time, he had to make the shaped things automatic. Some of them were simple monsters that tried to attack. Others were mazes or constructs, designed to confuse.

But his favorite were large, encompassing structures that could hide things within them. Most notably his seemingly endless supply of those armored soldiers. Recently he had added jammer devices to these areas, which made charging through them with a drill spell somewhat more difficult.

Today it was a giant clock with no backing to its face - just a seemingly endless sea of gears. The fleet occupied a hole within this mesh of gears that it had formed in the last dimensional jump forward. While the speeders rushed forward, the fleet had to deal with attacks on all sides from the remaining gears. They could no longer see beyond their own space, relying entirely on dimensional communication to confirm the whereabouts of the other subfleets.

Rainbow flew her speeder right through the turning gears, worming her way through the holes between them. Skarn thought he was clever, making razor sharp gears that had just enough holes to make it possible to fly through them, but very difficult. No doubt it had sawed numerous speeders in half.

But Rainbow was an excellent pilot. She moved through the gears like a surfer on a wave, elegantly threading the needle. Skarn’s soldiers popped out from hiding spots and fired their weapons – but the shields deflected the invisible dimensional packets. Fleetfoot and Thunderlane made quick work of the offending soldiers with their weapons. They may have had a lot of weird memory tricks, and they may have been able to dodge things before they were fired, but magical seeker bullets were still really effective, especially when large enough to be mounted on a ship.

The speeder shook.

“One’s grabbed onto our engine!” Misty reported.

Rainbow tried to shake him by entering a corkscrew dive through a bunch of rapidly rotating gears.
“He’s still on! Tampering with the engine!”

Rainbow sucked in a sharp breath of air. She pulled up and flew directly for the jammer, worming her way through more gears. She kept a close eye on the engine status, especially the state of the combustion reaction.

She kept one wingtip on the eject button. “Get ready…” she said, pushing as fast as she could through the gears. That tag-on was going to get to the engine and blow the speeder. But they were never as fast or as powerful as the speeder in just their armor. She had to eke out as much as she could…

“NOW!” She shouted, pressing the eject button. The four pegasi were launched into the air just as the soldier managed to trigger an explosive reaction in the drive. Misty was thrown off course by the explosion, struggling to regain control of her power armor.

She failed. She flew right over a gear that was turning and one of its razor edges cut her in half.

“Dammit,” Rainbow muttered, but she didn’t slow down. Her wings – and those of Fleetfoot and Thunderlane – glowed with bright energy. They certainly couldn’t move as fast just with their armor, but they were definitely more nimble.

Rainbow let out a Breath, allowing the three of them to feel the wind under their wings. They flew in formation through the gears, dodging attacks and bullets. She saw no other speeders or squadrons here – she had to assume they were it.

She could see the jammer up ahead. It didn’t seem to be guarded by a squadron of soldiers, which was a plus. They just had to avoid the soldiers that were attacking them right now.

Just as she thought that, one of the weapons hit Fleetfoot’s personal shields. Rainbow tried to use the Breath to keep her on course, but the hit was too strong. She went into a tailspin – recovering within a few seconds. But it was already too late. She was an open target, and Rainbow couldn’t slow down for her.

Fleetfoot knew this – so she unloaded all the weapons she had built in on everything around her, taking out as much as she could before they took her out.

The resulting explosions pushed Rainbow and Thunderlane forward.

“Still with me Thunder?” Rainbow asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “I can see it.”

“Unguarded too.”

“That’s suspicious.”

Rainbow grimaced. He was right – that was suspicious. There should be at least some there, even if they had just been wiped out, they were excellent at reassigning troops. “Prepare for anything.”

They entered weapons range, confirming the black, knobby jammer to be about four times as large as a pony. Rainbow fired a few test shots, glowing blue missiles dropping from her suit. They sailed toward the jammer, but were stopped by an entity that wasn’t a standard armored soldier. The humanoid wasn’t armored at all – he was a bear. Not Brell, not Arthon, not Skarn – a different one.

“Get ready for a fight,” Rainbow said. “Take the shot if you get the opportunity!”
Thunderlane and Rainbow fired off more bullets, but the bear caught them all. He roared – but there was no air in the gears, so it could not be heard. There was little to no magic coming off him, Rainbow’s sensors told her – he was just absurdly strong.

They passed through the last gear between them and the area the jammer was in. Rainbow stopped assisting Thunderlane with her Breath and focused all the winds on the brute of a bear.

He didn’t even flinch. He jumped into the air and punched Rainbow Dash across the face. Her helmet went flying off despite being locked to the rest of her head. She felt a break form in her neck.

She fell, skidding across a flat gear that served as ‘ground’ for this bear. He left her for dead – which would have been a reasonable course of action had she not been the Maid of Breath. She was able to keep air near herself while her suit injected her with a high-strength health potion to fix her neck. It hurt like Tartarus, but she was able to move again.

The bear was fixated on Thunderlane. She watched as he was flattened by one of his hairy, clawed feet.

Rainbow Dash was all that remained. But right now, the bear thought he had won. Rainbow could take advantage of that. Her suit was damaged in most ways, but she still had control over some of the weapons. She fired at the jammer with magic missiles.

The jammer cracked, but didn’t break. The shockwave drew the bear’s attention. He roared again – though Rainbow still couldn’t hear it. He charged at her, claws open.

Rainbow used the winds of Breath to move the jammer between her and the bear. In his rage, he punched right through the jammer with his unimaginable strength – burning off much of his fur and cutting himself in many places in the process. But his fist went straight through and connected directly with Rainbow. Her already broken suit absorbed almost none of it – her ribs were completely flattened as a result, and blood shot out of her mouth.

But she smirked.

“Gotcha, sucker,”

Rainbow Dash fired all her weapons. At this close a range, it was just an explosion. They were both disintegrated.

The twenty-seventh subfleets moved a universe forward.

Across the Q-Sphere, the Tree of Harmony that belonged to Equis Vitis screeched. The branch of Loyalty shattered.

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Overhead-Charter Evening Sparkle put down the book she was reading as a deep pit formed in her stomach.

Something’s happened.

Her first instinct was to slide over to her personal computer and check the state of the war. The defensive front was going well – it had been five days on this side of the front, and ever since day two the damage had been minimal. They had figured out how to block Skarn’s dimensional portals on every planet while keeping their own in orbit active. It had taken quite a bit of power and planning to make it possible, but no more reinforcements were arriving for the ground troops, and
Skarn’s ships only showed up occasionally to remind everyone they couldn’t drop the harmony network or they would suffer the consequences. Skarn’s forces had resorted to more stealthy warfare, attacking key locations in small groups. But Saxton Hale’s mercenaries paired with Starbeat’s cheats were proving to be more than they could handle. After the heavy losses of the first day it might have seemed like they were in danger of losing, but they now had control of the situation.

They also hadn’t found Celestia City yet, so that wasn’t what was wrong.

Eve flipped over to the offensive report. Thirty subfleets were still active, but it was looking to be twenty-nine soon enough. They only had a quarter light-day left to travel, but Skarn was getting more and more effective at slowing them down and picking them off. The casualty rates within the offense were absolutely absurd – but after the numbers were run, it was clear that the Redshirt principle was working. Team leaders and prior heroes had a much higher rate of survival than was to be expected.

Corona’s subfleet was still active and was still one of the best-performing fleets. Corona herself was still actively pushing forward, though the latest report said she had taken the opportunity of a lull in the fighting to take a rest.

Eve checked the twenty-seventh fleet next. Still operating strong – they’d just had a major breakthrough with Skarn’s maze of clocks, having pushed to the next universe. There didn’t seem to be anything wrong large-scale… But she just had to be sure.

She opened up the personnel files on the Wonderbolts. Half of them were marked as deceased – but the other eight were still marked as alive. Eve let out a sigh of relief – she had been so sure deep down…

Then the files updated.

There was only one Wonderbolt marked as alive. Surprise. All the rest of them were marked deceased.

Eve stared at Rainbow Dash’s file. She was smirking in the photo.

Eve turned on her eye, examining the Light of the screen.

The information was true.

Rainbow Dash was gone.

“That’s not possible…” Eve told herself, unable to blink. “She was one of us… she was protected! She couldn’t be!”

Cessera looked up from her desk. “…Eve?”

Eve didn’t look at her and therefore didn’t know Cessera was even talking to her. All she saw was a notification appear in her email. She knew what it was – it was the message sent to family and close friends when one of their soldiers died. The Starlight AI was customizing most of the messages, Eve knew, but that thought was far from her mind.

She clicked it open and read it, but didn’t really read it. She saw ‘I regret to inform you…’ and Rainbow Dash’s name somewhere in there. Everything else was just a haze.

Cessera walked up behind her and saw what she was looking at. “…I’ll call Flutterfree.”
“This is all my fault…” Eve said, tears rolling down her face. “This is all my fault!”

Ceessera shook her head, picking up the phone.

“Cass…” Eve said, holding up a hoof. “I need you… I need you to call a meeting.”

“Eve you’re not in any sta-”

“A meeting of friends, Cass. Not… not about the war.” Eve tried to swallow, but found the action too difficult to complete. “There are some people I need to see…”

Ceessera nodded slowly.

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The third subfleet jumped forward again, passing through one of Skarn’s creations, entering an empty space in the Congeries.

Corona grinned – this was a good thing to wake up to. They would probably have a significant amount of time to push forward without Skarn sending more traps at them. It would give them a chance to catch up to the further-ahead subfleets – and a much needed break.

Speeders shot forward, found the next universe, and jumped the fleet forward without all the death-defying stunts and complicated maneuvers they’d been stuck in for the last twelve hours. That nest of thorns had been outrageously annoying and had actually managed to turn them around once. But it was over.

…Until the next shape of Skarn decided to rear its ugly head.

“I’m going to actually go eat something in the mess hall,” Corona told the bridge crew. “Rarity, you’ve got the bridge.”

Lady Rarity saluted. “Bring me back a tub of ice cream.”

“Sure. I-”

Raging Sights beeped. “Meeting request from Eve. Earliest convenience.”

Corona let out a grunt. “Never mind then. Looks like I’ll be taking this because it’s convenient.”

Lady Rarity smiled. “I’m sure it won’t take long, she’d never try to keep you given your responsibilities.”

Corona nodded. “If we’re attacked, you know what to do.”

Lady Rarity smiled. Corona teleported herself to the communication center of the Andromeda. She could take the call directly over audio communications on the bridge if she wanted, but since this was a meeting, it would probably be best to use more advanced communication. She entered a cubical, white room with a single console at the door. “Answer the call holographically,” she told Raging Sights.

Suddenly she appeared to be in one of the Relations Divisions’ meeting rooms, standing inside a table. The only other people in the room were Cessera, Spike, and Aradia at the moment.

Cessera looked up at her. “You responded faster than I was expecting.”
“Lull in the fighting. You need to adjust the ‘spawn location’ for this.” She waved her hand through the table. “This probably looks weird.”

Cessera nodded. “I would invite you to sit down, but, you know.”

“Yeah, just a hologram. I’ve got it.” Corona carefully walked a short distance until she felt one of the walls of the cubic room. It looked like she was leaning on nothing. “So, what’s this about?”

“Eve’s called a personal meeting,” Cessera said. “I’ll let her explain it. Everyone should be arriving shortly – you were the only one we thought might be unavailable.” She pressed a few buttons on her data pad, altering the ‘spawn location’ for the holographic setup.

People started filing in. Pinkie, Nova, Flutterfree, Jotaro, and Vriska were the first, followed shortly by Renee and Daniel – notably Daniel took a position in the room as far away from Corona’s hologram as possible. O’Neill and Allure also showed up via hologram, seeing as they were not allowed to physically leave Celestia City at the moment, and Giorno appeared via a similar method. Princess Luna and Toph arrived together. Applejack walked in as well, putting a consoling hoof around the tear-stained form of Prism. There was also a Rarity Corona didn’t recognize sitting in the back of the room, staying out of sight of the others, a crescent-shaped scar over one of her eyes.

Corona knew at that moment this wasn’t going to be a pleasant meeting.

Eve walked in last. She didn’t sit down – she remained standing at the doorway, the door closed behind her. Everyone looked at her expectantly.

Like many of the faces in the room, there was evidence of tears on her features. But unlike all the other faces in the room, she had the look of a deer in the headlights – frozen in a deep, primal fear. Her throat moved as if to swallow, but she choked on it.

Flutterfree moved to comfort her, but Eve held up a hoof. “Just… Let me get through this.” She took in a deep breath and licked her dry lips. “As… as most of you know, Rainbow Dash fell in battle earlier today.”

Corona put a hand to her mouth. She hadn’t known that.

She wasn’t the only one who audibly winced – even those who knew flinched at hearing the words again. Prism broke into tears.

“And it’s all my fault,” Eve concluded.

“Eve…” Flutterfree said, sighing.

“Do not blame yourself, Evening,” Luna said. “Y-”

“I killed her,” Eve said, shuddering. “And it’s not unfounded blame. I called this meeting so I could come clean. I’ve been lying to all of you – some more than others.” She swallowed. “You… you all deserve to know what I’ve done.”

She took in a deep breath and began her story.

~~~

Several months ago…

Eve woke up in a cold sweat, her left eye glowing with the power of Light.

*That* hadn’t been a regular dream. That had been a vision. She’d been getting them more and more lately – the visions Celestia had been known for. Visions that were only augmented by Eve’s status as the Witch of Light.

The only issue was she never knew what they *meant*. Was it telling her Skarn was a danger to them? Was it telling her Skarn was a horrible individual? Was it just showing her what happened within the Congeries?

She didn’t know. She didn’t know *anything*. The Light didn’t help her understand *dreams*.

…It had only been two *days* since she’d cut ties with Skarn face-to-face. Why now?

Was there any purpose to the vision at all? Luna had mentioned a few times Celestia had received visions that told her things that were true but, in the end, meaningless. Sometimes the visions were misleading as well. She couldn’t be certain about this one.

She rubbed her head, most of the vision fading from her memory. Except one image.

The human zipper of Arthon. It continually ground its way through Eve’s mind, a torture worthy of some of the hell universes they had encountered.

…Why couldn’t they have done something about that? They had the power. They had reason. They were supposed to use their power to help people even at risk to themselves… It wasn’t like the Watchmaker of Zhui. Even if the fall of Skarn destroyed the people in the Congeries, it would prevent billions upon billions of others from being drawn into the cruel, cruel fate.

Why couldn’t the others see that?

She knew the answer. It was too much loyalty to Merodi Universalis over the rest of existence. It was a sort of selfishness, a national pride. They weren’t willing to risk it. She couldn’t blame them. They made what they thought was the best choice.

But it was wrong. She *knew* it.

If only they felt that Skarn was an actual threat to Merodi Universalis… Something that couldn’t be safely ignored…

*Tower’s Fate, I’m actually hoping he attacks one of our worlds in retaliation. What’s wrong with me?*

She paused for a moment.

*Maybe nothing*…

She knew the idea coming into her mind was horrible. She knew from the very start it would require lying, cheating, and gambling with people’s lives. She tried to tell herself the cost was too high – the things she would have to do were just too much.

But she’d told herself that in the past about killing people. About sacrificing those who served under you. About manipulating other governments with kind words and half-truths. Those things she would have sworn she would *never* do in the past were now part of her day-to-day life. Never a part she *liked*, and always a part that haunted her, but a part she understood was necessary.
She couldn’t convince herself to throw the idea away. It remained with her, festering in the back of her mind, no matter how much she tried to ignore it.

She had to do something about it.

~~~

Eve walked into Giorno’s secret office and sat down in a chair.

Giorno looked at her with curious eyes. After a moment of examining her features, he pressed a button to lock the door and turn off all recording equipment in the room. “I take it this is going to be extremely off the record.”

Eve nodded. “The fact that this conversation even took place should never be uncovered by anyone.”

“You have my word,” Girono said. “What are you thinking?”

“Skarn and his Congeries need to be ended. I know you agree.”

Giorno nodded. “I agree wholeheartedly. They killed one of my best agents and know nothing of mercy or treating those conquered with respect. It’s atrocious. But the vote was cast – we are going to protect Merodi Universalis instead. We can’t do anything.”

“What if we did?” Eve asked. “What if we could make them think Merodi Universalis was under threat?”

Girono raised an eyebrow.

“What if we created a fake attack – and made it look like Skarn did it?”

Giorno sat back in his chair, hand to his chin. “…That would be difficult. Not to mention so illegal it borders on treason.”

“It wouldn’t overthrow our government.”

“It undermines it and goes against its wishes. Close enough.”

Eve nodded. “I know. But I can’t shake him from my mind. I’m even gotten a vision about Skarn, though I can’t tell you what it means, or even if it’s encouraging me to do this.”

“And there’s the eternal unreliability of multiversal prophecies,” Giorno pointed out.

“Yes. I know that. …But I tried to convince myself this wasn’t what needed to happen, and I couldn’t.”

“How long have you been trying?”

“I first got the idea three days ago. It hasn’t left me since.” She looked into Giorno’s pleading eyes. “Tell me, to my face, that it’s wrong. That we really shouldn’t do it. That our safety is more important than the billions of lives Skarn destroys regularly. That the political process is more important than ending the human zipper.”

Giorno looked at her. “I can’t tell you that.”

Eve sighed. “I was afraid of that…” She looked into his eyes. “Will you help me?”
“I may have resources, but something of this nature I can’t even leave to my Agents. I’ll have to do it personally. We won’t be able to move quickly – but it’s better if there’s a gap between events so it doesn’t look suspicious.”

“We need a nearly uninhabited world that we own, that we can create a fake ‘shaping’ in.”

Giorno nodded. “Scientific outposts on worlds with unusual physics. We’ll need higher dimension-altering spells, a way to evacuate everyone without raising suspicion, and a way to indicate without a doubt that Skarn is the one who did it…”

“I think I can do most of those things. But I can’t alter technological data, which the station will have plenty of.”

“I can do that.”

“I figured as much.”

“Will we be bringing anyone else in on this?”

Eve shook her head. “If we’re found out, only the two of us go down. I know there are others who are willing, but I don’t want to jeopardize them.”

Giorno nodded. “…Eve, you’re going to have to lie to a lot of people. And if the plan works, there will be a war where millions will die.”

“I know.”

“Some of them will probably be your friends.”

Something in the back of Eve’s mind screamed, but she pushed it back. “I know. I can do this, Giorno.”

Giorno was silent for a moment. “Then we need to complete the plan.”

~~~

Eve knocked on the door to Corona’s house. The human-alicorn-thing opened the door with a sad smile. “Hey, Eve.”

“Hey,” Eve said, forcing a smile. “Busy?”

“Oh, no, not at all,” Corona said. “Come on in.”

A few minutes later they were sitting in her living room drinking the latest experiment of Corona’s – extremely fizzy drinks.

“…This is like drinking pop rocks,” Eve said.

Corona smirked. “That’s kinda the idea.”

Eve nodded slowly, taking another sip – carefully.

“So, what brings you here?”

Eve forced herself to keep a straight face. “Out of a mixture of curiosity and a personal desire for science, I’ve come to ask to access your universal shifting spells.”
“Research has those, you know.”

“It’d take an annoying amount of time to get approval to use those, even in my position.” And there’d be a record of it. A very prominent record. “Just figured I’d ask you for them.”

“Sure thing,” Corona said, summoning a book with three different locks on it. She unlocked one of them with her personal magic touch and gave it to Eve with two keys.

“You’re cautious.”

“It’s not exactly a secret that I’m the one creating these spells. Someone could try to steal it. It’s why I don’t have a digital copy of the framework – those are all stored deep in Research’s secure servers. I’d keep one key on you at all times and hide the other somewhere else.”

“Sure you won’t need this?”

Corona tapped her head with Raging Sights. “We’ve got it under control. What’re you going to use this for?”

Eve paused for a moment. “Going to analyze the methods by which universes can be fused together. Less of an experimental nature – like what Research does – and more of a ‘let’s just see what happens’ sort of thing.” Eve shrugged. “I was half expecting you to tell me no.”

Corona rolled her eyes. “Yeah, no, those spells are under lock and key to keep people from destroying everything. You’re not the kind of person who’d do that.”

Well I’m not exactly using it to directly destroy everything… Eve smiled. “Thanks. I guess I’ll get started on this – there’s a few geometric universes that I’ve got in mind.”

“If you need help altering the frameworks to get it to do what you want, just let me know,” Corona said. “They aren’t exactly the simplest of spells. I’d also suggest having magic batteries on standby. It’s very easy to burn yourself out on these even if you’re a magical powerhouse.”

“Thanks for the advice!” Eve said, putting the book in a pocket dimension. “Now, have any other cool inventions I can see?”

“The lab is currently experiencing the eighth color.”

“…Huh?”

“Come on, I’ll show you.”

~~~

Renee giggled. “Eve, listen, I usually don’t gossip… But I’ve realized something.”

“Hm?” Eve said, looking up from her sandwich, preoccupied with other thoughts.

“We’re slowly becoming part of the same family.”

“How so?”

“Think about it. You’re part of the Royal Family, and Cadence’s kids have married into the Apple family – and the Joestars, but they’re separate. Then some of the Apples have married into the Pies, adding Pinkie. Now, if Minna doesn’t marry Frigid I will eat my hat. When it does happen, I’ll be added in as well. That’s four of us. If I were a betting mare I’d say Stardust is going to marry one of
the many eligible bachelors in the family tree, which will add Nova and Corona to it. That just leaves Flutterfree and Rainbow.”

“Rainbow’s not married,” Eve pointed out. “She has time.”

“I talked to her about that. I believe she said something along the lines of ‘Prism’s father was enough of that for a lifetime’. It’s dreadful that she’s been so inoculated to romance because of the incident, but it is what it is. Though there is that Rarity she hangs out with. Now Flutterfree…” Renee pursed her lips.

“Has to be someone within the church,” Eve reminded her. “And she’s not looking particularly hard to begin with.”

“She’s getting a little old for it,” Renee commented. “And she’s not like you.”

Eve raised an eyebrow. “I know. I spend a lot of time with her, Renee.”

“Oh, right, apologies.”

“She’s just not hung up on it. You are unusual for a pony, Renee.” Eve smirked. “No wonder you chose a human.”

“Ah, perhaps, perhaps…” She leaned back and stretched her neck, allowing the conversation to trail off.

“Hey, Renee?”

“Hm?”

“I was wondering if you could transfer your data about universal population. Particularly scientific outposts.” Eve put on a smile. “I’ve got a curious itch I need to scratch.”

“Oh, of course, remind me when I’m back in the office.”

Eve raised an eyebrow. “You have to be back in the office?”

“Well I…” Renee blinked. “Actually, I don’t. I have permanent access from any location. Let’s see…” She pulled out her phone and requested the files, receiving them instantly. “Emailed.”

And they won’t track her personal email. “Thanks!”

Renee didn’t even ask what it was for, moving directly on to another topic. “Now, about my niece…”

The fact that it was so easy to fool her friends just made Eve feel worse. They weren’t suspicious and trusted her implicitly. Here she was, taking advantage of it…

~~~

“It’s done,” Giorno said, dropping his cloak in one of the alleys of Celestia City.

Eve looked up at him. By ‘it’s done’ he meant ‘the black box of Planetary Proxima has been programmed to see a Skarn ship even though there isn’t really one there.’

“And we’re sure everything else is ready?” Eve asked.
Giorno nodded.

Eve took a breath. It had been several months since the plan was first conceived. Most of that wait had been part of the plan – to make it seem the least suspicious. But that amount of time had given them plenty of moments to turn back, to stop themselves. Neither of them wanted to.

It had also given them plenty of time to test. Eve ran through several different versions of Corona’s spells to create one that looked most like Skarn’s shaping – testing it on abandoned universes that nobody ever went to. Nobody would bat an eye that these ‘nowheres’ were gone, if they noticed at all. Using Renee’s files, they had chosen Planetary Proxima because it seemed like a universe Skarn would appreciate, due to its unusual physics, and because it would be relatively easy to evacuate. Giorno had increased spy activity within the Congeries so they would have needed intel for a war, so they were readier than they had been last time.

All that remained was one final lie. The most blatant one of all. She’d even talked with Flutterfree about it earlier – though she wouldn’t give Flutterfree any details out of fear for implicating her. Her advice? “Don’t be afraid to turn around, but do what you think is right.”

“This is it,” Eve said. “…Last chance to turn around. Wrap this up and forget about it.”

Giorno turned to her. “…I’m following your lead on the moral call.”

Eve nodded slowly. Is this right? Do the ends justify the means, ever? Do the lives saved forgive the betrayals, lies, and deaths that are to come of this?

…Will I regret this decision?

…Yes. I will. But I’ll also regret not doing it. There is no way out of this one with peace of mind. No solution that is obviously right. I just have to choose which one is better.

Eve looked ahead. “I’m going to do it. Ready the autospell.”

Giorno nodded. He vanished into an invisibility cloak.

Eve allowed herself to look panicked – it would actually help her sell what she was about to do. She scrambled out of the alley in a gallop. She teleported herself right outside the center of Celestia City – a place where she knew she could find the person she needed.

Aradia Megido.

“What’s wrong?” Aradia asked.

“V-vision,” Eve lied, panting. “Horrible vision. I saw destruction in… a strange universe. Everything was dying. And then… and then you were there, and I woke up.”

Aradia nodded slowly. “What does it mean?”

“It means you need to go somewhere to stop a disaster. I… I think I found the coordinates after a search.” Eve handed Aradia a dimensional device keyed to Planetary Proxima. “That’s… That’s all I know.”

Aradia took the dimensional device. “I’ll check it out. You realize I might cause the disaster, right?”

“Then…” Eve bit her lip. “Then just get everyone out of there.”

Aradia nodded. “Got it. …Wonder what’s so important about this universe that you got a vision
about it…” She shrugged, not questioning it further. She left the universe.

When she arrived in Planetary Proxima, she triggered the activation of the spell. Because of this, when she tried to go to the future, there was no future to go to. She quickly evacuated everyone, allowing the universe to be ‘shaped’ without costing a single life, but with the very real threat that lives could have been lost had it not been for a trick of fate.

Aradia would later believe Eve received a vision about the shaping because it had been Skarn’s assault. After all, there had been an illusory ship in there.

She never thought it was because Eve hadn’t had a vision at all.

The Handmaid had been manipulated like a puppet on a string.

And a war had been declared based on a lie.

~~~

Eve had broken down into tears several times in the telling of her story.

But now, at the end, she was all out. She was sniffing, but her eyes were dry, and her head heavy. She sat down on the ground, tired.

Then she looked up to check people’s reactions.

Pinkie, Flutterfree, Vriska, Corona, Spike, Cass, Luna, and Giorno were fixing her with sad – but understanding – eyes.

There were a few she couldn’t read at all. Jotaro, Daniel, O’Neill, Allure, and Toph.

And lastly there were the people who were clearly livid. Nova, Aradia, Renee, Applejack, and Prism.

None of them said anything. They were clearly still processing it all.

Corona took a few steps toward her, leaning down. As a hologram she couldn’t put a hand on Eve’s shoulder – but she could give her a sad smile. “I think you did the right thing.”

“Ex-cuse me!?” Renee blurted. “She manipulated us! She betrayed the trust not only of her friends but of her entire government! How is that okay!?”

Corona narrowed her eyes at Renee. “You can’t tell me you didn’t think about doing it too.”

Renee took a few steps back. “I, er… Yes! I did think about it! For a split second and then I pushed it out of my mind because it was wrong.”

“Sometimes you have to be a bitch,” Vriska said, folding her arms.

“I thought we learned this lesson already!” Aradia blurted. “And… I…”

“I’m sorry I had to lie to you,” Eve said.

“That’s not the point!” Aradia said, waving her hands. “You… you just… you fooled me! I trusted you and I was led to start a war!”

“We could have started the war without you,” Giorno said. “We used you to save lives.”
Flutterfree nodded slowly. “Always, spend as few lives as possible.”

Aradia looked at Flutterfree, eyes sad. “…You’re still on her side?”

“She never lied to me,” Flutterfree said. “She went out of her way to tell me she couldn’t tell me for my own protection, and still sought my counsel. I… I didn’t expect it to be this bad, but I knew it was going to be bad.”

Aradia glanced around the room. Then she looked to Eve. “…I can’t condone your activities in the war any longer. I’m withdrawing all versions of me from the effort.”

“Hold it,” O’Neill said, holding up a hand. “We can’t let this get out. It’d destroy us.”

Aradia nodded. “I know. I suppose I should have clarified only versions of me that are god-tier. You can keep the ghosts. I just… I can’t fight a war based on a lie.”

Renee glanced at O’Neill. “O’Neill, we can’t keep this locked up!”

“Yes we can,” O’Neill said.

“This is an impeachable offense!”

Hearing those words come from Renee drove a pick of ice through Eve’s heart.

“I know it is.” O’Neill leaned closer to Renee. “But we need the face of our people. If we get rid of her, things will fall apart. The inherent trust the people have in their leaders will vanish. Surely you know what happens to the USA regularly.”

Renee shook her head. “But… But if she’s willing to do this, we can’t trust her with this power anymore!”

“Renee!” Pinkie blurted. “Reel yourself in!”

“I’m an Overhead, Pinkie!” Renee blurted. “It’s part of my job to make sure there’s no corruption!” A single stream of tears rolled down her cheek. “And Eve’s just… She’s just…”

“She did what she thought was right, that’s not corrupt!” Pinkie blurted. “Do you really care more about the system than your friend!?”

“I… I…” Renee shook her head. “I can’t let her stay where she is, Pinkie! Not if she’ll ever do something like this again!”

“I Pinkie Promise that I’ll never do this again,” Eve said. “Hear that Pinkie?”

Pinkie blinked. “Eve, you can’t ma-”

“I already did. I’m not doing this again. I thought I was ready to sacrifice my people.” She shook her head. “I wasn’t.”

“Why couldn’t you have thought of that sooner!?” Prism shouted. “Huh? It took mom’s death to get you to see how screwed up you are!?”

“We can talk about that later!” O’Neill barked.

“Jack…” Daniel said, raising a hand.
“Daniel, quiet. We need to make sure none of this leaves this room. We can’t let this fall apart. Does everyone understand!?”

Renee looked at Eve, then back to O’Neill. “I… I… Yes. I know. I see. You’re right.”

Prism glared at O’Neill. “Are you any better than her? Willing to cover up?”

“Would you like Merodi Universalis to devolve into civil war?” O’Neill blurted.

Prism blinked. “Wh-”

“If Eve is impeached, or if the reason for her stepping down is ever uncovered, there are those so fiercely loyal to her they would refuse it. There are a lot of people who will think she made the right decision.”

Prism’s expression became horrified – as did Eve’s. “I… I didn’t realize…”

“You’re so preoccupied with what’s beyond us that you don’t realize the difference you make here,” Toph said. “I’d expect that from you. But Giorno?”

“Giorno, I was going out of my way to protect everyone!”

Giorno looked at her with a serious expression. “Which just happened to make it much, much less likely for us to be found out. You avoided involving people out of a desire to protect them. It just happened to be the pragmatic choice as well.”

Eve stared at him. “W-what!?"

“The consequences of failure should not have mattered. All that mattered was if it was right or not. We were not going to be caught.”

“Giorno, I was going out of my way to protect everyone!”

Giorno looked at her with a serious expression. “Which just happened to make it much, much less likely for us to be found out. You avoided involving people out of a desire to protect them. It just happened to be the pragmatic choice as well.”

Eve’s mind reeled, unable to process that she, the mastermind of the whole scheme, had been manipulated in little ways as well.

“It’s going to be hard to keep this a secret with so many people knowing,” Giorno pointed out.

“We are not wiping any minds!” Eve blurted. “They all deserve to know! They need to know what I did, why I did it, and why Rainbow Dash is dead! That’s the whole point!”

“It took that much for your conscience to get to you?” Applejack asked, walking forward. “Ah’m surprised, Eve. Ah figured you were better than that.”

“Applejack…” Pinkie cautioned.

Applejack ignored her. “That was a really, really big lie Eve.”

Eve nodded. “It was.”

“Got one of your best friends killed.”

Eve winced. “Y-yes.”

“Ah figured Ah would have been able to see the shift in your eyes, the nervousness. But you managed to keep this entire thing secret for several months, and only Flutterfree knew anything about
“Applejack narrowed her eyes, leaning in. “You couldn’t keep something this big a secret without
practice.”

Eve’s and Flutterfree’s eyes opened wide in alarm. Corona bit her lip. Pinkie looked confused.

“What is it, Eve?” Applejack asked. “What other big lies have you kept from your friends? There’s
no damn way this is the only one!”

Flutterfree inserted herself between Eve and Applejack. “Applejack, this isn’t what this is about…”

“Oh, you know what they are, don’t you? Why don’t you tell me?” Applejack threw a hoof in the air.
“What’s she lied about, Flutterfree? What’s she kept from us!”

Flutterfree winced. “Applejack, stop. Please.”

There was a moment where Applejack looked like she was going to listen to Flutterfree’s plea – but
her face returned to anger after a second. “No. No Ah’m not gonna stop. Eve! What is it? If you’re
gonna come clean about this, might as well come clean about everythin’ else! And then that Pinkie
Promise might actually mean somethin’.”

Eve looked around in fear. “I don’t… I can’t… No…”

“Why not!” Applejack shouted. “It’s worse than this? How is that possible!”

“I know what happens if you find out!” Eve squealed, the tears coming again even though she had
supposedly run out earlier.

“The truth Evening! THE TRUTH!”

“I… I a-”

Flutterfree put a hoof over Eve’s mouth. “Now’s really not the time, Applejack. Really not the time.”

“Flutterfree, get out of the way.”

Flutterfree shook her head. “No.” The robes of Rage began to billow in a wind that didn’t exist.

“Nova? D’ya mind?”

Nova shook her head. “Not at all.” She grabbed Flutterfree in her magic and tore her off Eve.
Flutterfree struggled – but Lolo couldn’t do anything to a telekinetic field, and she was not able to
muster up Rage against her friend.

“Flutterfree!” Eve wailed.

“You don’t get to hide behind her,” Applejack said. “And you don’t get to hide behind your lies.”

“Applejack…”

“JUST LET IT OUT BEFORE I GO IN THERE AND DRAG IT OUT MYSELF!” Nova shouted.

“You don’t… I don’t…”

“There’s no way it’s worse th-”
“I AM NOT EVENING SPARKLE! HAPPY!?”

Pinkie’s mane deflated to fully straight in an instant.

“What in tarnation does that mean?” Applejack asked.

Pinkie grabbed Eve by the neck. “It means she’s Twilight-X. That’s what it means.”

“…What?” Vriska asked.

Eve was crying too hard to respond. So Pinkie did it for her. “Let’s go down a trip through memory lane, shall we? Once upon a time, there was a universe that copied every universe that touched it. This universe made copies of all of us! But, tragically, it was destroyed by Rick Sanchez. All our copies… destroyed. Except the Twilight that got killed wasn’t the copy! It was the real one! She’s been lying to us for decades about who she is!” Pinkie threw her to the ground. “You’re not Evening. You stole that name the moment it was created. You’re Twilight.”

“Back off!” Corona said.

“SHE LIED TO MY FACE CORONA! I ASKED HER AS DIRECTLY AS I POSSIBLY COULD OVER SPARKY’S GRAVE!”

“I KNOW!” Corona shouted. “I SAW IT IN TOPEKA!”

“You… you knew!?”

“I didn’t know this was the secret, but I knew there was a secret. And I know she was suffering deep, internal agony about not telling any of you.”

“Lying to us for decades…” Applejack said, face haunted. “What in the…”

“She wanted to tell you!” Flutterfree said. “She really did! She ju-’

“Why didn’t you!?” Applejack shouted.

“Because I was going to lose a friend when I did,” Eve said, unable to keep her face straight. “… That’s not completely true. I kept it at first out of fear, and then just because I kept doing it. But then I talked to Twilence. She… She told me that everything I feared was true. I’m going to lose a friend here today. I’m also going to have broken a bond of trust between someone and it’s never going to be fixed. I’m going to get some people to hate me, and I’m going to drive some people into depression.” She twitched, turning to anger. “Why did you have to drag it out of me, Applejack!? WHY!?"

“Because it was the truth!”

“Yeah, well it’s going to ruin everything! I admit, it was a mistake! I should have told you way back then! There’s no defense of pretending to be someone I wasn’t!”

“And there’s a defense for doing what you did here?”

“YES!”

“NO THERE AIN’T!” Applejack shouted. “THERE AIN’T NO DEFENSE FOR LYING TO CAUSE A WAR, TWILIGHT.”

The use of her old name shocked Eve to her core.
“That’s right. *Twilight*. You’re *Twilight*. You don’t get her name. You’re not the Charter-Princess.”

“You’ve known her longer than you knew the original!” Flutterfree shouted.

This fact seemed to terrify Applejack. “Ah… Ah…”

“I’m sorry!” Eve blurted. “I never should have let it get this far!”

“SORRY ISN’T GOOD ENOUGH!” Pinkie roared.

Nova’s anger dissipated for a moment to allow her to look at Pinkie. “…Pinkie? Yo-”

“NO! No I’m not freaking okay! I can see it now! I can see it all clearly. Lost friend? Applejack. Permanently ruined trust? Renee. Hatred? Oh that’ll be Prism over there. Depression? Well whoop-de-doo, that’s me.” She let out a laugh. “How about you all realize just what this means, huh? Flutterfree, you knew and you agreed to keep it from us! Spike, you didn’t notice that your mother-sister-whatever was replaced! Jotaro, that pony you owe that great debt to for fixing your family!? *This isn’t even her. And how a-“

Vriska punched her in the face. “SHUT THE FUCK UP!”

Pinkie was behind her. “You can never shut me up, Vriska! Why don’t you know this by now?!”

“I don’t care,” Vriska said. “All I know is that I may or may not have really known the original Eve. But I know this one. And I know she’s a fucking amazing person and you’re all being assholes! Friendship is magic, idiots!”

There was the sound of a door slamming. Everyone realized Jotaro had stormed off in a huff.

There was silence. The only real sound was Eve’s retching, her body trying to force her to cry more, but she just couldn’t.

O’Neill sighed. “…There’s nothing else for us to do here, right now. None of this leaves this room. Understood?”

Everyone nodded – they had at least gotten that out of this. Most of them turned away from Eve and left. O’Neill returned to his duties, letting his hologram vanish.

Flutterfree, Vriska, Allure, Corona, and Giorno remained after everyone had shuffled away.

Flutterfree held Eve close. She glared at Giorno. “You need to leave.”

Giorno’s face darkened. He wordlessly did as she asked.

Corona kneeled down and looked at Eve’s tormented face. “…I’m sorry. I have to go.”

Eve nodded, gagging on her breath in the process.

“I… I probably should be mad,” Corona admitted. “But… I’m not.”

Eve opened her mouth. “Th… thank you.”

Corona nodded, wiping her face. “We’ll talk later.” She disconnected.

Just Flutterfree, Vriska, and Allure now.
Allure looked at Eve. “…I don’t know what to think.”

Eve looked at her. “…I don’t know either.”

Allure moved to nuzzle her – but remembered she was a hologram. “Oh… …Sorry.”

“It’s… It…” Eve heaved again.

Flutterfree wiped her face. “She means it’s the thought that counts.”

Allure nodded. “Yeah.” She turned to Vriska. The troll’s face was of understanding. The Thief of Light empathized with the horrible feelings churning around Eve’s heart and mind.

Vriska pulled the Charter in. “I know,” she whispered into Eve’s ears. “…I know.”

Flutterfree, Vriska, and Eve held each other, still.

Allure decided she should probably go. She disconnected, wiping her own eyes. She walked down to the ground floor of the League of Sweetie Belles. “I’m going home early today.”

Thrackerzod took one look at her face and decided not to object. “…Need anything?”

“Minna,” Allure said. “…I need to go home.”

Thrackerzod let her go. Allure passed through the teleporter and arrived at the front door of her house.

“Hey mom, what-”

Allure pulled her into a hug. “I don’t know what’s up. Sorry.”

Minna blinked in surprise for a moment, but hugged her back. “…Are you okay?”

“Me? I’m fine,” Allure said, sniffing. “There’s a lot of other people who aren’t though.”

“Oh. Is it about the war?” Minna blinked. “Did… did the soldiers get to Celestia City?”

“Oh, no, no, not that,” Allure said. “We’re still safe. It’s just… An emotional issue.”

“I don’t like those soldiers. There’s something about them that… I just hate. I see their armor on the news and every sense in me tells me they’re… …Why are you looking at me like that?”

“My first instinct was to lie to you,” Allure said.

Minna blinked. “…What?”

“I was all ready to say, ‘don’t worry about it, they’re just the enemy, that’s why you get a bad feeling.’ But… but that’s not it. I know why you feel so strongly about them.”

Minna stared at her.

“We need to stop keeping secrets for the sake of others,” Allure said. “So… here it is. Under their armor they are white skinned white haired humans with purple eyes.”

Minna glanced at herself in the mirror.

“Who can sense the future. And have the ability to appear completely normal to all standard types of
scans.”

Minna looked at her hands. Her dull purple eyes flashed, entering a bright, intense state. “I…”

“I know. The Congeries… I think that’s your home.” Tears formed in Allure’s eyes. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner.”

“It’s only been a few days, it’s o-” Minna’s eyes opened wide and she reeled forward. “I…” She put a hand to her forehead. “You… you still remember what I am, right?”

Allure nodded.

“Good. I… I stopped it.” She sat down on the couch, staring into space. “…A lot of images are flowing across my mind. I’ve been… activated somehow.”

“Huh?”

“I remember…I c-” She winced, cocking her head sideways. Then her eyelids opened fully and her pupils shrunk to pinpricks, her bright purple iris shimmering with power she barely knew. She stood up tall, creating a crack in the ground with the force she exerted. “I’m a warrior.”

“Minna, no you’re not…”

Minna waved a hand. “I’m not now, but I was designed to be. I…” She closed her eyes and took a breath. “We don’t have a name. We’re just the soldiers. We exist to protect the Congeries and… to judge? I don’t understand what that means. I…” She put a hand on Allure, trembling. “I… Such pain… It’s too… It’s too much.”

“I’m here!” Allure said, holding her close. “I can take some of it for you!”

Minna looked right into Allure’s eyes. Both of their pupils pulsed in time – larger, smaller, larger, smaller again.

Allure was given a memory. She was a ‘human’ girl sitting in a vat, tubes plugged into her back. Each tube gave her extreme pain, making her want to cry – but she was in a vat, and every part of her was covered in a thick green syrup that made any action impossible.

She had no concept of food, language, family… She barely understood that time was a thing.

But today was the day she was taken out. The image of who took her out was blurry, but Allure only knew of one feminine bear creature. Brell.

Brell touched Allure with a gentle finger. It might have been soothing if Allure wasn’t so afraid, and if she didn’t touch everywhere.

The wires and tubes were removed in an instant, sending great pain into Allure. Brell didn’t care about the pain. She just left Allure there, moving to another vat.

The memory shifted. Allure saw other children like her have a knife stabbed into their brains, coming out. The children were alive, but they stopped screaming. Stopped caring. They were ready to listen.

There was a voice. Brell’s? Allure didn’t know. “My beautiful children…”

Allure saw a human man dropped in front of the children. The others jumped him, tearing him limb from limb. Allure didn’t join – but she couldn’t stop watching.
She was dragged away from all the others…

And then the memory ended. Allure staggered back, breathing heavily.

“I… I have to go,” Minna said. “I have to stop it. Have to stop all of them. I… I have to *destroy* that place.”

It was rare Allure saw *anger* in her daughter’s face, but she definitely saw it now.

“Minna, that’s in the Congeries! Th—”

“I’m going,” Minna said, looking toward the door.

“You can’t leave Celestia City! We have a travel ban!”

“There won’t be a record of me leaving and nobody will remember,” Minna said. “…I can still *think* well enough to control it. Unlike the rest of them.”

“But that’s a warzone!”

Minna looked at Allure. “…Mom, I *have* to go.”

Allure stared at her daughter. Sixteen years old. She’d been such a treasure all those years – kind, quiet, understanding, mysterious, and patient. She’d never gone through the rebellious phase. Allure couldn’t even see *this* as a rebellion – it was a *need*. Since Allure had told her, a need had awoken in Minna.

Minna was talking to Allure not like a child, but an adult. An adult who understood the situation.

Allure gulped. “I… I can’t stop you, can I?”

Minna shook her head sadly. “No.”

“…Then I won’t try.” Allure hugged her daughter. “Come back.”

Minna bit back tears. “I will. I will. …Mom, if you see Frigid, tell him…” she paused. “Actually, you know what to tell him already.”

Allure nodded. “Yeah. I do. I love you.”

“I love you too.” Minna pulled back and opened the front door. “Pretend like you don’t remember me leaving. That’ll help you if anyone asks questions.”

“I know.” Allure said.

Then Minna was gone.

Allure looked at her hooves. *This all happened because I decided to tell her the truth…*

*…Was I wrong?*

~~~

Eve walked up to the front door of the Apple Family farm and knocked.

Apple Bloom opened the door, a judging look on her face. “*Twilight.*”
Eve sighed. “She told you?”

“You know how much she hates keeping secrets. Now she has to for national security.” Apple Bloom bristled. “You should consider yourself lucky she’s doin’ it at all.”

Eve nodded. “I don’t suppose she’ll let me talk to her?”

“Nope. And in fact Ah’m supposed to tell you never to come by here again. You’re not welcome.”

“…Oh,” Eve said, drooping.

Apple Bloom’s stern exterior broke, replaced with sympathy. “Look, E- Twilight, Ah… Ah don’t think you need to be ostracized like this. But she’s made her decision. And Ah think she’s sure of it. Very sure.”

Eve said nothing.

“Ah’m sorry. Ah think you’ve lost her.”

“I know I have,” Eve said. She levitated a letter out of her saddlebags and gave it to Apple Bloom. “…Give this to her when you think she’s in a better mood.”

“What is it?”

“A goodbye letter,” was all Eve said. “…And Apple Bloom?”

“Yah?”

“Thanks for being… you.”

Apple Bloom smiled awkwardly. “Uh… kay?”

Eve teleported away. She used Seraphim to override the planetary dimensional lock, appearing in the Hub. She teleported to Renee’s house and knocked.

Daniel opened the door. The sounds of Renee’s wailing could be heard from inside the house.

“…She’s not in the mood to talk to you,” Daniel said.

“…That’s obvious,” Eve said. She pulled out another letter. “This is for her. When she’s ready.”

“What is it?”

“An apology, a plea, and a goodbye. And some other things.” Eve smiled sadly. “You’ll give it to her?”

Daniel nodded. “There’ll probably be a lot of ice cream tubs I give her before this, though.”

“Take as long as she needs,” Eve said. “…Thanks.”

She teleported away. She dialed Equis Vitis again, stopping by Pinkie’s house.

She walked up to the door and knocked. There was no response.

Eve had expected this. What she had not expected was to be able to see through one of Pinkie’s windows into the dining room. Pinkie was sitting on the table, mane perfectly flat, faced away from Eve.
Eve knew Pinkie knew she was watching, and vice versa. Pinkie didn’t turn her head to look at Eve with her eyes, only registering the alicorn’s presence through her Awareness.

That was enough for Eve. She left Pinkie’s letter in the mailbox.

Then she teleported away.

~~~

It was a few days before Apple Bloom thought she could leave the letter for Applejack on her nightstand. Applejack was ready for bed when she saw it – Eve’s cutie mark imprinted on it.

She almost didn’t read it. But, in the end, she picked it up.

*Hi, Applejack.*

*I know it’s over. You and I may never speak again for all I know. Normally I would fight against this with every fiber in my being, but I know that’d just make it worse for both of us. I’m sorry for that.*

*I lied. I lied a lot, for a long time, to everyone I met about who I was. I lied about other things. But it was always mostly that.*

*You were right. It trained me to keep my face level, to not visibly react when people said certain things. It turned me into a better liar. It’s the reason I was able to go through with what I did.*

*For what it’s worth, I’m sorry I hurt you.*

*I want you to know that, despite the ending, I will always cherish the friendship we had. All those picnics we had with the girls, all those adventures, and all those lessons. Remember the time when you had me feed the pigs and your instructions were absolutely absurd? I was always sure you were the sane one before that day. Or what about the time we worked together to run Flim and Flam out of Ponyville?*

*But those are her memories, aren’t they? Even though I know they’re not truly mine, I have a hard time separating them.*

*What of the memories we had afterward? Renee’s wedding? The struggle we shared against the Combine and Horrorterrors? The last mission on the island?*

*The point is that I will cherish these memories. I like to think you will too.*

*But I know you won’t be able to accept me. I’m not the Charter-Princess, and you need to grieve for her loss. You’ll never be able to see me as anything other than one big lie that thumbs its nose at your feelings. Which I guess I am, and I will continue to be. It’s okay if you resent me. I understand.*

*So this is a goodbye.*

*I’m going t-*

Applejack couldn’t read anymore. She crumpled the letter up, threw it in the trash, and proceeded to cry herself to sleep.

~~~

Renee found her letter inserted between a tub of vanilla ice cream and orange sherbert.
She started crying again the moment she saw it, but she opened it up anyway.

*Hi Renee,*

*Trust should be one of the Elements of Harmony.*

*There are some Trusts that can be repaired – regained over time. Flutterfree and I were like that. But you’re a different mare to Flutterfree, and our relationship is decidedly unique. We aren’t just friends – we’re also colleagues. Colleagues with huge responsibilities, including the charge to keep each other in check.*

*Maybe you’re right. Maybe I am corrupt. Maybe it’s because I spent so long lying about who I was.*

*I like to think I’ll change now. But the secrets still need to be kept for the sake of the nation. I wish they didn’t. I’m so tired of secrets, of abused trust. Sick of it all.*

*I don’t really know what you think about me lying to you about who I was. I hope you’ll move past it, and accept that I am still your friend.*

*I don’t want to lose two. I didn’t want to lose one.*

*If you really think I can’t be trusted in my position, come talk to me after I’m back. Tell me why. Let’s talk it out. I’ll say I resigned because I had been the Relations Overhead for too long, and that it was time to pass on the torch. You will have to convince me of that for it to be true.*

*But first, I’m going t-*

Renee burst into tears again, throwing the letter off the table. She just couldn’t handle it right now.

~~~

Pinkie Pie w-

“Just shut up.”

…

“Thank you. *So* readers! Here I am, sitting on a table, as depressed as I’ve ever been. I’ve been betrayed not only by Eve, but also by my knowledge. I should have known she had a secret. But guess whaaaaaat? It was kept from me. On purpose. For the sake of *drama* and *tension.*

*ISN’T THIS ENTERTAINING!? ISN’T IT!?*  

“It is, isn’t it? You like watching us wallow in despair, watching us suffer, watching us struggle. I bet you were laughing at it the whole time ‘aha, Pinkie doesn’t know! How silly! That’s going to bite them all later’ and then you felt all satisfied when you realized you called it. Or maybe you wanted something unexpected to happen and were disappointed?*

*WELL WHY DON’T I JUST SLIT MY OWN THROAT RIGHT HERE THEN, HUH? WOULDN’T THAT BE UNEXPECTED!?*  

“…”

“I’m sorry. I… I wouldn’t do that. I just got angry and wanted to hurt you. That was wrong of me.

“I guess I should probably read my letter now. Sun’s setting after all. Appropriate time.”
Hi Pinkie.

I’ve wanted to tell you for so long. I’ve wanted to spill my very soul to you, to tell you everything about myself, about my struggles, about the things I’ve had to see through the eyes of a survivor, about – well I don’t really know.

I’ve had that dream multiple times. Where I’m standing with you at Sparky’s grave, and I tell you everything. I never get to see the ending of that dream.

Maybe I will now.

I know it’s hard to be you. I know that I just made it worse by what I did. I kept things from you, things you should have known. You all should have known.

Should I have told you that first day, Pinkie? Would you all have accepted me? Or would you have grieved over the original and seen me as an unfortunate reminder?

Can you answer that question?

I don’t think you can. Twilence wasn’t able to, not for sure.

It was still wrong not to tell you. I don’t know why I’m rambling like this. I’m sorry. If nothing else, I should have told you that day you asked. You were in pain about your uncertainty. I could have helped you. I didn’t. I was a horrible friend.

I want to thank you for standing up for what I did. It meant a lot.

“It’s because we can’t lose. You deduced that. You knew that, because of who we were, we couldn’t lose… You just never vocalized it.”

I know I can’t fix this. But I’m going to try to atone for it.

I’m going to the warfront.

“Wait what!?”

I’m going to fight in the war I created instead of hiding in my tower, locked away from the danger. I’m going to atone for what I’ve done – whether it was really wrong or not, I will suffer the consequences of it. The secret cannot come out. So I will experience it myself.

I’ll be back. I’m the protagonist, right? Or maybe I’ll just be replaced again. I’ll be fine with that. I should have perished with my universe.

Take care of yourself.

-Evening Sparkle

“Uh… Yeah I’m going to need a scene break.”

~~~

Pinkie’s mane was still completely flat. She glared at Vriska, Nova, Flutterfree, and Jotaro.

“Eve’s gone to the warfront,” Pinkie said. “And she’s going to get herself killed if we don’t do something.”
Vriska and Flutterfree sat up in shock.

“Yes, I know you two helped her arrive at that decision. Yes, I also know you two are thinking ‘hey, what about her being the protagonist, doesn’t that protect her?’ Let’s just cut to the chase. That was stupid and your ka-based decision licenses are revoked.” She cleared her throat. “So we’re going to save her. Now we get to go to the warfront.” She turned to Jotaro. “And before you say anything, remember all the other things she’s done for you. You owe her a lot more than just that one thing.”

Jotaro grabbed his hat. “Yare yare daze…”

“Good.”

Nova sighed. “I’m… I’m still mad at her. But you’re right, we can’t just let her throw her life away.”

“I was so su-” Flutterfree began.

Pinkie shook her head. “I know you were sure. But trust me when I say we have to go help her. We are the primary team – and she’s our friend. No matter what she’s done, no matter how we feel, if she’s in danger we’re going to help her.”

“Right,” all four of them said at once.

Pinkie let herself smile – even though her mane didn’t pick up at all. “I’m glad we’re all on the same page.”

“One problem though,” Vriska said, pointing at Flutterfree. “She’s not a warrior. Never has been. She wouldn’t survive in a war.”

Pinkie glanced at Flutterfree. “You can stay behind if you want.”

“I’m going,” Flutterfree said, jaw set. “There’s no way I’m not going now. And you know this.”

“Yeah. Which is why I asked for a special guest today.” Pinkie clapped her front hooves together. A version of Fluttershy walked into the room. She had a blindfold over her face to hide her lack of eyes, razor sharp tips in her wings, and sharp metal boots on her hooves. “This is Flair, the Fluttershy of Affix’s world.”

Flair turned to face Flutterfree, even though she was blind. “I can give you the weapons I have.”

Flutterfree nodded. “Do it.”

“They are not easily removable without trauma to the nervous system,” Flair warned. “Not to mention your wings are no longer going to be soft and comforting – they will be deadly. Are you certain you want to turn yourself into a warrior?”

“If I want to survive out there, I’ll have to.” She fixed Flair with a determined glare, brimming with a slight aura of Rage. “Do it.”

Flair nodded. She produced a black box and placed it on the ground. She tapped it with one of the sharp tips of her wing, making it open up. Shards of metal shot deep into Flutterfree’s wings. No blood was drawn – but Flutterfree felt her bones crackle and fuse back together, prompting her to scream. Only the tips of the metal were visible at the ends of her wings, one for each clump of feathers. The boots went next – embedding large spikes right into her hooves that replaced much of her lower leg bones, giving her hooves a metallic point at the front.
She grabbed her chest – lucky that the points on her hooves pointed away from her. “Ah… Ah… Ah…”

“The pain will subside in an hour or two,” Flair said. “Your wings are now razor sharp. Careful what you hold with them. Your hooves should still function as they did before, except now you have sharp points at the front. I was able to flood the power of my Element of Kindness into the weapons – your internal Rage should be able to do the same.”

Flutterfree looked at the emblem of Rage on her chest. “Got it.”

“If you react any way like I did, you’ll grow accustomed to this naturally.” Flair put a gentle hoof on Flutterfree’s shoulder. “You are now a killing machine, Flutterfree. Be careful.”

“I will.”

“What are we waiting for?” Pinkie blurted. “Let’s go save Eve!”

“Wait, Renee will try to stop us,” Nova pointed out. “She has close tabs on us.”

Pinkie and Jotaro smiled knowingly. “We have a man on the inside,” Pinkie said with a wink.

“GIRL!” a voice shouted from the other room.


“Thanks for getting her off our backs!” Flutterfree called.

“Just get going before she figures out and fires me, okay?”
O’Neill had called another special meeting in the middle of Celestia City, including Thor, Squeaky, Saxton Hale, Starbeat, Ava, and the robotic Research Overhead. “We’re approaching the end, people. Within the hour the subfleets are expected to breach Skarn’s defenses and be within weapons range of the Congeries’ center. It took them seven local ‘days’ to get this far. The effectiveness of the Redshirt strategy has exceeded all expectations.”

Starbeat couldn’t help but smirk.

O’Neill grunted. “Yes, we get it, you were right. Outside of a large-scale military engagement such methods are going to be banned, you understand.”

“That’s Oversight’s and Justice’s purview,” Ava pointed out.

“And the chances of them not regulating this sort of thing?”

“Minimal. Just reminding you of your place.”

O’Neill looked at the Labor Overhead. On some days he thought she was the perfect person for the job, and on others she was just so nagging about ‘proper use of authority’ and the like.

She would definitely have Eve and Giorno’s heads if she knew. Which she wouldn’t. Ever.

Which made him accessory to conspiracy. What fun. Four of the thirteen Overheads in on a conspiracy.

If they were somehow found out now it would be even more disastrous than if it had just been Evening and Giorno. Such pleasant thoughts today, I’m on a roll.

Squeaky cleared her throat, sensing a lull in the report. “We have received occasional visual confirmation of the Congeries’ center. Every image we manage to snap is not useful for more than a few minutes because it’s in a state of rapid flux. What we do know is that the center of the Congeries occupies a single universe about the size of a standard Earth Sun, relatively speaking. Unlike all the other universes in the Congeries, this one is perfectly spherical, instead of the random patchwork we’re used to. The outer edge of this center is always completely solid, although changing material and pattern.”

“I thought he gave up using walls?” Saxton Hale asked.

“It was ineffective against a spread out fleet,” Thor said. “However, once we reach the center, the surface area is small enough that Skarn’s Shaping Mechanism can alter the entire area at one time. This means a wall that he can continually repair on all sides will be very effective at keeping us out, assuming he can jam teleportation past it.”

“We’ve also detected that all his remaining ships are clustering around the center,” O’Neill said. “There’s not that many – few hundred – but it’ll be enough to do some damage. Not to mention there are probably hundreds of thousands of those vanilla bean soldiers hiding out in various places, ready to board and wreak more havoc on our fleet.”

“Remaining subfleets?” Ava asked.
“Twenty-six,” the Research Overhead reported. “Projected to be twenty-five or twenty-four at time of arrival. Roughly 60% of our original fleet size.”

“Those are bad numbers,” O’Neill pointed out.

“In a standard Earth War,” the Research Overhead countered.

“This is a multiversal war,” Thor commented. “Weapons are significantly more lethal and when a ship is destroyed, the entire crew usually goes with it. I suspect the defense numbers are much better for our side.”

The Research Overhead nodded. “Medical attention and revive spells are much more readily available for our combatants here – ones that aren’t using the Conjoiners, anyway. 95% strength, the exact opposite predicted for the Congeries forces.”

“Guess we’re moving on to the defense report,” O’Neill said. “Conclusion of the offense – horrible losses, but we’ve got enough left to smash their doors in from all sides. As already mentioned the defense is going much smoother. With the exception of the first day where we scrambled to defend against unexpected ground troop movements, we have taken control of the situation. As the offense has pushed deeper and deeper into the Congeries, fewer and fewer ships arrive in our space.”

“Recovery efforts for Earth Vitis and Equis Cosmic are underway in full force, though numerous cities have been lost in both. Earth Vitis Canterlot is a complete loss, structurally. Luckily the city was mostly evacuated before the Congeries fully entered. Currently, these two worlds have almost no enemy presence, same for Equis Vitis. E-Sphere universes never had any significant presence to begin with.”

“Which leaves three fronts,” Thor said. “The Elemental Nations, Lai, and the Hub. The Hub is under no major threat but it is known vast numbers of them are hiding in the jungles. The Elemental Nations have been fighting numerous waves of the soldiers in several locations for most of the war, so there is no surprise there. We were completely surprised by Lai.”

Squeaky nodded. “They found an ancient Rune that allowed them to duplicate themselves. The Rune was destroyed at the behest of Queen Toph, but the aftermath is proving to be problematic. Lai has the least dimensional stabilizers out of all the founding worlds, and they are being systematically removed by the Congeries. They are not expected to take out any of them in Lai castle, but the civilian damage they are causing cannot be understated. Even with medical staff and harmonic energy all around, it’s a bloodbath out there.”

“Which is why we need to take Skarn out,” O’Neill said. “End this war.”

“And what if the soldiers keep fighting?” Ava said, raising an eyebrow.

“Then we better hope the fleet finds a way to get past their memory screwing so we can dump the protomolecule on them, because it’ll be a long extermination process otherwise.”

~~~

Allure looked at her chosen warriors.

Jade, Alushy, and Nae.

“I want you to find Minna and protect her,” Allure said.

Jade raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t y-”
“I can’t sleep!” Allure blurted. “I have to know if she’s okay! D-don’t try to stop her from completing her mission, but help her if you can.” She looked down. “I’m not a soldier. Even though I learned to fight well in the Loops, I don’t think I could handle a full-scale war. I’d just get in the way.”

“You got that right,” Alushy said. “Though I hear Flutterfree got some snazzy new wing knives, I’m sure there’s some bitchin’ super armor we can get you or somethin’.”

“I’d rather not integrate my skeleton with deadly metal, thank you,” Allure said. “But I do have friends I trust. Friends that can go and keep her safe.”

Jade nodded. “You can count on us.”

“I know. Nae here has already been fighting – she’ll get you into the thirty-eighth subfleet and guide you in from there.”

Nae smiled. “It’s brutal out there, but we’ll find her. Just have to spend a little time in every fleet to do it. Personnel are a bit hard to keep track of, especially if there’s a soldier who’s lying about their name, age, or otherwise.”

“If she’s fighting, whatever commander she’s under will know it,” Allure said. “Because… you know.”

“We know,” Nae said. “By the way, Alushy, I thought you were already fighting?”

“I got bored,” Alushy said, stretching her wings. “But this is more than enough reason for me to go back in. Let’s fuck ‘em up.”

Jade barked.

Alushy chuckled. “There it is.”

Jade sighed. “Shouldn’t we get going?”

“One last thing,” Allure said. “You’re not supposed to be in speeders or high-danger situations unless you find her there. …Please, come back safe.”

“Do I look like I plan to die today?” Alushy said, laughing. “No, of course not. Don’t you worry your pretty head about us.”

Nae opened a portal. “The best place to dial the fleet is from the Hub. Come on.”

The three of them left, the portal closing behind them.

Allure was alone once again.

*I’m going to be in a constant loop of second-guessing my decisions today.*

She cut her hologram transmission, returning to Celestia City. She’d wanted to send Thrackerzod as well, but there was currently a travel ban to keep the Congeries from finding Celestia City.

…She still wanted to be near the action, or at least the place the action would be. She asked the City to track down O’Neill for her. She had the required security clearance to do so. It pointed her right to his bunker briefing room.

She stepped outside onto one of the outer layers of Celestia City and looked at the sky – or what
parts of the ‘sky’ she was allowed to see. She could only make out mysterious swirling patterns of red, a simplified view of the true eldritch nature of the location.

Hastur had been kind enough to lend a smaller Eldritch Embodiment universe that nobody cared about to them. The Congeries would never expect them to be within the space of another nation while they were at war – which was exactly why they were here.

It was only a short walk to a teleporter pad and then Allure arrived at the military bunkers. They were a series of simple, metallic rooms devoid of decoration. She received a few odd glances from the military masterminds, but she didn’t mind, and they didn’t look long – they were far too busy. She found O’Neill enjoying a cup of what was probably coffee, leaning against a wall.

“Hey,” Allure said.

“I wasn’t sleeping,” O’Neill told her, standing up tall.

“Sure.” Allure sighed. “Don’t mind me, I’m just here because I can be and I’m really, really nervous.”

“Minna still?”

Allure nodded. “Yeah.”

“This might make you feel worse. We talk a lot about death and sacrificing soldiers here.”

“Maybe. I’ll leave if I think it’s too much.” She looked at the holographic model of the offense – the subfleets converging on a single point. It looked beautiful to her, the golden color of Merodi Universalis charging the red cluster of dots that represented the Congeries.

“You think we’re going to win?”

“It’s not actually a question of if we’ll win,” O’Neill said. “We’re almost certain of it. The question is how much are we going to have to sacrifice to pull it off.”

“Ah…”

“There’s also the third option,” O’Neill said. “Something unexpected happens.”

“But if you’re expecting it doesn’t that make it expected?”

“Talk to Starbeat, and then proceed to be more confused.”

Allure let out a sigh. “Oh joy…”

~~~

Corona was not on the Andromeda at the moment – she was strolling down the speeder bays of the Austraeoh, so named because it’s captain was a Rainbow Dash who said that was how it needed to be. Apparently it meant something in her home universe.

Not that Corona had any idea what it meant. That Rainbow Dash captain had a lot of stories to tell, but they jumped all over the place so much that Corona had a hard time keeping track of it all, especially since so few of them ever got finished due to sudden combat.

Corona pushed those thoughts out of her mind – she had a particular speeder team she wanted to talk to. Her current prized team who had pulled through so many times to pull the fleet forward.
She tapped on the window of speeder forty-two. “Hey.”

A purple alicorn with a white mane (styled in the standard Twilight Sparkle fashion) and green eyes poked her head out of the speeder. “Yes?” she asked, light glinting off her white hearing devices.

Corona knew it was Eve. But as far as Eve was concerned Corona thought she was ‘Twinkie’, so named because of her white mane. Which totally wasn’t fake. “Twinkie, I want to see your whole team.”

Eve nodded, gesturing for everyone to come out. Two of the crewmembers were redshirts that Corona didn’t have time to care about, unfortunately. The fourth member, however… white skin, white hair, purple eyes.

Definitely Minna. She called herself Nadia and claimed to be a turncoat. Corona didn’t have any complaints about the falsehood, since Minna was the most effective speeder pilot she had, considering her sudden mastery of her kind’s unusual sight.

Corona also knew that while both Eve and Minna thought their ‘disguises’ were perfect, they each knew who the other was. It was frankly rather comical.

“Right, so, you know you’re the speeder team with the biggest success in the entire third subfleet, right?” Corona asked.

Eve nodded. “Right.”

“Good news, you’re all getting medals. Bigger ones this time.”

Eve rubbed the back of her head. “Yeah…”

“I’m also going to be transferring you off speeders.”

Minna blinked. “Wait, what?”

“We’re reaching the center,” Corona said. “Won’t need them much longer. I think you’ll do great as part of my personal strike team.”

Eve blinked. “Shouldn’t you stay on the Andromeda commanding the subfleet?”

“I am one of the strongest spellcasters in the entire fleet,” Corona pointed out. “I won’t be needed when Yellow Diamond retakes control in the final moments. So I’m forming a team for direct attacking. You four are on it.”

Minna’s concerned look turned to a smile. “Good. Thanks, Corona.”

“Don’t mention it, Nadia,” Corona said with a smile. “You can come with me to the Andromeda for now. We’ll be able to discuss the actual plan. I really think you should be part of it.”

Eve shot Corona a glance. …Do you know? she asked telepathically.

Yes. Eve, that’s a horrible disguise.

She grimaced. Ah. Well, thanks then. For covering.

Anytime.

Minna glanced between Corona and Eve. “Hidden conversation… Hrm…”
Corona waited for Minna’s inkling to tap into what was going on.

Unfortunately, it looked as if Minna was not meant to know about the conversation, because she just shrugged and put on a smile.

Corona teleported them to the Andromeda’s bridge to begin the explanation of what was to come.

~~~

“You know what I hate?” Pinkie said as she trudged through the halls of another speeder-carrying ship in yet another subfleet. Her mane was still as straight as it could be, but she was otherwise fine.

“Skarn?” Vriska suggested.

“War?” Nova muttered, trying in vain to magically grow part of her mane back.

“Needless violence?” Flutterfree added. She looked the worst out of all of them, by far – her wingtips were covered in blood that had dried long ago, her Rage robes and mane were in tatters, and she looked tired.

“Yare yare daze?” Jotaro suggested.

“Spotty information,” Pinkie said. “I was just partially aware of Eve getting taken out of a speeder and onto a strike force mission. But I can’t tell you in which fleet it’s in because, gasp, that would ruin the boring drudgery we’re doing now!” She pulled a knife out of her mane and threw it into a nearby wall. “I’m getting real fed up with it.”

“We’ve searched over half the subfleets,” Flutterfree reminded her. “It won’t be that much longer.”

“I think we all know we’re going to end up in the big battle in the center,” Pinkie muttered. “Because of course we do. The story was never going to get there without us.” She smacked herself in the head. “What a dummy I’ve been!”

“You really need to get back to being yourself,” Nova said. “Seriously, I’m used to fighting the Pinkies that have gone psycho. You’re making me want to shoot you out of reflex.”

Pinkie grunted. “I’ll be fine. Ish. Eventually. Whatever, you all voted me out of the leader position anyway, who cares about my mental state!?”

“I do,” Flutterfree said, smiling warmly. “We all do.”

Pinkie sighed. “Sorry, sorry. Not in the best headspace right now, and I’m being forced to fight in a war. You don’t know what that’s like.” She caught Flutterfree’s glance. “…Nevermind, talked without thinking again.”

“It’s okay.”

“And this is why you’re the leader right now,” Vriska said. “You’re still cool.”

“I predict I’ll have a psychotic breakdown sooner or later,” Flutterfree said, staring at the blood on her wings. “Jotaro, remember, you’re the backup.”

Jotaro nodded.

Nova rubbed the back of her head. “I just realized. All of us are kinda stressed out to the point of shouting at each other, and yet we’re still a functioning unit.”
“We’ve been working together for decades,” Flutterfree explained. “So even if I’m acting like a bitch everyone will just roll with it and we’ll be fine.”

Nova stared at Flutterfree. “…I don’t think I’ve ever heard you say ‘bitch’ before.”

“Evidence of my impending psychotic breakdown,” Flutterfree said with a sad laugh.

“There is something seriously wrong with all of us,” Vriska said.

“This war needs to end,” Nova said. “Assuming Pinkie’s right, we might be the ones to do it.”

“At least that’ll be cathartic,” Pinkie muttered. “I’ll crush them like bubble wrap.”

“Fun,” Jotaro commented.

“Well look what the kraken dragged in!” Meenah marched up to them, Feferi at her heels. “Never expected to see you fronds in the twenty-seventh subfleet.”

“We’re looking for Eve,” Nova said. “Have any alicorn mares with suspicious deafness or an aversion to loud sounds?”

“Not that I know of,” Meenah said.

Feferi pulled out her phone and did some searches. “Nothing comes up. But the persoshell files aren’t always up to date. Or organized. Or accurate. It’s just become more of a seaweed tangle as time’s gone on. That’s probably why you’re down here, isn’t it?”

“Direct search!” Pinkie declared. “Results: big fat zero.”

Meenah smirked. “I’m shore you’ll find her eventually.” Her smile faded a second later. “Hey… I’m sorry about Rainbreath.”

Flutterfree smirked. “…Rainbreath?”

“Yep. That’s what I called her. A few others had started usin’ it as shell.”

“Probably would have ended up being her name,” Pinkie said with a sigh. “…’Dasha’ was never really her, you know?”

“We know it wasn’t your fault,” Nova assured Meenah.

“Probably was, indirectly,” Meenah said. “So… Yeah. Anyway, if I can do anyfin’ for ya just let me know a-”

Red lights started flashing on the ships wall. An alarm message met their ears. “WE’VE BEEN BOARDED!”

“And that’s my cue to get back to my ship,” Meenah said. “Want a teleport out of here while they sort this out?”

Flutterfree shook her head. “No, we’ll help deal with it. Right team?”

Vriska produced her dice, grinning. “Hell yeah.”

Meenah gave Vriska a thumbs-up before returning to the safety of her command ship. Everyone knew she would have loved to stay and fight, but such were the responsibilities of a subfleet
Nova lit her horn and checked her screen. “They’re in the engine room. Teleporting now…”

They teleported successfully to the engine room – a cylinder-shaped enclosure with a large blue column of energy in the center. There was a hole in a nearby wall that vented to the bizarre space of the Congeries, but luckily explosive decompression wasn’t a thing under the current physics; it was just a windy loss of air.

About a dozen of the armored soldiers were in the room, shooting at the heavily-shielded column of energy with their invisible attacks.

“And you get to die of a heart attack,” Vriska said, draining one’s luck to zero in an instant. He died of spontaneous combustion. This made Vriska’s left eye twitch.

“STAR PLATINUM: THE WORLD!”

It was generally very difficult for the soldiers to dodge time stop, even more so when Jotaro threw Hermit Purple and the Passion into the mix, reading the intents of their souls and tying them together. That said, they were still in power armor, and thus didn’t die instantly from Star Platinum’s punches.

The enemy soldiers gambled and went for the energy column whole hog. They destroyed it without much more effort, breaking the ship’s engines. The resulting power surge caused an explosion elsewhere on the ship, destablising its trajectory. It headed straight down for the protomolecule planet’s surface.

“HOLD ON!” Nova shouted, tapping into the deepest reserves of her magic to telekinetically grab the ship and pull up. There was no way she was preventing the crash – but maybe it wouldn’t be at terminal velocity.

Flutterfree moved, slipping between the standing soldiers with her bladed wings. Many of them were able to simply step out of the way, but the three that couldn’t were cut in half. She whirled around and fired the bow of light a couple times for good measure, forcing another one to dodge right into Pinkie’s chainsaw.

“You are a lot more interesting to fight with when you’re crazy,” Vriska pointed out.

“Less quipping, more fighting,” Pinkie said, producing a spike-studded golf club and removing a soldier’s head with it.

Even with their strength and memory twisting, Skarn’s forces never stood a chance against Merodi Universalis’ primary team.

Nova managed to safely crash the ship on the surface of the protomolecule planet with the hole in the wall facing upward, so as to not crush all of them. The blue biological construct began to worm its way into the ship and do its work – repairing damage and trapping any living enemy soldiers in cocoons. The next best thing to actual infection.

The Investigator appeared to Pinkie. “Sometimes the cases close themselves.”

“Yes, you’re right.” Pinkie said. “I confess, I totally murdered these people. …Though for all we know the fight was actually long and brutal but our memories have been altered. Heh.”

Everyone stared at her.
“Investigator,” Pinkie explained.

“Thought you were the nice ones,” the Investigator said, examining a body Flutterfree had cut in two.

“We’re in a bad mood,” Pinkie muttered. “Speaking of, we need to check this ship and move to the next subfleet. Sorry, no time for you.”

Vriska turned to Jotaro. “Should we tell her to be less rude?”

Jotaro shrugged. “For all we know the Investigator is insulting her family.”

“He’s not!” Pinkie called. “But we do need to move it! Chop chop! Adventure awaits and all that crap!”

~~~

“All we know for sure about it is that it’s spherical,” Corona said, bringing up a hologram that displayed the Congeries’ center, complete with all the red dots that represented the enemy ships they knew about. The reddish light covered the Andromeda’s bridge “We have reason to believe it’s just a big, shifting wall that wants to keep us from whatever’s inside.”

“So what’s the plan, then?” Eve asked.

“The first plan is to shoot everything we’ve got at it,” Lady Rarity said. “Yellow Diamond thinks the simple solution will be the best. Smash it until it opens and reveals the inside for us.”

“Skarn’s going to be too clever for that,” Minna said. “Just keep shaping the wall back into existence. Wailing on it isn’t going to do anything.”

“I’m personally hoping ramming a protomolecule planet into it will do it,” Corona said. “We’ve got the really big one still. If nothing else we can probably infect the center with that maneuver.”

“We’ll need to use a planet that doesn’t have anyone grounded on it,” Eve said.

“Clearing efforts are underway now,” Corona said. “Regardless, that’s plan A. Plan B is what we’re going to be doing. Take small teams down, go to the surface of the shape, and try to avoid Skarn’s senses. If he’s occupied with giant ships he may not be able to take time out of his day to smash us directly. Which means, yes, the strike team doesn’t get a ship. Armor, but nothing else.”

Minna nodded. “Okay.”

“So we just sneak in?” Eve asked.

Corona smirked. “Sneak until we’re on the surface. Then a drill a hole right through this crust of his using all the magic we have at our disposal. Then… We don’t exactly know what’s inside, so we’ll work that part out when we get to it.”

“Sounds fun,” Eve commented.

“I think it’s a good plan,” Minna said. “Who’s coming?”

“Me, Rarity, you two, the rest of your team, and some others.” All Redshirts. “Got it?”

“Seems simple enough,” Eve said.
“Good. It won’t seem simple while we’re out there.”

“Incoming message!” the communications officer declared. “Yellow Diamond is ordering us to fuse with subfleet nineteen.”

“Nineteen?”

“The one that’s currently at the front and suffering heavy losses.”

“Why am I not surprised,” Corona said, hand to her chin. “Right, dial nineteen’s coordinates, let’s show these morons we mean business.” She sat down in her chair. “Might want to get your suits on – there may not be a lull between combat anymore.”

Eve didn’t need a suit, so she just took her position next to Corona. Lady Rarity fastened a few clamps around her armor’s neck, making it airtight. Minna was the only one who had to walk to the back halls behind the bridge to access armor storage.

She nervously reached out, placing her hand on the storage door. Behind it was the only physical thing that separated her from those monsters out there. Cold, impassioned metal that existed to improve her ability to kill. It may have been armor, but she wasn’t paying very much thought to the defensive aspect of the clothing. At the moment, it was all war and danger to her.

She popped the door open, walking into a short hall with standard equine and humanoid suits hung on the walls. She somehow just knew which one was her size, walking right up to it and staring up at its helmet.

It didn’t look anything like the purplish armor of what they were fighting. The metal was a simple gray. The lights in it were glowing an ominous red, but that was only because it was hooked up to Corona’s personal magic in the Andromeda. The plates fit together smoothly, and it was well padded on the inside. She even noticed interior pockets for small, sentimental items.

This was definitely not the things her people were wearing. There was no physics-altering field here, just standard high-end magitech.

She suddenly felt a lot better. She stepped right into it, feeling the padding close around her limbs. She didn’t feel claustrophobic, though that may have had more to do with her limited capacity to feel fear than the minor epiphany she had just gone through.

The screen on her visor lit up – and gave her an error message she saw three seconds before it popped up. PLEASE SEE MECHANIC TO ADJUST ‘FLUX CAPACITOR’ BEFORE USE. There was fine print under the message. The ‘Flux Capacitor’ is nameless component 849-1234-2842-13590715.

Minna sighed, prying herself out of the suit. She looked for another one of the same size in the locker but found none. With a grunt she returned to the bridge. “Only one of my size is broken. I’m going down to the lower decks to get one.”

“Computer, give Nadia full armory clearance if she doesn’t have it already,” Corona said absent-mindedly, closely watching the report of the fight. The third fleet had taken over the nineteenth and they were pushing forward much faster than expected – the near-zone of the Congeries center might be nothing but a single universe jump away.

Minna moved to leave the bridge – but then the Andromeda shook.

“Under fire!”
Corona examined her map. “Directly? How? Where? I don’t see a ship here!”

“Currently unknown!”

“Probably some stupid one-time trick,” Corona muttered. “Scramble some Heart and Light players here, I need to know where it’s coming from.”

Eve conspicuously closed her left eye tight and lit her horn – even though she had no need to light her horn to use her Light powers. “…We can’t see them because our memories are being molded.”

Minna’s eyes widened. “You can tell?”

Eve opened her eye and let her magic aura drop. “It’s a complicated spell, and I only think it works because they don’t know that I know. I also don’t think it’s the soldiers.”

“Yeah, they couldn’t hide an entire ship,” Minna said. “Too du-” she blinked, staring at the display. “I can’t see anything either… I should. I’m not getting anything though.” She narrowed her eyes. “Must be something there… Just need to push…”

It appeared for her – a single yellow ship shooting at them at point-blank range, moving randomly around them to keep the pattern from being predictable.

Minna pointed her finger, following the hologram only she could see. “Shoot this.”


Eve covered her eye again. “Augh! Our memories are being altered!”

“Just shoot!” Minna said. “Trust me!”

Corona looked at her – as if she couldn’t see Minna’s arm and had just forgotten what Minna had said.

Minna grunted. “Fine, I’ll do it myself… Somehow. Hey, Corona, I’m curious, which console has weapons control?”

Corona’s mind registered this question. “Ah, that would be over there, next to- hey wait!”

Minna didn’t. She pressed a few buttons – the weapons were already firing on other ships, so there was no need to unlock them – and changed the weapon’s direction toward the invisible one. It hit dead-on, breaking the spell that was on everyone.

“What did you just hit?” Eve asked.

“I don’t know, but it was a lot smarter than just a general soldier,” Minna said. “It was controlling, calculating, adapting.”

Corona rubbed her head. “I really need to figure out a defense against them…”

“I can be your eyes,” Minna said. “Now, Twinkie, do that thing you do to tell us stuff about stuff.”

“How do y-”

“You just did it twice in the last two minutes.”

Eve blinked. She didn’t even bother hiding her eye this time as she activated it, looking into the
“WE’VE GOT THE LAST COORDINATES!” the communications officer shouted. “A speeder just got through and then kept flying.”

“Get the entire fleet moving!” Corona said. “Prepare for battle!” Corona stood up and flexed her wings. She lit her horn, preparing to take them to the lower decks.

“Oh no,” both Eve and Minna said at the same time.

The bearish form of Brell punched through a door to the bridge, allowing all of them to see her – but only giving Corona the honor of being looked at. “You must have found a way to fight against my Convolution. I am impressed, but not surprised, that it would be you C.”

Corona teleported the entire bridge crew to the escape pods before she could finish. “Everyone out. I’m going back up there and teaching her a lesson. Raging Sights, instinctual protocol, we need t-”

Just as the Andromeda passed through the final portal, its engines exploded, sending dark, red magic in all directions.

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The destruction of the Andromeda was barely a blip on Yellow Diamond’s radar as she reclaimed control of the entire fleet. All around the third subfleet, the remaining twenty-three other subfleets appeared, all but one carrying with them a protomolecule planet. The Merodi Universalis fleet was complete once again.

The center of the Congeries currently had a hybrid appearance – half watermelon, half sea urchin, the spines moving to point at the fleet like turrets. The few hundred remaining Skarn ships flanked the central globe, facing the incoming fleet.

For a moment, all the fighting stopped. The ships that had been attacking the third fleet jumped back to rejoin their brethren. The forces of Skarn and Merodi Universalis stared at each other across an uncharacteristically empty divide, devoid of any artistic works.

Two swarms of ships. One vastly outnumbered the other, while the other had a shaping mechanism at their backs.

Yellow Diamond allowed herself to smirk. “You all know the plan,” she addressed the fleet. “Hit it with everything you’ve got.”

They did.

Splinter nukes fired from the Tau’ri ships, carrying more than enough supercharged nuclear material to blow a planet to shreds. Beams of pure red energy shot forth, carrying with them the promise of instant death to whatever they touched. Holy arcs shot across the sky, blessing the space with their divine, but vengeful presence. Superweapons that had been kept under lock and key the entire rest of the war were unleashed, including a few minor eldritch horrors and Discords, not to mention the Imperium’s Blackstone Fortress planet-core busters.

The ships in orbit never stood a chance. Almost all of them were vaporized within minutes.

But the central orb itself was not so defenseless. Instantly it shifted from a watermelon-urchin to a ball of pure gold, upon which sat hundreds of pyramids. Each pyramid opened up, revealing strands of white energy.
Harmonious energy.

Harmonious energy that surrounded the entire world like a web, intercepting all incoming attacks with ease, destroying them without letting them unleash their terribly destructive yield. All the violence was simply cancelled.

Yellow Diamond frowned. “He’s letting us have a taste of our own medicine. Wonder how many Trees of Harmony he had to pulverize to pull this off?”

There were a chorus of stressed calls to her – did they have a way to break through harmonious energy of that caliber?

“Yes,” Yellow Diamond said. “Brute force would break through. But if we charge in brazenly, that will just leave us open to Skarn’s shaping. We move in cautiously while I consult with command. Pattern delta-seven, understood?”

There were a series of confirmation messages. The fleet moved forward, slowly, watching carefully for an attack from Skarn.

It didn’t take long. He generated a few dozen cones of vibrant energy, sending them all at the fleet. The cones proved to be immune to all their standard methods of attacking, shrugging them off like they were nothing. Skarn had been doing his homework over the past week of war, watching them, studying them – and learning. With his Shaping Mechanism, he could easily throw new things at them on a whim.

It was taking heavy, direct altering of reality on their part to stop his attacks – and that simply took too long and cost too much energy to deal with the sheer amount of stuff he was throwing at them. They had to move quickly.

Yellow Diamond still hadn’t received anything from O’Neill. “Tell the fleet the secondary teams can move through this as soon as they think the risk is acceptable. Make it clear I’m not ordering them to go yet. We don’t want to fire everything we’ve got at once…”

A few sets of various Merodi in armored suits flew toward the center. Many of them were caught in the crossfire – but Yellow Diamond saw many others were making it past the location in space Skarn was currently creating the cones. He did not create any more to stop them.

Hopefully one of them knew how to get past the harmony barrier.

Several thousand miles away, closer to the center of the Congeries…

“I have no idea how we’re going to bust through this thing,” Alushy admitted. “None at all.”

Nae rolled her eyes. “Brute force it. You’re a creature of darkness, you should be able t-”

Jade pointed out her thumb and pointer fingers on each hand, using them to create a rectangular box in front of her. She pressed her hands closer together, shrinking the three of them to microscopic size while keeping their velocity. “This might do it!”

Alushy laughed. “Wouldn’t it be something if Minna got there before we did?”

“I wouldn’t put it past her,” Nae admitted. “She is a strong woman, like her mother.”

“You met her mother after she took a level in badass,” Alushy pointed out.
Nae made no response.

*Back on Yellow Diamond’s command ship…*

O’Neill finally answered the call. “Yes?”

“Skarn’s got a harmony barrier.”

“What’re you calling me for?”

“We have a weapon at our disposal that can destroy the harmony energies, and you know it,” Yellow Diamond said.

O’Neill narrowed his brow. “Which one are you talking about? Rohan? We’ve got him working around the clock over here. And then the eld—”

“No,” Yellow Diamond said. “We have six agents under Renee’s Expeditions from a world known as Equis Duo. Usually lent to you and Giorno. Known as the Mean Six by the rumor mill?”


“Normally I would not hesitate, but Skarn has proven exceptionally resourceful. He may find a way to recreate their power if we use them on him. Our defenses would fall instantly.”

O’Neill nodded. Yellow Diamond’s ship shuddered as one next to it exploded.

“Do you think you’ve taken down most of his resources?”

“He’s assuredly hiding at least a small group of ships elsewhere in the Congeries,” Yellow Diamond said. “Enough to lay waste to nations.”

O’Neill folded his hands. “Do you think you can make it through without them?”

“Not without exceedingly heavy casualties. I also have no way to prove that the secondary teams are getting through.”

O’Neill glanced off-screen – presumably gauging the responses of the other advisors. “I’ll send them over. But only use them once you’re close and can move in quickly. We want to catch him with his pants down, not give him a chance to turn this against us.”

Yellow Diamond nodded. “Understood.” She cut the transmission and turned back to her command. “Change formation – Alpha four-star. Push as fast as we can!”

The fleet took an overall arrowhead shape with the largest protomolecule planet spearheading everything. The speed of the ships increased, looking ready to ram the center of the Congeries. Which they were.

Skarn’s cones weren’t working for him anymore, so he mixed it up – creating a whirlwind made of blades the size of small moons, going for the protomolecule planets.

Yellow Diamond ground her teeth. He finally had the focus to deal with several of the planets at once. Now that he saw they might be a threat, he was taking them out.

“Defend the protomolecule if at all possible!” Yellow Diamond roared.

Ships began to crash onto the protomolecule planets.
Yellow Diamond would not slow the blue worlds for them. If the ships didn’t get off by the time they needed to crash right into Skarn’s front room, they would have to find a way to survive impact. Which was unlikely.

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Minna woke up.

Above her, she saw strands of harmony.

Below her was a ground that shifted from hardwood to sheet metal in an instant, the morph cutting across her back. She hissed, standing up onto her feet.

She looked around. There was only one other person here – Lady Rarity. She was standing nearby, the light of her horn visible even under her power armor. She must have been straining herself keeping air around Minna.

Minna leaped onto her back without asking. “Awake.”

“Oh good, I didn’t want to stay in one place much longer,” Lady Rarity said. She glanced around. “There’s no entrance, and neither of us have the power to drill through this crust…”

“Skarn’s using harmony energy.”

“While I can use an Element of Generosity should the need arise, I was never infused with one’s power,” Lady Rarity said. “So any plan you may have about using that power will not work. …Not sure if it’d work even if I was Affix.”

“Mhm…” Minna narrowed her eyes. “Rarity, you need to tie yourself up with your own silk and find a way to hide your horn’s glow. Do it fast.”

Lady Rarity decided now was not the time to question things. She tied herself up with her silk and dimmed her horn. “You have an auto-bubble now. It’ll only last a few minutes and I wouldn’t move your head too q-”

“Shh,” Minna said, taking a dominating stance over Lady Rarity.

A squad of purple soldiers appeared out of a dimensional portal in front of them. They raised their weapons – and lowered them when they saw Minna.

“I have returned,” Minna said. “I am without armor or weapons, but I have brought a prisoner. Believed to be high value, was working alongside a subfleet commander.”

“Prisoner identity confirmed,” one of the soldiers said with a dry voice. “Lady Rarity, mid-high value target. Acceptable. Question: why are you in standard clothing?”

Minna didn’t look down at her black dress – to do so would out her as not being like them. “Lost my armor in combat. Better than nothing.”

There was no nod but Minna knew he had accepted her story. “Incursion contained. Returning to nest.” A portal opened up. Minna dragged Lady Rarity along – leaving her hammer behind. It would just be too conspicuous if they dragged that along with them. Minna was delighted that they weren’t demanding the armor be removed.

Then Minna knew they were inside the center of the Congeries. They were in a hallway that could fit
a planet in it. And yet, it still looked like a normal hallway. The flecks of dust may have been the size of large islands, but they were still accurate.

Minna knew they wouldn’t be able to transmit dimensional coordinates out of here. Skarn had the entire place surrounded in a wall for more than one reason, after all.

They walked along the edge of a floorboard, a door every twenty meters or so. They entered the second door they came to, one marked with a symbol Minna hadn’t seen since she was barely more than an infant, but recognized instantly.

*The nest.* That’s what he’d just called it. *The nest.*

They opened the door.

The nest looked exactly as she remembered it. The entire area was covered in deep, black, emotionless metal. A green haze hung over the area, and yet there was no smell at all coming from it. Metal railways shot off in every direction and angle, speeding off into the miasma until they faded into the green. From the ceiling hung hundreds of pods with people inside them. The ones near the railways were full-grown people, asleep in a sludge that was either clear or just as green as the rest of the area.

In the distance, a large chandelier of smaller pods could be seen. The ones that were still growing.

*She was pulled out of a tub a-*

Minna used her ability on herself. If she allowed it to work, it did – she would have no traumatic flashbacks. Not here. She would just have a sense of unease. Possibly even a bit of fear.

She saw that, in the future, they were going to set a mechanical suit out for her to wear. She undressed before it arrived, since the suits plugged right into their bodies and cloth would get in the way. Most humans her age wouldn’t have been able to pull off standing nude without a sweat, but she had grown up with a unicorn for a mother. It wasn’t like they wore clothes most of the time, and Allure hadn’t made a big deal out of it unless Minna was out in public.

The harder part was walking into the suit without flinching. She didn’t want to be like them. She didn’t want to be indoctrinated. But she still saw herself in the future, walking around, without her brain being cut out.

She had to take in a breath to get herself to do it – but none of them noticed. She felt the spikes plug into her with a sharp pain. They were very uncomfortable, but the pain wasn’t enough to hinder focus except after the first moment.

Then she arrived.

Brell.

Minna hadn’t been able to sense her coming.

“My children…” she said.

Minna had to force her mind to calm down, force it to refuse the traumatic flashback.

She was so glad Brell couldn’t see her face. It would have betrayed her decidedly emotional state.

~~~
Eve and Corona did not wake up after they hit the ground.

They woke up just as the harmony field activated.

It activated while they weren't quite done falling through it. They felt a sharp burning sensation that prompted Seraphim to automatically divert the dimensional energy. The only issue was that Seraphim was protecting Eve, and not particularly Corona. The Stand still helped Corona, though since she was tall it didn’t think to extend the field beyond Eve to protect Corona’s feet.

Long story short, Corona’s feet were burnt off.

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAA!” Corona shouted.

“Right, right, hold in there, uh… oh brother, ground approaching.” Eve shook her head. “Heal your feet. I’ve got this.”

Corona winced, moving her healing magics to her nonexistent feet. She was able to create stumps, but that wasn’t exactly going to be easy to walk on. Good thing she had wings. Which she wasn’t using…

She spread them – but quickly realized what Eve was doing and closed them up again.

Eve had placed Seraphim right below them, a determined expression on her face. “Let’s try… no nuclear forces. Turn everything into radioactive particle soup. Hope you know how to cure radiation poisoning!”

Corona didn’t get a chance to say ‘yeah’ before Seraphim activated. The ground shifted beneath them from a coconut to a metal plate, and then to nothing as Seraphim localized physics to remove the ability for matter to even exist right in front of them. They fell into a hole that was being created as they fell. The ‘ground’ was eternally a couple of meters in front of them, no matter how fast they fell.

Corona started the radiation cure spells. “Those are some serious rads you’re giving us.”

“You’re welcome,” Eve said, glancing around nervously. “Guess I can drop these disguises now that it’s just us…”

“While we’re falling!?”

“This thing is the size of a sun, we’re going to be falling for a while!” She lit her horn, returning her mane to its normal, windswept appearance and purple color, the orange streak bringing a smile to her face. “Ah… that’s better.” She then popped out the green contact lenses she was wearing.

“Those weren’t an illusion?”

“Nope. Not even Lolo would see through those. Though I wouldn’t be able to hide from Flutterfree even if I tried.”

“She’s probably worried sick.”

Eve nodded solemnly. “I know she is. But she knows I’m out here, and that I have to do this. So let’s go kick some flank. Or bear-butt. I guess.”

“The term is ‘kicking ass’.”

“That word always sounds like people are being racist to donkeys,” Eve muttered.
Corona rolled her eyes, looking up. “Looks like the hole’s been sealed.”

“And lucky for us you’re a portable flashlight!”

Corona examined her glowing skin. “Yep. So what do we get to do in the tunnel of eternal falling?”

Eve shrugged. “Make a plan?”

“We drop through and start blowing stuff up.”


“Brell, Arthon, Skarn. Rest are just mooks.”

“Do we have any new defenses against their memory messing?”

“Instinctual protocol,” Corona said, tapping Raging Sights. “If I activate it I’ll forego logical thought and confusion, just reacting to stimuli.”

“Going berserk?”

“Basically.”

“Sweet. Wha-” Eve’s pupils dilated. “Seraphim’s connection is destabilizing.”

Corona snapped her fingers, forcing her own connection to open in front of them – but it was unstable as well. “Of course. Inside here, he wouldn’t allow a single portal out that wasn’t specially sanctioned. It would let people just pour in.”

“My rejection of reality is going to slip!”

Corona created a reality anchor around the area with several magic rings. “And now you can relax Seraphim. This’ll take care of everyth-”

The area they were falling through opened up – not because they had reached the bottom, but because someone had Shaped it to open up. They saw, for a moment, the actual interior of Skarn’s seat of power. It appeared as several large rectangular prisms fused together at odd angles, planetary statues of the bear and his family propped along the prisms at alien angles.

Deep in the center, they could see a metal sphere, inside of which something was glowing a dozen different vibrant colors, full of intense action. The Shaping Mechanism, presumably.

The next instant Arthon had a hand on both their necks.

Corona and Eve tried to fight – but the Shaping Mechanism activated on them. The very ceiling above them attacked them with a full rush of power, flattening them against Arthon’s hands. The bones in the backs of their necks cracked, but one could live with a broken neck.

Corona maintained consciousness. She lit her horn, blasting Arthon in the face with a death spell. It squirmed around him, moved by careful spatial distortion.

All it took was a simple flick to her horn to bring her world to darkness.

~~~

It turned out that, yes, being microscopic got you through the harmony barrier.
Or maybe they just got lucky, Alushy didn’t know. If being microscopic had been the answer, one would assume Skarn had tried it already.

Then again, maybe he couldn’t do shrinking or growing without control over shaping, or whatever.

“You look distracted,” Nae said as she fired more psychic bullets at approaching enemy soldiers. They were standing on what was currently a plane of orange peels, beneath the harmony layer, realizing they had no way to breach the barrier.

“Thinking about shitty tactics or something,” Alushy muttered, firing her guns. All of her bullets were dodged. “Gah. They don’t make it fun. You have to use the complete bullshit attacks on them to do anything, and it’s boring when you do that!”

Jade was shrinking the soldiers one at a time and stepping on them. Those few that managed to figure out how to not be shrunk were crushed by giant rocks.

Suddenly, all three of them had cuts all over them.

“A special one exploded, right?” Jade asked, hissing at the pain. “Right?”

“There is literally no way to know,” Nae said. “Not a—” something hit her in the chest, forcing her to the ground.

“Nae!” Jade said, extending a hand. Then she realized one of her reality anchor bracelets had broken off. She still had five more, but the fact that one had broken off and she didn’t know about it was very concerning. “Alushy…”

“Fine. Absolute bullshit maximum level.” Alushy put a hoof to her mouth and coughed. A wave of dark shadows shot out of her and surrounded the three of them. The shadows of the millions of souls she had killed in her lifetime appeared before them and laid waste to the surrounding battlefield, tearing the pale soldiers limb from limb, throwing their loose body parts asunder.

The shadows cleared. As far as the eye could see, there were dead soldiers.

“Right…” Alushy walked over to the still form of Nae and bit her neck. The Ga’s eyes opened wide, flashing red. “Up an’ at ‘em, vampy.”

“Did you jus-”

“You’re welcome,” Alushy said.

“I’m never going to be able to eat garlic bread again…”

Jade blinked. “That’s the first thing you think of?”

“Uh, yeah? It’s not like being a vampire is going to be a problem in this day and age. There’s blood manufacturing, super sunscreen, and video screen mirrors. But synthetic garlic just isn’t the same.”

“I miss when being a vampire was something special,” Alushy muttered.

At this point two figures fell from the sky – a human and a pony. One was a version of Sunset Shimmer who looked somewhat normal, but had an artificial leg. The human was an auburn haired individual with heterochromatic eyes and a big sword.

They landed like ragdolls.
“JANE!” Sunny shouted. “I thought ragdoll physics was off!”

“Guess it wasn’t,” Jane said, regaining control of her body and standing up. “Alright, where are they?”

“Dead,” Alushy said. “Now I need more souls for absolute bullshit. No offense to this army I just killed but they’re small fish.”

“How did you guys get through the harmony barrier?” Jade asked.

Sunny rubbed the back of her head. “I think we’ve been blessed by so many Trees of Harmony at this point…”

“Skarn had to grind a lot of them up to do this,” Jane said, grinding her teeth. “Their essences must have recognized us. He’s gonna pay.”

“Oh, of course, of course!” Alushy smirked. “But, one problem, how are we going to get to him? We’re standing on top of his shield right now. Not even complete bullshit can dig miles into the earth.”

Jane fixed Alushy with a blank look that slowly grew into the smile of someone who’d had a horrible couple of days and had just now caught a break. She pulled a purple pickaxe out of her inventory. As it moved, a magical aura became visible, like a film of soap around the tool. Occasionally bright sparks of electricity would fly off the tool, driving home the unsettling aura it produced.

“Jane…” Sunny said.

“This was a job I was always meant to do. *Me. I am going to fucking mine this goddammed hellhole’s final defenses with my trusty iridium pickaxe.*” She gripped the handle. “Well, old friend… Here we go.”

“What’s a pickaxe going to do, exactly?” Jade asked.

“It’s magic,” Sunny explained. “The most important enchantment being efficiency level ‘I pressed the nine key more times than I can count’. You might want to hold onto something.”

“There’s nothing to hold onto but dead bodies,” Nae said. “…Actually, that sounds like a good ideaAAAAAA-”

Jane had started digging.

No one saw her pickaxe even hit the ground before the giant square had formed and they were falling into it.

The hole was filled in naturally, but there was no transdimensional magic to draw attention to them. They would cross the boundary unnoticed.

~~~

“Right, so, news,” Pinkie said as she led her team to the dimensional bay of Yellow Diamond’s flagship. “Bad news, Corona and Eve got their necks snapped. Good news, they’re not dead.”

Flutterfree put her hooves to her mouth. “W-wha?”

Pinkie shook her head. “Right, sorry, I’m sorry, I’ll dial it back. Arthon’s keeping them alive,
thinking he can use them to convince his father to extort us into surrendering.”

“Much as I hate to admit it, that won’t work,” Nova said. “O’Neill won’t negotiate over hostages.”

“Skarn believes in honor,” Jotaro reminded them. “He will not resort to demanding our surrender through hostages.”

“Arthon could turn out to be a manipulative bastard and do it anyway,” Vriska pointed out.

Pinkie nodded. “All possibilities. But they’re together and alive. Minna too – though I think the time-shift of the events are a liiiittle wonky right now. It’s been several minutes for her since I last saw her, pretty sure.”

“So, if we know where they are, why are we here?” Flutterfree asked. “I know I said I trusted you, but I’d like to know.”

“You’re in charge, all you had to do was ask,” Pinkie said, smirking. “We’re going in as part of the main invasion force.”

“But they’re stuck,” Nova said.

“Not for looooong~!” Pinkie trilled with an ominous tone of voice.

A dimensional portal opened, revealing six ponies that vaguely resembled the Elements of Harmony, but clearly weren’t, the six of them giving the impression they would be what the Elements of Harmony would see if they looked through a mirror of corruption and darkness.

The unicorn ‘Twilight’ was dark-coated like Brutalight, but had a bright mane and an air of darkness around her. She was not the leader, but instead the point was the ‘Applejack’; a blue mare with smooth features and an intelligent expression. A red-and-green-maned ‘Rainbow Dash’ strode behind them in steel boots, while a bright red ‘Fluttershy’ with a permanently angry expression flew above them. Near the back was a blackish ‘Rarity’ with a yellow mane and a glazed-over expression.

The ‘Pinkie’ was just a slightly redder version of Pinkie with a sharper mane. The primary team didn’t even flinch – they were used to seeing crazy Pinkies at this point.

Flutterfree opted to watch these mysterious dark reflections of her and her friends for a moment.

“Why did we become good guys again…?” the ‘Rainbow Dash’ muttered, putting hooves over her face.

“Because we realized zat being ‘evil’ was razer unfortunate, Grayscale,” the ‘Applejack’ said.

“Yeah, who the buck even cares why? It happened.” The ‘Fluttershy’ shrugged. “And now we get to fight in a super-space war.”

“Like, Havocwing,” the ‘Rarity’ said, “of course you would want the whatever war thing. It’s your thing. But some of us prefer not to go there. Cha.”

“Because you’re morons,” Grayscale muttered.

“Oh, uh, that’s just me, right?” the ‘Rarity’ asked “Or… am I missing the joke…?”

“Yeah, you’re down the twister, Insipid,” the ‘Twilight’ said. “Not an immense difficulty, merely a factoid of your psyche. In principle.”
“Uuuugh, Shadow, why do you have to talk like that when you’re trying to be comforting?”

“Uh… being stupid isn’t a problem?”

The ‘Applejack’ facehooved. “C’est la vie… Tact, Zadow, tact.”

Shadow nodded. “Ah. Right. So, what’s the plan, Curaçao?”

“I know, but per’aps—”

“Talk to the primary team and give them a piece of our minds,” the ‘Pinkie’ finished, looking up from a book she was reading – *Increasing Awareness*, by *A Lot of Pinkie Pies*. She was holding the book with a tendril of blood coming out a slit in her back.

“Oh this should be good!” Pinkie said, appearing in front of her double. “Hi, I’m Pinkie Pie, you’re Red Velvet!”

Velvet smirked. “You’ve gone and messed yourself up in the head there.”

“You’re one to talk!”

“Word of advice – get over yourself.”

Pinkie twitched, turning to Curaçao. “Hey, miss leader—”

“I’m the leader too!” Havocwing blurted.

Pinkie ignored her. “Weren’t you saying something about tact?”

“Ah, see, I was, but zat’s only when speaking with zose who mean well.” The blue mare fixed her gaze on Pinkie’s. “*You* plan to use us.”

“Duh, have to break through a barrier of pure harmony energy, and you guys are like evil elements that somehow turned good sorta-kind and we can use that to break through it!”

“Oh, no, it’s more zan zat, les ami. Velvet?”

A tendril of blood dropped a single bloody page of the book in front of Pinkie. The one with *Redshirts* listed under the heading ‘Important Tropes.’

“…Ponyfeathers,” Pinkie muttered.

Flutterfree gasped. “Pinkie! You were going to do that on purpose?”

“Uh… yeah,” Pinkie admitted, looking at the ground. “Bu—”

“Can it!” Havocwing shouted. “We’re fighting this war because we owe the others. We have no intention of dying here today! Kapeesh?”

“Kapeesh!” Insipid echoed.

“Well if we don’t find at least some interesting redshirts we’re not safe!” Pinkie blurted. “We’re heading right into the belly of the beast and it’s just us! I don’t like those odds.”

“We like zose odds,” Curaçao said, raising an eyebrow. “We certainly qualify as ‘eros’ do we not? And yet, we will be charging in alone, wizout any accompanying cannon fodder.”
“Because we don’t need anybody to protect us!” Havocwing shouted.

Velvet giggled. “They’ll all tremble and shake… They’ll probably try to eat me! It’ll be like beating up my old self!”

Grayscale stared at her with mild disgust.

Shadow cleared her throat. “I think what my compatriots are trying to say is that, despite our dark and villainous past and the remnants of certain unsavory particulates within our essences, we are not resorting to careful manipulation of random ‘expendables’ deemed ‘slightly interesting’ enough to be included in a narrative, through which your lives may be perpetuated and ours annihilated.”

Insipid groaned. “Shadow, like, condense it? Cha?”

Shadow blinked. “Or to put it simpler: Pinkie, fuck you.”

Havocwing let out a laugh. “Oooh, burn!”

Flutterfree laid her head on the floor. “I’m terribly sorry f-”

“No you,” Grayscale muttered. “You’re the nice one who wouldn’t hurt a fly, right?”

“…Do you see those wing-blades on her?” Insipid muttered.

“She’s still the nice one. Sorry for everything.” Grayscale narrowed her eyes.

Curaçao nodded. “I ‘ave ‘eard much of you, Flutterfree. You apologize so much that such an action becomes almost meaningless.”

This comment shook Flutterfree to her core. “I… Wh…”

“Is this your way of telling me to apologize?” Pinkie blurted.

“Nope!” Velvet said, behind her. “It’s our way of saying ‘nice try’!”

“…I wouldn’t mind an apology,” Insipid muttered.

Pinkie muttered. “Look. I… I don’t want anyone to suffer. But there are going to be people and ponies who have to. In a war like this, if nobody dies, there are going to be permanent consequences.” She looked behind her. She realized something painful.

Nova had suffered emotionally with Sunburst and Stardust. Flutterfree had gotten vampirism and bladed knives and her spirituality to struggle with. Jotaro had lost family, lost trust, and had to deal with a world where emotions were rarely hidden. Vriska’s list of problems could fill a book.

She’d had some difficulties with being Aware early on, but she hadn’t really suffered long-lasting harm in any way yet, had she?

“…It’s my turn,” Pinkie said, pupils shrinking. “Oh no no no…”

Curaçao sighed and looked Pinkie in the eyes. “You ‘ave my condolences. But we will not be taking the ‘it for you.”

“Maybe we can compare notes on suffering later,” Shadow suggested. “Pretty confident we have most of you undeniably trumped.”
“Wanna bet?” Vriska asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I said most.”

Havocwing coughed. “AHEM! Don’t we have a white barrier to take out or something?”

“You do,” Yellow Diamond said, having just teleported into the room. “The fleet is close enough. Do you six have the false Elements?”

Shadow lit her horn and summoned five dark necklaces to them, placing a sixth tiara on Curaçao’s head. The crystals within were of deep, dark colors.

“Wh- hey! Where’s my crown!” Havocwing blurted.

“Guess, like, Curaçao’s more leadery than you?” Insipid suggested.

“The decisions of deviated magic artifacts mean nothing to us,” Curaçao said. “We are sisters, forever.” She turned to Yellow Diamond. “Just tell us when.”

“Now,” Yellow Diamond said. “You’ll be on a protomolecule planet prepared to ram the central wall. Do what those artifacts were designed to do. Destroy the harmony.”

The six of them nodded. Yellow Diamond then teleported them away.

“…Pinkie,” Nova said, looking to her. “Should you go back? Stop fighting?”

“One of you will die if I do that,” Pinkie said. “It won’t save me from any pain. Or any of you.”

Flutterfree hugged her. “Whatever it’s going to be, we’ll be here for you.”

“If you can.”

“…If we can,” Flutterfree admitted.

Pinkie sighed. “Well, we might as well pick out a speeder and get behind this planet. We’re smashing in! Might as well get to the Kicking of the Dog quicker rather than later. HeHAhah. … Let’s go.”

They ran off to find a speeder.

~~~

Skarn took his hands off the Shaping Mechanism controls – he could afford to let it run on automatic now that he had fully programmed it for defending this place. He turned around – both of his remaining children were standing behind him. Brell had with her an armored prisoner and a small squad of her creepy ‘children’, while Arthon was holding two broken individuals Skarn recognized.

“Prisoners?” Skarn asked. “From Brell I would have expected this, but you Arthon?”

“Use them,” Arthon said. “They’re alive. Tell the Merodi you have them hostage and make them surrender.”

“No,” Skarn said.

“Can you drop your distorted view of honor for one second and think about the art?”
“Art and honor go hand in hand, my son. Maybe one day you will understand this.”

“Or maybe you’re just senile,” Arthon glared.

“…Do you wish to challenge me now?”

Arthon shuffled his feet. “No, father. I do not.”

“Oh, thank the Tower,” Brell muttered. “That would have been disastrous.”

Arthon nodded slowly.

Skarn pressed his hands together. “Brell, what about you?”

“I’m asking permission to bless this one. To create the first nonhuman among my children.”

Skarn looked Lady Rarity up and down. “…Do as you will, I cannot keep you from your art. It is yours, even if I do not find meaning in it personally.”

Brell bowed. “Thank you, father.” She left with her squad, one of the shorter ones dragging Lady Rarity along.

Skarn placed a hand on the controls again, this time fixing Corona and Eve’s bodies. Their eyes flew open.

“Skarn…” Eve said, narrowing her eyes.

Skarn held a hand up at Corona. “Do not attempt to attack or I will have to execute you. I would rather not do that.”

“Why do you care?” Corona blurted. “You toss around entire civilizations like they’re nothing! What are we to you?”

“Old friends,” Skarn said. “…Or who I thought could be friends.”

“What made you think we’d ever be okay with what you do here?!”

“I’m a patient being,” Skarn said. “I would have slowly shaped your society to appreciation of true art over the centuries before revealing my work. You would have voluntarily joined yourselves to the Congeries after that – and would have become shapers of your own. The beauty of harmony would be added to the lattice of existence!” He held his arms wide. “It would have been glorious! But you had to find me suspicious.”

“Of course we did!” Eve blurted. “We had no information on you! You were just a guy who showed up, acted powerful, and gave us a lot of things!”

“Your government has no Intelligence or Secret Service,” Skarn muttered. “That shouldn’t matter to you.”

Eve and Corona looked at him with smug smirks.

“…You do have Intelligence…” Skarn stood up tall. “Well played. I thought I was safe. But it looks as if you do have secrets.”

“When you only have a couple you learn to keep them really, really well,” Eve said.
“I suppose my spy just wasn’t in a high enough position… Perhaps I should have targeted one of you instead…”

Corona blinked. “Wait…”

“Oh, yes, Allure’s daughter was placed there on purpose to gauge your higher politics. She gathered a lot of information before I dropped by to collect. Such a sweet girl, unlike all Brell’s other mindless brutes. A bit like my other son, except less relatable…”

“You did that on purpose!?” Eve blurted.

“Oh, of course. Place a crying, bruised, and battered child in front of someone who is emotionally vulnerable and something’s bound to happen.” Skarn looked into the distance. “She’s been given such a beautiful life because of it. Shame I have to take it away from her.”

Eve thought, for a moment, about bargaining for peace – but then she remembered what Skarn did as part of his life. He destroyed civilizations without batting an eye. “…How can you think you’re consistent?”

“He’s not,” Arthon said. “He’s mad.”

“All the best artists are,” Skarn said with a shrug. “Imprison them, Arthon. You can do whatever you want with them after the war is over.”

Arthon nodded. “They shall make a good addition to a very particular cell.”

Skarn put both his hands back on the globe that controlled the Shaping Mechanism. “I’m glad you’re already thinking of the personal aesthetics. …Speaking of, has anyone seen Torvost in a while?”

Arthon tensed. “…He’s dead.”

Skarn let out a deep sigh. “…Not surprising, but still an ache on my old heart. How I wish he had learned.” Skarn shook his head. “Just go. Do what you can about the incoming fleet. They look like they’re about to try something.”

Arthon vanished, taking Eve and Corona with him.

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“No reports of Minna?” Allure asked O’Neill.

“None,” O’Neill said. “There was something of Alushy, but that was for a brief moment and we aren’t even sure where her magic signature was coming from.”

Allure nodded, looking at the hologram display of the battle. The red sphere of Skarn’s holding was surrounded in a barrier of white. Red dots and shapes representing his larger constructs were attacking the fleet from all sides, decimating it.

The number of remaining forces was 49%.

But they were still moving. The largest protomolecule planet seemed agonizingly close to the Congeries’ center. Just a little more and they would be touching the barrier… Just a little more…

“Breach detected!” the Research Overhead beeped. “Portals opening all over Celestia City!”

O’Neill pressed a button. “Yellow Diamond, defense commanders, this is O’Neill. We have to jam
all dimensional communications, repeat, all dimensional communications. We’ve been found. You’re on your own.” He moved his finger to another button. “JAM ALL DIMENSIONAL PORTALS!”

In other locations in the bunker, other generals and commanders had to press buttons of their own. All dimensional communication was cut – no portals in or out of Celestia City. The hologram of the offense vanished in an instant, just before they unleashed their attack on the harmony barrier.

Allure gulped. They had no way of knowing what was happening.

“How bad is it?” O’Neill asked.

“The breaches mostly consisted of ground forces,” Thor said. “…The majority of them are heading straight here.”

“What’s near here besides us?”

“One of the larger dimensional drives. They could destroy it and wipe out much of the city – or they could possibly take advantage of it and bring in more soldiers.”

O’Neill grunted. “Right, can’t let either of those happen. Third division, get yourself up on defense of that drive! Take seventh with you! Rowan, I need our backups in front, protecting us! Allure, sorry, looks like you might get caught in the middle of a firefight.”

Allure made a soft whimper but nodded her head.

She just wanted to know if Minna was okay.
Yellow Diamond received O’Neill’s message.

She was truly in charge now. No authorities for her to call back to. Both O’Neill and Thor were on Celestia City, cut off. As far as anyone was concerned, she was the Overhead now.

Not even White Diamond had authority over her here.

Good.

“We’re close enough! Launch!” Yellow Diamond ordered.

From the tip of the largest protomolecule planet, a squad of ships launched consisting of speeders, gunships, some god-tier Skaian droppers, and a handful of angels. They approached the harmonious barrier, using all their resources to keep the central ship from being destroyed.

The top of the central ship opened up, revealing the six Elements of Discord. Red Velvet, Fear; Havocwing, Anger; Insipid, Greed; Grayscale Force, Apathy; Curaçao, Deception; and Starlight Shadow, Void. All of them knew they were naught but corrupted versions of their respective Elements, all having turned their backs on the ways of Discord for the most part.

But that worked to their advantage for the moment. Each of them still had a seed of the darkness within them – but they also had the seeds of friendship, so they could use their powers in conjunction. The majority of Elements of Discord or Disharmony or Chaos across the universe, by nature, were unable to be used as one like the actual Elements of Harmony.

They went against that nature. So they were the perfect mares for this job.

These particular corrupted Element artifacts had not been found – they had been built especially for situations like this by the Research Division. Merodi Universalis had a lot of harmonious superweapons, but almost nothing composed of pure dark magic.

Beams of darkness shot from their Elements, forming a hexagonal shape. A sphere of swirling smoke whirled around them, shrouding their faces. Dark sparks of energy orbited the sphere and a rainbow composed of the darkest shades of every color was unleashed, hitting the harmony barrier head on.

The pure white energy shifted to a dark black around the point of impact. The dark miasma spread like a virus through the holy weaves of energy, soon transforming the entire white barrier into a jagged mess of dark energy.

“All it takes is one little mistake to barrel into a catastrophe,” Shadow said.

“A little lie opens the way for everyzing else,” Curaçao agreed.

Velvet smirked. “All you have to do is take a speck of darkness

Add it to the mix!

Now just take a little something dark not horrid,

A corruption, deep inside!
Darkness, it’s just so easy!

Darkness, you just can’t stop it!

Darkness, darkness, darkness, DARKNESS!

“Just do the smashy thing already!” Havocwing demanded.

“Like, do it now,” Insipid added.

Grayscale just grunted.

With their wills combined, they ordered the dark aura to crush the world it had been protecting not even a minute prior.

The moment the darkness hit the exterior and started cracking it, Skarn ordered the barrier to vanish – leaving the center exposed.

“GO!” Yellow Diamond ordered.

The engines on the back of the largest protomolecule planet burned as hard as they could. A few ships were on the planet’s surface trying to recover from the most recent fight but they would not be given time to escape. They needed to crash through now before Skarn came up with any new tricks.

The ships in front of the planet cut away at the last moment, allowing the two spheres to collide.

From afar, it wasn’t very impressive. It was like the Earth crashing into the sun – one could barely see the speck of blue when looking at the tremendous shifting ball that protected the Shaping Mechanisms.

Up close was another story.

Two solid crusts impacted each other at high velocity. The front face of the protomolecule planet vaporized in an instant, creating a gigantic depression in the ever-shifting material of Skarn’s crust. Both sides buckled, unleashing molten rock on each other, burning away both surfaces with the immense pressure. Volcanoes erupted everywhere on the protomolecule planet, some of the geological activity disrupting the engines on the other side of the globe.

But the planet couldn’t be stopped now. It embedded itself further and further into the shifting crust. The defensive barrier may have been hundreds of kilometers thick – but the planet was larger. It punched through, raining molten debris on the hollow interior.

The shell squeezed around the planet’s equator, attempting to crush it from outside. This would have worked – eventually.

But the fleet didn’t need long. With a large area on the other side of the barrier, they had a solid reality anchor on the other side. A few ships were able to teleport from the back end of the planet to the front, and those ships were able to fold space within the bubble of their physics to create a wormhole that obeyed the local physical rules. Who cared if the entire interior of this place was filled with dimensional jammers? They didn’t have time to destroy them. Why not use something a little more mundane to teleport people across the boundary of the planet?

As more and more ships passed through the wormhole, they added their energy to the endeavor, increasing the size of the portal, allowing the smaller protomolecule planets through.
They suffered heavy losses moving in this manner – the shell was able to attack many of them on the outside and inside, lashing at ships with spikes of impossible matter.

But they made it through. They were on the inside.

Yellow Diamond checked her readings. 42% forces remaining.

That seemed like a good number to her.

“Destroy everything,” she ordered. “Focus on the center, but destroy everything.”

The fleet fired everything it had. This was significantly less impressive than the previous volley they had unleashed outside the barrier, but it did the trick. The interior of the central universe lit up with nuclear explosions and magical mushroom clouds.

In retaliation, the planetary statues of Skarn and his children came to life, rushing the ships like they were flies, swatting them away with powerful movements. Numerous armored soldiers crawled over the limbs of these behemoths, leaping off to board ships whenever their abilities told them it was possible. The outer shell attacked from behind, shreds of random material swatting at the ships.

Yellow Diamond watched their forces start to drop. Great Imperium warships began to fall and a Flat Reaper snapped in two like a twig. They were surrounded on all sides. Suddenly she wasn’t quite as confident this was going to work.

“Launch more secondary teams toward the center!” Yellow Diamond shouted. “We need to get at him from the inside!”

Luckily for her, several of these teams had already launched. Ultramarines, Ahzek’s Chaos contingent, an Inkling squad, and near the front were the Primary Team and the Mean Six.

“We’re going to get more of them than you!” Havocwing hassled Pinkie’s Party from across the radio.

“Wanna make a bet on those odds?” Vriska smirked.

“Fuck ye-”

They heard Curaçao put a hoof over Havocwing. “Non, she’s trying to exploit ‘er luck abilities, ‘Avoc.”

“Wait, what the- BITCH!”

Vriska smirked. “Thank you.”

“INCOMING!” both Nova and Shadow shouted at the same time.

One of the large statues had apparently decided they weren’t just small fish and needed to be cut down.

“I’ve got this,” Nova said. She didn’t light her horn, instead tapping into her Prince of Time powers. “Erase.” She muttered.

The next thing everyone knew, they were behind the moving statue. Both their ships had nicks in them, but they weren’t cut in half.

“Uh, what?” Insipid said.
“I erased time,” Nova commented. “There were about fifteen seconds that just don’t exist anymore.”

“Then how did we get cuts on our ships!?”

Shadow audibly perked up. “Clearly, she allowed time to progress through an indicative moment in which events occurred, but no conscious decisions could alter the events that were happening aside from her own personal machinations. The act of time vanishing prompted a confused response with.”

“It just works,” Jotaro, Pinkie, and Velvet interrupted all at once.

“Yare yare daze…” Jotaro added.

“I’m, like, major confused,” Insipid muttered.

“Just keep your head together, we’re going to have t-” Flutterfree’s eyes widened at the thing that appeared in front of them. It was a purple miasmic creature with numerous gears and other clockwork mechanisms inside of it, the front face of which looked like a gaping maw filled with jagged teeth.

“Damn, time eater,” Nova muttered. “Not going to be helpful against that.”

“Indubitably Void-resistant as well,” Shadow commented after her magics did nothing.

“Oh! Major. Fresh!” Insipid chirped. “Shadow, be, like, the best friend ever and teleport me out there. I’ve got this~!”

Nova blinked. “Wait, you?”

They saw the dark unicorn appear outside, just above the time eater, her armor protecting herself from the elements. She touched one of the gears with her hoof – prompting a cut to form. She quickly undid the damage though – for she had just absorbed the time eater’s powers. “So, I can, like, eat you now, right?”

One thing the time eater had never thought of was using its powers to actually eat. It thought the powerset was purely metaphorical.

As it turned out, it wasn’t. Insipid was able to devour the being into herself before it realized what happened.

Nova, Flutterfree, and Vriska stared in shock.

Pinkie chuckled as Insipid was teleported back into the Mean Six’s ship.

“Nothing can stop us!” Havocwing shouted.

Pinkie facehooved. “Moron.”

“Fuck you.”

“She’s right though,” Velvet said. “You’ve doomed us all.”

A series of explosions filled the space around them, sending their ships flying off in different directions. The engines jammed and parts started to fly off.

Nova lit her horn. “Evacuating…”
“See you girls on the other side!” Vriska called.

“We’re getting to Skarn first!” Havocwing declared.

“Go ahead and try,” Pinkie said. “We’re going to save Eve.”

Nova teleported them out of their ship and onto the outside of one of the rectangular prisms extruding from the central, glowing sphere. The Mean Six appeared on a completely separate structure.

“And now we’re on our own,” Pinkie said.

Flutterfree nodded. “Everypony watch out for each other, okay?” There was a series of nods. “Pinkie, am I right in assuming Eve’s in the central area?”

Pinkie nodded. “Yep.”

Flutterfree spread her wings and prepared her armor’s engines. “Let’s go get her.”

They blasted toward the center.

~~~

“This is probably the last report I’m going to make,” O’Neill said, looking at Thor, Ava, Allure, the Research Overhead, and Starbeat. “In a few minutes they will reach us despite our best efforts and we will have to fight for our lives.”

Allure nodded. “Ready.”

“Starbeat, suggestions?”

“Survive as long as possible,” Starbeat said. “Hope that the offense wins and is able to call off the soldiers.”

“Will that happen?”

Starbeat bit her lip and looked at her ka scanners. “Maaaaayybbe?”

“It’s a gamble we can’t take,” Ava said. “We must evacuate the city.”

“Sorry, but no,” O’Neill said. “That’ll just let more of the assholes in now that they figured out where we are. Right now we are targets – for the most part the civilians are safe.”

Ava nodded curtly. “That call is yours to make.”

“And don’t you forget it,” O’Neill muttered. “Now, have we figured out how they found us?”

“It wasn’t a security breach if that’s what you’re wondering,” Starbeat said. “Minna was the only individual to leave the city, and we have literally no records of that happening because of her nature. We know of no other breaches.”

“They probably intercepted our transmissions,” the Research Overhead said. “We were gambling they wouldn’t have time to hack them during the rush war, but this has lasted longer than we were expecting.”

Thor nodded. “It is almost at an end, however. The offense should have already breached the wall and begun its assault on the interior.”
“And that might allow Skarn to breach our harmony barriers,” the Research Overhead said. “He’s seen first hand a power specifically designed to counter it. He could recreate it.”

“So, as far as we know, both offense and defense were going well, but they could both be going terribly right now,” O’Neill summed up. “I love being in the dark. Don’t you?”

Allure sighed. “No…”

They heard an explosion above them.

“That’s all the time we have for today,” O’Neill said. “Homework is due tomorrow.”

“Homework?” Ava asked.

“It’s a pass/fail assignment.” O’Neill looked at them all. “Stay alive.”

There was a solemn silence over the meeting. Above them, there was another, louder explosion.

They picked up their weapons and prepared to fight for their lives.

~~~

Brell walked through her green facility, Lady Rarity being dragged along beside her by Minna. Not that Brell knew it was Minna – or had even registered Minna’s presence within the Congeries. She scarcely paid much attention to any one of her individual children, thinking of them more as a collective. She wasn’t even sure how many were with her – a squad, yes, but she didn’t care if it was fourteen or twenty-six or some other number. All that mattered was that they were with her.

“So, uh…” Lady Rarity said. “If you’re going to turn me into one of… them, why haven’t you tried it before?”

“Didn’t feel the need,” Brell answered. “My children were always perfect, able to move in and out without being noticed. They’d been around your worlds long before we made official contact, you know. We even dropped an incomplete one at your doorstep to learn more about you from the inside.”

“…Really?” Lady Rarity said, pretending to be completely ignorant of Minna.

“Yes. We let you raise her, let her learn to be like you. Few years ago we downloaded her memories and have been using them ever since.”

“Oh, so you’ve been using her for intelligence gathering? I take it you know everything about our troop movements then?”

“That would require her being open,” Brell commented. “After the borders were closed we dropped all communications. And getting to her has proven… difficult since the war started. She’s in Celestia City somewhere, and only recently have we gained access to it. We will find her and adopt her back into our fold.”

“That’s possible?”

“There is no age limit to when they can be completed,” Brell said. “It’s just the most efficient if it is done when they’re young. You will suffer quite a bit if I’m successful.”

“And if you’re not I’ll just be dead.”
Brell gave her a warm smile. “I certainly hope not. You seem like you’d make a wonderful child.”

Lady Rarity shivered. “I’d pass if I had the choice.”

“You do not,” Brell said, stopping in front of an empty pod filled with goo floating over a large, metallic table. “Untie her.”

Minna and a few of the others untied Lady Rarity. She rose to her feet, armor clanking.

Brell leaned down so she was eye-level with Lady Rarity. “Now, you can be cooperative and take off your armor. As a reward, you’ll receive the procedure with anesthetic and painkillers. If I have to force that armor off of you it’ll be done the painful way. I don’t like causing pain — that’s what the rest of my family is for — but I know when it’s necessary.”

Lady Rarity slowly started removing her armor. “Why do you do this?”

“What?”

“Such cruel biological experimentation.” She gestured with a bare hoof at the soldiers behind her. “They barely have a spark in them. They don’t enjoy life.”

“They don’t hate it either,” Brell said. “They exist as a beautiful middle ground. Balance. They are able to see what is coming so they aren’t surprised by life, and they don’t have expectations that will be brought down. They’re content, under all circumstances. Something I wish I was.”

“If you wish it, why don’t you do this to yourself?”

“I’ve considered it,” Brell admitted. “But neither my father nor my brother has the requisite understanding of morality or care to give them a pure direction, and I do not have access to something with enough power to take their place. My hunt for a Wishing World has proven futile.”

“You call this war a pure direction?”

“No,” Brell said. “I would rather not have sent my children into battle. But I am subservient to my father. I would never dream of crossing him — to do so… It wouldn’t mean my death, but I wouldn’t be able to live with myself. He has an understanding of cosmic beauty unlike any other.” She looked at her hands. “If I could only convince him that not all beauty is good.”

“…Can you think that, maybe, this beauty you’re making here isn’t good?” Lady Rarity suggested, standing naked.

“It is what I wish I could be,” Brell said with a smile. “I can’t see why it wouldn’t be good.”

Lady Rarity sighed. “Are you sure? What ab-”

There was a loud explosion from somewhere in the facility.

Brell let out a ‘tsk’. “Someone’s in. All of you, take care of it — I’ll be fine.”

The soldiers moved away without flinching — including Minna. Lady Rarity was now alone.

“You’re contemplating fighting me now,” Brell said. “A skilled wizard and warrior such as yourself could pull off a plucky victory. Don’t. Think about the power scale between us.”

Lady Rarity sighed. “I’m not an idiot.”
“Up on the table please.”

Lady Rarity moved onto the table. She caught some shouts coming from the distance in the green fog.

“…Like, girls, these powers are major. Fresh!”

“Pour l'amour de la princesse… ‘Avocwing! Down!’”

“BURN FUCKERS! BURN!”

“Everybody scream scream scream…”

Lady Rarity blinked. She didn’t know those voices.

Brell pressed some buttons on the console next to her, accessing the deep controls of the facility. In an instant, Lady Rarity lost all feeling in her muscles. She wobbled. “What th-”

“Anesthetic.”

“I’m still very conscious.”

Brell smirked. “I know my way around a biological mind. I can turn whatever I want on and off at will.”

“So, what exactly does this procedure entail?”

“Well, first I’ve got to analyze your DNA patterns and how they intermingle with both your spirit and your arcane nature. The program’s doing that right now. I’ll make a few tweaks and shape you into one of my children. Then there’ll be a scoop in your brain to complete you. It’ll be exceptionally bloody and trigger a few biological reflexes, but it won’t hurt. Then you’ll be done.”

“…And this won’t take long?”

“My children will take care of whatever miscreants are rampaging through the area,” Brell said dismissively. “There’s millions of them in this facility alone.”

“That’ll be enough?”

“Assuredly.” Brell’s screen lit up. “Ah, looks like I’ve found the correct pattern. I do hope this works.”

Lady Rarity braced for a dramatic alteration of her genetic code. But it never came.

Minna dropped from the ceiling and punched Brell across the face with all her power. Brell fell to the ground, dazed.

Minna didn’t waste any time – she turned right to the console and started pressing buttons. “Self destruct… Self destruct… Self destruct…”

She found it. All the primary controls were already open. All she had to do wa-

Brell used her telekinesis to pull Minna to her and remove her helmet. “You…”

Minna struggled, but Brell’s grip was way too strong. “Let go of me!”
“How can you fight your own siblings this way?”

“Because you removed what makes them people!” Minna shouted. “That’s what!”

Brell shook her head. “I’m afraid you’ve been indoctrinated too fa-”

Lady Rarity jumped for the button on the console. Brell tossed the spirid to the side with a flex of her eyelash. Lady Rarity didn’t feel any pain as she hit the ground, but given the shape of her left foreleg, she had probably broken a few bones. “Ergh…”

“I do not blame you for trying that,” Brell said, placing Lady Rarity on the table and strapping her down. “You will still undergo the procedure with kind treatment.” She removed Minna from her power armor and set her down next to Lady Rarity. “She will just undergo the procedure with you. You need to be completed, my child.”

“NO!” Minna shouted. “I do not want to be like them!”

“Why?”

“I… I want to be able to look at my friends the way they look at me! I want to look at Frigid and tell him how I feel! I want to look at my Mom and give her some of what she’s given me!”

“I am your mother, child.”

“You’re a mad scientist who grows people in tubes,” Minna spat.

“So I am,” Brell said. “I—” she sensed an attack coming from the future. She lifted her hand, freezing the incoming Grayscale in midair. The ‘Rainbow Dash’ snarled, unleashing her power on Brell anyway, increasing the gravity around her considerably.

Brell didn’t flinch. She reacted with her cosmic power, tossing Grayscale into a nearby wall. She used gravity to lessen the impact, preventing anything from breaking, but it still wasn’t comfortable to be flattened against a metallic wall.

“HEY BOSS LADY!” Havocwing shouted, unleashing a stream of fire at her. “EAT THIS!”

Brell took this order literally, sucking all the fire into her mouth and unleashing it directly at Havocwing.

“Shit,” Havocwing muttered, diving to the ground.

“How about your own medicine!?” Shadow added, unleashing a beam of pure void energy at Brell. The bear twisted it around herself and fired it back at Shadow, who twisted it around herself and shot it back at Brell, creating a game of ping-pong.

Velvet appeared behind Brell while the game was underway. She summoned a tendril of blood and flung it at Brell’s back, only for a magic construct that resembled a solar system projection to appear and defend Brell.

Brell was decidedly busy with this – so Insipid took her chance. She darted from her hiding spot behind a pod and reached for Brell’s leg.

Brell kicked out with her foot, psychic energy tossing Insipid back.

“Like, wow, good ploy!”
Brell blinked – the voice had not come from Insipid. It had come from the other side.

The ‘Insipid’ Brell had kicked dropped her illusion, revealing herself to be Curaçao. “Je t’ai eu.”

The real Insipid had used the powers she obtained from one of the soldiers to sneak past Brell’s future-sight. She laid a hoof on Brell, giggling. “This is going to be an excellent power! MAJOR. FRESH.”

Brell found this annoying. She tried to drive a fist of magic energy through Insipid, but a magical barrier like a solar system appeared around her instead. Insipid let out a dismissive huff. “Pfft. Whatever. I wear it better.”

The necklaces of their Elements began to glow darkly. Now that they were all here, as one, they were ready to unleash utter darkness on Brell.

Brell thought fast – Insipid had her abilities now, and wouldn’t be easy to take out. Shadow was still flinging Void at Brell, keeping her occupied along with Velvet. She knew nothing about Curaçao, which left Havocwing and Grayscale as her primary targets.

Havocwing looked the weakest.

“Sorry,” she muttered. She stared at Havocwing and flexed her eyes.

Havocwing was absorbed into a miniature black hole that existed for all of a second, her red body going through the shredder. A wing and a leg vanished from existence while others fell to the ground after the singularity had vanished, her blood pooling with the red of her coat.

Without her, the elements stopped working.

“HAVOCWING!” Shadow shouted, losing concentration and allowing the Void energy to hit her straight on. She fell back.

“Bitch!” Insipid said, pushing at Brell with her own raw energy.

But Brell knew how to use her abilities a lot better than Insipid did. She unleashed a complex chain algorithm that hit Insipid from all sides. Without knowledge of how to defend against the compression, the unicorn had all the air squeezed out of her.

This just left Velvet and Curaçao standing.

Velvet glared at Brell. “Wrong.”

Brell made Velvet’s blood vanish with a snap of her fingers. “Wrong?”

“You’re wrong.”

“I’m no-”

“But what if you are?” Velvet asked, cocking her head with a menacing smirk. “Do you ever think about that?”

Brell grimaced. “What is your point?”

“Just talking at this point. Call it… curiosity.” Velvet smirked. “I see in you. I se-”

Brell punched Velvet in the face, forcing her back. “A fear-feeder. Curious.”
Curaçao walked up to Brell and blinked. “Curious? ‘ow so?”

“She instinctively knew which button to press,” Brell said, turning to face her last opponent. “What can you do?”


“Not a warrior then?”

“Not wizout ze rest of zem,” Curaçao admitted. “Not ze best in ‘oof-to-’oof combat, generally only good for copycat ploys like the one you just witnessed.”

Brell nodded. “Then you’ll get to witness history.”

“’istory? Do tell.”

Brell narrowed her eyes. “You seem far too interested, especially considering that I heavily injured most of your friends and killed one of them.”

“Friends? We’re just a team who works togezer out of convenience. You must ‘ave us confused with someone else. Like the Elements of ‘armony.”

Brell looked at her curiously. “It seems unlike the Merodi to employ those such as yourself…”

Curaçao shrugged. “A simple necessity. Zey had to destroy the ‘armony field. We had the means to do so.”

Brell leaned down. “No loyalty to them whatsoever?”

“None.”

“You seem to be a refined mare. And I don’t detect a trace of anger or resentment toward me in your voice… Just annoyance that you’ve been defeated… How do you feel about art?”

“Art is a beautiful construct zat bonds the souls of all beings togezer zrough a shared experience, vie partagée if you will. It comes from ze closest thing to on ‘igh, zat place above all ozers from where our creativity is driven.”

Brell pondered this. “Perhaps you would be willing to assist me in my endeavors… I’ll have to check inwardly first, and possibly complete you… But it might work…”

“I would make an excellent servant for you, but zere is a problem.”

Brell raised an eyebrow. “Hm?”

“Hélas, I am les menteur.” Seeing her confusion, Curaçao smirked. “A liar.”

Brell blinked. “What?”

“SELF DESTRUCT ACTIVATED.”

Brell whipped around to see Minna standing over the console, fingers pressed on the self-destruct button.

“You know, it’s really easy to guess passwords if you can see yourself typing them in,” Minna commented.
Brell grabbed Minna around her stomach and rammed her into the ground. “DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT YOU’VE JUST DONE!!?”

“Blowing up this place?” Minna suggested, hearing explosions start from a distant corner of the facility.

“IT’LL TAKE EONS TO BUILD THIS UP!”

“Shouldn’t have had a self-destruct button then.”

“I WH-” she blinked. “Why did I have a self-destruct button?”

This observation made the barely-conscious Velvet laugh. Brell ignored her, focusing intently on Minna.

“What’re you going to do?” Minna asked.

Brell’s eye twitched. “I’m going to make you pay for what you’ve done.” Brell kicked Minna across the room, breaking numerous bones in the process. “You won’t be leaving this place alive!”

“There’s the evil mother I know and hate,” Minna coughed, spitting up blood.

While Brell was fixated on Minna, Insipid got up. “Right, right… Uh… Shroudy magics and stuff!”


Shadow nodded, rubbing the back of her head. She walked over to the remnants of Havocwing and tapped into her rarely-used holy magic. Unlike how most Twilight Sparkles were masters of harmonious energies and only used dark powers in times of dire need, Shadow was the exact opposite. Her standard motions were of darkness – while her last resorts were of light.

Her eyes lit with holy power and her body began to spasm from the uncomfortable presence of bright magic. She cast the revive spell on Havocwing.

It was pretty clear she Came Back Wrong. Her skin was missing in several places, her eyes didn’t focus on anything, and she let out a whispering scream.

“…Oh no,” Shadow said, putting a hoof to her mouth.

“The Elements don’t care,” Grayscale said, still flat against the nearby wall. “Use them.”

As the green laboratory lit aflame in the distance, the Mean Six used their Elements in tandem, a swirl of darkness surrounding them. All of them – including the wrong Havocwing – rose into the air, the darkness connecting all of them.

The chaos grabbed Brell from the back. Several spires of dark energy shot through her shields, making her gag.

Minna, despite her injuries, punched Brell across the face. With her magic otherwise occupied with the darkness attacking her, she had none left to counter Minna’s force.

In reality, Brell was a frail creature. Her neck snapped. The pain forced her defenses into a panic.

She was absorbed by the darkness, much like how Havocwing had been taken moments prior.

Minna breathed heavily. It was over. She had destroyed the one who created her siblings, and the
facility would soon follow.

*Oh. Right. Forgot about that.*

“Get us out of here!” she shouted.

The swirling darkness expanded, surrounding both her and Lady Rarity protectively. Minna could see the Mean Six trying their hardest to keep the power up – even as the world exploded around them.

Insipid and Shadow lost consciousness first – the former not having much strength to begin with, the latter having used too much already. And yet, the Elements held together, powering the shield of darkness.

Grayscale passed out next, leaving the holding of the barrier to Curaçao and Velvet.

The burning fire of destruction raged against the barrier, forcing more and more energy out of them. Velvet let out a scream of agony and lost her control as well – leaving only the blue earth pony.

Minna knew she wasn’t going to last long.

Lady Rarity shouted at Minna. “Minna! Which one should I take?”

Minna started running through futures in her head. Lady Rarity didn’t exemplify or cause Fear… She wasn’t one for Greed… or Void… or Apathy… *Anger.*

“I hope you’re angry!” Minna blurted, pointing at Havocwing’s element. Lady Rarity grabbed it with her magic and *pulled* – tearing herself out of the restraints and taking Havocwing’s place as the Element of Anger.

Lady Rarity bared her spirid teeth and allowed her primal instincts to take over just as Curaçao passed out. She kept the connection going for the needed few more seconds – much longer than she should have because she couldn’t feel pain.

She *allowed* the darkness to dissipate. All of them were now standing on top of a broken chunk of metal floating in empty space within the Congeries’ center. Below them they saw a planet-sized burning hole eating away at one of the rectangles.

Havocwing snarled in rage, reminding Minna of her presence. The *wrong* pegasus flew at her, enraged, hooves on fire.

Lady Rarity shot her through the head with a laser, breathing heavily. The red pegasus died once again. “Enough… of… that…”

The Mean Five began to rise up. Insipid stumbled over to Havocwing and started crying. The rest just hugged each other – with the exception of Grayscale.

She was looking at where they were headed.

“Everyone? We might not have time for this.”

“What’s wrong with you!” Insipid blurted. “Like, we need time to *mourn*!”

Grayscale pointed ahead. “We’re about to fly into the center, that’s what.”

Minna gulped. She guessed she wasn’t actually done.
Velvet looked right at her. “…Oh no.”

“What?” Minna asked.

“I think we’re Redshirts now.”

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Arthon threw Eve and Corona into his personal cage. The two of them had magic inhibitors on their horns, hooves, hands, wings, and foot stumps just to be sure - including anti-Stand measures. The cage they had been thrown into hung in the middle of Arthon’s research room, with full view of all his holographic magitech computer displays. Usually the displays would show future plans for his art, but today it was mostly military plans.

Corona wished so badly she could get the information she was seeing out.

“I’m going to turn you into a special piece,” Arthon said as he walked up to one of his computers, creating a new file. “One that speaks of the tragedy and glory of war at the same time.”

“You’re sadistic,” Corona spat.

Arthon didn’t argue.

“That doesn’t bother you?”

“Not at all. My sister and my father are hindered by emotions, and cannot get to the truth of art. Brell is too obsessed with her balance and father with honor. I serve only the works of art. There is nothing beyond them.”

“Give it a rest…” a raspy voice said from the back of the cage. Eve and Corona glanced behind them and gasped.

It was Olivia – except it also wasn’t. She had the same face and shape as they remembered, but she wasn’t human anymore. Her body was made of a crumbling stone material that constantly broke little chunks off, filling the air with dust as she regrew the loose piece.

“Olivia!” Corona shouted, tears coming to her eyes. “You’re… You’re alive!”


Eve frowned. “Don’t worry, we’ll find a way to fix you… We’ll get you back!”

“Always hopeful,” Arthon muttered, pressing a few buttons on a nearby screen. “Even in the face of absurd danger.”

“Hey, you’re the guy who’s home is being invaded,” Corona spat. “You probably need to surrender. We can’t be the only ones who got in.”

Arthon let out a laugh. “Had you mentioned that a few seconds ago, you would have had a point. But look at this message I’ve just received. Details about how you broke through our harmony barrier – giving me exactly what I need to break down your home’s aggravating defenses.” He moved his fingers through the holograms. “Just need to get father to create a few more ships… Shouldn’t be too much of a strain on him. The defenses will hold for a second.” He sent a message. “Soon, your worlds will burn.”
Corona grabbed the bars. “You monster.”

“This is just standard warfare, Corona,” Arthon said.

“Then I call you a monster for making human zippers.”

Arthon shrugged. “Then a monster I shall be. It must be the true form of art to be hideous to others.”

“He’s crazy,” Olivia coughed, forcing dust out of her mouth. “No getting through to him. And no attacking him either, since we’re up here. I suggest waiting for help to arrive because otherwise we’re just going to go loco.”

Eve looked down at Arthon, shaking her head. “I came here to do something… Not get captured and make things worse.”

“You did fine, he was just too strong,” Corona said. “Also caught us by surprise…”

“You should have known you’d be easy to detect,” Arthon muttered.

“I’d just gotten my feet burned off at the time!”

Arthon smirked. “Then the barrier did something useful, at least.”

Corona glared at him – an idea slowly forming in her mind.

“…I bet you’re scared of us.”

“Quite the contrary. It is you who are scared of me.”

“Oh, I don’t mean the three of us. I mean all of us as a whole. We’re right outside your doorstep, banging on your front doors, destroying your home. We have a good chance of overpowering you in here with our ships alone.”

“That i-”

“What are you going to do if we win?”

“You won’t win.”

“You should have a plan though,” Corona said. “I mean, I thought you were the one not hindered by balance or honor – just pure devotion to the art? Hrm? How can you claim to do that if you haven’t thought of every contingency?”

Arthon growled, saying nothing.

“It’s because you aren’t really devoted. You’re devoted to yourself, not the art. You can’t imagine life without this power. Can’t imagine smaller art. You’ve grown up in the shadow of your father and have no way to view the world outside of him! You’re trapped!”

“I am not in my father’s shadow!”

“Then how come you do everything he wants, eh? Look at you, commanding his armies, subjugating worlds that need it, moving plans to help his view of the future. Do you really think you can challenge him? What if you beat him? What would you do then? Nothing. Because you’re just his son, and you’ll never be anything more!”
Arthon threw a punch at Corona, planning to bust through the bars.

Corona raised a bare hand to catch the fist.

He saw this, stopping just short of the bars.

Corona stuck her arm through the bars and tried to grab his hand, but he pulled back. “Your empathy still works, doesn’t it? Direct contact even while under magic inhibitors, using my power as your own…”

“Dammit,” Corona cursed under her breath.

“That was a clever ploy,” Arthon admitted. “What were you going to do? Destroy my consciousness? Did you really think you could do that?”

“I’ve beaten a Great Old One at mental chess, Teddy. You’re not that good.”

“Then it’s certainly fortunate for me that I didn’t let you get to me. I’m more than my anger, after all. I am devoted to the a-”

There were suddenly several dozen magical holes in his body along with several fist impressions. He went flying into one of the walls, breaking several computers. “What in th-”

Jotaro cracked his knuckles. “Time to take you back to hibernation.”

Nova jumped off his back, creating several magical barriers around the two of them. “What he said. …I think.”

“YEAH!” Corona shouted. “GET HIM!”

Vriska and Flutterfree dropped from the ceiling; the former adjusting her glasses while the latter splayed her wings aggressively.

“F-flutterfree?” Eve said, eyes wide. “W-what happened t-”

“I had to become a warrior,” Flutterfree said. “I… I’ll deal with the consequences later.”

Arthon pulled himself out of the wall and readied a spell, the arcane energies swirling around his hand like a miniature solar system.

Pinkie hit him on the head with her warhammer, following it up with a million-degree knife to his hand, chopping it off. “SURPRISE!”

Arthon roared, the force of his voice pushing all but Jotaro back. Jotaro wrapped Arthon up in Hermit Purple and the Passion, feeling the horrific anger and darkness in his soul. Jotaro followed up with a Star Platinum punch, driving a hole through Arthon.

Arthon’s power healed him. “You… can’t… do anything to me!”

Vriska smirked. She started draining his luck. “Let’s see how much of this you have…”

“Inversion,” Arthon said. Suddenly Vriska felt her luck dropping instead of increasing. She stopped instantly.

Flutterfree flew by Arthon, scraping him with the knives, but she was tossed aside easily. She opted to fire the bow of light at him, annoyed to find that he had a Seraphim-like field around him that
diverted projectiles.

Nova erased time, appearing behind Arthon after a confusing round of everyone switching places in the room. She hit him with a mixture of a concussive blast and aging spell, planning to blow him to dust.

The aging didn’t affect him, and the concussive blast barely made him move. He pushed back at her, throwing her into Vriska – forcing the troll to lose hold of some of her dice. “FUCK.”

Jotaro went after Arthon again. “ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA!”

Arthon altered the barrier around himself after the second ‘ORA’, making Star Platinum’s fists disappear the moment they got within half an inch of Arthon’s body.

Flutterfree attempted to use Lolo, but the same rule applied – no Stands could approach Arthon now. Jotaro attempted to throw a piece of computer shrapnel at him, but Arthon caught the plating and threw it back at Jotaro.

“I will counter everything all of you have!” Arthon roared, his shield blocking more and more as time went on. Vriska’s sword vaporized the moment it touched him. Nova’s magic signature started to charge Arthon. Stands were pointless. “Did you think it was my father who was responsible for the adaptations!? No! It was me! I never let you do the same thing twice!”

“Then you better get ready for the death roulette,” Pinkie spat. She cracked her neck and grinned. “What to do first?”

Arthon pushed her back with his psychic power. But she wasn’t there – she was behind him, driving a glowing green sword through his chest. Then she was far away, firing a machine gun at him. Then she was under him, placing bear traps around his feet.

Arthon roared. “CHILD’S TRICKS! I WILL ALWAYS RECOVER!”

Pinkie produced a sword and cut Arthon’s arm off. It didn’t grow back. “See this? This is a starmetal sword. On loan from a nice mare who currently isn’t using it. Very useful.” She didn’t bother swinging it again, knowing Arthon had already figured out how to defend against it.

He rushed her, but she was once again behind him, driving a jackhammer into his back. Then she smashed him into the Wall.

“What in…?”

“Ka is a funny thing, isn’t it?” Pinkie said. She pressed his face to the back of the computer screen. “Look at them. Look at them cheering for your downfall. You villain.”

“I WILL NOT BE BROUGHT LOW BY PETTY EXISTENTIALISM!” He pushed back, summoning a complex crushing spell on her. She appeared behind him.

He was expecting this. His hand was ready for her. He drove it right into her face, two fingers going for the most vulnerable areas.

She screamed. A force of burning, searing power like nothing she had ever felt before went directly from her eyes to her brain and through her entire nervous system.

He shaped her, expressing his creativity on her body. Candy-red blood spurted out the back of her head in arc patterns. Her body didn’t go limp, but instead took a jagged, twitching pose. She flew to
the back wall, her limbs twisted behind her back and embedded into the rock.

Blood dropped from her face, making up for her inability to cry.

Arthon turned to the rest of them. “Now that the annoyance is out of the wa-”

Flutterfree had her psychotic breakdown.

She couldn’t make a word with her mouth – couldn’t scream ‘PINKIE!’, couldn’t tell anyone else what to do, and couldn’t think.

All was Rage.

She flew at Arthon, purple energies channeling through her blades. She drove her hooves and wings into Arthon, surpassing his barriers with something new.

She attempted Flair’s instant death technique, slicing Arthon into several pieces.

He reformed, the places he had been cut sparkling with white energy. A cosmic torrent shot out from his hand, pushing her back – but her Rage kept her standing.

The ground beneath her tore up and flew backward. She tore it apart with pure physical strength, landing on the ground. She took a step toward Arthon.

He sneered – her power was formidable, but he could deal with her. All he had to do was keep pushing her back until she tired. Everyone ran out of the ability to express such unbridled rage after enough emotional taxation. It would only be a matter of time.

What he didn’t realize was that a Page of Rage was a beacon.

They gave their power to those around them.

Jotaro, Vriska, and Nova all grabbed hold of Arthon’s neck at the same time, all three of their bodies burning with purple energy. He felt the Rage claw into him, seeping the power of destruction into him.

No. He couldn’t fall to this. He had to find a way to defend against it. To stop his body from succumbing to this pathetic weakness. All he had to do was find a defense… a spell… something cosmic. Something to keep from disintegrating.

White cracks appeared in his body, the light within shifting color to a deep purple.

He realized he didn’t have time.

The Rage revealed the truth of his situation. As he was, he would not survive.

He left behind his devotion to the arts to tap into the Rage of his own. He was going to take as many down with him as he could.

He tore off Nova’s leg with his teeth, spitting the offending limb to the floor. He summoned the power cosmic within him, preparing to self-destruct and take everything out. No one would survive within a hundred miles.

Flutterfree plunged the tips of her wings through his back and tore him in half, the power of the Rage keeping him from reforming. His blood sprayed all over her – a glowing red and white liquid riddled with magical sparkles akin to stars. The thick fluids ran down her body and pooled at her hooves.
She let out a *scream*, channeling all the Rage into it – draining herself. The purple glow vanished and she slumped to the ground, eyes rolling into the back of her head.

In the end, Arthon knew how truly pointless his fight had been.

The battle was over.

Vriska leaped to the cage and tore the door open, popping the magical inhibitors off the three of them, being careful with Olivia’s crumbly body.

Eve ran to Flutterfree to hold her. The pegasus moaned, but didn’t open her eyes.

Corona ran to Pinkie – catching her in healing magic before the party pony bled out. Her cuts and bruises healed up nicely… Her eyes didn’t. There were now gaping holes instead of bloody waterfalls.

Corona put her hands on Pinkie’s shoulders. “We’ll get you to a doctor. We-”

“Help Nova,” Pinkie said, voice hollow.

“R-right,” Corona said. Nova’s wound was much simpler – just healing up a leg stump. “We’ll get you to a doctor as well. Grow everything back.”

“That’ll work for Nova,” Olivia said, crawling out of the cage. “Won’t work for Pinkie. Or me.”

“Wh – why?”

“Do you all remember the Sweetie Belle? The one the Collector called Sweetie Chronicle?”

Nova nodded. “…Vaguely.”

“Remember her crystal condition? A being called ‘the beast’ cursed her to eternally have a crystal body, regardless of where her soul wandered, regardless of any healing offered.” Olivia tapped her own rocky exterior. “We’ve been changed like that.”

Vriska curled her fist into a ball. “Someone bring him back so I can kill him again.”

Eve looked up at Pinkie from her position over the unconscious Flutterfree. “…Pinkie?”

Pinkie tried to look at her, but wasn’t quite able to set her face straight. “Y-yeah?”

Eve choked. “I’m sorry.” She levitated Pinkie into a hug. “I’m so, so sorry, I… I thought I…”

“You’re safe,” Pinkie said, fumbling to hug her back. “That’s… That’s all that matters. I couldn’t let you die out here.”

“I’m the idiot who decided I needed to come out here!”

“We always needed to be here,” Pinkie said. “All of us. Including you, Eve.” She finally got her hooves around Eve in the correct way. “I forgive you. For everything.”

“P-pinkie…” Eve burst into tears, unable to take it all. “I don’t deserve you! Any of you!”

“Yes you do,” Pinkie said, squeezing harder.

Then Eve let out a sharp cry of pain. Pinkie pulled back. “W-what is it?”
“Eheh…” Eve rubbed her side. “I think you hugged too hard… Snapped a rib, somehow…”

Corona laid her hand on Eve, healing the wound. “Good as new.”

Pinkie gulped. “S-sorry…”

“Pinkie, don’t worry, it was just you being emotional and I didn’t—”

“Eve, I had no idea I was hugging you too hard.”

Eve looked at her. “Wh—”

Pinkie smashed her hoof against the floor a few times, drawing blood and cracking her hoof in several places. “I didn’t feel any of that.”

“P-Pinkie…”

“It’s… It’s not okay, no,” Pinkie said. “But… but it was my turn. I figured it out. If I wanted to save you, I was going to have to suffer.”

“This is all my fault!” Eve shouted.

“E—”

“Don’t you dare say otherwise!” Eve interrupted. “If I hadn’t kept my identity from you I would never have run away to this war in the first place! If I hadn’t started this war, none of you would have needed to risk your lives like this! If…”

Corona put a gloved hand on Eve’s shoulder. “Eve. This war needed to happen.”

“…C-corona…”

“You’ve seen what Arthon and Skarn do. They do things like what’s happened here to millions, daily.”

Eve grabbed Corona’s shoulders. “I can’t make these kinds of sacrifices, Corona! I just… I just can’t do it!”

“Yes you can,” Corona said, holding her tight. “You can.”

Eve looked into Corona’s eyes – a strange calmness taking over the purple alicorn’s expressions. “I… can?”

“Yes. You can,” Flutterfree said. “So long as you’re also willing to sacrifice yourself, you’ll have paid everyone back.”

Eve looked to her. “But you came to stop me from doing just that!”

Flutterfree looked at Eve’s eyes, the blood of Skarn dripping down her face. “…Because we should never have let you go alone.”

Eve blinked. Then she threw her hooves around Flutterfree’s neck. “I’m so sorry…”

Flutterfree nodded. “I know. I am too.”

“Everyone is,” Jotaro said, kneeling down to Eve.
Eve looked up at him. “Jotaro… Thank you. You don’t owe me anything anymore. I know I always told you that you never owed me anything, but I mean it this time.”

“Yare yare daze…” Jotaro said, adjusting his hat. “There’s more to loyalty than that.”

Eve nodded. “Y-yeah. Something I should know…” She turned to Nova.

“I’m still pissed you started this war,” Nova said.

Eve hung her head.

“But I understand why you did,” Nova said. “And, let’s be perfectly honest, I would have probably done something a lot worse a lot sooner if I had your position.”

Eve looked into Nova’s eyes. “…Are we still…?”

“Yes, Eve, we’re still friends,” Nova said, pulling her in. “You taught me too much to just let it all go now. I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Y-yeah. Just…” She wiped her eyes. “I don’t know.”

“I know something,” Corona said, folding her fingers together. “That’s only one bear down. There’s still a war going on.” She looked at everyone in the room. “A war we need to finish.”

“Corona!” Flutterfree called. “Some of us are in no condition t-

“Let’s go,” Pinkie said. “She’s right, we need to end this war. Some of us can’t fight – but we have to do this and we’re all sticking together.”

Flutterfree looked at her for a moment. “…Okay. We all go to face Skarn.”

Corona took a step forward, establishing herself as the one to lead the charge. “Hope he’s ready for us.”

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Jane had followed a very basic philosophy – don’t stop digging.

Even when they had burst through the crust, she didn’t stop digging.

Even as they fell through the sky and toward the central sphere, she didn’t stop digging. Every missile that hit her pickaxe was reduced to its basic resources in an instant.

Even as they hit one of the rectangular prisms, she didn’t stop digging, falling through a hallway far too large for them.

Even as they approached the central sphere, she didn’t stop.

Behind her, Nae, Jade, Alushy, and Sunny fell, a little bored that they weren’t doing anything.

“Got any sevens?” Alushy asked Jade.

“Go fish,” Jade said, smirking at her.

“Fudgefucklesticks,” Alushy muttered, drawing another card from the deck Sunny was holding in her telekinesis.
Nae went next. “Any aces, Sunny?”

“Yep,” Sunny said, levitating her card over.

“And I win,” Nae said, folding her arms and grinning, her pair of aces floated up into the air.

“And now we don’t have a full deck of cards,” Alushy commented. “Great going, Einstein.”

“I can always make more,” Sunny pointed out.

“I think we should stop anyway,” Jade said. “We are getting pretty close to the center.”

They looked down – wondering what would happen when Jane’s pickaxe finally hit the glowing spherical center of the Congeries.

Jane herself was wondering what would happen. “Make sure we come in slow!” She called up. “Don’t want to turn into pancakes!”

“On it!” Jade and Sunny said, extending their telekinetic powers around all five of them, slowly decelerating them as they approached the center sphere. They landed on the surface, finding it to be smooth like glass, but otherwise opaque.

“If we can see the lights inside this thing, they must be really bright,” Jade observed.

Jane drove her pickaxe into the material. The tool bounced back from it, unharmed. Jane was not all that surprised about this.

“I do have to ask,” Nae interrupted. “Do we really think Minna is in there?”

“Do you think she could be anywhere else?” Alushy asked.

“No, but we have to ask. Going in there will definitely have danger, probably a lot more than we’re expecting or used to.”

“Don’t worry,” Jane said, pulling a clockwork sword with a red blade out of her inventory. “I’m here. Back before we settled down, Sunny and I killed gods for a living.”

Sunny facehooved.

“This Skarn guy may be a bit above our usual fare… But I’m not worried. He’s an asshole who needs to be kicked down a few pegs.”

“All the pegs?” Jade asked.

“All of them,” Jane asserted. Then she blinked. “…Did you just Vriska me?”

Jade giggled. “Heheh… yeah.”

“Huh. Good for you, I guess.” She whirled around and drove her god-slaying sword into the outside of the sphere. It cracked like an egg and they all fell inside. The interior light was blinding – enough to actually burn parts of Alushy – but Sunny was able to see through it.

“Jane, swing again!”

Jane didn’t hesitate, driving through another layer. They entered a tube-like construction that took them away from the outer light, sliding deeper and deeper into the core.
Their vision slowly returned allowing them to see outside the clear tube they were in. They saw hallways with soldiers running through them, complicated mechanisms that moved magic to and fro between labs to living quarters to museums of creative art taken from various universes. They even saw some allies - a few Space Marines trouncing the enemy and some Inklings getting trounced.

The pipe in front of them was constantly shifting, redirecting their course – but instead of diverting them into somewhere they didn’t want to go, it was taking them right to the center of the Congeries. The very center.

Jane gripped her sword. “He knows we’re here. Get ready.”

The pipe deposited them in the control room for the Shaping Mechanism. They saw the tendrils of magic energy that served as the display winding into images of ships, troops, and giant bear statues. They saw the glowing blue orb that allowed Skarn to interface with the Shaping Mechanism.

They saw Skarn himself. He was, as always, a bear made of pure cosmic energy, nebulous stars shifting through his fur. Horns sprouted out of his head, casting him in a demonic image. Spiraling, swirling magics surrounded him, reminiscent not only of solar systems, but of galaxies, while a necklace resting on his bare furry chest sparked with energy.

He removed his hands from the controls, allowing the Shaping Mechanism to run on autopilot, and turned to face them. His expression wasn’t angry – but calm. Expectant, even. “Welcome to the center of my Congeries. I can’t say I was expecting you to be the first here – though I suppose Eve and Corona did drop by earlier.”

“You have been expecting us,” Nae said.

“But of course. This is not just any regular war, decided by numbers, tactics, and ploys. That part of the war is over – the squabbles between my Shaping and the Merodi fleet outside are there just to keep each other occupied right now, making them meaningless. This is a war that is to be decided by the greatest warriors, in deep, personal battle.”

“Um… What exactly would killing us accomplish?” Nae asked. “We’re just soldiers. Strong, yeah, but not very… important.”

“And even killing the highest leaders won’t stop us,” Sunny pointed out.

“And killing me won’t stop my forces,” Skarn countered. “They will keep fighting, even without guidance. It will be difficult to overcome them even without the aid of my Shaping.”

Jane pointed her sword at him. “How about we kill you and figure that out later?”

Skarn moved forward. “Or we could make an honorable agreement. I’ll promise to have my soldiers automatically stand down upon my death. In return, you must promise me something.”

“We don’t have the authority to surrender,” Sunny said. “Or call anything off.”

“Oh no, nothing like that. All I want you to promise is that, upon your deaths, I get all your memories and knowledge. Which would no doubt include methods by which I can enter Merodi Universalis personally and use my abilities to tear planets in half.”

Jane glared at him. “You’re rather upfront about that.”

“It is the way of honor,” Skarn said. “We can fight with those terms – or not.”
“Don’t take it,” Jade said.

“DO take it!” Alushy blurted. “C’mon, we’ve gotta end this guy in one epic showdown! Dragging it out will only make it lame.”

“I say take it as well,” Nae said. “The rewards outweigh the risks.”

“. . . I don’t think so,” Sunny offered. “I think he’s got some sort of trick up his sleeve. Something he’s playing off of.”

“The only thing I am playing off is your severe underestimation of what I am,” Skarn said. “I could explain that to you, if you like. I am a combination of two higher deities and a mortal shell blessed with the gift of seeing the true beauty of existence, and the inspiration to draw it out of its hiding.”

“You sound like nothing special,” Jane said. “But I don’t trust this, in any way, so no deal.”

“The smarter choice, for you,” Skarn admitted. “It would truly be silly if this side-group defeated me, after all.”

“Fuck,” Alushy blurted. “I didn’t even think about the narrative. We’re a bunch of side characters and backgrounders.”

“But we’re not Redshirts,” Jane said, gripping her sword. “Skarn, let me put this to you simply. You’re going down.”

Skarn nodded. “It makes sense that you would believe that, godkiller. Perhaps we should move somewhere more appropriate for a battle, then?”

He didn’t wait for a response. They were suddenly elsewhere – a different universe, one that existed as a functionally endless plane of metal engraved with billions of different symbols. The sky above them swirled with galaxies of every color, but it wasn’t real – the ‘stars’ were just specks of magic floating in the dark blue void above them.

Skarn put his hands behind his back. “I’ll be a gentleman. You can make the first move.”

Jane took the opportunity – she teleported behind him, her flaming blade materializing in the middle of his stomach. He let out a gasp of pain, moving his hand to clutch the wound.

“Hurts more than you were expecting, eh?” Jane said. She pulled it up, expecting to cut him in half – but her blade didn’t budge.

He had grabbed hold of the point sticking out of his stomach with his hands. He pulled with his whole body, tearing the blade out of Jane’s hands.

Then he snapped it in half between two of his fingers. The fire went out unceremoniously.

“It didn’t hurt that much at all, godkiller,” Skarn reported.

“This is one of those moments I wish I hadn’t already unleashed my army of damned souls,” Alushy muttered. She dropped her usual form, opting for the tremendous wall of shadow, eyes, and teeth. Jade took a fighting stance, barking as she arranged her fingers in a rectangle. Nae aimed her gun and activated her magic abilities. Jane drew another blade – clearly not her preferred weapon, but a brutal slayer of gods nonetheless. Sunny surrounded herself in the colors of fire and magic.

Skarn flicked a finger. Nae went flying, unconscious. “Now that the children have gone to where
they won’t get hurt, the adults can have their fun, hrm?”

The four of them charged.

The four of them bounced back like rubber balls.

Skarn shrugged. “So hard to find a good challenge these days…” ~~~

Prior to his gruesome death, Arthon had ordered a few attacks. Attacks equipped with the knowledge to breach the harmony field.

He had chosen three worlds in which to do this – the Hub, Elemental Four, and Lai, simply because they were the ones with heavy Congeries presence.

Ships appeared in orbit around each of the three worlds, firing beams of darkness at the harmony fields – corrupting them in seconds. Cosmo quickly shut off power to those worlds to keep the harmony field from being corrupted elsewhere, but that left three worlds wide open.

The Hub had enough standard defenses to blast the invading forces out of the sky with ease, the city’s primary shield more than enough to absorb the orbital bombardment.

The other worlds, however…

Corea teleported to Air Temple Island with her magic, landing next to Tenzin. “Energy bars, magic bars, all the bars, stat,” she said, rubbing her head.

Tenzin gave her a basket of the requested ‘food’. She began devouring them ravenously.

“I take it defending Republic City has been particularly tiring today?”

“They must have figured something out with their abilities we can’t know about,” Corea muttered. “They keep getting past our defenses without us knowing, entire buildings just vanishing.” She wiped her brow, stuffing a magic bar into her face. “We’re still keeping them back, but our outer defenses keep needing to call in more reinforcements. Eventually they’re going to just stop coming, especially with Celestia City communications down.”

Tenzin nodded. “I’ve received word that the attack is almost over. One hour, maybe less.”

“That’s good. We can hold out for at least that long.” Corea let out a sigh of relief. “Good to know this is almost over. I b-”

The white lines of harmony in the sky flashed black, then vanished. Corea’s pupils shrunk to pinpricks. She could sense the danger coming.

She entered the Avatar State on a trigger. Her eyes went white and she floated into the air. A torrent of water swirled from the seas around Air Temple Island, surrounding them in a dome of water. She added a shell of air around that, followed by a dome of earth that blocked out the sun. With a twist of her body, she created a final swirl of fire around the earthen dome, and on the very interior of the water she created a tremendous magical barrier.

She barely finished it in time. The orbital bombardment from Skarn’s fleet hit the second it was done removing the harmony barrier. Corea couldn’t see anything happening out there, but she felt her barrier of fire come down, followed by her earthen wall, and the air. The water lasted a bit longer,
but eventually even it too dissipated, leaving just a magic shell. At the top of the dome, everyone on Air Temple Island could see a deep, red energy pushing at them from above, trying to break through the last layer, eating away at the remnants of the earthen dome and water layer.

Corea’s shield began to crack at the very top.

The unicorns of Air Temple Island gave her their aid, pushing their magic right into her. Tenzin meditated, willing his spirit into her own.

Corea strained. “It’s not enough!” the Avatars said. “It’s too much to stop! There must be... Spirit! PURE SPIRIT!” She roared, tapping into the spirits of everyone on the island, forcing their bodies into great pain. “We are sorry! There is no other way!”

The shield broke – but a great white spirit shot out of Corea and caught the energy beam with itself. The spirit was weak compared to the shield – only able to last a few seconds.

But that was all they needed. The bombardment stopped.

Corea fell to the ground, returning everyone’s souls to them. There were a few screams as this happened, but everyone on Air Temple Island was alive.

Nobody else was. There was a crater where Republic City had been. The entire bay Air Temple Island had sat in was vaporized, waiting for more ocean water to fill it.

Corea scanned the land – looking for any signs of life. She saw a few scant protrusions of artificial structures that had been slightly too durable to be glassed by the orbital lasers, but no life. There was nothing green as far as the eye could see. Not even the full-grown dragon that had taken to living on the nearby mountain was there – no skeleton to indicate he had ever been there.

Corea stared, slowly realizing that most of her close friends had been fighting to defend Republic City. “N-no...”

Tenzin grabbed Corea by the shoulders. “You saved what you could.”

“I... I...”

“You did your duty as the Avatar, Corea. You saved the Air Nomads from extinction.”

Corea nodded, biting back tears. “I... I know, Tenzin. That doesn’t mean this isn’t a tragedy!”

“I know it doesn’t,” Tenzin said. “Almost everyone I knew lived in that city. But you can’t allow yourself to think this is your failure!”

Corea burst into tears, falling to her haunches.

On Lai, a very different story took place.

Terezi rushed into Toph’s throne room. “Toph, you’re needed in the Hub!”

Toph cocked her head. “Really? What for?”

“I don’t know, I just know!”

“Terezi-”

“Just come already,” Terezi muttered, dialing the Hub with a government-issue device that could
overrule the dimensional lock.

Toph sighed, giving instructions to one of her trusted Generals to move a legion to the south to protect the border better. Then she ran through Terezi’s portal, appearing in the Hub.

Just as the portal closed behind them, the bombardment of the Hub began. The city shook from the impact.

“They’re under attack!?”

“They’re fine, their point defenses are excellent,” Terezi said. “It’s easy to defend only one target.”

“…Then why are we here?”

“Before we get into that, I’m going to preface by saying I forgive you for what you’re about to do to me.”

Toph’s expression became angered. “Terezi what did you do?”

“I saw the possible futures. I didn’t like it. So I did something about it.” She pointed at a breaking news program on a nearby public screen. A Ga was reading the news.

“This just in, the Hub, Elemental Four, and Lai have been hit hard by Congeries forces that removed the harmony barriers. While the Hub was able to repel the attack quickly, Elemental Four and Lai have suffered extreme losses in the form of Republic City and the Lai Capital…”

Toph punched Terezi in the face. “I NEEDED TO BE THERE!”

“There was no future where you could have done anything!”

“Take me back. Now.”

Terezi didn’t argue – she dialed back. They walked to what had been Toph’s throne room just a moment ago.

Now it was a crater that extended as far as the eye could see.

Toph punched Terezi again. “You’re fired.”

“Yep… Saw this coming…” Terezi muttered.

Toph slammed her foot into the ground, sensing for any survivors on the surface.

She found one.

She ran to the nearby area of earth and spread the rocks apart, revealing a glowing sphere of esoteric energy that contained a single Arcei – the only Arcei. Starcei.

She had curled up into a fetal position and had her eyes shut as tight as she could manage.

“It’s okay,” Toph said, setting the magic sphere gently onto the ground. “You’re safe now.”

Starcei opened one of her eyes. She dropped her Runic shield and took a moment to look around.

“Armonia’s horn…” she said, hoof to her mouth. “The entire city…”

“Everything,” Toph said. “EVERYTHING.”
“We need to find out how many soldiers we have left, how our fronts are doing a- Toph, what are you doing?”

Toph rammed her fists into the ground, creating a wall. “What’s it look like? I’m rebuilding the palace.”

“Toph, there a-”

“If this war doesn’t end soon this entire planet is going to be glassed,” Toph spat back. “Nothing we do is going to be able to change that. So I’m going to get a head start on rebuilding this place with my own two hands. Since I didn’t go down with the city like I was supposed to.”

Terezi grumbled. “You’re welcome.”

“I’m not thanking you.”

“I suppose I’ll go check on the armies then.”

“You’re fired Terezi, get out of my sight and don’t come back,” Toph grunted. “Starcei, you go check on the armies.”

Starcei saluted. “Yes, your Highness.” She teleported away.

Terezi let out a sigh and walked away in a random direction.

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Allure hid beneath O’Neill. She held a small gun in her telekinesis, and had her Heart ready for combat. But she knew she wasn’t a killing machine. She would probably need to be.

There were five others in the room with her. Besides O’Neill, there was Ava, Starbeat, Thor, and the Research Overhead. Squeaky was out controlling the League of Sweetie Belles to keep civilian danger to a minimum while Allure just cowered in here since the teleporters were down. It was her place, she supposed, to be here.

She gulped. She had no idea where her daughter was, or even if she was alive. Allure’s League was up there, fighting and dying without her. And here she was, cowering, sitting in a room with several high value targets. Herself included.

She could hear them getting closer and closer, breaking through wave after wave of soldiers.

The Research Overhead took point – unfolding his body, shedding the humanoid shape in favor of a forward-lurching four-armed being with burning hot claws. He had all four of the claws aimed at the entrance, ready for anything.

Those who had Stands had them out. Crimson Sushi hung on to O’Neill’s shoulder, ready. Thor’s Stand – which Allure had recently learned had been named Lithium – was a series of three colorful orbs. She had no idea what it did. Just like she had no idea what Ava’s Stand did. It was named Red Rain and took the form of a perfectly spherical bubble of bloody water with an eyeball inside of it.

She briefly wondered if she should name her Heart powers. It definitely wasn’t a Stand, but it was able to act like one.

These thoughts were quickly banished when the first soldier walked in through the doorway. The Research Overhead shot at him from four different directions – three of which were dodged, but the
fourth went right through his chest.

Red Rain activated. The blood pooling out of the soldier gained an eye similar to the one in Red Rain itself. The blood floated into the air, creating a drop-shaped being. The moment another soldier came in, the drop blasted right through his visor and into his face, freeing blood to make a second drop creature.

It was at this point the soldiers started getting smarter – coming in with larger groups. But O’Neill and Starbeat took care of them, confusing their perceptions and blasting them with a mixture of magic and physical bullets specifically designed to fool their perceptions.

They threw a grenade in, but Thor’s Lithium used one of its globes of energy to reduce it to subatomic particle dust. Another of the spheres created a burst of electromagnetism that sent the soldiers outside flying away.

*Ah, he must control the fundamental forces of the universe. The nuclear force, electromagnetism, and gravity.* Allure blinked. *Wait, no, he’d have used gravity if he could… That’s right, the nuclear force is split in two. Wonder how that works, exactly.*

As it turned out, the third sphere was just extremely good at dealing with radiation. A soldier dropped dead outside from the interactions of Lithium’s third orb.

Allure felt a lot more confident that they had Thor on their side. With their mixture of Stands there was no way they could lose.

And then Thor was gone. Nothing more than a splat of juices on the ground next to a soldier with a broken neck.

“Wh… Wh…” Allure blinked.

“Godammit!” O’Neill shouted, pulling out one of his grenades and throwing it into the hall.

“Memory trick!” Starbeat shouted. “Be careful!”

“Did he transmit his consciousness?” O’Neill asked the Research Overhead.

“Negative,” the robot responded. “It appears his mind was caught up in their tricks as much as ours.”


Allure knew Thor was a good friend of O’Neill’s. Another tragedy in this war…

The Congeries’ soldiers smashed through the back wall, rushing in with a full contingent. Red Rain’s blood drop creatures rushed them, but they were somehow all taken out. No one was permitted to know how.

Crimson Sushi didn’t permit any of the enemies to know where they were, prompting several of them to shoot each other. But one of them had gotten clever and pointed a finger directly at Allure.

She rolled to the side, pushing O’Neill out of the way of the invisible bolt with her telekinesis. She activated her Heart and tore at the soldier’s feet, knocking him over. She delivered a quick blow to the base of the skull. She didn’t know if she killed him with that or just knocked him out, and she didn’t have time to find out. She had to do a backflip into the air to avoid the next set of shots.

Something hit Ava in the arm, forcing her to lose focus – all the droplets of blood fell.
Starbeat overexerted herself on a spell, shorting out her horn.

The Research Overhead got an arm blown off.

Allure realized they couldn’t win this fight. Not in a million years.

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Corona, Eve, Olivia, Flutterfree, Jotaro, Vriska, Nova, and Pinkie walked together through a clear cylindrical tube, through which they could see the inner workings of the Shaping Mechanism and all the living quarters for Skarn and his family. There were a few soldiers around, but not that many.

Eve was levitating Pinkie along. They had discovered quickly that Pinkie had difficulty walking with no sensation in her hooves – it was going to take time they didn’t have for her to learn to adjust to her condition.

“You’re all looking for a pipe that leads all the way to the center,” Pinkie said, no longer full of the fire she had been for the last few days, instead speaking in flat, calculated tones. As if afraid of her own emotions. “It’ll take us right to the Shaping Mechanism controls.”

Olivia readied her rocky fingers. “Been a while since I’ve done a hacking job this advanced. Should be fun.”

“I see it,” Corona said, ending her scan spell. “I can teleport us right into the tube. It’s going to be a long ride, so we need to be prepared.”

“Got it,” Nova said, taking a ready stance on her three hooves. “…This is so weird…”

Corona clasped her hands and teleported them all into the tube. They slid down to the center, watching as all the other rooms and mechanisms flew by.

Vriska narrowed her eyes. “Did I just see the Mean Six up there?”

“You did,” Nova said. “I’ve locked onto Starlight Shadow’s magic signature. Sending her a ping no-”

Nova didn’t even get to send the ping. The Mean Five, Lady Rarity, and Minna teleported right into the midst of them. “Hell-WAUGH!”

Everyone had failed to realize they were about to hit a turn in the pipe. They were jostled around and unceremoniously deposited on a pile in the Shaping Mechanism’s control room.

There was silence for a moment.

Pinkie let out a soft laugh despite herself. “Pony pile! Heh…”

“Yare yare daze…” Jotaro muttered.

Eve, Corona, and Shadow set to levitating everyone out of the pile to a standing position.

Olivia walked right up to the globe controls the moment she could and began touching her fingers to it. Of course she was locked out, but that wasn’t going to stop her. “I need some technological interfaces to work on this.”

Nova limped over. “Guess that’s me.” She sat down and put one of her remaining hooves next to the globe, letting Olivia access her screen.
Eve looked at the five strange ponies. “So, uh, who are they?”

“Dark but not evil clone copies of you from Equis Duo,” Velvet explained. “I’m Velvet, that’s Starlight Shadow, Grayscale Force, Insipid, and our leader Curaçao.”

“Hello again,” Flutterfree said, smiling at Curaçao. “Guess we both ended up in the same place?”

“Indeed,” Curaçao said. “…We lost one of our number. Your counterpart.”

“…I’m so-” Flutterfree caught herself. She looked at Curaçao with sad eyes. “…I know what that feels like.”

Curaçao nodded. “It’ll be time to mourn later. What I want to know is why Skarn isn’t here.”

Pinkie coughed. “He’s fighting Jade, Jane, Sunny, and Alushy in a pocket dimension we can access through the spark in the center of this room. …Wherever the center is. Just look, you’ll see it.”

While Corona and Lady Rarity took a moment to hug, Eve and Shadow walked to the center of the room. There was, in fact, a spark of energy on the ground, through which they could both sense a dimensional signature.

“Guess that’s where we need to go,” Eve said. “Help them fight Skarn.”

Corona healed Lady Rarity and Minna with her magic. “Duh. Anyone else need heals?”

“We’re good,” Grayscale muttered.

“Wait!” Flutterfree blurted. “We can’t all go, remember? You’d just be Redshirts.”

“Oh, yeah, I totally forgot about that,” Insipid said. “Weird.”

“You know what, screw it,” Shadow said. “We’ve come this far and gotten to the inner organs of the leviathan, I’m not just going to idle while the ‘big damn heroes’ assume control of the situation. So what if I’m a ‘Redshirt’? I’m here for a destined reason, just like the rest of us.”

Curaçao nodded. “Furthermore, I believe the situation ‘as changed now.”

Pinkie nodded. “Skarn’s obsessed with honor. He won’t kill you until his victory is complete or he has to. He took Nae out of the picture non-lethally. He doesn’t believe in needlessly sullying the other side’s victory, or driving them to rage before defeat.”

“…Whackjob,” Corona muttered.

“No argument here,” Pinkie said, stumbling as she absent-mindedly took a step forward.

“So…” Eve looked at everyone there. “All of us who are able to fight right now should go in. Flutterfree, Pinkie, Nova, Olivia, you’ve all exerted yourselves too much. Sit this one out.”

Flutterfree nodded. “I know… Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. And Minna?”

Minna looked at Eve.

“I can’t stop you. But I don’t think your mother would like it if you came with us.”
Minna blinked for a moment. Then she nodded. “I already did what I came here to do. I don’t have to be there. Brell was my problem – not Skarn.”

Eve, Corona, Lady Rarity, Jotaro, and Vriska stood next to the spark. They glanced at the Mean Five. “Which of you are coming?”

Curaçao stepped back. “I am a capable ‘oof-to-’oof fighter. I am not a legendary cosmic warrior. Deception will not do much to this foe, will it?”

“No,” Pinkie and Velvet said at once.

“C’est la vie,” Curaçao said, taking another step back. “I am afraid I will sit out, seeing as we can’t get ze Elements to activate. Lady Rarity simply isn’t angry enough to be accepted as a full bearer.”

“I’ll stay to guard all you injured slackers,” Grayscale said, standing next to Curaçao.

That left just Velvet, Shadow, and Insipid on the team to go into the dimension.

Eve readied herself. “Right. Let’s d-”

Olivia’s left hand crumbled “…Dammit,” she muttered, her body scattering fragments of stone.

Corona’s eyes widened. “O-olivia?”

“Without Arthon’s power… It looks like I don’t regenerate. I’m falling to powder.”

“Olivia, just stay calm, we’ll find a cu-” Corona stopped mid-thought. “…No cure.”

“No,” Olivia said, turning to glance at Corona with sad eyes.

“I just got you back! That’s no-”

“Life’s not fair,” Olivia countered.

“We can keep you in stasis until we find a cure! Or transfer your spirit!”

Pinkie sighed. “Corona…”

“Don’t you start, Pinkie! I’m not losing her again!”

Olivia held up her stump of a hand. “Yes, you are. There’s no cure for this, even a spiritual form would crumble from what he did. He killed me the moment he caught me. This body is a prison, Corona. Think of it as me… being freed. After all, all deaths mean something, right?”

Corona twitched. “That’s not fair.”

“No, it’s not.” Olivia sighed. “I’ll use what time I have left to give you control of these mechanisms. It’s the least I can do.”

Corona twitched.

“There’s really nothing you can do, amiga.” Olivia assured her. “Except go in there and wreck that bear’s shit.”

“I will,” Corona promised.

“Now get going so I can focus.”
“One last thing,” Pinkie said. “Eve, Skarn is going to offer a deal. You have to take it.”

Eve blinked. “I… do?”

“Merodi Universalis could be glassed if you don’t.”

Eve took in a sharp breath. “Okay. Got it.”

“Take care of yourself,” Flutterfree called after Eve. “…Don’t let him do anything to you.”

“We won’t let that happen,” Jotaro asserted.

“Like, that would be majorly uncool,” Insipid said. “No way is he laying those grubby claws on any of us.”

Eve nodded. “Ready, team?”

There was a ready from all seven of the others.

“Then here we go.”

They vanished in a spark of light.

Olivia sighed. “Back to getting this thing to work…”

“That’s not going to work,” Minna offered.

“What isn’t?”

“What you’re thinking of trying now. Try to think of something else.”

“Uh…”

“That’s not going to work either. Again.”

Olivia smirked. “You’re really helpful, huh?”

“I imagine if I weren’t me I’d be going very existential about all these possible futures. Whatever you’re thinking about now doesn’t fail instantly, so go ahead and try it.”

Olivia used her free hand to press some buttons on Nova’s screen. “Nova, time manipulation on the console would be appreciated – not on me, though. I’m crumbling.”

“We can set up a mental link,” Nova suggested. “You think to me, and I do things with my horn.”

“Do it,” Olivia said. “We’re going to get control of this thing yet.”

Flutterfree took the moment to walk up to Olivia. “…Hi.”

“Heh. Are you here to tell me about my lord and savior?”

“Actually, for once in my life, I am,” Flutterfree said. “You don’t have much time, Olivia.”

“I know all your teachings and everything, Butters.”

“I’m not sure anyone who studies us academically understands exactly what we are, and what we mean. It’s about believing in a place we came from, about a power on high that is absolute, and…”
and that the ultimate fate of everything is good even if we are broken.”

“Look, I’m all for living forever, and I’m definitely offering up prayers like nothing else right now.” Olivia let out a bitter laugh. “Not sure if they’re fully serious, though.”

“Try something else,” Minna suggested.

“Huh?”

“For the hacking, not the religious experiment,” Minna said. “I’ve no idea where that conversation’s going.”

“What do you believe, Minna?” Nova asked.

“…We have souls. And I haven’t really thought much beyond that.”

“Hm. You should think about it more often. Really interesting conversation.”

“Hey, Nova, why aren’t you fighting Flutterfree’s preaching attempts here?” Olivia asked, one of her ears crumbling to dust.

“Because even though I believe it’s a load of tar, she’s trying to save your soul. All I’d be doing is convincing you of an uncomfortable truth or damning you.” Nova rubbed the back of her head. “I would be on the side of what I think is truth if you weren’t falling apart right in front of me. Depressing you in your final moments… Yeah. Not good.”

“Wanna know what I think?” Grayscale called back. “Your conversation is pointless.”

Curaçao raised an eyebrow. “‘ardly. The truth of what lies beyond, if anyzing, is of immense importance to all of us.”

Grayscale rolled her eyes. “Live in the now, everybody. Live in the now.”

Curaçao looked at Olivia. “It is now for ‘er, Grayscale. If ze’s going to make a decision, it ‘as to be now.”

Olivia gulped. “Flutterfree, keep talking while I work here. Okay?”

“Okay.” Flutterfree cleared her throat. She began to speak of the God she put her faith into. She spoke of Him in a way she rarely did – persuasively, with the intent of conversion. As Olivia crumbled, she listened.

She never responded. She just continued with her work, nodding every so often as she reduced in size over the next several minutes. Nova ended up carrying out all the work when her other hand fell off, Minna standing there to provide future-sight.

Eventually, Olivia was just a head without a lower jaw – no mouth.

The lights in the Shaping Mechanisms turned green. The restrictions had been released.

Olivia closed her eyes, a single tear crawling down the sides of her face.

Flutterfree bowed her head, offering her a last-minute blessing. Olivia’s head crumbled to dust the moment she said, “amen.”

Everyone but Pinkie was crying – even the apathetic Grayscale. Pinkie wanted to cry so badly.
Minna wiped her face. “She… She did it. We’ve got the Shaping Mechanism now.”

“Stopping it from attacking the fleet,” Nova said, wiping her face.

“Do you zink ze listened to you?” Curaçao asked Flutterfree.

“She listened. I don’t know if she heard,” Flutterfree said. “I’ll live the rest of my life wondering if she did.”

“She’ll be remembered as a hero if nothing else,” Pinkie said, looking up at the sky. “She started the war… and she ended it.”

“It’s not over yet,” Minna said, pointing at the spark in the ground. “Skarn’s still around.”

“So are the soldiers,” Nova added. “There’s still more that needs to be done.”

Flutterfree closed her eyes and sent off a prayer.

Let them all come back okay. I’m not sure if I can lose any more. Let Skarn truly be a man of honor. Please.

~~~

Sunny lay to the side, horn cracked, legs broken.

Alushy had a magic stake driven through her chest that kept her frozen in ice.

Jade was lying on the ground, a magic box wrapped around her last reality anchor bracelet – if she acted against Skarn, it would break and make her Skaian self dissipate in the physics of the universe.

All three of them were far from the actual battle, having been blown away by the forces that were being exchanged between Jane and Skarn. Jane had unleashed every trick she had in the book on Skarn, only for him to overpower and occasionally outmaneuver her.

Jane ground her teeth – she wasn’t doing well. She’d been able to heal most of the damage dealt to her, but she only had so much energy in herself. The power of the Evermore did have a limit, even with her immense amounts of experience and gathering of extra abilities. Skarn had been smart – he knew Jane would take the longest for him to wear down, so he worked on all the others first so he could minimize what she did to him.

Jane wasn’t even sure she was doing anything. She’d occasionally get hits off, and he would roar in pain, but she sensed no drop in his power at all. Her godkilling techniques seemed like they would almost rip him apart, but then he would come together.

She was considering destroying the universe – but that would take everyone with him, including Sunny, and possibly including herself. She also had the sneaking suspicion the world they were fighting in would be resistant to that kind of action, but she had no way to test that without actually trying it.

“You tire,” Skarn observed.

“You don’t,” Jane muttered.

“I do, believe me,” Skarn said. “But when you’re tapped into the cosmic energy of every universe within the Congeries, even blades designed to kill gods are little more than backscratchers.”
“So I just need to cut you off?”

“And how would you do that?” Skarn asked. “I, in many ways, am the Congeries. This physical form is just a leftover of the circumstances of my birth. I have enough power within me to shroud all of my realms.” He held his arms wide, allowing her to see the full glory of the stars within him. “This appearance isn’t cosmetic, Jane! It is my connection to the stars, matter, and works of my realm!”

“Then I’ve just got to hit you hard enough,” Jane muttered. Her eyes darkened.

“Going with your dark side, again? Shade has proven herself just as useless as you already.”

‘Jane’ launched at Skarn with cold, calculated fury. A darkness.

She was willing to try and destroy the universe. She pulled a star-like item out of her inventory and held it to the sky. It exploded with a force designed to shatter reality.

Skarn simply shunted all the energy into himself, releasing it in a dead realm in the Congeries. “Almost.” He shoved ‘Jane’ over, knocking her to the ground. “But that was the furthest thing from an honorable maneuver. It would have taken all your teammates out with me, and likely you as well. Desperation is not befitting of you, Jane. Push that dark side back where it belongs. Out of this battle.”

‘Jane’ did no such thing. She sneered, leaping up to drive yet another weapon into Skarn.

Skarn’s face seemed depressed. “If you won’t fight honorably…” He grabbed the weapon out of Jane’s hand with his power and shattered it, driving all the shards into Jane with psychic energy she couldn’t hope to combat. The force of her own legendary weapon sent her to the ground, shuddering in violent spasms.

He dusted his hands. He had won. There were no stakes – but their lives were forfeit. He levitated the five defeated warriors in front of him.

Only Jade was still conscious. She was glaring at him. “We won’t be the last.”

“No, you w-”

“SKARN!” Eve shouted. “LEAVE THEM!”

Skarn turned around to see the new challengers. Eve, Corona, Lady Rarity, Jotaro, Vriska, and three ponies he didn’t recognize.

Skarn gently set his five previous combatants to the ground. “Very well, Evening. I owe you that much.”

“You bet you do,” Eve spat.

“Eve!” Jade shouted. “He’s tapped into the energy of the entire Congeries! We couldn’t do anything to him!”

“We’re going to try anyway,” Jotaro said, cracking his knuckles.

“Like, totally,” the gray unicorn said.

Skarn smiled. “It is your right to face me in combat. But first, I have some requests – a deal if you would.”
“I’m listening,” Eve said, eyes narrow – but Skarn saw a spark of recognition in there somewhere. *Curious.*

“I will agree to have all my soldiers automatically stand down upon my defeat,” Skarn said, noting the surprised expressions on his new opponents’ faces. “In return, if *you* are defeated, you must agree to the complete surrender of Merodi Universalis.”

“One condition,” Eve said. “You can’t kill *any* of us until you’ve defeated all of us. Got it?”

Skarn nodded. “I accept those terms on one condition of my own. I wish to know the names of those I do not recognize. You three, who are you?”

The red-pink earth pony sneered. “Red Velvet, Insipid, and Starlight Shadow. No, we’re not telling you more than that. It’d ruin the surprises.”

“An acceptable deception,” Skarn agreed. He summoned a pink ball of energy. “Eve, lay your hoof on this while I lay my hand on the other side. It will ensure we cannot break our sides of the bargain.”

Eve gulped. Skarn saw her mulling it over in her mind. He expected her to think about it twice and back out. She couldn’t sacrifice all of them – she had already suffered too much.

Eve stuck her hoof to the sphere. “Do it.” She demanded.

Skarn placed his hand on the sphere, smiling warmly as both of them were cosmically demanded to keep up their ends of the bargain. “Tell me, Evening, why did you agree to the possible sacrifice of so many more?”

“Because Pinkie told me to,” Eve said.

Skarn’s calm smile faltered slightly.

*I am the villain of their story, and the hero of the Congeries’. The Congeries’ story is stronger than theirs.*

*But why else would Pinkie ask her to do this unless she was confident?*

Skarn shook his head, deciding it didn’t matter. He bowed respectfully to them. “Let’s decide the outcome of this war right here, right now.”

Eve attacked first. Seraphim may not have been able to access other dimensions right now, but that didn’t mean the Stand was useless. She physically rammed the rings into Skarn, pushing him back into Corona’s Bacon Pancakes. The Stand forced him to flatten like a piece of paper. Jotaro moved next, punching through the paper and tearing Skarn to shreds with a great “ORA ORA ORA ORA!” Lady Rarity smashed with her hammer, Vriska rolled her dice and threw a series of sawblades at him, Velvet lacerated him with her own blood, and Shadow unleashed a bolt of pure void energy while Insipid…

…Insipid sat back and yawned.

*They were waiting to use her. That made her the most dangerous.*

How this unknown unicorn could be the most dangerous was beyond him, but that meant he had to watch her closely.
Skarn shifted his shredded body back into one piece, holding his hands wide. “Behold. Not a scratch.”

“There’s ways around that,” Shadow commented.

“But can you find them quickly enough?” Skarn went for the weakest of the eight attackers – Lady Rarity. With a quick series of cosmic punches, her armor was blown clean off and the wind was knocked out of her. She flew through the air, only for what looked like a shooting star to hit her and throw her to the ground.

One down.

“Rarity!” Corona shouted. Skarn sensed something within Corona flare up – but she pushed the power back into herself. Saving it.

What are you planning?

Shadow unleashed her dark magic, enveloping Skarn in a beam of pure Void energy. Had he been lesser, he would have vaporized around the edges into the nothingness. His regeneration was certainly hindered – but he was still a cosmic being.

He walked out of the Void energy, slapping Shadow aside with a burst of psychic energy. Her body was weaker than he had been expecting, breaking in several places from the attack.

Two down.

“STAR PLATINUM: THE WORLD!”

Time stop was easy for Skarn to counter – he just bent space around him to be immune to it. This did not deter Jotaro from wrapping Hermit Purple and the Passion around him, the purple thorns cutting into Skarn’s interstellar flesh.

Jotaro caught a glimpse of Skarn’s soul. Skarn felt him balk at the true honor within.

“Like what you see?”

“You’re mad!” Jotaro shouted.

Perhaps that soul-sight isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, Skarn mused. He leaned back and kicked Jotaro in the stomach. The behemoth of a man didn’t register the pain. Time resumed, and he was still ORA ORA’ing Skarn.

It was decidedly annoying. Nothing but punching, punching, punching.

Skarn sent a miniature comet into Jotaro’s chest, freezing him solid. He then pushed him far enough away that none of his Stands would be able to reach Skarn.

Three down.

Vriska, Eve, Corona, and Velvet tag-teamed. Velvet seemed to be the next weakest, so Skarn leaped over the swords and magic lasers, heading for her blood. He punched through the crimson blades, smashing the ground in front of her. The shockwave rattled her brain into the back of its skull, tossing her back.

A smile appeared on her face because of the deep pain, bringing some sadistic form of enjoyment to her features.
“…And you all think I’m mad,” Skarn commented.

Velvet let out a soft chuckle but made no effort to get up. Skarn didn’t let himself think for a second that she was down for the count, but he could afford to leave her there for a while.

Vriska drove her blade into him. He pulled the blade through his body and snapped it in half, using a leg to kick Vriska back. She took the full brunt of the force, cobalt blood flying out of her mouth in the process. She rolled her dice and flipped back at him, surrounded by a swarm of angry bees.

Skarn snapped his fingers, unleashing an inverse gravity well that threw all the bees out of sight and made it difficult for all the others to move. He capitalized this opportunity on Vriska, punching toward her…

…and he missed.

Even if she’s not at maximum luck right now, she’s still got a lot of fortune stored up.

She kicked him in the groin.

“Dishonor begets dishonor,” Skarn muttered, doing the same to her. She took it anyway, twisting around his leg and stabbing him in several locations.

“Hey, Skarn!” Eve and Corona called, prompting Vriska to duck and roll away from Skarn.

Skarn didn’t look around. He just sighed as a destructive spell they had been charging up for the last little while unleashed, hitting him with a torrent of purple, orange, red, and white energy. He tried to walk out, but the pins of Bacon Pancakes fixed him in place while the laser burned his backside.

It kept burning his backside.

This was concerning enough he decided he had to act. He altered his personal bubble of physics to divert the laser around him, allowing him to emerge unscathed.

“You know, all this talk of honor seems shitty to me,” Vriska said. “You just limit yourself as you fight us, but when we do something that might be unfortunate for you, you delve into your larger power stash and just divert the attack away. That’s fucked up. Why not just get it over with?”

Skarn looked at her closely. “Most don’t wish for that, but if you insist.” His eye twitched. Vriska’s body was compressed into a cube the size of an apple and tossed to the ground. “She’s fine. Angry, but fine.”

Four down.

Corona glared. “You won’t be able to do that to me or Eve.”

“No, I won’t,” Skarn said. “Your defenses are able to shift reality to accommodate. That doesn’t mean I ca-”

A magical laser shot at Skarn from a dimension that didn’t exist, knocking him off balance. He quickly realized Corona and Eve were folding space between them to keep Skarn from knowing which direction things were coming from.

He clapped his hands, returning space to normal. “That was foo-”

They channeled their magic together to send a planned death spell at him – though of course he was immune. They followed it up with another magic beam, this one intended to tear reality apart as it
moved.

He let out a *roar* that pushed the offending attack back. “You two are strong, there can be no doubt.”

“But…?” Corona said.

“But I am superior. You will eventually tire or run out of your magic, even if I cannot end it quickly. I will not.”

“Come and get us then,” Eve said, glaring at him. “We’ll show you that we’re never going to stand down.”

Skarn charged after them, fists ready to punch both of them in their heads. They prepared for his impact.

Corona dissipated her gloves and reached a hand toward Skarn. He diverted to the left, not wanting to deal with her empathic powers. His quick dodge to the side allowed Eve to touch him, however. Eve set up a mind-link spell and allowed Corona into Skarn’s mind *through* Eve.

Corona and Eve appeared in one of Skarn’s memories. He was looking down at his three young children – Arthon, Brell, and Torvost.

Skarn didn’t let the memory play out. He stood up, brushed the mental images of his children away, and marched up to the two of them. “What do you plan to do in here?”

“Last time I channeled the memories of Majora. Don’t really have those anymore,” Corona admitted. “But I’ve learned a thing or two about dominating minds like yourself. There are ways to erase you.”

“Which will fail.” Skarn focused on Corona and ejected her from his mind with a thought. He turned to Eve. “You know less than her.”

Eve smiled coyly. “Oh, this wasn’t the real plan anyway. We just needed to get your mind somewhere else.”

Skarn forced Eve out of him and regained full consciousness.

There was a hoof touching one of his legs. He felt a sharp pain as his power *shifted*.

“Major. *FRESH.*” Insipid boomed, the power of Skarn flowing into her. Her gray body and yellowed mane gained stars and nebulous clouds within them. She started floating off the ground, the cosmic energy a bit much for her to control at once. “Hooooly shiiit this is so cool! Velvet you’ve gotta try this!”

“I cannot,” Velvet muttered.

Skarn ignored Velvet, Eve, and Corona completely. He had to take care of this Insipid *quickly*. He pushed his hands forward, unleashing a beam of energy at her – not the most creative attack, but it should have worked.

It didn’t. She giggled and used Skarn’s power to create a shield made of *galaxies*. “Sweetness! I can, like, see everything, and all the cycles of everything, and all the cycles of cycles of everything…”

*She’s an idiot,* Skarn realized.

The idiot pointed a hoof at Skarn and forced him to burn like the core of a star. He dissipated it after less than a second, but it was enough to scare him.
She’s a dangerous idiot. If she taps into any of the primordial forces in any special way...

“I taste it,” Velvet said, standing up. “I taste fear, Skarn. The realization that the one thing you can’t beat… Is yourself.”

Skarn ignored her, focusing on Insipid. He threw more attacks at her – even trying to turn her into a cube – but she had already mastered the defensive physics shield.

“Look at her, barely an infant in these abilities. She’s stronger than you.”

A pit began to form in Skarn’s stomach. It seemed as if the natural light of the universe was darkening around him.

Wait… it really was darkening.

“Noticing something problematic? Skarn?” Velvet asked. “That you’ve been had by a plan within a plan within a plan? You know we have them. We have backup plans for all those plans. We know exactly how to defeat you. She’s one way, yes.”

A bolt of Insipid’s energy hit Skarn. He deflected it – but it felt almost unreal; like it was from another plane of existence. Corona’s and Eve’s blasts hit him as well and he didn’t even register them. Everything except him was darkened.

“Can you really chance any of this for honor?” Velvet asked. “She could kill you Skarn. She could kill you in an instant and you would never be able to defend.”

“There’s no way.”

“Isn’t there? Isn’t there a way you can kill her? Isn’t there a way she can kill YOU!”

Skarn looked at Velvet in fear, dodging Insipid’s attempt to condense him into a black hole. “Y- you’re right…”

“SHE’S GOT YOU SKARN! YOU CAN’T KILL HER, BUT SHE CAN KILL YOU! YOUR HONOR HAS LED TO YOUR DOWNFALL! A SIMPLE IDIOTIC UNICORN KNOWS YOUR POWERS BETTER THAN YOU! YO! H T A V E F A! L F D Y O E!”

Skarn turned away from Insipid to look at Velvet.

A being of his caliber was able to comprehend the literal incarnation of Fear standing before him. Most would have gone mad from the sight of dark, bloody, living nightmares. The tendrils of blood that screamed to Skarn his own inadequacy attacked.

Skarn lashed out in panic with a powerful burst of energy. Despite the fact that Velvet was feeding off his fear, her newfound eldritch power wasn’t enough to defend her from the outburst. The nightmares were blown away and she was tossed to the side, this time not smiling from the pain.

Five down.

Skarn breathed heavily, the heightened fear Velvet had instilled in him very much still active. He knew he wasn’t thinking straight – and he couldn’t get a hold of his mind quickly enough.

Insipid was still active. Insipid was better than him. Insipid was a threat.
But he was contractually bound not to kill her.

He would get as close as he possibly could. He pulled his hands back, summoning the energy of the Congeries into his limbs. He would do exactly what he would do were he fighting himself. Use everything from all sides in a complex pattern that no amount of instinct or ‘bizarre stupidity’ could defend against. There was nothing she could do. Even his power set was useless against it.

He shoved his hands forward, letting out a panicked breath.

“NOW!” Eve shouted, her eye burning with the Light of knowledge.

Corona obeyed. Her eyes flashed a deep, ugly black. She flexed her wrists, the symbol of Doom projecting from the crystals on the backs of her gloves.

Corona moved Insipid’s Doom to Skarn.

Eve had told her exactly when to time it so Skarn wouldn’t have a chance to defend.

Skarn lit up like a Christmas tree, every color of the rainbow sprouting from his body in a series of fractal patterns that gave those who saw it headaches.

“Oh, pretty!” Insipid said. “Why don’t I get a glow like that?”

“Because it’ll pretty much kill you,” Corona said, glaring at the sparking energy that was Skarn “…We might want to move away.”

“Oh, chill!” Insipid lowered herself to the two of them and erected a cosmic barrier. “I got this, cha.”

Corona and Eve erected barriers around themselves just to be safe.

Skarn was barely aware of this happening. His thoughts were dominated by pain, by his mortal body being torn asunder in such ways to remove his connections to the power of the Congeries an atom at a time.

They had outsmarted him. Played off his mind, off his fears, off his confidence, and carefully held their cards close to their chest.

He had forgotten about Corona’s status as the Rogue of Doom, and in his fear he had been unable to remember that information when he was unleashing an attack that would ‘Doom’ Insipid.

Eventually, the pain stopped. Skarn fell to the ground, the stars and nebulous cosmos gone from his fur, replaced only with brown fuzz. He grunted, standing up, looking at his dead necklace.

“I… salute you…” he said, taking a step forward. “But I am not done yet.”

Insipid raised a hoof. “I can totally bake him for you. Starbeam to the face!”

Skarn tensed. “That would hardly be honorable…”

“Do you surrender?” Eve asked.

Skarn looked at her. “…What?”

“Do you admit defeat?” Eve ruffled her wings. “We don’t have to kill you, you know. You can complete your end of the deal while alive. We can have you taken to one of our prisons. I’ll even arrange a comfortable one for you, where you can live in peace.”
“I won’t be able to spread the art!”

“So? Isn’t your life more important than art?”

Skarn froze. She was offering him a way out. She was honest about it – she was speaking from her immense feelings of guilt, sorrow, and displeasure with the war. If she could kill one less person, she would be happy with it. She really would offer him that life.

But if he couldn’t do the work…

“I refuse,” Skarn said. “Life is meaningless without the work.”

“And you wonder why we think you’re insane,” Corona said, folding her arms.

Skarn opened his mouth to respond – but he never got to finish.

Eve had shot him with a death spell, her eyes glowing with a powerful, deep darkness.

Skarn the Shaper, founder and ruler of the Congeries, being of untold age and power, fell to the ground like a wild animal that had been shot in the head.

~~~

A soldier pointed his finger at Allure.

She would have died right then and there had Saxton Hale not come out of nowhere and punched right through the man’s chest. “AHA! These blokes have nothing on me!”

“HALE!?” O’Neill blurted. “WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN!?”

“Stompin’ them wherever I can find ‘em!” He laughed as the Congeries soldiers fired at him, the physics bullets bouncing off his bare chest. He was just too manly to take any real damage, even from the exotic weapons. “Come and get me, cowards!”

One of them did – using a forbidden technique that combined memory manipulation to make the target hit themselves. Saxton punched himself out while the soldier bared his teeth.

Allure realized something – she remembered that happening. Why would she remember!? Nobody ever remembered things like that!

“ORDERS RECEIVED: STAND DOWN!” every soldier shouted at once. Then every last one dropped dead in an instant.

“What the…?” Allure said, backing up in horror.

“How did they receive their orders?” the Research Overhead blurted. “All communications are jammed!”

“That would be because of me,” Aradia said, appearing in front of them. “Suffice it to say, there’s now a time loop here where I appear in the future where communications are restored, travel back in time with the orders, and give the orders that allow communications to be restored.”

“Uh…” Allure rubbed her head. “Okay…?”

“The war’s over, by the way,” Aradia said. “If I did my calculations right, I timed this so I arrived just when Skarn died. Relatively speaking.”
O’Neill let out a sigh of relief. “We won then.”

“Yes. We won.” Aradia said, smiling. “Let’s take a moment to breathe, shall we?”

Allure gladly complied, sliding to a splayed position and letting out a long breath of air.

~~~

Eve and the other twelve returned to the control room of the Shaping Mechanism. There were celebrations at first – a round of ‘we did it’ and ‘finally it’s over’. But eventually they remembered the scars they had gained, and the ponies they had lost.

Corona went to the pile of dust that was Olivia and fell to her knees. The Mean Five allowed themselves to remember Havocwing.

Eve saw Pinkie sitting near the edge of the room, her empty face aimed straight ahead. Her expression unreadable.

Eve walked up to her and stood beside her, looking closely at her face. There were candy-red bloodstains that made her look like she’d been crying, even though she definitely hadn’t. *Couldn’t.* That had to be hard for her. She was always such an emotional pony.

“…How long have you been standing there?” Pinkie asked, having sensed her breathing.

“A while,” Eve responded.

“…Sorry, didn’t notice.”

“Not a problem.”

“I know… Guess you were just letting me think, huh?”

“Yeah. Also didn’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything.”

Eve paused, a momentous feeling setting upon her heart. “I want to say something. I want to say I know your pain.”

Pinkie smiled softly. “You would, wouldn’t you?”

“…Actually, I guess I didn’t actually experience Fluttershout’s atta-”

“Evening, that was you,” Pinkie said. “You experienced that. I don’t care if you’re a clone or copy of one Charter-Princess Twilight Sparkle. That was you. You felt that.”

Tears came to Eve’s eyes. “Pinkie…”

Pinkie gulped. “I’m sorry. I got angry.”

“I’m sorry. I was wrong.”

“Everyone’s always so sorry…” Pinkie said, shaking her head. “Wouldn’t it be nice if we could just stop making mistakes so we wouldn’t have to be so sorry all the time!?”

“That’s not how things work,” Eve said.
“I know, I know,” Pinkie bit her lip. “I do know how things work. That’s… that’s the problem. I knew this was coming. I figured it out a little later than usual, but I told myself I could handle it. I… I was ready to sacrifice myself. But now…” She took in a breath. “I’m not just blind, Eve. I could live with that. I know several people who can help me learn to live with that. It’s just… I can’t feel anything. I’m not sure if my hooves are touching the floor correctly, for all I know my face is gently pressed against a wall, and…” She heaved, trying to sob and failing.

“I thought I was ready to sacrifice everything,” Eve said. “For the betterment of all, I put everything at risk. My friends, my family, my nation.” Eve caught Curaçao looking at her with understanding empathy. Eve made a note to talk to her later. “Was it the wrong decision? I have no idea anymore. My mind tells me it was the logical answer. My heart tells me it was the worst decision I’ve ever made. All I know is that I wasn’t really ready to make that choice.” She looked closely at Pinkie’s features, eyes sad. “We’re asked to make a lot of decisions we aren’t ready for, Pinkie. I… I guess I just didn’t realize how unprepared we could be.”

“We aren’t as strong as we think we are,” Pinkie sighed.

Eve shook her head. “I think… I think nobody can truly know themselves. We think too highly of our abilities. We like to ignore our weaknesses. Even those of us who try hard… We still get caught.” She looked at Pinkie. “I’m never risking you girls like that again.”

“Don’t Pinkie Promise that,” Pinkie warned. “Really, don’t.”

“I won’t.” Eve shook her head. “I want to, but I know I can’t.”

Pinkie sniffed. “Some promises just shouldn’t be made.”

Eve sighed. “Can I promise to always be your friend, no matter what?”

“Yes,” Pinkie said, a smile forming on her face.

Eve gently turned Pinkie to give her a hug. “Then that’s what I promise. No matter what you do, or what I do, I’ll stay here. I’ll be here. And I know you will too.”

Pinkie was able to tell from the motion of her body that she was being hugged. She gently pushed her hooves around until she was able to sense they weren’t moving, giving Eve one of the awkwardest hugs of all time.

“It’s going to be okay, Pinkie,” Eve assured her. “I know we can’t fix you. But you can learn to live with this. I can make pressure sensors for your hooves. Renee can make you the most beautiful blindfold of all time.”

“That would be great!” Pinkie said, allowing a soft laugh to come out. “I’d be like a ninja! Or a pirate!”

“The mysterious leader of Merodi Universalis’ primary team!”

“You really think I can still go adventuring like this?”

“I did, didn’t I? We have blind and disabled people of all kinds, Pinkie. We can’t just get rid of you! Who would want to? You’re the best, brightest, happiest pony around!”

“Yeah… Yeah I am! Screw this curse; I’m going to make the best of it! I’m going to become the sharpest hearer in existence! I’ll be unable to feel pain, so there will be no fear! I will become the blind party pony! I can see it now, Eve!” She laughed. “I’m going to be fine! I’m going to be fine!”
“Yeah, you are,” Eve said, hugging Pinkie tighter. “You are.”

Pinkie’s mane poofed back up in a sproing. “I’m so glad you’re okay, Eve. I don’t know what I would have done…”

“I don’t know either. We can’t. Because we really don’t know ourselves.”

“Heh… Yeah, we don’t.”

The two held each other for an extended period of time in silence.

~~~

Eve had a lot to do when she returned to Merodi Universalis and her office. Ending a war, holding a press conference, figuring out what to do with all the work that had piled up…

But first, she had decided she was going to sleep in her own bed. She was beyond tired from all the exertion. She was going to sleep like a rock.

She opened the door to her bedroom. I was sitting on the bed, smiling warmly at her. “Hi.”

Eve blinked, “Uh… Why are you in my bedroom?”

“To offer you my congratulations,” I said, hopping off the bed. “You’ve taken the next step.”

“What kind of step we talking about?”

“You’re a Class 2 society now.”

Eve blinked. “Wait, what?”

“You don’t just take control of a conglomeration of thousands of different universes and the means to shape them to your will without becoming a Class 2. You have the power and influence of a low-tier Class 2. Welcome to the neighborhood.”

“That’s… Well I think that should be a big deal, but I’m somewhat underwhelmed by it.”

“You won’t be for long. It opens up a big can of worms. But it also means I can hang around more. Like Aradia. You’ve reached the point where me talking to you wouldn’t exactly be much cheating.”

Eve smiled. “I’m glad you’ll be around more often, Twilence. We don’t talk anywhere near enough.”

“You’ll be tired of me talking your ear off before too long,” I said, smirking.

“…The end is soon, isn’t it? If you’re here,” Eve said.

“Depends on how you look at it,” I replied. “There’s only one arc left I can see. But I also know that it takes up more time than all the rest of your adventures combined. Relatively speaking, this is year forty since you began your trek with the bowling ball. You’ve got more than that left in what I can see.”

“I guess we won’t really get to see the long-term consequences of immortality serum then, huh?”

“Not in your society. There are others you could look at.”
“Forty years…” Eve looked into the distance. “That’s a lot of time.”

“It may seem like it. But beware the power of the Time Abyss. It may seem like nothing happens, then before you know it time’s up.”

Eve pursed her lips, nodding slowly. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“There’s a lot of things you’re going to have to keep in mind,” I told her. “You’re in the big leagues now. Things will change.”

“The more things change the more they stay the same,” she reminded me.

I smirked. “You’re starting to get it.”

“…Did all this have to happen?”

I paused, thinking about it for a moment. “Yes. You would not have gotten to Class 2 status in time for the end, doing things the peaceful, normal way. The higher you climb, the harder it is to climb further. You needed to be here, so the things that are about to happen will happen the way they should.”

Eve nodded. “I can take comfort in that, I guess. That I didn’t screw up fate or something.”

“I believe it’s impossible to screw up fate,” I said. “I think even the glitches are part of a story. Every mess up and every victory is part of everything.”

“It seems… limiting.”

“It is,” I said. “And I fear that’s all there is every day. But I also fear the alternative.”

“Hm?”

“That there’s more than the story.”

Eve was silent.

“No matter which way you slice it, existence is cosmically terrifying. Ka or no, God or no, Truth or no… Every option.”

“…I’m going to have a great time sleeping tonight.”

“Oh, I can help you with that.” I lit my horn. “A simple sleep spell to give you the energy you need for the coming day.”

“I could use energy for the coming years, apparently,” Eve said, climbing into bed. “I should introduce you to the Overheads…”

“Don’t worry about that.”

“Mhm…” Eve muttered, yawning. “Nice to see you again, Twilence.” She drifted off to sleep before my eyes.

I cut the sleep spell and smiled warmly. Even after all she had experienced… She was still in one piece.

She might have been stronger than me in many regards.
Eve opened her eyes, a smile on her face.

“Hi,” I said.

Eve’s eyes focused. “…Were you there the entire night?”

“Yep.”

“That’s creepy.”

I smiled. “Yep.”

Eve sat up and rubbed her eyes. “You’re not secretly some kind of freaky stalker, right?”

“Oh, Gan’s flesh, no. At least not the kind you’re implying I am.”

“I thought we were supposed to be entering a Time Abyss or something?”

“Not a true Time Abyss, it’s only seventy relative years or so. There’s just going to be a lot where it seems like nothing’s happening and time flies. It was just a warning of sorts. Just because things are going to move quickly doesn’t mean we can’t just pick up where we left off.” I looked out at your ‘screen’. “RIGHT?”

“Who are y- oh.” Eve rubbed her head. “Audience in general?”

“Mhm.”

“Do they watch me while I sleep too?”

“Rarely,” I admitted. “Generally only when there are nightmares or something to deal with. If you’re just going through your normal routine they’re only watching if something’s about to go wrong.”

“Yaaaaay.” Eve rubbed her eyes. “I knew this, ugh.”

“It’s fine if you push it out of your mind. It’s not the most comfortable thing to know.”

Eve summoned herself a cup of coffee. “So, since you’re here, and you’re supposed to be helping us now… Uh, how about you tell me the plot of today’s chapter or episode or whatever?”

“Sure thing,” I said, smiling. “We’re in a two-parter focused on the aftermath of the war against Skarn. You and I are just small parts of a half-dozen or so little stories that need to be fleshed out.”

“That’s handy.”

“You’re only going to get to ask that question a maximum of nine more times. Cause after that my vision goes dark. And you won’t ask me all those times because you aren’t involved in every chapter!”

“Yeesh. You have the path to the future mapped out don’t you?”
I made a mock salute. “I know all the major twists and turns, mon capitán. No I’m not going to tell you everything that’s going to happen over the next seventy-odd years.”

“Wasn’t going to ask,” Eve said.

“Oh.” I blinked. “Ah, the little details…”

“From what I hear Pinkie tell me of that incident with the world of Prophets, sometimes the little details can make you slip up.”

I rubbed the back of my head. “Eh… Yeah. Sometimes the fluidity of things or interactions with other prophets will screw with me. You’re going to find that I’m not a tremendously overpowered ally at this point. Which is why I’m here.”

“You’re saying we could do everything you do without you.”

“Yep. If you really wanted to you could smash Rohan, the Pinkies, and all your Skaian Seers in a room together to get the same results. I’m just convenient! …And important in other ways. Which may or may not be obvious to you.”

“Doesn’t matter to me. You be you. I’ll thank you for helping.”

I smiled warmly. “Thanks. …My first piece of advice to you as an official subordinate is to ask you to not overexert yourself. You may feel like you’re done with your ordeal, but the scars are still on you. You’re through the woods but you aren’t at your grandmother’s house yet.”

“…Should I not work?”

“Oh, no, you got enough vacation time in running off to join the war.”

Eve let out a bitter laugh. “I really need to reexamine my idea of a vacation.”

“No argument here.”

“So, what should we do with today then?”

I shrugged. “That should be your decision. I could just tell you, but that’d be dumb.”

“Guess I’ll introduce you to the Overheads then. It is what we were talking about last night. I’ll work on the speech I’ll have to give.”

“Don’t worry too much about the speech,” I reminded her. “O’Neill’s is more important. As is Corona’s.”

“…I was there with Corona.”

“And do you really think anyone knows that?”

Eve blinked. “Ah, Giorno, always keeping secrets.”

I nodded. “It’s one that needs to be kept. Nobody can ask why you were there, so nobody can know you were there. All they know is that you took some time off to grieve. Which is technically true.”

Eve nodded slowly, furrowing her brow. “…I have to keep living a lie.”

“Enough people know, Eve. You can be honest to them. Not every interaction you have depends on
“your past actions, y’know.”

Eve shook her head. “We are what our past makes us.”

“That’s no reason to dwell on it.”

“True…” Eve put a hoof to her chin. “If I’ve done it for this long I can keep doing it, especially with support from my friends. …Most of them.”

I looked at her sadly.

“I know, you warned me. Still hurts.”

“It went well, considering,” I said.

“Yeah.” Eve gulped. “I think we need to see Renee first. I’ve made up with most the others I can.” She ruffled her feathers. “But first, breakfast.”

“Oh, I love waffles!”

Eve blinked, pondering this for a moment. “Do you know what we’re having for lunch too?”

“Hrm… blue jello,” I said, scribbling something in my notebook.

“Now here’s the question, is that going to happen because you saw it, or because you wrote it?”

I grinned mischievously. “I don’t have to tell you everything.”

“You’re enjoying this.”

“I’ve been locked in the basement of a library for an effective eternity, of course I’m enjoying this. I get to interact with ponies. I haven’t done that in decades. It’s all ‘I’ll just watch them and insert myself in a few key places’ and ‘oh hey, I’ve got a visitor, let’s see if I’m allowed to talk to them’.”

“Welcome back then,” Eve said, smiling. “C’mon, waffles await.”

“You cook. I’ve eaten my own cooking too much.”

“You’re a bad cook?”

“Nope. Just consistent.”

“A version of me that speaks of consistency with disdain…” Eve chuckled. “Fun.”

“Monotony is a killer. You’ll learn that soon enough.”

“…You have to work on your ominous foreshadowing.”

I rubbed the back of my head. “Er… Right, yes. I’ll try to rediscover tact. Again.”

“Hm?”

“There was a long period of time between when Vriska’s and my adventure ended and before yours began. Relatively speaking for me, anyway. Enough time to have multiple series’ of small adventures.”
“I bet you could fill entire libraries with your adventures.”

“I have.”

~ ~

Renee looked at the four people sitting across from her desk.

Nova, Flutterfree, and Vriska wouldn’t meet her eyes. Jotaro looked at her with a stern, serious glare.

She met it.

“I told you not to go,” Renee said, finally. “You did anyway.”

“Eve needed us,” Jotaro said.

“You would have done the same,” Nova pointed out.

“You could have told me what you were doing at least,” Renee said. “I was worried sick! I had no idea where any of my friends were, if they were okay, or what was even going on! I’d get scant reports here and there that were nothing more than rumors! I’ve gone through more gallons of ice cream than I can count and didn’t sleep until you came back yesterday!”

“I’m s-” Flutterfree caught herself. “Actually… No. No, I’m not, because it needed to be done. I’m not happy that I hurt you, but I don’t regret what I did. I don’t think any of us do.”

Renee stared at her. “…You’ve changed.”

Flutterfree looked at the sharp tips of her wings. “I… we’ve been through a lot.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m still the same as ever,” Vriska said, leaning on a nearby wall. “But that wasn’t my first real war. No, the ghost-war doesn’t count, virtually nobody died there.”

“The rest of us aren’t going to be the same,” Nova said. “…Pinkie’s got it the worst, though.” Nova checked her screen. “She’s still in surgery.”

“I hope it goes well…” Flutterfree said, nervously scratching her hooves together.

Renee sighed. “Look, the reason you’re in here is because you work for me and you didn’t listen to me. So I’m going to have to punish you. All of you are suspended for two months.”

“…Just two months?” Jotaro asked.

“You did save everyone and specifically went to help Eve and suffered because of it,” Renee said.

“You didn’t have to do it at all,” Flutterfree pointed out. “…This is just so Pinkie can be given time to recover.”

Renee let out a soft chuckle. “You always see through everything.”

Flutterfree smiled back. “You’re giving me too much credit.”

Renee rolled her eyes. “Well, the whole ‘serious, stern discussion’ plan is out of the window. Just try not to go off like that again without at least telling me, okay?”

“I am sorry for not telling you,” Flutterfree admitted. “You deserved to know what we were doing
and why we were going.”

“Thank you,” Renee said, sitting back in her chair. “…How are you all holding up?”

“I’ve turned into a refined killing machine and slaughterer of hundreds who watched someone die by crumbling, but otherwise I’m completely fine,” Flutterfree said with an innocent smile.

“She’s not okay,” Nova translated. “She needs to have some extended talks with Rev and Eve about her new place in existence.”

Flutterfree sighed. “Yeah. I… I probably need these two months to seek professional help.”

“Just ask and I’ll have the best psychologists in the multiverse at your beck and call,” Renee said. “And don’t think you have to come back right away either. There’s no rush.”

Jotaro put a hand on Flutterfree’s shoulder, giving his comfort. She smiled. “Thank you. …All of you. I don’t know what I’d do if I didn’t have friends like you.”

“Go insane?” Vriska suggested.

“I’m already insane,” Flutterfree pointed out. “But that’s because I hang around Pinkie too much.”

“…Speaking of, we should probably go check on her,” Nova said, looking up from her screen. “Her surgery is wrapping up. We should be there when she wakes up.”

Renee stood up. “I’ll go with y-” she got a notification on her desk. “…Or maybe I won’t.”

“…Why not?” Nova asked.

“Eve wants to see me. Says she has something important to talk about.” She stretched her neck. “I’ll catch up at some point. I suppose we did just end a war yesterday and all of us have jobs to do…”

“It’s okay,” Flutterfree said. “See you around.”

“Bye,” Renee said with a wave.

Nova teleported them away.

Renee accepted the meeting with a button – at which point Eve and myself teleported into the room.

“…Hi,” Eve said.

“…Hello,” Renee responded.

Both of them fell into silence.

I cleared my throat, taking a step forward. “Clearly you two need to talk. Renee, I’m Twilence, we haven’t met. I’m a highly Aware Prophet who’s able to help you now that you’re a Class 2 civilization.”

“Wait wh-”

I kept going. “I’m going around with Eve and introducing myself. I look forward to working with you. Now I’ll go sit back here on this chair and let you two get reacquainted.” I did as I said, planting myself on a chair in the back of the room and pulling out my notebook. Instead of writing anything down, I just read.
Renee turned to Eve. “…She seems nice.”

“She is. She also suffers a lot more from knowing things than Pinkie does.”

“An informant of yours?”

“…Not really? When we talked – which wasn’t all that often – I’d be the one to help her unload her fears. And then I’d unload mine. She’s the reason I knew revealing who I was wouldn’t… go well. Ever.”

Renee nodded slowly. “Eve, I don’t care about that. …Okay, that’s a lie, but it doesn’t fly in the face of who I thought you were. If almost any of the other girls were to walk up to me and say ‘I’m just a replacement’ I would feel bad but I wouldn’t feel like it was all that unexpected. In many ways, we’re all replacements because of that whole retcon paradox…”

“That’s different and you know it.”

“I do, I do,” Renee said, rubbing her head with a hoof. “Stars, that was confusing… My point is I’m not all that upset about that. It makes sense that you would keep your ‘identity’ a secret. What I am upset about is this war.”

Eve’s ears drooped. “I… I can’t tell you if the choice was the right or wrong one, Renee. I can tell you I regret it. I… I wasn’t ready to sacrifice everything.”

“I know that, dear, and you are forgiven. I was never going to ostracize you. I had the same idea myself, if you’ll recall, I just didn’t act on it.” She folded her hooves together. “The problem was that you were able to do it. If you had asked me if I thought you’d be able to betray the system you built… I would have been completely certain you would not be able to, regardless of the circumstances or reasoning behind it.”

“Well, I did. And now you know it’s possible for me to do so. And you can’t trust me anymore.”

 “…Afraid not, darling.”

“That’s fine. Maybe I shouldn’t be trusted.” Eve looked into Renee’s eyes. “…You got my letter?”

Renee nodded. “Yes. I did.”

“Are you going to try to convince me to resign?”

Renee looked at Eve for a long while – and then shook her head. “No… No, I’m not. I’ve done a lot of thinking about this since I found out. I… I got angry. I thought you were bad for us if you were willing to do this. And then I remembered that nobody’s perfect. I couldn’t think of you just as the one mistake you made. So what if you brought us to war once? You’ve brought us to peace so much more often. You’ve extended the hoof of friendship successfully to so many that would have considered us enemies. We’re on good terms with the USM now, many worlds that attacked us in the past are part of us. You did these things, Eve. One blemish on your record does not negate all of it.”

There were tears in Eve’s eyes. “But Renee… Your system!”

“We made the system with the intent of not falling into the trap of legalism,” Renee said. “There’s no final authority on everything. There’s always allotments for freedom and bending of the rules. Even if the law says you should be removed from your position for your actions, the spirit of Merodi Universalis says that can be brushed aside. How many times have we pardoned criminals and given
them a second chance? How many people do we work with despite being crazed murderers? How many of our friends do things we consider horrible?"

Renee put a hoof on Eve’s tearstained cheek. “Darling, you deserve to have the forgiveness we’ve given everyone else. You can’t just give. You have to receive as well.”

“…T-thank you,” Eve said with a hard swallow.

“It’s the least I could give you.”

The two entered a long, heartfelt embrace.

I sat in the background, carefully reading my notes.

Renee cleared her throat a short while later. “Now, Twilence, I believe that introduction of yours was woefully inadequate. I need a full personnel report.”

“Hm? I’m not joining the Expeditions Divisi-”

“Full report, Twilence. Full report.”

“Right away,” I said, clicking my pen in preparation for the paperwork flood.

~~~

Pinkie woke up. She opened her eyes and saw nothing.

Eh, what was I expecting, that it would all be a dream?

“Uh… Pinkie? You awake?” Vriska called from her left.

“Yes. I know it’s hard to tell, but c’mon Vriska, I opened my eyelids! That should give you some indication of my awakenss!”

“…You have a blindfold on.”

“Oh. Huh.” Pinkie chuckled. “Guess I’m going to have to start checking for that. …Somehow…”

“You’ll figure it out,” Flutterfree said.

“Well, my first instinct is to just be Aware and know, which would work most of the time, but this entire scene is being narrated from my point of view so I can’t exactly cheat right now. I am the bat with a flashlight shone in its face. I am the worm in the earth. I am… Give me another animal metaphor.”

“Crab?” Vriska suggested.

“I AM THE CRAB ON THE SEAFLOOR!” Pinkie blurted, sitting up. She heard something clang. “…I just hit my head on the overhead light, didn’t I?”

“Yes,” Flutterfree said. “You were rubbery though, so it bounced right off.”

“Pinkie Pie – living play-doh,” Pinkie said with a chuckle. “So, uh, was the surgery a success?”

She heard Nova’s screen beep. “It says a complete success. The damage to your brain was completely reverted, though only the insides of your sockets could be grown back. No eyes – which
was expected. The sensors on your hooves are active and should work fine. It says here using them will hurt at first, but the pain should wear off after a couple of hours of walking.”

“Time to test!” Pinkie declared. She lowered one of her hooves to where she felt her haunches were and gently pressed down.

She didn’t feel anything. All she got was a signal in her brain that formed a localized headache, and she saw bright white. She jerked the hoof back. “…Ow.”

“Oh thank goodness, it works,” Flutterfree said with a deep sigh.

“I didn’t feel anything,” Pinkie said. “My brain just twitched, that’s what happened.”

“That’s basically how it works,” Nova said, making a few more beeping noises with her screen. “Since your soul is cursed not to have a sense of touch, the new ‘sense’ the doctor created has to go directly into your brain. You just happened to have an entire visual cortex you weren’t using that could receive electrical inputs.”

“The irony – because I’m blind I’m able to get feeling implants.” She tried to roll her eyes – immensely disappointed that she couldn’t do that. She carefully put her hoof back down, feeling a jolt of pain when she touched something solid – presumably the table. But she held it there. The pain wasn’t bad, and she would definitely get used to it, but it was a little jarring at the moment. The ‘light’ was annoying since it made her think something was in front of her, but she could train herself to ignore that. At least she’d know she actually had a way to tell that she was touching something now. “So, any weird features I should know before I start exploiting this?”

“Each hoof sensor has a different signal so your brain will know which hoof is touching something,” Nova said. “Each hoof has two signals – touch, and grab. Grab will only activate when you’re successfully holding something.”

Pinkie reached into her mane. She didn’t need to feel anything to pull stuff out of there. She told her hoof to grab – and it did, sending a slightly different ping to her brain. She pulled out her squeaky hammer and twirled it. “Huh. Neat.”

There was a crash right after she said that.

“Aaaaand I just broke a vase.”

“I just fixed it,” Nova said, presumably having repaired the vase with a spell. “It’s all good. You’ll need to learn to be more aware of your surroundings. It’ll take time.”

“Time we actually have. Two months of ‘punishment’ hm?”

“Were you watching us while you were in surgery!?” Vriska blurted.

“Oh no, I was out cold. I just went back and read what I missed.” She giggled. “It is time to begin ‘Pinkie’s Rehab’! New episodes Tuesday at eight, seven central.”

“Yare yare daze…”

“Hey, big guy! I didn’t know you were in here! So quiet!”

“Sorry.”

“Ah, don’t be. Gives me an excuse to listen better. I’ll be able to pick up on breathing before too
long. Lessee…” She closed her eyelids even though such a motion was pointless. “Hrm… Air conditioning unit, buzzing lightbulbs over there, Vriska’s standing creepily close to me, I’m sitting on a bed with springs given the squeaks when I shift my weight, this over here is a heart monitor with its infernal BEEP BEEP BEEPing…”


“You should see Toph,” Pinkie said. “Or if you want someone who isn’t cheating with earth vibrations, Flair. They just know where things are and don’t have to think.”

“You’ll get there eventually.”

“You bet I will!” Pinkie blurted, exuding optimism. “Nothing’s gonna stop Pinkie Pie! …By the way, what do the implants look like?”

“Round horseshoes,” Vriska said. “Can’t even see them unless you lift up your hoof.”

“Nice. …Can I get out of the bed now and try to walk around?”

“Yes,” Nova said. “Turn yourself to the left and move your back hooves off the bed. Then slide forward – I’ll catch you if you fall.”

Pinkie felt around carefully with her hooves. She was able to sense the pose of her body, so she knew when her legs were dangling over the edge of the bed. She carefully placed her front hooves solidly onto the bed. She pushed herself off gently, allowing her back hooves to set on the ground.

The sensation of them touching the floor the first time sent chills through her mind, but she kept her cool. She settled all four of her legs down, standing proud.

“Hah. Did it! Take that, disability! Pinkie Pie can walk!”

“You’re standing,” Vriska pointed out.

“Vriska!” Flutterfree chided.

“Ah, she has a point,” Pinkie said, starting to walk forward. “I’ll be just fine an-”

She heard a thunk inside her skull. “…And I just ran into a wall. I believe the correct response is ‘ow’. Ow.”

Nova let out a soft chuckle. “Hey, at least you were able to walk.”

“Yep! Things are looking up!” Pinkie grinned. “Now, before we begin rehab, who wants lunch? Or breakfast. Or whatever time it actually is.”

“Sure, I’m famished,” Nova said. “There’s a nice joint down the block th-”

Pinkie pulled an entire table out of her mane set with high-quality sandwiches. “You forget who you’re visiting.” She sat down in front of the table, holding out a hoof. “Unfortunately I probably shouldn’t be trusted with my own food right yet so someone’s going to have to stuff this sandwich into my mouth for me. Vriska! I know you’re just dying to help me here!”

Vriska facepalmed. “You’re enjoying this too much.”

“Hey, I’m blind and have virtually no sensation within my body. I reserve the right to mess with people. Chop chop, sandwich, mouth, don’t let me bite my tongue~!”
“Uh, you just did,” Flutterfree said.

“…Ponyfeathers. I’m going to need to start carrying health potions. Or protective clothing or somefimimm.” Pinkie blinked, receiving a muddled signal of lettuce through her sense of taste. She just stuffed the sandwich in my mouth.

Pinkie started chewing, slowly. With effort, she was able to know where her tongue was in relation to her teeth, and she realized that gave her some indication as to where the actual food was. She really should be eating soft foods right now, but screw that, she could figure this out.

It took about a minute of intense focus, but she managed to get it down.

“Practice makes perfect!” She declared, pressing a hoof down on the table for effect. “ANOTHER!” Vriska obliged.

~~~

Nova walked home later that day, having been told by Pinkie it was okay to leave.

Nova wasn’t sure about that. Pinkie sure seemed fine, tackling everything with a smile and a laugh. Apparently getting Eve back really had cured her of her swirling depression.

Honestly, that didn’t surprise Nova. She had seen Pinkie bounce from absolutely despondent to joyful in a matter of seconds numerous times. It was part of being Pinkie Pie to experience exceedingly drastic mood swings at levels normal people could never hope to understand.

Nova knew Pinkie really was back, given the state of her mane, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t hiding behind a big smile. Pinkie was more than able to shroud her fears and pain in laughs so long as they weren’t all-consuming feelings.

…Or maybe Nova was just worried about her. Whenever she had thought about losing senses previously, she had thought about sight and hearing. The things everyone relied on most if they weren’t a unicorn. Smell and taste were pretty pointless senses to be frank. She had always thought her sense of touch was one of the lesser senses as well, but seeing the slow way that Pinkie moved…

She was never going to take it for granted again. Simply moving became difficult without a basic sense of touch. Pinkie stumbled, had no idea when she’d hit her head on something, and could have a sword driven into her without her having a clue.

If it had been anyone other than Pinkie, Nova would have thought this would be impossible to move past. You couldn’t adventure like that. Not unless you were Pinkie and were made of rubber the vast majority of the time.

Still… It had to be hard for Pinkie. And she wasn’t really letting anyone see how hard it was. At least not yet.

Nova sighed, walking in the front door of her home. She had been here last night, briefly, to let everyone know she was okay before rushing off to help get Pinkie into surgery and deal with the aftermath of the war…

She hadn’t slept at all. She’d just kept busy.

She walked into the living room and fell onto her couch, looking at the ceiling.
“Nova? That you?” Sunburst asked, poking his head from around a corner in the house.

“Yes. Yes it’s me.” Nova rubbed her eyes. “I’m home. For real, this time. Sorry if I fall asleep.”

He walked over and sat next to her. “Won’t be a problem. I understand I’m boring.”

“For once, it wouldn’t be because you’re boring. It’d be because holy crap am I exhausted. Between the war, the battle, Eve, Pinkie, and the not sleeping… Just gah. I need a serious unwind.”

“Well I can certainly provide that.” Sunburst said.

Nova giggled. “Thanks for the offer. I might take you up on that later. But right now I’m just going to sit and stare at my ceiling. Maybe I’ll find the answer to life.”

“Forty-two.”

“Nineteen,” Nova countered.

“Are we arguing over stupid numbers now?” Stardust said, walking into the room.

Nova’s smile was replaced with a groan – one she immediately tried to cover up. But it was too late, Stardust saw it.

Stardust turned around and walked away.

“Stardust, wait!” Nova called, pulling herself off her couch. “I’ve just had a ba-”

“I get it, mom,” Stardust said without turning around. “I’m just one of your little chores you don’t have the patience for right now.”

“Stardust!” Nova called. “You don’t get to just walk away like that!”

Stardust let out a sigh and turned around. “Why not? If I stick around you’re just going to get fed up with me and start giving me a talk.”

“Why not? Because if you walk away and I let you, you’ll do it again and again. Not happening, Stardust. Even when I feel like tar I’m never going to let you just walk away when I – or anyone else – wants to talk to you.”

Stardust opened her mouth to object – but she didn’t quite have enough guile to face her mother directly quite yet, even when Nova was clearly weakened. “A-alright.”

Nova let out a sigh of relief. “Thank you. Now let me apologize. I’m sorry – I was weak and let my impatience get the better of me. My reaction to hearing you walk in with a question was wrong. I really did lose my patience with you before you even started.”

Stardust looked at Nova, an expression of confusion appearing on her face. Her inherent fear of her mother’s authority wasn’t parsing well with the sudden display of humility.

“How about you come sit on the couch with dad and me?”

Stardust was silent.

“You can bring your book, if you want,” Sunburst suggested.

may think it’s silly, but sure, we can have family time with a book tonight.”

Stardust brightened up slightly.

“Really. Don’t expect this to be a pattern or anything, but today you can sit there with a book if that’s what you want. I just want to be able to see your face, okay?”

Stardust nodded, scrambling to her room to grab her book.

Sunburst looked at Nova expectantly.

“…What?”

“You’re not going to go on a mini-rant?”

“Celestia, no,” Nova let out a laugh. “I don’t have the energy for that. Stardust can have her nose in a book tonight and I won’t get on her case about it.”

“Didn’t you say something about ‘letting them get away with something once lets them think it’s okay’?”

“That’s tomorrow Nova’s problem,” Nova said. “And there’s also the corollary. ‘Let them have good things and show them love’."

“I don’t think that’s strictly a corol-”

Nova kissed him. “Shut up. It’s profound, or something.”

“EEEEEEW!” Stardust squealed, having just returned with her book.

Nova let out a laugh. “Get up here you little rascal. Let’s see what this book of yours is about.”

“Uh…” Stardust shifted nervously.

Nova levitated Stardust and her book to the couch. “Hrm… …‘Twilight’?”

“Uh, yes…?”

“And what do you think of this book?” Nova asked.

“It’s absolute garbage that I’m reading just to gain a newfound disdain for the culture in which I find myself part of.”

Nova turned to Sunburst. “…What’s this book about?”

Sunburst shrugged. “I dunno. I think it’s a teen supernatural romance, one of the more popular ones.”

“It’s lame and I feel insulted that it comes highly recommended,” Stardust muttered, opening the book up.

“So why don’t you stop?” Nova asked.

“And just leave the story hanging!?” Stardust said with a panicked gasp. “NEVER!”

Nova blinked. Then she let out a chuckle. She may not have understood her daughter most of the time, but she was still great nonetheless.
“Have you read any books you’d think I might like?”

“You don’t read books.”

“I can take some time out of my schedule!”

“…Well, you might like The Mare Machine…”

~~~

Rev’s church had a confessional in the back. It wasn’t used all that often – Rev didn’t push confessions as a ‘holy sacrament’, despite the fact that her original congregation had been deeply involved in the regular act of confessing. But it was there in case anyone needed it, and from time to time there was a person who did need to simply confess what they had done in a spiritual setting.

Rev had been mildly surprised when Flutterfree asked to go through with it, but she hadn’t hesitated. They took their positions on opposite sides of the booth’s interior. The light was dim, but not ominously so. It felt… homey.

“Forgive me, Reverend, for I have sinned. It has been… a long, long time since my last confession.”

“So long as you have confessed your sins to the Lord, you need not concern yourself with listing them all.”

“My sins… are many. I encouraged my sister to go off to war for her sake, ignoring the needs of all others. I turned myself into a killing machine for the sake of a war. I killed hundreds. I lost my patience an untold number of times. I became a brutal being brimming with Rage, losing all self-control. I hurt my friends with dark words and violent motions. I neglected my own needs, ruining this body that I was given. I killed a man with my bare wings.” She looked at the ground. “I could confess many, many more. I did so many things in the war…”

“How many of those things were necessary?”

“Some. Definitely not all of them. And none of them were pure.”

“We are often placed into difficult situations where impure actions must be taken for the sake of what is pure and holy.”

“I didn’t have to go,” Flutterfree said, tears forming in her eyes. “I could have stayed back. I’ve stayed back before. Kept myself out of fights I didn’t need to be in. But I didn’t this time – because of her. She was the one in danger this time. I could have left it to the others, but I didn’t. I sacrificed my own body to go help her.”

“And was that a sin? Sacrificing oneself for others is certainly a noble deed.”

“…I don’t know. I do know all my thoughts weren’t pure. At the time, I did want to punish everyone who was a danger to her. I let my rage get the best of me. Many of the deaths I inflicted were very necessary. But my presence wasn’t.”

“So your sins stem from a single decision made for the sake of another?”

Flutterfree nodded to herself. “Yes. Yes, they do. I was thinking too much of her, not of others, not of the Lord. I even encouraged her to go off to war…” She trailed off.

“It is a deep, complicated sin you have given,” Rev said, looking up. “It was one not born out of
selfish desire, but of love for a sister. That doesn’t make it righteous.”

Flutterfree nodded.

“For your penance, please devote yourself to prayer this night, specifically prayers of forgiveness alongside ones of clarity. Seek out this sister you sinned for, and make yourself right with her. Furthermore, have an extended discussion with your closest spiritual advisor about what actions you should take next. She’ll have some ideas.”

Flutterfree smirked. “Yeah. …Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

“May God bless you,” Rev said, bowing her head.

“Thank you, Reverend.”

The two wordlessly left the confessional and walked to a small table Rev kept in the back room.

“…So am I supposed to pretend that wasn’t you talking in there?”

Rev let out a soft chuckle. “It’s fine, we can talk about what happened in there. We didn’t exactly do a normal one in the first place.”

Flutterfree nodded, sitting down in a chair. “…I certainly feel better, getting it all out.”

“It does help,” Rev said. “Sometimes your own mind can get in the way of direct prayer, a fact I’m sure you’re becoming well acquainted with.”

Flutterfree nodded. “…It’s all so muddled. I don’t know if half the things I did were necessary or not. And now I realize the whole reason I was in that mess was because I was thinking only of Eve. Nothing else.”

“Love can be a very dangerous thing, in any of its forms,” Rev said. “It is the highest, purest emotion we can have. But, fallen as we are, we can screw it up just like anything else. Love can result in neglect – neglect of others, neglect of God, neglect of self.”

Flutterfree looked at her wings. “Yeah…”

“Our bodies are temples,” Rev said. “We have to take care of them. Sacrifice is very noble, don’t get me wrong.”

“But I went a little far this time.”

“…I can’t say that for sure,” Rev admitted. “I’m not some source of all ‘spiritual answers’. Maybe you really did need to be there. Could they have won without your power?”

Flutterfree looked at Rev. “No. But God works all things together for good. Just because the result was good doesn’t mean it wasn’t bad to start with.”

Rev nodded. “I’ve taught you well. …You’re right, of course. Your deep bond with Eve resulted in you taking some impure actions. Throwing your soul and your body to the wind for her sake. But I want you to know something.”

“Hm?”

“Don’t think this means the special bond you share is wrong,” Rev said. “I know you sometimes wonder if it is – if you’re stepping over a boundary you shouldn’t. I always tell you that you’re not,
and the same advice applies here. Everybody makes everybody else stumble at times. It’s because we’re not perfect.”

Flutterfree nodded.

“You’ll need to go talk to her,” Rev said. “Tell her how you feel about all this. Get it out in the open.”

“I know. I will. We see each other daily. I just… I wanted to come to you first.”

“Because I wasn’t part of the problem?”

Flutterfree nodded. “…I’m sure she and I will work it out. We always do. But like you said, I have a case of self-neglect here I need to deal with. I am important. I need to change a bit. Stop being what I was… But also stop being a warrior.”

Rev smiled warmly. “I agree. I can see the transformation happening within you already.”

“Yes. Within.” Flutterfree looked at the knives sticking out of her wings. “But these are always here. Making me a warrior. I could cut your head off right now.”

“No, you couldn’t,” Rev said. “I mean, you think you can, and if I was just a regular pony, yeah, but trust me when I say you couldn’t.”

“Right,” Flutterfree rubbed the back of her head.

“Have you considered doing something about those knives?”

“I can’t remove them, it would do serious damage to my nervous system. Unpredictable damage. Disguising them with magic won’t work because of Lolo.”

“So? Shave them down.”

Flutterfree blinked. “…What?”

“Like a fingernail or wild hoof. Clip the ends off. The stuff inside you still functions, there’s just nothing on the outside.”

“…I’m pretty sure that’ll do damage as well.”

“Covers, then?”

Flutterfree stared at Rev. “…That’s an excellent idea. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“You were too busy swirling in your mental self-harm.”

Flutterfree smiled nervously. “Heheh… Yeah…”

“Don’t worry, the advice is free. I bet you could even get ornate engravings or something.”

“I think I’ll go talk to Flair about that. See if it’ll work.” There was a big, genuine smile on her face. “I… I won’t have to walk around as a killing machine all the time!”

“Thank God for small miracles.”

“Amen!”
Corona, Toph, Lady Rarity, Roxy, and Giorno stood outside Lai’s new palace.

Toph had not stopped working all night. With her earthbending, she had recreated the entire palace from memory. If it wasn’t for the fact all of it was made out of earth instead of the normal materials, it would have been a perfect match.

They weren’t here to look at the palace, though.

There was a monument behind the palace. It was a round pedestal of earth with a concrete sculpture on top of it. A sugar-skull – the symbol that had been Olivia’s own before she had been forced to abandon it. The symbol of Sombra.

It had been made out of her crumbled dust by Corona’s request. Enchanted to never wear away. It would remain here, behind the castle, forever – without a name. ‘Olivia Velazquez’ already had a grave somewhere else from when they thought she was dead earlier. *Sombra* would be remembered here.

The five of them had been there for almost half an hour already.

“…Just how cruel do you have to be to make curses like this?” Corona asked, removing her shades to wipe her eyes. “Who does that!?”

“Mad artists,” Giorno said, hands in his pockets. “Arthon thought it was poetic and beautiful to fuse physical ailments to souls. Or maybe he just found it amusing and used art as an excuse to fuel his own sadism.”

Lady Rarity sighed. “He’s already paid the price for what he did.”

Corona nodded, saying nothing.

“I wonder if she had any family,” Toph said.

“…There were a few people she talked about back home from time to time.” Corona said.

“Then let’s go find them,” Roxy said.

“I don’t know who they are for sure,” Corona said. “And it’s been decades since we had any contact with Earth Omnic.”

“Then let’s open up new contact and find them,” Toph said, folding her arms. “Kapeesh?”

Corona looked at Toph and nodded. She pulled out her dimensional device and searched for Earth Omnic. She dialed the portal. “Raging Sights, find out what ping frequency this place uses. I’ve never been.”

Raging Sights beeped, giving Corona an information frequency. The four of them walked through the portal into a forested area while she made the call. “This is Corona Shimmer of Merodi Universalis, contacting… whoever this communication device was given to.”

A second later, a smooth robotic voice responded to her call. “…This is Zenyatta. Would you by chance be the otherworlders?”

“Ah, yes, right, we met you before we were united,” Corona said. “Uh… you met General O’Neill, right?”
“I did indeed.”

“Good. You might be able to help us. Are you in a place it would be convenient for us to teleport to?”

“I am alone in my temple. By all means, come in.”

Corona had Raging Sights triangulate Zenyatta’s position, teleporting all four of them to a simple temple made of marble. Zenyatta was a humanoid robot with nine blue dots on his head instead of a face. He looked up at them from his sitting position. “I take it things have changed drastically on your side of existence since I last spoke with your people?”

“A lot,” Corona said. “Is it the same here?”

Zenyatta nodded. “The Omnic Crises are over. There is currently peace on Earth. I had been considering making the call to you myself over the last few months to tell you we were ready – but it appears that wasn’t necessary.”

“Glad to hear you’re ready,” Corona said.

“Though, am I correct in assuming that is not the primary reason you are here?”

“No,” Corona said. “Do you remember Sombra?”

“…She was a problematic hacker back when you first arrived. She vanished when you left. I believe I heard something about her leaving the universe.”

“She did,” Corona said. “She was an enemy, at first. But then she started working for us, helping us uncover the secrets of the multiverse. And… she was my friend.”

“She has passed.”

“Yeah. She passed.” Corona looked at Zenyatta. “I know she was secretive, but do you think there’s anyone who would like to know what really happened to her? To know that… she ended up a hero, in the end?”

“I have my doubts that such people exist here anymore,” Zenyatta said. “But it would be my honor to search. It will take time, of course.”

“We can wait,” Giorno said. “A-”

Corona’s phone rang. She pulled it out with her telekinesis and glaring at it – and then her jaw dropped.

Olivia was calling.

She nervously answered the phone. “Hello?”

“If you’re hearing this, I’m dead,” Olivia said, getting right to the point. “I don’t know how I went out. I hope it was awesome doing something great and heroic, but it’s just as likely I was punched by some overpowered idiot and kicked the bucket in an instant without doing much. Whatever happened… Hi from beyond the grave! I’m probably totally freaking you out right now.”

“No, really?” Corona said, a hand to her mouth.

“Anyway, I’m not going to get all touchy-feely here – no way to tell how many toes I’ll step on or
things I’ll screw up. For all I know I’ll have gone through a drastic personality shift whenever it 
happens, and I can’t really speak for whatever I was feeling at the time. So, sorry if you were 
expecting something cathartic, Corona. But I do have something for you that I’m sure you’ll love me 
for and hate me for at the same time!”

Corona raised an eyebrow. “Oh?” she asked the recording.

“See, you’ll only get this message if you go to Earth Omnic, where my super-duper-uber secret base 
is. First off, the location of the base is encrypted in this audio file, should be easy to find now. 
There’s presents waiting!”

Corona didn’t wait – she teleported all of them to the coordinates, including Zenyatta.

They appeared in a cylindrical room with no entrances or exits. The moment they appeared in the 
room, the screen-lined walls lit up with the sugar-skull emblem.

“Welcome to the secret Sombra base, Corona and… company.” the recording declared, chopping up 
at ‘company’, indicative of multiple recordings being spliced together. “Got two presents for you. 
First, you get all the files on the multiversal Truth.”

A tremendous flow chart spread across the screens, all centered around the Dark Tower.

“Chances are I haven’t figured it out, not completely. What I know right now is that the current Truth 
of the multiverse lies in the top room of that Tower. I’ve tried more times than I like to admit to get in 
and ascend the stairs and get to that room, but it never lets me in. No matter what I try, it always 
sends me somewhere else. It’s like I’m not meant to know. Which I’m never going to accept, but it’s 
rather disheartening.

“Amiga, you have this now. Everything I have. Maybe you’ll find the answer.”

Corona felt Raging Sights downloading all the information.

“And as for the second present… You might get mad at this one.”

A light shone from the ceiling at the center of the room. A small purple crystal in the shape of a 
sugar-skull was sitting there, plugged into the pedestal with a series of tiny black wires.

“…Is that what I think it is?” Lady Rarity asked, a hoof to her mouth.

“This is the Sombra Artificial Intelligence,” Olivia explained. “I call her Sai. She, uh… well she’s 
my attempt at a mind upload. See, I knew I might die, as evidenced by this recording, so I figured I 
might as well pursue alternate methods of extending my life. She’s an upload of my memories and 
experiences in a little purple box that really isn’t perfect. No discernable soul, the emotions are 
wacky, she's inconsistent… So she’s not me but she sorta is me…”

Corona closed her hand around Sai, feeling the energy within. Olivia was right, there was no real 
soul in there, no full mind, just a bunch of code.

“So, feel free to be mad at me for leaving you a shadow of myself that’ll just bring bad memories. 
You can do whatever you want with her. I’m sorry if she’s painful to have around.”

“She won’t be,” Corona said, holding Sai to the light.

“Anyway, if you actually want to talk to her, just say ‘Sombra’ or ‘Sai, activate’. She should 
automatically provide you with some of my personal nanobots as well, if you ask. …Adios, Corona.
Here’s to hoping there really is something after.” The recording stopped.

Corona and her companions stood in silence for a moment, soaking in what they had just heard. Corona lifted a finger to her eye and wiped away a tear.

“Sombra, activate,” Corona said.

“Hola, Amiga!” the crystal beeped in Olivia’s voice. “What can I do for you?”

“Get those nanobots ready… and then keep researching the mutiversal Truth,” Corona said, generating a string and placing the crystal around her neck, making sure to hide it beneath her shirt.

“All right!” Sai beeped. Raging Sights reported to Corona that she now had control over a large array of Sombra’s microscopic machines. Then Sai went silent – returning to quiet research.

Olivia was never someone to let something as pedestrian as death keep her from finding answers.

~~~

Allure and Minna sat down to have lunch.

“So…” Minna said, tapping her fingers together. “I think I’m ready to tell you everything that happened now.”

Allure nodded. “Go on. I won’t interrupt you. I’ll just drink this juice.”

So Minna began her story. She spoke of how she left, how she ended up on a Speeder team with Eve, how she was recruited directly by Corona, how she was separated with Lady Rarity, how she found the facility where she and her soldiers were made, how she destroyed the place and helped kill Brell, and how she helped Olivia hack into the Shaping Mechanisms. She finished her story and looked expectantly at Allure.

“Well…?”

“…I’m just glad you’re alive,” Allure said with a smile on her face. “…Actually, I’m also glad the people who tormented you got what was coming to them, but I really shouldn’t be happy that Brell was killed. She sounded… confused.”

Minna nodded. “She was. I don’t think we could have saved her though. Insanity ran in that family.”

“I figured,” Allure said. She leaned forward and clasped Minna’s hand with her hooves. “I’m glad you’re back.”

“I’m glad to be back,” Minna admitted. “…I didn’t like not having you there.”

“You’ve had me most of your life,” Allure said. “This definitely wasn’t the place or time to learn independence.”

Minna nodded slowly, eyes wide. “…I did enjoy it, at times. Not the being alone, but the thrill. I… I never really felt a thrill like that, before.”

Allure raised an eyebrow. “Not even with Frigid?”

Minna blushed slightly. “Not the same feeling. This feeling was… like I was doing what I was meant to do. Even after I had destroyed the facility, I still felt it. It felt right.”
Allure nodded slowly. “Some of us are meant to explore. You… never struck me as the type, but then again we didn’t know what you were before.”

“So I can join up?”

“Not until you’re eighteen, missy!” Allure said with a chuckle. “After that, sure, you can go sign up with Expedition—”

“Military, mom.”

Allure blinked. “…Minna, are you sure?”

“It feels… right.”

“But wasn’t that just what Brell wanted you to be?”

“She wanted me to be a mindless killing machine,” Minna said. “Not a protector. Not a savior.”

“This is the point where I try to point out that Expeditions does the same thing, that Expeditions is a lot safer, and that we’re likely not going to have an actual war for a while.”

“I mean, I’ll think about it, but if I join Expeditions I’d want to be part of a strike force or quasi-military unit. …I really felt like I belonged, mom.”

Allure let out a sigh. “I’m not going to stop you – once you turn eighteen – but I want to be sure this is your decision and not brought on by… by whatever’s hidden inside you.”

Minna looked at her hands, then at a nearby screen so she could examine her reflection. “Maybe it is that. Maybe I’m naturally drawn to being a soldier because of what I am. But there’s nothing wrong with being a loyal soldier, is there?”

Allure shook her head. “Not at all.”

“So long as I’m not being controlled and manipulated into doing it, why not follow my nature?”

“…Because it was forced on you?”

“And you were ‘forced’ to be a Cutie Mark Crusader, and then part of the League of Sweetie Belles,” Minna pointed out. “…We’re all a story, after all. Our natures and our stories might be the same.”

Allure let out a soft laugh. “You’ve matured a lot in the last few days.”

“…I found myself.”

Allure walked over to her and gave her a hug. “I’m glad you did. If you really think that’s your calling, go ahead. I won’t even try to stop you.”

“Thanks,” Minna said, hugging her back.

“You still have to be eighteen.”

“I get it, I get it.”

“I mean it! No more running off even if another war happens!”
“Alright! Yeesh!” she laughed.

~~~

“…Are you sure you understand?” Flutterfree asked Eve as they walked through the deep halls of Celestia City. I hung back far enough so that I couldn’t hear their conversation with my ears, but that didn’t mean I didn’t know what they were saying. It was just a courtesy.

Eve nodded. “I think I do. I risked all of Merodi Universalis for their sake – or what I convinced myself was their sake, anyway. I still have no idea if the decision was right or not.”

Flutterfree nodded. “Good.” She carefully hugged Eve so as not to scratch her skin.

“Glad we had this talk,” Eve said, smiling.

“Same. Now, you can go back to introducing Twilence to everyone important and I can go talk to Flair now, see what can be done about these knives in my wings.”

“See you later,” Eve said.

“Yep!” Flutterfree spread her wings and took off.

I trotted back up. “You’ll be glad to know most of that conversation was private.”

Eve let out a sigh of relief. “Good. At least there’s something I can cherish.”

“There’s a lot of things. The vast majority of your time is spent offscreen.”

“Though usually not the important stuff.”

“Usually not. But in this case, she already had a conversation so the readers could look at her – it would have largely been redundant with you.”

“…Interesting…” Eve said, rubbing her chin. “There’s probably a way to exploit that…”

“There is. Generally not worth the effort to figure it out, though.”

Eve nodded slowly, pondering this new influx of information. We finally passed by the room we were heading for, which included four Overheads at once – O’Neill, Ava, Luna of Aid, and the Research Overhead. They were currently listening to O’Neill talk.

“Heavy damage is localized to Earth Vitis, Elemental Four, and Lai,” O’Neill said. “They’ve lost major cities in the assaults. Canterlot, Republic City, and the Lai Capital. As crazy as Toph is, I doubt that her efforts to rebuild the Capital will pan out. Otherwise, war’s completely over since every one of them just dropped dead. Cleanup is more important than that. Plans, Luna?”

“Diverting resources from Equis Vitis, Equis Concrete, and Skaia’s Dream to the needed worlds,” Luna reported. “Earth Vitis is expected to recover quickly given their high population density and internal relations. The four major nations of Elemental Four suffered significant levels of damage, but aid will repair the structural damage there. The crater of Republic City is a complete loss save for Air Temple Island… Elemental Four’s neutral territory is gone.”

“How will that affect them?” Ava asked.

“Cultural’s report says they’ll bond together, though the behavior of the Avatar is a big factor in their long-term response,” Luna said. “…She’s lost a lot of close friends. That city was her home. She’s
accepted professional help to cope, but I don’t have the authority to say how she’ll fare even with that.”

“She’ll pull through,” Eve said, walking in. “She’s strong.”

“Ah, Eve,” Ava said with a smile. “What brings you here?”

“Finish your meeting first, it can wait.”

Luna nodded. “Lai is going to suffer the most. They are a single unified people under one ruler. Even the quick rebuilding of the palace has only done so much – they lost their seat of power. They don’t have another major metropolis to turn to. So the majority of Gem and Equis Cosmic efforts are being diverted. R. O., your people will need to work closely with ours to maximize the efficiency.”

The Research Overhead nodded.

“Aside from that, Ava, we’ll need more personnel to undertake a relief effort of this magnitude. It is a bit… odd that we’re devoting our resources to internal regions.”

“I will send out a call for volunteers,” Ava responded. “I expect many will come instantly.”

“Thanks. Other than that…” Luna let out a sigh. “We do need to address the people in a more direct way than ‘the war is over’.”

“O’Neill’s the one that falls to,” Ava said. “No offense to present company intended.”

“None taken,” Eve responded.

O’Neill stretched his back. “Always more and more speeches… I’ll come up with something by the end of the day.”

“You can use Cessera if you need to,” Eve offered. “She loves writing speeches. She’s actually a little annoyed that she never gets to write any of mine.”

“I’ll take you up on that.”

“I know you will,” Eve said with a smirk.

“I think we’re done with the general report,” Ava said, turning to Eve. “Care to introduce your guest?”

“This is Twilence,” Eve said, giving them a brief overview of who I was and what I could do. O’Neill and Ava already knew who I was, but the Research Overhead and Luna had no idea.

The R.O. beeped. “Fascinating… A device infused with Awareness… How would such a thing be possible?”

“Trade secret,” I said with an innocent smile. “You wouldn’t be able to make it anyway.”

“Words like that just make a scientist want to know more,” Luna said.

“Oh, I know. I’m just not going to let him poke me with knives.”

“I have no intention of doing so,” the Research Overhead admitted. “But I wouldn’t mind it if you dropped by the labs and told me what you knew about the device.”
“I think Starbeat would understand it better, I could have her send the information to you later.”

“I would appreciate that.”

“While it is nice to have you on board, we do have a nation to run,” Ava said. “If you don’t have any suggestions I believe it would be prudent for us to get back to repairing our worlds.”

I pondered this a moment. “Be careful assuming that some worlds will be fine – large-scale psychological damage is hard to see when there isn’t much damage. Equis Vitis in particular is struggling to accept the things that have taken place. You might want Cultural to look into that.”

Ava nodded. “I shall make the calls. Thank you, Twilence.”

“No problem.” I turned to Eve. “Guess that means we get lunch now.”

“I’ll join you,” O’Neill said, standing up and stretching his back. “It’s time for the age-old tradition of jello eating with General O’Neill.”

Eve shot me a ‘really?’ glare. I chuckled.

~~~

“So…” Vriska said, inviting herself to sit at Aradia’s table. “How ticked off are you at this point in time?”

They were in a food court on Celestia City that served ‘almost everything’. Vriska had yellow corn dogs while Aradia was poking her fried rice with her fork.

“Oh, a bit. I know I get over it eventually – future self helping you all save this city and all – but I’m upset.”

“Y’know Eve did what she had to, right?”

Aradia let out a sigh. “Now that I’ve had a look around time, yeah, I get that. I see that this needed to happen to alter our course onto a new trajectory, I was still manipulated. I should be used to that at this point, but… I really thought I had put that behind me. Changed how I handled things.”

“So, you failed?”

“Yeah, I failed at my job. Even if it turned out for the ‘better’ this time.” She looked at the ceiling. “It’s just frustrating. To have so much power and still fall to a simple lie.”

“No shit,” Vriska said, rolling her eyes. “We’re such badasses we forget we’re still people.” She let out a bitter laugh. “It was about time you got your ass handed to you.”

“I’m not undefeated!”

“Last time you had any difficulty was with the University of Doors,” Vriska pointed out. “The whole thing with the Celestialsapien doesn’t count and you know it. You were always going to be able to go back and fix that if you had to. You just happened to get it right the first time.”

“You really don’t understand how time travel works, do you?”

Vriska rubbed the back of her head. “…Guess not.”

“I’ll save you the explanation of time-metatime interactions that I have to deal with every day on this
multiversal scale. I get caught up with the paradoxes all the time. It’s why I have so many backups running around – in my line of work there are sometimes universes where I’ll just be erased without warning. Getting bested by those sorts of things are part of the job. But I don’t get fooled by innocent lies.”

“I think you’re just full of yourself,” Vriska said, kicking back.

Aradia smirked. “You’re one to talk.”

“Oh yeah, I’m definitely full of shit too, it’s a thing we share apparently. We could both stand to be kicked down a peg or two. Of course you more so than me.”

Aradia rolled her eyes. “You’re full of yourself all right. But you do have a point. Maybe I am a bit too confident. …Or too trusting.”

Vriska shrugged. “I think you just rely too much on your abilities to let you know everything, and when something comes out of left field you don’t see it until it hits you.”

“Apt metaphor.” Aradia folded her arms. “I dunno. I can’t help but feel I could have done something to stop the war. But I also know that, if I was able to see this future, I would have let the war play out, possibly even helped create it.” She sat back. “I guess I’m just complaining?”

“Yeah. You are,” Vriska said with a smirk. “You’re just bitching and whining. ‘Wah, I can’t see everything and make the best possible choice anymore!’ Welcome to being a regular person.”

Aradia’s bright smile returned to her. “I am being a little silly, come to think of it.”

“Hey, that’s what Vriska’s here for, to point out your shit.”

“Who points out yours?”

Vriska blinked. “…Flutterfree, usually.”

“Glad you have someone who can do that for you. How is Starbeat doing by the way?”

“She breezed through the entire war like a ship on smooth seas. Not even scarred by the danger she was in at the end. She’s just got a ton of chill.”

“Really? I thought she was hyperactive and slightly crazy.”

“You can be that and still have chill.”

Aradia raised an eyebrow. “That’s dumb.”

“No, that’s me being full of shit,” Vriska smirked. “Get it right.”

“Mmmmm, nah.”

“HEY VRISKA!” I called, scampering over.

“…Twilence?” Vriska said, looking up to see me leaving the table with Eve and O’Neill – both of them eating the blue jello. “What’re you doing here?”

“You’re a Class 2 now, I don’t have to hide in my ‘basement’ anymore.” I winked.

“Nice to see you again!” Aradia said, smiling. “Though I already have, in your relative future.”
“I know, I saw that,” I answered. “I look forward to being the one at an advantage!”

Vriska blinked. “Suddenly I’m terrified of what you two will do.”

“Conquer existence,” I said. “…Either that or just innocently hang out. Both seem rather tantalizing.”

Aradia giggled.

Vriska shook her head. “The world isn’t ready…”

“The world wasn’t ready for more than one Pinkie Pie, so we got more worlds,” Aradia pointed out. “Just extrapolate from there and we should be good!”

“Oh, Vriska!” I said, turning to her. “Got somethin’ for ya.”

“Hm?”

I pulled a round, blue-pink object out of my hand and tossed it to her. She caught the orb in her hands and stared at it. The sphere was lined with dozens of complex shapes tessellated together to form a nearly perfect sphere. Every second or so, the shapes would shift to different sizes and arrangements to create a new arrangement for the sphere. Every single face contained a seemingly random symbol, and the symbols changed every time the object shifted.

“An infinity-sided die!?” Vriska blurted. “Where did… how did…?”

“I kept it around,” I said. “I knew you’d want it.”

“FUCK YES!” Vriska said, holding the die up to the light. “I AM NOW THE MOST POWERFUL BEING IN EXISTENCE!”

Aradia raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Okay, maybe not the most, but you know.” She held the die in front of her eye. “When this sweet baby is rolled anything can happen. For most people, it’s worse than useless and extremely dangerous. But for me… I can tell it what to do if I have enough luck. At maximum luck… I could reshape an entire universe with this beautiful beast.”

“And you’re currently in an area of the multiverse that doesn’t have them banned,” I offered. “And even when Oversight and Justice do pick up on the power you have, they’ll make an exception for you due to your exemplary service to Merodi Universalis. You don’t have to worry about simply having it anymore. Not here.”

“Sweeeeeeet!”

“Sweet is right,” I said, winking. “You’re welcome.”

“I’ve got to go tell the others STAT! Sorry Aradia, need to showcase some fun!” She opened a dimensional portal and left Celestia City.

I turned to Aradia. “Y’know, now that she’s gone, you can go talk to Eve. She’s right over there.”

Aradia looked at Eve. “…Not yet.”

“…But now’s the perfect time?”

A new Aradia appeared, allowing the old Aradia to disappear. “Now I’m ready.” She walked up to
Eve’s table, sat down, and smiled warmly. “Hi!”

“Uh… Hi!” Eve said, smiling nervously. “Look, I-”

“Don’t worry about it. Everything’s okay now, and this is better for all of us in the long run.” Aradia put a hand on Eve’s hoof. “You’re okay by me, Evening. Don’t go out of your way to reconcile with me. There are others your efforts would be better spent on.”

Eve nodded, a look of relief crossing her expression. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. Now, O’Neill, have you ever tried invisible jello?”

O’Neill blinked. “No. The fact that I haven’t is clearly a horrendous evil that must be remedied immediately.”

I summoned four plates of invisible jello. “Enjoy finding it,” I said.

Everyone chuckled.

~~~

“So… I just got a message about the Shaping Mechanism,” Kitten said, addressing the golden-throne bound Emperor of Mankind. “Looks like we’re going to be able to use it to manipulate dimensional physics.”

“And?” the Emperor spoke, as always vocalizing with a text-to-speech device.

“You already know.”

“I WANT TO HEAR YOU SAY IT.”

Kitten let out a soft chuckle. “Well okay then. It is my pleasure to announce we finally have in our hands a final solution to Chaos. We can safely disconnect Galaxus Immaterium from the Warp. It’ll be difficult - we’d have to keep all the Chaos Gods from using reality anchors - but it’s a much better option than everything else we’ve been considering lately.”

“I TAKE IT BACK. THIS IS THE BEST FUCKING DAY OF MY LIFE.”

“We might be able to get you off the Throne soon…”

“I’M GOING TO HAVE A LOT OF FUCKING AMAZING DAYS DOWN THE LINE.”

“Don’t get too excited, it’ll take several years to get the universe ready… But when it is…”

The Emperor’s phone rang. A voice came through without him answering it.

“HELLO! It’s Tzeentch. You just figured out the solution to the Warp problem! Woohoo, good on you for finally getting around to that realization. But what you don’t know is that it was all part of the plan!”

“...Your defeat was part of your plan?”

“It wouldn’t be my defeat! Why do you think I’ve been spreading out into other universes and helping with the war? With this Shaping Mechanism, I can be FREE of the definitions of the Galaxy’s collective psyche! I will fully become my own entity, separated just as you wish your
universe to be. Exactly. As. Planned.”

“TZEENTCH, SINCE WHEN WOULD WE DO WHAT YOU WANTED?”

“When I’m willing to use my daemons on the other three? I’ve already started up a civil war anticipating your response. You say this is the best fucking day of your life, well, think about how much CHANGE this will bring to me! YES! DELICIOUS CHANGE!”

“...I would say you’re insane, but that’s already evident,” Kitten deadpanned.

“Hoo hoo hoo! I look forward to working together!” He hung up.

“...You didn’t say yes…”

“HE KNOWS I WILL. THE TWISTED PSYCHOTIC INCONSISTENT FUCK. SIGH. THIS IS STILL A GOOD DAY.”

“Oh of course! Shall I get the festive hats?”

“YOU KNOW ME SO WELL.”

~~~

Eve walked into one of the Golden Joke’s meeting rooms that evening, expecting to give a general report on the war to the foreign powers. I tagged along, but for once I was not to be introduced – I was just a new face.

Eve was somewhat surprised that it wasn’t just Valentine, Hastur, and Twilight M4 in there. Valentine and Hastur were both there, yes, but so were the Grand Secretariat, Nanoha, Empress Twilight of the Void, Lightning of the Collection, and even a Melnorme. Eve hadn’t seen one of the one-eyed orange creatures in ages, presumably because of the generally anti-big-business stance of Merodi Universalis.

“Uh… What is this…?” Eve asked.

“A welcoming party,” Nanoha said with a smile. “You’ve made it to Class 2.”

“Did that get out already!?”

I coughed. “I may have let slip to the Empress why I was leaving.”

“It is not hard to tell,” Lightning said, flexing her Infinity Gauntlet – dimmed because it was not keyed to the current universe. “If you have the capacity to shape universes combined with a large number of realms under your ownership, you are a Class 2.” She smirked. “The Collection is a Class 2 by power and scope alone. We aren’t ‘decentralized’, since all of us live in one universe that’s just shrouded by hundreds of others. Skarn was similar to us in that regard.”

“So we’re suddenly a Class 2 and doors open up?” Eve asked.

“With us?” Nanoha asked. “Not really. If you wanted to file for inclusion into the TSAB you’d be given priority now, but that would still take forever. Twenty years, I would think.”

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Eve said. “We need to be our own entity.”

“And I have no problems with that whatsoever.”
The Melnorme moved forward. “Now that you have access to higher dimensional technology your avenues for trading have drastically increased. We have many requests of you for our own universes that we would be willing to pay handsomely for.”

“You don’t have a Shaper?”

“Ah, that information has a price.”

Eve narrowed her eyes at the Melnorme. “If you want to start actually engaging in relations with us, you’re going to have to be more open than that. I’m not paying for every little tidbit of information I want to know about you. We should just, I don’t know, maybe trust each other a bit?”

The Melnorme looked at her like she was speaking an alien language.

“It is the way of their people,” the Grand Secretariat said. “Not exactly convenient.”

“The inventors of Inconvenience Stores,” Hastur joked.

Valentine stared at him, then shook his head. Eve knew he must feel a bit suffocated here – expecting a report on the war, and instead getting overlooked by a bunch of Class 2 representatives. He was not a fan of being the smaller fish.

Eve went to talk to him – but ‘Empy’ Twilight got to her first. “I wish to welcome you to our ranks personally, Charter-Princess Evening Sparkle, Overhead of Relations. May this day serve as the start of a full-fledged relationships as equals.”

“You are of a significantly higher caliber than them, Empress” Hastur pointed out. “There is much disparity between a high-end Class 2 and a low-end.”

“True,” Nanoha said. “But that doesn’t mean they can’t be allies.”

Empy smiled. “I look forward to meeting with you more, Evening. Take good care of Twilence for me.”

“I will,” Eve promised.

I winked. “I’ll be taking care of myself, Empress.”

“Don’t be so arrogant of your abilities,” Empy reminded me. “You know where that’s gotten you in the past.”

I nodded solemnly. “I know. I never forget.”

Eve let Empy and me talk for a bit, finally making it to Valentine. “Sorry about this, I had no idea.”

“Clearly,” Valentine said, arms folded. “It seems as though you’re drawing the attention of everyone.”

“None of the Class 1s are here,” Eve pointed out.

“I wouldn’t be so certain of that,” Valentine said. “They’re watching. My people detected Xeelee wire for a split second. The Flowers are here too – that’s not just a rose in that vase.”

Eve walked over to the decorative rose, discovering that it was glowing slightly, a clear indication of Flower technology. “…Oh joy.”
“The faster you climb through the ranks the more attention you draw,” Valentine said. “I envy you for what you’ve achieved – but I also pity you for what is to come.”

Eve nodded slowly. “It’s going to be a long road ahead, apparently.”

Valentine didn’t say anything in response to this.

“Anyway!” Eve called. “I came here to originally give a report on the war, and that’s what I’m going to do. Everyone’s free to listen, this shouldn’t take too long – I have extra copies of the reports. So without further a-”

Jenny of the Red Gloves fell through the front door, landing flat on her face. “Ow…”

“…Jenny!?” Eve blurted. “…This is a surprise.”

“Uh, yeah, and your mind is about to be blown right off!” Jenny grinned cheesily. “Dracogen Enterprises is here to petition for inclusion within Merodi Universalis.”

Eve stared at Jenny. “What.”

“You heard me.”

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